BRITTEN PEARS ARTS

Autumn 2026

Friday 27 November 12pm
Peter Pears Recital Room

Duration: 60', with no interval

Friday Lunchtime Concert

London Chamber Soloists

Anna Noakes flute
Robert Smissen viola
Gabriella Dall'Olio harp

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937), arr. Skaila Kanga
Sonatine (1905 / 1994) *14'*

i. Modéré
ii. Mouvement de Menuet
iii. Animé

Mel Bonis (1858–1937)
Scènes de la forêt, Op.123 (1928) *15'*

i. Nocturne
ii. À l'aube
iii. Invocation
iv. Pour Artémis

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)
Sonate, for flute, viola and harp (1915) *15'*

i. Pastorale: Lento, dolce rubato
ii. Interlude: Tempo di Minuetto
iii. Finale: Allegro moderato ma risoluto

Astor Piazzolla (1921–1992)
Libertango (1974)
Oblivion (1982) *10'*

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The combination of flute, viola and harp is most readily associated with Debussy's Sonata at the heart of this recital. But if we zoom out from that work, there emerges a picture in which the use of the harp, especially in chamber music, was at an exciting, even pivotal, stage. We hear Ravel's piano *Sonatine* arranged for these forces by harpist Skaila Kanga, and both Ravel and Debussy were caught up in the competition between instrument manufacturers as to whose harp design would prove most popular, their chamber works proving integral to the outcome.

In 1905 – the year he completed the *Sonatine* – Ravel received a commission from Alfred Blondel, director of the instrument manufacturer Érard. Debussy had recently composed his *Danse sacrée et danse profane* for Pleyel's chromatic harp, and Blondel wanted to see off the competition by showcasing Érard's new double-action pedal harp. Ravel spent eight days and three sleepless nights composing a work to meet this commission, producing the exquisitely crafted *Introduction and Allegro* for harp, flute, clarinet and string quartet – a turning point in the harp's reputation.

Although Ravel and Debussy cannot be held wholly responsible for the success of the pedal harp in relation to the chromatic harp, it is fair to say that Ravel's sumptuous score, compared with Debussy's more demure *Danses*, perfectly fulfilled Érard's wish to promote the instrument. The chromatic harp has long since been overshadowed by the pedal harp, and even by the time Debussy composed his Sonata in 1915, the writing was on the wall. He heard a rehearsal of the work on chromatic harp, but decided that the pedal harp had the power needed to balance the work, choosing it for the premiere and afterwards observing: 'I was able to confirm once more the superiority of the pedal harp over the chromatic harp'.

Ravel had begun writing his *Sonatine* for solo piano in 1903 but had to set it aside while prioritising other work, as well as travel. When he returned to the piece in 1905, it represented an intriguing contrast with his recent and more overtly impressionistic piano work, the sparkling *Jeux d'eau*. Yet the *Sonatine* fulfilled a specific function, partly as an exercise in neoclassical writing, the discipline of which allowed Ravel to refine the combination of structural clarity and expressive fluidity apparent in so much of his output. He would return to neoclassicism in works such as the *Tombeau de Couperin*, a tribute to friends lost in the First World War, this understated language making a touching tribute.

For all its Classical reference points, the *Sonatine* is full of characteristics typical of Ravel's style, anticipating his *Mother Goose* suite. The first movement's lyrical main theme has a delicate, trickling fluidity underpinned by fragile harmonies, while in the second movement, Ravel took the well-established minuet form and made it his own. The final movement suggests the influence of Debussy's 'Toccata' from *Pour le piano*, Ravel integrating the first movement's theme into swirling, propulsive textures.

Mel Bonis studied at the Paris Conservatoire, where she and Debussy were contemporaries; she won first prize in harmony there in 1880. Over the course of her life, Bonis composed over 300 works, most of them published. *Scènes de la forêt* dates from 1928 and was originally composed for flute, horn and piano, but is frequently performed in the arrangement for flute, viola and harp. It is a dreamy soundscape that seems to conjure up dappled woodland, the harp acting rather like a narrator tying the whole piece together. The 'Nocturne' opens with delicate harp arpeggios, playful flute writing and undulating viola. In the second movement's evocation of the dawn, the harp's sparkling textures set the scene before being joined by the other instruments. The 'Invocation' unfolds with sonorous viola lines answered by the flute, while the finale's vibrant writing for viola and harp, decorated by the flute, reflects the movement's dedication to Artemis – goddess of the hunt.

In 1914, the First World War began to rage. **Debussy** felt the impact acutely: 'I should like to write a "Marche Héroïque" ... but I must say, I regard it as ridiculous to indulge in heroism, in all tranquillity, well out of the reach of bullets.' He never recovered his former *joie de vivre*: 'I am just a little atom crushed in this terrible cataclysm. What I am doing seems so wretchedly small.' This state of mind was exacerbated by his diagnosis with bowel cancer. His previous elan gave way to introspection, a shift audible in three late chamber works (he planned six in total but never got to write them all): the Cello Sonata, the Sonata for Flute, Viola and Harp, both 1915, and the Violin Sonata, finished with great effort in spring 1917.

Yet while these works seem to articulate Debussy's darkening of mood, they were also the product of a change of scene that inspired a renewed enjoyment in composition. In the summer of 1915, he stayed in the village of Pourville, where he found the energy to start writing again, explaining in a letter to a friend: 'The reason I haven't written before is that I'm relearning about music… The emotional satisfaction one gets from putting the right chord in the right place can't be equalled in any of the other arts. Forgive me. I sound as if I've just discovered music. But, in all humility, that's rather what I feel like.'

The Sonata for Flute, Viola and Harp (originally conceived with oboe instead of viola) is pervaded by wistful nostalgia, accentuated by polytonality that is muted rather than astringent. The fragments of melody in the opening 'Pastorale' have an elusive quality, like memories drifting in and out of focus, while the brighter central 'Interlude' is, rather as in Ravel's Sonatine, Debussy's take on the minuet. The sonata concludes with the more vigorous, dramatic finale, but the work's overriding pastoral quality remains. Debussy summed up its emotional ambiguity when he wrote: 'It's terribly sad and I don't know whether one ought to laugh at it or cry? Perhaps both?'

Argentine composer **Astor Piazzolla** studied with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. It was Boulanger who recognised where Piazzolla's real passions lay: in 1954 she urged him to focus on the tango rather than on purely classical forms, observing: 'Here you have the real Piazzolla; Astor, be true to him'. Much of Piazzolla's early music is gritty and uncompromising, but in the 1970s he was encouraged by a European agent to write something more 'airplay friendly'; the *Libertango* was the result. At the time, Piazzolla was performing with a nonet that included electric instruments as well as the composer's own bandoneón (a type of concertina). He wrote this piece, a 'sort of song to liberty' for that group, and many arrangements of the piece have been made since. Dating from 1982, *Oblivion* is one of Piazzolla's most famous works, its mournful melody a stirring example of his 'nuevo tango' style.

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