



# Stratford Symphony Orchestra

## *Season Opener*

Saturday September 15, 2018 at 7:30 pm

### **Prelude a L'Apres-Midi d'un Faune**

This exquisite piece is Debussy's most celebrated orchestral work and, despite its revolutionary nature, was an instant success at its premiere. The great 20<sup>th</sup> century French composer and conductor Pierre Boulez made this powerful claim about the importance of the composition: "just as modern poetry surely took root in certain of Baudelaire's poems, so one is justified in saying that modern music was awakened by *L'apres-midi d'un faune*."

Debussy based his composition on a poem from 1887 by famous French symbolist poet Stephane Mallarme which describes the sensual awakening of a faun from his afternoon nap. Its revolution is in the orchestration and in the harmonic landscape. It is scored for a large orchestra which never plays loudly. Its unique sound is the result of rich and ingenious writing for winds and percussion: it requires 3 flutes playing often in a sultry low register, oboe and English horn whose tonalities have long been associated with pastoral tone painting, muted French horns which have a distant dream-like quality, the percussive richness of two harps, and an exotic, ethereal quality from antique cymbals. Debussy's harmonies defy the logical progressions of traditional tonal composition: many of the chords and chord progressions have no functional value but are instead meant to suggest the illogical drift of dreams. The theme, introduced by a flute, shifts and reconfigures to represent the faun's movements through his ever-changing reveries.

It inspired many musical works by other famous French composers - Ravel, Milhaud, and Boulez among them, but the most notable inspiration - perhaps the most notorious - was the ballet created by the famous Russian dancer Vaclav Nijinsky in 1912 to this score. Why notorious? Balletomanes were offended by Nijinsky merely *walking* around striking poses! Parisians in general thought it was *blasphemy* to so distort this, by now, iconic music. Debussy was offended by the overly *explicit* sexuality of Nijinsky's performance. And yet, in amongst the catcalling, there were many who were ecstatic and called for a reprise. So Nijinsky and his dancers did it again. Interestingly, Mallarme quite liked it.

### **Concertino for Piccolo, Strings, and Harpsichord**

Allan Stephenson was born in 1949 in Cheshire, England, studied cello at the Royal Manchester College of Music, and since 1973 has resided in Cape Town, South Africa where he enjoys a successful career as a composer, cellist and conductor. His wind concerti, for bassoon, clarinet, horn and piccolo, are among his most well-known works. He writes in sonata form in a lyrically expressive style which sits pleasingly on the listener's ear.

Although he received no formal training as a composer, he has educated himself by studying the music of a wide variety of styles and composers... Perhaps what makes this work so accessible to audiences is that Stephenson attempts to assimilate and renew elements from the compositions of famous composers.

The harpsichord certainly adds some interest and variety to the string texture in the first and third movements. One of its other functions seems to be to add humour in certain movements of the work, most notably in the last movement.

In the middle movement Stephenson displays a deeper, more thoughtful side, while managing to capture the soul of the piccolo. In this movement the melodic and lyric qualities of the piccolo are allowed to come to the fore. Here is some profound and insightful writing seldom seen in the piccolo repertoire.

This Concertino has been a welcome addition to the piccolo repertoire! Although he wrote it in 1979, it languished in South African archives for over 20 years before being resurrected via a recording by Leipzig Gewandhaus piccoloist, Gudrun Hinze.

## **Symphony No. 2 in B minor**

Alexander Borodin was the illegitimate son of a Russian prince, raised by his stepfather, a retired army doctor, so it isn't too surprising that he went on to study medicine and have a distinguished career in that field. What is much more surprising is the opportunity for travel his profession allowed. Going to conferences in major European centres allowed him to attend concerts and meet musicians. In fact, one important patient, who was a fine pianist, introduced him to the wonders of Chopin, Liszt and Schumann. But by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Nationalism flourished in countries that had no developed musical tradition of their own as a way to free themselves from the influence of foreign music, especially German. Borodin was among a small group of Russian musicians who embraced this ideology. Though he had little formal musical education, his comparative inexperience with conventional compositional practice meant he discovered his own way of creating music, using what was nearest to hand, namely traditional Russian folk songs. The result for Borodin was, according to Sir Henry Hadow, British musicologist, that "no musician has ever claimed immortality with so slender an offering." In spite of this faint praise, the second symphony, completed in 1876, richly explores Russian folk song material and is considered to be his greatest achievement, perhaps owing in part to the significant technical revisions at the suggestion of Rimsky-Korsakov, a true master of orchestration, to ready the score for publication in 1886.