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Summer Pops at the Phil  
L'Après Midi  
Saturday 29 June 2019 7.30pm

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CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862–1918)  
Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune

Occasionally in Western music a single work seems to mark a radical change in musical language, opening up a whole range of new possibilities. *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, composed between 1892 and 1894, signalled not only Debussy's coming-of-age as a composer, but also the turning of a significant corner in the development of Western music.

The poem 'L'après-midi d'un faune' (A Faun's Afternoon), by the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898), describes the half-goat, half-human creature of Greek mythology indulging in a drowsy, erotic day-dream. Mallarmé originally intended a stage presentation of the poem, for which Debussy was to provide incidental music. We do not know when or, for that matter, why this idea was abandoned, but it was as a purely orchestral work that Debussy's score was premiered, in December 1894. It was an immediate success. The conductor, Gustave Doret, remembered: "All at once I felt behind me, as some conductors can, an audience that was totally spellbound."

Debussy was working towards a musical language that would reflect the immediacy of fleeting sensations, using instrumental and harmonic colour as expressive and structural devices in their own right, not just as decoration (it is only in this very specific sense that his music can be described as 'Impressionist', not in the more generally accepted meanings of 'vague' or 'imprecise').

Mallarmé's poem, exploring sensations and impressions on the border-line between waking and sleeping, was exactly the kind of stimulus he needed. The fluid rhythm and tonality of the opening flute solo (the equivalent of the faun's reed-pipe) immediately captures the essence of the poet's dream world. In place of conventional symphonic development the music is made up of a mosaic of melodic phrases separating and re-combining, like the faun's half-remembered impressions and feelings; everything is elusive in the shimmering afternoon heat.

Debussy's early music shows the influences of older French and Russian composers such as Massenet and Balakirev. Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune marks the point at which he was able to forge them into his own unique musical language. As for the work's wider implications, these are well summed up by the writer Edward Lockspeiser: "...something had happened in L'après-midi from which there was no going back."

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FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)  
Violin Concerto in E minor, Op.64

Allegro molto appassionato – / Fast, very passionate

Andante – / At a walking pace

Allegro non troppo – allegro molto vivace / Fast, but not too fast – fast, very lively

Beethoven was an inspiration to Romantic composers – but he was also a problem. To write concertos like Beethoven, you really needed to be Beethoven. Hummel, Weber and Chopin all copied his powerful orchestral introductions, whereupon their concertos sank like stones under the sheer weight of having half a symphony hanging off their front end.

It took Mendelssohn to break the deadlock. No surprise there – this, after all, was the boy-genius whose Midsummer Night's

Dream overture had revolutionized a generation's sense of instrumental colour before he'd even turned 18. Mendelssohn wasn't really a violinist, and he completed the concerto in 1845 for his childhood friend Ferdinand David. But he knew what needed to be done. "He never touched a string instrument the whole year round", recalled the composer Ferdinand Hiller, "but if he wanted to, he could do it – as he could do most things".

And his answer was simple. He ditched the introduction altogether and brought the soloist straight in after a mere bar of orchestral accompaniment. So the violin sings its bittersweet opening theme over the subtlest of accompaniments, and the woodwinds actually float their melting second subject over the solo violin. Next, Mendelssohn calls time on the 19th-century custom of applauding between movements. From the final chord of the Allegro, a bassoon note hangs motionless in the air before blossoming, through magical harmonies, into the Andante – a sweet and gloriously tuneful example of yet another Mendelssohn invention, the Song without Words.

It sinks to a twilit close, and the violin briefly turns opera-singer amidst the miniature fanfares and woodwind rustlings that launch the finale. Even without the words A Midsummer Night's Dream on the score, fantasy is in the air as the solo violin summons every scintilla of speed, lightness and panache for its brilliant dance across Mendelssohn's iridescent orchestra.

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JEAN SIBELIUS (1865-1957)  
Symphony No.2 in D major, Op.43

Allegretto / Quite fast

Tempo andante ma rubato / At a walking pace, but with freedom

Vivacissimo – / Very lively –

Finale: allegro moderato / Finale: moderately fast

## Vodka for Two

In November 1907 two great composers met in Helsinki. Gustav Mahler paid a visit to Jean Sibelius, and – doubtless over a glass of Sibelius’s beloved vodka – “discussed all the great questions of music thoroughly”. Naturally, it wasn’t long before they were talking symphonies. For Sibelius, what made a symphony was “its severity of style and the profound logic that creates an inner connection between all the motifs”. “No,” countered Mahler, “the symphony must be like the world. It must embrace everything”. Unsurprisingly, rather more Mahler than Sibelius biographers have quoted this exchange – who wouldn’t prefer Mahler’s life-affirming vision to Sibelius’s icy formula? But these neat definitions aren’t the whole story – formal logic certainly can’t be the only reason why Sibelius’s Second has become one of the best-loved of all modern symphonies.

## Like the World

And it would have been extraordinary if Sibelius, of all composers and in 1901, of all times could have written a purely abstract symphony. Finland was still a province of the Russian Empire, a fact that no red-blooded Finn could swallow quietly. And a red-blooded Finn, Sibelius certainly was. He’d been involved in the struggle for Finnish independence for over a decade – so prominently that the Finnish senate had granted him a state pension at the age of 32! He’d then had the dubious honour of having one of his works banned by the Russian authorities; his symphonic poem *Finland Awakes* (1899). It’s now called *Finlandia*, but until 1917 it could be performed only as *Impromptu*. So Sibelius was the hero of a great patriotic movement well before he composed his *Second Symphony*, in the second half of 1901. Music engaged his emotions as well as his mind, and it shows. The symphony grows with unstoppable power from a quiet pastoral opening to a majestic and unmistakably triumphant conclusion. His compatriots got the message at once.

## Embracing Everything

But it wasn't just about Finland. Sibelius himself was anything but a granite statue of a National Hero. An impulsive, unpredictable man, he was quick to respond to new emotional experiences and perfectly capable (as he once admitted) of writing passages in his symphonies while drunk. The Second Symphony is full of personal experience. Conceived on a holiday in Italy, it's his warmest symphony, its first movement aglow with throbbing string chords and dancing woodwinds. A breath of the Mediterranean? Certainly, he admitted that the Spanish legend of Don Juan had inspired much of the slow movement. And he captured a more painful personal experience in the symphony's finale. The long, lamenting melody for winds that comes before the final triumph is a heartfelt tribute to Elli Jarnefelt, the composer's sister-in-law, who died as he was completing the symphony.

### Forests and Rivers

So there's no shortage of the man and his world in Sibelius's Second. What about that "profound logic"? It's there, and it's brilliant (musicologists have traced it bar by bar); but it's not about musical mathematics – it's in the way that the Symphony grows. From the playful fragments of its opening bars, through the dark passions of the second movement, the whirlwind third, and into the sweeping melodies and victorious trumpets of the finale, it unfolds with the inevitability of some natural force. And that was how Sibelius, who loved the forests, lakes and birds of the far north, wanted us to hear it. He liked to compare the symphony to a great river, into which innumerable tributaries feed before it broadens majestically and flows into the sea. Let the Second Symphony carry you, and see for yourself if this doesn't seem like a wonderfully apt description.

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