



LUCERNE FESTIVAL

audite

HISTORIC  
PERFORMANCES



# Armin Jordan

**Debussy** *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*

**Debussy** *Six épigraphes antiques*

**Roussel** *Bacchus et Ariane – Suite No. 2*

**Chausson** *Poème de l'amour et de la mer*

**Dame Felicity Lott**  
**Orchestre de la Suisse Romande**



Claude Debussy (1862–1918)  
*Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* 9:38

Albert Roussel (1869–1937)  
*Suite No. 2 from the ballet Bacchus et Ariane, Op. 43* 19:04

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)  
*Six épigraphes antiques (orch. Ernest Ansermet)*

- I. Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été 2:40
- II. Pour un tombeau sans nom 3:30
- III. Pour que la nuit soit propice 2:21
- IV. Pour la danseuse aux crotales 2:43
- V. Pour l'Égyptienne 3:11
- VI. Pour remercier la pluie au matin 2:12

Ernest Chausson (1855–1899)  
*Poème de l'amour et de la mer*

- I. La Fleur des eaux 12:25
- II. Interlude 2:38
- III. La Mort de l'amour 14:06

Dame Felicity Lott soprano (Chausson)  
 Orchestre de la Suisse Romande  
 Armin Jordan

recorded live at LUCERNE FESTIVAL  
 (Internationale Musikfestwochen Luzern)

Previously unreleased





**Between rapture and control:  
The conductor Armin Jordan**

“Who is playing in the hall?”, a member of the public asked a journalist who was on his way to the upper circle. When told that the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande were rehearsing, he asked whether Ansermet was conducting. “No, Armin Jordan,” came the reply, “do you know him?”. A terse “No” ended their exchange at Symphony Hall Birmingham, where the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande was appearing with its chief conductor Armin Jordan in the late autumn of 1991. To an average concertgoer, the Geneva orchestra and Ernest Ansermet, its founder and music director of nearly fifty years, remained a congruent unity – even two decades after Ansermet’s death.

Armin Jordan, far from feeling burdened, perceived this as a matter of honour, a welcome challenge. When he took up his post in 1985, it was hoped that he would revive the ensemble’s reputation as a flagship of French orchestral culture which it had obtained under Ansermet’s leadership, whilst retaining its extended expertise in the realms of German soundscapes, which the orchestra had acquired under Paul Kletzki, Wolfgang Sawallisch and Horst Stein after Ansermet’s departure in 1967. With this starting position, Jordan was the ideal candidate – for several reasons. Firstly, he was regarded as a genuine representative of Ansermet’s aesthetics. Although he had met his colleague, five decades his senior, only once in person (for a conversation which Jordan remembered as being extremely friendly and insightful), he had attended many of Ansermet’s concerts and studied his recordings. In addition, Jordan was famous for combining the musical traditions of the German-speaking and francophone cultural milieus, forming a unique, not to say true Swiss, synthesis.

Armin Jordan, born in 1932, was truly bilingual. At home in Lucerne and later, after his father’s premature death in 1943, in Fribourg, he spoke French, whilst at primary school he learnt German. After leaving secondary school he was unsure how to continue. He had come into contact with the piano early on and discovered his passion for music as a chorus singer. He was equally attracted by language: initially planning to become a journalist, he entered Fribourg University to read literature. In the end, however, music prevailed and at the age of twenty-three he graduated with a piano diploma. His aim was to become a conductor. He made his debut with André Messager’s *Véronique*, and it was as an opera conductor that he was to build his career – initially at the Municipal Theatre of Biel-Solothurn, then at the opera house in Zurich, at St Gallen, where he was made general music director, and finally, between 1969 and 1989, at Basel where he was engaged as *Kapellmeister* before being appointed music director of the theatre and chief conductor of the symphony orchestra. The sense of departure hailing from the era of the legendary Basel theatre director Werner Düggelin remained unforgotten, but he also paid





tribute to the milestones of the great German repertoire. In 1982 Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's screen adaptation of Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* caused a sensation: Armin Jordan was the music director and also appeared – albeit without singing – as Amfortas alongside Edith Clever, no less, performing the role of Kundry.

Jordan's traversal of French music proved to be just as intensive. In 1973 he became music director of the Lausanne Orchestre de Chambre which he rebuilt from scratch, in 1986 he accepted the post of music director of the Ensemble Orchestral de Paris, and in the French capital he also regularly worked with the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France and the Orchestre National. In Monte-Carlo he appeared with the Orchestre Philharmonique. Significantly, performing French repertoire also led to a close cooperation with the record label Erato, enabling Jordan to build an extensive and comprehensive discography, consolidating his reputation in France. At that time, the record industry was in full bloom, especially after the introduction of the compact disc in the 1980s; Michel Garcin, the music director at Erato, aspired to a fundamental setup, especially in the field of French music and musicians. For this he engaged experienced conductors of the younger generation such as Armin Jordan who recorded, on the one hand, pillars of the repertoire such as Maurice Ravel's *La Valse*, and on the other hand rarities such as the ballet *La Péri* or the *Symphony in C major* by Paul Dukas. Some of these recordings provided surprising insights and caused considerable sensations.

This was the constellation in which Armin Jordan found himself when he was offered the directorship of the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande in 1985. In terms of biographical cornerstones, his development is relatable. More noteworthy seems to be the fact that Jordan's musical bilingualism can also be determined in sound – at least where the process of listening (as that of reading) is also considered as a process of understanding, i.e. as an act of interpreting the interpreted. An example for this is the live recording of Claude Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* from a concert given on 27 August 1988 at the Internationale Musikfestwochen Luzern, today's LUCERNE FESTIVAL. As though magnified under a burning glass, the first ten bars of the piece are indicative of Armin Jordan's musical principles.

The principal flute's introduction is supple and relaxed, with a free approach to tempo but respect for the rhythmic and metric progression, soft-toned and with small vibrato so that there is enough breath for an uninterrupted slur through to the end of this solo in the middle of bar four. There is a sense of individuality which may be perceived as an expression of French art. In fact, however, Jordan always maintained – as did Claudio Abbado or Bernard Haitink – that orchestral music-making was primarily defined by the players, not the conductor: an orchestra without a conductor was perfectly conceivable, according to Jordan, a conductor without an orchestra, on the other hand, would prove more complicated.





The opening flute solo leads into a chord played by the horn and woodwind which is then underpinned by the violas, cellos and double basses. The rich depth of this string entry, the warm sound of the emerging foundation and the subtle, yet sonorous pianissimo – all this is far removed from French aesthetics. Rather, it harks back to Jordan's extensive experience with the music of Richard Wagner which he never depicted with edgy accents and heightened pathos, but rather with a soft brush – with empathy. As Jordan himself pointed out repeatedly, he eschewed sharp, edgy sounds, even in a piece like Igor Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps*.

The sustained chord of the low strings is joined by two horns – in this Lucerne recording, the tuning of the third horn is an acquired taste. Intonation-wise, this passage is famously difficult and sounds unlovely in many recordings, not least in the one made by the perfection fanatic Herbert von Karajan. The intonation problems may be attributed to tension in the concert situation, or they might be an expression of the French playing tradition. When Ernest Ansermet founded the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande in 1918, he travelled to Paris in order to engage French school wind players. In the orchestra's early recordings with Ansermet these wind instruments are easily recognised due to their clear, slightly nasal sound and their characteristic vibrato. At the same time, one can hear how many intonational negligences Ansermet let pass.

When Armin Jordan stepped onto the podium in front of the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, the era of the French hues had long since passed: the international sound had by then stretched as far as, and become prevalent in, Geneva. Nonetheless, by employing and handling colours very deliberately, Jordan created a completely individual idiom for the orchestra. It comes alive through rich colours and euphony without losing any clarity in the compositional texture, and it is grounded on a form of breathing associated with vocal experience. Jordan repeatedly emphasised how inspiring he found it to work with singers and how he was learning from them how to structure musical sequences plausibly. An impressive example of this can be heard in the second suite from Albert Roussel's ballet *Bacchus et Ariane*, also performed and recorded in the summer of 1988 – and incidentally a piece of beautiful French music, rarely performed even today. Jordan has the orchestra make a magnificent entrance whilst ensuring that the structure remains clearly perceptible. He also creates a thrilling sense of drama in this music which, in itself, is only indirectly connected to the plot and content.

Much the same can be said about the *Poème de l'amour et de la mer* by Ernest Chausson, recorded at a Lucerne performance of 20 August 1994. Here we have Jordan, the opera conductor; he looks after Felicity Lott like a *maestro concertatore* – and the singer captivates us not only with her fabulous shaping of the French text, but also with her ravishing vocal performance. Here, the emotional component of the performance appears even more intense than in the studio recording of 2001, made with the same forces. A radical con-





trast to these resplendent musical paintings is provided by Claude Debussy's *Six épigraphes antiques* in Ernest Ansermet's orchestrations which Jordan and the orchestra performed in Lucerne both in 1988 and in 1994. Based on early sketches from around 1900, these short character pieces provide examples of the composer's late works. Originally conceived for piano duo and later condensed into a version for piano solo, Ansermet arranged these pieces – whose compressed writing is reminiscent of Webern – for orchestra, retaining the originals' sense of structural refinement. Armin Jordan's interpretation remains close to the text, although we still experience the generosity of his phrasing, the suppleness in nuancing his tempi and the variety of instrumental colours, contributing their very own flair to the conductor's musical thumbprint.

It is little short of a miracle that all this can be heard here and now: even though the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande enjoyed a very close relationship with the Internationale Musikfestwochen Luzern, it performed there relatively rarely – or at least under its own name. In an attempt to create further sources of income for his musicians (whom he was able to employ for only six months per year), Ansermet had opted to establish a music festival in Lucerne. Thus in the summer of 1938 the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande and the Luzerner Kursaalorchester gave a series of concerts with Ernest Ansermet, but also with conductors such as Fritz Busch, Bruno Walter and Willem Mengelberg: most of these performances were given before the legendary gala concert with Arturo Toscanini and his elite orchestra, the official "hour of birth" of the festival. The fact that following this, the Geneva ensemble did not appear for a long time at Lucerne is doubtless connected to the foundation of the Schweizerisches Festspielorchester (Swiss Festival Orchestra) in 1943 which included members of the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande.

It was to take fifty years after its debut that the Geneva ensemble would be re-invited to Lucerne. The fact that this was with Armin Jordan is of symbolic significance. After half a century with Ernest Ansermet it was the Romand from German-speaking Switzerland who helped the orchestra to gain a new sense of self. His twelve years with the ensemble were a golden era which explains why Jordan, even after retiring from his position as music director in 1997, continued to work regularly with the orchestra in Geneva and Lausanne, not least, incidentally, at the Grand Théâtre de Genève, where the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande flourished in impressive productions under his baton. Revered and loved at his places of work, Armin Jordan was a man who was modest and self-deprecating. He was, however, proud to be made Officer of the Légion d'honneur by the French ambassador to Switzerland in the year 2000.

Peter Hagmann  
Translation: Viola Scheffel



## LUCERNE FESTIVAL

recording: live recording at LUCERNE FESTIVAL (Internationale Musikfestwochen Luzern)  
Previously unreleased



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recording date: August 27, 1988 | August 20, 1994  
recording location: Kunsthhaus, Lucerne  
recording producer: Jürg Jecklin (1988) | Hans-Rudolf Fleischmann (1994)  
sound engineer: Leo Baumann, Stephan Schneider, Lucien Suter (1988) |  
Leo Baumann, Daniel Haberthür (1994)  
producer SRF: Dr. Peter Keller (1994)  
executive producer: Dipl.-Tonmeister Ludger Böckenhoff

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photos: © Priska Ketterer / Archive LUCERNE FESTIVAL: Felicity Lott at the last festival concert given at the old Kunsthhaus (1996)  
© Stadtarchiv Luzern, F2 PA V607/006: Armin Jordan conducts the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande in Lucerne (1988), photograph: Peter A. Meyer, Lucerne

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