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By Noel Morris ©2026

DEBUSSY *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune*

In 1889, an astonishing 32 million visitors traveled to Paris to attend a world's fair. The Exposition Universelle celebrated advancements in science, culture, and technology. There were pavilions dedicated to machines, electricity, and a new invention called the telephone. A tower constructed by Gustave Eiffel offered unprecedented views, aided by a lift designed by the American company Otis Elevator. Countries from around the world came together, although there were conspicuous absences. Because the Exposition celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Storming of the Bastille, the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy, and Russia boycotted the fair — they still had functioning monarchies. In essence, they represented the “old,” while the Expo represented the “new.”

Debussy had entered the Paris Conservatory at age ten and stayed for eleven years, thus beginning a sometimes bumpy relationship with formal music education. He, too, clashed with the old guard. When he won the prestigious Prix de Rome in 1884, he faced a similar problem in Italy. Traveling to Rome for further studies, he couldn't find it within himself to get excited about Italian opera — much to his teachers' frustration. Ultimately, he found the home he'd been searching for in the creative hothouse of Paris.

During the 1889 Exposition Universelle, the 27-year-old composer spent time in the Javanese pavilion, where he fell under the spell of the gamelan, a percussion ensemble in which performers drum on a battery of pitched, bell-like instruments. As the gamelan does not adhere to Western scales, structures, or principles of tuning, the experience proved liberating for Debussy and had a lasting influence on his music.

After his return from Rome, he fell into a group of intellectuals who gathered on Tuesday evenings at the home of Stéphane Mallarmé. Self-titled Les Mardistes, this group included W. B. Yeats, Paul Verlaine, and Rainer Maria Rilke.

In 1894, Debussy completed his masterpiece *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* based on a poem of the same name by Mallarmé. Unlike earlier 19th-century composers, Debussy's piece is not so much storytelling as an impression of the mythical faun (a half-human, half-goat), as depicted in the dream-like language of the Symbolist poem.

“The majority of his compositions are symbols of symbols,” wrote his longtime friend Paul Dukas in 1901, “expressed in a language so rich and so persuasive that it attains the eloquence of a new word, with its own laws, and often much more intelligible than the language of the poems on which it is based. Such is the case, for example, with *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*.”

Before the 1894 premiere of his *Prelude*, Debussy attended the rehearsals and made adjustments to his score through trial and error. The musicians happily played along, and that spirit of generosity spilled into the first performance.

“All at once I felt behind me, as some conductors can, an audience that was totally spellbound,” wrote the first conductor Gustave Doret. “It was a complete triumph, and I had no hesitation in breaking the rule forbidding encores. The orchestra was delighted to repeat this work, which it had come to love and which, thanks to them, the audience had now accepted.”

SIBELIUS Violin Concerto

It was a brutal winter. Crops failed, and typhoid swept through the hospital wards of Hämeenlinna. Dr. Christian Sibelius worked tirelessly to save his patients until the plague caught up with him. He died, leaving behind crushing debt, a pregnant widow, and two kids.

Biographers argue that the fallout from Christian’s death left two-year-old Johan, or “Janne,” with permanent scars. Nevertheless, his extended family rallied around him. Janne attended good schools. He spent many happy hours exploring the forests around the family home. Musically, Aunt Julia gave him piano lessons, and Uncle Pehr gave him his first violin. Young Sibelius formed a piano trio with his siblings and wrote music for them to play.

“I wanted to be a celebrated violinist at any price,” said the composer. With his uncle’s blessing, he started lessons in 1881. While still a student, he took the name “Jean” after his father’s brother. Finally, he took an audition with the Vienna Philharmonic — it didn’t work out. “It was a very painful awakening when I had to admit that I had begun my training for the exacting career of a virtuoso too late.”

His personal “tragedy,” as he called it, was Finland’s gain. Without the distraction of violin practice, Sibelius became a composer. He wrote patriotic music that supercharged the Finnish struggle for independence from Russia, and his government awarded him a lifetime pension.

Unfortunately, his outward success — a devoted wife, beautiful daughters, and an international career — belied his reality. Sibelius overindulged, and his hero’s pension couldn’t keep up with his bar tab.

He wrote his only violin concerto for the German virtuoso Willy Bermester, who got the short end of the stick in this story. Bermester was a phenomenal player who inspired a concerto of sizzling virtuosity. However, the composer needed quick cash, so he moved the premiere from Berlin to Helsinki and settled on a lesser player. It didn’t go well. Sibelius revised the concerto to its current form in 1905.

Musically, it’s easy to merge this music with impressions of the man who wrote it: a burning passion for the violin and the dark, snow-covered forests of the North — a quality that prompted Sir Donald Tovey to refer to the piece as a “polonaise for polar bears.”

Indeed. If the snowshoe fits...

HOVANESS Symphony No. 50

Alan Hovhaness wrote a staggering amount of music. In his 70s, alone, he wrote nearly 20 symphonies, including the Symphony No. 50.

A Massachusetts native, he was born Alan Vaness Chakmakjian to an Armenian father, Haroutioun Hovanes Chakmakjian.

"My family thought writing music was abnormal, so they would confiscate my music if they caught me in the act," he said. "I used to compose in the bathroom and hide the manuscripts under the bathtub."

In 1931, the composer picked up the surname Hovanes and eventually added the "h" to become "Hovhaness."

Two features of his long career fed into his 50th symphony — his love of mountains and his abiding fascination for non-Western music.

Early in his career, Hovhaness played organ at an Armenian church. "I was looking for a new direction that would be more expressive, and I found that direction in the church music of Armenian culture. That led me to a more ancient kind of Armenian music than 'folk music,' much of which has been tampered with," he said.

But it didn't end there. "Somehow, Armenian music led me to India when I heard the music of the dancer Uday Shankar, Ravi Shankar's brother, who brought along a group of musicians from India. This opened up a whole new world yet seemed very much related to the different modes of Armenian music."

Hovhaness then explored the traditional musics of Korea, China, and Japan. Meanwhile, he pumped out copious amounts of music, often with mystic titles, such as *Mysterious Mountain* (1955). Hovhaness wrote his Symphony No. 50 in 1982, while living in Seattle.

"When Mount St. Helens erupted on the morning of May 18, 1980, the sonic boom struck our south windows," he wrote. "Ashes did not come here at that time, but covered land to the east, all across the State of Washington into Montana. Ashes continued to travel all around the world, landing lightly on our house a week later, after their journey all around our planet. In my Mount St. Helens Symphony, I have tried to suggest a musical tribute to the sublime grandeur and beauty of Mount St. Helens and the surrounding majestic Cascade Mountains." The three-movement symphony forms the "before and after" of that cataclysmic event.

Mount St. Helens had been a pristine wilderness area and a popular destination for camping, hiking, fishing, and other activities. The explosion, which was equivalent to 25,000 Hiroshima-era atomic bombs, incinerated pine forests, flattened and fashioned topography, and filled Spirit Lake with debris and toxic ooze. The explosive music of the third movement takes us to that day when the destructive and constructive forces of nature served up an epic reminder: we are but humble passengers on planet Earth.