

AFTERNOON OF A FAUN

Debussy's Afternoon of a Faun was a landmark work in the history of music. It is a difficult piece to conduct on every level: sound, timbre, atmosphere, balance, pacing, to say nothing of good ensemble. The following article is a result of having conducted and taught this piece many times; each time has afforded me the opportunity to gather a little more experience and understanding of how to present it to the orchestra and the audience.

My preference is to meet with the principal flutist before the first rehearsal to discuss the opening phrase, and not to conduct until the 4th bar. I then lightly mark the 4th bar, and cue the winds on the 2nd beat.

The opening passage needs to be treated as a musical phrase, and not as an athletic event. If the flutist must breathe after the G in the 2nd bar, then so be it. If the player doesn't need to breathe at that point, then a breath after the B in the 4th bar works fine. Note that Debussy's tempo marking in the Norton Critical Edition is dotted quarter note = 44, which is quite a bit faster than usually played. However, this indication may be taken to at least assure that the tempo doesn't drag or is overly drawn out.

Bar 5, violins: I suggest placing the bow on the string during this bar to avoid doing it during the pause in bar 6.

Bar 8, first horn: breath after this bar

1 bar before #1, horns: don't drag this bar too much

#1, tutti: in 9 (subdivided 3), but a bit faster than the beginning. The subdivision should help the cellos as they change their notes

5 bars after #1, tutti: I go into 3 here, since there isn't anyone who needs subdividing

5 bars before #2, oboe: perhaps insert a crescendo here as in the clarinet and bassoons to accentuate the *p subito* in the following bar

2 bars before #2, tutti: starting less than forte makes for more effective swells.

1 bar before #2, horns: subdividing here helps the horns stop together

1 bar before #2, clarinet: connect to #2

#2, beats 1 and 2, harp: the first B of each group of 5 lands on each beat of the subdivision

#2, beat 4, flute: breath after the G

Second bar of #2, flute: notice that the first beat is diminution of the third bar of the piece

Second bar of #2, tutti: everyone lift at the end of this bar

3 bars after #2, harp: same comment as previously, except the first note of the quintuplet is A

4 bars after #2, tutti: perhaps a small pushing ahead

6 bars after #2, harp: same as before, on D

1 bar before #3, conduct very clearly for the second violins

1 bar before #3, be very clear for the clarinet and 3rd horn

#3, the feeling is a little anxious, unrest

#3, cellos: off the string. The tempo must be quick enough so that this articulation is not labored

Second bar of #3, I conduct in 3

3 bars after #3, I suggest stopping briefly on beat 3, and preparing the next bar with an eighth note, which enables the conductor to help the horns with their attack

1 bar before #4, I relax a bit into #4, which helps to change the mood

#4, perhaps a little faster

#4, first clarinet should change to B flat clarinet and transpose, since there isn't enough time to do so at #5

4 bars after #4, violins: this phrase is quite wonderful - start quietly, and add a small portamento from the B to the D. In the next bar, another down bow on the second 16th note of the third beat, with the first violins changing to the A string and the second violins changing to the D string. They then play the G sharp on an up bow which is slurred into the next bar with a lovely portamento and diminuendo

2 bars before #5, tutti: although the *en animant* isn't written until #5, I move these bars imperceptibly.

3 bars after #5, English horn and clarinets: this passage is marked *tres en dehors*, but often is covered. One possible aid would be to have the oboes double this part, with the second and third flutes holding the oboes notes for a dotted half note instead of the quarter notes that are in their parts. I haven't tried this, but maybe next time I will. I'm not in the habit of making changes of this nature in Debussy, but as this passage is so often covered, this alteration might help.

For the *retenu* into #6, I suggest relaxing into the tempo, not beyond it

#6, violins: I keep the two bars in one up bow, and the following two bars in one down bow. This bowing and pp enables the clarinet to be heard, although the clarinetist needs to project in this register to be heard.

5 bars after #6 is a hint of the glorious melody to come. I make sure that the last eighth note 6 bars after #6 is in no way rushed, and even stretched a bit.

The unrest at #7 may encourage a slight movement of the tempo for 2 bars only. However, the triplets 4 bars after #7 shouldn't be rushed, and actually a little stretched.

4 bars after #7, woodwinds and horns: don't rush the triplets; perhaps lean on the first note a tiny bit

For 5 bars after #7, the conductor must decide whether to keep the slurs as marked or play separate bow

The glorious melody at 5 bars after #7 is accompanied by an equally powerful accompaniment in the winds. The conductor must be very careful to listen to both elements, and stay in tempo so that the full sighing effect of the winds is maximized. Not only the first flute and clarinets, but also the 2nd and 3rd flutes and horns must play with a sighing sound that dies away on its second note or within the quarter note, with a resulting separation between the notes. As with the winds, strings must extend their last eighth note 6 bars after #7.

6 bars after #7, strings (minus basses): as with the winds earlier, broaden the last eighth note, with a portamento up to the B flat. I suggest slurring that note on a down bow into the first note of 7 bars after #7 to maximize the effect.

9 bars after #7, tutti: start quieter in order to build to fortissimo

6 bars before #8, first violins and cellos: still expressive, and then diminuendo to pianissimo; *cedez un peu* is found in the critical edition

3 bars before #8, clarinet and horns: echo

1 bar before #8, oboe, clarinet, and horns: echo

#8, tutti: let the tempo flow; poco crescendo 3 bars after #8

5 bars after #8, tutti: faster, stay in 4

1 bar before #9, strings: spiccato; last beat slightly held back

#9, oboe and harp: let the tempo flow; I do a slight broadening of the tempo and diminuendo toward the end of the second bar

5 bars after #9, tutti: as before, faster and stay in 4

1 bar before #10, clarinets and horn: I subdivide the last beat only, but subdividing the last 2 beats is also an option

#10, tutti: this phrase is difficult to control - I've changed my interpretation several times. At #10, I suggest doing the first 2 beats in quarter notes and subdividing the last 2 beats in triplets, then conducting at the same tempo in 4 for the following 5 bars. The piano subito in the 4th bar is very effective

2 bars and 1 bar before #11, tutti: in 12, with a click on beat 8 to help the flute and solo cello change together.

Second bar of #11, tutti: in 3

4 bars after #11, tutti: in 9, with the first violins and solo cello playing 2 against 3

#12, tutti: in 8

Second bar of #12: in 12 with a small click on the 5th eighth note to help the horns and first violins. Note that the 2 solo first violins don't play here, so the outside player on the second stand becomes the leader of the first violins

All flutes breathe 2 bars before the end. I look at the flutes with my left hand extended, and cut them off after the bass pizzicato on the second eighth note.

NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

The Norton edition incorporates revisions found in the copy of the score that Debussy used when conducting the piece from 1908-1913. Some of these comments are changes from the Kalmus publication, some are additions.

Instrumentation list: add Cor anglais, 2 Bassoons, antique cymbals

Instrumentation list, harp: LA flat is incorrect; LA sharp only

2 bars before #2, tutti: each big beat is marked to start forte

2 bars before #3, tutti: *Cédez* is marked on the third beat of 2 bars before #3

Second bar of #3, tutti: *Sans trainer*

Second bar of #3, flute: is the grace note at the end of the bar is G#?

#4, tutti: quarter note = 72

#5, horns, violas, cellos and basses: each crescendo starts mf, with a line over the quarter notes for the violas and cellos

#6, tutti: quarter note = 60

4 bars after #6, tutti: *Cédez un peu*

5 bars after #6, tutti: quarter note: 56

2 bars before #7, flutes, oboe, English horn, and clarinet: an accent and a line are marked on the downbeat

5 bars after #7, tutti: *En animant*

6 bars after #7, strings except basses: a line is marked between the last note and the next downbeat

9 bars after #7, tutti: *Toujours anime'*

6 bars before #8, tutti: *Cédez un peu*

#8, tutti: quarter note = 84

5 bars after #8, violas: add an E, as in the next bar

2 bars before #11, cello: *espressif (un peu en dehors)*