

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
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94th Season / Subscription Concert No.1
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This opening program of our 94th season is titled “Love, Lust, and Redemption,” and begins with a piece that has plenty of all three! Wagner’s *Overture and Venusberg Music from “Tannhäuser”* opens with redemption—the solemn “pilgrim’s chorus”—but also includes the thoroughly sexy music of Venus’s grotto from the beginning of the opera. The Madison Symphony Orchestra has made a tradition in the last several years of featuring our own players in at least one performance each season—this year it is principal organist Greg Zelek, who plays Barber’s brilliant *Toccata Festiva* on Overture Hall’s magnificent Klais organ. We then turn to Debussy’s sensuous *Prelude to “The Afternoon of a Faun,”* a languid and colorful portrait of slightly erotic daydreams. The program ends with one of the finest works by Dvořák, his grand seventh symphony.

Richard Wagner (1813-1883)

Tannhäuser: Overture and Venusberg Music (Paris version)

Wagner’s Tannhäuser was completed in 1845, and the first production took place on October 19, 1845, in Dresden. The Madison Symphony Orchestra has performed the Overture and Venusberg Music twice previously, in 1960 and 1979. Duration 21:00.

Tannhäuser is Wagner’s retelling of a medieval German legend of temptation and redemption: a minstrel-knight, Tannhäuser, is seduced by Venus and is a virtual prisoner in her grotto in the Venusberg. He finally calls upon the Virgin Mary and escapes Venus, only to set off on a long and bitter quest seeking pardon for his sins. In the end, Tannhäuser is redeemed only by the love and faith of Elisabeth, whose dying prayer is for his forgiveness and salvation. By 1845, when he completed three years of work on *Tannhäuser*, Wagner had largely abandoned the conventions of Romantic grand opera, and was well on his way to developing his own distinctive conception of music-drama. *Tannhäuser* was not an immediate hit at its Dresden premiere, but it met with slightly better success over the next few years with performances throughout Germany and in England. In 1861, Wagner made a bid for the Paris audience with a lavish production of *Tannhäuser* at the Paris Opéra. Parisian audiences demanded that operas included at least one ballet sequence, which almost invariably occurred in Act II. Wagner grudgingly revised the opera, though the only place it made dramatic sense to insert a ballet was in the

opening Venusberg scene in Act I. He extended the Venusberg music to include in a wild *bacchanale*. Despite his efforts, *Tannhäuser* was a miserable flop in Paris, running for only three performances. Each performance was disrupted by a noisy and dedicated claque of hecklers, led by members of the exclusive Jockey Club. The club's wealthy members—who were accustomed to dining late, and making it to their boxes at the Opéra in time to watch the usual Act II ballet—were outraged by the fact that Wagner had placed the ballet at the very beginning of the opera!

The opening music of the opera exists in two distinctly different versions. In the original, “Dresden” version, Wagner brings the overture to full and dramatic conclusion before beginning Act I. In the “Paris” version heard here, the overture cuts the original music rather short and leads directly into the erotic spectacle of the Venusberg ballet. The overture proceeds in the manner of most Romantic opera overtures, foreshadowing many of the important dramatic moments of the opera itself. It opens with the stately “pilgrim’s chorus” from the conclusion of the opera, sung by clarinets, horns and bassoons. After a more forceful statement of this theme by unison trombones, and a reprise by the winds, Wagner turns to the bacchanalian Venusberg music. The next theme, stated by the woodwinds and upper strings is Tannhäuser’s Act I song *Dir töne Lob!* (“Let praises ring!”), in which he sings Venus’s praises, but begs her to let him leave her kingdom. In response to this music there is a seductive melody played by solo clarinet above string tremolos: Venus’s *Geliebter, komm!* (“Come, beloved!”). Tannhäuser’s song returns in grand form, but where the original overture ends with a stirring reprise of the “pilgrim’s chorus,” this version launches directly into the Venusberg *bacchanale*—wild, almost frantic music that maintains an unbelievable intensity until it is finally brought to close by series of brass fanfares. There change in character, subsiding into calm and quiet music that is no less sensuous than the opening. Violins and solo clarinet introduce a new idea, and though Wagner occasionally hints at the music of the *bacchanale*, the scene ends in a hushed string passage.

Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

Toccata Festiva for Organ and Orchestra, Op.36

Barber composed the Toccata Festiva in 1960 and it was premiered in Philadelphia on September 30, 1960, by organist Paul Calloway, with conductor Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra. We have performed it once previously, in 2007, with organist Thomas Trotter. Duration 16:00.

When the Philadelphia Orchestra installed a splendid new concert organ in 1960, Samuel Barber was engaged to write a bravura piece for the dedication concert. The enormous instrument—at that time one of the world’s largest organs—was the gift of the philanthropist Marty Curtis Bok, and she personally commissioned Barber to write the dedication piece. Bok and Barber had a long history together—as a 14-year-old, Barber had been one of the first students at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, which Bok had founded. She became his most important patron, and helped him out at several points in his career. Among other things, she helped Barber and his partner Gian Carlo Menotti buy the house in Mount Kisco, NY that was to be their retreat for three decades. Though he was not often thought of as an “organ composer” Barber had a lifelong interest in the organ, and had actually started his professional career at age 12 as an organist. Though there are a few early unpublished organ pieces, it was not until 1958 that he published his first solo organ work, *Wondrous Love, Variations on a Shape-Note Hymn*. The *Toccata Festiva* is a much more ambitious piece, using the full sound resources of the orchestra and of a large, powerful concert organ.

The toccata is among the oldest of keyboard genres. The earliest toccatas seem to be written-out versions of what were originally improvisations, but by the Baroque, composers from Frescobaldi to Bach wrote much more substantial toccatas in several sections, alternating between several musical textures and characters. Barber’s toccata is very much in this spirit. He begins with a forceful passage for full orchestra from which the organ gradually emerges in a flurry of ornamentation. There follows a long contrasting section of a more reserved character. The opening texture returns briefly, and there is another contrasting episode, with soloists from the orchestra playing above a shimmering background from the organ. This builds to peak, and eventually leaves the organ alone to play an extended solo cadenza. There is brief recapitulation of the main ideas before the piece ends in the same forceful style as the opening.

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

Debussy composed this work in 1892-94, and its premiere was in Paris in December 1894. The Madison Symphony Orchestra has performed it on eight previous concerts between 1939 and 2005. Duration 18:00.

“Those nymphs, I want to make them permanent.
 So clear, their light flesh-pink, it hovers on the atmosphere
 Oppressed by bushy sleeps.
 Was it a dream I loved?
 My doubt, accumulated through the night past, branches out
 To many a fine point—no more in fact than twigs—
 Proving, alas! that what I’d claimed for my trophy by myself
 Was only my imagination’s lack of roses.
 Let’s think...”

- Mallarmé, *The Afternoon of a Faun* (translated by W. Austin)

The composition of this work marks a clear turning-point in the career of Claude Debussy. He had attended the Paris Conservatoire as a young man and in 1884 had won the prestigious *Prix du Rome*, the stamp of approval from the French musical establishment. In the late 1880s—what he later called his “bohemian years”—he scratched out a living in Paris as an accompanist and composer, and absorbed all of the musical influences in the air. In these years he befriended many of the most forward-thinking musicians in Paris, flirted with the music of Wagner (even making two pilgrimages to Bayreuth), and was deeply impressed by a performance of Javanese *gamelan* music he heard at the Paris Exposition in 1889. One of the most important influences from around 1890 onwards was his association with the Symbolists. Just as Impressionist painters like Monet and Renoir were rejecting realism in favor of pure color and light, the Symbolist poets rejected rigid poetic forms and description in favor of a free and sometimes kaleidoscopic style, in which fleeting images become symbols of deeper truths. Symbolism was the *avant garde* in French poetry from the 1880s through the turn of the century, and Debussy associated with many of the movement’s leading poets: Verlaine, Baudelaire, Valéry, and Mallarmé. The Symbolists often described their poetry in musical terms—imagery that expresses what cannot be directly expressed in words—and Debussy responded by setting many of their poems as art songs, or, as in the case of his *Prelude*, using their works as inspiration for purely instrumental compositions. Stéphane Mallarmé was a particularly important contact for Debussy—he hosted weekly *salóns* at his home, inviting poets, artists, and musicians to present and argue over their latest works. Debussy was a regular at Mallarmé’s *salóns* in the 1890s, and their association led to the composition of Debussy’s most famous orchestral piece.

It went through several different versions from the 1870s onwards, but Mallarmé’s lengthy poem *The Afternoon of a Faun* was nearly in its final form in 1890, when he asked Debussy to provide music for a projected theatrical presentation of the

work. Mallarmé's poem is vaguely erotic throughout, with a faun free-associating on his encounters with various nymphs. Debussy's *Prelude*, written between 1892 and 1894 was all that ever came of the theatrical presentation, though in 1912, Vaclav Nijinsky choreographed a ballet on Debussy's music for the Ballet Russe. Nijinsky's ballet went far beyond Debussy's music and even Mallarmé's poem in its frank sexuality—so much so that it horrified even a Parisian audience! Debussy's *Prelude* was a thoroughly *avant garde* work for 1894, and more than any other piece, made Debussy an internationally-known composer. Rather than setting this as a conventionally programmatic symphonic poem, Debussy tried to capture the ambience of Mallarmé's poetry without really telling a story. Mallarmé, after hearing Debussy play the score on piano for the first time, exclaimed: "I didn't expect anything like this! The music prolongs the emotion of my poem, and sets its scene more vividly than color." Though critics generally—and quite predictably—disliked a piece as startlingly new and radical as the *Prelude*, audiences and musicians took to it quickly and it was being performed across Europe and in the United States within just a few years.

On the surface, the *Prelude* has a conventional three-part form: an opening section that is repeated in varied form at the end, and a contrasting middle section. However, there is nothing conventional about the way that Debussy constructed the work. The main idea—perhaps representing the faun himself—is the familiar flute theme heard in the opening bars. Mallarmé jotted a brief poem about this melody on the first page of the manuscript score: "Sylvan of the first breath: if your flute succeeded in hearing all of the light, it would exhale Debussy." This theme reappears some eight times in the course of the work, but it is never developed in a traditional way. Each time it shows up it ends—like one of the faun's lazy thoughts—by spiraling off into new, unrelated ideas. The flute theme dominates the two outer sections, and the middle section presents a succession of contrasting ideas. There are a few climactic moments in this central section, but the music is never strident, and the scoring remains transparent and colorful through the whole work. (As apt as the designation "Impressionistic" seems for the music of Debussy, it is worth noting that he disliked the term just as much as "Impressionist" painters!) The coda presents one final mysterious reference to the faun in the horns, before the music evaporates into silence.

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)
Symphony No.7 in D minor, Op. 70

Dvořák composed his symphony in 1884-85 and he conducted the London Philharmonic Orchestra in the premiere, on March 17, 1885. Previous Madison Symphony Orchestra performance of the symphony were in 1987 and 2008. Duration: 36:00.

In December 1884, Dvořák wrote to a friend: “I am now busy with the new symphony (for London), and wherever I go, I have no thought for anything but my work, which much be such as to move the world—God grant that it be so!” He was describing the composition of his seventh symphony, generally considered to be his finest symphonic work. Earlier that year, he made the first of eight successful visits to England. English audiences adored his music, and shortly after arriving he was named an honorary member of the London Philharmonic Society. This honor came with a commission for a new symphony. Though this was his major reason for writing the *Symphony No.7*, there were several other factors at work as well. Dvořák had been deeply moved by the premiere of Brahms’s third symphony in 1883, and it is clear that he wanted to respond in a musical way to this work by his mentor and friend; his letters and diaries from this period speak of wanting to live up to Brahms’s confidence in him and to produce a work of similar depth. There are even musical clues that in some sense the *Symphony No.7* is a “symphony about Brahms”—its musical forms, its intense thematic development, and the rhythmic quirks of the third and fourth movements all pay tribute to Dvořák’s mentor. What is put in the background in this work—aside from the third movement—are the Czech musical styles that had played such an important part in his *Slavonic Dances* and earlier symphonies. It seems that though Dvořák remained a strong Bohemian patriot, he was trying to break out of the nationalist mold he had created in so much of his earlier music.

The symphony’s reception in London was everything Dvořák could have hoped for, and after a few revisions, he sent it off to his publisher Simrock. In his long years struggling for recognition the contract with Simrock, acquired with the help of Brahms, had been a blessing, though Simrock had also profited enormously by publishing popular pieces like the *Slavonic Dances*. Now, he was finally in a position to bargain: Simrock offered 3000 marks for the symphony, but Dvořák stood his ground until the publisher doubled his price. The score was published by Simrock in 1885 as the *Symphony No.2*. Its present numbering—*No.7*—reflects its actual place in the composition of Dvořák’s symphonies.

The first movement (*Allegro maestoso*) begins with a brooding melody in the low strings that is the basis for several later ideas. A horn call and a woodwind passage announce a contrasting major-key melody played by the flute and clarinet. After a short, but intense development section Dvořák recapitulates the main ideas, though in reverse order: the second theme returns first in a flowing clarinet solo before he finally returns to the tragic mood of the opening. A melancholy clarinet solo above *pizzicato* strings opens the second movement (*Poco adagio*). This is answered by the strings and other solo woodwinds, building to a related idea that critic Donald Tovey once called “one of the profoundest in any symphony since Beethoven.” A final, more pastoral theme is introduced by the horns. All three melodies find their way into the development before Dvořák restates them, and ends the movement with a final statement of the opening idea, now in the oboe above string tremolos, and a quiet epilogue.

While the second movement probably shows Dvořák at his most “Brahmsian,” the scherzo (*Vivace*) looks back to his Bohemian roots. The opening dance has the feel of a *furiant*, a fast Czech folk dance much used by Dvořák. However, he introduces one of Brahms’s favorite rhythmic devices, pitting triple-meter melody against a duple-meter accompaniment. The central trio changes the character briefly, with solo woodwinds above, before the opening mood returns. There is one more brief slow episode before he closes with a furious coda. The finale (*Allegro*) begins with a long, moody introduction that builds intensity until Dvořák introduces a forceful off-beat main idea. From this point the movement has an unstoppable rhythmic energy. There are occasional breaks in the intensity, but the mood remains tempestuous throughout, culminating in a fierce coda.