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*Debussy & Fin-de-siècle France*  
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### ***Commonalities Between Mallarmé, Debussy, and their L'Après-midi d'un Faune***

In France, at the turn of the century, the arts were being pushed into new directions. Styles were changing. The straightforward, meticulous ways of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were quickly evolving into something more figurative and suggestive. Revolutionaries such as Mallarmé and Debussy were taking a much more symbolic approach to their art. Mallarmé's poem, *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, and Debussy's *Prélude* by the same name, as well as the words and action of these two artists, can be compared to help create a bit of an understanding as to how art transitioned from the romantic styles of Wagner, Goya, and Poe into the diversities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Mallarmé often wrote about his style as well as the styles of others. It was his belief that the reader should have to pull meaning out of words. An idea should never be directly handed to the reader. This in-depth style can sometimes make for a seemingly impenetrable piece of work, but to Mallarmé, it is the ultimate form of art. This different way of viewing art consumed the impressionistic period of his time. Debussy shared this same way of creating his art. In a conversation between Debussy and his former master, Ernest Guiraud, Guiraud asks about an ideal poet. Debussy answers by telling him that an ideal poet is "one who only hints at what is to be said". He goes on to say "one can travel where one wishes and leave by any door" when referring to a seemingly random cluster of notes he played on the piano<sup>1</sup>. This idea of implied meanings is common between Debussy and Mallarmé and is eminently noticeable in much of their work.

Debussy mastered this implicative style with his musical rendition of Mallarmé's *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*. The rhythm of both the poem and Debussy's *Prélude* is inconsistent and constantly moving. In the conversation between Guiraud and Debussy mentioned earlier Debussy states, "It is nonsense to speak of 'simple' and 'composed' time. There should be an interminable flow of them both without seeking to bury the rhythmic patterns". His *Prélude* is a perfect example of these words. Time seems to stop altogether in several sections of his work. Between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> measures of *Prélude a L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, the rhythmic flow of the piece changes so frequently that it seems to disappear all together. Mallarmé's poem often does the same. For example, Mallarmé writes...

*"But the other, all in sighs, you say, compares  
To a hot wind through the fleece that blows at noon?  
No! through the motionless and weary swoon  
Of stifling heat that suffocates the morning..."*

While the form of both the poem (110 lines) and the *Prélude* (110 measures) are completely arguable, most can agree that both were written in an "arch-form" with a

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from Maurice Emmanuel's *Notes on Debussy's Conversations with Ernest Guiraud, 1890*.

forward progression towards the middle of the piece at the climax and a downward motion to the end. Mallarmé's poem begins in a dreamlike confused state of waking and gradually moves to a much more conscious and confident state before returning to a drowsy confused state again. By studying the motifs, rhythms, and dynamics of Debussy's *Prélude*, we can make the same assumption as to the form.

Although, it is not likely that Debussy translated Mallarmé's poem into music line by line; at the very least, the over all feelings of the poem can be heard in the music. There is an obvious connection between lines 48 and 50 of the poem...

“That, purged of all ordinary fantasies  
Of back or breast—incessant shapes that rise  
In blindness...”

...and the *rising* motion that begins in the strings in measure 48 and moves to the clarinet in 51 ending its ascension directly at 55; the climax and halfway point of the piece. Between lines 52 and 61 the faun is pleading for the nymphs to return so that he can discover that what was potentially a dream was in fact reality. This correlates directly to the events of Debussy's *Prélude* between measures 52 and 63. The listener gets a liberating, safe sense that everything might turn out okay at this point in both the poem and piece. The music directly leads into a beautiful melody where the strings are reminiscent of the new motif discovered in the woodwinds at the climax in measure 55. Around both line and measure 62, there is a huge change in dynamic in the poem and *Prélude*. The faun tells of a beautiful memory of coming across the two nymphs. This section of the poem, written in italics to symbolize a memory, describes the feeling the faun has been longing to achieve. He then, of course, falls back into confusion wondering whether or not he really felt these feelings and witnessed these nymphs. This section of the poem is portrayed beautifully beginning at measure 63 of the *Prélude*. The segment between measures 63 and 74 has its own arch-form within the piece. There is a build up to the center that then falls off back into nothingness when the faun's confusion returns.

Following the climax, the faun slowly loses touch with reality and gets lost in confusion before falling asleep again. In the *Prélude*, the same thing occurs with the dynamics and motifs that present themselves again as they did earlier in the piece. The downward motion of the harp in measure 106, outlining a perfect fourth, begins a resolution in the *Prélude*. This perfect fourth contrasts the outlined tritones used commonly throughout the piece. The following measure features the horns playing a line similar to the main motif of the piece that normally outlines a tritone. This time, it is a third. The tritone that helped create such a confusing feeling throughout the piece is absent from the resolution with the exception of the second to last measure. Debussy quietly sneaks the outline of a diminished chord with the tri-tone between an A# and E natural into the violin. A perfect resolution to coincide with the faun falling asleep as the confusion fades away.

These symbolic beliefs shared by Mallarmé and Debussy helped pave the way for music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Symbolism liberated art and music while helping define an artistic era.