

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune [Prelude to "The Afternoon of a Faun"] Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) was one of the greatest innovators in the history of French poetry. His works, which abound in complex symbols and images, seek to represent states of mind rather than ideas, express moods rather than tell stories. Mallarmé tried to capture that elusive line between dream and awakening that most of us who are not poets are well aware of but are unable to put into words.

Mallarmé's eclogue *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* ("The Afternoon of a Faun") was published in 1876. Debussy first set a poem by Mallarmé to music (as a song) in 1884, at the age of 22. Three years later, the young composer joined the circle of poets and artists who met at Mallarmé's house every Tuesday night for discussions and companionship. Thus he was thoroughly familiar with the poet's style before he began work on his prelude to "The Afternoon of a Faun" in 1892, completing the work in 1894.

Claude Debussy did not care for the term "musical impressionism"—who, after all, approves of their work being reduced to a brief slogan? But it is as good a shorthand description as any for his music, with its constantly shifting harmonic inventions and unconventional orchestrations. Indeed, in the work of Debussy, impression matters more than any well-defined musical statement. The impressionist painters of the late 19th century were important to Debussy, but so were the symbolist poets, as his work attempted to evoke in music what other artists did on paper and canvas. Mallarmé's poem—whose eroticism caused it to be refused publication more than once—follows the reverie of a faun (a half man/half goat creature out of Greek mythology) and his unsuccessful pursuit of a pair of nymphs. In Debussy's own description of the work, he says, "The music of this Prelude is a very free illustration of the beautiful poem of Mallarmé. By no means does it claim to be a synthesis of the latter. Rather there are the successive scenes through which pass the desires and dreams of the faun in the heat of this afternoon. Then, tired of pursuing the fearful flight of the nymphs and the naiads, he succumbs to intoxicating sleep, in which he can finally realize his dreams of possession in universal Nature." Appropriately, the music is sensual, hedonistic, and dreamlike, from the opening melody (played on flute) suggestive of the faun playing his pipes to the rather formless but richly expressive colors provided as the piece moves forward, on harp, woodwinds, and strings. Some were scandalized by the piece when it debuted in Paris, and others were put off by its radical formlessness. But it turned out to be a staggeringly important work for the generation of composers that followed. As Pierre Boulez commented, "Just as modern poetry surely took root in certain of Baudelaire's poems, so one is justified in saying that modern music was awakened by 'L'après-midi d'un faune.'"

The first-person narrator in the eclogue (the word evokes associations with the pastoral poetry of the great Latin poet Virgil) is a faun, a mythological creature who is half man and half goat. The faun lives in the woods, near a river surrounded by reedy marshes; he is daydreaming about nymphs who may be real or mere figments of his imagination. The faun's desire is filtered through the vagueness of its object as he recalls past dreams, which emerge from the shadows only to recede into the darkness again.

The faun plays a flute, which evokes the *syrinx* [the Greek panpipe]. (Debussy was to write a piece for unaccompanied flute under the title *Flûte de Pan* in 1913, planned as part of an incidental music; the piece was published as *Syrinx* after Debussy's death.) It was quite natural that in Debussy's prelude the orchestral flute is given a solo part throughout. The languid opening melody, which descends, mostly in half-steps, from C-sharp to G natural and rises back to C-sharp again (thus outlining the exotic interval of the tritone, or augmented fourth), has become famous as an example of a melodic style independent from any traditional models. As it unfolds, the orchestral accompaniment becomes more and more intense. After a short resting point, a new section starts in which the first clarinet and the first oboe temporarily take over the lead from the flute; the tempo becomes more and more animated and finally a new melody is introduced, in sharp contrast with the chromatic flute theme that opened the piece. The new melody moves in wide intervals, and is played by all the woodwinds, plus the first horn, in unison. Finally, the first theme returns in its original tempo; following a passage that briefly brings back some of the agitation of the middle section, the music settles into a serene and peaceful idyll which prevails to the end.

In his music, Debussy admirably captured that delicious vagueness of contours which is so important in the poem. The themes do not follow any stable metric patterns, and instead of progressing in a certain direction, they remain entirely unpredictable, reflecting the unconstrained nature of the faun's meditations.

Two aspects of Debussy's style bear special mention here: his use of chromaticism and his handling of orchestral color. Chromaticism had been one of the main musical means to express sensuality at least since Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, a work that exerted a decisive influence on the young Debussy. But Debussy's use of chromaticism is more subdued and less goal-oriented than Wagner's. His instrumentation, much more restricted than Wagner's (no brass except horns, no percussion except the soft-toned antique cymbals) causes us to perceive the faun's sensuality at a certain remove. Mallarmé referred to the faun's *syrinx* as an "instrument des fuites" (translated as "elusive instrument"; literally, perhaps, "instrument of evasion"); with his novel rhythmic and harmonic language, Debussy managed to render that elusive/evasive quality of the faun's self-expression.

There have been attempts at showing more concrete correspondences between poetic and musical themes, but perhaps the essential link is in the general mood, which, in any case, *is* the real theme of the poem.

The first performance was on December 22, 1894, in Paris, with Gustave Doret conducting the orchestra of the Société National de Musique. The 10-minute masterpiece is scored for 3 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, antique cymbals pitched in E and B, 2 harps and strings.

--Stephen Larmore