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Debussy Quartet

Claude-Achille Debussy was no academic. Fed up with the rigors of conservatory training, he longed to compose in a style that was distinctly French, as opposed to the more Germanic intellectual and aesthetic ideals of his teachers. He was very much involved with the artistic currents of his time in his native country, especially Symbolism in poetry and in the visual arts. Attention was being shifted from concrete meanings and associations with reality toward meanings of a different sort. Symbolist art was to be understood as metaphorical and suggestive, pointing toward truths inaccessible through direct description. Thus a poet such as Mallarmé or Verlaine could shift attention toward sounds of words and mystical images -- a new, more purely sensual poetry. The painter Odilon Redon, who had enormous appreciation for Debussy, might depict a giant eyeball aloft in the manner of a hot air balloon (or a cactus-man, or a crying spider) and in doing so shift the viewer's understanding toward the exotic world of fantasy and the quirks of free association. Symbols, no longer referencing or tethering us to reality, were set free to engage our senses in new, foreign ways. Historically the symbolist movement was a precursor to surrealism, and entering the dream world of later surrealist painters is not entirely divorced from the feeling of listening to Debussy's music. Even within received forms there is often a sense of following the dictates of free-association rather than consciously constructed architecture.

Ironically, exoticism and what we now call "world music" furnished a large part of Debussy's vocabulary in his quest to create something distinctly French. A Javanese gamelan (a sort of colorful percussion orchestra) performance at the Paris exposition in 1889 left a strong impression on the composer, as did the music he came to know on a trip to Russia. Debussy's creed was that French music should above all else exist to give pleasure, and the flavors of foreign lands were exploited for their sensual novelty, in the manner of the best fusion cuisine.

Debussy's String Quartet in g minor, written in 1893, has become one of the most beloved in the repertoire partly because of the stunning sensual beauty and variety of textures Debussy manages to create with these four homogeneous string instruments. The sounds he creates flutter and undulate; his harmonic language is often iridescent. Turner was one of Debussy's favorite painters, and the sense of motion and activity one sees in Turner's skies and seas has aural analogues in so many moments of this piece.

The piece has as well a dramatic arc reminiscent of an epic journey in that one 'motto theme,' proclaimed boldly at the opening of the piece, appears throughout in different guises and in a variety of settings. This theme is transformed rather than developed in the traditional sense. Because of this a listener may feel he is following a protagonist through travels in unexpected lands, in the manner of Homer's *Odyssey* or, to get back to France, Voltaire's *Candide*.

As any hero feels on his home turf, the initial statement of the theme is forthright and self-assured, but it quickly slips away into uncharted territory. Already after its first encounter with alien material the theme is more uncertain, modulating through various key areas looking for a way to understand new surroundings. Often one recognizes the theme in flight, or at sea, in transition from one experience to the next; other times it is self-assured again, as if settled in a new territory, albeit temporarily. The first movement ends with a furiously brilliant version of the motto theme in double notes, fully mobilized, in contrast to its more stable, if full of potential, version at the opening.

The scherzo movement features many new versions of this theme: one playful and jaunty which becomes an ostinato background, a more seductive, drawn-out version, plus a bravura, declamatory version on the lowest string of the first violin. This last, somewhat unexpected, version is perhaps a tip of the hat to Eugene Ysaye, the great Belgian violinist whose eponymous quartet premiered the work. Besides partaking, with its pizzicati and repeated ostinato patterns, of the flavor of the Javanese gamelan, this movement also has a somewhat Iberian character, with rhythms and guitar-strums suggestive of flamenco.

The thoroughly enchanting slow movement is the only one in the work not truly having a version of the motto theme. Here, instead, there is an encounter with the new, the other. In the same key (very distant from the opening key of the work) and meter as the corresponding, and likewise profoundly eloquent, movement of Beethoven's last quartet, Op. 135, this movement also starts out with exploratory bars leading into a broad, poetic theme. This, plus the addition of mutes, gives a distant, introspective quality to the movement. The only reference to the motto theme is in the build-up to the climax in the contrasting middle section, where the quick three-note turn of the theme helps to propel the motion forward, perhaps another possible, yet somehow impossible, transformation of the hero as seen only in a dream. When the opening theme returns it is with a foreign note left over in the cello, suggesting that that which has been imagined and yearned for is not to be had in the end. The movement closes with an endlessly touching, ethereal sense of floating free from any

reality-based problems, content and absorbed in a glowing vision.

The most uncertain part of the piece is the start of the last movement, for, while basking in the glow of a peaceful vision is pleasurable and liberating, eventually there is the moment of awakening. Here we have the return of the motto theme, chords that slip languidly, even groggily, and a section that builds up steam with the main theme gathering momentum to lead into the main section of the movement proper. There is a sense of preparing for a homecoming, the recounting of adventures, and there are two major climaxes both featuring the motto theme in full splendor. When the pace quickens twice as the piece nears its conclusion there is a sense of great excitement and triumph. The hero has returned home, and this home is now bright with the possibilities of lessons won through experience, now in G major rather than g minor as it was at the start.

Note by Mark Steinberg