

Programme Notes

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune, L.86

A flute slithers languorously down a scale and back up again, in what's barely a melody. Oboes and clarinets intone a mysterious, reedy chord, and there's a quiet flurry of pluckings from a harp. With these seemingly aimless, disconnected gestures, Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* emerges hesitantly from silence. But with its mere 10 minutes of sensuous sounds, it succeeded in overturning music's existing conventions, and shining a bright light on new possibilities, new directions – all with just a caress, a suggestion.

This afternoon's concert begins at the end, so to speak, with Debussy's first mature masterpiece. And in his *Prélude*, he gave full rein to all the experimental sensuality and elusiveness that he'd been hinting at in earlier works such as *L'enfant prodigue*, which closes today's concert.

By 1892, when he began composing his *Prélude*, Debussy had spent two unhappy years in the Italian capital after *L'enfant prodigue* had won him the Prix de Rome in 1884. He'd also immersed himself in Wagner in two trips to Bayreuth, and he'd marvelled at Javanese gamelan at the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle. He was a composer confident in his radical new ideas about music – and it was only a year after the *Prélude*, in 1893, that Debussy set about taking those ideas further still in his only opera, inspired by his attendance at a Paris performance of Maurice Maeterlinck's play *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Debussy's *Prélude* is in some ways a precursor to his *Pelléas et Mélisande* – if nothing else, it shares the opera's repressed sexuality, sumptuousness and suggestion.

And suggestion, rather than anything as vulgar as overt storytelling, was the relationship that Debussy also intended between his *Prélude* and the poem that inspired it, *L'après-midi d'un faune* by symbolist writer Stéphane Mallarmé, at whose free-thinking Saint-Gervais salon the young Debussy had been a regular visitor. In the poem, a faun, half-man and half-goat, exhausted from his sexual escapades with two nymphs in the forest, lies in the afternoon heat imagining future conquests while blowing an idle tune on his pipe. It's the faun's lazy piping we hear at the *Prélude*'s opening, but the rest is, as Debussy described it, 'a succession of scenes through which pass the desires and dreams of the faun in the heat of the afternoon'. Mallarmé was delighted with Debussy's musical interpretation, inscribing a manuscript of his poem after hearing the *Prélude*'s first performance:

*Sylvan spirit, if with your primal breath
Your flute sounds well,
Hear now the radiance
When Debussy plays.*

Jean Sibelius (1865–1957)

***Pelléas and Mélisande*, Op.46**

- 1 At the Castle Gate
- 2 Mélisande
- 3 At the Seashore
- 4 A Spring in the Park
- 5 The Three Blind Sisters
- 6 Pastoral
- 7 Mélisande at the Spinning Wheel
- 8 Entr'acte
- 9 The Death of Mélisande

Maeterlinck's dream-like *Pelléas et Mélisande* so fascinated composers in the wake of its 1893 Paris premiere that they were left almost vying with each other to transform the play into music: four of them produced major musical interpretations within a period of just 12 years.

First off the blocks was Debussy himself, who threw himself into his opera in September 1893, just four months after seeing the original Paris production. Gabriel Fauré was commissioned to write incidental music for the English-language premiere of the play in London in 1898 (music that Debussy later dismissed as 'fit for seaside casinos'). Richard Strauss gave a copy of the play to Arnold Schoenberg in 1902, and the epic symphonic poem that Schoenberg wrote as a result began life as an opera too, until he discovered Debussy had created something similar.

Way off in Finland, however, Jean Sibelius was the last of this quartet to create his musical response. He was commissioned to write incidental music for *Pelléas et Mélisande*'s Finnish premiere, in Swedish, at the Swedish Theatre in Helsinki in 1905. It's the closest that Sibelius came to Impressionism or Symbolism, yet in place of Debussy's sensual suggestiveness, Sibelius evokes instead a sense of quiet, restrained nobility. His mood is entirely in keeping with the repressed emotions of Maeterlinck's story of a love triangle involving half-brothers Golaud and Pelléas and the mysterious stranger Mélisande at the court of King Arkel in Allemonde.

The brooding **At the Castle Gate** (well known to TV astronomy fans as the theme music to *The Sky at Night*) conjures up the grandeur and mysteriousness of King Arkel's castle at dawn, and its massive gate that swings open as the sun rises. There follows a forlorn portrait of **Mélisande** herself, portrayed by a cor anglais, and discovered by Golaud weeping beside a spring in the woods. The tiny movement **At the Seashore** depicts Golaud, Pelléas and Mélisande watching the boat that had delivered Mélisande to Arkel's kingdom sailing into the distance.

We see Pelléas and Mélisande together in a secret meeting in **A Spring in the Park**, and Mélisande fatefully drops the wedding ring that Golaud has given her into the water. **The Three Blind Sisters** was originally a song sung by Mélisande to Pelléas. In the **Pastoral**, Golaud warns Pelléas to stay away from his wife. **Mélisande at the Spinning Wheel** is an ominous, agitated movement in which the young woman foresees impending tragedy, and the breezy **Entr'acte** originally introduced the play's fourth Act. By **The Death of Mélisande**, Pelléas has already been slain by his half-brother, and Mélisande's life slowly ebbs away after she gives birth to a daughter – though Maeterlinck never reveals which of her two lovers is the baby's father.

INTERVAL

Claude Debussy ***L'enfant prodigue***

- 1 Prélude
- 2 Air: 'L'année, en vain chasse l'année; Azaël, pourquoi m'as-tu quittée?'
- 3 Récit et Air: 'Eh bien, encor des pleurs!'
- 4 Cortège et Air de danse
- 5 Récit et Air: 'Ces airs joyeux; O temps, à jamais effacé'
- 6 Récit et Air: 'Je m'enfuis'
- 7 Duo: 'Rouvre les yeux à la lumière'
- 8 Air: 'Mon fils est revenu; Plus de vains soucis'
- 9 Trio: 'Mon coeur renaît à l'espérance'

'Some progress. Poorly balanced temperament, but intelligent. Will succeed, I believe.' That's composition teacher Ernest Guiraud's rather grudging assessment of his pupil Claude Debussy's second-year progress at the Paris Conservatoire, in 1882. By the end of Debussy's third year, Guiraud had become rather more exasperated: 'A bizarre but intelligent temperament. Writes music poorly. Nonetheless has made progress.'

It's not clear why Debussy had enrolled in the class of the relatively unknown Guiraud, rather than that of the far starrier and more influential Jules Massenet. But it turned out to be a wise move. Not only was Guiraud open-minded about his students' offerings, but once Debussy had shown him some of the more forward-looking music he'd been creating privately, Guiraud also became a trusted advisor and supporter.

And it was Guiraud who encouraged the reluctant young Debussy to enter the esteemed Prix de Rome composition contest, seeing it as a necessary stepping stone to a glittering career as a composer – after all, Berlioz, Gounod, Bizet and Massenet had all won it (as had Guiraud himself). But, Guiraud advised, Debussy should tone down the sensuality of his more experimental style.

It's perhaps understandable that Debussy felt a certain reluctance. Not only would he have to compromise his ideas about music, but he'd also have to submit himself to the competition's rigorous strictures. Competitors were locked away for up to 25 days within the Conservatoire, required to bring their own work tables, chairs, beds and even chamber pots, their conversations monitored, and required to produce a cantata to a given text.

At his first attempt, Debussy didn't make it past the first round. At his second, however, he was awarded second prize. And with his third attempt, for which he created *L'enfant prodigue*, he won – even if it was a somewhat calculated win. He took his teacher's advice to heart and made his winning cantata deliberately conservative in style, heavily influenced by Delibes and Massenet. The result may sound strangely unfamiliar to anyone used to Debussy's later music – although there are hints of what was to come. Both *L'enfant prodigue's* plaintive oboe melody – intended to be evocative of the Middle East – and the tumbling flute theme of its central ballet section, for example, bring to mind the famous flute opening of the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, which began today's concert.

Based on the biblical tale of the Prodigal Son, Debussy's cantata or *scène lyrique* opens with an atmospheric *Prélude* as dawn breaks over the oriental countryside, and a far-off piper blows a lazy melody. In an extended recitative and aria, Lia laments the passing of time and the loss of her son Azaël, and her husband Siméon encourages her to see the happiness of life, while the young men and women of the village form a joyful dance, led by a graceful flute melody. A mysterious stranger suddenly appears, remembering with regret his earlier life. When Lia suddenly recognises the visitor as her son, they sing a warm, tender duet, and Siméon proclaims that the villagers should travel and spread news of Azaël's return. *L'enfant prodigue* concludes with a final hymn of praise to God from the family.

To bring today's concert full circle: Debussy spent two miserable years in Rome as a result of winning the Prix de Rome, unhappy principally because he was separated from Marie-Blanche Vasnier, the married woman 11 years his senior with whom he'd been having an affair. But they were unhappy too because of the compositional 'envois' that he resented having to send back to the Conservatoire, displaying his supposed progress. It was a turning point for Debussy, and the moment at which he moved firmly towards the sensual, forward-looking musical style he would pursue – the first full flowering of which we heard at the start of today's concert.

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