

Edexcel Study Notes – *Music for Large Ensemble***Debussy: *Prélude à L'Après-midi d'un Faune***

In 1890 it would have been difficult to envisage that France was to become the leading light on the European musical stage at the turn of the century. In a country that had traditionally set itself apart from the rest of Europe, Wagner-worship had a surprisingly firm foothold, espoused above all by César Franck and his 'Bande'; even the young Debussy came briefly under the spell. But 'briefly' is the operative word, for by the 1890s Debussy's extraordinary original genius had begun to manifest itself, with the visionary *Prélude à L'Après-midi d'un Faune* opening the doors into the 20th century and away from the all-engulfing Austro-German influences that had led the way for so long. Of course, this was a gradual process; the first performance of *L'Après-midi* in 1894 aroused little interest and the work was not widely performed until after Debussy's opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902) had furthered Debussy's reputation, and he, among others, had begun to re-establish a truly French school.

Through his studies at the Paris Conservatoire, Debussy was naturally acquainted with the work of a broad spectrum of established composers. But like most composers of imagination, he was open to many and various other stimuli. Musically he had been fascinated by unfamiliar sounds featured at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1889, where he heard musicians from Africa, Arabia, the Orient (including Javanese gamelan), Spain and, above all, Russia; he had grown to appreciate the refreshing simplicity of the old medieval church modes and the parallel motion of organum; and he was stimulated by his friendship from 1891 of that 'musical anarchist', Erik Satie. In addition, he was keenly aware of what was happening in the worlds of painting and literature, and it was his friendship with the symbolist poet, Mallarmé, that gave birth to Debussy's musical evocation of the Mallarmé poem, *L'Après-midi d'un faune*¹. Finally, Debussy's compositional methods have been likened to those of the painters of the period, the Impressionists, and although this was not an analogy that Debussy himself was happy with, it is a useful one. Debussy's *Prélude* is in no way a narrative account of the poem, but a musical 'impression'; and the fragmentary way in which he uses his orchestra has parallels with the spots of light and colour used in pointillism. But to use the term Impressionism to denote a general vagueness is wide of the mark – Debussy wrote with carefully calculated precision to produce his 'impressionistic' effects.

What, then, are the features of *Prélude à L'Après-midi d'un Faune* which singled it out as the first work in which Debussy was expressing himself in his unique musical voice?

SAMPLE

¹ For a fuller account of the collaboration between Debussy and Mallarmé, read David Cox: *Debussy's Orchestral Music* (BBC Music Guide), pp.9-12