

Debussy & Ravel
March 12, 2027

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Notes on the Program

By Aaron Grad

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune [1894]

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Born August 22, 1862 in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France

Died March 25, 1918 in Paris, France

Finding inspiration in art, poetry, and sounds from around the world, the French composer Claude Debussy revolutionized music for concert halls. He was especially influenced by the poets of the Symbolist movement, who made the *sounds* of words as important as their meanings. One of Debussy's breakthrough compositions was this concert overture based on a Symbolist poem by Stéphane Mallarmé, *The Afternoon of a Faun*, about a mythological creature that is half-man, half-goat—represented by the mysteriously seductive flute solo at the beginning—who lounges in the forest and lusts after nymphs.

Le tombeau de Couperin [1919]

MAURICE RAVEL

Born March 7, 1875 in Ciboure, France

Died December 28, 1937 in Paris, France

At the start of World War I, the 39-year-old composer Maurice Ravel volunteered as a truck and ambulance driver, forcing him to set aside *Le tombeau de Couperin*, a work-in-progress for solo piano honoring the French Baroque composer François Couperin. By the time Ravel finished the suite in 1917, it had acquired a more personal meaning, with each of the six movements dedicated to friends killed in the war.

Ravel transcribed four of the movements for chamber orchestra in 1919, starting with a fluid *Prélude* featuring the oboe. The second movement, a *Forlane*, is based on a lively

and flirtatious couple's dance from Italy, one of many styles imported into France under the rule of Couperin's boss, the dance-obsessed King Louis XIV. After the *Menuet*, distinguished by its stately, three-beat pulse and more solo statements from the plaintive oboe, the suite ends with the *Rigaudon* that pays tribute to two family friends of Ravel: Pierre and Pascal Gaudin, brothers killed by the same shell on their very first day at the front in 1914. Pushing back on critics who found this memorial music too cheerful, Ravel purportedly responded, "The dead are sad enough, in their eternal silence."

Petite Suite [1889]

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

After a two-year residency in Italy that Debussy earned as the winner of the prestigious Rome Prize, Debussy returned to Paris in 1886. It was an unsettled time for the young composer as he bucked against the French traditions he learned in school and sought a new creative path forward, while at the same time trying to earn a living as a working musician. The *Petite Suite* for piano four-hands that he composed between 1886 and 1889 proved to be an early success, helped in part by the fact that the pianist he invited to join him for the first performance, an old conservatory classmate, also happened to be the son of a major publisher. With piano parts that were not too challenging, and a great variety of moods and colors within the four short movements, Debussy's suite was just the sort of thing people would buy to play in their living rooms, in the cozy arrangement of two pianists sharing a bench.

Debussy was at the height of his fame in 1907 when he asked his younger colleague Henri Büsser to create this orchestral version of the *Petite Suite*. Taking inspiration from a favorite poem by Paul Verlaine, the first movement captures the feeling of sailing, and the second movement corresponds to an expectant scene in anticipation of a romantic tryst. The *Menuet* and *Ballet* round out this suite with music that tips its hat to the dance suites that flourished in France during the Baroque era.

Suite of Five Pieces from *Ma mère l'Oye* (*Mother Goose*) [1911]

MAURICE RAVEL

Ravel spent many of his Sunday evenings at the salons hosted by his good friends Cipa and Ida Godebski, a Polish couple living in Paris, and a few times he even joined them on vacation at their country house. It was during those visits between 1908 and 1910 that Ravel composed a set of five piano pieces based on popular fairy tales, dedicated to the family's two young children. The title and two of the tales came from Charles Perrault's 1697 collection *Tales and Stories of the Past with Morals: Tales of Mother Goose*, which immortalized Sleeping Beauty, Tom Thumb, and many other classic characters. Ravel then orchestrated the *Mother Goose Suite* in 1911 and added some additional material to transform it into a ballet.

This performance features the five original selections of *Mother Goose* in their orchestrated versions, starting with the *Pavane of Sleeping Beauty*, a short and mournful dance that retains the ceremonial quality of the Italian style it is named for. In *Tom Thumb*, the little protagonist drops breadcrumbs to guide his way home and becomes flummoxed as the chirping birds steal his crumbs. *Laideronnette, Empress of the Pagodas*, uses pentatonic themes and tam-tam strikes to evoke an Asian setting. The next tale depicts *The Conversation of Beauty and the Beast*, in which the clarinet leads a beautiful waltz and the contrabassoon makes beastly interjections. *The Enchanted Garden* blooms from delicate solos into a resplendent finale for full orchestral forces, celebrating the rising sun.

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