Chapel Hill Philharmonia

Sunday, 7 December 2025
5:30 pm

Moeser Auditorium
University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill

Donald L. Oehler, Music Director

National Visions

Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun	Claude Debussy (1862-1918)
Symphony No. 7 in D Minor, Op.70 I. Allegro maestoso II. Poco Adagio III. Scherzo – Vivace IV. Finale - Allegro	Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

National Visions

This afternoon's concert features two works, written less than ten years apart, but which are two very contrasting examples of music styles closely aligned with nationalistic trends. The earlier work, Symphony No. 7 in D Minor by Antonín Dvořák, is representative of the Czech style of symphonic composition, whereas the Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun is a work that literally defines French Impressionism in music.

Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun is a symphonic poem for orchestra by Claude Debussy. It was composed from 1891 to 1894 and first performed in Paris on 22 December 1894. The work is loosely based on a poem of the same name by Stéphane Mallarmé.

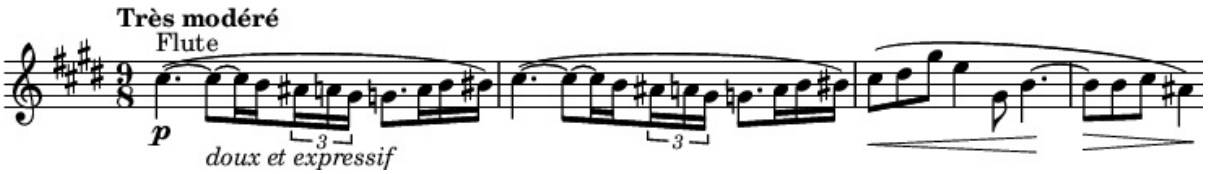
Claude Debussy

In writing to a friend about this composition, Debussy stated:

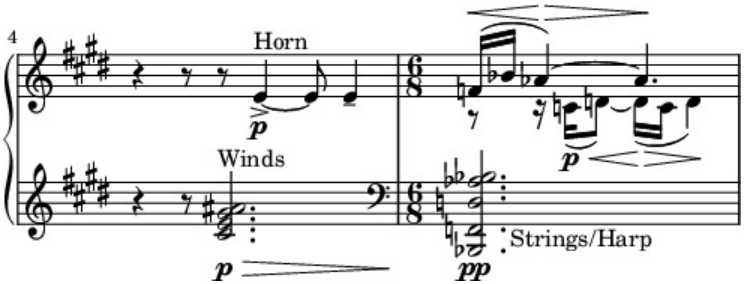
> The music of this prelude is a very free illustration of Mallarmé's beautiful poem. By no means does it claim to be a synthesis of it. Rather there is a succession of scenes through which pass the desires and dreams of the faun in the heat of the afternoon. Then, tired of pursuing the timorous flight of nymphs and naiads, he succumbs to intoxicating sleep, in which he can finally realize his dreams of possession in universal Nature.

On first listening, this work seems improvisational and almost free-form. However, closer analysis reveals that the piece consists of a intricate organization of musical cells, motifs carefully developed and traded between members of the orchestra. Despite the work sounding free form, it is meticulously notated with rhythms purposefully avoiding accented beats much of the time. Harmonically, Debussy reinforces this sense of gently floating along, by emphasizing tritones without resolution, frequent use of whole tone scalar passages, and a general avoidance of traditional dominant-to-tonic harmonic relationships. This is deliberate ambiguity both rhythmically and harmonically.

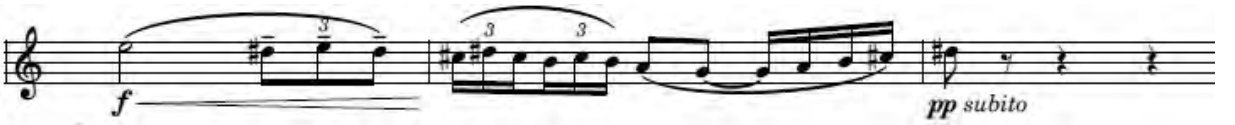
The opening theme presented in the solo flute emphasizes a chromatic descent and return.



This opening is answered by the harp, strings and solo horns with ambiguous harmonies.



This opening theme is developed and expanded later on in the work. Note the use of the whole tone scale at the end of this passage.



Antonín Dvořák

Antonín Dvořák began work on his **Seventh Symphony** on 13 December 1884, after hearing and admiring Brahms' Third Symphony. Earlier that same year, the Royal Philharmonic Society invited him to write a new symphony and elected him as an honorary member. In January 1885, he said in a letter to a friend, "The first subject of my new symphony flashed in to my mind on the arrival of the festive train bringing our countrymen from Pest [to a Czech nationalist event at the National Theater in Prague]." The Czech nation was struggling politically, striving to come into its own.

It is worth noting that the lands once known as Bohemia (much of what is now the Czech Republic) came to be ruled by the Austrian Empire in 1806 with the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire. During the late 18th and 19th centuries, the Czech National Revival began its rise, with the purpose to revive Czech language, culture, and national identity. The Revolution of 1848 in Prague, striving for liberal reforms and autonomy of the Bohemian Crown within the Austrian Empire, was suppressed. Dvořák resolved that his new symphony would reflect this struggle of his countryman's nationalist feelings with his intense patriotism and his wish to see the Czech nation flourish.

Dvořák completed a sketch of the first movement in five days, and he wrote to one of his friends: "I am now busy with this symphony for London, and wherever I go I can think of nothing else. God grant that this Czech music will move the world!!"

He finished his sketch of the slow movement ten days later. He added a footnote “From the sad years”. While this comment may refer to the recent death of his mother, or to the previous death of his eldest child, Dvořák may be referring to a broader context. He wrote to a friend, “What is in my mind is Love, God, and my Fatherland.”

In the next month or so, Dvořák completed the sketches of the third and fourth movements. He later said that the fourth movement includes a suggestion of the capacity of the Czech people to display stubborn resistance to political oppressors.

On 22 April 1885, Dvořák’s Seventh Symphony received its brilliantly successful first performance at St James’s Hall in London, with Dvořák himself conducting.

This symphony follows the traditional four-movement symphonic structure and employs these standard symphonic forms:

First Movement (Allegro maestoso): Sonata form, featuring a dramatic opening with two contrasting themes – a powerful, march-like first theme and a more lyrical second theme. The movement includes the standard exposition, development, and recapitulation sections.

Second Movement (Poco adagio): This movement opens with chorale-like writing in the clarinet and bassoon, followed by a lyrical horn melody. The movement then takes an abrupt and dramatic turn, signifying the struggles of the Czech peoples. The hymn-like chorale from the beginning returns on the oboe over pianissimo, tremolo strings as the movement comes to a close.

Third Movement (Scherzo: Vivace): Scherzo and trio form (a type of ternary/ABA form). The scherzo section is energetic and rhythmically driven, contrasting with a gentler trio section in the middle, before returning to the scherzo.

Fourth Movement (Finale: Allegro): Sonata form, bringing the symphony to a powerful conclusion. This movement is particularly notable for its cyclical elements, as Dvořák references themes from earlier movements, creating a sense of unity across the entire work.

Program Notes by Garth E. Molyneux