

Notes on the Program

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Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (*Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*) Nocturnes

Claude Debussy

Claude Debussy achieved his musical maturity in the final decade of the 19th century, a magical moment in France when partisans of the visual arts fully embraced the gentle luster of Impressionism, poets navigated the indirect locutions of Symbolism, composers struggled with the pluses and minuses of Wagner, and the City of Light blazed even more brightly than usual, enflamed with the pleasures of the Belle Époque.

Several early Debussy masterpieces of the 1890s have lodged in the repertoire, including, most strikingly, the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. Debussy was hardly a youngster when he composed it. He had begun studying at the Paris Conservatoire in 1872, when he was only ten; had served as resident pianist and musical pet for Nadezhda von Meck, Tchaikovsky's mysterious patron, in Russia and on her travels during the summers of 1880–82; had finally gained the imprimatur of the Prix de Rome in 1884 (for his cantata *L'Enfant prodigue*), enabling him to spend the next two years in Italy; had inhaled the Wagnerian breezes of Bayreuth in 1888 and 1889; had grown enamored of the sounds of the Javanese gamelan at the Paris International Exposition of 1889; and had composed a great many songs and piano pieces, some of which are ensconced in the repertoire today.

While it defined the composer's distinctive voice, this ten-minute piece baffled many listeners. Debussy's fellow composer Alfred Bruneau wrote that it "is one of the most exquisite instrumental fantasies which the young French school has

produced. This work is too exquisite, alas! It is too exquisite."

In Short

Born: August 22, 1862, in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, just outside Paris, France

Died: March 25, 1918, in Paris

Works composed and premiered: *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* begun in 1892 — perhaps as early as 1891 — and completed by October 23, 1894; premiered December 22, 1894, at a concert of the Société Nationale de Musique in Paris, Gustave Doret, conductor. *Nocturnes* composed 1897–99, drawing on material sketched as early as 1892; dedicated to the music publisher Georges Hartmann; *Nuages* and *Fêtes* premiered on December 9, 1900, at the Concerts Lamoureux in Paris, Camille Chevillard, conductor; the complete three-movement *Nocturnes* was premiered on October 27, 1901, by the same orchestra and conductor.

New York Philharmonic premieres and most recent performances: *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* premiered November 12, 1905, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928); most recently performed, November 18, 2014, Case Scaglione, conductor. The complete *Nocturnes* premiered February 17, 1910, Gustav Mahler, conductor, with the MacDowell Chorus; most recently played November 30, 2010, Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos, conductor, with the New York Choral Artists Women's Chorus

Estimated durations: *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, ca. 10 minutes; *Nocturnes*, ca. 24 minutes

Even at the distance of a century, listeners can appreciate Bruneau's concern. Debussy — or at least the Debussy of the 1890s — sometimes seemed so obsessed with minute details of timbre that other musical

concerns appeared to be overlooked; everything threatened to implode into a mass of sensual loveliness. Of the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* the composer Ferruccio Busoni said (apparently as a compliment), "It is

The Path to the Premiere

Radical though the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* was, its premiere was entrusted to a relatively untried conductor. Gustave Doret (1866–1943) would go on to become principal conductor of the Opéra-Comique, but in 1894 he was a recent graduate of the violin and composition programs of the Paris Conservatoire. He recalled the experience in his memoirs, *Temps et contretemps*, published in his native Switzerland a year before his death:

The first concert I was to conduct at the Société Nationale was set for December 22, 1894, and, as I expected, it was to be a considerable test.

At this debut of mine, Claude Debussy was to entrust me with the first performance of his *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. He took me to his tiny apartment on the rue Gustave-Doré (a strange coincidence!), spread out the proofs of the orchestral score, which were already covered with corrections, and sat down at the piano; while I, open-mouthed and with eager ears, sat beside him. I was completely seduced, entranced, overwhelmed.

I promised that we would take as much time preparing the score as was needed. And never, I believe, did rehearsals take place in such an atmosphere of intimate collaboration. Debussy was constantly modifying this or that sonority. We tried it out, repeated it, compared it. Once the players had come to understand this new style, they realized that we would have a serious battle on our hands. Of course, Debussy's name was familiar to the real connoisseurs, but to the general public it was still unknown. The hour of the great test duly arrived, Debussy pressing my hands and hiding his anxiety behind a grin that I had come to recognize. There was a vast silence in the hall as I ascended to the podium and our splendid flutist, [Georges] Barrère, unfolded his opening line. All at once I felt behind me, as some conductors can, an audience that was totally spellbound. It was a complete triumph, and I had no hesitation in breaking the rule forbidding encores. The orchestra was delighted to repeat this work, which it had come to love and which, thanks to them, the audience had now accepted.



From top: Debussy and Doret, ca. 1902

like a beautiful sunset; it fades as one looks at it.”

Debussy's eventual style was not to display the sort of firm, unmistakable architecture that most composers up until that time had cherished. His method would evolve into something more intuitive, with themes that invite little development, and harmonies inspiring momentary excitement rather than underscoring long trajectory. Although he is sometimes called a musical Impressionist, Debussy's aesthetic affinities would seem to be more allied to the Symbolists, those poets and artists of the late 19th century who disdained the purely expository or representational and sought instead to evoke a specific, fleeting emotional illumination in the reader or viewer through mysterious metaphors.

One of the highpoints of Symbolist poetry was *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, by Stéphane Mallarmé. The poem first appeared in 1865 under the title *Monologue d'un faune* and then kept evolving until it reached a definitive version in 1876. At that point Mallarmé published it, under its new title, in a slim volume embellished with a drawing by Édouard Manet. Vintage Symbolism it is: a faun (a rural deity that is half man and half goat) spends a languorous afternoon observing, recalling, or fantasizing about — it's not always clear which — some alluring nymphs who clearly affect him in an erotic way. The poem became iconic in its time (although it was merely a point of departure for Mallarmé's even more revolutionary poetry) and Debussy fell under its spell by the early 1890s, when he seems to have discussed with Mallarmé the idea of creating a musical parallel.

Debussy appears to have embarked on the project sometime in 1892. The score was complete by October 23, 1894, and the piece was premiered two months later, to such acclaim that it was immediately encored on

the same program. It was certainly radical in its unremitting sensuality, but the work's harmonic implications were also profound. In retrospect, the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* may be taken as a harbinger of the musical century that lay ahead.

As Alfred Bruneau observed, the loveliness of the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* is nothing short of exquisite. That flavor continued in the next orchestral work Debussy composed, the three symphonic movements grouped together as his **Nocturnes**: *Nuages (Clouds)*, *Fêtes (Festivals)*, and *Sirènes (Sirens)*. *Nocturnes* is a series of distinct tone poems. Their genesis dates to 1892–94, when the composer embarked on writing *Trois scènes de crépuscule (Three Twilight Scenes)*, which he described as experiments in orchestral groupings. He gave up on that project, which he intended to introduce during an American tour that failed to come to fruition, but several years later he recycled some of the material he had sketched into the *Nocturnes*.

Each of the movements evokes a specific landscape and each is a masterpiece of sensual orchestration. Monet, Renoir, Whistler, Turner, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Musorgsky, Wagner: all of these artists, and all their different arts, have been regularly evoked in discussions of the *Nocturnes* — particularly Whistler, who bestowed the same title on a series of his atmospheric paintings. Whatever the influences, Debussy's language here is instantly recognizable as his own, whether in the hazy impressionism of *Nuages*, the bright-hued animation of *Fêtes*, or the ceaseless undulation of *Sirènes*, in which the composer extravagantly employed a textless women's choir to push seductive mystery to its very limit. In fact, this piece was not initially heard as a triptych. The first two movements were played alone at the work's premiere, on December 9, 1900, and the complete three-movement

Views and Reviews

The critic Jean d'Udine, reviewing the premiere of *Nuages* and *Fêtes* (the first movements of *Nocturnes* to be unveiled) in the *Courrier musical*, summoned up impressions from the visual and literary arts to help explain the effect Debussy's new works made on him:

One cannot imagine a more delightful impressionist symphony. It is entirely made up of splashes of sound. It does not trace the sinuous outlines of definite melodic curves, but its treatment of timbres and chords — its harmony, as the painters would say — maintains nevertheless a certain strict homogeneity which replaces the beauty of line by the equally plastic beauty of a sonority skillfully distributed and logically sustained. ... [In *Nuages*] all is expressed with an indescribable variety of nuances and the deepest poetic feeling; it is the most finely sifted music imaginable.

And yet, I almost think I prefer *Fêtes*. Oh, what lively gaiety there is in the atmosphere, what fairy-like effects the light produces as it plays through the furbelows of the cirrus clouds that whirl until they fray. And how subtly naïve it was to render these ethereal frolics in dance rhythms; such an infinite variety of old-world rhythms, with their skillful syncopations, suggesting dainty gavottes and rigaudons, and expressing infectious gaiety, full of peals of laughter and delightful fun, with sudden flourishes of the bassoons or a sparkling harp scale ending in a joyful clash of cymbals.

It represents the French taste of a century ago, with all its delicate tenderness, its wit and elegance; the rustling dresses of the *L'Embarquement pour Cythère* and the charm of the *Nymphes Endormies*. It is Verlainé à la Fragonard, and the effect is accentuated when the fantastic visions of a procession in old-world costumes passes through the festive scene, heralded by a discreet and harmonious fanfare on two short trumpets.



The spirit of *Fêtes* in Watteau's *L'Embarquement pour Cythère* (The Embarkation for Cythera), 1717

In the Composer's Words

Although Debussy was normally averse to explaining his compositions in any detail, he consented to provide a commentary on each of the **Nocturnes**:

The title *Nocturnes* is to be interpreted here in a general and, more particularly, in a decorative sense. Therefore, it is not meant to designate the usual form of the Nocturne, but rather all the various impressions and the special effects of light that the word suggests.

Nuages renders the immutable aspect of the sky and the slow, solemn motion of the clouds, fading away in gray tones lightly tinged with white.

Fêtes gives us the vibrating, dancing rhythm of the atmosphere with sudden flashes of light. There is also the episode of the procession (a dazzling fantastic vision) which passes through the festive scene and becomes merged with it. But the background remains persistently the same: the festival with its blending of music and luminous dust participating in the cosmic rhythm.

Sirènes depicts the sea and its countless rhythms and presently, amongst the waves silvered by the moonlight, is heard the mysterious song of the Sirens as they laugh and pass on.

version was not heard for the first time until 10 months later, a women's choir (needed for *Sirènes* alone) not having been available for the earlier performance.

The *Nocturnes* were received enthusiastically at their premieres, and critics were overwhelmingly positive in their reviews. The piece definitively established Debussy's reputation among the forward-looking in musical Paris. Still, this was difficult music for some early listeners to grasp. As Debussy's biographer Léon Vallas reported:

It delighted a certain number of music-lovers — the most sensitive but perhaps not the most cultivated, paradoxical as this may seem — but a great many others were disappointed. The professors who respected classical usage and the conservatives who were faithful to the traditional habits were once more horrified. They were bewildered by an instrumentation that was so utterly different from the opaque style to which they were accustomed. The absolute freedom of the harmony caused even more amazement than the other elements of this music.

But, he continued,

Owing to the success of the *Nocturnes*, even those musical analysts who were the most antagonistic to progress found themselves obliged to take the new art into consideration. The composer himself, as he wrote to [the critic] Pierre Lalo, was only timidly endeavoring “to rid music of the legacy of clumsy, falsely interpreted traditions, under whose weight the art seemed likely to succumb.”

The Debussy biographer Marcel Dietschy summarized this triptych: “*Nuages* is contemplation; *Fêtes*, action; *Sirènes*, intoxication.”

Instrumentation: *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* calls for three flutes, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two harps, antique cymbals, and strings. *Nocturnes* employs three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, three bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, military drum, two harps, and strings, plus a women's chorus.