

VARIETIES OF ECSTATIC EXPERIENCE

BY DANIEL DURCHHOLZ

TIMELINKS

1889

DVOŘÁK

Symphony No. 8 in G major, op. 88

George Eastman's Kodak camera goes on sale

1891-95

DEBUSSY

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun)

Thomas Edison patents motion-picture camera

2007-08

JAMES MACMILLAN

Piano Concerto No. 3, "The Mysteries of Light"

Financial markets fall into global recession

What the world needs now, is ecstasy, sweet ecstasy. Burt Bacharach and Hal David didn't say that, exactly, though they might have had they heard the types of ecstatic expression found in tonight's program—the sensual delights of Debussy, the religious rapture found in the deep devotion of MacMillan, and Dvořák's reveling in the country comforts of his homeland. That these three pieces come from such wildly different directions is somehow comforting. There is more joy to be found in the world than we know and it can be found in more places than we think.

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun)

IMPRESSIONS Claude Debussy did not care for the term "musical impressionism"—who, after all, approves of their work being reduced to a brief slogan? But it is as good a shorthand description as any for his music, with its constantly shifting harmonic inventions and unconventional orchestrations. Indeed, in the work of Debussy, impression matters more than any well-defined musical statement.

The impressionist painters of the late 19th century were important to Debussy, but so were the symbolist poets, as his work attempted to evoke in music what other artists did on paper and canvas. One of those symbolist poets was Stéphane Mallarmé, whose 1865 poem (subsequently revised) "L'après-midi d'un faune" was a favorite of Debussy's. He had written his first song based on a Mallarmé's poem eight years prior to the *Prelude*.

Mallarmé's poem—whose eroticism caused it to be refused publication more than once—follows the reverie of a faun (a half man/half goat creature out of Greek mythology) and his unsuccessful pursuit of a pair of nymphs. In Debussy's own description of the work, he says, "The music

of this *Prelude* is a very free illustration of the beautiful poem of Mallarmé. By no means does it claim to be a synthesis of the latter. Rather there are the successive scenes through which pass the desires and dreams of the faun in the heat of this afternoon. Then, tired of pursuing the fearful flight of the nymphs and the naiads, he succumbs to intoxicating sleep, in which he can finally realize his dreams of possession in universal Nature.”

Appropriately, the music is sensual, hedonistic, and dreamlike, from the opening melody (played on flute) suggestive of the faun playing his pipes to the rather formless but richly expressive colors provided as the piece moves forward, on harp, woodwinds, and strings.

Some were scandalized by the piece when it debuted in Paris, and others were put off by its radical formlessness. But it turned out to be a staggeringly important work for the generation of composers that followed. As Pierre Boulez commented, “Just as modern poetry surely took root in certain of Baudelaire’s poems, so one is justified in saying that modern music was awakened by ‘L’après-midi d’un faune.’”

JAMES MACMILLAN

Piano Concerto No. 3, “The Mysteries of Light”

DIRECT APPEALS Contemporary composer James MacMillan is a bit of a polemicist. He stands staunchly against “the old guard of the avant-garde” who “are deeply suspicious of any significant move towards tonality, any hint of pulse that is actually discernible, and any music which communicates successfully with a non-specialist audience.” His works, instead, are direct appeals to communication on an emotional level, and the traditional music of his native Scotland is something he has drawn on again and again to achieve that.

Another perennial source for MacMillan is religion, the impulse toward which he sees as among the “primal, universal aspects of the human condition.” A deeply devoted Catholic, MacMillan found inspiration for his Piano Concerto No. 3, “The Mysteries of Light,” in the 2002 introduction by Pope John Paul II of a set of five



Born

August 22, 1862, St. Germain-en-Laye, near Paris

Died

March 25, 1918, Paris

First Performance

December 22, 1894, in Paris; Gustave Doret conducted the orchestra of the Société Nationale de Musique

STL Symphony Premiere

January 30, 1908, Max Zach conducting

Most Recent STL Symphony Performance

May 22, 2009, Ward Stare conducting

Scoring

3 flutes
2 oboes
English horn
2 clarinets
2 bassoons
4 horns
percussion
2 harps
Strings

Performance Time

approximately 10 minutes

**Born**

July 16, 1958, in Kilwinning,
Scotland

First Performance

April 14, 2011, Jean-Yves
Thibaudet was soloist, with
Osmo Vänskä conducting
the Minnesota Orchestra, in
Minneapolis

STL Symphony Premiere

This week

Scoring

3 flutes
piccolo
2 oboes
English horn
3 clarinets
bass clarinet
2 bassoons
contrabassoon
4 horns
3 trumpets
3 trombones
tuba
timpani
percussion
harp
strings

Performance Time

approximately 25 minutes

meditations known as the Luminous Mysteries, to the practice of praying the Rosary. Previously, there had been three sets (Joyful, Sorrowful, and Glorious) of five Mysteries each, which recall scenes from the lives of Jesus and Mary. Perhaps the most famous example of music based on the structure of the Rosary is Heinrich Biber's Rosary (or Mystery) Sonatas, composed in the 17th century.

MacMillan wanted to revive this practice, and the addition of the Luminous Mysteries provided the perfect opportunity. The five, as presented by John Paul II, focus on the public ministry of Jesus Christ.

MacMillan's composition lays them out in a single continuous piece with five distinct sections, thus fusing the concerto form with that of the symphonic poem. The sections are "The Baptism of Jesus Christ," "The Wedding at Cana," "Proclamation of the Kingdom of God," "The Transfiguration of Our Lord," and "The Institution of the Eucharist."

A working knowledge of the source material would likely deepen the experience of the concerto, but MacMillan has issued this rather intriguing disclaimer: "the music here is in no way geared towards liturgy, or devotional in any accepted, traditional sense. Rather, each image or event becomes the springboard for a subjective reflection, and proceeds in quasi-dramatic fashion, not too distant in concept from the musical tone poem."

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Symphony No. 8 in G major, op. 88

CHANGE OF ATTITUDE For his Symphony No. 8, Antonín Dvořák said he wished to compose a work “different from the other symphonies, with individual thoughts worked out in a new way.”

To be sure, the great Czech composer did not reinvent the symphonic form with his Eighth, though he did find unique ways of presenting his ideas, working his way through a variety of themes and composing with great invention, verve, and a deep affection for the music of his Bohemian homeland.

More than anything, Dvořák’s Eighth stands in stark contrast to the tragic hue of his Seventh, which was written following the death of his mother; a time, he said, “of doubt, and obstinacy, silent sorrow and resignation.” Yet that particular work stands as one of his most profound achievements.

The Eighth is every bit its equal, but is its attitudinal polar opposite. As Dvořák would say, “different.” It is notable for its exuberance, its tunefulness, and its use of Slavic folk idioms, something Dvořák excelled at throughout his career. It was his fellow Czech composer Leoš Janáček—himself no stranger to borrowing from his native culture—who declared Dvořák the “sole representative of Czech music.”

The Eighth Symphony is one reason why.

MELODY POUR Perhaps the mood of the piece and the sources it draws upon have something to do with the circumstances of its composition. By the time he undertook the Eighth, Dvořák was living in comfortable circumstances. Brahms had praised Dvořák and made connections for him, and noted conductors such as Hans Richter and Hans von Bülow also championed his work. He traveled extensively (though not yet to America, which would inspire his Symphony No. 9 (“From the New World”), and he was famous as a conductor as well as a composer.

Success had not turned Dvořák’s head, though, and he remained deeply devoted to Czech nationalism and to the music of his homeland—a passion that burned within him since his early



Born

September 8, 1841,
Nelahozeves, Bohemia

Died

May 1, 1904, Prague

First Performance

February 2, 1890, in Prague;
the composer conducted
the Czech National
Orchestra

STL Symphony Premiere

December 18, 1964, Edouard
Van Remoortel conducting

Most Recent STL Symphony Performance

October 10, 2010, Gilbert
Varga conducting

Scoring

2 flutes
piccolo
2 oboes
English horn
2 clarinets
2 bassoons
4 horns
2 trumpets
3 trombones
tuba
timpani
strings

Performance Time

approximately 34 minutes

work with another great Czech composer, Bedřich Smetana. But success had accorded him a certain degree of comfort, including the purchase of a summer home in Bohemia, where he composed and orchestrated his Symphony No. 8 in a mere two and a half months—between August 26 and November 8, 1889.

Being in the countryside no doubt inspired the symphony's bucolic feel and lent to the ease and speed of its composition. "Melodies simply pour out of me," he said at the time.

That much is evident in the first movement, which begins with a bit of melodic misdirection. Rather than the key of G major, which is promised in the title, Dvořák introduces a theme in G minor. Its somber sound is comparable to a sky full of gloomy clouds whose purpose is to remain only long enough to offer a contrast to the moment when they disperse and allow the sun to burst through. Present also in the first moment is a playful "bird call" melody played on the flute as well as energetic bursts—lots of timpani, to be sure—and an abundance of melodic ideas following fast on one another's heels.

The second movement, more peaceful and pastoral, tracks the passage of a day in the countryside. Woodwinds and strings evoke the tranquil beauty, while brass and timpani threaten to bring a thunderstorm, though it comes to nothing.

The third movement features a lovely waltz that moves suddenly from its 3/8 time signature to 2/4—a shift from a staid tempo to a more frenetic one characteristic of a Slavic *dumka*—a folk form borrowed by Dvořák on numerous occasions.

Opening with a trumpet fanfare, the final movement offers a theme and variations, with energetic dance rhythms and Czech folk melodies, giving way to a more lyrical sequence and then a rip-roaring finale.