Monet's Flowers of War

The Last Shining of the Belle Époque

National Gallery of Australia
Friday September 29th at 7.30pm
Saturday September 30th at 2.00pm

Program

The Eye – The Alley of Roses and the Bridge
Claude Debussy 1862-1918 Finale: Animé, léger et nerveux from the Cello Sonata
Maurice Ravel 1875-1937 Modéré from the Piano Trio
Claude Debussy Allegro vivo from the Violin Sonata in G Minor

The Garden
Lili Boulanger 1893-1918 D’un jardin clair from Trois morceaux pour piano
Lili Boulanger Nocturne for violin and piano

The Weeping Willow
Claude Debussy Pour L’Égyptienne (Épigraphes antiques) arr. flute, violin, cello & piano *P
Jean Cras 1879-1932 Paysage maritime (1917) arr. flute, cello and piano *P

The Floating World
Philippe Gaubert Nymphes à la fontaine from Médailles antiques for flute, violin & piano *AP
Philippe Gaubert 1879-1941 Soir sur la plaine from Deux esquisses *AP
Lili Boulanger Cortège from Trois morceaux for flute & piano

The Shimmering Pool
Camille Saint-Saëns 1835-1921 Le cygne (The Swan) for cello & piano
Maurice Ravel Passacaille (Très large) from the Piano Trio

The Lotus
Jean Cras Mystérieuses from Âmes d’enfants (1917) arr. flute, violin, cello & piano *P

Towards the Light
Jean Cras Danza tenera (1917) arr. flute, violin, cello & piano *P

Duration: 70 minutes

*AP – Australian premiere
*P - Premiere of this arrangement

Jane Rutter flute
Tamara-Anna Cislowska piano
David Pereira cello
Christopher Latham violin, images, director
Recorded by Ross A’Hem
This concert, *Monet's Flowers of War*, is about the death of Impressionism, how it was destroyed by the bullets and shells of the Great War. From that traumatic wound all of the colour of the Belle Époque bled out, leaving behind a sepia shell of cubism on one hand and a strange bloodless return to conservatism on the other. This program is an exaltation of Monet’s exploration of the emotional resonance of pure colour throughout the Great War.

Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) in his treatise *On Painting* stated that “the inventor of painting according to poets was Narcissus, who was turned into a flower … what is painting, but the act of embracing, by means of art, the surface of the pool?”

Monet was born in 1840 and was 74 when World War I broke out. He had been working on the creation of a magnificent *jardin d'eau*, or water garden, which would feature a recent created botanical novelty - hybridized water lilies created by Joseph Bory Latour-Marliac. Latour-Marliac had managed to cross the European white lily with wild varieties he obtained from the Americas and elsewhere, creating a palette ranging from delicate yellow to fuschia and deep red. Monet first saw the plants in 1889 at the World’s Fair in Paris (at which the Eiffel Tower was unveiled) and they inspired him to buy a field adjoining his property at Giverny, where his team of gardeners undertook a vast landscaping project, diverting a nearby stream to create his famous lily ponds. In 1909 he would exhibit his first 48 paintings of Waterlilies.

Giverny had been a printers’ colony before the war, but with the outbreak of violence in 1914, thirty men from the tiny village were immediately conscripted and all the American painters, such as Theodore Earl Butler who had married Monet’s stepdaughter Marthe, immediately left. During the war a small hospital was based there which was filled with soldiers, who would scream in the middle of the night believing they were still in the trenches. The nurse Eugenie Buffet said they would all scream over and over the same pitiful cry – “Maman!” (Mother!). Monet, himself, brought them vegetables which had been grown in his garden to nourish them.

At the outset of the war, Monet’s step-son Jean-Pierre was called up and his family evacuated. Likewise all the younger French painters were called up, among them Fernand Léger, Maurice de Vlaminck and André Derain, while the young cubists Georges Braque, Jacques Villon, Roger de La Fensaye and André Mare were tasked with designing camouflage, an innovation of that war.

Four members of Monet’s extended family served on the Western Front and somehow all of them survived. In all, however, more than 350 French artists would be killed. Painters lost to the Great War on both sides from war or from the Spanish flu include Franz Marc, August Macke, Wilhelm Morgner, Umberto Boccioni, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Egon Schiele and Gustav Klimt.

During this period not only was Monet working in isolation, constantly bothered by the unusually bitter winters, but also he was increasingly disturbed by cataracts. His sight diminished measurably, and he eventually agreed to have three operations in 1923 to remove them. The colour distortions caused by these cataracts possibly explain the palette of the opening paintings in this concert. The very final years of his life were spent experimenting with enormous special lenses which the German manufacturer Zeiss made for him so that with what vision remained in his good left eye he could complete his canvasses.

Cézanne had said of Monet that he was “only an eye - yet what an eye!” The likelihood of losing his great gift plunged him into severe anxiety and a sustained period of hyper-creativity, as he struggled to create his final culminating masterpieces – a body of work he hoped would summarise everything he felt and believed about painting. In doing so he created more work than any other artist during the Great War. His late works returned to familiar themes, including substantial series of paintings of the Japanese Bridge, Weeping Willows, Flowers, the Alley of Roses and a monumental series of Waterlilies, but as his vision deteriorated, the images tended ever more towards pure abstraction.

The horizon which bisected almost all of Monet’s paintings until then, suddenly disappears, and his gaze drops so that the viewer is looking down into the pool, yet staring at the reflection of the sky itself. It is a floating world of upside-down reflections where gravity has no sway. Here Weeping Willows rise up to the sky, while the surface of flowers and lily pads interweave with the background of floating submerged algae and water weed.

Many of Monet’s admirers called him “le peintre du Bonheur” (the painter of happiness) and Monet himself speculated that these paintings might calm “nerves strained through overwork” and offer the viewer “an asylum of peaceful meditation”. He felt they were an attempt at healing, his artistic response to the traumatic events of the war.

French deaths in WWI totalled over 1.4 million with 4 million wounded. As Ross King states in his wonderful book on Monet’s last period, *Mad Enchantment*, “a quarter of all French
men born in the 1890s, the children of the Belle Époque had been wiped out”.

Monet would paint a great series of Weeping Willows to express the grief of France for her lost sons. The Weeping Willows had been a famous symbol of mourning and are often found in French cemeteries. JJ Grandville in his prose poem, Les fleurs animées (Flowers Personified) put it thus: “come into my shade all you who suffer, for I am the Weeping Willow. I conceal in my foliage a woman with a gentle face. Her blonde hair hangs over her brow and veils her tearful eye. She is the muse of all those who have loved... She comforts those touched by death”.

The deeper one looks into these pictures, and indeed all of Monet’s late images, the more female figures seem to populate them – whether they are there, or whether it is just our subconscious looking back at us, is impossible to know. The word for waterlilies in French is nymphéas, which is related to nymphae (nymphs), female spirits who inhabit sacred places and are often represented as young, beautiful girls. The word nymphs has a second more sexual meaning, being also the term for the membranous folds lining the upper half of the vulva inside the labia majora. There is a final layer of meaning as the waterlily is closely related to the lotus, the famous flower which had been for the Egyptians a symbol of rebirth and immortality and in Buddhist and Hindu philosophy was the image of the mind rising up out of the mud and opening itself to wisdom and enlightenment.

Between the outbreak of war and his death in Giverny in 1926 Monet produced just over 200 works, many of which he grouped into a series on an immense scale which he called “Les Grands Décorations”. To do this he need to create a vast studio on his property simply to have enough space to work on them. He would paint quickly in summer while the light was good, and then spend his winters filling in the details. It is also known that he destroyed a great number of paintings, frustrated by his failing vision, which would cause him to make mistakes and, in his words, “to ruin them”.

During this period, a constant visitor was his close friend the French president Georges Clémenceau, who had a holiday house in a neighbouring village, and together they decided that these paintings would become Monet’s contribution towards the French war effort. That gift can now be seen in L’Orangerie—a venue which during the war had served as a canteen for wounded North African soldiers.

His donated creations filled two rooms with 22 enormous panels. The first Room has 10 panels (for a total of 40 square meters of paintings): Soleil couchant (The Setting Sun – 1 x 6 meters – 6 square meters), Les nuages (Clouds – 3 x 4.25 meters – 12.75 square meters), Reflets verts (Green Reflections – 2 x 4.25 metres – 8.5 square meters) and Matin (Morning – 2 x 4.25 + 2 x 2.25 metres – 12.75 square meters).

The second room contains 12 panels for a total of 40.75 square meters of paintings: Reflets d’arbres (Reflections of Trees – 2 x 4.25 metres – 8.5 square meters), Le matin aux saules (Morning with Willows – 3 x 4.25 – 12.75 square meters), Les deux saules (The Two Willows – 4 x 4.25 – 17 square meters) and Le matin clair aux saules (Bright Morning with Willows – 3 x 4.25 – 12.75 square meters).

Their size defies photographic reproduction, and even here in projection one struggles to convey their scale. It is a study in seeing, but ultimately an attempt to portray light itself. Towards the end of this concert, all subject matter falls away and we are left only with light, and finally the death of his sight. Ultimately, as Gustave Geffroy wrote in his final line in his 1922 book on Claude Monet, it is a “dream of infinity”.

The walls of Monet’s house were covered with hundreds of prints from his hero, the Japanese artist Hokusai, who signed his works “The Old Man Mad About Painting”. Hokusai, at the age of 75, added a postscript to the first printing of his “One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji”, which can perhaps also serve as the best footnote to the remarkable life and work of Claude Monet:

“From the time that I was 6 years old I had the mania of drawing the form of objects. As I came to be 50 I had published an infinity of designs; but all that I have produced before the age of sixty five is not worth being counted. At the age of 73 that I began to understand the true structure of nature, of animals and grasses, and trees and birds, and fishes and insects; consequently at 80 years of age I shall have made still more progress; at 90 I hope to have penetrated into the secret of things; at 100 years of age I shall certainly have reached a magnificent level, and when I am 110, all that I do, every point and every line, shall be distinct with life — and I ask all those who shall live as long as I do to see if I have not kept my word.”

Christopher Latham
Director, the Flowers of War
**The Last Shining of Musical Impressionism**

**Claude Debussy (1862-1918)**

When war was declared in the summer of 1914, Claude Debussy was fifty-one, too old to serve. He was widely regarded as the greatest living French composer, holding a similar position to Monet in French cultural life, though a generation younger.

Debussy had been diagnosed with colon cancer in 1909, and in December 1915 underwent one of the earliest colostomy operations ever performed. The operation achieved only a temporary respite, and caused him considerable discomfort. He described dressing each day as “all the labours of Hercules in one”. He died on 25 March 1918 in the midst of the aerial and artillery bombardment of Paris during the German Spring Offensive and the funeral procession made its way through deserted streets to the Père Lachaise Cemetery as German guns bombarded the city.

He had been struggling to compose and was suffering financial hardships as a result of diminishing commissions, but during the war, he experienced a burst of creativity including *En blanc et noir* (for two pianos), the *Études* (for solo piano) and a far less well known work, his *Épigraphes antiques*. This was an arrangement for piano four hands or piano solo of 6 short pieces drawn from his incidental music for the *Chansons de Bilitis* by Pierre Louÿs. Although it was performed in 1900, the work was not published during Debussy’s lifetime; however, he valued the work highly and returned to it in 1914, choosing six of the old pieces and reworking them into a sonorous cycle for piano four hands and also a version for piano solo which has been arranged here for flute, violin, cello and piano.

Debussy’s most famous works of the Great War were a planned set of six sonatas, of which he would complete three, including the two excerpted here for violin and piano, and cello and piano. Debussy confided to a friend, that they were “not so much for myself, [but] to offer proof, small as it may be, that 30 million Boches can’t destroy French thought ... I think of the youth of France, senselessly mowed down ...What I am writing will be a secret homage to them.” He signed these last sonatas, completed just before his death: “Claude Debussy, musicien français”. With his death French impressionism lost both its inventor and its guiding voice.

**Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)**

Ravel was 13 years younger than Debussy. When Germany invaded France in 1914, Ravel had been working on writing a piano trio for at least six years before he began work in earnest in March 1914, remarking to his pupil Maurice Delage, “I’ve written my trio. Now all I need are the themes.” During the summer of 1914, Ravel did his compositional work in the French Basque commune of Saint-Jean-de-Luz, across the bay from the town he was born. His mother was Basque, and he felt a deep identification with his Basque heritage, and noted that the opening movement of the Trio was “Basque in colouring.”

While initial progress on the Trio was slow, the outbreak of war in August 1914 spurred Ravel on to finish the work so that he could enlist in the army. A few days after France’s entry into the war, Ravel wrote again to Maurice Delage: “Yes, I am working on the Trio with the sureness and lucidity of a madman.” By September he had finished it, writing to Igor Stravinsky, “The idea that I should be leaving at once made me get through five months’ work in five weeks! My Trio is finished.”

In October, he was accepted as a nurse’s aide by the Army, all the while trying to join the French Air Force but being rejected because of his age (39) and also due to a minor heart complaint. Instead in March 1916 he became a volunteer truck driver for the 13th Artillery Regiment, and was sent to the Western Front at Verdun in northwest France. The only supply road was the Bar-le-Duc, which became known as *La voie sacrée* (*The Sacred Way*). Writing at the time, he recalled: “For a whole week I have been driving days and nights – without lights – on unbelievable roads, often with a load double what my truck should carry. And even so I had to hurry because all this was within range of the guns. Adélaïde and I – Adélaïde is my truck – escaped the shrapnel, but the poor dear couldn’t keep going and after losing her number-plate in a danger zone where parking was forbidden, in despair she shed a wheel in a forest, where I did a Robinson Crusoe for 10 days until someone came to rescue me.”

While returning from a brief stint of leave in mid-August 1916, he contracted dysentery and was hospitalised. Just as he was getting over the dysentery, he was diagnosed with a hernia and operated on and finally suffered frostbite in his feet the following winter. He would serve no more, and his health was permanently affected by both the stress of his war service and the death of his mother in 1917. He would remain permanently plagued by both insomnia and digestive problems.
Ravel composed very few works in the war years. In September 1922, when the Revue musicale published a special number dedicated to the 77-year-old composer Gabriel Fauré, Ravel was one of several composers asked to compose a tribute. He obliged (just in time) with a Berceuse (Lullaby), which he composed in a single day, using the letters of Gabriel Fauré’s name to create the opening melody. If the piece’s duration of three minutes seems a meagre tribute to his most significant mentor, it shows at least the emotional and creative difficulties that Ravel was experiencing at the time.

In October 1932, Ravel suffered a blow to the head in a taxi accident, which may have exacerbated a pre-existing neurological problem (from 1927 close friends had been concerned at Ravel’s growing absent-mindedness), and within a year of the accident he started to experience symptoms suggesting aphasia - which not only prevented him from writing another note of music but also deprived him of the power of speech and made it impossible for him even to sign his name. He underwent experimental brain surgery, and after the operation there seemed to be an improvement in his condition, but it was short-lived, and he soon lapsed into a coma. He died on 28 December, 1937, at the age of 62, and with his death, French music lost its other great star and would never again reach the heights it had previously attained.

Philippe Gaubert (1879 - 1941)

Philippe Gaubert was first and foremost one of the primary exponents of the French flute school, and throughout his long career he further distinguished himself as a conductor and composer. Born to a good amateur clarinettist in Cahors in the department of the Lot, at an early age Gaubert began private lessons with the great French flute pedagogue Paul Taffanel. Having gained his first prize for flute playing in 1894 from the Paris Conservatoire, in 1897 Gaubert became a member of the orchestras of the Paris Opera and of the Paris Conservatoire, swiftly achieving fame as a soloist. He studied composition and also became an assistant conductor of the Paris Conservatoire Orchestra from 1904. In 1907 he premiered Maurice Ravel’s Introduction and Allegro for harp, flute, clarinet and string quartet.

With the outbreak of World War I, Gaubert was mobilized into the French Army and fought at the Battle of Verdun, earning the Croix de Guerre. He wrote of his war experiences in a letter dated 11th of December 1915 from the Calonne trench near Verdun: “for two months we have received large amounts of bombs, grenades and shells because our trenches are only 10 to 15 metres from the German trenches. Often we stretcher bearers find the wounded near Éparges, a sector situated a few kilometres from our own. These operations are done at night on terrible paths, copiously sprayed by enemy machine guns and shells. How will I ever I leave this hell hole sane and in one piece. It is something I can’t even hope for. I have lived through such tragic times which I will never be able to erase the memory of – what torments I have seen.” Curiously the works he produced during his war service such as his Poèmes for voice and piano, the First Flute Sonata, the Trois aquarelles for flute, cello and piano and these two works, Médailles antiques and Deux esquisses contain none of that violence.

Discharged in the last year of the war owing to chronic bronchitis, Gaubert returned to the Conservatoire where he was named a professor of flute. In 1918-1919, he made his first recordings as a flute soloist, and was appointed Principal conductor of the Paris Opéra and the Orchestre de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire. In 1923 he published the Méthode complète de flûte (Complete Flute Method). In 1930, he took over from Vincent d’Indy as professor of conducting at the Conservatoire, a role he kept until 1938. Gaubert was still conducting at Paris Opéra when it was evacuated to his hometown of Cahors in June 1940. He died suddenly in 1941 from a stroke, just hours before he was to conduct the premiere of his ballet Le chevalier et la demoiselle.

With both the Paris Conservatoire Orchestra and the Paris Opéra Gaubert was a tireless champion of contemporary French music and composers. He conducted many works by composers such as Debussy, Ravel, Dukas and Florent Schmitt, including the premieres of works by Fauré, Enescu, and Ibert. He also led the first performances in Paris of many significant scores by non-French composers, such as Richard Strauss’s Der Rosenkavalier and Elektra and Puccini’s Turandot, and in 1934 and 1935 he presented the first modern performances in France of Monteverdi’s Orfeo with the Paris Conservatoire Orchestra. He composed prolifically: not only many pieces of chamber music featuring the flute, but also operas, ballets, and orchestral works. He died in 1941.

Lili Boulanger (1893 - 1918)

Marie-Juliette Olga (“Lili”) Boulanger was the first female winner of the Prix de Rome composition prize and the younger sister of the noted teacher Nadia Boulanger, who taught such varied composers and conductors as Leonard Bernstein, Aaron Copland, Elliott Carter, Quincy Jones, Astor Piazzolla, Philip Glass, John Eliot Gardiner and Daniel Barenboim.

Lili’s talent was noted at age two by Gabriel Fauré, a friend of the family and later one of Boulanger’s teachers, when he discovered she had perfect pitch. Her parents, both of whom were musicians, encouraged their daughter’s musical education. Lili accompanied her ten-year-old sister Nadia to classes at the Paris Conservatoire before she was five, sitting in on music theory classes shortly afterwards and then studying organ with Louis Vierne. She

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sang, played piano, violin, cello and harp, and could speak three languages, but much of her childhood was spent either convalescing from illness or going to spas with her mother in order to recover. Lili was greatly affected by the death of her father in 1900, and as a result many of her works touch on themes of grief and loss.

In 1912 Boulanger competed in the Prix de Rome, but collapsed from illness. She returned in 1913 at the age of 19 and won the composition prize for her cantata *Faust et Hélène*, becoming the first woman composer to win the prize. Throughout her life she was troubled by chronic illness. Although she loved to travel, completing several works in Italy after winning the Prix de Rome, her failing health forced her to return home, where she and Nadia organized efforts to support French soldiers during World War I. Somehow she also found the energy to write most of her major works during this period, including her large-scale setting of Psalm 130 *Du fond de l’abîme* (1910-17), the magnificent *Vieille prière bouddhique* (1914-17) for tenor, chorus and orchestra, the masterful orchestral diptych *D’un soir triste/D’un matin de printemps* (1917-18) and her famous *Pie Jesu* (1918) which she dictated to Nadia, as Paris was being bombarded by German artillery. With this work she wrote her own Requiem, distilling her harmonic ambiguity, her intense lyricism, and her sense of the transcendent sublime into a radiant four minute gem. Then, after receiving her last rites, she died peacefully in her sleep on March 15, 1918. She was 24.

**Jean Cras (1879-1932)**

Cras was born and died in Brest, the home of the French fleet, his father having been a brilliant naval surgeon. At the age of six, Cras began composing short piano pieces, songs and vocal duets for house concerts with his siblings. Following in the family tradition, he enrolled at the Naval Academy in 1896 and, concurrent with his basic training, also taught himself theory, orchestration, counterpoint and composition.

At 20, Cras decided to study with the great art song composer, Henri Duparc. For three months during the latter part of 1900, while Cras enjoyed a rare break from the Navy, Duparc guided Cras meticulously through the compositional processes of Bach, Beethoven and his own mentor, César Franck. These would be Cras’ only lessons in composition. From then on he would continue refine his art independently.

With the outbreak of war in 1914 Cras was appointed adjutant to Admiral Augustin Boué de Lapeyrère. He later worked in the Submarine Defense Service. In 1916 he was appointed commander of the torpedo boat *Commandant Bory*. During the Adriatic campaign he sank a submarine and was decorated for his bravery in rescuing a sailor who had fallen overboard.

His most ambitious work, the opera *Polyphème*, was orchestrated during his service during the Great War, and after its wildly successful premiere by the Opéra-Comique in Paris in 1921, Cras was catapulted to the zenith of French cultural life. With all of France intrigued by the novelty of a decorated war hero who had written his music on his small upright piano in his cabin, his name became as much a household word as that of Ravel, with whom Cras was a close friend. His compositional ingenuity reached its peak during the final decade of his life, but after his death in 1932, he was largely forgotten until the last decade of the 20th century.

Jean Cras’ greatest problem as composer was a chronic lack of time to devote to his art. Although patriotically devoted to the Navy, he resented the long absences it required from his children. A solution to this was to write endless letters, as well as music for family to play – hence his work *Âmes d’enfants (The Souls of Children)* for piano six hands, written for his three daughters, during the winter of 1918 when the Commandant-Bory docked at Valona on the Albanian Coast. Likewise he conceived and composed the suite *Danze pour le piano* (1917) aboard the Commandant-Bory during his tour of duty at Taranto (Puglia) as he guarded the Ionian coastlines. Composed over an eight week period between February and April 1917, Cras dedicated the third movement, *Danza tenera*, to his wife, Isaure. It is Cras at his most passionate and vulnerable. Finally his *Paysages maritimes (Maritime Landscapes)* was also completed in his cabin on the Commandant-Bory in October 1917, while posted at Brindisi. It is a nostalgic reverie recalling his beloved Brittany coastline.