

PRELUDES, RAGS and CAKEWALKS

Debussy ★ Joplin ★ Auric
Milhaud ★ Satie



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THE SYMPHONIC BRASS OF LONDON
Conductor: Eric Crees

PRELUDES, RAGS AND CAKEWALKS

Debussy, Joplin and the influence of ragtime on French music



Claude Debussy

The inspiration for the evocative piano music of Claude Debussy (1862–1918) was a heady cocktail of seemingly disparate subjects: the poetry of Baudelaire, an Arthur Rackham print, the Javanese gamelan that he heard at the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1889, the 'Pickwick Papers' of Charles Dickens, fireworks, a Spanish postcard from a fellow composer, a verse about a Scottish lassie and even an American clown, all tempted the composer's fertile imagination in his two books of *Préludes*, (1910–11 and 1912–13).

One of his other most fascinating influences was the 'ragtime' music and 'cakewalks' beginning to be performed at the end of the 19th century by negro minstrel groups. The word 'ragtime' appears to have come from the 'ragged' rhythms of the music and 'cakewalk' from the high-kicking competitive dances whose best performers might earn the prize of a cake. These performers caused a sensation in London, Vienna and Paris as well as their native America and were admired by both the public and also renowned 'classical' musicians such as Stravinsky and Ravel, (the latter, having seen a minstrel troupe in 1921, wrote to a friend that "their virtuosity is at times terrifying").

Debussy had already heard (and favourably reviewed) ragtime when John Philip Sousa brought his outstanding ensemble to Paris in 1903. However, his first genuine experience of a real minstrel band came later in 1905 on the streets of Eastbourne, whilst on a summer holiday.

It is the aim of this programme not only to present (and hopefully enhance) Debussy's piano works in a burnished brass and percussion colouring, but to show the enormous impact of ragtime on both his music and that of other French composers in the first part of the twentieth century.

The now acknowledged master of ragtime was, of course, the American Scott Joplin (1868–1917). Although the film *The Sting* was admittedly responsible for the Joplin renaissance following its release in 1973, he is sadly known for only a very few pieces, an omission which we hope to rectify here. His tutor book, the *School of Ragtime*, shows tremendous pride in his art form. In the opening remarks he comments: "That real ragtime of the higher class is rather difficult to play is a painful truth which most pianists have discovered. Syncopations are no indication of light or trashy music". He goes on to give detailed instructions and exercises as to the precise rhythmic subdivision of the music, as well as stating unequivocally, "never play ragtime fast at any time".



Scott Joplin

Despite their very close dates it is not known if Debussy actually heard any of Joplin's music. What is evident however, is that there is a striking similarity between the openings of our first two pieces, *Swipesy* of 1900, (written with his pupil Arthur Marshall) and *Golliwogg's cake walk*, composed ten years later as the finale to his *Children's Corner*. These six humorous and enchanting movements are dedicated to his daughter Chouchou, 'with her father's tender apologies for what is about to follow'.

The indication at the beginning of *Golliwogg's cake walk* is *Allegro giusto*, that is, 'brisk but strictly', which clearly adheres to Joplin's stylistic advice. The breakneck tempi at which some pianists approach this music, favouring speed over style, would seem to be highly inappropriate.

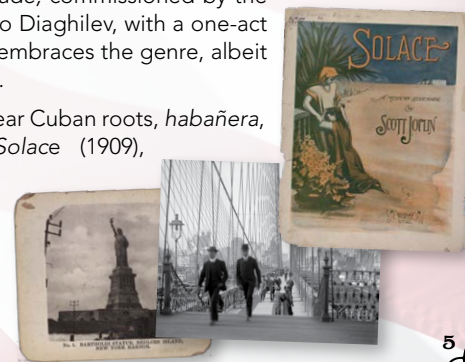
Having begun with a cheeky unison ragtime theme highly reminiscent of the opening of *Swipesy*, Debussy, while still essentially imitating the Joplin style, then follows his own instincts with a 'vamp till ready' ostinato and a happy-go-lucky tune. He then abruptly slows the speed (which Joplin never did) to an almost flippant 'um-cha' section, before gently ridiculing what he must have thought of as the over inflated romantic opening theme from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* (marked 'with great emotion'). This is done, unflinchingly, not one, but four times! I hope I will be forgiven in further emphasising the composer's mocking tone with trombone vibrato and glissandi, harmon mute 'wah-wahs' and the comic sound of the flexatone. The opening music returns, ending with an irreverent final downward slide.

The Strenuous Life (a Ragtime Two Step) was written in the same year as Joplin's more famous *The Entertainer* (1902), and is a tribute to

Theodore Roosevelt's famous speech of April 11th 1899 which began with the austere words 'I wish to preach, not the doctrine of ignoble ease, but the doctrine of the strenuous life, the life of toil and effort, of labour and strife'. One might have expected a minor key rather foursquare musical response from Joplin, but the opposite is the case with one of his most happy-go-lucky pieces showing a sprightly rhythmic lilt. It follows the usual ragtime AA-BB-A-CC-DD form in developing the material in discrete sections, but never returning to the opening theme at the end. This formal compositional structure is the reason that ragtime pieces often appear to finish rather abruptly.

Reflecting the immense respect he had for his friend, the only composer whose music Debussy actually arranged was that of the zany Erik Satie (1866–1925). Best known for his *Gymnopédies* and *Gnossiennes*, he too fell under the spell of ragtime and his *Rag-Time Parade* (1916–17) from the avant-garde ballet *Parade*, commissioned by the esteemed dancer and impresario Diaghilev, with a one-act scenario by Jean Cocteau, fully embraces the genre, albeit in a restrained and elegant style.

Joplin's only tango, or with its clear Cuban roots, *habañera*, is the stunningly beautiful *Solace* (1909), subtitled *A Mexican Serenade*. With the tempo deliberately marked 'Very slow march time', its gentle chromatic melody and poignant dissonances, all





held together over a gently rocking 'ostinato' rhythm, form an expressive gem in the composer's output.

Debussy's own take on the dance could hardly have been more different. The composer, Manuel de Falla (1876–1946) sent him a postcard of the massive *La Puerta del Vino* or 'The Wine Gate', which protected the Alhambra in Granada and was a meeting place for Gipsies. Although Debussy had only briefly visited northern Spain, he had come across Spanish folk music from the south at the Universal Exposition in 1900, remarking, 'so much imagination mingles with so much rhythm'. This sparked the most violent piece in his two books of *Préludes*, full of markedly flamenco-influenced contrasts between passionate outbursts, sensuous lyricism and dissonant tone clusters.

'Les Six' was coined as a title in a 1920 article by the critic Henri Collet for the composers Auric, Durey, Honegger, Milhaud, Poulenc and the only woman, Tailleferre. They were seen to be reacting against what was perceived as the overly romantic style of Wagner and perhaps surprisingly, even Debussy and Ravel. As a consequence their writing is in a much drier, satirical, foursquare idiom.

Milhaud became known for his jazz influenced polytonal style (ie writing in two or more keys at the same time), exemplified by his ballets *La Creation du Monde* and *Le Boeuf sur le Toit*. His *Rag Caprice No 1* is no exception, reworking the ragtime style with crunchy harmonies and crisp rhythms to suit his own musical idiosyncrasies.

By contrast, in the earlier *Minstrels*, from the first book of *Préludes*, Debussy ingeniously displays the exaggerated and playful gestures of the minstrel performers in a much more rhythmically fluid way, with clear imitations of the banjo and drums.

Debussy had already set to music the poem by Leconte de Lisle *La Fille aux cheveux de lin* or *The Girl with the flaxen hair* in his *Chansons Ecossaises*, (*Scottish Songs*) of 1881. But in this, the seventh of his *Préludes*, the 'cruel young girl' who sings her praises to the morning and is clearly the poet's object of desire, is transformed into a much more reflective and innocent creature.

Interestingly, early examples of the popular dance, the foxtrot, were actually danced to ragtime, and this influence on 'Les Six' member, Georges Auric in his quirky *Adieu, New York!* of 1919, is more than apparent. Auric was quite the prodigy, both as a young writer, arranger and pianist, giving his first recital as a twelve-year-old. Under the wing of Satie, he became a highly successful critic and composer in the 'populist' style and later collaborated with the multi-talented Jean Cocteau, to whom the piece is dedicated, on the music for eleven films.



Having led a mainly itinerant life since leaving home three years earlier, at the age of seventeen Joplin made “Honest John Turpin’s” Silver Dollar ragtime saloon in St. Louis the centre of his work life. The title of Joplin’s *Search-Light Rag – A Syncopated March and Two Step* (1907) is a tribute to Turpin’s two musician brothers. The story is that Thomas Million and Charlie travelled in 1881 to the town of Searchlight, Nevada to seek their fortune mining gold, (although we are not told if they succeeded). Revisiting his early career to find inspiration for superbly crafted music is an endearing quality: the forthright character and in the final section, the high, syncopated ‘crazy chords’, as they were known, make for a most attractive and invigorating work.

The stark bleakness of Debussy’s sixth *Prélude, des pas sur la neige*, or *Footsteps in the snow*, could hardly be more different. There appears to be no known origin for the title, but his directions that the insistent opening rhythm ‘must have the echoing evocation of a sad and frozen landscape’, with the fragmented melody ‘painful and expressive’ and in a later passage, ‘like a fond and sad regret’, all couched in very quiet dynamics, give us little doubt as to his intentions. This distillation into musical thought of extreme desolation and loneliness, which finds its counterpart in so much other art and literature familiar to Debussy, is unique in his output.

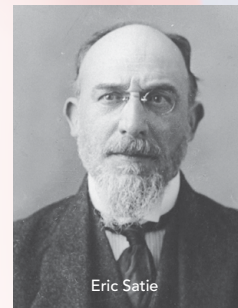


Satie’s *La Diva de L’Empire* brings us back to a much more joyous world, with an early foray into a cabaret song, written in a witty cakewalk style for Paulette Darty and first performed in the revue *Devidons la Bobine* in 1904. It was later arranged for piano and then small orchestra with the subtitle *Intermezzo Américain*.

Le Petit Negre (1909), was the first attempt at ragtime by Debussy in 1909, and was written as a commission for Théodore Lack’s tutor book for beginners, the *Méthode élémentaire de piano*. Apart from the bracing cakewalk music, two slower sections show the composer at his most lyrical.

Joplin’s *Weeping Willow* (1903), in common with his other rags written that year, displays a much gentler singing style, with a particularly beautiful third section that may surprise the listener.

According to his biographer René Peter, and perhaps not unexpectedly, with what we have now learnt about his eclectic tastes, Debussy was an avid reader of Dickens, for whom “Spleen could be cured by a swift dose of Pickwick.” His *Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C.*, (Perpetual President and Member of the Pickwick Club) from the second book of *Préludes* opens with the British national anthem in the bass and continues with a delightful mixture of rather pompous solemnity and high-spirited frivolity.



Eric Satie

Joplin's 1907 *Rose Leaf Rag* is quite simply a masterpiece, with the unforced style of a mature composer at ease in his expression. Laced throughout with subtle chromaticism, the repetitive rhythms and 'crazy chords' of the coda, (already heard in *Search-Light Rag*), build the piece hypnotically to its playful conclusion.

Satie's earlier *Le Piccadilly* of 1904, written well before Debussy's first skirmishes with the genre, yet again shows how he had managed to fully embrace the ragtime idiom so early on. This joyful march is full of inimitable Gallic charm, with an underlying English understatement inspired by the title.

Although rarely considered as a waltz composer, in 1905 Joplin clearly thought that *Bethena* was substantial enough to be subtitled *A Concert Waltz*. And so it is. Its elegant but gently swinging opening theme frames the other three contrasting sections with their far-flung keys. The connecting bridge passages contain some of his most audacious harmonies, demonstrating that not only is a serious and versatile composer at work, but one who can transcend in triple-time the duple-time rags for which he was better known.

Our last *Prélude*, No. 6 from the second book, reflects the composer's fascination with clowns and music hall performers and is the only piece in the two dedicated to a living person. *General Lavine* – excentric, (Debussy's own spelling), or 'The Man Who has Soldiered All His Life' as Lavine called himself, would have been seen by Debussy in Paris at the Marigny Theatre in 1910 and probably later in 1912. The score is marked

'in the style and movement of a cake walk' and following its fanfare-like opening, Debussy uses many varied and bizarre musical gestures to mimic the absurd appearance and slapstick comedy of Lavine, including a discreet quotation from the popular minstrel tune, *Camptown Race*.

While Joplin was busy working on his opera *Treemonisha* in 1910, he somehow found time to write the brilliant *Stoptime Rag*. Foot stamping (or 'stomps') had already become a mainstay of ragtime performance and 'stoptime', or literally stopping the music in order to introduce a heart-wrenching silence or a 'stomp', was becoming very popular. For the very first time Joplin gives the tempo indication, 'Fast or slow', in other words, that the foot movements of the performers should govern the speed, rather than the music. The result is an exhilarating fun-filled romp, full of both musical hiccups and nonstop semiquavers.

As I researched this project, its scope became somewhat more substantial than I had originally envisaged and I would like to express my sincere thanks to Tom Kearsey and Geoff Batchelor for their help in typesetting the arrangements.

© Eric Crees, July 2019



ERIC CREES

Eric Crees was born in London and studied at Wandsworth School, where, in the famous boys' choir, he worked with many distinguished professional orchestras and conductors. Of particular importance was the school's long association with Benjamin Britten, who wrote a solo part for him in the *Children's Crusade*.

While still at school he was awarded a scholarship to study at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and as a student undertook an extensive period of work with the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble. Having won the Mechanical Copyright Protection Society's 'Joyce Dixey Award' for composition, he graduated from the University of Surrey with first class honours and joined the London Symphony Orchestra, where he spent twenty-seven years, twenty as Co-Principal Trombone. In September 2000 he was appointed Section Principal Trombone at The Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. In addition to the concert and recording work, he has performed on many of the most iconic film soundtracks, including the first four of the *Star Wars* series, *Superman 1 & 2*, *Raiders of The Lost Ark*, *Braveheart*, *Aliens*, *Who Killed Roger Rabbit*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter 1, 2 & 3*, *Willow*, *Krull*, *Die Another Day*, *Rat Race*, *Life of Brian*, *An American Tail*, *Honey I Shrunk the Kids*, *Long Walk to Freedom*, as well as dozens more.



As director of London Symphony Orchestra Brass for many years he regularly conducted them at the Barbican Centre and internationally. He has made five CDs with the ensemble: two originally for Collins Classics, American Brass and Cathedral Brass, (re-released as Brass Americana and Sacred Brass on Alto) featuring many of his arrangements, which are also available on LSO Live and three of a world première recording by Naxos Records of the complete forty-three instrumental ensemble sonatas and canzonas of Giovanni Gabrieli, for which he made a new performing edition, available from Brass Wind Publications.

In 2011 Eric edited the complete works that the Belgium composer Paul Gilson wrote for La Fanfare Wagnérienne, a brass group based at the Brussels Conservatory at the turn of the 20th century, using the brass instruments that Wagner used in his Ring Cycle. Extraordinarily, these works have not been performed for 100 years. He has made a world première recording of them on the Musical Concepts label with Guildhall Brass, released in May 2013.

Since joining Covent Garden, he has directed the Royal Opera House Brass Soloists in concert at the Floral Hall to great critical success and made two recordings for Brass Classics, (*On The Town* and *The Twelve Days of Christmas*), which includes many of his carol arrangements sung by the Chorus of the Royal Opera House.

He has also written acclaimed arrangements for The London Trombone Sound and The London Horn Sound, for Cala Records and has worked for many of the world's most distinguished ensembles and brass bands

in concerts, recordings, television and radio broadcasts. His symphonic version of Bernstein's *Suite from West Side Story* has been commercially recorded four times. Three of his arrangements have been featured on a Chicago Symphony Brass CD on CSO Live.

Recent original compositions include *Silk Street Stomp* written for the Guildhall School of Music Big Band and played at a festival of youth big bands at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, *Two Antiphonal Fanfares* performed at the Lord Mayor's banquet at the Mansion House, *Frighteners' Gallop* for 8 horns commissioned by the British Horn Society, *Orage* for 16 trombones written for Bone Lab and premiered at the Dartington Summer School, *The Birth of Conchobar* for symphonic brass and percussion for the Ulster Youth Orchestra, *Three Sketches from Rackham* for flute and harp, *Flourish* for solo trombone and *Carillons* for six harps for the Royal Academy of Music Harp Ensemble.

In order to develop and extend his work for the large ensemble, he has formed The Symphonic Brass of London, a hand-picked group of Britain's finest brass and percussion players who have performed at home and abroad to great acclaim. In January 2014 they released their first CD of French and Spanish music, *A Bridge over the Pyrenees*.

Eric is an internationally renowned teacher and is Professor of Trombone, Chamber Music Coach, a regular Conductor of Wind, Brass, Percussion and Choral concerts and repertoire classes at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama where he was made a Fellow in 1991. In September 2014, Eric was awarded Conferment of Title to Professor in acknowledgement of

his national and international standing and outstanding contribution in performing, recording, arranging, composing, the publishing of scholarly editions, teaching and academic leadership. He is a frequent coach at music colleges and specialist schools both in the UK and abroad, as well as the National Youth Orchestras of Great Britain, Belgium, Spain, the Ulster Youth Orchestra and the Pacific Youth Orchestra in Japan. Many of his students now hold important orchestral and teaching positions throughout the world.

In March 2014 the International Trombone Association presented him with the prestigious 'Neill Humfeld Award for Teaching Excellence 2014' 'In recognition of his distinguished teaching career and with deep appreciation for the inspiration and example he has provided for trombonists of our time'.





THE SYMPHONIC BRASS OF LONDON

The Symphonic Brass of London is a hand-picked ensemble of Britain's very finest brass and percussion players.

This unique combination of excellence and mastery of varied styles has created an extraordinary ensemble whose musical flexibility is second to none. The Symphonic Brass of London is widely celebrated for the impeccable quality of its orchestral sound and the vibrancy, high energy, pure joy and fun of its music-making. The group have appeared twice on Radio 3's 'In Tune' and have also led many very successful educational projects and regard this side of its activities as a core element.

James Fountain Piccolo Trumpet*

Chris Deacon Piccolo Trumpet**

Paul Archibald Trumpet

Katie Smith Trumpet

Bruce Nockles Flugel Horn/Trumpet

Hugh Seenan Horn

Christopher Houlding Trombone

Simon Wills Trombone

Nick Lloyd Trombone

Christian Jones Bass Trombone

Adrian Miotti Tuba

Scott Bywater Percussion

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Acclaim for The Symphonic Brass of London:

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CD Review for 'A Bridge Over The Pyrenees'

Joby Talbot, Composer (Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, The Winter's Tale, Theatre of Blood)

Concert reviews:

"The concert with The Symphonic Brass of London was an amazing experience. They presented an exciting programme with finesse and virtuosity."

"The ensemble was precise and displayed a large dynamic range and excellent communication of the very beautiful, lyrical, powerful, fiery and lively arrangements."

"Their expertly balanced, slick ensemble playing combined with individual virtuosity delighted the audience and left them calling for more."



PRELUDES, RAGS and CAKEWALKS

Debussy ★ Joplin ★ Auric ★ Milhaud ★ Satie



1. **Swipesy – Cake Walk Joplin & Arthur Marshall** arr. Crees 3.15
2. **Golliwogg's Cakewalk Debussy** arr. Crees 3.08
3. **The Strenuous Life – A Ragtime Two Step Joplin** arr. Crees 3.27
4. **Rag Time Parade Satie** arr. Crees 3.31
5. **Solace – A Mexican Serenade Joplin** arr. Crees 5.42
6. **La Puerta del Vino Debussy** arr. Crees 4.21
7. **Rag Caprice No. 1 Milhaud** arr. Crees 2.08
8. **Minstrels Debussy** arr. Crees 2.38
9. **La fille aux cheveux de lin Debussy** arr. Crees 2.35
10. **Adieu, New York! Auric** arr. Crees 6.42
11. **Searchlight Rag – A Syncopated March and Two Step Joplin** arr. Crees 4.37
12. **des pas sur la neige Debussy** arr. Crees 4.11
13. **La Diva de L' Empire Satie** arr. Crees 2.51
14. **Le Petit Nègre Debussy** arr. Crees 2.02
15. **Weeping Willow – Ragtime Two Step Joplin** arr. Crees 4.28
16. **Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C. Debussy** arr. Crees 2.33
17. **Rose Leaf Rag – Ragtime Two Step Joplin** arr. Crees 3.22
18. **Le Piccadilly Satie** arr. Crees 1.46
19. **Bethena – A Concert Waltz Joplin** arr. Crees 5.56
20. **General Lavine – excentric Debussy** arr. Crees 4.00
21. **Stoptime Rag Joplin** arr. Crees 3.39

Total playing Time 76:53

THE SYMPHONIC BRASS OF LONDON ★ CONDUCTOR: ERIC CREES

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