

# Listening Guide

## Debussy: *Prelude to "The Afternoon of a Faun"* (*Prélude à "L'après-midi d'un faune"*)

**DATE OF WORK:** 1894

**GENRE:** Symphonic poem

**ORCHESTRA:** Strings (with 2 harps), flute, oboes, English horn, clarinets, French horns, and antique cymbals

**BASIS:** Symbolist poem by Stéphane Mallarmé

**FORM:** Free ternary (**A-B-A'**)

**WHAT TO LISTEN FOR:** Lyrical, sinuous melodies (opening is chromatic) that repeat. Rich instrumental color, with individual timbres that stand out against the orchestra; free-flowing rhythm gives a sense of floating. Loose 3-part (ternary, or **A-B-A'**) structure. Evocative mood that expresses the poem's sensuality. Emotional climax in middle section that peaks in range, dynamics, and textural density.

### Opening of poem:

#### TEXT

Ces nymphes, je les veux perpétuer.

Si clair

Leur incarnat léger, qu'il voltige dans l'air

Assoupi de sommeils touffus.

Amais-je un rêve?

Mon doute, amas de nuit ancienne, s'achève

En maint rameau subtil, qui, de meuré les vrais

Bois mêmes, prouve, hélas! que bien seul je

m'offrais

Pour triomphe la faute idéale de roses.

#### TRANSLATION

These nymphs I would perpetuate.

So light

their gossamer embodiment, floating on the air  
inert with heavy slumber.

Was it a dream I loved?

My doubting harvest of the bygone night ends  
in countless tiny branches; together remaining  
a whole forest, they prove, alas, that since I am  
alone,

my fancied triumph was but the ideal  
imperfection of roses.

Réfléchissons . . . ou si les femmes dont tu  
gloses  
Figurent un souhait de tes sens fabuleux!

Let us reflect . . . or suppose those women that  
you idolize  
were but imaginings of your fantastic lust!

### A Section

Opening chromatic melody in flute; passes from one instrument to another, accompanied  
by muted strings and vague beat:

*Très modéré*

*p doux et expressif*

*etc.*

### B Section

Clarinet introduces more animated idea, answered by rhythmic figure in cellos.

New theme, more animated rhythmically in solo oboe, builds in *crescendo*:

*doux et expressif*

*etc.*

Contrasting theme in woodwinds, then strings, with synco-pated rhythms, builds to climax:

*p* *expressif et très soutenu* *mf* *p*

*etc.*

### A' Section

Abridged return, in varied setting.