

JEAN-YVES THIBAUDET IN RECITAL

23 FEBRUARY 2026

Concert Hall,
Sydney Opera House



Presenting Partner



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WELCOME

Welcome to the first concert in the *International Pianists in Recital Series* for 2026, and to this very special performance of **Jean-Yves Thibaudet in Recital**. We are excited to welcome this wonderful musician back to Sydney for his first performances here since 2018, and his first solo recital since 2006.

Jean-Yves Thibaudet is one of the great pianists of our time – but he is so much more than that. From the earliest days of his career he has eagerly sought music beyond the standard repertoire, often transcribing pieces himself so that he could play them on the piano. His deep and long-lasting professional friendships span the globe and have led to collaborations in film, fashion and the visual arts.

Despite his pilgrim soul, Thibaudet's pianism has always been firmly grounded the repertoire of his homeland – and one of the cornerstones of French piano music is the *Préludes* by Claude Debussy. In these 24 short pieces Debussy paints vivid and evocative images of worlds real and imagined, from the brick and mortar of Granada's famous Wine Gate to more ethereal and intangible *Mists*, *Footsteps in the snow* and *What the west wind has seen*.

As Presenting Partner of the *International Pianists in Recital Series* we are honoured to support the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in its mission to bring world-class artists to our stages. For more than twenty years, Theme & Variations has remained dedicated to nurturing a love of the piano and to presenting artists whose passion and artistry inspire audiences, students and fellow musicians alike.

We believe recitals like tonight's are not only performances but shared experiences that celebrate the enduring power of music to connect us. Jean-Yves' profound musicianship reminds us of the piano's infinite possibilities, and we are delighted you can join us for what is sure to be an unforgettable evening.



Nyree Vartoukian
Co-Founder and Director,
Theme & Variations Piano Services

2026 CONCERT SEASON

JEAN-YVES THIBAUDET IN RECITAL

DEBUSSY'S PRÉLUDES FOR PIANO

Jean-Yves Thibaudet piano

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862–1918)

Préludes, Book 1 (1909–1910)

- I. *Dancers of Delphi*
- II. *Sails*
- III. *The wind in the plain*
- IV. *'The sounds and fragrances swirl through the evening air'*
- V. *The hills of Anacapri*
- VI. *Footsteps in the snow*
- VII. *What the west wind has seen*
- VIII. *The girl with the flaxen hair*
- IX. *Interrupted serenade*
- X. *The engulfed cathedral*
- XI. *Puck's dance*
- XII. *Minstrels*

INTERVAL

Préludes, Book 2 (1911–1912)

- I. *Mists*
- II. *Dead leaves*
- III. *The Wine Gate*
- IV. *'The Fairies are exquisite dancers'*
- V. *Bruyères*
- VI. *General Lavine – the eccentric*
- VII. *The Terrace of Moonlight Audiences*
- VIII. *Ondine*
- IX. *Homage to S. Pickwick, Esq. P.P.M.P.C.*
- X. *Canopic Jar*
- XI. *Alternating Thirds*
- XII. *Fireworks*

Monday 23 February, 7pm

International Pianists in Recital

Concert Hall,
Sydney Opera House

Estimated durations

Book 1 – 45 minutes

Interval – 20 minutes

Book 2 – 40 minutes

The concert will run for
approx. 1 hour and 45 minutes

Cover image

By Andrew Eccles

Jean-Yves Thibaudet's performances with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra have been made possible with support from the Berg Family Foundation.

We acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, the traditional custodians of the land and water on which we work and perform. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present.

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Photo by Elizabeth Caren

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

JEAN-YVES THIBAUDET piano

Through elegant musicality and an insightful approach to contemporary and established repertoire, Jean-Yves Thibaudet has earned a reputation as one of the world's finest pianists. He is especially known for his diverse interests beyond the classical world, including numerous collaborations in film, fashion, and visual art. He is the first-ever Artist-in-Residence at the Colburn School, which awards several scholarships in his name.

Thibaudet opens the 2025–26 season with Saint-Saëns' Piano Concerto No.5 with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam and in Bucharest; he later brings the piece to the Orchestre Philharmonique Royal de Liège, Houston Symphony, National Arts Centre Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte-Carlo, and the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. He performs the Saint-Saëns, alongside Guillaume Connesson's *The Shining One* – composed specifically for Thibaudet – with the Bern Symphony Orchestra. A major contemporary champion of Khachaturian's Piano Concerto, which he recently recorded for Decca, Thibaudet performs the piece with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra and New York Philharmonic in November.

In January, Thibaudet bookends the LA Phil's *Body and Sound* festival with two multisensory works – Scriabin's *Prometheus, the Poem of Fire* and Messiaen's *Turangalîla-Symphonie* – before joining the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra for the world premiere of a new piano concerto by Aaron Jay Kernis. He journeys to Australia to perform Qigang Chen's *Er Huang* with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, followed by Gershwin's Concerto in F with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra – a piece he later brings to the Gothenburg Symphony. He joins the New World Symphony for Leonard Bernstein's Symphony No.2, *The Age of Anxiety* before closing his 2025–26 season with the piece at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

In addition to his orchestral dates, Thibaudet joins violinist Lisa Batiashvili and cellist Gautier Capuçon on a fall trio tour, with stops throughout western Europe; Thibaudet and Capuçon reunite in the spring for a duo recital in California. He also continues his multi-season focus on Debussy's *Préludes*, performing both books in their entirety at recitals around the world.

A prolific recording artist, Thibaudet has appeared on more than 70 albums and six film scores; his extensive catalogue has received two Grammy nominations, two ECHO Awards, the Preis der deutschen Schallplattenkritik, the Diapason d'Or, the CHOC du Monde de la Musique, the Edison Prize and Gramophone awards. Recent recordings include *Khachaturian*, a celebration of the Armenian composer including his Piano Concerto and several solo piano pieces; and *Gershwin Rhapsody*, a selection of Gershwin pieces recorded with Michael Feinstein, including four newly-discovered ones. He is the soloist on Dario Marianelli's recently reissued score for *Pride & Prejudice*, which was certified Gold by the RIAA in 2025; his playing can also be heard on Marianelli's score for *Atonement*, Alexandre Desplat's scores for *The French Dispatch* and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and Aaron Zigman's score for *Wakefield*. His concert wardrobe is designed by Dame Vivienne Westwood.

Jean-Yves writes:

I would like to dedicate my Debussy recital to the memory of Dame Marie Bashir.

I was privileged to meet Dame Marie Bashir at the occasion of one of my concerts in Sydney many years ago. We started a beautiful friendship, and everytime I would be in Sydney she would come to my performance and entertain me at Government House.. She was an extraordinary lady who adored and appreciated music so much. Knowing her was not only a great honor, but it has also immensely enriched my life.

It really saddened me to learn that she has left us – I will greatly miss her, but she will always be remembered.



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

ABOUT THE MUSIC

WHO WAS 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 him 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. But Debussy would never quite shake off the influence; later in life, Debussy – by then a trenchant music critic – could in the same breath lampoon the endless declaiming of the musical tags or leitmotivs in Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, yet pronounce that work a monument 'whose architectural lines stretch far into infinity'; when he complimented Stravinsky on the score of *Petrushka*, he noted 'orchestral certainties such I have only encountered in *Parsifal*'. His rejection of late 19th-century German music extended to the more neoclassical Brahms: listening to a Brahms Symphony, Debussy writes 'ah, the development section, I can go out for a cigarette.'

Debussy remarked that for him Mussorgsky was 'something of a god'. Mussorgsky – and other members of the group known as the Five – experimented with unusual scales (such as the whole-tone and octatonic modes) and provided a model of music that is immediate, sensuous, and unconcerned with large scale process. 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. In his harmony no chord necessarily implies movement to another chord, that the relationship of chord to chord is flexible and ambiguous. In fashioning his melodies, too, Debussy cultivated this principle of ambiguity. His beloved whole-tone scale imparts a fluidity to his melodies; his love of the pentatonic scale suggests mythical, imaginary landscapes; his most famous melody of all, the flute arabesque which begins the *Prelude to 'The Afternoon of a Faun'*, winds hypnotically through half a chromatic scale before settling on B major – the key is almost an afterthought.

Despite his frequent use of allusive titles, 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' or, as he put it in 1886:

As to the kind of music I want to make, I would like it to be flexible enough and sufficiently accented to correspond to the lyrical impulses of the spirit and to the capriciousness of dreams.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

DEBUSSY AND THE PIANO

Debussy was never a virtuoso soloist yet many who were, and many others, remarked on the amazing beauty of his sound. Pianist-composer Alfredo Casella captured the prevailing view saying that:

No words can give an idea of the way in which he played certain of his Preludes. Not that he had actual virtuosity, but his sensibility of touch was incomparable; he made the impression of playing directly on the strings of the instrument with no intermediate mechanism; the effect was a miracle of poetry. Moreover, he used pedals in a way all his own.

In fact Debussy's remarks on pedalling clearly indicate how sensitive he was to the immediate sound of his music in any given environment. Pedalling, he said 'varies from one instrument to another, from one room, or one hall to another...Trust your ear.' Charles Timbrell writes that:

in small halls he usually preferred to play with the lid down. It should also be noted that he preferred rich-sounding German pianos to the thin-sounding French ones of the period. From around 1904 he had a small Blüthner grand in his salon; it was a special model with an extra set of strings placed above the others, permitting an enriched sound through sympathetic vibrations. From about 1907 he had a Pleyel upright in his study, and by 1913 he had also acquired a Bechstein upright.

This suggests that Debussy didn't have a single ideal sound in mind when composing for piano, and that individual pieces, even within groups like the prelude, might have composed with quite different instruments in mind.

ABOUT THE PRELUDES

Debussy's Preludes are in two books of twelve. While some of Book 1 was sketched in 1907 and 1908, the bulk of the work was done in eight weeks in the winter of 1909-10. In both books, the composer wanted the music to speak for itself in the first instance, so the illustrative titles are placed at the end of each score.

Debussy doesn't systematically explore each key, like other composers did in sets of preludes. Indeed there is nothing to suggest that Debussy intended the Preludes to be played only and ever as a set, and yet there are numerous ways in which musical ideas are replicated from one piece to another. Debussy was, after all, a great fan of Schumann's piano music, so the Preludes, like, say, *Carnaval*, assemble contrasting character pieces that are subliminally unified by common elements. The first three pieces, for instance, couldn't be less alike: *Dancers of Delphi* (No.1, depicting the female ritual dancers at the temple of Apollo, as represented by a sculpture in the Louvre) is icily classical, with regular phrases, clear (if richly inflected) tonality and a simple ternary form.

Voiles ('sails' or 'veils', No.2) by contrast is almost entirely based on the ambiguous whole-tone scale except for six pentatonic bars, recalling Debussy's *Pagodes*, at its centre. Yet is in the same basic tempo as the first prelude, and both are anchored to the note B flat, which is sounded as a repeated gong-stroke in the second piece. And B flat is the centre of tonal gravity in the third prelude, *The wind on the plain*, despite that piece's completely different character.

Eric Frederick Jensen has pointed out that many of the Preludes have literary connections: the title of *The wind on the plain* is borrowed from an 18th-century drama by Charles-Simon Favart. The fourth, *Sounds and scents swirl in the evening air*, shows Debussy using the unusual 5/4 metre; its title is a quotation from Baudelaire's *Harmonies du Soir*, and the eighth, *The girl with the flaxen hair*, appears in Leconte de Lisle's *Chansons écossaises* (Scottish Songs), both of which Debussy set to music.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Jensen suggests also that the seventh, *What the west wind saw*, 'may have been inspired by Hans Christian Andersen's tale *The Garden of paradise*', and that the eleventh, *Puck's Dance*, might refer to Shakespeare or Kipling. With its skipping dotted notes, the latter piece, as Simon Tresize has demonstrated, has some of the most complex cross-rhythms in the whole set.

Some evoke a less specific place or event: the fifth, *The hills of Anacapri*, a glittering evocation of Mediterranean light uses a series of discrete gestures that suggest popular song and dance from that part of the Italian coast; the ninth, *The interrupted serenade*, is initially marked 'quasi guitarra', and uses Spanish dance rhythms and 'Moorish' Phrygian-mode melodies to evoke Spain as he does in 'La Soirée dans Grenade'. *Minstrels* represents an early European appropriation of African-American music, introduced to Paris at the turn of the century. Like ragtime, it features duple rhythm with accented offbeats in the left hand.

The tenth prelude is the mostly immediately striking piece: *The submerged cathedral* graphically depicts the Breton legend of Kêr-Ys, a city drowned beneath the ocean waves, whose cathedral bells and chants can be heard sounding in the deep. At the heart of the set, though, is what appears to be the simplest. The sixth prelude, *Footsteps in the snow*, is tiny, and dominated by the simple trudging ostinato (figure D-E, E-F) in nearly every bar. Around this, so slowly and quietly that we barely notice, Debussy weaves a texture using all twelve-notes of the scale. Here is, as Howat notes, 'characteristic irony in his having done that in the most static, ostinato-ridden of all his preludes'.

Like the first book, **Book 2** consists of twelve strongly contrasted pieces, with illustrative or allusive titles 'hidden' at the end of the score. As a whole they are more experimental than Book 1, with more extreme use of dissonance, forms that allow for disjunctions of sound or mood, a more noticeable element of parody, and an intense focus of the sound of the instrument that includes, at times, its percussive qualities. A considerable amount

of the music is written on three staves, making Debussy's conception of the texture, even where quite simple, absolutely unambiguous.

In the opening *Mists*, Debussy establishes his greater interest in polytonality, setting up a pattern, which will recur in various guises through the book, of left-hand harmony that sits mainly on the keyboard's white notes while the right explores black note configurations. *Mists* and *Bruyères* probably don't have a specific literary or visual-art inspiration, but Jensen notes:

Dead Leaves, No.2, may come from the title of a poem by Debussy's friend Gabriel Mourey; the poetic phrase, 'La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune' (The Terrace for Moonlight Audiences, No.7) may have been taken from a very matter-of-fact newspaper article on the coronation of George V.

The other obviously literary source is *Homage to S. Pickwick, Esq. P.P.M.P.C.*, which pays tribute to Charles Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers* with its gentle mockery of the British national anthem.

Several preludes' titles refer to works of visual art: Manuel de Falla once sent Debussy a postcard depicting the Puerta del Vino, or *Wine Gate* (No.3) of the Alhambra palace in the Andalusian city of Granada, (the Spanish name is probably a mistranslation from the Arabic), which accounts for the 'guitar' sounds, the habanera rhythm and the use of the 'Moorish' scale. *Canopic Jar* is a small funeral jar from the ancient Egyptian city of Canopus, hence the work's hieratic feeling.

'*The Fairies Are Exquisite Dancers*' takes its title from an illustration by Arthur Rackham for JM Barrie's *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* (1907), and Jensen suggests that *Ondine* may have been inspired by a Rackham illustration for La Motte-Fouqué's novella, *Undine*, about the dangerous and seductive water-sprite.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

The remaining two prelude evoke, respectively, *General Lavine – the eccentric*, an American music-hall clown that played in Paris from 1910-12 who is depicted in a cakewalk or ragtime idiom, and *Fireworks*, an evocation of Bastille Day fireworks, hence the quotation of *La Marseillaise*.

The feature that unifies these disparate pieces is Debussy's manipulation of harmony – often, as we have noted, in the use of polytonality, where different keys are sounded simultaneously. Roy Howat argues that this interest in bi- and polytonality stems in part from Debussy's admiration for the 'sonorous magic' of Stravinsky's *Petrushka*, and notes 'many allusions' to the younger composer's score. In *Mists*, for instance, there is a fanfare of C-G flat-C which is very close to Stravinsky's famous black-and-white-note fanfare, and at one point the left hand plays a repeated pair of 'mouth-organ' chords such as appear at the end of the ballet. Howat also draws attention to the 'Petrushka-like bitonal arpeggios in *Fireworks*, and 'the opening trumpet-call of *General Lavine – the Eccentric*, echoing the Appearance of the Ballerina in the Third Tableau of *Petrushka*' Howat also hears echoes of *Petrushka* in '*The Fairies are exquisite dancers*'.

In 1913, just before Debussy completed Book 2, he heard a piano rendition of Stravinsky's latest score, *The Rite of Spring*. He would later famously describe it as 'primitive music with all modern conveniences' but at first hearing it was 'a beautiful nightmare' that created a 'terrifying impression.' In the only purely abstract prelude, *Alternating thirds*, No.11, Stravinsky's 'Ritual Action of the Ancestors' can be heard subtly enunciated in the left hand of the piano.

After Book 2 Debussy's productivity waned somewhat, and the reception of certain works like the ballet *Jeux* disappointed him. But, as Pierre Boulez put it, Debussy changed music by allowing 'the fluid and the instantaneous [to] erupt into it.'

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