

Canticles of Time

Brahms – *Tragic Overture*

Debussy – *Afternoon of a Faun*

Chausson – *Poème* - Solenn Seguilon - violin

Beethoven - *Symphony No. 5*

Tragic Overture

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Johannes Brahms learned the basics of music from his father, a bass player. He started taking piano lessons at age 10, and began studying composition with a teacher at age 12. By the age of 20, he had met such musical luminaries as Joachim, Liszt, and Robert and Clara Schumann. He came to be thought of as Beethoven's successor, but it took time for the public to understand his profound and reserved style of composition. And he was always a little intimidated by living in the shadow of Beethoven's legacy.

The *Tragic Overture* shows Brahms' connection to Beethoven in its architecture-like structure and its somber, fierce character. A more serious and intense piece could hardly be found in the standard orchestral repertoire. Brahms wrote this piece in the same year that he wrote his *Academic Festival Overture*, an irrepressibly joyous work. Though it stands well on its own, the *Tragic Overture* displays enough contrasting moods and a large enough scale to have been the first movement of a large symphony.

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

Every so often, a composer writes a piece that says something really new, that adds significantly to musical language. This is such a piece. Up to 1894, very little of Debussy's music had been heard in public. This is Debussy's first orchestral work of significance, and a landmark in musical history. No one before had ever created such musical textures and colors.

The eldest of five children, Debussy was the only child his parents raised; the others were brought up by his mother's sister-in-law, probably because his parents could not afford to support the others. He never went to school, and was taught to read and write by his mother. He entered the Paris Conservatory in 1874, at age eleven. He studied at the conservatory for eleven years, gaining the reputation for being an erratic pianist and a complete individualist in all matters of music.

In *Prelude a faun* (a mythical creature, a man above the waist and a goat below) slowly wakes in the afternoon heat after a night of wine and women. The flute represents the faun's pan pipes as he recalls the beauty of blue-eyed girls and marshy Sicilian shores.

Poème* *Ernest Chausson (1855-1899)

After having studied law, Chausson entered the Paris Conservatory at the age of 25 and studied with Massenet and Franck. *Poème* might not have been published were it not for the intervention of Chausson's friend, the Spanish composer Isaac Albeniz. Without Chausson's knowledge, Albeniz took a score of the piece to the music publisher Breitkopf and Härtel. He personally paid the publishing costs and the composer's royalty.

Poème reflects a mood similar to many of Chausson's songs that alternate between despair and resignation. This dark, complex work expresses more than words can say, from its murmuring beginning to its downward-spiraling finale.

Symphony #5 in C Minor

Ludwig von Beethoven (1770-1827)

An amazing character was Beethoven. He couldn't dance, was a terrible cook, was often ill-tempered and disagreeable, never married, moved often, and couldn't manage his own money. As a child, he was a disappointment to his father when he failed to become a commercially successful child prodigy like Mozart. In 1808, the year he composed this symphony, Beethoven's hearing was fading, and his general health was certainly less than perfect. The Count who commissioned the fifth symphony never paid the full agreed price, and never took delivery of the work. In spite of it all, Beethoven wrote a symphony that has been called the greatest work in the repertoire.

The famous four-note theme forms almost the sole basis of the first movement of this piece. Beethoven's skill at development and economy of source material are demonstrated in music that is as dramatic as anything that an orchestra can play. The second movement is a gentle, welcome relief from the fierce intensity that precedes it. The third is built roughly in the form used by Mozart and Haydn in their symphonies, but the character of the first section is unlike anything those earlier composers would ever use in a middle movement. The third movement leads straight into the last movement without a break. Here trombones are heard in symphonic music for the first time in the sound of pure triumph and joy.

Notes by R. M. Teplitz