**Concert 5 April 30, 2016**

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

While others, notably Franz Liszt, were on the forefront of stylistic change during the nineteenth century, it is surely Claude Debussy who forever established entirely new ways of thinking about the fundamental ways of defining and composing music in Western culture. More than anyone, he truly was the father of much of the philosophical basis for the complete turnover in musical art that defined the twentieth century. And, along the way, he composed some of the most original, creative, and dare we say, beautiful music in the repertoire. His name, of course, is indelibly linked with what is popularly called “musical impressionism,”—a term he deplored--but that doesn’t really specifically tell you much. What you may say is that he largely worked within a musical style that made little use of so many of the characteristics of a musical tradition that really dominated the concert halls of the 18th and 19th centuries. Most of us are familiar with concepts such as sonata form; development; key relationships; major and minor tonalities, with their respective scales, counterpoint, fugues, and especially “developing” musical ideas in an ongoing linear fashion. As dominant as these procedures were, Debussy saw other ways of creating and working with musical ideas. His specifically French way of looking at things was quite a contrast to the ideas and methods of the German-speaking composers (all names we know so well!) that had dominated concert halls for several centuries. There was opera, to be sure, and Italians had always held sway there, but in abstract music (no words) the Germans were generally king. Along comes Debussy with a refreshing alternative æsthetic.

In a nutshell, Debussy was not much interested in systems of musical composition, wherein each part—large or small—had a rational, expected, and traditional relationship to every other part. Rather, he focused upon listening to musical sounds in new ways—considering them just for their intrinsic sound, and not how they might fit into a hierarchy as a mere building block. He opened up new ways of composing and listening, and the musical world was changed forever.

He adored painting and poetry, and his deep immersion in those arts is fundamental in searching for meaning in his personal musical style. His æsthetic was rooted in the French nineteenth-century literary movement known as “symbolism.” While most educated Americans today know and speak glibly of “impressionism,” and associate our composer with that style in painting, it is with the much less familiar concept of “symbolism,” specifically that in French literature, that informed almost all of Debussy’s music. Symbolism is traced by most to the poet, Charles Baudelaire, as well as to the imagery and themes of Edgar Allen Poe, whose works in French translation were of great popularity and influence in France. Later, Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine were the central figures of the movement, and whose influence on Debussy it would be difficult to overestimate.

Essentially, symbolists were interested in spirituality, dreamlike imprecision, the indefinite nature of the imagination. They deplored artistic trends of the time that focused on nature, reality, objectivity and the like. The imagery in their poetry was elusive and indirect. Those familiar with movements in the visual arts will find more affinities in the Pre-Raphaelites, for example, than the Impressionists. In the former, a gauzy impression of an object or scene is not the intent, but rather a depiction of something apparently clear in perception, but heavily laden with veiled meaning. An evocation of a feeling, rather than an impression was sought. Moreover, symbolist poetry was highly dependent upon the sound of the French language and the possibility of aural ambiguity—and nowhere was this more basic than in the poetry of Mallarmé.

His poem, *L’après-midi d’un faune*  (1876), is the subject of Debussy’s one-movement “tone poem,” and is his most recognized work. While the text concerns the awakening of a faun from a drowsy mid-afternoon nap, and his reflections on his memories of his adventures with nymphs that morning, the narrative is not straightforward and linear—and neither is Debussy’s score. A faun, of course, is a creature that is half goat and half man, symbolic in literature of untrammeled natural spirits, and nymphs are young, nubile free spirits who sing and dance their way to amorous freedom. So.

The tone poem in the hands of masters such as Liszt, Smetana, and Strauss generally has focused on very specific images and the stories behind them. But, the genre in the hands of Debussy (under the influence of the symbolists) approached the text in a much different way. His *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* (1894), from the immortal opening languid, sensuous flute solo, creates an episodic series of feelings, atmospheres, and reflections rather than a story. The faun, half-dulled by the afternoon heat thinks random thoughts of “. . . enervating swoon of heat, which stifles all fresh dawn’s resistance”; “. . . Girls sleeping, with their reckless arms around each other”; and “. . . my speechless soul and heavy-laden body succumb at last to noontime’s ceremonial pause.”

For these thoughts and moods Debussy crafted perfect orchestral colors, melodies, and harmonies. While not a follower of Brahms—nor, on the other hand, of Liszt, Wagner, and Strauss, either--Debussy, with this first great success, opened the door to the twentieth century in music, and it was never the same thereafter.

Piano Concerto No. 1 in Eb, No. 1, LW H4—Franz Liszt

In the pantheon of musical greats it would be difficult, indeed, to think of anyone whose reputation as man, performer, and composer has varied more with both scholars and the public. He was clearly one of the most influential musicians of the nineteenth century, both as composer and as one whose virtuosity as pianist was—and probably still is—unexcelled. Musical composition during the Romantic period in music tended to roughly align with two schools of thought: those who believed there was significant life left in the traditional approaches inherited from Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, and those who pushed ahead into the future with new approaches to basics of form, harmony, and æsthetics. Only a moment’s reflection will remind us that the former group included Brahms, for example, and the latter, our friends, Wagner, Berlioz, and, of course, Franz Liszt.

After World War I, with the advent of musical modernism and the waning of respect for the music of the nineteenth century, it became fashionable to deride just about everything to do with Liszt. His compositions were viewed as lightweight, bombastic affairs that sacrificed integrity for cheap theatrics, borne by stellar, but empty virtuosity—too freighted with extra-musical romantic mush. His personal life was a perfect exemplar of a nineteenth-century “rock star,” with swooning admirers and flagrant public violation of moral values. No one, except perhaps Paganini, wowed the public more on the stage. Liszt more or less thumbed his nose at every convention, musical and social, for the aggrandizement of his personal and musical life. So was the story.

Well, that was the common view until the advent of the revival of Romantic music after World War II. Most all agree that the perceptions outlined above were a gross distortion. Where to start? His virtuosity was without peer, but in his compositions that very virtuosity—along with the important advances in the construction of pianos—laid the foundation for modern piano technique, and a myriad of possibilities for new textures in compositions for that instrument. His contributions to modern piano study, performance and composition are fundamental. As a teacher he was indefatigable, generous, and taught without compensation legions of students—whether they were of great talent or not. Today, we have come to appreciate his prescience for the directions of advanced harmony that informed early twentieth-century composition. His late piano works anticipate much of what we hear in the harmonies, scales, and economical textures of Debussy, Schoenberg, and others. And Liszt knew it and predicted it. The nineteenth-century’s answer to the symphony—the tone poem—was his creation. Yes, he did notoriously live without the convention of marriage with other men’s wives, and fathered children with them. But, those relationships were few, long lived, and with women the legitimacy of whose marriages were questionable, anyway. He was devoted to them, loved his children deeply, and late in life, turned more and more to the solace of what was a lifelong sincere religiosity. He lived in Rome at the Vatican, and took minor clerical orders, and became a dedicated associate of the establishment there, including the Pope. So there.

A prolific composer—with hundreds and hundreds of works—he wrote chiefly for the piano, but also for the organ, for chorus, solo voice, and the orchestra. Among his works for solo instrument and orchestra are two fully completed piano concertos, out of many infrequently performed works, which entered the standard repertoire early on (a third recently surfaced). He composed both of them during roughly the same period, from the 1830s to the1850s, revising them, and not giving the premières until long after the inception of their composition.

The Eb concerto was first performed in 1855 with Liszt as soloist and another great musical proto-romanticist conducting, Hector Berlioz. Liszt’s original title for the work, “Première Concerto Symphonique pour Piano et Orchestre,” gives us a strong clue to an important aspect of the overall form of this concerto. It is, indeed, symphonic in its conception, with all four movements mirroring the traditional makeup of a symphony: fast, slow, scherzo, and fast. Liszt, ever the innovator, thus dropped the traditional three-movement scheme of concertos, and then went one further by designing his first concerto to blend all four movements together into one continuous, unified work. Liszt was a master of the technique, “thematic transformation,” in which a given idea appears throughout a large work literally transformed into various guises. These different appearances at first seem to be totally new ideas, but are in fact, cleverly derived from the original. He pursed this in most of his large, single movement forms, whether for solo piano, or in another of his innovations: the symphonic poem.

The main theme is impossible to miss, in the stentorian announcement by unison strings at the very beginning. Listen well, for it subtly informs the other themes that follow. The piano immediate answers with a Lisztian roulade, followed by an exquisite, lyrical phrase in the best Chopin tradition, and we’re off to the races. Each section, to be sure has its own themes, as does a sonata form, and Liszt exploits that idea in the concerto. While the orchestra is clearly in a subordinate, accompanying rôle, there are nevertheless opportunities for the group to shine, especially in many of the “duets” between various orchestra soloists and the pianist—clarinet and viola, especially. The virtuosity of Liszt, himself, is clearly on display throughout, with dazzling rapid octaves, and a plethora of other impressive digital pyrotechnics. When the last movement arrives, we hear the main theme from the very beginning, of course in a new guise, and a review of all the themes from the other sections suitably transformed. This jolly, but sturdy, march is comprised of all of this, new—yet familiar—and careens to a brilliant conclusion. While this first concerto is representative of the dazzling virtuosity for Liszt is known, and does not yet show the abstruse paths to the future that his late works imbue, it is nevertheless a work of great integrity and beauty. It is clear evidence of genius in a protean man now newly appreciated.

*Symphonie fantastique,* op. 14—Hector Berlioz

Of all of the major composers of the nineteenth century, Hector Berlioz is perhaps the most personally interesting. What a vivacious, unique individual he was, both in his life and in his music. And, perhaps most refreshing--for one who lived such an intense and varied existence—he was a relatively normal individual. He was single minded of purpose and impassioned in his pursuit of the composition of music that reflected his literary interests, his interaction with his physical surroundings, and his deeply felt emotions. He was not a virtuoso performer (he did play the flute and the guitar passably), his early musical training having been derived largely from the study of harmony books. However—and it is a major informing aspect of his intellect—he was a man of literature. He read widely and with sophistication from an early age, and later become one of the most important music critics and general authors in music of all time.

The son of a doctor, who pressed him to follow the family tradition, Berlioz studied medicine for two years at Paris’ famed medical schools, but left in disgust at the “hands on” necessities—especially the malodorous dissection labs. He pursued music, instead, finally enrolling at the Conservatory for some formal instruction. He was criticized relentlessly for much of his career, not only for his forging ahead in a progressive romantic style—violating almost every canon of composition with alacrity—but especially for his putative lack of education and traditional skills. He was undeterred.

He composed assiduously in his twenties, primarily in various genres of accompanied vocal music, before finally winning the prestigious Prix de Rome in 1830 (after several unsuccessful attempts). In the interim, two significant events occurred in his life: he encountered Beethoven’s symphonies—which opened his eyes to the expressive capabilities of instrumental music—and he witnessed Anglo-Irish actress, Harriet Smithson, in a performance of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet.*  To say that he was smitten would be one of the world’s great understatements—he was captivated, stunned, enraptured, obsessed! In a word, it was completely the stereotypical infatuation of the Romantic Era.

The result was his composition of one of music’s unique works, the *Symphonie fantastique*, a work without precedent, and certainly one of controversy—to this day. Where to start? It had a controversial “program,” or story, an unusual structure, odd chord progressions, unconventional melodies, and a mastery of the orchestra and orchestration that was almost unprecedented. It is cast in five movements, a bit unusual, but certainly not unique. But, the notoriety is founded in the rather detailed story which is associated with the work—so detailed that it was printed and handed out to the audience at the first performance. Despite its subject matter, it wasn’t really that *outré* for French audiences of the time, for the public in Paris loved lurid tales in their opera librettos. Berlioz subsequently altered some of its details, and published many reflections about the story and its relationship to the music, but the close association of the tale with the symphony is still considered essential. It takes us through each of the colorful movements with a detailed explanation of what the composer was thinking as he composed, or at the least, his mood. So let’s begin.

The first movement (*Reveries, Passions)* is divided into two sections, wherein the poet is first infected with a “sickness of the soul,” listless without focus. But then he discovers his ideal, the object of his passion, which, in the best Romantic tradition, he sees only from afar. This, of course, is Miss Smithson, the Shakespearian actress, and she sets his soul on fire with unrequited love. In point of fact, in the few years between Berlioz’ first glimpse of her and the composition of the symphony, he never met her. The fast section of this movement reflects his passion, and at the beginning marks the appearance of the famed *idée fixe*, which is an important unifying device in the symphony. It’s simply a rather bland melody—but easily identified in its various guises--that represents the poet’s beloved. You’ll hear it first unaccompanied in the flute and first violins (right after the loud punctuations that kick off the fast section).

The second movement (*A Ball*) serves as the traditional scherzo movement of a symphony and in this work is simply a gracious and elegant waltz depicting a ballroom scene where the poet sees his beloved. The third movement (*Scene in the Country)* is a convenient way to work in a slow movement. In this context, the poet is wandering about in a bucolic atmosphere, hearing shepherds playing on rustic pipes (English horn solos, here), intimations of distant thunder in the timpani, and rustling of the wind as he ruminates over his anxieties in his relationship with the beloved.

The fireworks begin in the fourth movement (*March to the Scaffold*). The poet has dreamed (too much opium) that he has killed his beloved, is condemned to death, and is being marched to the guillotine. The movement tramps along, variously brilliant or softly ominous. A tumultuous arrival at the place of execution is suddenly interrupted by a soft, dreamy thought of the beloved—represented by the *idée fixe* played gently by the unaccompanied solo clarinet. Without warning the blade drops, the head falls, and a blaring fanfare in the winds and percussion announces the poet’s demise—or was it just bad drugs?

The gloves come off in the last movement (*Dream of a Witches’ Sabbath*), a grotesque evocation of ghosts, monsters, conjurers, replete with odd sounds, noises, evil laughter—you name it. The *idée fixe* occurs again—as the beloved apparently joins this God-forsaken group—this time played in a bizarre and stilted dance rhythm in a solo small clarinet. The evil celebration builds intensity, and then we hear a parody of the *Dies iræ* —a plainchant from the Mass for the Dead,played by the winds, accompanied by tolling church bells. What follows is a round dance for the witches, which starts as a kind of fugue, building to a climax, with the *Dies iræ* returning to join the witches. The drive to the finish has few equals in the repertoire for pure excitement and rhythmic drive, as this paean to obsessive love and romantic passion careens to an end.

The irony is, Berlioz finally did meet his beloved, and swept her off her feet into marriage. The realities of domestic life triumphed over drama, music, and poetry and the marriage dissolved in a few years.

--Wm. E. Runyan

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