

Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances*

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Claude Debussy: *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*

In Stéphane Mallarmé's symbolist poem "L'après-midi d'un faune," 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, Claude Debussy had become a member of Mallarmé's inner circle. The subtle eroticism of Mallarmé's imagery in the poem inspired him to compose this prelude to Mallarmé's poem.

The music evokes the poem's lyrical spirit. Debussy's music has two principal themes. The first, stated by the flute, is sinuous, lyrical, sensual. The second, which belongs primarily to the other winds, is more concrete. Throughout the *Prélude*, Debussy's effect is fragmentary. Muted strings and horns capture the shimmering beauty of the summer's day. Debussy's delicate orchestration is a rainbow of pastels to beguile our ears.

George Duke: *Dark Wood: Bass Concerto for Christian McBride*

The late George Duke had a multi-faceted career as performer, composer, singer-songwriter, and producer. After studying composition and trombone at San Francisco Conservatory, he became active in jazz and fusion circles, working with Cannonball Adderley, jazz violinist Jean-Luc Ponty, and stylistic polymath Frank Zappa.

Duke met Christian McBride in the early 1990s. By 2002, McBride had joined the George Duke Band. Their relationship evolved into a close friendship, one of whose legacies is *Dark Wood*. The concerto comprises two movements that require the soloist to switch among upright bass, electric bass, and fretless electric bass. Both movements provide extensive opportunities for improvisation, over either minimal orchestra or repeated vamps. The score also allows for some improvised jazz piano solos.

Part one is atmospheric and cinematic, and unfolds in sections. Part two begins with a soulful melody that recalls the French ballads Edith Piaf made famous. Duke treats it as a subject for variations, transforming the theme in sequential sections that vary in mood, meter, and tempo. Duke's synthesis of jazz orchestra with traditional symphony orchestra knits together seamlessly, making for an enthralling listening experience.

Christian McBride: *Fried Bacon*

Fried Bacon is the second movement of a jazz French horn concerto the NJS commissioned for Principal Horn Christopher Komer. Komer asked four composers to find inspiration in the art of the Spanish surrealist master Salvador Dalí (1904-1989), one of Komer's favorite artists. "I knew these four movements would be very different from one another, and wanted a common thread to connect them," he says.

Though Komer did not know Christian McBride previously, he knew that McBride had a big band and a jazz trio – and that he was classically trained. The commission was McBride's first work for full orchestra. The title comes from Dalí's "Soft Self-Portrait with Fried Bacon," a 1941 canvas. Dalí described the painting as presenting his outer self: this was the glove, not the soul. Komer says that McBride's *Fried Bacon* swings. "It's down-home and blues-y; a bit like going to church down South on Sunday – but also like a party," he observes.

Sergei Rachmaninoff: *Symphonic Dances*, Op. 45

During the summer of 1940, Sergei Rachmaninoff vacationed on the then-bucolic north shore town of Huntington, Long Island. Though he lived nearly three years longer, the work he composed that summer was his last complete score. And a magnificent swan song it was.

The first movement is dominated by a descending triad motive. Rachmaninoff surprises us with a panoply of percussion, woodwind and brass accents amidst the ongoing sweep of the strings. A unique stroke is the luscious alto saxophone solo in the middle section.

The central waltz opens with muted trumpets. Pizzicato strings establish the ghostly waltz rhythm; a free violin solo lends a Gypsy facet to the music. The brasses of the opening measures return periodically, as if to herald the sinister spirits that seem to underlie this disquieting dance.

Rachmaninoff used the medieval *Dies irae* chant in several compositions. Its presence in the finale to the *Symphonic Dances* was his last, definitive statement. An English horn solo also makes use of Russian Orthodox chant. The two ideas bind together with the composer's original material to build to a dynamic close. These *Symphonic Dances* meld balletic impulse and symphonic grandeur in a superb example of Rachmaninoff's mature orchestral style.

Claude Debussy: *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, France; Gustave Doret conducted

Duration: 10 minutes

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

"*L'après-midi d'un faune*" ("Afternoon of a Faun") is a poem by the French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898). Debussy's orchestral piece, though often mistakenly referred to by the name of the poem, is actually a *prelude* to the poem. The composer intended his music 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.

Debussy was a highly literate musician and an excellent writer. By 1890, he 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. When the piece was announced in March 1894, it consisted of a *Prélude, Interludes et Paraphrase Finale*. Debussy either abandoned the later movements or compressed his ideas into the single ten-minute work that has survived. In that form, it received its first performance in December 1894, two years after he began work on it.

The *Prélude* is atmospheric, an evocation of the poem's lyrical spirit rather than a narrative representation. Debussy's music has two principal themes. The first, stated by the flute, is sinuous, lyrical, 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. No brasses other than mellow French horns mar the subtle delicacy of the orchestration, whose rainbow of pastels beguiles our ears so seductively.

A free illustration of a poem

The atmospheric *Prélude* is an evocation of the poem's lyrical spirit rather than a narrative representation. Debussy's music has two principal themes. The first, stated by the flute, is sinuous, lyrical, 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.

George Duke: *Dark Wood: Bass Concerto for Christian McBride*

George Duke

Born: January 12, 1946 in San Rafael, California

Died: August 5, 2013 in Los Angeles, California

Composed: 2011

World Premiere: September 24, 2011 in Los Angeles, California

Duration: 22 minutes

Instrumentation: woodwinds in pairs, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle bass drum, cymbals, guiro, shekere, claves, glockenspiel, marimba, 2 bongos, horn, jazz trio [piano, bass, drum set], harp, and strings

The late George Duke had a multi-faceted career as performer, composer, singer-songwriter, and producer. He started piano lessons at age 7, subsequently learning trombone as well. He studied trombone and composition at San Francisco Conservatory, with a minor in contrabass, earning both Bachelor's and Master's degrees. Duke soon became active in jazz and fusion circles, working with Cannonball Adderley, French jazz violinist Jean-Luc Ponty, and stylistic polymath Frank Zappa.

Duke met Christian McBride in the early 1990s, and by 2002, McBride had joined the George Duke Band. Their relationship evolved into a close friendship, one of whose legacies is *Dark Wood*. The concerto comprises two

movements that require the soloist to switch among upright bass, electric bass, and fretless electric bass. Both movements provide extensive opportunities for improvisation, over either minimal orchestra or repeated vamps. The score also allows for some improvised jazz piano solos.

Part one is atmospheric and cinematic, and unfolds in sections. Part two begins with a soulful melody that recalls the French ballads Edith Piaf made famous. Duke treats it as a subject for variations, transforming the theme in sequential sections that vary in mood, meter, and tempo. Duke's synthesis of jazz orchestra with traditional symphony orchestra knits together seamlessly, making for an enthralling listening experience.

Christian McBride: *Fried Bacon*

Christian McBride

Born: May 31, 1972 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Composed: 2022

World Premiere: June 11, 2022 in Red Bank, New Jersey

Duration: 6 minutes

Instrumentation: 3 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, extensive percussion [suspended cymbal, gong, triangle, wind chimes, orchestral bells, bass drum, snare drum, shaker, castanets, cymbal, temple bells, marimba, xylophone], drum set, harp, piano, solo double bass, and strings

When Christopher Komer was appointed the New Jersey Symphony's Principal Horn in 2017, he suggested the idea of commissioning a jazz French horn concerto with a twist: four movements, four composers, and the addition of a jazz trio – piano, double bass, and drum set – to the orchestra. Komer selected the composers in collaboration with Xian Zhang and the Symphony's artistic staff.

Komer asked each composer to find inspiration in the art of the Spanish surrealist master Salvador Dalí (1904–1989). A painter, sculptor, graphic artist, and designer, Dalí was celebrated both for his personal eccentricity and for the often hallucinatory character of his work. Komer summarizes, "Dalí is simply one of my all-time favorite artists, and I have always been fascinated by the methods of the Surrealists and their manifesto. I knew these four movements would be very different from one another, and wanted a common thread to connect them." The musical result, *Surreal Sketches*, was a composite concerto with four diverse approaches to Komer's challenge.

Komer is unusual among horn players in that he has always been involved in the worlds of both classical music and jazz. "I thought, this concerto would give me a chance to show off what I can do in both arenas," he says. The incorporation of the jazz trio to the orchestra was directly related. "Since I wanted to improvise, it was important to have a good rhythm section behind me," he explains. The jazz trio further links *Surreal Sketches* to the jazz world.

Christian McBride was the only one of the four composers Komer did not previously know. "He has a big band and a jazz trio, he's won multiple Grammy awards, and I was always a big fan of his playing and his compositions," he says. "I also knew he was classically trained, and thought perhaps he had not had an opportunity to write for full orchestra. I gave him free rein." As his point of departure, McBride chose Dalí's "Soft Self-Portrait with Fried Bacon," a 1941 canvas and one of many self-portraits he painted. Dalí described the painting as presenting his outer self: this was the glove, not the soul. Komer says that McBride's *Fried Bacon* swings. "It's down-home and blues-y; a bit like going to church down South on Sunday – but also like a party," he observes.

Sergei Rachmaninoff: *Symphonic Dances*, Op. 45

Sergei Rachmaninoff

Born: April 1, 1873 in Oneg, Novgorod District, Russia

Died: March 28, 1943 in Beverly Hills, California

Composed: 1940

World Premiere: January 3, 1941; Eugene Ormandy led the Philadelphia Orchestra

Duration: 35 minutes

Instrumentation: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, alto saxophone, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, tambourine, tubular bells, xylophone, tam-tam, glockenspiel, piano, harp and strings

During the summer of 1940, following an exhausting concert season, Sergei Rachmaninoff took refuge on the then-bucolic north shore town of Huntington, Long Island. He hoped to compose some music and regain his failing health. Though he survived until spring 1943, the work he composed that summer proved to be his last complete score. And a magnificent swan song it was. Rachmaninoff was deservedly proud of the new piece, writing excitedly on 21 August to his friend, Philadelphia Orchestra conductor Eugene Ormandy:

Last week I finished a new symphonic piece, which I naturally want to give first to you and your orchestra. It is called '*Fantastic Dances*.' I shall now begin the orchestration. Unfortunately my concert tour begins on October 14. I have a great deal of practice to do and I don't know whether I shall be able to finish the orchestration before November.

I should be very glad if, upon your return, you would drop over to our place. I should like to play the piece for you.

Ormandy responded promptly, accepting the composer's invitation for the following week. By then, Rachmaninoff had changed the title to "*Symphonic Dances*."

While we know that Rachmaninoff flirted with the idea of presenting his new piece as a ballet -- choreographer Mikhail Fokine heard the piano version even before Ormandy did -- it is essentially a symphonic work that celebrates the lush orchestral palette for which Rachmaninoff is celebrated. At the same time, vigorous dance rhythms permeate its fabric in all three movements, providing forward momentum and catching us up in a whirl of mysterious, compelling sound.

The string parts to the *Symphonic Dances* are notoriously difficult, and a major challenge to the finest orchestra. There is a good reason: Rachmaninoff enlisted the assistance of the eminent violinist and composer Fritz Kreisler in editing the string parts, including all the bowings. Whereas the strings do not dominate the sound, their presence is a constant factor throughout the *Symphonic Dances*.

The first movement is dominated by a descending triad motive from which the balance of the musical material unfolds. Rachmaninoff takes superb advantage of his orchestral resources, continually surprising us with a panoply of percussion, woodwind and brass accents amidst the ongoing sweep of the strings. His unique stroke in this movement is the luscious solo awarded to alto saxophone in the more leisurely middle section. Precedent for using saxophone as a significant orchestral soloist lay in Bizet's *L'Arlésienne* Suites, Ravel's *Boléro* and his

orchestration of Musorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Rachmaninoff's countryman Alexander Glazunov composed both a solo concerto for saxophone and a saxophone quartet. Still, the timbre is unusual: peculiarly close to the human voice, and vividly set with clarinet and oboe sharing a light accompaniment.

The central waltz opens with muted trumpets in an eerie reminder of the composer's Russian roots. Pizzicato strings establish the ghostly waltz rhythm; a free violin solo lends a folksy, half-gypsy facet to the music. Rachmaninoff focuses on individual instrumental colors, whose chromatic lines often seem like veiled threats undulating beneath the smooth exterior of the waltz. The brassy of the opening measures return periodically, as if to herald the sinister spirits that seem to underlie this disquieting dance. Metric vacillation from 6/8 and 3/8 to 9/8 and back again add to the haunting character.

Much has been made of Rachmaninoff's recurrent use of the medieval *Dies irae* chant in his music. The best known example is the *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini*, but there are several other occurrences among the composer's works. Its presence in the finale to the *Symphonic Dances* has been called Rachmaninoff's last and definitive statement. An English horn solo also makes use of Russian Orthodox chant. The two ideas bind together with the composer's original material to build to a dynamic close.

The magnificence of Rachmaninoff's achievement in this thrilling work is the melding of balletic impulse and symphonic grandeur. Vastly more sophisticated than the heart-on-sleeve romanticism of the early piano concerti, the *Symphonic Dances* are a superb example of his mature orchestral style.

This information is provided solely as a service to and for the benefit of New Jersey Symphony subscribers and patrons. Any other use without express written permission is strictly forbidden.