

18 June 2025

LANG LANG AND THE SYDNEY SYMPHONY



SYDNEY
SYMPHONY
ORCHESTRA

Principal Partner



SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

PATRON Her Excellency The Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC

Founded in 1932 by the Australian Broadcasting Commission, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra has evolved into one of the world’s finest orchestras as Sydney has become one of the world’s great cities. Resident at the iconic Sydney Opera House, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra also performs in venues throughout Sydney and regional New South Wales, and international tours to Europe, Asia and the USA have earned the Orchestra worldwide recognition for artistic excellence.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra’s concerts encompass masterpieces from the classical repertoire, music by some of the finest living composers, and collaborations with guest artists from all genres, reflecting the Orchestra’s versatility and diverse appeal. Its award-winning learning and engagement program is central to its commitment to the future of live symphonic music, and the Orchestra promotes the work of Australian composers through performances, recordings and its commissioning program.

The Orchestra’s first chief conductor was Sir Eugene Goossens, appointed in 1947; he was followed by Nicolai Malko, Dean Dixon, Moshe Atzmon, Willem van Otterloo, Louis Frémaux, Sir Charles Mackerras, Zdeněk Mácal, Stuart Challender, Edo de Waart and Gianluigi Gelmetti. Vladimir Ashkenazy was Principal Conductor from 2009 to 2013, followed by David Robertson as Chief Conductor from 2014 to 2019. Australian-born Simone Young commenced her role as Chief Conductor in 2022, a year in which the Orchestra made its return to a renewed Sydney Opera House Concert Hall.

PERFORMING IN THIS CONCERT

FIRST VIOLINS

Andrew Haveron
Concertmaster
Harry Bennetts
Associate Concertmaster
Sun Yi
Associate Concertmaster
Emeritus
Sophie Cole
Sercan Danis
Claire Herrick
Georges Lentz
Emily Long
Alexandra Mitchell
Alexander Norton
Léone Ziegler
Marcus Michelsen°
Benjamin Tjoo°
Liam Pilgrim†

SECOND VIOLINS

Lerida Delbridge
Principal
Kirsty Hilton
Principal
Wendy Kong
Acting Assistant Principal
Alice Bartsch
Victoria Bihun
Rebecca Gill
Emma Hayes
Shuti Huang
Benjamin Li
Nicole Masters
Robert Smith
Maja Verunica
Caroline Hopson°
Emily Qin°
Riikka Sintonen°

VIOLAS

Tobias Breider
Principal
Justin Williams
Acting Associate Principal
Anne-Louise Comerford
Associate Principal Emeritus
Sandro Costantino
Rosemary Curtin
Stuart Johnson
Felicity Tsai
Leonid Volovelsky
Andrew Jezek°
Ariel Postmus†
Jacqueline Cronin*

CELLOS

Catherine Hewgill
Principal
Leah Lynn
Assistant Principal
Kristy Conrau
Fenella Gill
Timothy Nankervis
Elizabeth Neville
Christopher Pidcock
Noah Lawrence†
DOUBLE BASSES
Kees Boersma
Principal
Dylan Holly
Steven Larson
Richard Lynn
Jaan Pallandi
Benjamin Ward

FLUTES

Emma Sholl
Acting Principal
Carolyn Harris
Emilia Antcliff*
Guest Principal Piccolo

OBOES

Stephane Rancourt*
Guest Principal
Miriam Cooney°
Alexandre Oguey
Principal Cor Anglais

CLARINETS

Francesco Celata
Associate Principal
Christopher Tingay
Alexander Morris
Principal Bass Clarinet

BASSOONS

Todd Gibson-Cornish
Principal
Matthew Wilkie
Principal Emeritus
Fiona McNamara
Noriko Shimada
Principal Contrabassoon

HORNS

Samuel Jacobs
Principal
Euan Harvey
Acting Principal
Marnie Sebire
Rachel Silver

TRUMPETS

David Elton
Principal
Brent Grapes
Associate Principal
Cécile Glémot
Anthony Heinrichs
Isabella Thomas†

TROMBONES

Scott Kinmont
Acting Principal
Nick Byrne
Christopher Harris
Principal Bass Trombone

TUBA

Steve Rossé
Principal

TIMPANI

Mark Robinson
Acting Principal

PERCUSSION

Rebecca Lagos
Principal
Joshua Hill°
Acting Associate Principal
Timpani/Section Percussion
Timothy Constable

HARP

Louisic Dulbecco
Principal
Natalie Wong*

KEYBOARDS / EXTRAS

Catherine Davis*
Guest Principal Piano

Bold Principal

* Guest Musician
° Contract Musician
† Sydney Symphony Fellow

2025 CONCERT SEASON

Wednesday 18 June, 7pm

Concert Hall,
Sydney Opera House

LANG LANG AND THE SYDNEY SYMPHONY

INDULGE IN FRENCH ROMANTICS

BENJAMIN NORTHEY conductor
LANG LANG piano

LILI BOULANGER (1893–1918)
D'un Matin de printemps (Of a Spring Morning) (1918)

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862–1918)
La Mer – Three Symphonic Sketches (1903–1905)
i. *De l'Aube à midi sur la mer* (From dawn to noon on the sea)
ii. *Jeux de vagues* (Play of waves)
iii. *Dialogue du vent et de la mer* (Dialogue of the wind and the sea)

INTERVAL

CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS (1835–1921)
Piano Concerto No.2, Op.22 (1868)
i. Andante sostenuto
ii. Allegro scherzando
iii. Presto

Pre-concert talk
By Zoltán Szabó in the
Northern Foyer at 6.15pm

Estimated durations
Boulanger – 5 minutes
Debussy – 25 minutes
Interval – 20 minutes
Saint-Saëns – 25 minutes

The concert will run for
approximately 90 minutes

Cover image
Lang Lang performing
with the Sydney Symphony
Orchestra in 2019
Photo by Rae Strum

Principal Partner



NEW SYDNEY SYMPHONY RECORDING

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Sydney Morning Herald

RELIVE THE MAGIC OF THIS LANDMARK EVENT IN AUSTRALIAN MUSIC

Simone Young’s tenure as Chief Conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra began in resounding style in July 2022, with unforgettable performances of Mahler’s *Symphony No.2, Resurrection*, and *Song of the Earth* by First Nations composer William Barton.

Broadcast live around the world, this concert also marked the reopening of the Sydney Opera House Concert Hall after two years of extensive renovations.

Now you can relive the magic of that landmark event in your own home, with its release on vinyl, CD and digital via Deutsche Grammophon – the first time an Australian orchestra has been released exclusively on the famous yellow label in its 127-year history.



Available for sale in the Southern Foyer,
or scan the QR code for purchase, streaming
and download options.



YOUR CONCERT AT A GLANCE

LILI BOULANGER (1893–1918)
D'un Matin de printemps (1918)

A composer of great promise tragically unfulfilled, Lili Boulanger composed her evocation of a spring morning shortly before her death at the age of 24 in 1918. This five-minute work shows an unerring sense of orchestral colour and instrumental idioms.

The year 1918 saw the beginning of the 'Spanish' flu pandemic in Kansas, the end of World War I and Australia's first electric train.

Contemporary music included Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale*, Holst's *The Planets*, and Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*.



1913 photograph of Lili Boulanger by French photographer Henri Manuel (1874–1947)

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862–1918)
La Mer – Three Symphonic Sketches (1903–1905)

Debussy's 'Three symphonic sketches' are not intended as pictorial music, though it is hard not to be struck by images of the sea in various moods. It is also a masterpiece of formal design, clothed in Debussy's radiant and transparent orchestration.

It was completed and premiered in 1905, the year that saw an unsuccessful uprising against the Russian Tsar, a federal US law to regulate monopolies, and the first celebration of Empire Day in Australia.

Contemporary music included Webern's *Langsamer Satz*, Sibelius' *Violin Concerto* and Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro*.



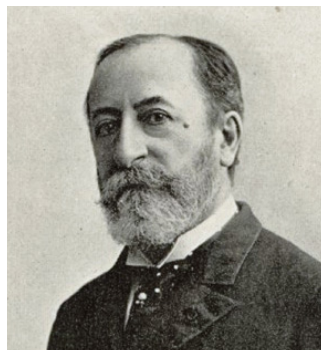
Photograph of Debussy by Atelier Nadar (the studio of Nadar) of Paris, c. 1900.

CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS (1835–1921)
Piano Concerto No.2, Op.22 (1868)

Each of the three movements of Saint-Saëns' most popular concerto is a little faster than one before, contribute to a mounting sense of excitement after the piano's opening, improvisatory flourish.

It was written and first performed in 1868, the year that saw the Meiji Restoration in Japan, the Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution (defining citizenship), and the last boatload of British and Irish convicts sent to Australia.

Contemporary music included Brahms' *A German Requiem*, Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and Bruckner's *First Symphony*.



Camille Saint-Saëns c.1880, photo by Charles Reutlinger (1816–81). Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France/ Wikimedia Commons.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

BENJAMIN NORTHEY conductor

Australian conductor Benjamin Northey is the Chief Conductor of the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra, Conductor in Residence of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and Principal Conductor, Artistic Advisor – Learning and Engagement of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. From 2019-2023 he was the Principal Conductor in Residence of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, having previously held the posts of Associate Conductor (2010-2019), Resident Guest Conductor of the Australia Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra (2002-2006) and Principal Guest Conductor of the Melbourne Chamber Orchestra (2007-2010).

As of 2025 he is the Artistic Director of the Australian Conducting Academy, a national training program for Australian and New Zealand conductors.

Northey studied conducting at Finland's Sibelius Academy with Professors Leif Segerstam and Atso Almila after being accepted as the highest placed applicant in 2002. He completed his studies at the Stockholm Royal College of Music with Jorma Panula in 2006 before returning home to Australia, where he has become one of the most sought-after conductors in the Asia-Pacific region.

He previously studied conducting with John Hopkins OBE at the University of Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, graduating with a Master's degree in 2002. In 2009/10 he was invited as one of three conductors worldwide to participate in the Allianz International Conductor's Academy with the London Philharmonic Orchestra and the Philharmonia Orchestra, where he was mentored by Vladimir Jurowsky and Christof von Dohnányi.

Northey appears regularly as a guest conductor with all the major Australian symphony orchestras. His opera credits include *La bohème*, *Turandot*, *L'elisir d'amore*, *Don Giovanni*, *Così fan tutte*, *Carmen* (Opera Australia), *Sweeney Todd* (New Zealand Opera), *La sonnambula*, *L'elisir d'amore*, *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* (State Opera South Australia) and *Candide*, *Into the Woods* (Victorian Opera).

His international appearances include concerts with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, the Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra, the Mozarteum Orchestra Salzburg, the Hong Kong

Philharmonic, the National Symphony Orchestra of Colombia, the Malaysian Philharmonic and the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra.

Northey has collaborated with a broad range of leading artists including Pinchas Zukerman, Maxim Vengerov, Anne-Sofie von Otter, Julian Rachlin, Karen Gomyo, Piers Lane, Alban Gerhardt, Johannes Moser, William Barton, Lu Siquing, Amy Dickson, Slava Grigoryan, Marc-André Hamelin, James Morrison, Kurt Elling, Archie Roach, Ben Folds, Nick Cave & Warren Ellis, Paul Grabowsky, Tim Minchin, kd Lang, Patti Austin, Kate Miller-Heidke, Megan Washington, Barry Humphries, Meow Meow and Tori Amos.

Northey is highly active in the performance and recording of new Australian orchestral music, having premiered dozens of major new works by Australian composers. He has also been active in music education and training through concerts and workshops for the Melbourne, West Australian and Sydney Youth Orchestras, the Australian National Academy of Music, the Australian Youth Orchestra, the University of Melbourne Conservatorium of Music and Monash University.

An ARIA Awards, AIR Music Awards, and Art Music Awards winner, he was voted *Limelight Magazine's* Australian Artist of the Year in 2018. Northey's many recordings can be found on ABC Classics.

In 2025, he conducts the Melbourne, Sydney, Queensland, Tasmanian and Christchurch Symphony Orchestras and the Hong Kong Philharmonic.



Photo by Laura Manariti

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

LANG LANG piano

Lang Lang is a leading figure in classical music today – as a pianist, educator, and philanthropist, he has become one of the world's most influential and committed ambassadors for the arts in the 21st century. Equally happy playing for billions of viewers at the 2008 Olympic Opening Ceremony in Beijing, the 2020 Dubai EXPO Opening Ceremony, the 2024 Reopening of Notre Dame in Paris or just for a few hundred children in public schools, he is a master of communicating through music.

Heralded by *The New York Times* as 'the hottest artist on the classical music planet,' Lang Lang plays sold-out concerts all over the world. He has formed ongoing collaborations with conductors including Sir Simon Rattle, Gustavo Dudamel, Daniel Barenboim, and Christoph Eschenbach, and performs with all the world's top orchestras. Lang Lang is known for thinking outside the box and frequently steps into different musical worlds. Millions of viewers watched his performances at the Grammy Awards with Metallica, Pharrell Williams and jazz legend Herbie Hancock.

Lang Lang's passion for innovation has led him to exciting collaborations beyond classical music. He has worked with global pop icons such as Ed Sheeran, John Legend, Rose from BLACKPINK, J Balvin and Jay Chou, bringing classical music to new and diverse audiences. He also collaborated with Disney, blending his classical artistry with the magic of Disney, further expanding his reach.

For about a decade, Lang Lang has contributed to musical education worldwide. In 2008, he founded the Lang Lang International Music Foundation, aimed at cultivating tomorrow's top pianists, championing music education at the forefront of technology, and building a young audience through live music experiences. In 2013, Lang Lang was designated by the Secretary-General of the United Nations as a Messenger of Peace, focusing on global education.

Lang Lang started playing the piano at age three and gave his first public recital before the age of five. At age nine, he entered Beijing's Central Music Conservatory and won First Prize at the International Tchaikovsky

Competition for Young Musicians at 13. He subsequently went to Philadelphia to study with legendary pianist Gary Graffman at the Curtis Institute of Music. He was seventeen when his big break came, substituting for André Watts at the Gala of the Century, playing Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Christoph Eschenbach; he became an overnight sensation, and the invitations started to pour in.

Lang Lang's boundless drive to attract new audiences to classical music has brought him tremendous recognition: he was presented with the 2010 Crystal Award in Davos and was picked as one of the 250 Young Global Leaders by the World Economic Forum. He is also the recipient of honorary doctorates from the Royal College of Music, the Manhattan School of Music and New York University. In December 2011, he was honoured with the highest prize awarded by the Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China and received the highest civilian honours in Germany (Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany) and France (Medal of the Order of Arts and Letters). In 2016, Lang Lang was invited to the Vatican to perform for Pope Francis. He has also performed for numerous other international dignitaries, including four US presidents and monarchs from many nations.



Photo by Olaf Heine

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT FRENCH MUSIC

Paris and Vienna vied for musical superiority in the first decades of the century. In Vienna Schoenberg and his pupils sought ways to go even further beyond the extreme state conjured by Mahler; in Paris, Debussy and Ravel had found ways to write music ‘without sauerkraut’ – Erik Satie-speak for ‘uninfluenced by Wagner’. Stravinsky, marooned in Paris by the Russian Revolution, soon came to dominate the city’s musical skyline, his neoclassical idiom becoming the *lingua franca* for the generation of composers which included Poulenc and Milhaud.

The roots of Parisian independence from Vienna, and ‘German’ music more broadly, go much farther back – the poet WH Auden once remarked that in order to understand the 19th century, one needs to understand Berlioz. The composer’s enthusiasm for Shakespeare, Goethe, Gluck and Beethoven enabled him to transform the face of French music, turning away from the stricter formal ideas that characterised Viennese classicism and cultivating the native tradition of sensual and pictorial depiction that goes back to the French Baroque.

Late 19th-century French artists, such as Baudelaire, were therefore ready to embrace Wagner and his heady mix of sensuality and apparent spontaneity.

Not all composers swallowed the ‘music of the future’ – Saint-Saëns, for instance, loved Liszt but produced a flexible harmonic language and lucid orchestral palette which looks to the 18th-century Classicists for a sense of coherent form. Another escape from Germanness came from the exploration of the music of Spain, as we find later in the music of Ravel, not only in the explicitly-titled pieces, but in a work like the G major Piano Concerto, originally planned as a ‘Basque fantasy’.

In the works of Boulanger and Debussy on this program we hear music that echoes Baudelaire’s motto to ‘paint, not the thing, but the effect it creates.’

ABOUT LILI BOULANGER

The Boulanger household must have been quite something. Ernest Boulanger, the son of a storied cellist father and famous soprano mother, taught singing at the Paris Conservatoire, where he met his Russian-born wife, singer (and countess) Raïssa Mischetsky. An elderly man at the time of his daughters’ birth, Ernest had won the Prix de Rome for composition in 1835. The Boulanger daughters, Nadia and Lili (Marie-Juliette) studied with some of the greatest instrumentalists of the day; they were even more gifted composers. The family’s numerous illustrious friends included Gabriel Fauré, who would read through his newly composed songs at the Boulanger home. Lili was in mostly poor health throughout her short life; Nadia gave up composing soon after Lili’s death, but went on to become an influential mentor to several generations of composers and performers from around the world, and a tireless advocate of her sister’s work.



1913 photograph of Lili Boulanger by French photographer Henri Manuel (1874–1947)

ABOUT THE MUSIC

In 1913 Lili made history as the first woman to win the Prix de Rome with the cantata *Faust et Hélène*. The first woman to enter the competition was Hélène Fleury in 1904. Nadia Boulanger entered it four times beginning in 1906, but neither she nor Fleury were ever awarded the prize, merely the honour of being 'second runner-up'. Scholars Annegret Fauser and Richard Taruskin suggest that Nadia failed to win, at least on one occasion, partly because of her assertive nature, and for having 'written the customary fugue for string quartet instead of chorus' thus providing the judges with an excuse to avoid giving it to a woman. They suspect that in *Faust et Hélène*, being deliberately non-threatening, Lili overrode the judges' prejudices.

Sadly, Lili Boulanger's one opera *La princesse Maleine* was left incomplete, but there are several important vocal pieces including a song-cycle *Clairières dans le ciel*. The series of larger-scale sacred works from the last years of her life – the years of the First World War – give a glimpse of what might have been. These include settings of Psalm 24 ('The earth is the Lord's'), Psalm 130 ('Out of the depths') and the *Vieille prière bouddhique* (a prayer for peace from the *Visuddhimagga*). Boulanger's last work was another heartbreaking prayer for rest (and perhaps, at the same time, a gently rivalrous tribute to Fauré): a setting of the *Pie Jesu* from the Mass for the Dead, for voice, organ, harp and string quartet. Lili Boulanger died at the age of 24.



Nadia and Lili Boulanger, photographed in 1913.
Source: Agence Meurisse.

ABOUT *D'UN MATIN DE PRINTEMPS*

D'un matin de printemps exists in several versions; as an orchestral work it is frequently paired with *D'un soir triste*, both of which demonstrate Boulanger's early and distinctive command of orchestration. There are two chamber versions, dating from 1917, which are essentially identical, both drawing out the energetic melodic material around which all versions coalesce. The orchestral version was made by the composer early in 1918 not long before she died and the war in Europe ended.

This spring morning is conjured at first by a fast tempo, insistently repeated high string chords and a skipping theme full of dotted rhythms and ebullient scales, stated first on two flutes in unison, who soon hand over to a high-lying cello line. As in the Nocturne, Boulanger displays a flexible approach to key-centres, using sequences to move the material from one to another, and makes small but ingenious changes to rhythmic motifs. A passage of simple lines and 'mysterious' chords leads to a new lyrical section that features the darker tones of low-register woodwinds. While using a fairly large orchestra Boulanger – following Debussy – never over-upholsters her material. She constantly varies the palette, leaving plenty of sonic space for solo writing from bassoon, horn, and violin, and creating real effect when she does bring the full tutti together. These two contrasting manners then contend, throwing off short motifs that are developed, and leading to a louder and more fully-voiced version of the opening material as the work ends.

Boulanger's orchestral version of *D'un Matin de printemps* is scored for 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, cor anglais, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons and contrabassoon; 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones and tuba; percussion, harp, celeste and strings.

It was premiered on March 13 1921 – almost exactly three years after her death – at the Paris Conservatoire with the Concerts Pasdeloup orchestra, conducted by René-Emmanuel Baton, known as Rhené-Baton.

This is the work's Sydney Symphony premiere.



Photograph of Debussy by Atelier Nadar (the studio of Nadar) of Paris, c. 1900.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Born near Paris in 1862 to a family in modest circumstances, Debussy began learning music at the age of seven and by ten years old was admitted to the Paris Conservatoire where he spent, on and off, 12 years studying. In the 'off' periods during the early 1880s he served as in-house pianist to Nadezhda von Meck, Tchaikovsky's patron; for Meck and himself to play, Debussy produced a number of two-piano reductions of works by Tchaikovsky, Saint-Saëns and others.

Like most of the canonical French composers Debussy applied for the Prix de Rome, failed on his first attempt, was runner-up on his second but, on his third, won. 'My heart sank,' he confessed. 'I had a sudden vision of boredom and of all the worries that inevitably go together with any kind of official recognition.' Nevertheless, in January 1885 he arrived in Rome where he would be accommodated in the Villa Medici, hated it, and spent the bare two-year minimum there. But while in Rome he did meet Liszt and Verdi, and it is from this time that his brief but consequential love of Wagner's music dates.

Debussy's near contemporary, Erik Satie, took credit for persuading Debussy to write music 'without sauerkraut' – in practice that meant abandoning several features of the Austro-German tradition including what we might call 'goal-directed structures' such as symphonic forms that move away from and back to a tonal centre, and the rich upholstery of late-Romantic orchestration.

Debussy's credo would become 'there is no theory; pleasure is the law', composing works that explored moments of sensual beauty with no – apparent – urgency to develop a musical argument, but we should be wary of simply assuming that his works are illustrative. And we should certainly avoid comparisons with 'what imbeciles call Impressionism' (as Debussy put it) in painting, which after all gained notoriety while the composer was still in short pants. Like Beethoven in the *Pastoral* Symphony, Debussy's musical response to the world was one of 'feeling rather than painting'.

He was more drawn to the literary ideas of Symbolisme, and such works like Stéphane Mallarmé's dreamy 'Afternoon of a Faun' would inspire one of Debussy's most characteristic works of erotic languor. One of Debussy's objections to Wagner was that 'symphonic development and character development can never unfold at exactly the same rate'. In *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Debussy allows the text to dictate its own speed. The vocal lines are as simple and fluid as Gregorian chant. The harmony and orchestral writing, honed in such works as the *Prélude à 'L'après-midi d'un faune'* and the *Nocturnes*, responds with infinite subtlety to the emotional fluctuation of the texts.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT *LA MER*

Debussy's music is never intended as visual imagery, or the soundtrack to some imaginary film. (This is what Debussy's colleague Satie was burlesquing when he praised *La Mer*'s first movement, 'From dawn to noon on the sea', by saying he particularly liked the bit 'around a quarter to eleven.')

The composer may have invited such misinterpretations: in titling the work 'Three symphonic sketches' he of course evokes the media of visual art; moreover, he often used terms like 'colour' and 'shading' when discussing his music. But in 1903, when he began work on *La Mer*, Debussy wrote to a friend from the Burgundian countryside:

You may not know that I was destined for a sailor's life, and that only chance led me in another direction...You will say that the ocean does not exactly bathe the hills of Burgundy, and my seascapes may be studio landscapes, but I have an endless store of memories, and in my mind they are worth more than reality, whose beauty often weighs heavily on the imagination.

The work, then, is about the *idea* of the sea rather than being a representation of it; significantly, much of the composition of the work took place away from the coast.

Debussy's genius for orchestration and subtle rhythmic organisation certainly make for an evocative work where it is possible to imagine the crash of waves, the call of seagulls and the protean movement of light on water. The final climactic moments of the first movement, for instance, somehow create a sense of emerging from the deep into the light.

Other masterly touches abound: the unusual timbre of cellos divided into four parts; the use of muted horns (which Debussy admitted to taking from the music of Weber) to evoke space; the soloistic use of wind instruments and harp.



The Great Wave off Kanagawa (1831) by Japanese artist Hokusai.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

But *La Mer* is as much ‘symphonic’ as it is ‘sketch’. Its three movements are by no means simply rhapsodic, but rather show Debussy’s subtle and careful approach to form. In the first movement his careful development of short motifs is perfectly symphonic; the second movement, ‘Play of Waves’, is, among other things, a symphonic scherzo; and the third movement – which has one of the rare ‘big finishes’ of any work by this composer – is a symphonic finale. (This movement, with its references back to the first, also shows Debussy’s adherence to the notion of cyclical form which he learned from César Franck and applied in such works as his String Quartet.)

The pianist and Debussy expert Roy Howat has also shown how Debussy’s structure corresponds to the ancient Greek idea of the Golden Section where a line is divided so that the ratio of the shorter portion to the longer portion forms the same ratio as the longer portion does to the whole length. (The façade of many a classical temple is built such that the ratio between its height and width corresponds to these divisions.) By applying this formula to time, a composer can plot where significant events (changes of speed, colour moods or metre) will have the greatest dramatic effect. Howat has argued persuasively that the moment in the last movement of *La Mer* where the violins play a soft, impossibly high harmonic represents the Golden Section of the piece.

By a nice paradox, Debussy’s marvellous musical reflection on the constant flux of the sea is achieved by the most painstaking and careful calculation. Not for nothing did the published score carry the intricately designed woodcut *The Great Wave* by the Japanese artist Hokusai.

Debussy’s *La Mer* is scored for 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, cor anglais, 2 clarinets and 3 bassoons and contrabassoon; 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 2 cornets, 3 trombones and tuba; timpani, percussion, 2 harps and strings.

The premiere was given on 15 October 1905 in Paris, by the Orchestre Lamoureux conducted by Camille Chevillard.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra first performed the work on 8–10 April 1948, led by Chief Conductor Eugene Goossens.

Notable performances include those conducted by Alceo Galliera (1951), Nicolai Malko (1957), Moshe Atzmon (1969), Willem van Otterloo (1973), Charles Mackerras (1978), Louis Frémaux (1979), Okko Kamu (1985), Stuart Challender (1989), Mark Elder (1994), David Zinman (1998), Gianluigi Gelmetti (2005), Thomas Dausgaard (2011), Vladimir Ashkenazy (2013) and David Robertson (2015).

Our most recent performances were in 2022, under Asher Fisch.

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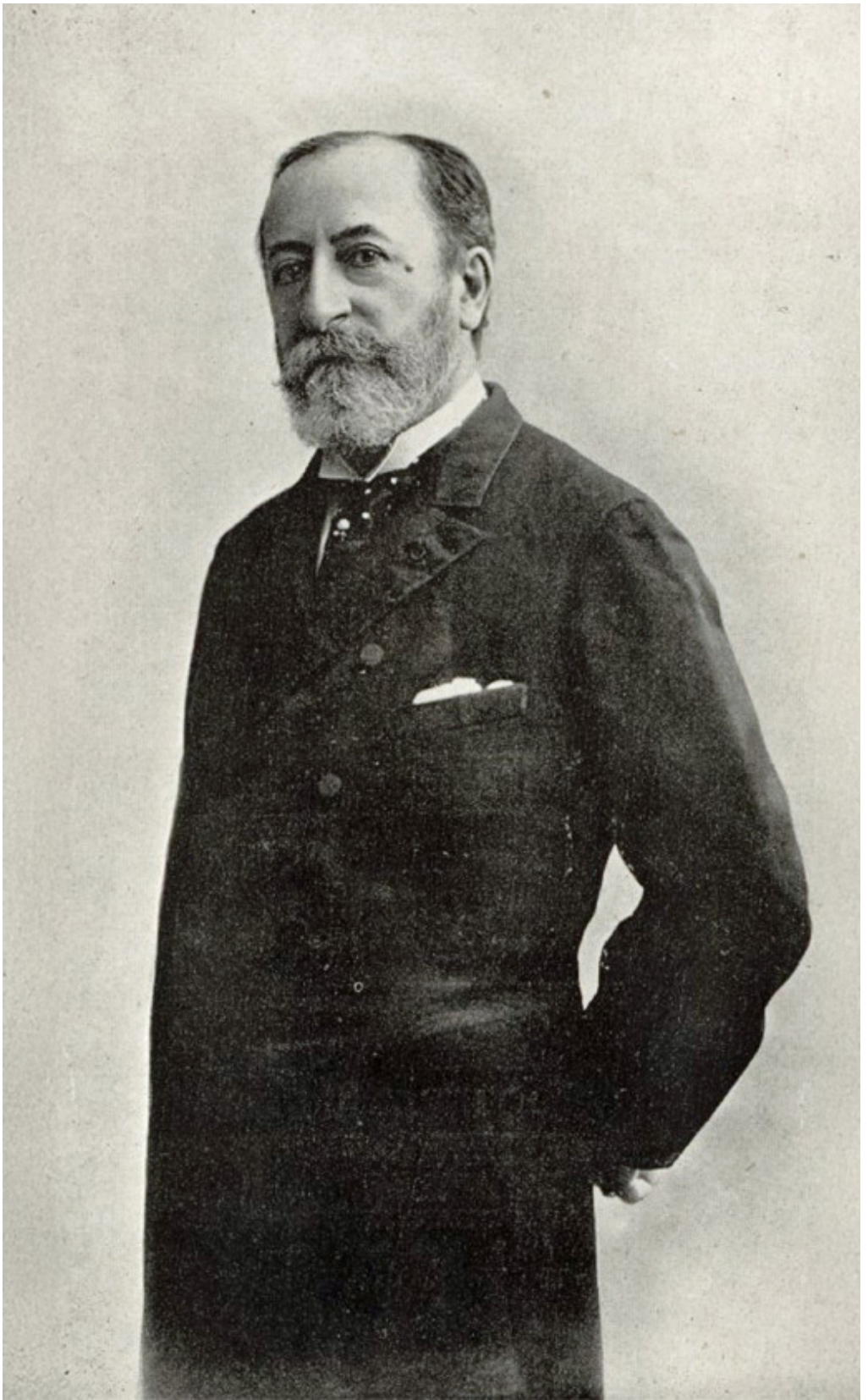
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SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Principal Partner
Emirates



Camille Saint-Saëns c.1880, photo by Charles Reutlinger (1816 -81). Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France/Wikimedia Commons.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS

The Paris that we – those of us that don't actually live there, that is – all love in the springtime came into being in the 1860s. After a cycle of revolution and reaction, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte was elected President of the French Republic on the abdication and flight of Louis-Philippe, King of the French, in 1848. In 1851 he staged a coup d'état, becoming President for Life; the following year he had himself crowned Emperor Napoléon III, a title he held until deposed during the debacle of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870. From dictatorial beginnings, Napoléon III's regime became progressively more liberal in its politics from about 1860. The 'Second Empire' was, moreover, a time of huge renovation in Paris: Hausmann oversaw the demolition of medieval slums and the creation of those boulevards and avenues which give the city its spacious character; part of a fever of new construction, now-iconic buildings such as the Gare du Nord, L'Opéra and the Trinité church appeared. This fusion of modernism and classicism is evident in the visual arts – this is the period of the Realist painters like Corot, Manet and the young Degas – and perhaps, too, in music.

Saint-Saëns began his studies at the Paris Conservatoire in 1848, so by the late 1860s was in the period of his early maturity as an artist. From 1857 he had been organist at the Madeleine; in 1861 he took up a teaching position at the Ecole Niedermeyer. (Niedermeyer, the school's founder, was determined to train musicians who were able to build on the long traditions of Catholic church music; he had written a treatise on how 'modern harmony is submitted to the form of the ancient modes', another case of the fusion of modern and classical ideas.)

Balancing his classicism, of course, is Saint-Saëns' mastery of Romantic opera in *Samson et Dalila*, his distinction in being possibly the first composer to provide a through-composed score for film, the 1908 *The Assassination of the Duc du Guise*, and the sharply witty humour of his Grand Zoological Fantasy – *The Carnival of the Animals*.

At the Ecole Niedermeyer Saint-Saëns met the young student composer Gabriel Fauré, beginning a life-long friendship. Debussy and Saint-Saëns, by contrast, loathed each other, but writing as his alter-ego Monsieur Croche in 1903 Debussy observed that a

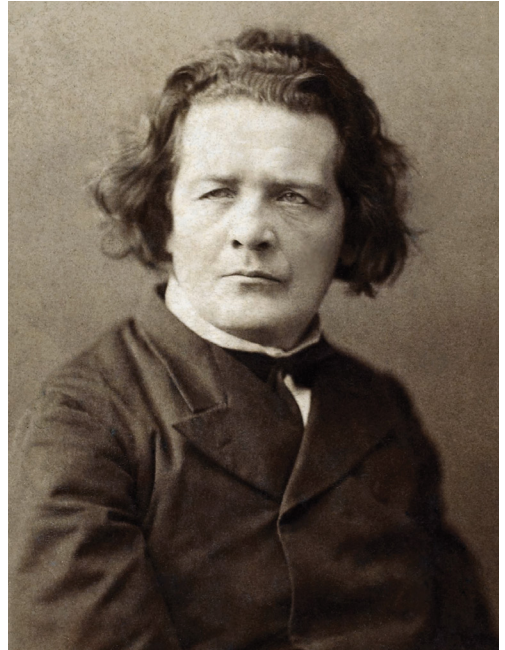
scientific approach to music has meant that Saint-Saëns will never allow himself to overload his music with too many of his personal feelings. We are indebted to him for having recognized the tumultuous genius of Liszt, and we should remember that he professed admiration for old Bach at a time when such an act of faith was also an act of courage.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

ABOUT THE PIANO CONCERTO NO.2

Debussy was, of course, a small child when Saint-Saëns' Piano Concerto No.2 appeared in 1868, but M Croche's remarks are pertinent to it. The piece was composed in 17 days, when at the last minute Saint-Saëns was invited to perform a concerto with visiting Russian conductor Anton Rubinstein. One wag has noted that it 'starts with Bach and ends with Offenbach', a *bon mot* that illustrates the concerto's fusion of Baroque and 19th century sensibilities. It also recognizes one of Saint-Saëns' structural innovations in this piece: each movement is notably faster than the one before.

A church organist was expected to be able to improvise, and organists who were also composers, like Bruckner and Saint-Saëns, regarded improvisation as an important skill. While we don't, sadly, have any recording of Saint-Saëns improvising at the keyboard, the opening of his second Piano Concerto might give us a hint of how that might have sounded. The expansive opening flourish for piano over a pedal note is seriously Bachian; one can almost imagine Saint-Saëns trying it out on the instrument at the Madeleine. (Saint-Saëns' later said of Bach and Mozart that 'as high as their expression may soar, their musical form remains supreme and all-sufficient'.) The orchestra's tutti entry breaks any Baroque spell, however, and leads into the main body of the movement. The principal theme of this movement is a melody written by Saint-Saëns' student Gabriel Fauré (according to Fauré's account) for a discarded setting of the hymn *Tantum ergo* (the words, from St Thomas Aquinas' *Pange lingua*, are traditionally sung in the liturgy of Benediction; Fauré made several settings of the text).



Anton Rubinstein, whose visit to Paris inspired the concerto.
Photo by J Ganz.

The central scherzo has become one of Saint-Saëns' best known pieces. And, just as the composition had been rushed, the concert at which the concerto was premiered was woefully under-rehearsed, but the critics and audience all loved the scherzo. It is arguably the most 'Offenbachian' movement in its light step, glittering scoring and good-humoured themes. The faster final movement is a tarantella in all but name, mounting in speed and intensity and with hints, in certain harmonic sequences, of the *Danse macabre* of six years later.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

The Concerto is in many ways a document of artistic life in Second Empire Paris. It also brings together Saint-Saëns' trailblazing interest in the baroque with the 'tumultuous genius' of the nineteenth-century concerto, and demonstrates the immaculate craftsmanship for which Saint-Saëns is rightly celebrated. Indeed Liszt himself praised the fact that Saint-Saëns had not compromised either his compositional rigour or his pianistic virtuosity.

Gordon Kerry © 2025, 2008

Saint-Saëns' Second Piano Concerto is scored for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons; pairs of horns and trumpets; timpani, percussion, strings and piano soloist.

It received its premiere in Paris on 13 May 1868, with the conductor as soloist conducted by Anton Rubinstein.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra first performed the work on 9 October 1941, with Ignaz Friedman conducted by Bernard Heinze.

Other notable performances include those with Gordon Watson conducted by Nicolai Malko (1958), Nancy Weir/Willem van Otterloo (1962), Shura Cherkassky/Stuart Challender (1987), Howard Shelley/Edo de Waart (1993), Simon Trpceski/Thomas Dausgaard (2008) and Vadym Kholodenko/Miguel Harth-Bedoya (2015).

Our most recent performances were in March 2023, with Mihhail Gerts conducting Marie-Ange Nguci.

Scoring and history by Hugh Robertson



Saint-Saëns at the piano in 1913, with conductor Pierre Monteux. Source: Agence Rol/Bibliothèque nationale de France.

FROM THE ARCHIVES



2011 – HAPPY BIRTHDAY LANG LANG

2025 will be superstar pianist Lang Lang's fourth visit to the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, having previously made the trip in 2019 (performing Mozart's Piano Concerto No.24, K491, with Chief Conductor David Robertson), 2016 (Grieg's Piano Concerto with Manuel López-Gómez, and a solo recital of Tchaikovsky, Bach and Chopin) and 2011 (Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto under Jahja Ling, a solo recital of Beethoven, Albeniz and Prokofiev, and a masterclass for three young pianists).

That first performance in 2011 took place on 14 June, which also happened to be Lang Lang's birthday. Our Artistic Planning team organised a cake in the shape of a piano, which was presented to Lang Lang on stage at the conclusion of the performance.

We are a few days later this time around, but from all of us at the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, we want to wish Lang Lang a very happy belated birthday for last week!

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