

**MasterWorks 5 Concert**  
**Saturday, March 10, 2012**

***Prélude a "L'après-midi d'un faune" (Prelude to "The Afternoon of a Faun")***

**Claude Debussy (1862-1918)**

Written: 1892-94

Movements: One

Style: Impressionistic

Duration: Ten minutes

"Was it a dream I loved?" asks the mythological faun in the opening lines of Stéphane Mallarmé's poem *The Afternoon of a Faun*. Were those sensuous nymphs he carried off real or just imagined? When the young composer Claude Debussy met Mallarmé, and heard *The Afternoon of a Faun*, the idea of turning the poem into a ballet intrigued him. Debussy worked for the better part of two years on the brief opening scene and soon realized that the symbolism of Mallarmé's poem was not easily suited to the theater. He contented himself by reworking the opening section as an orchestral concert piece and called it a "prelude." "The music of this prelude is a very free illustration of Mallarmé's beautiful poem," he wrote. "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."

By the time Debussy wrote the *Prelude to "The Afternoon of a Faun,"* he was already known as someone who was willing to break the established rules of composition. He intentionally left dissonances unresolved, using them solely for their colorful effect. Debussy used scales other than the traditional major and minor ones. He handled rhythm differently, too. Instead of having a clearly defined beat grouped into distinct measures, Debussy purposely confused the rhythm in his music. The *Prelude to "The Afternoon of a Faun"* exhibits all of those characteristics.

The flute, representing the faun's panpipe, begins the *Prelude*, but its theme seems to lack any definable key and sputters out, giving way to the horns. The flute begins again, and this time gives way to the oboe. For the third time the flute starts, and this time extends the theme into a full-blown melody. The clarinet introduces a new theme that grows in intensity and passion as the whole orchestra joins in. Suddenly, the oboe and English horn play a tune that mimics a dream dissipating and the flute returns with the opening theme. Just like the beginning, it fades away, leaving us to ask, "Was it a dream?"

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***Death and Transfiguration, Op. 24***

**Richard Strauss (1864 B 1949)**

Written: 1888-89

Movements: one

Style: Romantic Tone Poem

Duration: 23 minutes

By the time Richard Strauss turned twenty-four, he was already something of a celebrity in the German speaking music world. He was a semi-professional violinist by the time he was thirteen, and by the ripe age of sixteen a composer of a string quartet, a piano sonata, and a symphony. When Strauss was twenty-one, Hans von Bülow – one of the leading conductors of the day – became a champion of his music. Strauss became von Bülow’s assistant conductor and within months became a chief conductor. Strauss was also a concert pianist. However, nothing in this meteoric rise could point to the virtuosity he would exhibit as a composer when, at the age of twenty-four, he started writing *tone-poems*, his orchestral masterpieces.

The music world of the nineteenth century was divided between those who felt that the essence of music is sound in motion – like Mozart and Brahms – and those who felt that music was capable of representing non-musical ideas. Richard Wagner, in his many operas, portrayed ideas of love and jealousy along with actual physical things like rings, swords, and even the droop of a hat. Composers of *symphonic tone poems* like Franz Liszt felt they could do the same in purely instrumental music. Richard Strauss took the symphonic tone poem to its zenith. His first great success was *Don Juan*, a musical representation of that nefarious lover. He wrote *Tod und Verklärung (Death and Transfiguration)* at about the same time. This was his inspiration:

It occurred to me to present in the form of a tone poem the dying hours of a man who had striven towards the highest idealistic aims, maybe indeed those of an artist. The sick man lies in bed, asleep, with heavy irregular breathing; friendly dreams conjure a smile on the features of the deeply suffering man; he wakes up; he is once more racked with horrible agonies, his limbs shake with fever; as the attack passes and the pains leave off, his thoughts wander through his past life; his childhood passes before him, the time of his youth with its strivings and passions and then, as the pains already begin to return, there appears to him the fruit of his life’s path, the conception, the ideal which he has sought to realize, to present artistically, but which he has not been able to complete, since it is not for man to be able to accomplish such things. The hour of death approaches, the soul leaves the body in order to find gloriously achieved in everlasting space those things which could not be fulfilled here below.

If you ever have the opportunity to look at a score to one of Strauss’ tone poems, do it! You will marvel its virtuosic complexity. And, if you get the chance, ask some orchestra musicians about the difficulty of Strauss’s music. Undoubtedly, they will tell you that it demands virtuosity on everybody’s part, including the conductor!

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### ***Concerto No. 2 in B-flat Major for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 83***

**Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)**

Written: 1878-81

Movements: Four

Style: Romantic

Duration: 50 minutes

Johannes Brahms is often naively mislabeled a *Classical* composer in the midst of a *Romantic* age. This is a misconception, due in part to a feud that went on for decades between “Brahmsians” and “Wagnerians” over who really had it right! What they argued about most was the difference between “absolute” music and “Gesamtkunstwerk” (total artwork). Brahms was the torchbearer for absolute music and the German symphonic tradition. His followers considered Wagner a musical rebel (a badge he wore with honor). Indeed, Wagner broke new paths with his music. However, putting Brahms into a separate camp diminishes his tremendous innovations, especially concerning rhythm, that prompted even Arnold Schoenberg, the great leader of the German *avant-garde*, to write an article entitled

“Brahms the Progressive.”

In a letter to a friend, Brahms playfully describes his second piano concerto as a “tiny little piano concerto with a tiny list wisp of a scherzo.” This little concerto is actually an intense 50-minute symphony for solo piano and orchestra. Brahms’s decision to expand the traditional concerto from three to four movements is the first clue that he not chained to tradition. The opening tune of the first movement, played by the horns, provides the basis for all the musical material of the first movement. Instead of the traditional antagonism between orchestra and soloist that usually marks the classical concerto, the piano takes the role of partner. The second movement is Brahms’s “little wisp of a scherzo.” The material for it is probably a scherzo he left out of his *Violin Concerto* on the advice of his friend Joachim. If you want to take note of the interesting rhythmic complexity of this movement, just try counting along with the pianist! The andante third movement begins with a simple and poignant melody played by the solo cello. Even though the music becomes quite agitated in the middle part of the movement, it returns to the repose of the solo line at the end. A skipping tune played by the piano breaks the stillness to begin the final movement. It comes back in many different guises before vaporizing into a flashy conclusion.

Perhaps the greatest pianist of the nineteenth century was Franz Liszt. He was a “Wagnerian,” not prone to giving in to the other side. On hearing the Second Piano Concerto, Liszt sent a little note to Brahms: “. . . at first reading this work seemed a little gray in tone; I have, however, gradually come to understand it. It possesses the pregnant character of a distinguished work of art, in which thought and feeling move in noble harmony.” Strong praise from the enemy camp!

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