

EL PASO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
APRIL 19 & 20, 2024
PROGRAM NOTES

Claude Debussy

Born August 22, 1862 – Saint-Fermain-en-Laye, France

Died March 25, 1918 – Paris, France

Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun

Prelude à l'après-midi d'un faune (“Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun”), *Trois Nocturnes* (“Three Nocturnes”), and *La mer* (The Sea) were Claude Debussy’s only compositions originally scored for orchestra. While the composer’s clear preference was writing for the piano, luckily for us Debussy took his orchestral endeavors with the utmost seriousness.

The first in the set, *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* is perhaps the most effortful, showing all angles of what Debussy was truly capable of at the time. Although at only 10 minutes long, the work is far more rhythmically and harmonically complex than the composer’s other orchestral compositions and showcases Debussy at the height of his “impressionist” state.

There is often a common confusion in regards to the piece’s subject matter, particularly the word “faun.” It is easy to assume that Debussy is painting a musical picture of a baby deer, or “fawn,” perusing around the woods on a lovely spring afternoon. However, the devil lies in the details, in this case, the spelling.

The “faun” here is from mythology — the half-goat, half-human creature. Debussy’s piece depicts a particular faun from a poem of the same name, *L’après-midi d’un faune*, by Stéphane Mallarmé. The poem’s subject matter is rather sensual in nature being the central character (the faun) in concomitant with nymphs.

Debussy’s objective with his composition was not to create an original image or setting, but to simply set Mallarmé’s poem to music. It was a miraculous achievement that paved the way for early modernism, but also was fully-palatable and stunningly beautiful — a combination of traits that would soon be hard to come by.

Sergie Prokofiev

Born April 23, 1891 – Sontsivka, Ukraine

Died March 5, 1953 – Moscow, Russia

Piano Concerto No. 3, Op. 26 C Major

By the end of the 19th century, music was at war with itself about its own future. On one end were the romantics, passionate about continuing the harmonic language of Beethoven and his generations of successors. The other corner was occupied by modernists who were hell-bent on redefining the standards of what current music should sound like. In the end, neither side would prevail over the other as both would contribute numerous champions throughout the entire first half of the twentieth century.

One of the most aggressive proponents of modernism (at least early on) was Sergei Prokofiev, whose unique compositions would not only inspire an entire generation of twentieth century composers, but also help establish a national sound for the Soviet Union. Prokofiev would be defiant of tradition from a young age, frustrating his early teachers with his unwillingness to abide by compositional guidelines and norms that had been in practice for centuries. His early works were shocking, bold, and clear in their message that their creator was afraid of nothing.

However, Prokofiev would tone down his ultra-modernist approach as his life and career progressed, leaving before his death a catalogue filled with a beautiful blend of new sounds combined with those of the more traditional, leading to a splendidly unique sonic signature.

To explore this, you could not make a better choice than *Piano Concerto No. 3 in C Major, Op. 26*. Completed in 1921, it falls right in the middle of both Prokofiev's piano concerto output and his music career in general. Today it is one of Prokofiev's most popular works and contains not only the excitement and joy of a classical-era concerto, but an eeriness that had not yet been experienced in any music.

If you are partial to the "in-between," Prokofiev can easily become one of your favorite composers. There have been few musicians in history capable of offering such a diverse body of work.

Sergie Rachmaninoff

Born April 1, 1873 – Starorussky, Uyezd, Russia

Died March 28, 1943 – Beverly Hills, CA

Isle of the Dead, Op. 29

Art of any kind is enjoyed because of how it enriches our lives — creating it is a form of self-expression through a medium other than speech, which makes progressing through life a fascinating experience. While we are moved by art that is beautiful whether it be a painting that takes our breath away or a piece of music that brings us to tears, art can be equally unsettling ... bringing us thoughts and emotions of the dark and the cold.

In 1880 the Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin began work on a set of paintings that would define his career. The paintings are five versions of the same setting which Böcklin deemed *Isle of the Dead*. Today these paintings can be found at various galleries around the world: Basel, New York, Leipzig, and Berlin all house a version of the painting.

Isle of the Dead depicts two figures in a rowboat traveling towards a small island, clad in stone and tall trees. The painting is unsettling for two reasons: One, the island is desolate with no other human figures visible. It is also inferred that there is much more to the island than meets the eye, kept hidden by the dark shadows cast by the trees. Two, there is a tall figure standing at the front of the approaching rowboat. This figure is facing towards the island (away from the viewer) and is dressed in a white robe. The subject matter of this painting is rather obvious: A resident being delivered to their new home.

Overall, the work is breathtaking, particularly when you take the time to view all five versions (all completed by Böcklin himself). They vary in their depictions of the unsettling traits mentioned

earlier: The island itself and the white-robed figure. Each version affects its viewers in a slightly different fashion, making these paintings a symbolist work of genius and one of the most popular painting projects throughout the early 20th century.

Meanwhile, the Russian composer and pianist Sergei Rachmaninoff viewed Bocklin's *Isle of the Dead* for the first time, more specifically a photograph of the painting's fourth version. Rachmaninoff had been searching for a subject in which to base a tone poem, and his viewing experience of *Isle of the Dead* had passed the test.

For a 20-minute orchestral work, Rachmaninoff completed the piece in a relatively short amount of time — it was premiered in the spring of 1909. Naturally, the music is far more vague than the painting, with many sounds and passages open for interpretation. For a setting as simple as this painting, Rachmaninoff's *Isle of the Dead, Op. 29* has much to say and it is up to you, the listener and viewer, to ultimately translate."

George Gershwin

Born September 26, 1898 – Brooklyn, New York, NY

Died July 11, 1937 – Los Angeles, CA

An American in Paris

An American in Paris

By the end of the 19th century, the United States was desperately trying to expand its possibilities for a “national sound.” Being somewhat of an infant in regards to a free and independent state, the U.S. was well behind in the art music scene, which had been dominated by Europe for centuries. To be clear, music has existed in the Americas for as long as people have resided here, stretching back thousands of years before colonization. However, the U.S. made it clear that it wished to follow in Europe's footsteps when it opened its first music school, the Boston Academy of Music, in 1883 and performed Beethoven's *Symphony No. 1* in its first concert.

Roughly 15 years later, composers such as John Philip Sousa and Scott Joplin were making serious headway at defining a new American sound, with military band marches and ragtime piano music still remaining hugely popular to this day. However, when jazz began to appear in 1917 and America branched off towards its own ingenious and original genres, there are still American composers interested in pursuing art music, and they are tackling it more effectively than ever before.

George Gershwin is one of the finest examples from the early 20th century to pursue this idea. Although he would only live to the age of 38, due to brain cancer, his works cemented him as a champion who truly made classical music sound “American.”

An American in Paris was completed in 1928 during Gershwin's most notable decade. The '20s also saw Gershwin's iconic *Rhapsody in Blue* and the hit songs *I've got Rhythm*, *Fascinating Rhythm*, and *Embraceable You*. These definitive classics would symbolize Gershwin as the composer of the “roaring Twenties” and forever remind us of the eclectic excess of America's most exciting decade.

An American in Paris is a tone poem inspired by Gershwin's trip to France in 1926. It is a soundscape based on the noises heard on the busy Parisian streets — clear impressions of happy pedestrians walking

and traffic frantically navigating the morning commute define the pleasant atmosphere of the music. The work even calls for “car horn,” a scoring decision inspired by the debut performance of the piece that featured authentic Parisian car horns that Gershwin brought back with him to the United States.

Gershwin tragically met the pattern set by numerous great composers — the gift of incredible music at the price of a short life. Thankfully Gershwin will never be forgotten, particularly because he helped us understand how effectively music can be made to sound “American.”

Nathan Black is the general manager of the El Paso Symphony Youth Orchestras and a section cellist in the El Paso Symphony Orchestra. In addition, he produces and hosts 88.5 FM KTEP’s *El Paso Symphony Orchestra Broadcast*, and as of 2022 is the resident lecturer of EPSO’s “Opening Notes” series.