

Chapel Hill

Philharmonia

7:30 p.m. December 9, 2018

Moeser Auditorium
Hill Hall, UNC-Chapel Hill

Music Director
Donald L. Oehler

Dreams and Visions

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun (1894)

Viola Concerto, Op. Posth.

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

Completed by Tibor Serly

Moderato [attacca]

Adagio religioso—Allegretto [attacca]

Allegro vivace

George Taylor, Viola

Intermission

Symphony No. 4 in F Minor, Op. 36

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Andante sostenuto—Moderato con anima

Andantino in modo di canzona—Più mosso—Tempo I

Scherzo. Pizzicao ostinato (Allegro—Meno mosso—Tempo I)

Finale: Allegro con fuoco—Andante—Tempo I

Please join us after the concert for a reception in the rotunda



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Dreams and Visions

The color of my soul is iron-grey and sad bats wheel about the steeple of my dreams

– Claude Debussy

Reality is wrong. Dreams are for real.

– Tupac Shakur

“Life, as we find it, is too hard for us,” wrote Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, “it brings us too many pains, disappointments and impossible tasks. In order to bear it we cannot dispense with palliative measures.” What are these measures which dull the ache of incurable miseries? Freud lists three. We have “deflections” such as professional activities that engage our intellects, but ultimately beg the question of life’s purpose. At another extreme, we have “intoxicants” like the opium Hector Berlioz smoked in 1830 while he composed *Symphonie Fantastique* and propelled music into the Romantic era. As the conductor Leonard Bernstein once reminded his audience at a Young People’s Concert, hallucinogens are dangerous: “Berlioz tells it like it is. You take a trip, you wind up screaming at your own funeral.” Finally, we have “substitute satisfactions...illusions in contrast with reality...but nonetheless psychically effective, thanks to the role which fantasy has assumed in mental life.” Put another way, we have dreams and visions. We have art.

Debussy: Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun

Stéphane Mallarmé’s poem *L’après-midi d’un faune* (1876) gives us a faun (a mythical male nature spirit with a goat’s beard, horns and lower half) waking from a nap. He recalls an image of a group of lovely nymphs, possibly glimpsed that morning, and strives to distinguish between memory and illusion:

These nymphs, I would perpetuate them
So bright
Their crimson flesh that hovers there, light
In the air drowsy with dense slumbers.
Did I love a dream?

– English translation by A.S. Kline



Faune by Édouard Manet

A circle of writers and artists met every Tuesday (*Mardi*) in Mallarmé’s Parisian apartment. These *Mardistes* joined in rejecting “naturalism...realism and overly clearcut forms.” They shared “a taste for the indefinite, the mysterious, even the esoteric.” (François Lesure, Grove Music Online) The composer Claude Debussy joined the salon in 1890. His childhood had been disrupted by the Franco-Prussian War and the arrest of his father when the Paris Commune was suppressed. Although “a little backward in the rudiments,” in 1872 young Claude (age 10) gained entrance to the *Paris Conservatoire*. He studied music there for 13 years, his only formal education. During that time, Nadezhda Filaretovna von Meck, an uber-wealthy Russian widow with a great passion for music, engaged “her little Frenchman” over three summers to play piano duets and tutor her children. Debussy won the *Prix de Rome* in 1884, allowing him to work for several years in Italy before returning to Paris. After a brief flirtation with Wagnerian style, Debussy developed a distinctive compositional voice. Even as a student he rebelled against traditional harmonies. Later, he advised aspiring composers to remain “unique” and “unblemished.”

Debussy and Mallarmé agreed to collaborate on a staged version of *L’après-midi d’un faune*. The production never materialized, but in 1894 Debussy completed a symphonic “Prelude” to the poem. He described it as “a succession of scenes through which pass the desires and dreams of the faun in the heat of the afternoon. Then, tired of pursuing the

timid flight of nymphs and naiads, he succumbs to intoxicating sleep, in which he can finally realize his dreams of possession in universal Nature.”

Debussy's Prelude begins with a solo flute playing a meandering, chromatic passage that evokes the faun blowing seductively on Pan pipes. It is unlike anything heard before in the musical canon. The avant-garde composer/conductor Pierre Boulez singled out these notes as the awakening of modern music. Leonard Bernstein's interpretation of a passage from Mallarmé's poem suggests the same notion: "On the banks of a calm Sicilian pool, [the faun] has been cutting the hollow reeds to be subdued by talent, as he puts it...an image, in other words, of the birth of music." ("The Delights & Dangers of Ambiguity," Norton Lectures, Harvard University, 1973)

Bernstein delves deeper into the "radical change" catalyzed by Debussy's seminal composition. He argues that, contrary to "the conventional Hollywoodish idea of the moody composer improvising a vague dream in which anything can happen anywhere...the Faun is a masterpiece of structure." The opening flute solo, he observes, is built on a tritone, in which the two whole tone steps plus one semitone step that comprise a perfect fourth interval (*do-re-mi-fa*) are replaced by three whole tone steps to yield a dissonant augmented fourth (*do-re-mi-fa^{sharp}*). Bernstein calls this "the most unstable interval there is, the absolute negation of tonality." He reminds us that the "Early Church fathers declared [this interval] unacceptable and illegal, *diabolus in musica* — the Devil in music."

Debussy doubles down, linking two tritones together to yield a scale of six whole tone steps. The result, observes Bernstein, is that traditional harmonic relationships disappear entirely: "no tonic or dominant...no 'bread and butter,' therefore no traditional modulations are possible...in short it is atonal, the first organized atonal material ever to appear... the most ambiguous sounds ever heard in musical history..." Yet, "just when we're beginning to feel utterly lost in these atonal woods," Debussy brings us to a "point of repose" at the end of each internal episode of Faun by returning to a conventional tonal key, E major. And in the final bars, Debussy even concludes with two "Amens...just as they are heard in Church at the end of hymns," albeit with the "twist" of two augmented notes, "consistent with the tritone principle that's been operative since the very first bar."

Bartók: Viola Concerto



Béla Bartók

Béla Bartók was born in a small Hungarian town, now within western Romania. His father died young, and his mother migrated around Eastern Europe to find suitable teaching positions, eventually settling in Pozsony (now Bratislava). At age 18 Bartók accepted a place at the Royal Hungarian Academy of Music in Budapest. He graduated in 1903, expected to excel as a concert pianist.

Temperamentally and physically, however, Bartók was better suited to life as an educator than a touring virtuoso. He joined the piano teaching staff of the Academy of Music. A greater passion emerged as he explored peasant music, an interest triggered by hearing a nanny from Transylvania sing to the children in her care. Bartók became a pioneer in ethnomusicology—the study of the music of different cultures. In this field he found an outstanding partner and friend in fellow Hungarian Zoltán Kodály. The two collaborated as song collectors and championed each other's compositions. They eschewed the "Gypsy" music popularized by Romani bands in urban centers, instead seeking authentic Magyar folk songs that often resembled the indigenous music of Central and Eastern Asia.

Bartók's own compositions drew increasingly from the ancient native folk songs he discovered around Eastern Europe and in Turkey and North Africa. He synthesized their distinctive rhythms and harmonies with modern European art music, from Debussy forward, and also with classical and baroque forms. As he neared the end of his sixth decade, Bartók could

count among his achievements six remarkable string quartets and other fine chamber music, numerous pieces for solo piano, the opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* and other stage works, and multiple violin and piano concertos.

As strong opponents of Nazism and Hungary's fascist government, Bartók and his young wife Ditta, once his piano student, chose to emigrate to the United States in 1940, after the outbreak of World War II in Europe. The move exposed them to many of the pains and disappointments alluded to by Freud. Despite receiving an honorary degree from Columbia University and a fellowship to support research on a collection of Serbo-Croatian songs, Bartók struggled financially. He was neither well-known nor appreciated in this country, and he found little audience interest in concerts of his music. Moreover, the tuberculosis symptoms that had handicapped Bartók as a young man returned, and he developed blood abnormalities that progressed eventually into a fatal leukemia. The deterioration of his health undermined Bartók's ability and motivation to compose new music.

Aid came from several quarters. The American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) helped pay Bartók's medical costs and underwrote stays at health spas in Saranac Lake, NY and Asheville, NC, where he could work in reasonable comfort.

A commission from the conductor Serge Koussevitzky rekindled Bartók's creative spirit. He produced *The Concerto for Orchestra*, "a joyous and brilliant piece universally acknowledged as one of the masterpieces of the 20th Century." (Conductor Kenneth Woods) The Boston Symphony Orchestra premiered it in December 1944.

Commissions also came from two world-famous string players—Yehudi Menuhin for the *Sonata for Solo Violin* and William Primrose for the *Viola Concerto*. In addition, Bartók undertook a new piano concerto as a 42nd birthday gift for Ditta. It was intended to guarantee her future income from concert bookings.

Inevitably, time ran out. Upon Bartók's death in September 1945, the *Third Piano Concerto* required only 17 further bars of orchestration. Tibor Serly, a friend and musical disciple, readily accomplished this task. The *Viola Concerto*, however, proved a more daunting project. Serly, a violist himself, worked from loose manuscript sheets that contained a nearly finished virtuosic solo part but only sketchy orchestration. He devoted three years to prepare a complete version. Primrose embraced the work, performing it well over 100 times and establishing it as a bedrock of the viola repertoire. Bartók's concerto transcends the poverty, neglect and illness that shadowed the composer's final days. It "is a profoundly lyrical, spiritual and life affirming work," writes Woods. "[revealing a] "capacity for joy that listeners continue to marvel at."

The *Viola Concerto* comprises three movements played without break. For the first movement, the work's longest, Bartók employs classical sonata form. The viola enters over a softly plucked accompaniment in the low strings. The opening theme uses an octatonic scale—that is, a symmetrical eight note scale with alternating half and whole steps. The pace quickens in an extended conversation between the viola and woodwinds, with the soloist navigating an extended section of arpeggios (broken chords). A lightly accompanied cadenza leads into the recapitulation.

The transition to the second movement is marked *Lento parlando*, a reference to a speech-like declamatory style in slower folk melodies, with accents characteristic of the Hungarian language. A bassoon solo links to the slow movement proper, marked *Adagio religioso*, in which the solo viola weaves an introspective line over a chorale-like accompaniment. The work concludes with an energetic folk dance embellished by hints of droning bagpipes, perhaps honoring Primrose's Scottish heritage.

Leon Botstein, a respected conductor and musicologist, and the President of Bard College, points to a dream and vision that, in the end, may be Bartók's greatest legacy. "Whether it is debates in the United States...about immigrants... assimilation, and ethnic pride, or in propaganda within the former Communist bloc countries about foreigners, Jews, and cosmopolitans as opposed to loyal nationalists...we need to find ways to use group identity as a basis for human solidarity, not human conflict...Bartók sought through his work and study of folk musics the common thread among ethnic groups and diverse cultures." [*Musical Quarterly* (1995) 79: 423-8]

This evening's soloist, **George Taylor**, is Professor of Viola at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. Previously, he was a member of the Ciompi Quartet at Duke University. A dedicated, sought-after and beloved teacher, he has served on the artist faculties of The Castleman Quartet Program, *Le Dormaine Forget*, the Chautauqua Institution, Musicorda, The Encore School for Strings, the Meadowmount School, the Manchester Music Festival, and the Elan International Music Festival, among others. Mr. Taylor has performed in solo recitals and chamber music concerts throughout the United States and in Taiwan. He collaborates frequently with the Ritz Chamber Players and with ensembles such as the Triple Helix Trio and the Ying Quartet. His recordings include "Night Strings" with guitarist Nicholas Goluses and the complete chamber music of the African/American composer William Grant Still with the Videmus Ensemble. Mr. Taylor co-founded and conducted the St. Stephens Chamber Orchestra (Durham, NC). In 1983 he served as the first conductor of the Village Orchestra, now the Chapel Hill Philharmonia.



Tchaikovsky: *Symphony No. 4*

The single generation between Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky and Debussy marked a transition from the apotheosis of the Romantic era in music to the beginning of its end. Defining characteristics of Romanticism include emphasis on emotion, subjectivism, and the central autobiographical role of the individual creative spirit: "The vision or dream-world of the Romantic artist, informed and made aesthetically whole (unified) by his genius, would give the rest of humanity a privileged insight into reality." (Jim Samson, Grove Music Online)

Tchaikovsky exemplified the Romantic artist. Yet, as he composed his *Symphony No. 4* in 1877-8, his life seemed better suited to filling the pages of a gossipy penny dreadful than to uplifting humanity. His former student Antonina Milyukova, obsessed with the composer, employed "a combination of adulation, begging, tantrums and threats of suicide" to convince this homosexual bachelor in his late 30s to marry her. (Jan Swafford, *Vintage Guide to Classical Music*) Tchaikovsky likely conceived that this union would decrease the risk of exposing his true sexual preference and activities. Milyukova failed to grasp that Tchaikovsky intended only a marriage of convenience. As Swafford relates, this conjunction of a "hypersensitive artist struggling vainly against his sexual orientation" with a "neurotic, unintelligent, sexually insatiable" young woman "was a formula for nightmare."



Pyotr Tchaikovsky and Antonina Milyukova on their honeymoon in Saint Petersburg, July 1877

In July 1877, one month into the marriage, Tchaikovsky abandoned Antonina in Moscow and fled to his brother-in-law's estates in the Ukraine. He never reconciled with his wife, yet he emerged from the episode unscathed. This was thanks largely to the intervention of a new patroness whose gift of a rich annuity freed him to live independently. The unfortunate Antonina, however, never recovered from Tchaikovsky's rejection and ended her days in an asylum.

The composer's benefactress was Nadezhda von Meck, the very same who took the teenage Debussy under her wing. The Meck / Tchaikovsky relationship began with her first letter to him in December 1876. It remained intense but strictly platonic and epistolary over nearly 14 years. In return for an annual stipend of 6,000 rubles, Pyotr Ilyich corresponded faithfully, often with deep emotion, but never was allowed to confront Nadezhda Filaretovna in person.

Among over 500 letters exchanged between Tchaikovsky and Meck, one sheds special light on the *Fourth Symphony*, a work dedicated “To my best friend.” Although she insisted on anonymity, Meck felt free to demand that Tchaikovsky privately unveil her symphony’s underlying meaning. After offering the caveat that music cannot be explained by words, he complied. In the crucial letter he names the work’s opening brass fanfare “the *kernel* of the whole symphony,” and spells out the first movement’s program:



Nadezhda von Meck

This [the fanfare] is Fate, the force of destiny, which ever prevents our pursuit of happiness from reaching its goal...which hangs like the sword of Damocles over our heads and constantly, ceaselessly poisons our souls. It is invincible, inescapable... [A second theme] “O joy! A sweet tender dream has appeared...How distant now is the sound of the implacable introductory theme! Dreams little by little have taken over the soul. All that is dark and bleak is forgotten. There it is—happiness!

But no! These are only dreams and *Fate* awakens us from them: [brass fanfare again]. And thus, all life is the ceaseless alternation of bitter reality with evanescent dreams and visions of happiness...There is no refuge. We are buffeted about by this sea until it seizes us and pulls us down to the bottom.

Tchaikovsky goes on to explicate the Symphony’s remaining movements. In the second, the oboe introduces a wistful theme, echoed by the strings. The emotion is no longer rage at Fate, but nostalgia, “another aspect of sadness”:

Here is the melancholy feeling that overcomes us when we sit weary and alone at the end of the day. The book we pick up slips from our fingers, and a procession of memories passes by in review. We remember happy times of youth as well as moments of sorrow. We regret what is past, but have neither the courage nor the will to begin a new life...There is a bittersweet comfort in losing oneself in the past.

Next, the lively *Scherzo* capitalizes brilliantly on the sound of strings rapidly plucked, rather than bowed. No program is required to understand the cheerful effect. The mood turns. Perhaps we can hope, after all?

The *Finale* opens triumphantly. The melody derives from a childishly innocent folk song, “A Birch Tree in the Meadow,” a ditty about making a balalaika from the tree’s wood. Dense orchestration, manic speed, and repeated cymbal crashes blow the song up beyond recognition. Victory over Fate surely must be to hand. No! As in the first movement, the ominous Fate theme returns in the low brass. Again, even more wildly, the Birch Tree folk song drives it away. Do we believe now that Fate is banished forever? Tchaikovsky’s amped up music and his words to von Meck suggest “No.” He writes:

If you find no joy in yourself, look around you. Go out among the people: see how they can enjoy life and give themselves up to festivity. But hardly have we had a moment to enjoy this when Fate, relentless and untiring, makes his presence known. In their revelry, the others take no notice...There is still happiness, simple and naïve. Delight in the happiness of others. Life is still possible.

So, this is merely a respite. Like dementors from Azkaban in the Harry Potter novels, Fate will return, freezing joy from our marrows, sucking away our very souls. Only “simple and naïve” fools fail to see this. Well, if so, why not join their revelry, however brief it may be? Live while one can.

Is Tchaikovsky truly such a cynic? Does he share Freud’s bitterly pessimistic take on the human condition—pain and suffering sometimes palliated, but never cured, by fleeting dreams of happiness? I don’t know, but I suspect so.

And what would Bartók say? The Hungarian who, while dying of leukemia, could create true joy from the bones of ancient folk music might have a different philosophy, and more constructive dreams and visions, than his Russian neighbor.

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