

Faun, Asylum, and a Sacrifice

Saturday, December 19, 2026 · 15:30 · Musikverein
Klaus Mäkelä, conductor

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	DEBUSSY 1862–1918 <i>Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune, L. 86</i>	10'
2	ADÈS b. 1971 <i>Asyla, Op. 17</i>	25'
3	STRAVINSKY 1882–1971 <i>The Rite of Spring (Le Sacre du printemps)</i>	33'
TOTAL MUSIC		68'

Claude Debussy

1862–1918

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune, L. 86

10 minutes

THE COMPOSER

Claude Debussy, born in Saint-Germain-en-Laye in 1862 to a family of modest means, entered the Paris Conservatoire at the age of ten and spent the next decade exasperating his professors with chords that broke every rule. He won the Prix de Rome in 1884, endured (resentfully) the obligatory residence at the Villa Medici in Rome, and then set about quietly dismantling the foundations of nineteenth-century music. With the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894), the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902), and *La Mer* (1905), he created a new musical language, built on colour, atmosphere, and suggestion rather than Germanic development, that made him the single most influential composer of the early twentieth century. Critics called the style 'impressionism,' borrowing the term from painting; Debussy himself detested the label, insisting he was striving for precision, not haze. He died in Paris in March 1918, while the city was under German bombardment in the final year of the First World War.

ABOUT THE WORK

When Claude Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* was first heard in Paris on 22 December 1894, few in the hall can have grasped that they were present at one of the genuine turning points in the history of music. The conductor Pierre Boulez would later claim, with only mild exaggeration, that modern music was awakened by this

Prélude, and it is easy to hear why: here, in barely ten minutes of shimmering sound, the rigid grammar of nineteenth-century harmony quietly dissolved and something new began. The piece is short, languid, and apparently effortless, yet almost nothing in it behaves as a textbook would predict: keys melt into one another, the beat floats free of any insistent pulse, and the orchestra is treated less as a machine for building climaxes than as a palette of colours to be blended and dissolved.

Debussy wrote the work as a response to a poem, Stéphane Mallarmé's *L'après-midi d'un faune* (1876), a dense and sensuous piece of Symbolist verse in which a faun, drowsing in the heat of a Sicilian afternoon, half-remembers (or perhaps only dreams) an erotic encounter with fleeing nymphs, unsure where reverie ends and reality begins. Debussy originally conceived a larger triptych (a *Prélude*, an *Interlude*, and a *Paraphrase finale*) but in the end distilled everything into the single *Prélude*. He insisted that the music was not a literal narration of the poem but rather 'a very free illustration' of it, 'a succession of scenes through which pass the desires and dreams of the faun in the heat of the afternoon.' Mallarmé, initially wary of having his poem set to music at all, was won over at the premiere: he wrote to Debussy that he had come out of the concert 'deeply moved', and that the music went further than his text, 'into nostalgia and into light'.

The sound world Debussy summoned was new. He drew on a modest orchestra, woodwinds prominent, brass restrained, with antique cymbals and two harps lending an antique, dappled glow, and he asked the players for a transparency and suppleness of phrasing that few European orchestras of the day could provide. The exotic whole-tone and modal inflections, the parallel chords moving in defiance of conventional voice-leading, the refusal of a strong cadence until the very end: all of this gave the music a sensuous ambiguity that listeners had not encountered before. Within a generation it was recognised as a landmark, and it remains, perhaps, the single most influential short work of the modern orchestral repertoire.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Everything begins with the flute. Alone and unaccompanied, it traces a sinuous, chromatic line that slips downward and curls back on itself, suspended over silence with no clear sense of key or metre: the faun stirring in the afternoon heat. This melody is

the seed of the whole piece; listen for how it returns again and again, each time reharmonised, recoloured, handed to different instruments, never quite the same twice.

Notice how Debussy avoids momentum of the old kind. There are no driving sequences, no hammered climaxes building inexorably to a peak; instead the music drifts, pools, and evaporates, its phrases ending in soft exhalations rather than firm cadences. The harp glissandos and the antique cymbals' delicate, ringing strokes add a glint of cool light to the warm woodwind colours.

There is one moment of fuller feeling: roughly midway, the strings rise into a broad, ardent melody, the closest the piece comes to passion, before it too subsides back into reverie. Toward the end, the muted horns and a last appearance of the flute theme bring the music to a hushed, suspended close, the antique cymbals chiming faintly as the faun sinks back into sleep. Let the piece wash over you rather than tracking signposts; its whole art lies in seeming to have no edges at all.

Thomas Adès

25 minutes

b. 1971

Asyla, Op. 17

THE COMPOSER

Thomas Adès, born in London in 1971, is among the most celebrated composers of his generation, a triple threat who is also a formidable pianist and conductor. He studied piano and composition, read music at King's College, Cambridge, and emerged in the 1990s with a series of works whose technical command and vivid imagination made an immediate impression. His breakthrough came young: the orchestral work *Asyla* (1997), written for Simon Rattle and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, won the Grawemeyer Award in 2000, making Adès its youngest-ever recipient. His operas have been particularly admired: *Powder Her Face* (1995), with its scandalous subject and dazzling score; *The Tempest* (2004), after Shakespeare; and *The Exterminating Angel* (2016), after Buñuel. The last two have both been staged at the Royal Opera House and the Metropolitan Opera. Adès's music is marked by glittering, intricate orchestration, a fascination with dance rhythms and mechanical processes, harmonies that hover between tonality and dissonance, and a wit that can turn suddenly to menace or grief. He was artistic director of the Aldeburgh Festival from 1999 to 2008 and later the Boston Symphony Orchestra's first artistic partner, conducting both his own music and a wide repertoire, and he is often placed in the English line that runs through Britten.

ABOUT THE WORK

Thomas Adès was twenty-six when he completed *Asyla* in 1997, on a commission from the John Feeney Charitable Trust for the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and its young music director Simon Rattle. The premiere, in Birmingham that October under Rattle, was an immediate sensation; Rattle thought so highly of the piece that he chose it for his inaugural concert as chief conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic in 2002, an extraordinary vote of confidence in a composer barely past thirty. In 2000 *Asyla* won the University of Louisville's Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition, and it has since been performed across the world, the work that established Adès as a major orchestral voice.

The title is a deliberate puzzle. 'Asyla' is the plural of 'asylum', a word that carries two opposed meanings in English. An asylum is a place of refuge and safety; it is also, in older usage, a place of confinement for the insane. Adès plays on both senses at once. The four movements explore different kinds of sanctuary and different kinds of madness, places one might flee to and places one might be locked into. The ambiguity is the point: shelter and incarceration, peace and derangement, are never far apart, and the music slips between them.

Adès scored the work for a large orchestra deployed with characteristic ingenuity, including an array of tuned and untuned percussion and, strikingly, an upright piano tuned a quarter-tone flat, which lends certain passages an eerie, out-of-true shimmer, as if the music were sounding through warped glass. His orchestration throughout is brilliant and unconventional: bass oboe, cowbells, and a battery of metallic percussion sit alongside the conventional forces, producing textures that gleam, clatter, and dissolve in ways that recall both the precision of a machine and the disorientation of a dream.

The most famous movement is the third, marked 'Ecstasio,' an unabashed evocation of a techno nightclub: the relentless four-on-the-floor pulse, the build-ups and drops, the chemical euphoria of dance music transmuted into orchestral terms. It is at once exhilarating and faintly sinister, a portrait of communal release that is also a kind of mass trance, and it remains one of the most arresting things any composer has done with the orchestra in recent decades. Around it the other three movements offer their own asylums (uneasy calm, frantic energy, and a final, hard-won quiet), making *Asyla* a compact symphony for the turn of the millennium.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Asyla unfolds in four movements that together form a single arc. The first opens with delicate, glinting percussion and that quarter-tone-flat upright piano, establishing a soundworld of bells, tuned metals, and uncertain tuning; listen for how the music seems to assemble itself out of glittering fragments, tentative and searching, before gathering into something more urgent.

The second movement is the work's slow heart: brooding, lyrical, dominated by a long, keening melody on the bass oboe, an instrument so rarely heard that its dark, plangent voice is unmistakable. There is grief here, and a strange tenderness, the sound of a refuge that is also a confinement.

The third movement, 'Ecstasio,' is the one to wait for. Out of nothing a pounding dance beat materialises, four square beats to the bar, and the orchestra is transformed into a vast nightclub: synthesised-sounding riffs, surging crescendos, sudden 'drops,' the whole machinery of techno rendered by acoustic instruments. It is thrilling and a little frightening, euphoria with an edge of loss of control.

The finale brings the comedown. The dance dissolves, and the music gropes its way back toward stillness, recalling fragments of earlier movements before settling into a fragile, exhausted calm. Listen for the way Adès lets the brilliance ebb away, ending not in triumph but in a quiet that feels both like sanctuary and like emptiness: the two faces of asylum, held in balance to the last.

Igor Stravinsky

1882–1971

The Rite of Spring (Le Sacre du printemps)

THE COMPOSER

Igor Stravinsky was, more than any other figure, the composer who reinvented twentieth-century music, and he did it three times. Born near St. Petersburg in 1882, he came to international fame in his late twenties through his collaborations with the impresario Sergei Diaghilev, whose Ballets Russes commissioned the three early scores (*The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *The Rite of Spring*) that made Stravinsky perhaps the most talked-about composer alive. The 1913 Paris premiere of *The Rite of Spring* provoked a near-riot and changed the course of music history.

33 minutes

Then, almost as soon as he had perfected the explosive, primitivist style of his early ballets, Stravinsky abandoned it. From 1920 onward he spent some three decades writing music in what came to be called his “neoclassical” period: works of cool elegance, reduced forces, and sly references to the music of the past. After the Second World War, he reinvented himself yet again, embracing the rigorous serial techniques pioneered by Arnold Schoenberg and his school. Few composers have demonstrated such restless, lifelong curiosity.

ABOUT THE WORK

No single work did more to define the sound of the twentieth century than Igor Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*. Its premiere, given by Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris on 29 May 1913, has become the most famous scandal in the history of music: from almost the first bars the audience erupted, partisans of the new work shouting down its detractors, laughter and jeering rising to such a pitch that the dancers reportedly could not hear the orchestra, and the choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky stood in the wings bellowing the counts to keep them together. Whether there was an actual riot or merely an uproar has been debated ever since, but the symbolic force of the evening is undeniable: it marked the moment when modernism announced itself in the concert hall with shocking violence.

The work was conceived as a ballet, subtitled ‘Pictures of Pagan Russia in Two Parts,’ and grew out of a vision Stravinsky said came to him while completing *The Firebird*: an imagined ancient rite in which a young girl is chosen and made to dance herself to death as a sacrifice to the god of spring. Working with the painter and folklorist Nicholas Roerich, who designed the production and helped shape its scenario, Stravinsky drew on folk melodies (the opening bassoon tune comes from an anthology of Lithuanian folk songs) and on an idea of primeval ritual, fashioning from them a score of unprecedented rhythmic ferocity. Nijinsky’s choreography, with its turned-in feet, stamping, and convulsive movements, deliberately repudiated the grace of classical ballet, matching the music’s primitivism.

What so shocked the first listeners was above all the rhythm. Stravinsky unleashed irregular, hammering accents that fell where the ear least expected them, metres that changed almost bar by bar, and dissonances stacked into pounding blocks of sound. He treated the large orchestra, swollen with extra woodwind and brass and a battery of percussion, as a vast rhythmic engine, capable of both delicate, archaic colourings and overwhelming brutality. Beneath the chaos lay rigorous construction: the score is built from short, obsessively repeated cells that accumulate and collide, a technique that would influence

composers for generations. Within a decade the riot was forgotten and the music had triumphed; today The Rite of Spring is among the most performed and recorded of all orchestral scores, as thrilling in the concert hall as it once was scandalous in the theatre.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The Rite falls into two parts. Part One, 'The Adoration of the Earth,' opens with one of the strangest sounds in the repertoire: a solo bassoon, pushed to the very top of its register, spinning out an archaic, plaintive folk-like melody that seems to come from before history. Around it other woodwinds gather, the texture thickening into a dawn chorus of birdcalls and twittering, until the orchestra abruptly cuts off.

Then comes the moment everyone remembers: the 'Augurs of Spring,' where the strings, reinforced by horns, pound out a single dissonant chord again and again, with savage, irregular accents stamping down where you do not expect them. This relentless rhythmic violence is the heart of the work; let the displaced accents knock you off balance, as they are meant to. Listen, too, for the way Stravinsky builds from short repeated fragments (a tune, a rhythm, a gesture), layering and colliding them rather than developing them in the old symphonic way.

Part Two, 'The Sacrifice,' begins in mystery, a cold and shadowy nocturnal landscape, before mounting through the 'Glorification of the Chosen One' toward its terrifying climax. The work ends with the 'Sacrificial Dance,' in which the chosen maiden dances herself to death: a movement of jagged, convulsive rhythms in constantly shifting metres, almost impossible to count, driving to a final, shattering orchestral lurch, a single brutal chord that drops like an axe. After it, silence.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Thomas Adès: Full of Noises: Conversations with Tom Service**

Thomas Adès, Tom Service, Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2013

Adès in conversation with Tom Service about how he composes, a direct way into the sound world of Asyla.

ACCESSIBLE **The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century** *Alex Ross, Picador 2008*

Ross's history of twentieth-century music covers Debussy's Paris and gives a vivid account of the riotous 1913 premiere of The Rite of Spring.

DEEPER **Stravinsky: The Rite of Spring**

Peter Hill, Cambridge University Press 2000

A Cambridge Music Handbook on The Rite of Spring, covering its creation, its famous premiere and the music section by section.

SOURCES

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4. Prelude to The Afternoon of a Faun, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/prelude-to-the-afternoon-of-a-faun>
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6. Thomas Adès, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Ad%C3%A8s
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8. Asyla, Thomas Adès (programme note), Hollywood Bowl / Los Angeles Philharmonic. <https://www.hollywoodbowl.com/musicdb/pieces/1040/asyla>
9. The Rite of Spring, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rite_of_Spring
10. Stravinsky: The Rite of Spring, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/the-rite-of-spring>
11. Thomas Adès: Full of Noises: Conversations with Tom Service, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780374534011>
12. The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780312427719>
13. Stravinsky: The Rite of Spring, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521627146>



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