Timelessness in French Music: Debussy's Pelléas et Mélisande and Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune

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Debussy's orchestral works include Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (1894), Nocturnes (1897–1899) and Images (1905–1912). His music was to a considerable extent a reaction against Wagner and the German musical tradition. He regarded the classical symphony as obsolete and sought an alternative in his "symphonic sketches", La mer (1903–1905). His piano works include two books of Préludes and two of Études. Throughout his career he wrote mélodies based on a wide variety of poetry, including his own. He was greatly influenced by the Symbolist poetic movement of the later L'Aprés Midi D'Un Faune” was the base for Debussy's composition and allowed his impressionistic qualities to come forth. Debussy's piece musically embodies the story of symbolist Mallarmé’s poem through the use of orchestration, structural parallelism, and musical depiction. In what follows, I first provide a brief overview of the relationship between Debussy and Mallarmé, then a summary of the language barrier between poetry and music, and finally an analysis of the connections between the poem and the instrumental piece, the use of instruments and motives, and the influence of Mallarmé's poem. Welcome to the world of Debussy's Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune. Now imagine the audience's reaction one evening in 1894 when it was given its first airing at Paris’s Salle Harcourt. All this either captivated or repelled those listeners who couldn’t understand anything that veered too far from traditional convention. Originally a dramatic scene in a rhymed and rhythmic form, Mallarmé’s Afternoon of a Faun tells of a faun's vain attempts to seduce two nymphs, one rather shy, and one more forward. His antics take place against the backdrop of a hazy, humid landscape of rushes and reeds. A cello in Debussy's score seems to imitate a frog, and above there are some bird-calls. Trilling woodwind recall the 'Forest Murmurs' of Wagner's Siegfried.