

**Las Vegas Philharmonic
2009-2010 Season
Program Notes**

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Masterworks IV, April 3, 2010

Claude Debussy (1862-1918), *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*

The most familiar of all of Debussy's orchestral works, *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* was premiered in Paris on December 22, 1894. For many musicians, including this writer, this piece represents the beginning of the age of modern music. Its indeterminacy and its tonal ambiguity are a step beyond even the chromaticism of Richard Strauss. Having said that, this work is completely approachable by even the most inexperienced listeners. The sounds are lush and sensuous by design. The inspiration for the piece is Mallarmé's poem *Afternoon of a Faun*, and was choreographed as a ballet by none other than Vaslav Nijinsky. The poem centers around the musings of a faun, a mythological creature that is half man, half goat. The faun wonders if three nymphs visited him in his sleep, or was he only dreaming? The question is never really answered. The word "prelude" in the title indicated that there were to be three movements in all for this work, but the other two were never composed.

The unaccompanied flute solo that opens the composition sets the stage for what is to follow; the theme is melodic and alluring, but pays only passing attention to tonality. The following measures are a mixture of unanswered dominant chords and silence, inviting the listener to savor the sounds of the instant, rather than look for an organizational pattern. This quality may be the single most important feature of impressionistic music; that the images are passing, undeveloped, and incomplete. Yet somehow, the music does indeed give a representation of mood and emotion at the most basic level. Debussy's orchestrations are astounding; the lushness of the scoring adds to the almost palpable sensuality of the music. The dream sequence in the middle of the work eventually use the full reserves of the orchestra's dynamic range, but most of the *Prelude* is quite soft and reflective. The piece ends with an orchestral restatement of the original flute solo, lending a sense of closure to an otherwise roaming daydream about love and rapture.

Frederick Chopin (1810-1849), *Piano Concerto #1 in E minor, Op. 11*

Chopin is unique for several reasons. First, he is one of a handful of composers with an amazing melodic gift. His melodies are often times completely "right" and instantly memorable. It is not unusual to hear a Chopin piece once, then hear it again years later and find it familiar. Second, Chopin is certainly Poland's most famous and respected composer and pianist of all time. Third, he wrote almost exclusively for the piano. Almost all other composers tried their hands at various genres, but not Chopin. Piano was his love; 99% of the pieces he composed were for his own performance on the keyboard.

Chopin's two piano concerti came in close proximity to one another. In fact, the Piano Concerto #2 was actually composed before the Concerto #1. However, the work on tonight's program was published first, so the piece is listed as Piano Concerto #1. It was premiered on October 11, 1830 in Warsaw, Poland, with the composer at the keyboard.

Both of Chopin's piano concerti have been criticized by some musicians because of the orchestral scoring. True, Chopin may not have been the most experienced of orchestral composers, but the writing succeeds admirably in framing Chopin's intimate, personal pianistic style. The concerto is set in a conventional three-movement format, with a rather lengthy orchestral exposition. When the piano enters, it is a "complete" piano part, fully capable of standing on its own without orchestral accompaniment. The orchestra provides very simple, yet effective harmonic support. In that regard, the piano is dominant through most of the remainder of the movement; rarely do the orchestra and soloist compete for attention. Perhaps that is the source of some of the criticism of the orchestral scoring. In this concerto, the soloist and orchestra do not exist on a level "playing field." The piano is certainly supreme in all sections except the orchestral introduction.

The second movement is pure Chopin at his poetic best. In this movement, just as in many of Chopin's character pieces, one gets the feeling that the piano is speaking directly to you and no one else. Intimacy is an overused term, but it is the best word to describe the relationship between the soloist and the listener in this case. Again, the piano carries the weight of all melodic presentations and development; the orchestra provides warmth and support.

The third movement is a lively rondo; after a brief orchestral introduction, the piano launches into a characteristically catchy tune that periodically reappears after brief detours. Of course, this is the essence of a pure rondo, during which a central theme recurs, punctuated by forays into other thematic areas. The virtuosity required to master this movement is a reminder that Chopin's music, while engaging and approachable, may not be simple. Indeed, this rondo is a technical showcase of the first order. The finale is laced with rapid scale and arpeggiated passages that leave the listener breathless. In all, this concerto is a compendium of the world of Chopin: endlessly passionate, melodic, and virtuosic, but always polished and refined.

Edvard Grieg (1843-1907), *Symphonic Dances*, Op. 64

As Chopin is Poland's national champion of music, so Edvard Grieg is to his beloved Norway. Actually, the comparison is popular; Grieg is commonly referred to as the "Chopin of the North." He was, like Chopin, a brilliant pianist and composer of small-scale piano works and sonatas. Unlike Chopin, however, Grieg also frequently composed works for full orchestra. In spite of the fact that his *Piano Concerto in A minor* remains one of the most beloved in all the literature, Grieg seemed to be more at home with smaller forms rather than large sweeping symphonic epics. Thus, compositions such as his incidental music from *Peer Gynt*, and tonight's *Symphonic Dances*, seem to suit his preferences more comfortably. Composed in 1896, these four movements are fruits of Grieg's later "nationalist" period, during which he employed folk melodies and motives liberally in his compositions. These dances were originally

composed for piano four hands, and were re-scored later by Grieg for the full symphony orchestra. *Symphonic Dances* was premiered in 1899, with Johan Svendsen conducting.

The first movement is a somewhat comical, heavy dance that halts abruptly, leading to a tranquil *pianissimo* that uses an eighth-quarter-eighth syncopated pattern to propel the music forward. The theme, introduced in the oboe, is crystalline and sweet, followed by renditions in the clarinet and violins. The peace is short-lived, and is soon replaced by the original *allegro*, this time building toward a frenzied coda, which ends the movement. The second movement is a gentle, swaying tune in a tempo of *allegretto grazioso*. Over the delicate chords of the introduction, the melody, once again in the oboe, exudes Scandinavian charm and beauty. A central section, slightly faster, is a light, prancing dance that features the woodwinds, especially the piccolo. A return to the original theme brings the movement to a close, sweetly and gently.

The third movement corresponds roughly to the *scherzo* in a symphony. In a quick triple meter, it displays many playful tendencies including almost Beethoven-esque abruptness in dynamic changes. The trio section is much slower - a gentle, modal folk tune which is traded between woodwinds and strings. The movement concludes with a reprise of the original *scherzo*.

The finale sounds more Slavic, even Russian, than the other movements. Its minor setting and driving quarter note rhythms recall Tchaikovsky's *Symphony #2*, as well as its dynamic drive toward a rousing climax. A brief interlude, *pianissimo*, provides a moment of rest, but it is short lived. The *allegro* section returns to bring the movement to a thrilling close. This is fun music, well conceived and scored, and represents some of the finest musical moments in Grieg's symphonic output.