NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
NJSO
XIAN ZHANG MUSIC DIRECTOR

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

BY LAURIE SHULMAN, ©2019

Debussy Masterworks

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Debussy: *Prélude a l'après-midi d'un faune*

In Roman mythology, a faun was half man and half goat. Debussy's *Prelude to Afternoon of a Faun* has a dreamy quality: is the faun asleep or awake? The flute is the main "character," but listen for solo comments from clarinet, oboe and English horn as well.

Mendelssohn: Piano Concerto No. 1

In Felix Mendelssohn's First Piano Concerto, the soloist is the center of attention from her spectacular opening. Even when the orchestra assumes the melody, piano counters with showy accompaniment. Mendelssohn combines flashy passage work with memorable tunes. Listen for echoes of a first movement theme in the finale.

Britten: Four Sea Interludes from *Peter Grimes*

Peter Grimes reopened London's Sadlers Well Theatre in June 1945. Britten's first megahit, the opera gobsmacked the public. His Four Sea Interludes encapsulate the opera, capturing the mystery and power of the sea and the hero's tortured soul.

Debussy: *La mer*

Each movement of Debussy's symphonic masterpiece *La mer* reflects aspects of the sea's quicksilver moods. Debussy was inspired by the visual arts, particularly Japanese paintings. His subtitle, "Three Symphonic Sketches," supports the visual association. The play of sunlight and wind upon water is the dominant premise. Debussy spins orchestral magic in this magnificent score.

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

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Born: August 22, 1862, in St-Germain-en-Laye, France

Died: March 25, 1918, in Paris, France

Composed: 1891–94

World Premiere: December 22, 1894, in Paris. Gustave Doret conducted.

NJSO Premiere: 1929–30 season. Rene Pollain conducted.

Duration: 10 minutes

"L'après-midi d'un faune" is a poem by the French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–98). Debussy intended his Prelude to be "a very free illustration and in no way a synthesis of the poem."

Written between 1865 and 1876, Mallarmé's poem is subtitled "Eclogue." He conceived it for the stage, intending that it be recited by an actor as a monologue. One of its early titles was "Monologue d'un faune." In it, a faun dreams about the conquest of nymphs on a languorous summer afternoon. Mallarmé conceived it for the stage, intending that it be recited by an actor as a monologue.

By 1890, Debussy had become a member of Mallarmé's inner circle. The subtle eroticism of Mallarmé's symbolist imagery in "L'après-midi d'un faune" inspired him to plan an ambitious musical triptych as incidental music. The piece originally consisted of a *Prélude, Interludes* and *Paraphrase Finale*. Debussy compressed his ideas into this movement, which is actually a prelude to Mallarmé's poem.

The atmospheric *Prélude* is an evocation of the poem's lyrical spirit. Debussy's music has two principal themes. The first, stated by the flute, is sinuous, lyrical and sensual. The second, which belongs primarily to the other winds, is more concrete. Throughout the *Prélude*, Debussy's effect is fragmentary. No real development of the themes occurs. With muted strings and horns, he captures

the shimmering beauty of the summer's day. The mellow horns burnish the subtle delicacy of the orchestration, whose rainbow of pastels beguiles our ears so seductively.

Instrumentation: three flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, four horns, two harps and strings.

MENDELSSOHN: Piano Concerto No. 1 in G Minor, Op. 25

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Born: February 3, 1809, in Hamburg, Germany

Died: November 4, 1847, in Leipzig, Germany

Composed: 1830–31

World Premiere: October 17, 1831, in Munich.

NJSO Premiere: 1979–80 season. Hirokazu Yoshikawa was the soloist; Thomas Michalak conducted.

Duration: 21 minutes

A huge talent in many ways comparable to Mozart, Felix Mendelssohn was prodigiously gifted. In addition to his considerable activities as pianist and composer, he became one of the most prominent conductors of his day, leading the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra for many years. In the late 1820s, Mendelssohn played a key role in rekindling interest in the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, which had been largely forgotten since Bach's death three quarters of a century before. In his spare time, Mendelssohn was a prolific and entertaining letter writer who counted Johann Wolfgang von Goethe among his correspondents. He was also a gifted artist who took great pleasure in painting watercolors.

His piano music provides marvelous proof of his genius. Despite technical bravura, it lies remarkably well in the hands. Like Mozart, he understood the instrument with the natural gift of one born to play it with artistry and insight. At the same time, he boasted a dazzling technique, and he was able to execute extended passages of extraordinary difficulty with little perceived effort. The G-minor piano concerto, Op. 25, is a remarkable testament to the breadth of his musicianship and technical prowess.

Sketched in Rome, the concerto was completed in Munich in 1831. Mendelssohn, then 22, played the first performance in the Bavarian capital in October, with the King of Bavaria in the audience. With its flashy passage work and brash high spirits, the piece was an immediate hit. Mendelssohn's contemporaries Franz Liszt and Clara Wieck (the future Clara Schumann) were quick to add the work to their repertoire. Liszt played the concerto with great success in Paris, and it remained a staple of his repertoire during his virtuoso years. In its day, the work was so popular that it became a sort of Pachelbel Canon of its time. Hector Berlioz satirized it in his *Evenings with the Orchestra*, speaking from the point of view of an exhausted piano after some 30 performances of the same concerto, so bedeviled by the music that it virtually played the piece on its own, without benefit of virtuoso!

Oddly, Mendelssohn's concerto is less frequently performed today, at least in comparison to other romantic war horses of the concert hall such as Schumann's Piano Concerto, Tchaikovsky's First or Rachmaninoff's Third. The loss is ours, for this music shows Mendelssohn at his finest: vibrant, overflowing with youthful energy, sweepingly lyrical.

Several formal innovations distinguish it from other contemporary works, belying the composer's reputation as a traditionalist. The first is the telescoping of the exposition. Rather than having the orchestra unfold the principal thematic material in the opening movement prior to the pianist's entrance, the soloist is an active participant from the seventh measure. While there are a number of unaccompanied passages, Mendelssohn provides no opportunity for cadenzas. They are hardly necessary, inasmuch as pianistic bravura is omnipresent. Finally, all three movements are played without pause, a ploy that Mendelssohn was to call on again in his "Scottish" Symphony.

The opening movement surges with tempestuous abandon, relaxing to a tranquil song without words in the Andante. But the unbridled exuberance of the G-major finale distills the essence of this first concerto. With a brisk fanfare that recalls the Wedding March from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Mendelssohn ushers in an energetic romp that bubbles over with youthful optimism.

Instrumentation: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs; timpani; strings and solo piano.

BRITTEN: Four Sea Interludes from *Peter Grimes*, Op. 33a

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Born: November 22, 1913, in Lowestoft, Suffolk, England

Died: December 4, 1976, in Aldeburgh, England

Composed: 1944–45

World Premiere: June 13, 1945, in Cheltenham.

NJSO Premiere: 1977–78 season. Thomas Michalak conducted.

Duration: 16 minutes

Shortly after World War II ended, London's Sadlers Wells Opera made plans to reopen with Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*. Because Britten was somewhat of an unknown quantity as an opera composer in 1945, the decision was courageous and risky. Britten's previous forays in stage works were some incidental music and the operetta *Paul Bunyan*, Op.17 (1941). *Peter Grimes* was his first full-length opera.

Despite his youth, however, Britten already had extensive experience composing vocal and choral music, and an instinctive flair for drama that served him well throughout his career. With tenor Peter Pears in the title role, the premiere of *Peter Grimes* was a huge success, establishing Britten as an opera composer of international stature and re-establishing England, for the first time since Henry Purcell, as a major center for opera.

George Crabbe's poem "The Borough" (1810) provided the inspiration for *Peter Grimes*. Both poem and opera are dominated by the image of the cold, grey sea. Britten grew up near the sea and eventually took up residence in Aldeburgh, where Crabbe's poem is set; he was spiritually bound to the sea his entire life. The Suffolk setting and the seascapes lend a decidedly English character to this music.

Of the six instrumental interludes linking the acts and scenes of *Peter Grimes*, three are portraits of the sea in its various guises; two are psychological portraits of Peter, and one, the "Storm" interlude, is both.

"Dawn" opens with a tense unison melody in the violins, answered first by harp and clarinet; these are early morning sunlight and light breezes dance on the surface of the water, and the gulls swoop down. As low brasses and timpani respond; the ocean swell of larger waves is omnipresent and inexorable.

"Sunday Morning" evokes church bells. Britten conjures the bustling streets of a small seaside town whose church life dominates activity on Sunday. Discord in the horns and an ambivalence between major and minor mode characterize this movement. Polytonal clang imbues "Sunday Morning" with a piquant flavor.

In "Moonlight," lower strings, bassoons and horns suggest the ocean swell. Flutes, harp and percussion suggest the moonlight glittering on the sea.

"Storm" depicts both the chaos within Peter's tormented mind and nature's havoc wrought by the elements in a gale. We hear the relentless high wind and rain pelting on anything in their path. Similarly, the disorderly state of Peter's thoughts as his mind slips away from him fill our ears with violence and anguish.

Instrumentation: two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, chimes, gong, cymbals, tam tam, bass drum, tenor drum, tambourine, harp, celeste and strings.

DEBUSSY: *La mer*

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Composed: 1903–05

World Premiere: October 15, 1905, in Paris.

NJSO Premiere: 1963–64 season. Kenneth Schermerhorn conducted.

Duration: 23 minutes

In a letter to his friend André Messager written in 1903, Debussy alludes to the fact that his father intended that he be a sailor. While that did not come to pass, Debussy harbored a lifelong fascination for the sea. His biographer Marcel Dietschy has noted, "The sky and the sea thrilled Debussy; their immensity, their restless majesty held for him something implicitly unique and mysterious."

La mer is Debussy's paean to the sea. These three movements embody that most mercurial of natural wonders, the endlessly changing undulations of large bodies of water. In its evocation of the play of light upon water and wave upon wave, it is the quintessential impressionist work in music.

Few figures in music have been better qualified to cross-pollinate among the various arts. Debussy was highly cultured and well-read. He likely had several literary works in mind while working on *La mer*, such as Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, with its amazing evocations of the sea.

In the visual arts, Debussy's grounding was equally strong. He was well acquainted with both Western and Eastern art, and he held strong opinions about both. He considered J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851) to be "the finest creator of mystery in art." Among Japanese artists, his favorites were Ando Hiroshige (1797–1858) and Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), the outstanding printmakers of the 19th century who exerted a powerful influence on Degas, Van Gogh and Gauguin. Debussy requested his publisher to reproduce Hokusai's "The Hollow of the Wave off Kanagawa," on the cover of *La mer*'s full score. Association with Debussy's music has contributed to that painting's remarkable fame.

La mer consists of three movements that Debussy called “symphonic sketches.” They are, of course, more ambitious in scale than mere sketches: full symphonic movements, though not in the sense of an 18th- or 19th-century symphony. We are provided no program *per se* beyond the movement titles, which translate to “From Dawn ‘til Noon on the Sea,” “Play of the Waves” and “Dialogue of the Wind and the Sea.” Debussy eschews the kind of melody that one hums. While his score is filled with melodic fragments, it is the sweep of orchestral detail bringing the infinite variety of the water to musical life that holds our attention. Felicitous orchestral touches abound, but the parts for harp and muted brass, especially in the second movement, reward careful listening.

Instrumentation: two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, three bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, tam-tam, two harps and strings.