

Exploration on the Performing Way of Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un Faune*

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Abstract: *L'après-midi d'un faune* is one of the representative poems of symbolism, Debussy's dreamy preludes describe the mood of the poem from different perspectives. In order to better present this great work of music, we should start from the content and artistic conception of the poem, understand the symbolism that Debussy was fascinated by, and study different versions of performance and arrangements, finally combined with our own taste to present a unique prelude.

Keywords: Symbolism; Colors of Harmony; Different Interpretations

1. Introduction

Speaking of Claude Debussy's famous work, *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, then I have to mention the poem "L'après-midi d'un faune" written by Stéphane Mallarmé, a famous French poet and a good friend of Debussy. These two masterpieces, as the double jade handed down from generation to generation, are highly respected in the poetry and classical music circles.

2. Poem and Prelude

L'après-midi d'un faune is one of the representative poems of symbolism. The symbolist poet Paul Valéry considered it to be the greatest poem in French literature. After Mallarmé heard Debussy's work, he wrote to Debussy: "I have just come out of the concert, deeply moved. The marvel! Your illustration of *L'après-midi d'un faune*, which presents no dissonance with my text, but goes much further, really, into nostalgia and into light, with finesse, with sensuality, with richness. I press your hand admiringly, Debussy. Yours, Mallarmé." About his composition Debussy wrote: "The music of this prelude is a very free illustration of Mallarmé's beautiful poem. By no means does it claim to be a synthesis of it. Rather there is a succession of scenes through which pass the desires and dreams of the faun in the heat of the afternoon. Then, tired of pursuing the timorous flight of nymphs and naiads, he succumbs to intoxicating sleep, in which he can finally realize his dreams of possession in universal Nature." From Debussy's words, we can understand that his prelude was indeed inspired by Mallarmé's poetry, but this work did not have any actual content like poetry, also does not have a traditional order and regularity, and more inclined to build the picture, color and artistic conception, this also happens to conform to the characteristics of Debussy claims to symbolist, through polysemous but powerful symbols to suggest ideas. His use of harmony, for example, is very different from the traditional way, the chords are not arranged according to the function of harmony. If you want to analyze it in traditional way of harmony, you will not know what Debussy is doing, the chords are like different colors painted on the canvas, colors and colors can be mixed into new colors. You can't exactly hear the real mood and meaning from the music, only can feel the color and artistic conception vaguely and hazy. But when you have preconceived emotions and images in your mind, the Prelude can fit your imagination. There are a thousand *L'après-midi d'un faune* in a thousand people's ears.

Debussy's music creation in addition to the period of Conservatoire de Paris and French academy in Villa Medici in Rome, was deeply affected by the performance that of Java gamelan that he heard on the world expo 1889, Debussy's most excellent work basically create after that, a lot of pentatonic scale and oriental melodies are used in Debussy's works. As one

of Debussy's most exquisite works, the "non-functional chords" in the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* laid the foundation for the later atonal music, in which harmony became a palette of varied colors. Through these colors, Debussy gave us a sense of image and mood that is difficult to express and describe in words.

3. Exploration of Different Interpretations

The original of *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* is an orchestral work, after an transcription for chamber music has been made by famous composer Arnold Schönberg, there are also many other transcription, such as: trio for flute, clarinet and piano, septet for flute, clarinet, harp and string quartet, and several different editions of duo for flute and piano. The common denominator of these different editions is that the arrangers all used the flute as the main solo instrument. So, the flute got rid of the bright, resonant and metallic sense, but needs to keep looking for different timbre in different dynamics, and in addition, it needs to blend new timbre with other instruments, which brings unprecedented sensitivity and artistic conception in music. The final performance and artistic conception presented by this work are closely related to the understanding of the performer, the conductor and the sense of cooperation of performers. Roughly speaking, the understanding of the performer will affect the producing of timbre and the phrasing, the understanding of the conductor will affect the overall dynamics and speed, and the sense of cooperation of the performers will affect the sound integration and the ideological unity of the work presented. From the different interpretation, we will find a lot of differences, and these differences will push the work to a completely different artistic conception and direction, so that the listener has a completely different feeling. To take a relatively obvious example:

Compare the performance of Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra conducted by Celibidache on 14 November 1970 with the performance of Münchner Philharmoniker conducted by Celibidache in May 1994. Firstly, in terms of performance time, the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra played 11 minutes and 30 seconds, while the Münchner Philharmoniker played 13 minutes and 20 seconds. The difference between these two performances is about two minutes, as you can see, how the same conductor controls the speed of different orchestras at different ages. And the different speed brings the big changes of floating and phrasing. The performance of Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra gives the sense of flow more smoothly and simple but lack of exquisite transition between phrases and also lack of direction on lots of long notes in this piece. Münchner Philharmoniker's deduction is feeling slow and lengthy, but I can feel the direction of each note, the exquisite and clinking transitions between paragraphs, phrases, or even between notes, all have delicate transitions like gradual colors. Secondly, we can speak about the different understanding of the players. The flutist of the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra (the name of the flutist cannot be found) had a thick, solid and dark flute sound, which had the taste of woodwind instrument, without the sharpness of metal flute, and the volume was very high, the middle and low registers could also be clearly reflected in the orchestra. He or she is relatively faster, the flow of the phrase is very smooth, the melody expression is very simple, direct. On the other hand, the flutist of the Münchner Philharmoniker (Michael Martin Kofler), have a more metallic sound, brighter and rounder, not too loud, but like the sound of water droplets, which can be heard clearly when the orchestra is quiet. without any sense of vying for dominance. The tempo was noticeably slower, yet each note seemed to give him enough time to sing and proceed. And because of its slowness, his playing pays more attention to the connections between intervals and the transitions between notes. There are so many differences in the main solo instruments that it's enough to make this work fundamentally different. I objectively describe the above comparisons and analyze their characteristics and differences. However, in the sense of cooperation, I highly praise the performance of the Münchner Philharmoniker. All the solo parts and melody playing from flute, clarinet, oboe, french horn, english horn, strings, are very restraint and calm, the timbre will not become so dry and pointed during the performance of dynamics. All orchestra always maintained a fruity and soft sound, not to destroy the mysterious and hazy mood that create from beginning. The dynamics is only produced from modifying of the parts and number change of performers. Due to the soft timbre and good sound quality, the different instruments can achieve excellent blend effect when playing the same melody, perfectly creating the timbre of the instrument that does not exist in this world. However, the performance of the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra is deficient in these aspects, the performance of solos and melodies is very loud and obvious, which will destroy

the original timbre and even sound quality of the instrument, so that the integration of timbre between different instruments is not good enough, and in addition, it will lead to the problem of intonation.

4. Exploration of Different Editions

I am studying the transcription of duo for flute and piano. I found three editions from different arrangers and publishers. They are:

- a. Karl Lenski - Universal
- b. Nikolai Platonow- International music company
- c. Gustave Samazeuilh - Edition Jobert

What these three editions have in common is that they basically maintain all the solo parts of the flute in the orchestral version, and there are many differences in the rest parts. Lenski's edition will pay more attention to the instrument characteristics of flute and piano, and all the passages suitable for flute performance and play in the original music will be transcribed to the flute, while the piano part is more in line with the pianist's playing habits compared with other editions. The disadvantage of this edition is that most of the melody and all the solo parts are in the flute part, so it lacks the original idea from original version which is the same melody will never play by the same timbre. Moreover, the arranger added some notes in the flute part that were not in the original music in the two bars, which made these two bars seem redundant. Platonow edition has a lot in common with Samazeuilh edition(which is supposed to be the earliest transcription of duo edition of this piece), the difference between these two editions is the Platonow edition adapted a colorful wind instrument accompaniment passage to the piano part, flute will play the original cantabile string melody, as a result, the flute will sing this melody consistently and expressively, however, it will lose the advantage of color adjustment of wind instrument, and another deficiency is the same melody play by the same instrument.



Figure 1 Original Orchestra edition

Platonow edition and Samazeuilh edition are almost the same except for the difference I mentioned above, as shown in the figure below. They are characterized by very creative arrangement of parts, which can take into account the dispersion of the same melody in flute and piano parts to avoid the repetition of timbres, and basically respect the arrangement of the

original music in orchestration and harmony. The shortcoming of these two editions indeed is that they respect the orchestration and harmony of the original music too much, which makes it difficult to play in some parts of the piano due to too many notes and too complicated rhythm, and the flute part is not clear enough in some parts due to note register problems. To sum up, each edition has different advantages and disadvantages for me, so I decided to combine the advantages of each edition together, and adjust some of them which I think are unreasonable in order to achieve the best results.



Figure 2 Arrangement by Karl Lenski

5. Conclusion

About the details and taste of presentation on this work, I have three different resources, one part is from my teachers (Majority ideas from Jørn Eivind Schau and Cordula Hacke from University of Agder in Norway), another part is from different performance (Celibidache, Boulez, Karajan), the rest is my understanding according to present age and instrument skill. Maybe I will think my present understanding a bit silly when I am 50 years old, but now I really like it.

References

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