

**NOVEMBER 7, 2009**  
**TCHAIKOVSKY PATHÉTIQUE**  
**DEBUSSY: PRELUDE TO THE AFTERNOON OF A FAUN**

Claude Debussy: Born in St. Germain-en-Laye, August 22, 1862; died in Paris, March 25, 1918

The inspiration for Debussy's first orchestral masterpiece came from the poem "L'après-midi d'un faune" (The Afternoon of a Faun, 1876) by the French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé. The Symbolists worked with elusive images, imprecise feelings, evocative atmosphere, sensuous language, abstruse syntax, transient ideas, inferences and subtleties, all bathed in a suggestive half-light.

Debussy's musical sensibilities corresponded closely to the Symbolist aesthetic, and having read Mallarmé's poem sometime around 1877, the composer set about creating a musical interpretation that influenced the course of much twentieth-century music. Written in 1892-1894, it was first heard on December 22, 1894 in Paris. A faun, incidentally, is a mythological woodland creature which walks upright like a man, but which has cloven hoofs, horns, a tail and fur like a beast. Its chief concerns are eating, sleeping and the pursuit of sensuous gratification.

The substance of Mallarmé's poem is described in Edmund Gosse's famous synopsis as follows: "A faun ... awakens in the forest at daybreak and tries to recall his experience of the previous afternoon. Was he the fortunate recipient of an actual visit from nymphs, white and golden goddesses, divinely tender and indulgent? Or is the memory he seems to retain nothing but the shadow of a vision, no more substantial than the 'aired rain' of notes from his own flute? He cannot tell ... The sun is warm, the grasses yielding; and he curls himself up again, after worshipping the efficacious star of wine, that he may pursue the dubious ecstasy into the more hopeful boscaiges of sleep."

The music's luxuriant effects, its lambent colors and tonal ambiguities are all a reflection of Mallarmé's own style. The poet is said to have exclaimed: "This music prolongs the emotion of my poem and sets its scene more vividly than color."

**SCHUMAN: VIOLIN CONCERTO**

William Schuman: Born in New York, August 4, 1910; died in New York, February 15, 1992

William Schuman was for half a century a major artistic, education and administrative force in American music. In addition to creating a large catalogue of works (the majority of them choral and orchestral, including ten symphonies), Schuman found time to be the first president of Lincoln Center and for twenty years president of the Juilliard School of Music. Boldly sweeping melodic lines, enormous rhythmic vigor, a predilection for bright sonorities, a stridently aggressive quality and the use of contrasting blocks of orchestral forces are all characteristics common to many of Schuman's symphonic works.

Schuman wrote his Violin Concerto in the late 1940's on commission from Samuel Dushkin, who expected to give the premiere with the Boston Symphony and Serge Koussevitzky but, for reasons never fully understood, the premiere went instead to Isaac Stern with the same orchestra under its new conductor, Charles Munch, on February 10, 1950.

There is no orchestral introduction. The soloist plunges immediately into his opening statement – a wide-ranging, muscular subject (the score is marked “with full, broad strokes of the bow”) that provides the melodic material for the entire movement. Much in the manner of a Baroque concerto, this material continuously develops, expands and renews itself. The violin writing is lyrical yet incorporates so many wide leaps and covers such an enormous range that it is patently unsingable. The music remains angry, almost violent, until the second part of the movement arrives (*molto tranquillo*), where the soloist, now with mute, sings a long, mournful line of infinite tenderness and expressivity against a soft blanket of orchestral strings whose slowly shifting dissonances seem almost like grinding tectonic plates. Rhythmic activity increases and the soloist is suddenly left alone for a cadenza of enormous proportions, alternately reflective and virtuosic. The movement's final section begins quietly with an agitated rhythmic pattern for the strings, over which the soloist continues to explore familiar material in new ways.

The second movement begins with bold, craggy proclamations from the brass with angry retorts from the percussion. Schuman was famous for the timpani solos he wrote into his orchestral scores; here is perhaps the most impressive of all – a long, long diminuendo on just three notes but to a constantly changing rhythmic pattern. Finally the solo violin reappears to ruminate quietly on a broad new theme. A new mood arrives with the *Presto leggiero*, a quirky fugal passage. More humorous episodes follow. Soloist and orchestra, separately and together, work out the material for the remainder of the movement in addition to recalling material from the first movement. The tempo increases, the emotional tone becomes white hot, and the concerto ends in a blaze of sound from soloist and orchestra together.

### **TCHAIKOVSKY: SYMPHONY NO. 6 IN B MINOR, OP. 74 (PATHÉTIQUE)**

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: Born in Votkinsk, May 7, 1840; died in St. Petersburg, November 6, 1893

Much conjecture has surrounded the “program” of Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony. While working on the symphony, Tchaikovsky wrote to his nephew Vladimir Davidov that “the program will be of a kind that will remain an enigma to all - let them guess ... This program is saturated with subjective feeling ... while composing it in my mind I shed many tears.” Tchaikovsky at first called the work *Program Symphony*, but then decided that with no declared program to go with it, the title was a contradiction in terms. He then considered calling it the “Tragic,” but when his brother Modeste suggested *patetichesky*, the composer exclaimed, “Excellent, Modya, bravo, *patetichesky!*” The word was inscribed immediately on the score's title

page and taken to the publisher Jurgenson. One day later, the composer had a change of heart and asked Jurgenson to remove the word “if it’s not too late.” But Jurgenson, no doubt with an eye towards sales from a catchy title, let the work go out as *Symphonie pathétique*, and as such the name has stuck. The word *pathétique*, incidentally, derives from the Greek *patheticos*, and has a different flavor than in most modern English contexts, where it usually implies inadequacy and pity, as in “a pathetic attempt.” In Russian, the word *patetichesky* refers to something passionate, emotional, and, as in the original Greek, having overtones of suffering.

Tchaikovsky began working on his last symphony in February of 1893, and conducted the first performance on October 28 in St. Petersburg. It was only mildly successful, due to a puzzling *Adagio* finale that ended softly, an indifferent orchestra and the composer’s consequent lack of enthusiastic leadership. Nevertheless, he felt that it was “the best and especially the most sincere of my works. I love it as I have never loved any of my other musical creations.” At the second performance three weeks later, conducted by Eduard Napravnik, the symphony left a powerful impression. But the composer was dead - the *Symphonie pathétique* had become his swan song.