

HILTON HEAD SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
PROGRAM NOTES: APRIL 26, 2021 ORCHESTRA SERIES CONCERT

Claude Debussy – Danses sacrée et profane

The harp, in various forms, has been a part of Western music for centuries. However, it was not until the 19th Century that makers began tackling the difficult problem of enabling a harp to play all chromatic pitches found in Western music. The design that ultimately prevailed, known as the double-action pedal harp, has a complex internal mechanical system that raises or lowers each pitch by a semitone. In other words, each string can produce three different pitches; either a natural note, a sharp note, or a flat note.

There was one company, however, that came up with a different solution – Pleyel, the instrument manufacturer. Their idea was simply to have a separate string for each pitch and to attach them in a criss-crossed pattern. Pleyel, in an effort to promote the instrument, commissioned Debussy to compose a piece showcasing the harp. Thus, in 1904 Debussy finished his *Danses sacrée et profane*, premiering it later that year in Paris.

Although there are two contrasting dances, they are traditionally performed as a seamless whole without a break. The first dance represents Heaven, ethereal with a melodic movement like that of Gregorian chant. The second dance brings us down to Earth with a waltz. Yet it is a gradual transformation, with the orchestra using mutes and the rhythms softened by “mushy” bowstrokes known as *portato*. The melody and rhythm are reminiscent of Eric Satie’s *Gymnopédies*, although there is no concrete evidence that Debussy was intentionally inspired by those pieces. Throughout the work one can hear Debussy’s unique approach to harmony, with parallel movement and extra notes thrown in to create a richer sound.

Richard Wagner – Siegfried Idyll

Wagner composed *Siegfried Idyll* as a birthday gift for his beloved wife, Cosima, in 1870. He actually hired 13 players to come to Tribschen, their home in Lucerne, and serenade her on the main stairs. The original title was “Tribschen Idyll with Fidi’s birdsong and the orange sunrise, as symphonic birthday greeting.” Fidi was their pet name for recently born son Siegfried. While the “Tribschen Idyll” was certainly an intimate and very personal piece, in 1878 Wagner, needing some immediate cash, sold the work to the publisher Schott, expanding it into the Mozartean orchestra with which it usually is performed.

This piece shares many themes with the opera *Siegfried*, including: the pastoral melody of the wood bird, the heroic horn call of Siegfried, Brünnhilde’s pensive thoughts in Act III, and the bold descending interval sequence from the end of the opera. There is also a lullaby theme which is introduced by the oboe. It is easy for a concertgoer to think of Wagner as a composer of huge, bombastic music (*Ride of the Valkyries* comes to mind!) but *Siegfried Idyll* clearly shows him capable of some of the most tender and sweet music of the 19th century. Also featured in this piece is his propensity for complex rhythms in his melodies.

Maurice Ravel – Introduction and Allegro

As Pleyel was promoting its larger harp with chromatic strings, the Érard company (known for its pianos) developed the double-action pedal harp. They also felt the best way to increase sales was to commission a work by a major composer, in this case Maurice Ravel. In 1905, he composed the *Introduction and Allegro* for harp, flute, clarinet and string quartet, completing it in a remarkably short amount of time because he was eager to go on a boating holiday with friends! Later on, Ravel made a version of the piece for two pianos.

The Introduction is quite short (only 26 measures) and ends with a rising flurry of notes in arpeggios from all 7 players. The harp then launches straight into the Allegro using the same melody heard in the Introduction. Using traditional sonata form, Ravel leads into a second theme in the woodwinds. As he loves doing in many of his works, Ravel presents his melodies in an ever-changing combination of instruments and almost always in octaves. Near the end of the development, the harp embarks on an extensive cadenza featuring a marvelous use of harmonics, that special technique creating notes an octave higher and which seem to “ping” into existence. Surely the Érard company would have been thrilled with such a display of its new instrument. The piece wraps up with yet another round of arpeggios from all the players in a refined flourish.

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