

The Enjoyment of **MUSIC**

SHORTER VERSION

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Mythical Impressions: Program Music at the End of the Nineteenth Century

*"For we desire above all—nuance,
Not color but half-shades!
Ah! nuance alone unites
Dream with dream and flute with horn."*

—Paul Verlaine (1844–1896)

KEY POINTS

- **Impressionism** in music is characterized by modal and exotic scales (chromatic, whole tone, and pentatonic), unresolved dissonances, tone combinations such as ninth chords, rich orchestral color, and free rhythm, all generally cast in small-scale programmatic forms.
- The most important French Impressionist composer was Claude Debussy. His orchestral work *Prelude to "The Afternoon of a Faun"* was inspired by a Symbolist poem, and later choreographed by the great Russian dancer Vaslav Nijinsky.
- Debussy and his contemporaries were highly influenced by non-Western and traditional music styles heard at the Paris World Exhibition of 1889.

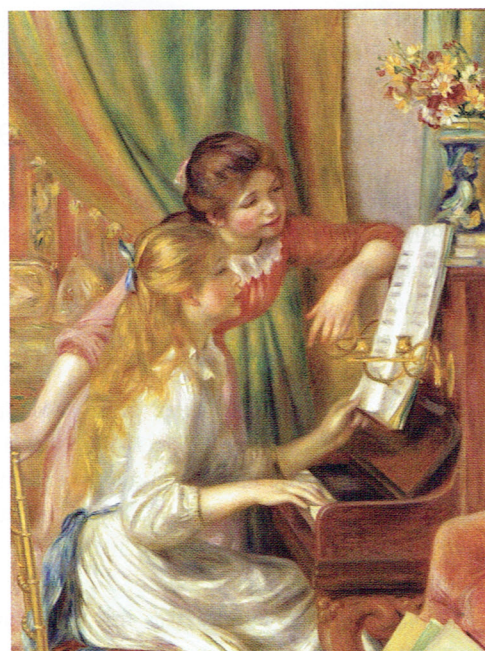
There is something about mythological characters that speaks both to essential human nature and to the mystery of the supernatural. They can serve as a resource for a musician, poet, or painter to pull us out of the ordinary, give us a glimpse into the possible. Mythological themes have been especially prominent in Western multimedia, from the sung plays of ancient Greece to contemporary film and role-playing games. A striking example is provided by one of the most famous works of the later 1800s, Claude Debussy's *Prelude to "The Afternoon of a Faun,"* which we will examine in this chapter. Looking backward to ancient mythology and forward to new sound worlds and expressions, it reflects the subtle perspectives of several creative minds through words, sounds, and movement.

Symbolism and Impressionism in Paris

In the 1860s, breaking with what they considered the static grandiosity of contemporary art, Impressionist painters tried to capture on canvas the freshness of their first impressions and the continuous change in the appearance of their subjects through varied treatment of light and color. A hazy painting by Claude Monet,

Impression: Sun Rising, completed in 1867, was rebuffed by the academic salons of Paris (see illustration below), and **Impressionism** quickly became a term of derision. However, Monet's luminous painting style was eagerly embraced by Parisian artists such as Edgar Degas and Auguste Renoir. We will see how composers like Debussy tried to emulate the use of color and iridescence that characterize this new style.

A parallel development in poetry was similarly influential to French composers: the Symbolist movement sought to evoke poetic images through suggestion rather than description, through symbol rather than statement. This literary revolt against tradition gained prominence in the works of French writers Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine, both of whom were strongly influenced by the American poet Edgar Allan Poe. Through their experiments in free verse forms, the Symbolists were able to achieve in language an abstract quality that had once belonged to music alone.



This music scene is typical of the everyday activities captured by Impressionists. *Young Girls at the Piano* (1892), by Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919).

Translating Impressions into Sound

Inspired by the Impressionist and Symbolist movements, a number of French composers of the later 1800s also attempted to break from tradition in order to experiment with greater subtlety and expressive ambiguity. The major-minor system, as we saw, is based on the pull of the active tones to the tonic, or rest tone. Impressionist composers regarded this as a formula that had become too obvious. In their works, we do not hear the triumphal final cadence of the Classical-Romantic period, in which the dominant chord is resolved to the tonic chord with the greatest possible emphasis. Instead, more subtle harmonic relationships come into play. Rather than viewing dissonance as a momentary disturbance, composers began to use dissonance as a goal in itself, freeing it from the need to resolve. They taught their listeners to accept tone combinations that had formerly been regarded as inadmissible, just as the Impressionist painters taught people to see colors in sky, grass, and water they had never seen there before. Composers made use of the entire spectrum of notes in the chromatic scale, and also explored the whole-tone scale and others derived from various non-Western musics.

Freed from a strong tonal center and rigid harmonic guidelines, composers experimented with new tone combinations such as the **ninth chord**, a set of five notes in which the interval between the lowest and highest tones is a ninth. The effect was one of hovering between tonalities, creating elusive effects that evoke the misty outlines of Impressionist painting.

These floating harmonies demanded the most subtle colors, and here composers learned new techniques of blending timbres from their counterparts in art. Painters juxtaposed brush

The Impressionists took painting out of the studio and into the open air; their subject was light. Claude Monet, *Impression: Sun Rising*.



Interface

Music, World Colonization, and the Exotic

In 1889, France hosted a fair called the Paris World Exhibition, to mark the centenary of the French Revolution. The fair highlighted technological achievements, including the newly invented Edison phonograph—a huge attraction—and the Eiffel Tower, constructed specially for this event. In addition to displaying triumphs of human ingenuity, the exhibition was highly political, reflecting imperialist and nationalist trends throughout Europe.

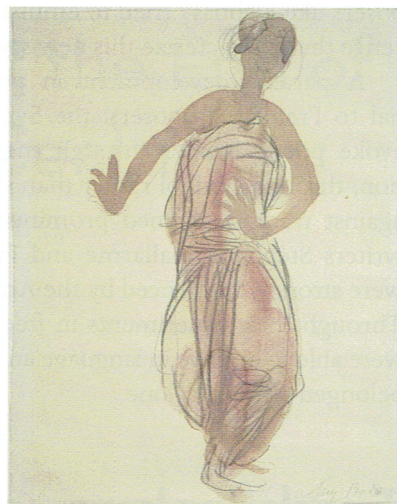
France's colonial empire was immense at this time, including territories in northern and western Africa, parts of the Middle East, and Indochina, which today takes in Vietnam and Cambodia. The French sought to affirm their position as a world power by showcasing these far-reaching colonies and their cultures. Accordingly, spectators were treated to displays of antiphonal singing from sub-Saharan Gabon, belly dancers and whirling dervishes from the Middle East, dancers from Cambodia, and Annamite (Vietnamese) theatrical productions—all in an effort to upstage the great British Empire, whose vast imperial holdings had been represented just three years earlier at a London Colonial Exhibition. The Dutch for their part showcased their wealthy East Indian colonies with a gamelan orchestra and dancers from Java, the most populated island of modern-day Indonesia.

With the spread of nationalism across Europe, countries were eager to offer their native repertoires of both classical and folk music. The French were introduced to contemporary Russian composers in concerts conducted by composer Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakoff, while Spanish national styles, includ-

ing flamenco and Gypsy dance music, quickly became favorites. This international soundscape captured the ears of musicians, who responded with their own “exotic” music. It was here that French composers Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel first heard the unique sound of the Javanese gamelan (an ensemble made up of gongs, chimes, and drums; see p. 374). Debussy later raved to a friend about “the Javanese music able to express every nuance of meaning, even unmentionable shades, and which makes our tonic and dominant seem like empty phantoms for the use of unwise infants.” He attempted to capture something of this sound world—its pentatonic scale, unusual timbre, and texture—in compositions like the famous symphonic poem *La mer* (*The Sea*, 1905), the piano work *Pagodas* (from *Estampes*, 1903), and several piano preludes. We will see that twentieth-century composers, including the bold American innovator John Cage (Chapter 62), continued to explore the unique timbre of the gamelan.



The central hall of the Paris World Exhibition, designed by Jean Béraud (1849–1935).



This watercolor of a *Cambodian Dancer* (1906), by the French artist Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), reflects the artistic interest in exotic subjects.

Composers were also charmed by the folk and popular musics they heard at the fair. Debussy sought to recreate the rhythms of Spanish Gypsy and flamenco dancers in his piano music (*The Interrupted Serenade* and *Evening in Granada*). Ravel's roots in the Basque region of France (where the Pyrénées separate France and Spain) brought him even closer to Spanish folk traditions, which he emulated in his hypnotic *Boléro*, the *Spanish Rhapsody*, and the violin work *Tzigane* (*Gypsy*, 1924). But Ravel too looked to far-away cultures he first experienced at the fair, evoking Middle Eastern folk tales (from *Arabian Nights*) and Persian music in his orchestral song cycle *Sheherazade* (1903). What began as an exhibition of world power and national pride among industrialized nations thus had far-reaching effects; music, appropriated to deliver a political message, was also opening eyes and ears to the wonder of the exotic.

strokes of pure color on the canvas, leaving it to the eye of the viewer to do the mixing. Debussy similarly replaced the lush, full sonority of the Romantic orchestra with veiled sounds: flutes and clarinets in their dark, velvety registers, violins in their lustrous upper range, trumpets and horns discreetly muted; and over the whole, a shimmering gossamer of harp, celesta, triangle, glockenspiel, muffled drum, and brushed cymbal. One instrumental color flows into another close by, as from oboe to clarinet to flute, in the same way that Impressionist painting moves from one color to another in the spectrum, from yellow to green to blue.

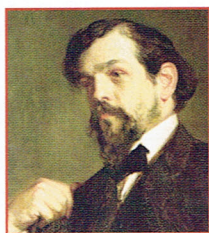
Debussy's *Prelude to "The Afternoon of a Faun"*

Claude Debussy's best-known orchestral work was inspired by a pastoral poem by Symbolist writer Stéphane Mallarmé describing the faun, a mythological forest creature that is half man, half goat, and symbolizes raw sensuality. Debussy intended his music to be a series of "backdrops" that would illustrate the faun and his actions. We can thus consider this work a coming together of visual Impressionism and textual Symbolism through sound (LG 40).

The work follows the familiar pattern of statement-departure-return (A-B-A'), yet the progression is fluid and rhapsodic, with a relaxed rhythm. We first hear a flute solo in the lower register. The melody glides along the chromatic scale, narrow in range and languorous. Glissandos on the harp usher in a brief dialogue in the horns, a mixture of colors never heard before.

Next, a more decisive motive emerges, marked *en animant* (growing lively). This is followed by a third theme, an impassioned melody that carries the piece to

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)



The most important French composer of the late nineteenth–early twentieth century, Debussy was born near Paris and entered the Paris Conservatory when he was eleven. Within a few years, he was shocking his professors with bizarre harmonies that defied the rules. He was only twenty-two when his cantata *The Prodigal Son* won the coveted Prix de Rome. By this time, he had already realized his future style.

The 1890s, the most productive decade of Debussy's career, culminated in the opera *Pelléas and Mélisande*, based on the Symbolist drama by the Belgian poet Maurice Maeterlinck. At first, *Pelléas* was attacked as being decadent and lacking in melody and form, but this opera made Debussy famous. His energies sapped by the ravages of cancer, Debussy died in March 1918, during the bombardment of Paris.

Like artist Claude Monet and writer Paul Verlaine, Debussy considered art to be a sensuous experience. "French music," he declared, "is clearness, elegance, simple and natural declamation . . . aiming first of all to give pleasure." His fame rests on a comparatively small output;

Pelléas and Mélisande is viewed by many as his greatest achievement. Among his orchestral compositions, the *Prelude to "The Afternoon of a Faun"* became a favorite with the public early on, as did *The Sea* (*La mer*).

Many of his piano pieces demonstrate an interest in non-Western scales and instruments (he regarded sonata-allegro form as an outmoded formula), which he first heard at the Paris Exhibition in 1889 (see Interface). Debussy also helped establish the French song (*mélodie*) as a national art form. His settings of the French Symbolist poets Verlaine and Mallarmé are exquisite and refined.

MAJOR WORKS: Orchestral music, including *Prélude à "L'après midi d'un faune"* (*Prelude to "The Afternoon of a Faun,"* 1894), *Nocturnes* (1899), *La mer* (*The Sea*, 1905) • Dramatic works, including the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902) and a ballet • Chamber music, including a string quartet and various sonatas • Piano music, including two books of preludes (1909–10, 1912–13) • Songs, choral music, and cantatas.



Jeux de vagues, from *La mer*

LISTENING GUIDE 40

9:45

Debussy: *Prelude to "The Afternoon of a Faun"* (*Prélude à "L'après-midi d'un faune"*)

DATE: 1894

GENRE: Symphonic poem

What to Listen For

Melody	Lyrical, sinuous melody; chromatic at opening and closing.	Texture	Homophonic; light and airy.
Rhythm/meter	Free-flowing rhythms; sense of floating; lacks pulse; middle section is more animated.	Form	Loose A-B-A' structure.
Harmony	Use of "blue" chords, with lowered thirds.	Expression	Evocative mood; sensual.
		Timbre	Rich colors, especially in the woodwinds.
		Performing forces	Strings (with two harps), woodwinds, French horns, and antique cymbals.

Opening of poem:

Ces nymphes, je les veux perpétuer.

Si clair

Leur incarnat léger, qu'il voltige dans l'air

Assoupi de sommeils touffus.

Amais-je un rêve?

These nymphs I would perpetuate.

So light

their gossamer embodiment, floating on the air

inert with heavy slumber.

Was it a dream I loved?

A section

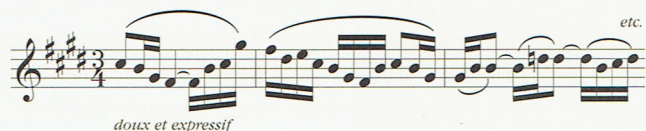
0:00 Opening chromatic melody in flute; passes from one instrument to another, accompanied by muted strings and a vague sense of pulse:



B section

2:48 Clarinet introduces a more animated idea, answered by a rhythmic figure in cellos.

3:16 New theme with livelier rhythm in solo oboe, builds in a *crescendo*:



4:34 Contrasting theme in woodwinds, then strings, with syncopated rhythms, builds to a climax:



A' section

6:22 Abridged return, in a varied setting.

an emotional climax. The first theme then returns in an altered guise. At the close, antique cymbals (small disks of brass whose rims are struck together gently and allowed to vibrate) play *pianissimo*. “Blue” chords (with lowered thirds and sevenths) are heard on the muted horns and violins, sounding infinitely remote. The work dissolves into silence, leaving us, and the faun, in a dream-like state.

Debussy’s symphonic poem was widely performed (as far away as Boston in 1902), but it gained even more prominence when it was choreographed by the great Russian dancer Vaslav Nijinsky (about whom we will learn more in Chapter 53). Nijinsky himself danced the role of the faun (see illustration at right), and his sensuous cavorting among the nymphs caused a scandal in Paris: this choreography is often viewed as a turning point in modern ballet. Nijinsky’s choreography helped make Debussy’s work all the more successful, but it also introduced a problem: to what extent does the meaning added by a dancer/choreographer “shape” the interpretation of a musical work? Does a storytelling choreography go against the subtlety and vagueness of Debussy’s Symbolist/Impressionist approach?



The great Russian dancer Vaslav Nijinsky as the faun in the 1912 ballet version of *Prelude to "The Afternoon of a Faun."* Design by Léon Bakst (1866–1924).

CRITICAL THINKING

1. How did composers translate the literary devices of Symbolism and/or the innovative use of color in Impressionist painting into sound?
2. How did non-Western musical ideas affect Debussy and his contemporaries?

YOUR TURN TO EXPLORE

Pick a movie, TV show, or video game that includes music and draws on mythology. How are specific elements like timbre, melody, and harmony used to reinforce certain characters or dramatic moments? How do you think those musical choices contribute to the simultaneously real/unreal quality of mythology?



Music at the 1889 World's Fair