

Claude Debussy

“Prélude à l’Après-midi d’un faune”

ACHILLE-CLAUDE DEBUSSY was born at St. Germain-en-Laye, France, on August 22, 1862, and died in Paris on March 25, 1918. He began composing his “Prélude à l’Après-midi d’un faune” (“Prelude to The Afternoon of a Faun”) in 1892 and completed the full score on October 23, 1894. The first performances took place on December 22 and 23 that year at concerts of the Société Nationale de Musique under the direction of Swiss conductor Gustave Doret.

THE SCORE OF DEBUSSY’S PRELUDE calls for three flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two harps, antique cymbals, and strings.

Though the critics were divided in their response to Debussy’s *Prélude à l’Après-midi d’un faune* following its premiere on December 22, 1894, by the Société Nationale de Musique in Paris under the direction of Swiss conductor Gustave Doret, the audience’s reaction was unequivocal: the piece was encored. The occasion was Debussy’s first great triumph, and the *Faun* remains, along with *La Mer* (1903-05), one of the composer’s best-known and most popular works for orchestra. In fact, with his Prelude, Debussy established himself as a composer for orchestra not just with the membership of the Society: a repeat performance of the entire program was given the day after the premiere, with the Society’s doors opened for the first time to the general public.

There is evidence to suggest that Debussy’s Prelude represents the end product of what was originally planned as a score of incidental music to accompany a reading, or perhaps even a dramatized staging, of the poet Stéphane Mallarmé’s eclogue, *L’Après-midi d’un faune*. Debussy began his work in 1892 and completed the full score on October 23, 1894. During the period of composition, the work was announced in both Paris and Brussels as *Prélude, Interludes et Paraphrase finale pour l’Après-midi d’un faune*, but there is no evidence at present to suggest that anything but the Prelude ever came near finished form. Before the premiere, the conductor Doret spent hours going over the score with the composer; Debussy made changes until virtually the last moment, and it was reported that at the first performance, “the horns were appalling, and the rest of the orchestra were hardly much better.” But nothing about the performance seems to have diminished the work’s success.

Though the first printed edition of Mallarmé’s poem dates from 1876, *L’Après-midi d’un faune* in fact went through various stages, being conceived originally as an *Intermède héroïque*. A draft from the summer of 1865, entitled *Monologue du Faune*, took the form of a theatrical scene for a narrator with actors performing in mime, and even as late as 1891 a list of Mallarmé’s works characterized *L’Après-midi d’un faune* as being “for reading or for the stage.” Mallarmé himself at various times described his conception as “definitely theatrical,” as representing “not a work that may conceivably be given in the theater” but one that “demands the theater.” With this in mind, it is not surprising that Debussy, who already knew Mallarmé quite well by 1892 and was a close enough member of the poet’s circle to be among those first notified of Mallarmé’s death in 1898, would originally have thought to write a score of incidental music. And that the sense of the poetry might one day lend itself to musical expression was in fact foreshadowed by Mallarmé himself, who wrote of his early *Intermède*, “What is frightening is that all these impressions are required to be woven together as in a symphony....” Following Mallarmé’s first hearing of the music, at Debussy’s apartment, and on which occasion the composer played the score at the piano, the poet commented, “I didn’t expect anything like this! This music prolongs the emotion of my poem, and sets its scene more vividly than color.”

The history of Mallarmé’s poem is treated in considerable detail in Edward Lockspeiser’s crucial biography, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*. Lockspeiser points out that by the final version of Mallarmé’s poem, which takes as its overt subject “a faun dreaming of the conquest of nymphs,” transitions between dream and reality had become more ambiguous, with imagery more subtle than the boldly erotic content of earlier stages. The poem plays not only with the distinctions between dream and reality, between sleep and waking awareness, but also with those between consciousness and unconsciousness, between desire and artistic vision. Indeed, in its more literal rendering of Mallarmé’s subject matter and imagery, Vaslav Nijinsky’s 1912 choreography to Debussy’s score, first performed in Paris by Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes on May 29 that year with Nijinsky as the faun, scandalized audiences when it crossed the line between artistic allusion and masturbatory fantasy (aside from the fact that the stylized poses of the dancers were generally deemed inappropriate to the fluidity of the musical discourse).

Debussy’s orchestra here is not especially large. It should be noted, however, that while trumpets, trombones, and timpani are entirely absent, the wind section, with its third flute and English horn, is a source for particularly rich

sonorities. In his *History of Orchestration* (1925), Adam Carse already highlighted what made Debussy's Prelude so innovative for its time, not just in its treatment of the orchestra, but also in its approach to harmony and musical structure: "Such a word as *tutti* is hardly usable in connection with orchestration which, like Debussy's, speaks with a hushed voice in delicately varied and subtly blended tone-colours, and often with intentionally blurred outlines."

Nowadays, when listeners may respond to the opening flute solo by sinking back into their seats with complacent familiarity, any fresh look at Debussy's score is obliged to reveal its boldly imagined instrumental hues as if it were a newly restored painting. Immediately following that opening melody, suggested by the indolent flute-playing of Mallarmé's faun, glissandos in the harp and distant, evocative horn calls conjure a dreamlike woodland atmosphere heightened by Debussy's avoidance of clearcut harmonies: an atmosphere to which the colors of rustling strings, cascading woodwinds, blossoming outbursts from the full orchestra, and, near the magical close, antique cymbals, all prove themselves ideally suited.

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