Exactly why the piano concerto did not establish itself in France until the mid-19th century cannot be determined precisely – perhaps a combination of factors associated with the political and sociological conditions of the *Ancien Régime* and Revolutionary France inhibited its development there. Whatever the reasons, it was 1858 when Saint-Saëns's first concerto more or less inaugurated the tradition, and this collection highlights the principal works composed during the following century, together with concertante works for piano and orchestra which, although not in the strict sense concertos, represent significant compositions of their composers. A few early examples do however exist: in November 1792 the teenage **François-Adrien Boieldieu** (1775–1834) performed what was advertised as a 'new concerto' in his native Rouen – although its two-movement format perhaps prevents it from truly fulfilling that description – after which he abandoned purely orchestral composition (apart from a harp concerto of 1801) for a career in the theatre and opera house, where he became known as the 'French Mozart'. Since most early Romantic piano concertos were written to display their composers' virtuosity, the relative lack of native-born keyboard virtuosos in the first decades of the 19th century led to a dearth of such works in France. The only significant exception was the remarkable and arguably unique **Charles-Valentin Alkan** (1813–1888) who early in his career produced two works in concerto format: the Concerti da camera Op.10 Nos. 1 and 2 of 1832 and 1833, respectively. Both follow the pattern of Weber's Konzertstück in comprising three linked sections unified by thematic repetition. The First was, until the recent rediscovery of the orchestral parts, known only in Alkan's version for solo piano; the Second, for piano and strings only, became one of Alkan's favourite concert pieces, which he often played with a string quartet. The single-movement Andante con moto for solo piano with string accompaniment *con sordini*, now numbered Op.10/3, dates from May 1838 but is in fact a version of one of the earlier 3 Andantes romantiques Op.13 (1837).

When **Camille Saint-Saëns** (1835–1921) wrote the Concerto in D Op.17 he had the examples of Schumann, Mendelssohn and especially Liszt before him (Brahms's first concerto did not appear until the following year). He had already written three (unpublished) symphonies, and his symphonic approach to the concerto is signalled by the romantic horn calls of its opening bars. The piano collaborates with the orchestra rather than playing a dominant role in the presentation and development of the thematic material, leading one critic to complain that it had become 'no more than [its] whimsical companion', and such role-sharing was to become a feature of his concertos. Also characteristic of his concerto style are the cadenza-like solo passages of the second movement, which although always notated, give the impression of improvisatory interjections placed at various points within, rather than at the end, of a movement. The Concerto in G minor Op.22 was composed at speed to provide a work which he could perform when his friend Anton Rubinstein made his Paris debut as a conductor in May 1868. Although Saint-Saëns claimed to have written it in 17 days, he had almost certainly been contemplating its material for some time – the solemn main theme had already been supplied to him by his pupil Fauré – and so at least some of the composition process would have involved writing down his finished thoughts. Even so, to create, rehearse and perform a work of this length and complexity in three weeks was an astonishing feat, which taxed Saint-Saëns's performing powers and sight-reading ability to the limit. It has been wittily described as progressing from Bach to Offenbach, opening with a long unaccompanied fantasia-like prelude for piano and ending in riotous fashion (although it is the tarantella rather than the can-can that is evoked by the finale) with an intervening Mendelssohnian scherzo which was (and is) its most popular movement. The Concerto in E flat Op.29 received a mixed reception at its premiere at the Leipzig Gewandhaus in November 1869: the audience was disconcerted by the uncertain tonality of the second movement, notwithstanding the allusion to *Tristan und Isolde*, and made its dissatisfaction apparent. The Concerto in C minor Op.44 of 1875 is the most innovatively structured of his five concertos: its two movements can be divided into four sections mirroring the structure of a symphony, with each section in turn replicating the introduction, development and recapitulation format of a sonata-form movement.

After his fourth concerto, Saint-Saëns abandoned the format for 20 years (apart from the Op.61 work for violin of 1880) although he did compose a number of concertante works in the 1880s. The *Rhapsodie d'Auvergne* of 1884 was written in Toulouse where he was rehearsing his opera *Henry VIII*, and its format is influenced by the slow–fast progression of Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsodies, its opening section based on a tune he had heard sung by a washerwoman in a mountain village. The following year he wrote a Caprice-Valse as a wedding gift for his friend Caroline Montigny-Rémaury with whom he gave the first performance in a two-piano version in March 1886 at a benefit concert for Poland. In 1889 he began work on *Africa*, a piece promised to the pianist Marie Roger-Miclos while in Cadiz, made progress on it in Las Palmas in the Canaries, and finished it in Cairo two years later on a return trip from India and Ceylon: so although it takes its title from the continent on which it was completed, its musical roots are more widespread, and it is only the Tunisian folk tune with which it ends that is truly African. His fifth and final Concerto in F Op.103, in which he returns to a conventional three-movement structure, has a similar genesis: it was begun in the Canaries and completed in Egypt in April 1896, and although known for this reason as the

'Egyptian', only the second movement has a specific connection with that country. That is based on a 'Nubian' song Saint-Saëns heard while on a boat trip on the Nile, to the musical accompaniment of croaking frogs and chirping crickets, while the third movement describes an exhilarating sea voyage with the thudding piano introduction representing the ship's engines. Saint-Saëns first performed it at a concert in celebration of the 50th anniversary of his first public performance in 1846, aged 11.

César Franck (1822–1890) was the only French composer of the second half of the century to rival Saint-Saëns as a composer of large-scale, purely orchestral works in the Romantic tradition. For most of his life, he was not actually French, having been born in Liège in what was then situated in the United Kingdom of the Netherlands and, after 1831, Belgium, only becoming a permanently naturalised Frenchman in 1872 on his appointment as organ professor at the Paris Conservatoire. His first attempt to establish himself in Paris as a composer and keyboard virtuoso was unsuccessful and he later disowned many of his early works, among them the Second Piano Concerto in B minor (*c.*1835) whose opus number 11 he reallocated to a later work. He concentrated his talents as a performer on the organ – becoming one of the acknowledged 19th-century masters of the instrument – and as a composer on large-scale choral works (now largely unperformed), and it was only in the 1880s that he wrote his great orchestral compositions, including several pieces for the piano, an instrument he had neglected for 20 years. *Les Djinns* (1884), based on Victor Hugo's poem on the spirits of light and darkness of Arabian legend, is in essence a symphonic poem – a genre that, decades before, Franck had pioneered with Liszt – with the piano representing the forces of light and the orchestra those of darkness. The *Variations symphoniques* (1885) is a more complex work which corresponds in its tripartite format to a three-movement concerto, the central section containing the variations which are tenuously connected to two ascending and descending themes given by orchestra and piano respectively in the introduction. The finale is in quasi sonata form, combining the two themes with elements of the variations.

Like most composers in late 19th-century France, **Claude Debussy** (1862–1918) passed through Franck's organ classes at the Conservatoire, though they would have little lasting benefit for him. Franck's *Variations symphoniques,* however, did have some influence on Debussy's *Fantaisie*, written between October 1889 and April 1890, both in the way it treats the relationship between piano and orchestra and its format: a tripartite structure concealed within two movements. It was supposed to receive its first performance at a concert conducted by D'Indy on 24 April 1890, but Debussy abruptly withdrew the work the day before, having learned that only one movement was to be performed. He told D'Indy that he feared (perhaps with justification) this would give a false impression of the work but later admitted that the piece as a whole no longer represented the musical direction in which he wished to travel. Although he made substantial revisions to the score, which had already been engraved for publication, he refused to allow it to be either published or performed in his lifetime.

Both Franck and Saint-Saëns had an immense influence on works for piano and orchestra by those who came after them. **Cécile Chaminade** (1857–1944) and the most fervent of Franck's acolytes, **Vincent D'Indy** (1851–1931), avoided direct reference to the concerto format: D'Indy most obviously in his three-movement *Symphony on a French Mountain Air*, also known as the *Symphonie cévenole* in reference to D'Indy's family origins in the Ardèche region's Cévennes mountain range, the source of its initial theme; and Chaminade in her Concertstück Op.40, which develops four contrasting themes (the first bearing an unmistakable resemblance to the *Flying Dutchman* motif) in a single movement. **Gabriel Pierné** (1863–1937) and **Édouard Lalo** (1823–1892), however, openly embraced it: Pierné's Concerto in C minor Op.12 is closely related to Saint-Saëns's G major Concerto – especially in the Scherzando and Finale – while Lalo's Concerto in F minor harks back to Liszt in its epic, and perhaps overdone, grandeur.

Gabriel Fauré's (1845–1924) Ballade Op.19 was originally a work for solo piano, written in 1877, which he rearranged with an orchestral accompaniment in 1881, and its episodic nature reveals its origins as a suite of separate but thematically linked pieces. If the occasion when Fauré showed it to Liszt – when the old virtuoso was said to have 'run out of fingers' while sight-reading it – was the first visit Fauré made to Weimar in 1877, then possibly it was at Liszt's suggestion that Fauré created the orchestral part.

Jules Massenet's (1842–1912) Concerto in E flat had a long gestation period: it was conceived when Massenet was studying in Rome in 1863–6 but set aside once he returned to Paris to embark on his long and successful career as an opera composer. It was only in 1902 that he took up the sketches once more, and the concerto was finally completed 40 years after it was begun. The result, however, found little favour in turn-of-the-century Paris. By that time, the Romantic concerto was seen as a musical anachronism, a point forcefully demonstrated in 1904 when performances of concertos by Saint-Saëns and Beethoven were hissed. In the ensuing scandal, the courts ruled such audience reaction to be perfectly valid, but French concert promoters, sensing a change in popular taste, became reluctant to programme traditional concertos and composers ceased to write them, although concertante works, such as the 1912 *Fantaisie* by **Nadia Boulanger** (1887–1979), a heady mixture of styles and moods in six parts, continued to be produced.

After the First World War, a group of young French musicians dubbed 'Les Six', including **Francis Poulenc** (1899–1963), **Darius Milhaud** (1892–1974) and, after the departure one of the original members, **Germaine Tailleferre** (1892–1983), set about taking French music in a new direction – though they often made use of traditional formats to do so. Poulenc's Concerto in D for 2 pianos was commissioned by Winnaretta Singer, Princesse de Polignac in 1931 and performed in Venice by Poulenc and Jacques Février, accompanied by the Orchestra del Teatro alla Scala. Elements of the first movement were inspired by the Balinese music that Poulenc had heard at the 1931 Colonial Exhibition, and the first part of the Larghetto is an obvious homage to Mozart – in particular the slow movement of his K466 – with the rondo finale combining Mozartean melody and Parisian *joie de vivre*. In 1949, he composed the Concerto in C sharp minor to perform with the Boston Symphony Orchestra on his tour of America the following year, describing the piece as a musical 'handshake' between France and America. The final movement includes a tune which his American audience would have recognised as Stephen Foster's 'Old Folks at Home' (although it is also found in a French folk song).

Darius Milhaud once said that his native Provence was a place that began in Asia minor and extended all the way to Brazil, and the *Carnaval d'Aix*, based on his 1924 ballet *Salade*, includes material drawn from Italy (the opening piece is based on a melody also used by Liszt in his *Canzonetta del Salvator Rosa*) and South America, where he had lived for two years. South American rhythms also pervade his Ballade, which he wrote for his own use (hence his claim that it was easier to play than it sounded), a piece in complete stylistic contrast to the 5 Études for piano and small ensemble also of 1920 with their uncharacteristic dissonances and formal complexity (there are four simultaneous fugues in the third part). His five piano concertos, composed between 1933 and 1955, cover a range of styles and vary in their technical requirements: the Third, being written for himself, is much less challenging than the Fourth, destined for a much more virtuoso player.

Germaine Tailleferre's Ballade of 1922 is in four continuous sections, which show aspects of the 'impressionism and orientalism' she later rejected in her severely neo-classical piano concerto, composed a few years afterwards. **Jean Françaix** (1912–1997) studied with Boulanger, to whom he dedicated his Concerto for piano of 1936, and it is performed here by his daughter with the composer making his recording debut as a conductor. His later Concerto for 2 pianos (1965) looks back to Poulenc's and, like that work, to Mozart. **Albert Roussel** (1869–1937) and **Reynaldo Hahn** (1874–1947) came late to the concerto form, both being in their mid-50s when they took it up. Roussel's Concerto in G (1927) with its violent mood swings poses a greater challenge than Hahn's more nostalgic Concerto in E, heard here in a 1937 recording (in which several minutes were cut from the final section), conducted by the composer with Brazilian pianist Magda Tagliaferro.

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937) had contemplated writing a piano concerto in 1913 and again in 1920, but it was only in 1929 – when Serge Koussevitzky commissioned one for the 50th anniversary season of the Boston Symphony Orchestra (1930–31) – that he actually did so. Work on it was soon interrupted by another commission, however: this one from Paul Wittgenstein who had lost his right arm in the First World War and desired a concerto for the left hand only. Thus Ravel, having spent a large part of his career not writing a piano concerto, found himself writing two very different examples simultaneously. He took Saint-Saëns and Mozart as his models for the Concerto in G, and its three movements follow the traditional format: a classically structured Allegro, an Adagio in which he wished 'to pay homage to scholasticism' and in so doing attempted to write 'as well as I could', and a Rondo finale 'conceived in accordance with immutable tradition'. The structure of the Concerto in D for the left hand is less clearly delineated, and Ravel himself was very vague on its precise nature: it could be two linked movements played continuously or comprise various slow and fast sections with the material from each combined in the later stages. The two works were performed within a few weeks of each other in 1932 (Ravel having missed Koussevitzky's deadline) with Marguerite Long the soloist in the G major work. When Ravel heard Wittgenstein perform his concerto, he was horrified to discover that the pianist had made several unauthorised changes, including reassigning some of the orchestral material to the soloist. There was an awkward confrontation when Wittgenstein (who had a five-year exclusive right of performance) refused to play it as written and Ravel considered taking legal action to force him to do so, but eventually the two entered an uneasy truce and Wittgenstein performed it under Ravel's direction in 1933.

Cover: *La Promenade (La Femme à l'ombrelle)* (1875), Claude Monet (1840–1926)