

Jessica Duchen's Classical Music and Ballet Blog. Novelist and journalist JD writes for The Independent, London



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Debussy's bustin' out all over

Here we go...it's the Debussy anniversary! A grand 150 years since the birth of (almost) everyone's favourite French composer, a figure without whom the entire face of 20th-century music would have been utterly different. I've written two relevant pieces which are both out today.

First, [here's my interview with Michael Tilson Thomas from this week's JC](#). The American conductor is presiding over the LSO's Debussy series which starts next week. His family background is truly fascinating, though: the American Yiddish theatre proved a rich and radical field for artistic development of many kinds, including his.

And [here, from The Independent, is an interview with the lovely Noriko Ogawa, who is doing a Debussy festival](#) in Manchester with the BBC Philharmonic, opening tonight. The influence of Japanese culture - 'Japanoiserie', at any rate - on Debussy was vital; and in return, his music has made a major impact on the Japanese composers of today. The piece has been somewhat chopped, though, so below is the director's cut. Plus a video interview with Noriko from Cardiff, recorded last summer.

NORIKO OGAWA & REFLECTIONS ON DEBUSSY

Jessica Duchen

In 1862 Claude Debussy was born in Paris: the biggest musical celebrations of 2012 will mark his 150th anniversary. 'Reflections on Debussy', a major new festival based at Manchester's Bridgewater Hall, promises to be one of the most unusual takes on this seminal French composer and his legacy. It unites past and present, Europe and Asia, and a pianist and orchestra who, having been caught up in Japan's devastating earthquake, are lucky to be here at all.

On 11 March 2011 the Japanese pianist Noriko Ogawa was waiting for a train in Tokyo when the platform began to shake under her feet. At the same moment, the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, on tour in Japan, was travelling in a bus, which was crossing a bridge. Miraculously, they all escaped unscathed.

Now they are working together, exploring the links between Debussy and Japanese culture.

The links are more serendipitous than one might imagine. “It was in the year of Debussy’s birth, 1862, that a group of 30-40 Japanese diplomats came to Europe for the first time,” Ogawa points out. “They would have been wearing full traditional regalia, complete with swords, and they must have looked incredibly exotic to the populations of Paris and London.” In those days, Japan was still “closed”, mysterious to the outside world, more distant even than India and China. And as the century progressed, a vogue for Japanese culture swept through France, carrying Debussy with it.

Ogawa suggests that Debussy had a natural affinity with deep underlying qualities in Japanese art, especially the *ukiyo-e* “Floating World” woodblock prints by artists such as Hokusai and Hiroshige. They likewise made a profound impact on western artists of successive generations – first Manet and Monet, later Gauguin, Lautrec and Matisse.

“Japanese art then used a very deformed perspective,” Ogawa points out. “Artists picked out the aspects they wanted to emphasise. For instance, if a man is looking furious in one Floating World picture, his face is much bigger than the rest of his body – just to reinforce the sense that he is angry.” It is not a vast step from there to the fantastical perspectives of Symbolism, a movement absorbed in subjective, dreamlike and suggestive atmospheres rather than literal images. Debussy associated himself with this artistic movement more than any other.

The cover picture on the first printed copies of his orchestral work *La Mer* – effectively a kind of sea symphony – is Hokusai’s *The Great Wave off Kanegawa*. “It brings out the strength of the sea, exaggerating this rather than being perfect like a photograph,” says Ogawa. “That deliberate deformation of perspective creates a stronger impression. Debussy does this, too, in his music. He broke all the rules!”

Other pieces by Debussy seem to share the formality, restraint and concision of Japanese art.

“You need a strong sense of control on the keyboard to play Debussy,” says Ogawa. “You can’t be overemotional or drown yourself in it; you have to be objective and keep searching for the right quality and beauty of sound. It’s the opposite of Brahms and Beethoven’s rock-solid Germanic music. After the incredibly emotional Romantic era, Debussy opens the window to let the fresh air in.”

The most Japanese of his works, she suggests, is ‘Poissons d’or’, the final piano piece from *Images, Book II* – directly inspired by exquisitely wrought images on a Japanese lacquer cabinet depicting koi carp.

Debussy’s fondness for Japanese culture was first sparked at the Exposition Universelle (World’s Fair) in Paris in 1889; there, too, he encountered the music of the Indonesian gamelan, which also made a deep impression on

him. He never travelled to the Far East, but his entire personality predisposed him to the absorption of influences rich and strange. Debussy, whom some considered Bohemian and non-conformist and whose personal life encompassed some very public scandals, was sensitive to a remarkable degree. His unceasingly enquiring mind allowed him to draw on innumerable sources for his music: everything was fair game, from the poems of Baudelaire to the novels of Dickens, from the drawings of Arthur Rackham to circus performances by acrobats. Perhaps his affinity for Japanese art was innate, or perhaps there was even more to it: "It's almost as if he was able to tune in to its wavelength, like a radio," says Ogawa.

Highlights she has devised for 'Reflections on Debussy' include a traditional Japanese tea ceremony before she performs the composer's Etudes for piano, and a flower ceremony before the Préludes; and the series also features works by the late Toru Takemitsu and a younger Japanese composer, Yoshihiro Kanno, who were both profoundly influenced by Debussy's musical language.

Ogawa has commissioned a set of three piano pieces from Kanno, each of which involves a different traditional Japanese percussion instrument. For instance, *A Particle of Water* employs Myochin Hibashi chopsticks: these are manufactured by a craftsman from the 54th generation of a family that once made swords for Samurai warriors and are constructed from the same metal as those legendary weapons. Ogawa couldn't resist adding *Chopsticks* itself to the programme, though.

Joking aside, though, the festival is part of her post-earthquake therapy. Born and brought up in Japan, she thought she was used to earthquakes, but this one was different: "The horizontal movement told us that this was something much stronger," she recalls. "It went on for 90 seconds, which is really long. After that the electricity went off, everything shut down and in the north of the country the tsunami arrived very quickly. People there lost everything – homes, businesses, livelihoods – in just half an hour."

Dazed, confused, and convinced that Japan was facing apocalypse, she lost interest in playing the piano until she decided to go to America and give a fundraising concert to help the victims. So far, she has raised more than £21,000 for the British Red Cross's aid to Japan; and additionally she has organised the design of some greeting cards – involving black cats, pianos and Debussy, who used to frequent a club named Le Chat Noir – which she sells at her concerts to benefit the Japan Society.

"There are still aftershocks even now," she says. "But I don't want to talk about disastrous things too much, because people are trying to be positive. I'd just like to offer something that people will enjoy, feeling at the same time they're doing something to help."

The intuitive Debussy could well have approved.

*Reflections on Debussy begins on 20 January at the Bridgewater Hall,
Manchester. Box Office: 0161 907 9000*