

# MSO

## EARS WIDE OPEN: DEBUSSY'S FAUN

22 OCTOBER 2018

**Melbourne Symphony Orchestra**

**Tianyi Lu** conductor / presenter

**Debussy** *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*

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### **TIANYI LU**

**CONDUCTOR / PRESENTER**

Tianyi Lu is active as a guest conductor in the UK, Europe, USA, Australia and New Zealand. She is the Cybec Assistant Conductor of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, Principal Conductor of the St. Woolos Sinfonia, and was recently a Dudamel Fellow with the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra. She has worked with the Hallé Orchestra, Dallas Opera Orchestra, Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra and was an active participant in Daniele Gatti's masterclasses with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra in June 2018. Upcoming highlights include a Sidney Myer Free Concert with the MSO and debuts with the Gulbenkian Orchestra, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, the Bucharest Radio Symphony Orchestra and the Ulster Orchestra.

Tianyi Lu works closely with Sir Andrew Davis in Melbourne, and has recently assisted Gustavo Dudamel, Susanna Mälkki and Matthias Pintscher in the USA. In previous masterclass and assistant roles, she has been mentored

by conductors including Carlo Rizzi, Bernard Haitink in the Lucerne Festival Masterclass, Sir Mark Elder and the Hallé Orchestra and Thomas Søndergård and Xian Zhang with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales. In 2014 she was voted a finalist at the 'Interaktion Dirigentenwerkstatt des Kritischen Orchesters' by players from the Berlin Philharmonic and other professional orchestras in Germany.

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**See Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* performed as part of French Classics on 23-26 November at Arts Centre, Hamer Hall.**

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## CLAUDE DEBUSSY

(1862–1918)

### *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (*Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*)

Stéphane Mallarmé's 1876 eclogue *L'après-midi d'un faune* is a monument of symbolist poetry, reflecting in its sumptuous but fragmentary language the erotic fantasies of a drowsy faun – a mythical half-man, half-goat – on a hot, languid Sicilian afternoon. Running like a thread through the imagery of fruit and flowers and naked nymphs are references to music, specifically to the syrinx. This instrument, the 'pan-pipes', was fashioned by the god Pan from reeds into which a young nymph, desperate to escape his amorous attentions, had been transformed.

One such reference, to the syrinx's 'sonorous, airy, monotonous line', would become the kernel of Debussy's musical rendering of the poem. Inviting Mallarmé to hear the work in 1894, he described 'the arabesque which...I believe to have been dictated by the flute of your faun'.

In fact the work's genesis was in a proposal by Mallarmé to present a staged version of his poem at an avant-garde theatre in 1891. The project fell through, but Debussy's imagination had been whetted. The orchestral piece that finally appeared made an immediate and positive impact with the audience, if not the critics, and may be said to be Debussy's breakthrough work. In 1912 it was choreographed and danced by Nijinsky, whose erotic performance caused one of those typically Parisian fracas.

The first phrase of the solo flute arabesque with which the piece begins has rightly been described as a founding moment in modern music. Its chromatic, rhythmically ambiguous line traces and retraces the

equally ambiguous interval of the tritone: like the material elsewhere in the work that is derived from the whole-tone scale, it is in no clearly discernible key, as is shown by the varied ways in which it is harmonised on its subsequent reappearances. The second half of the melody provides more 'conventional' motifs that are taken up from time to time by the rest of the orchestra.

Mallarmé's poem rhymes, but otherwise avoids traditional forms or a narrative line; similarly, Debussy's piece avoids the goal-directed development and tonal architecture that informs 19th-century symphonism. As Pierre Boulez puts it, 'What was overthrown was not so much the art of development as the very concept of form itself.' Musical events, like the vivid splashes of colour that first answer the flute, are there for the immediate pleasure they give; climaxes are approached by simple repetition of motifs; the most extended melody is a richly scored, Massenet-like tune at the work's midpoint, accompanied by layered, rocking ostinatos.

The faun's dream is overcome by sleep and the 'proud silence of noon', and the piece ends with flutes, muted horns and the glitter of harp and antique cymbals, fading to nothingness.

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The Melbourne Symphony Orchestra first performed this work on 12 September 1940 under conductor Sir Bernard Heinze, and most recently in October 2014 with Benjamin Northey.