

philharmonia orchestra

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

(1862 – 1918)

***Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1892-94)**

Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* was the work Messiaen analysed in his very first class at the Paris Conservatoire, on 7 May 1941. Yvonne Loriod, who was a member of the class, recalls that he played from a well-thumbed miniature score which had been part of the little music library that he had carried around in his kit-bag as a soldier, and which had been such a valuable life-line when he was a prisoner-of-war at Stalag VIII-A. It's no surprise that Messiaen should have chosen a work of such extraordinary originality for his first harmony class. First performed on 22 December 1894, Debussy's orchestral work was inspired by the poetry of Mallarmé, to whose soirées Debussy was sometimes invited. When the composer played his work through to the poet in a private performance, given before the première, Mallarmé is said to have remained silent for a long time, before declaring 'I didn't expect anything like this. It is music that brings out the feeling of my poem, providing it with a warmer background than colour'. Mallarmé also spoke of Debussy's work as 'an illustration ... which presents no dissonance with my text: rather, it goes further into the nostalgia and light, with subtlety, malaise and richness.'

While Mallarmé himself was enthusiastic about the work, the initial critical response was less friendly. The *Musical Courier* of New York described it as a 'curious fantasy, full of unprecise harmonies and fleeting phrases', and it lamented the 'large and unimproved opportunity for some beautiful pastoral melodies – but then melody is not the fashion.' A decade later, Louis Elson in Boston described the work as 'a strong example of modern ugliness; The faun must have had a terrible afternoon...' while a London critic thought it the equivalent of a vacuum, and 'may aptly be described as nothing, expressed in musical terms.' The same critic applied this even to the celebrated opening flute phrase: 'The piece begins with a fragment of the chromatic scale played on the flute, manifestly selected with care to express nothing ... I was glad when the end came.' By the 1920s, the work had come to be generally accepted as an innovative masterpiece, though the ageing Camille Saint-Saëns thought otherwise. In 1920 he wrote that he could not find in the *Prélude à l'après-midi* 'the least musical idea.' Coincidentally, this was in a letter to Maurice Emmanuel, a progressive and imaginative musician who was soon to become Messiaen's Music History teacher at the Paris Conservatoire.

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