

L'Après-midi d'un Faune (The Afternoon of a Faun)

Written by bluesever

Tuesday, 26 September 2017 15:48 -

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Stéphane 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 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.

Debussy - The Afternoon of a Faun

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.



Stéphane Mallarmé

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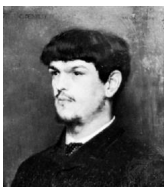
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This poem is about a faun who awakes in the mist of forest nymphs. The first-person narrator is a faun, a mythological creature who is half man and half goat. The faun lives in the woods, near a river surrounded by reedy marshes; he is daydreaming 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.



Faun (& nymph)

Debussy pondered the poetic source material for many years. “The Afternoon of a Faun” deals with a faun’s erotic fantasies inspired by nymphs (*“Was it a dream I loved?”*). The classical setting and overt sexuality of the text made it a touchstone for debates over the future of literature. Debussy’s tastes made him susceptible to the poem’s allure, for he had already begun setting similar texts by Baudelaire and Maeterlinck when work on the Prelude commenced in 1892. At first, he planned a full accompaniment to each moment of the poem, perhaps even a mini staged drama. But by the time of completion, he had wisely settled on a *“very free illustration of the beautiful poem of Mallarmé.”*



Claude Debussy, 1884

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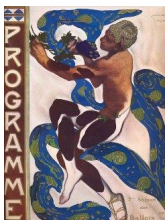
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The iconic opening theme outlines a descending tritone from C-sharp to G natural using solo flute. Uncertain tonal implications are given new light when the theme subsequently receives a harmonic foundation in a seventh chord on D. Above shimmering glissandi in harp and pulsating chromatic motion in the winds, the flute arabesques become gradually more ornate, more seductive.



Main theme, flute solo

The flute's theme, recurring throughout the work, though it is not intended as a literal translation of the poem. The line progresses throughout the piece and its metamorphoses account for the Prelude's richness of texture and harmony.



Nijinsky as Faun

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Debussy closes the first section in B major and then moves into a more agitated episode culminating in soaring strings. Tonal color, built from radiant mixtures of whole-tone and pentatonic elements, turns gently to A flat major. The next scene, (a pas de deux in Nijinsky's choreographed version,) suggests the faun embracing a nymph. Its poignant union of rapture and longing centers on the tritone-related chord progression. Debussy's lines undulate and swell, rise and recede. At the last part of the dance, he calms the rampant sensuality down to a violin solo leading seamlessly to a reprise of the opening theme. Almost the entire final three minutes are needed to cool off from the heat of passionate embraces. At the last, Debussy's faun strikes a languorous pose in serene E major.



The afternoon ..., flute score

About his composition Debussy wrote: *"The music of this prelude is a very free illustration of Mallarmé's beautiful poem. By no means does it claim to be a synthesis of it. Rather there is a succession of scenes through which pass the desires and dreams of the faun in the heat of the afternoon. Then, tired of pursuing the timorous flight of nymphs and naiads, he succumbs to intoxicating sleep, in which he can finally realize his dreams of possession in universal Nature."*

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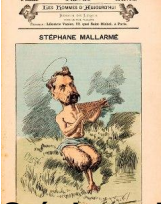
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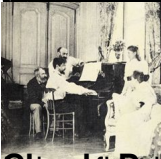
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Claude Debussy's 1893 Paris Bar 22 December 1894, conducted by Gustave Doret. The flute



Stéphane Mallarmé by Manet, 1876