Quad City Symphony Orchestra

PROGRAM NOTES

Masterworks I: French Moderns

By Jacob Bancks
Associate Professor of Music
Augustana College

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)

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

Instrumentation: 3 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, percussion, 2 harps, and strings.
Premiere: December 22, 1894, Paris, Gustave Doret conducting.
QCSO Performance History: Harry John Brown conducting in 1953; Charles Gigante conducting in 1960; James Dixon conducting in 1969, 1976, 1982, and 1990; Mark Gibson (guest) conducting in 1998; Mark Russell Smith conducting in 2008.

In 1886 Jean Moréas wrote an article in *Le Figaro* articulating the ideals that were animating a new generation of poets. This *Symbolist Manifesto* included the exhortation to artists that their core ideas should be hidden behind "sumptuous lounge robes of extraneous analogies." This was essential, he believed, because Symbolism "consists in never approaching the concentrated kernel of the Idea in itself." In other words, whatever animating idea sits at the core of a Symbolist work of art must be carefully obscured, like a concealed relic.

It is difficult to imagine a more perfect example of this than Stéphane Mallarmé's *The Afternoon of a Faun*, a poem written from the viewpoint of a sexually eager, profoundly confused faun (i.e., a mythic creature with goat's legs and man's head and torso; not a "fawn", or baby deer). If you can imagine your everyday, waking life being like a dream where every desire is frustrated, and that falling asleep is your only gateway to fulfillment, you might be on your way to understanding the beauty of Mallarmé's poem.

Did I love a dream?
My doubt, mass of ancient night, ends extreme
In many a subtle branch, that remaining the true
Woods themselves, proves, alas, that I too
Offered myself, alone, as triumph, the false ideal of roses.

If Mallarmé's goal, in line with the *Symbolist Manifesto*, was to write sensuous and evocative poetry that carefully obscured his central idea, he was clearly highly successful.

Incidentally, his poem also abounds in specifically musical imagery. For example,

The great twin reed we play under the azure ceiling,
That turning towards itself the cheek's quivering,
Dreams, in a long solo, so we might amuse

The beauties round about by false notes that confuse…

For a composer of Claude Debussy's artistic disposition, this poetry was irresistible. The "great twin reed," the "long solo," and most especially the "false notes that confuse" suggested a new kind of orchestral music, one that embodied the murky qualities of Symbolist poetry, but with the added "sumptuous lounge robes" of wordless music.

The core of Debussy's tone poem is a recurring flute solo (perhaps inspired by Mallarmé's description of a "sonorous, empty and monotonous line") which is not so much developed in a classical sense as mysteriously transformed and re-contextualized in its various iterations throughout the piece. Debussy was famously skeptical of "development" in the nineteenth century, Germanic sense: he detested Wagner's leitmotifs, and once famously remarked that the development section of a Brahms symphony was the prime opportunity to step out for a cigarette. So, if we are most accustomed to hearing short, simple motives lucidly extrapolated across long periods of time (in, for example, a Brahms symphony), for Debussy's work we have to adjust our ears to hear more arcane, musically ambiguous motives appear and reappear in puzzling, unexpected ways. In other words, for Debussy and other Symbolists, good art was not a reasoned argument, but rather an incantation.

Being the first piece of its kind both in expressive arc and harmonic invention, in its reception *Prelude* confounded traditionalists and inspired modernists. Camille Saint-Saëns, the leading composer of the generation prior to Debussy's, said the work "has a pretty sonority, but one does not find in it the least musical idea… Debussy did not create a style; he cultivated an absence of style, logic, and common sense." In contrast, Maurice Ravel, Debussy's younger contemporary, posited that *Prelude* had in it "more musical substance… than in the wonderfully immense Ninth Symphony by Beethoven." Later iconoclasts like Igor Stravinsky and Pierre Boulez pointed to the work's musical materials (obscure modulations, unexpected juxtapositions, and vivid orchestration) as the root of their own modernist musical projects. In this sense, the work is most certainly a prelude, not just to Mallarmé's poem, but to the musical developments of the 75 years to follow.

Things to Listen for in *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*

- There's no way you'll miss the luscious, haunting flute solo at the piece's beginning, and in its many later instances. Note that this first version fits almost entirely in the instrument's lowest octave, its least powerful range. We rarely hear the flute this low because it is so easily buried by other instruments. Debussy has to be very careful about how he accompanies a solo like this! Interestingly enough, it's the same range of pitches in the bassoon's high register that Stravinsky uses to begin *The Rite of Spring*, a work which owes much to Debussy.
- The solo's end is marked with a harp glissando, its most iconic gesture and (befitting the faun) itself a dreamy "illusion". Because of the unique construction of the harp, what sound to our ears like arpeggios are actually a series of

seven-note scales with various repeated pitches.

♬ Though Debussy is indeed artful at crafting every moment of sound, note how he also makes stunning use of silences.

♬ You will notice whenever the flute solo returns that something subtle changes about how it feels. Sometimes the notes of solo itself are different, but more often it is the harmonic context that changes, particularly the lowest bass note in the orchestra.

♬ Clearly if we left everything to the "sonorous, empty and monotonous line" of the flute, this piece could never get going, so Debussy uses the other woodwind soloists to move things along. He begins with the somewhat scatterbrained clarinet (who has figures in both the all-half-step chromatic scale and all-whole-step whole tone scale), ultimately entrusting the oboe with the middle section's more stable theme, clearly (for a moment at least) in the key of E major.

♬ After a third section with longer melodic lines over pulsing triplets in the woodwinds and horns, the flute solo returns, but this time at a slightly higher pitch level.

♬ The oboe again plays foil to the serene flute with a foolhardy, herky-jerky, trill-and-grace-note-laden solo, which the flute and English horn eventually come to imitate.

♬ The final section is marked with a shockingly sparse orchestral texture: two solo violins, a set of "antique cymbals" or crotales (sounding like a hyper-charged glockenspiel), and the solo flute and solo cello in octaves.

♬ For all its ambiguity, the flute solo ends in a triadic manner (i.e., imitating a major triad, the least ambiguous harmonic entity). The closing words of Mallarmé's poem seem entirely fitting: "Farewell... I go to see the shadow you have become."

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)
Nocturnes

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (third flute doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 3 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, 2 harps, female chorus, and strings.

Premiere: December 9, 1900 (first two movements only) and October 27, 1901 (complete work), Lamoureux Orchestra, Paris, Camille Chevillard conducting.

QCSO Performance History: Harry John Brown conducting in 1951; Charles Gigante conducting in 1959; James Dixon conducting in 1965, 1970, 1978, and 1987.

Like all modernists, Debussy was eager to forge a path toward the new, the unexpected, and the unexplainable. But modernism has frequently paired this forward-looking spirit with an equally-emphatic rejection of precedent. In short, it is a line of thinking both bewitched by the future and haunted by the past. Case in point: Debussy spent a tortuous decade writing and revising his only opera, *Pélleas et Mélisande,* desperate to avoid any indebtedness to operatic clichés, as epitomized in the works of Richard Wagner. As soon as Debussy thought he had succeeded in exorcising his opera's nineteenth century demons, he bemoaned that "the ghost of old Klingsor" (the nefarious wizard in Wagner's *Parsifal*) "kept appearing in the corner."

Opera was not the only genre in which Debussy attempted to transcend musical history. He wrote, for example, two books of piano preludes, a genre loaded with historical baggage from its many Baroque and Romantic manifestations. And when he renamed his orchestral work *Three Scenes at Twilight* to the more succinct *Nocturnes* (literally, "night pieces"), he likewise set out to avoid the nineteenth century trappings of that genre as well. In a program note, he was careful to declare that his title was "not meant to designate the usual form of the Nocturne, but rather all the various impressions and the special effects of light that the word suggests." This is, of course, a very Symbolist sentiment: hidden inner ideas concealed with "sumptuous lounge robes." Unsurprisingly, the work of another Symbolist poet, Henri di Régnier, helped to inspire this work.

Of course, the nocturne wasn't the only genre Debussy was flouting here. Although *Nocturnes* is a multi-movement work for orchestra, one dare not liken it to a symphony. Each of the three movements is carefully circumscribed to connect musically only with itself, and the scenes the music describes are, unlike in Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique,* completely independent from one another. In this spirit, it should be unsurprising that at the world premiere, only the first two movements were played, with the third being added a year later.

In his own program note, Debussy described the character of each movement. The first, *Nuages* ("Clouds"), "renders the immutable aspect of the sky and the slow, solemn motion of the clouds, fading away in grey tones lightly tinged with white." This is one of Debussy's most painterly musical descriptions, and he was reportedly inspired by the works of American painter James MacNeill Whistler. In the second movement, *Fêtes* ("Festivals"), Debussy's description is downright psychedelic: his music "gives us the vibrating, dancing rhythm of the atmosphere with sudden flashes of light. There is also the episode of the procession (a dazzling fantastic vision), which passes through the festive scene and becomes merged in it. But the background remains resistantly the same: the festival with its blending of music and luminous dust participating in the cosmic rhythm." Finally, *Sirenes* ("Sirens") both evokes Homer's *Odyssey* and predicts his later orchestral work *La Mer:* "the sea and its countless rhythms and presently, amongst the waves silvered by the moonlight, is heard the mysterious song of the Sirens as they laugh and pass on." Here, as in *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun,* Debussy betrays another impulse inherent in modernism: amid the desperate attempt to escape the past, we end up going even deeper into history.

Things to Listen for in *Nocturnes*

First movement: *Nuages (Clouds)*

- Notice the near-constant, unvaried, and unsyncopated quarter notes that persist throughout most of the movement. These provide a kind of blank background in front of which the more varied solos are set.
- Like the flute in *Prelude,* the English horn has a solo that provides a recurring motif uniting the entire movement. This is a favorite trick of Debussy's: to leave a musical element unchanged in itself but to transform its context throughout a piece.

♬ The movement's middle section has a sparkling theme which is doubled on flute and harp. This theme is composed in the primeval, universally-singable pentatonic mode.

♬ The last clouds of the movement float through the bassoons and low strings; the flute recalls its earlier pentatonic solo, though this time its last note falls outside the scale.

Second movement: *Fêtes (Festivals)*

♬ Motion in the bass from 5 to 1 (known as a "perfect fourth") is one of classical music's most fundamental ingredients. At the beginning of *Fêtes*, Debussy mimics this but chooses a much more mysterious and dissonant interval, the "tritone". Historically composers approached and resolved tritones carefully, but for Debussy the tritone becomes expressive independent of how it is resolved.

♬ The first section ends in an intense fanfare.

♬ In the middle of the movement, low rumbles in the harp, timpani, pizzicato strings and muted trumpets might be the "procession" Debussy described in his program notes.

♬ One might expect a big, triumphant end to this festival. But of course, Debussy always aimed to defy musical expectations.

Third movement: *Sirenes (Sirens)*

♬ Debussy's most innovative device in the entire work is the chorus of wordless voices. Obviously, he is depicting the captivating musical temptresses of Homer's *Odyssey*: "If any one unwarily draws in too close and hears the singing of the Sirens, his wife and children will never welcome him home again, for they sit in a green field and warble him to death with the sweetness of their song. There is a great heap of dead men's bones lying all around, with the flesh still rotting off them." So remember, this music is meant to be both beautiful and dangerous!

♬ On that note, the singing is so fresh and surprising that it can be easy to miss the other, equally intriguing musical layers. Listen especially for the rhythmic underlay; all kinds of conflicting rhythms are going on throughout the entire orchestra.

♬ If you've ever sung in a choir, you know you have to breathe at some point. Debussy achieves the effect of near-constant singing over some passages by seamlessly dovetailing the different sections of the choir; one is allowed to rest while the other continues the same musical lines.

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)
Syrinx

Instrumentation: Solo flute
Premiere: December 1, 1913, Louis Fleury, flute.
QCSO Premiere.

One genre for which Debussy had few if any precedents to break was music for unaccompanied woodwinds. For nearly all pieces for flute preceding *Syrinx,* instrumental accompaniment (at least harpsicord or piano) provided help to the solo flute by clarifying the underlying harmony and keeping the rhythmic momentum moving forward. "A flute singing on the horizon must at once contain its emotion!" wrote Debussy, articulating the unique challenge of writing for a single-line, unaccompanied instrument. "The line or melodic pattern cannot rely on any interruption of color."

Originally titled *Flûte de Pan*, the work is (surprise!) another nod to ancient mythology: in Ovid's telling, the nymph Syrinx turned herself into a river reed to avoid the advances of the god Pan, who promptly fashioned her into a flute. The piece was written as incidental music for a play on mythic themes by Gabriel Mourey; it was reportedly performed from the wings of the theatre between acts.

Things to Listen for in *Syrinx*

- ♬ The piece may not feel like it's in a key, but when you hear the flute line coming to a rest, it's probably on the pitch B-flat.
- ♬ Debussy frequently switches between different pitch collections, including pentatonic and chromatic scales. This adds an extra air of otherworldly mystery, since ordinary panpipes are fashioned to use only one scale (think of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, in which the panpipes played by the bird-catcher Papageno contain only the first five notes of the major scale).
- ♬ In *Syrinx* the flute goes even lower than in *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*; the lowest pitch is a D-flat just above middle C, which is very nearly the lowest pitch the flute can play.
- ♬ The form, as in many of Debussy's short pieces, is a simple ABA.
- ♬ You might notice the last pitch is very pungent and somewhat unexpected: rather than ending on the B-flat which has been central throughout, Debussy ends on a quizzical B-natural.

MODEST MUSSORGSKY (1839-1881)

Pictures at an Exhibition

Orchestrated by MAURICE RAVEL (1875-1937)

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (second and third flute doubling piccolo), 3 oboes (third oboe doubling English horn), 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, alto saxophone, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, 2 harps, celesta, and strings.

Premiere: October 19, 1922, Paris, Serge Koussevitzky conducting.

QCSO Performance History: Harry John Brown conducting in 1952; James Dixon conducting in 1965, 1974, 1980, and 1989; Donald Schleicher conducting in 2005; Mark Russell Smith conducting in 2013 and 2017 (QCYSE Side-by-Side).

Because of their shared nationality, similar affinities, and mutual gift for brilliant orchestration, Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel are often linked in the study of music history. Debussy's love of mythic topics so clearly evidenced on this program were shared by Ravel (recall his ballet *Daphnis and Chloe*, performed by the QCSO in March 2017), and the two clearly admired each other's work. But a close examination of both their music and their artistic temperaments demonstrates many sharp differences between them.

Debussy, ever-tortured by his efforts to forge new musical paths, seemed to find Ravel's music too facile and easygoing. In a 1907 letter to a friend, Debussy criticized Ravel for his perceived lack of seriousness. "What irritates me is his posture as a 'trickster,' or better yet, as an enchanting fakir, who can make flowers spring up around a chair," wrote Debussy. "Unfortunately, a

trick is always prepared, and it can astonish only once!"

And Ravel had misgivings about the older master too. In an article published a decade after Debussy's death, Ravel acknowledged his debt to the older composer, but then admitted, "Nevertheless, I started the reaction against him in favor of the classics because I craved more will and intellect than his music contained."

Ravel's gesture toward "the classics" and his desire for "more will and intellect" both point toward neoclassicism, or a widespread, post-World War I trend whereby composers re-engaged eagerly with music of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century (recall Hindemith's *Symphonic Metamorphoses on Themes of Carl Maria von Weber* and Stravinsky's *Pulcinella*, both major neoclassical works heard at the QCSO last season). As you might have guessed, the neoclassical impulse was more or less anathema to Debussy, who used old forms and modes of expression only to mock them; Ravel's work, on the other hand, is full of neoclassical minuets, pavans, and waltzes. In short, though Ravel was a younger man, he cared more for the composers who preceded him than Debussy did.

In this light, the idea of orchestrating a piano suite written by the nineteenth century Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky was a project Debussy might have detested, but that Ravel embraced with great enthusiasm. Commissioned by the conductor Serge Koussevitzky for premiere with the Boston Symphony in 1922, Ravel's was neither the first nor the last orchestration of Mussorgsky's suite, but it has been by far the most well-known and revered.

Mussorgsky wrote *Pictures at an Exhibition* in memory of his close friend, painter Viktor Hartmann, who died unexpectedly in 1873. The exhibition referred to in the title was a memorial to Hartmann in St. Petersburg following his death. Like much of his music, these piano pieces have a rough, exuberant, and untutored edge that earned him both criticism and praise during his lifetime. By Ravel's time Mussorgsky was a revered figure in Paris, thanks to a major revival of his opera *Boris Godunov* hosted there in 1908.

Anyone curious about how Ravel actually went about the task of orchestrating can rely on the testimony of Ravel's friend and biographer Alexis Roland-Manuel. "I saw–this was a great privilege–how he orchestrated," recalled Roland-Manuel. "Of course it wasn't his own music, but it was nonetheless very interesting. He attentively examined the passage he was working on; he wrote, distributing the instruments like any other orchestrator. Then, very often, he went to the piano and isolated an instrumental group. He needed, he said, to hear what one group was doing in relation to the others… He said that he used the piano far more when orchestrating than when composing the first drafts of his own works."

Roland-Manuel also shared the origin of one of Ravel's most distinctive instrumental choices. When trying to decide with which instrument to place the melody in Mussorgsky's second piece, "The Old Castle", Ravel asked his friend for a suggestion, and Roland-Manuel proposed the clarinet. "A clarinet? That would intrude!" said Ravel. So he assigned the melody to a saxophone.

Things to Listen for in *Pictures at an Exhibition*

Promenade

♬ Though Mussorgsky uses a very steady quarter note beat, the number of beats per measure changes quite frequently. Try to count along (1-2-3-4) to see how irregular the meter actually is.

No. 1, The Gnome

♬ In some cases, Ravel imitates the piano (e.g., in the opening gesture). At other times, like when the high strings slide between pitches, he uses techniques that are impossible on the piano.

No. 2, The Old Castle

♬ Notice that the entire movement is underlaid by one, long, single pitch (G-sharp). This is called a *pedal tone*, after the pedals on the organ. There are very few pedal tones as long as this one!

Promenade

♬ The promenade's first, brief return is somewhat more stark and less regal than its earlier version.

No. 3, Children Quarreling After Play

♬ Listen to how the flute doubles the oboes quick notes at the opening; sometimes Ravel doubles at the same note, and sometimes an octave above.

No. 4, Cattle

♬ The cellos and basses play nearly constantly for this movement. Watch them near the end: Ravel instructs them to put their mutes on one by one rather than all at once. This allows the sound to be dampened gradually and uninterrupted.

Promenade

♬ Notice how the character of this promenade bridges the somber mood of No. 4 to the giddiness of No. 5.

No. 5, Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks

♬ Imitating the piano's staccato, Ravel uses almost exclusively short sounds in the piece's outer sections. Listen for the change in the middle section, where the horn brings in the first long tones, later imitated by the strings in harmonics.

No. 6, Samuel Goldenberg and a Schmuÿle

♬ Here Mussorgsky gave Ravel a single melody. Rather than assigning it to only one instrument, he gives it to all of the strings, plus the "dark" woodwinds (English horn, clarinets and bassoons).

No. 7, The Marketplace (Important News)

♬ This music has constant motion. Strings and percussion, of course, can play more or less constantly, but the other half of the orchestra has to breathe. Watch the winds and brass: Ravel brings them in and out, both saving them from exhaustion and creating a magical, constantly-evolving texture.

No. 8, Catacombs; With the Dead in a Dead Language

♬ Notice the constant change of color between the horns and trombones, with help from the clarinets and bassoons.

♬ Having had their moment, the brass mostly rest for this movement's eerie second section.

No. 9, The Hut on Hen's Legs

♬ Meant to ferociously depict a witch's house, listen for the slower middle passage, where Ravel utilizes smaller groups of instruments.

No. 10, The Great Gate of Kiev.

♬ The glorious closing music requires no explanation; just note that, though Hartmann created the plans for it, the "Great Gate of Kiev" was never built.