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French Music
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Of all the national genres in Western music, French music occupies a special place and has a unique relationship to poetry, painting and dance. In some ways the story of Western music could be told through the development of French music, since the first great cross cultural encounter happened in Northern France in the early middle ages. In 753 the Pope, threatened by Lombard invaders and fearful of the destruction of Rome and the demise of Christendom appealed to the King of France and journey north, across the Alps and well into Northern France where, about a hundred miles from Paris he met with King Pepin and negotiated a political agreement. While this high level diplomatic effort was ongoing, the papal retinue got to know the French king's followers and you might even say they 'compared notes'. That is to say, the pope's musicians and the French music makers listened to each other's music and the French were particularly intrigued by the Roman musical notation, a development that facilitated remembering the 'tunes' used in religious observance, the great collection of liturgical chants compiled by or at the order of Pope Gregory the Great. Musical notation took a long time to emerge over written language, indeed certain markings still used in French, the acute and grave accents and the cedilla, are vestiges of the 'neumes' or early written guides to musical language. This story is told in the first volume of Richard Taruskin's sole authored History of Western Music published by Oxford University Press. What I find so exciting about this story is imagining the impact of two powerful traditions, coming into contact in such an unusual way. The pope came away from this great meeting with an agreement that enhanced his security, laid the foundation for a new political order in Europe and the French came away not only with political benefits, but with the seeds of a cultural phenomenon, Western music. The coming together of an oral tradition which must have been rich and the more austere and highly standardized Roman chant must have been a kind of esthetic explosion. Giving up their free flowing forms of musical expression cannot have been easy for the French, but exploring the possibilities of recorded notation and the rules that had to be development was a challenge that the French met successfully if we are to judge their musical prowess over nearly fourteen hundred years.

French music has many distinctive qualities. First there is the primacy of spoken language, the word, for French musicians has been the primary focus of musical composition. The Italians and the Germans took a different path, but for the French the primacy of the word has ruled musical esthetics. This has led to a strange phenomenon, to be explored in this class, what happens when the composition focuses on a non-verbal experience, i.e. a dream. Indeed the dream, has been for French music, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a remarkable opportunity for free floating musical expression. But the musical power of the dream did not have to wait for Debussy and his contemporaries, our first piece of recorded music will be an earlier dream, 'The dream of Atys', an

instrumental interlude during an opera composed by a great Franco-Italian musician who dominated the court of King Louis XIV. Jean Baptist Lully was born in Italy but culturally transformed himself by adopting and perfecting French styled compositions and winning the support of the 'Sun King' for his artistry. Lully was the master of the King's musical establishment, a powerful man whose success made many native born composers pretty resentful and helped to fuel the kind of fights that made French culture always interesting, noteworthy and downright controversial. Putting all that aside, it is interesting how this lovely piece of music seems to prefigure later compositions such as the famous Debussy prelude on the afternoon of a Faun, another dream sequence and one of the most remarkable and well loved pieces of orchestral music that is idiomatically French and irresistibly beautiful. The court of King Louis was a magnet for composers and playwrights from around the world, but the musical world of King Louis's time had been centered in Italy for many centuries. The arts in France enjoyed Royal support because the King expected nothing but the best. But the best art is not always built around the esthetics of one person, in this way French writers of the stature of Racine and Corneille have not enjoyed the enduring wide popularity of Shakespeare. On the other hand the great French comic playwright, Moliere is rightly celebrated as one of the greatest dramatists. A film about Moliere, by Ariane Mnouchkine, according to reviews, is well worth watching.

Hector Berlioz is and was one of France's greatest and most controversial composers, so much so that his music gets better performances in England, the US and Germany than in his native France. He wouldn't have been surprised. Son of an ambitious professional, Berlioz was packed off to medical school and quickly found the anatomy lab a revolting place. His description of it is well worth reading, as is much else by Berlioz who turned out to be both a great composer also a very fine writer, and, for better or for worse, an eminent music critic. When the musical establishment rejected him, he morphed into a music critic and his enemies felt the lash. They probably deserved it. Berlioz was a remarkable figure. Finely carven features, flashing eyes, a wild mane of hair, his nose was described as 'the beak of an eagle' he was hard to miss. At concerts he didn't hesitate to make his feelings known, jumping to his feet and storming around the theater while the action was under way. In all respects Hector Berlioz was a well defined eccentric. When he entered music school, the director of the Conservatory, an Italian composer Luigi Cherubini, took an instant dislike to him and Berlioz reciprocated with a remarkable account of their meeting. He progressed as a music student and eventually he won the top prize for composition, the Prix de Rome. With that he was off to Italy for three years of subsidized 'graduate' work and his prospects looked very good. Berlioz was a classical composer in a Romantic era who also happened to be an innovator and very gifted orchestral composer. One of his first big works, the *Symphonie Fantastique* remains one of classical music's most distinctive masterworks. Inspired by his obsession with a beautiful actress, Harriet Smithson, Berlioz sought her attention, wrote this music under the spell of his attraction to her, got rejected but years later they gave it a go and found out that they were absolutely incompatible. No one who knew him was surprised.

There are many, many recordings of the *Symphonie fantastique* and some conductors such as the late Sir Colin Davis are rightly regarded as Berlioz specialists. I really like a recording by Roger Norrington which uses period instruments including a remarkable wind instrument called the ophicleide. This unique instrument was used in marching bands in Napoleon's grand armée. Norrington makes sure to deploy its strange reedy sound, definitely audible from a distance. Right now my favorite performance comes from the historically informed Anima Eterna, a Flemish orchestra led by Jos van Immerseel. Using half the instruments of a regular symphony orchestra they produce a magnificent sound, including the ophicleide. The symphony has five movements including a dance sequence that is particularly beautiful.

Berlioz fought for the attention of the French musical public at a time when German composers such as Meyerbeer and Wagner were living in Paris and the great Italian composer Giachino Rossini was the most celebrated of all the foreign born musicians. Because he alienated the musical establishment he had a hard time getting his music performed, a shame because he was so very brilliant. After World War II the music of Berlioz has had a revival and now his big choral and operatic works are more often performed and great orchestral works like the *Symphonie* and *Harold in Italy* are frequently performed in concert halls.

Camille Saint-Saens (1835-1921) is one of France's most famous composers and is enduringly popular world wide. Anyone who writes a piece of music for kids, such as the *Carnival for the Animals*, has a chance to become very well known and the popularity of pieces like 'le Cygne' (the Swan) keeps his name in a place of prominence. His music is easy to like, but he never compromised high artistic standards and he had a very strong commitment to maintaining a distinctive profile for French music. This came to a head when in 1871, after a disastrous military defeat by the Germans, Saint-Saens called together all of the French musicians he knew and announced the formation of a National Society of Music, which as he pointed out, 'they can beat us at war, but we shouldn't have to submit to their musical taste, we must cultivate our own traditions and maintain French music as a great European tradition. From that point forward French music brought together composers who might disagree (they surely did) on matters of all kinds, but the notion of a specifically French tradition, supported by all of the nation's as well as international Francophone composers, was a powerful force that came at a propitious time and helped to establish Paris as the capital of the Arts for the next hundred years. With its emphasis on the importance of the word, theater and music were linked, but composers were equally interested in sets, illustrations, posters, painting and every other visual and imagined form of art.

The period from 1875-1925 is one of the most fertile and fascinating epochs in French music. At the outset composers such as Saint Saens and the Belgian born Cesar Franck who was a very distinguished organist and composer for organ. The tradition of composer-organist, is one of the most august French musical practices

and allows for brilliant displays of improvisation. Franck also wrote symphonic and chamber music which remains very popular. His organ music is among the best French music in for the instrument. He was one of Debussy's teachers but they didn't like each other and Debussy, intent on developing his own compositional methods was very dismissive of Franck's instruction.

Debussy quite obviously the most talented of Franck's students, was also the one who resisted Franck's advice to 'modulate, modulate', Debussy didn't want to do things the way his professor recommended and believed that the music he created was for his own pleasure. As things turned out, Debussy was one of the greatest originals in the history of music, but a hard man to like (two of his partners shot themselves after the breakup). Today of course he is judged by the music, and, happily for us the music is irresistible to us today. In Debussy's time it was Wagner's music that was hard to resist, so the young Debussy made every effort to resist Wagnerian intoxication which affected him as much as any contemporary. But he did push aside the influence of Wagner and succeeded in creating his own art. There is a great deal of confusion about this famous French composer. He was creative during a time when impressionism was the art movement so utterly identified with his country. But he steadfastly resisted the notion of his music having anything to do with this movement. Fascinated by poetry, he considered symbolism to be more significant to his thinking. A symbol is an image that is treated as a concept. A cross is the historic symbol of Christianity, a famous symbol, easily loved, hated or ignored. The power of symbolism and the work of poets meant far more to Debussy than painters. Not that he ignored art. In fact Japanese art meant a lot to him, again symbolism has something to do with it.