

## How Debussy keys into Japan

by Jessica Duchen

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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.

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.

Ogawa suggests that Debussy had a natural affinity with deep underlying qualities in Japanese art, especially the ukiyo-e ("floating world") woodblock paintings by artists such as Hokusai and Hiroshige.

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 Kanagawa*.

Other pieces by Debussy seem to share the formality 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..."

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

Highlights she has devised for Reflections on Debussy include a Japanese tea ceremony before she performs the composer's Études for Piano, and a flower ceremony before the Préludes.

*Reflections on Debussy, Bridgewater Hall, Manchester ([www.bridgewater-hall.co.uk](http://www.bridgewater-hall.co.uk)) to 9 Jun*