

Delights and Disruptions

by René Spencer Saller

With *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, Claude Debussy expanded the limits of tonality, meter, and form. The other works on this program are similarly disruptive—and no less delightful. Matthias Pintscher's violin concerto *Mar'eh* celebrates both the spiky experimentalism of Luigi Nono and the sensuous soundworlds of Debussy and Maurice Ravel. Ravel's *Alborada del gracioso* and Debussy's *Iberia* focus on Spain through a distinctively Gallic lens. Finally, Paul Dukas's *L'apprenti sorcier* transforms an old German ballad into a supernatural symphonic scherzo.

Afternoon Delight

Debussy was 22 years old when he first composed music inspired by the words of Stéphane Mallarmé. At 25 the young composer began attending the Symbolist poet's weekly salons. He began his setting of Mallarmé's seminal *L'Après-midi d'un faune* ("The Afternoon of a Faun") in 1892 and finished it two years later. Debussy understood that his version could not "tell the story" in the manner of a symphonic poem: "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."

With its woozy melodies and glistening, irresolute chords, the music mirrors the faun's erotic torpor. The faun plays a reed flute in Mallarmé's text, so Debussy's *Prélude* begins with a flute solo, a seductive tune that rises and falls in half-steps, forming a dissonant tritone. In a sly allusion to Mallarmé's strategic use of blank space, Debussy includes a bar of silence.

By late 19th-century standards, Debussy scored the work for a relatively small orchestra. The brass section is confined to four horns, and there is no percussion except crotales, or antique cymbals, which had scarcely been heard in the orchestral repertoire. This spare but inventive orchestration permits many alternate voicings—solo flute to oboe to doubled flutes to clarinet—to convey the faun's shifting impressions. Exotic harmonies, whole-tone scale runs, and rampant

chromaticism augment this luxuriant sound-world. The flowing meter vacillates between 9/8, 6/8, and 12/8, representing both the faun's stream of consciousness and the murmuring waters described in Mallarmé's poem.

Signs and Apparitions

Matthias Pintscher's second major work for violin and orchestra is called *Mar'eh*. "*Mar'eh* means face, sign," Pintscher explained in 2011, shortly before the violin concerto was premiered. "The Hebrew word can also mean the aura of a face, a beautiful vision, something wonderful which suddenly appears before you." The German-born composer and international conductor was inspired by listening to the pianist and violinist Julia Fischer. "I came across this word when I thought of the fine lines which she can spin with her [violin], this very intensive but light play."

The composition generates meaning from these wondrous apparitions, from the playful space between signifier and signified. "*Mar'eh* continually materializes new sounds out of nothing, with the violin acting as protagonist," Pintscher explains. "I have tried to shape the whole [work] in a very songlike fashion, so that the violin starts at the beginning and draws a line—or its vision—through to the end in the most varied registers, often quite high where it can only be continued in harmonics.... As part of the transparent sonority, the orchestra answers in gesture what the violin evokes and then realizes its own tone-color melody."

The piece is structured as a single movement and scored for a large orchestra. Four percussionists wield a dazzling array of tuned and nontuned instruments. Tam-tams and gongs are layered in myriad exotic combinations; instruments are struck, slapped, and stroked by a wealth of brushes, mallets, and bows, as well as fingers and palms. Surprising sonorities abound. The mouthpiece of an alto flute is held between the player's teeth, muted by the lips. A flute trio is "constantly answering the violin part in chamber music style," whereas the violin should sound "flutelike" and "a bit on the bridge."

The violinist's virtuosity is a given, but it's only the means, not the end. "The sound has a direction, not in the melodic sense, but in that the

sound always continues, is never interrupted," Pintscher explains. "It is about the direction of sound in space and time."

Spanish Morning

When he was a young student at the Paris Conservatory, Ravel aligned himself with the avant-garde "Apaches"—the punk rockers of fin-de-siècle France. As another member of their clique put it, "Ravel shared our preference, weakness, or mania, respectively, for Chinese art, Mallarmé and Verlaine, Rimbaud, Cézanne and Van Gogh, Rameau and Chopin, Whistler and Valéry, the Russians and Debussy."

Born to a Swiss father and a Basque mother in the French Pyrenees, close to the Spanish border, Ravel seemed predisposed to musical eclecticism. Although his family moved to Paris when he was still an infant, he retained a lifelong affinity for Spanish culture.

Ravel composed *Alborada del gracioso* for piano in 1905 and orchestrated it thirteen years later. The title, sometimes rendered as "Morning Song of the Jester," resists direct translation. In 1907 Ravel explained why he didn't want to translate it into French or any other language: "The fact is that the *gracioso* of Spanish comedy is a rather special character and one which, as far as I know, is not found in any other theatrical tradition. We do have an equivalent, though, in the French theater: Beaumarchais' Figaro. But he's more philosophical, less well-meaning than his Spanish ancestor."

Although this colorful standalone piece might seem at first like a comical character study, its structure is, Ravel explained, "as strict as that of a Bach fugue." *Alborada del gracioso* is organized in three connected parts: two vigorous, dancelike sections, with zesty castanets and simulated guitar (harp and pizzicato strings), and a quieter, more rhapsodic central portion featuring a plangent solo bassoon.

Sketches of Spain

Iberia is the second of three cyclical works—collectively titled *Images pour Orchestre*—that Debussy composed between 1905 and 1912. The set was initially planned for two pianos, but Debussy decided that it required a richer palette containing bolder and more diverse colors. With *Images*, he explained, "I'm trying to write something else—

realities, in a manner of speaking—what imbeciles call 'impressionism,' a term employed with the utmost inaccuracy, especially by art critics, who use it as a label to stick on Turner, the finest creator of mystery in the whole of art!"

A triptych within a triptych, *Iberia* is a three-part portrait of Spain. Like Ravel's *Alborada*, it features a slower, more meditative middle movement surrounded by romping, celebratory outer movements. Although *Iberia* is saturated with Moorish-inflected melodies and Latin-inspired verve, Debussy's actual experience of the country was minimal: He spent a single afternoon in San Sebastian, attending a bull-fight, and returned home to France before nightfall. According to the Spanish composer Manuel de Falla, Debussy's sole excursion to Spain left him with a vivid impression of "the light in the bullring, particularly the violent contrast between the one half of the ring flooded with sunlight and the other half deep in shade."

The lively, sun-dappled opening movement, "Par les rues et par les chemins" ("Along the Streets and Paths"), combines tart dissonances, stomping rhythms, and sparkling motivic digressions. Next, the mesmerizing nocturne "Les parfums de la nuit" ("Night Fragrances") traces the elusive contours of a dream: blurry harmonies, sinuous tempos, distant bells. Finally, "Le Matin d'un jour de fête" ("Morning of a Feast Day") brims over with giddy revelry. "It sounds like music that has not been written down," Debussy observed. "There is a watermelon vendor and children whistling—I see them all clearly!"

Magic and Mayhem

Studious, reserved, and self-critical, Paul Dukas destroyed all but a dozen of his compositions. Yet even so, he ranks among France's finest composers. In 1901 Debussy, his former classmate at the Paris Conservatory, praised his "brain of steel" and "cold, blue, unbending will," which, he predicted, would ensure his "influence on the 20th century, both now and later." Debussy was right about his friend's enduring importance: Dukas taught Olivier Messiaen and was admired by Richard Strauss. But today many music lovers know Dukas only by his 1897 symphonic poem "L'apprenti sorcier" ("The Sorcerer's Apprentice"), the soundtrack to the scariest scene in Walt Disney's

Fantasia. How many nightmares have been fueled by that feral broom alone?

Dukas subtitled his most famous showpiece "a symphonic scherzo after a ballade of Goethe." The Goethe poem, *Der Zauberlehrling*, originally published in 1797, was often reprinted in the program so that audience members could match each plot point with its orchestral corollary. Dukas chose a modified rondo form to reinforce the story's sinister repetitions; the same melody returns obsessively, much like the relentless broom keep coming back with buckets of water.

A tour de force of tone painting, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" deploys an ingenious arsenal of effects to conjure all the narrative details. Eerie strings invoke the fateful spell. A dripping harp becomes a raging tempest, as pizzicato plinks accumulate into rushing glissandi. A clarinet theme scampers pell-mell throughout the woodwinds. Lumbering bassoons depict the broom as it slowly comes to life. At the dramatic climax, an ill-advised swing of the ax splits the broom into countless unstoppable, marching, bucket-wielding drones. When the sorcerer returns, he stops the spell, saves his apprentice from drowning, and delivers a swift *fortissimo* kick for good measure.

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