

# Melrose Music Society

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**Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> July 2025, 3pm**

**Noriko Kawai, piano**



James Dillon: *The Book of Elements – Volume IV*

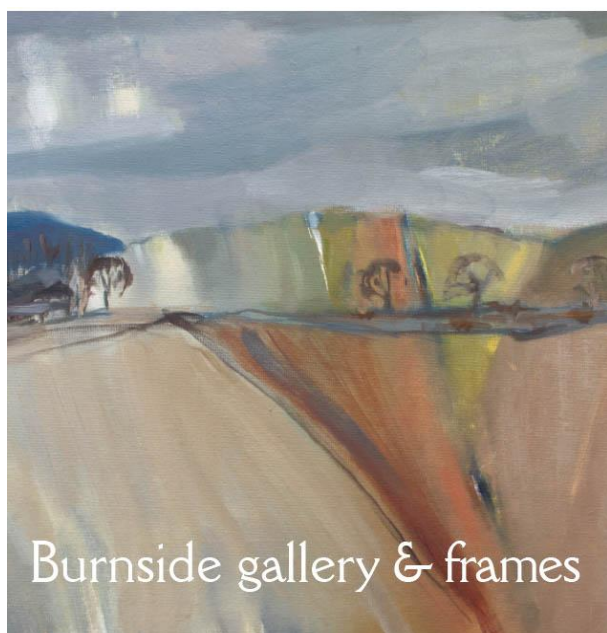
Maurice Ravel: *Gaspard de la Nuit*

Interval

James Dillon: *“echo the angelus”*

Claude Debussy: *Estampes*

Referencing the five elements of oriental cosmology, *The Book of Elements*, composed between 1996 and 2003, is structured by descending prime numbers. The first volume (air) comprises 11 brief pieces inspired by Beethoven's *Bagatelles Opus 119*; the second (water) is seven works; the third (earth) five; and the fourth (fire) three, arranged symmetrically; the last (the void) an extended single piece. Not "fiery" in conventional scorching virtuosity, *Volume IV*, premiered by Rolf Hind in 2002, suggests the fleeting flicker of flames. For Heraclitus, fire was the energy animating all existence. "This cosmos, forever and throughout, was not created by god or man, but always was and is and will be: ever-living fire, kindling in measures and being quenched in measures." Dillon explains, "The opening work begins with distant bell-like chords and gradually opens out, only returning briefly towards the end to the bell sounds of the opening (this time, however, now reduced to single notes). A recursive and static central composition is built around three simple musical elements... The plaintive repetition of this material takes on a mechanical, teasing melancholy and slants any notion of form. The final work of this triptych ... opens (again) with bell-like sonorities but soon begins to display a playful quality..." Its musical ancestry encompasses and fuses William Byrd's *The Bells* from the C16th with Ravel's *Le Gibet* and Debussy's *Cloches à travers les feuilles*, especially, perhaps, Artur Benedetti Michelangeli's controversially fast rendition from 1962.



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Of his suite composed in 1908, Ravel aimed “to say with notes what a poet expresses with words,” the poet being Aloysius Bertrand, who claimed the author of his gothic 1842 collection, *Gaspard de la Nuit* (*Master of the Night*) was actually Satan. Appropriately, Ravel’s work is devilishly difficult to play. *Ondine*, in C# major, evokes the song of a water nymph luring us to a watering grave from her realm at the bottom of a lake. The sounds of water falling and flowing, woven with cascades, is reminiscent of Ravel's earlier piano piece, *Jeux d'eau* (1901), which we heard in our first Ravel and Dillon pairing in May. Pianist Steven Osbourne has said, “technical feats, which would be rather tricky at a moderate volume, here become appallingly difficult because they have to be played almost inaudibly but absolutely evenly. I think this might be the cruellest piece... because the amazing atmosphere... can be broken in a moment if there is a brief lapse of control; it's as if someone gives you a priceless Ming vase then tells you to carry it across black ice wearing slippery shoes... I struggle to understand how a composer of such limited pianistic ability was able to create a work which explores the possibilities of the piano in such a prodigiously creative fashion.” *Le Gibet*, in Eb minor, depicts a dangling corpse at sunset in a lonely desert with a bell tolling from a far-off city. A Bb octave ostinato, imitating the tolling bell in the funeral march of Chopin's 2nd sonata, remains constant throughout as other notes cross over and the dynamics change. The more ostentatiously virtuosic *Scarbo*, in G# minor, represents a fiendish goblin, pirouetting in and out of the darkness, hitting and scratching the walls and bed curtains, casting crazy shadows in the moonlight.





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### James Dillon (b.1950) – “*echo the angelus*”

In memory of the Italian pianist, Michelangeli, whose interpretations of Debussy and Ravel remain unsurpassed, and of the Romanian poet, and Holocaust survivor, Paul Celan, “*echo the angelus*” was composed for Noriko in 2016 and premiered by her on Radio 3 during the 2020 lockdown. The temperamental perfectionist Michelangeli notoriously cancelled as many performances as he gave, saying, “no piano in the world is good enough for Ravel’s *Gaspard de la nuit*.” He travelled with his own Steinway Models C and D, sometimes using both in the same recital. Conductor Sergiu Celibidache witnessed four technicians ‘trying for a whole day to make his instrument playable to his ear, and his consciousness’. Such conflict between an inner ideal and the intractable vagaries of existence are tragically pertinent in the case of Celan, whose reflections on writing after Auschwitz may inform this piece’s disquietingly irregular silences: “Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language... In spite of everything... but it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech... It gave me no words for what was happening, but went through it... and could resurface, 'enriched' by it all.”


Another triptych, but one in which the panels seem mirrored approaches to the same intractable material, “*echo the angelus*” revisits – indeed “echoes” - the resonant bells of *The Book of Elements*. Dillon has said, “I find a frustration with the idea of finishing something. That’s why I write these big cycles. Are there beginnings and ends to things? I don’t know. One of the slightly appalling aspects of looking back on a body of work is how you find your fingerprints all over the place. And maybe you’re moving towards gestures that you’re imprisoned within - certain kinds of finger gestures from which I created three basic kinds of material, one quasi-scale, one chordal, another to do with resonance of the piano itself, shooting them around unpredictably until I’m happy with it. That’s basically the piece, which is very challenging for the pianist.” Tom Service describes Dillon’s music as “fearlessly, relentlessly explorative. To hear it is to confront a volcanic imagination that makes listening an act of thrilling, vertiginous unpredictability.” Yet, his motifs and patterns ineluctably reappear, like Heraclitan fire animating the continuous flux of experience. In his notes on the *Book of Elements*, Dillon writes, “The musical miniature is first and foremost melancholic; a beginning, an everlasting beginning, a miraculous spontaneity. The *Bagatelles* of Beethoven, the piano suites of Schumann, late Brahms and Schoenberg follow a lineage which in some ways may be traceable to the ‘character’ or ‘mood’ suites of the English virginalists (Gibbons, Byrd, Bull). Questions of connection arise: for example, does the mere grouping

together of apparently individual pieces establish a connection beyond their proximity? The musical miniature, with little time to develop, compresses the space for action and traces a gesture that contains its own ‘cut’. The ambiguity and fragility that form a constituent of this lineage will perhaps always carry some of that pleasing sadness associated with abandoned spaces; ruptures exist where the ear might expect coherence.” Dillon’s is a music of paradoxes and oxymora, of speculative becoming and receding rather than confident being, the epic emerging from the miniscule. Listen attentively to hear the wood that forms the trees that form the wood. To quote Heraclitus again, “All things are in flux, the flux subject to a unifying measure or rational principle. This principle (logos, the hidden harmony behind all change) binds opposites together in unified tension, which is like that of a lyre, where a stable harmonious sound emerges from the tension of the opposing forces that arise from the bow bound together by the string.”

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## Claude Debussy (1913-1976) – *Estampes*

*Pagodes      La Soirée dans Grenade      Jardins sous la pluie*

*Estampes* (“prints” or “engravings”), composed in 1903, displays the liberating influence of Ravel’s *Jeux d’eau* on Debussy, who embraced and extended its pianistic impressionism. *Pagodes* was inspired by a Javanese gamelan orchestra he had heard at the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris in 1889. The lack of a leading tone in its pentatonic scale, and the interchangeability of the two- and four-bar phrases, reinforced by the indication *presque sans nuance*, evoke tranquil ripples on a pool, the languid swaying of dancers. *La Soirée dans Grenade* represents the drowsy heat of Spain through the lilting rhythm of the *habanera* and the augmented intervals of the Arabic scale. In contrast, *Jardins sous la pluie* presents a blustery storm through a bustling toccata with sudden harmonic leaps and an incessant rain of 16th notes. Two folksongs, *Nous n’irons plus aux bois* and *Dodo, l’enfant do*, though, suggest - in the words of e e cummings - that childlike rapture “when the world is puddle-wonderful”.



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**Norko Kawai** began piano lessons at the age of 3. Moving to London as a teenager she studied with Phyllis Sellick and Yonty Solomon at the Royal College of Music, London. After graduating from the RCM with the highest honours including the Hopkinson Gold Medal, she then moved to Rome to study with Rodolfo Caporali. She has made world-wide concert appearances as a soloist at Festivals and concert series in Aldeburgh, Bath, Dartington, Huddersfield, Dublin, Paris, Strasbourg, Brussels, Berlin, Rotterdam, Valencia, Alicante, Oslo, Viitassari, Riga, Vilnius, Warsaw, Bludenz, Lausanne, Rome, Macerata, Venice, Sydney, Tokyo, San Diego, New York and Minneapolis. For the British NMC label she has recorded Dillon's *The Book of Elements* and works by Gerald Barry. Her earlier Scriabin recital CD from Live Notes, Japan, was hailed as a major artistic achievement: "rivalling the greats of the so-called Golden Age... one of the great Scriabin recitals on disc." A second Dillon disc for NMC includes chamber music with Irvine Arditti and the Arditti Quartet. She gave the first performance of Dillon's *Andromeda*, with the BBC Scottish Symphony orchestra conducted by Ilan Volkov, in London (BBC Proms 2006) and Glasgow. As well as her concert activities, Noriko has been active teaching, serving as a Professor of Piano at the Royal College of Music, London 2004-08, and associate professor of piano and chamber music at the School of Music, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities between 2007-13.

### **Our Next Concert and Our Next Scottish Premieres**

**Sunday, August 3<sup>rd</sup> 3pm, Michael Kevin Jones, Cello & John Bryden, piano**

We are delighted to welcome back our good friend John Bryden to mark the centenary of Berio's birth with another "book of elements", three delightful piano miniatures. Prize-winning and much recorded cellist, Michael Kevin Jones will give the Scottish premieres of a short piece by Christus and a recently discovered work for solo cello by Rodrigo. Together they will offer up a feast of gorgeous, poignant melodies, culminating in Rachmaninov's great sonata.

Grace Christus:	<i>The Dragon and the Phoenix</i>
Joachin Rodrigo:	<i>Como una Fantasia</i>
Antonio Vivaldi:	<i>Sonata E minor op.14, No.5</i>
Max Bruch:	<i>Kol Nidrei</i>
Daniël van Goens:	<i>Scherzo</i>
Luciano Berio:	<i>Wasserklavier, Erdenklavier, Luftklavier</i>
Sergei Rachmaninov:	<i>Sonata in G minor</i>

## Our Next Piano Recital

### Sunday, September 7<sup>th</sup> 3pm, Patrick Hemmerlé

The maverick French pianist is one of the most talented, idealistic and idiosyncratic musicians alive, somewhat in the mould of Michelangeli. Shunning fame because he prefers the intimacy of small venues, he delights in innovative and stimulating programming. We understand he will become only the second pianist in history to play these two sets of variations at the same concert. In 2013 András Schiff performed them to sell-out crowds at these vast venues: Carnegie Hall, New York; Walt Disney Hall, L.A., and Jordon Hall, Boston. You have the chance to hear them up close and personal in these wonderful acoustics, and on the piano that Martin Roscoe recently said was the best he had played in ages. Just as well, as, unlike Michelangeli, Patrick does not bring his own instruments with him.

Johan Sebastian Bach: *Goldberg Variations*

Ludvig van Beethoven: *Diabelli Variations*

Although we have been putting on concerts of the highest calibre since the 1960s, we remain a very small operation relying entirely on a few volunteers to organise and manage our activities. If you think you might be able to help in any way by, for example, transporting musicians to and/or from Tweedbank or Berwick station, providing overnight accommodation, serving refreshments during the interval, creating publicity materials, putting up posters, please, contact us.

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