

Like so many Russian musicians, Mravinsky seemed first headed toward a career in the sciences. He studied biology at St. Petersburg University, but had to quit in 1920 after his father's death. To support himself, he signed on with the Imperial Ballet as a rehearsal pianist. In 1923, he finally enrolled in the Leningrad Conservatory, where he studied composition with Vladimir Shcherbachov and conducting with Alexander Gauk and Nikolai Malko. He graduated in 1931, and left his Imperial Ballet job to become a musical assistant and ballet conductor at the Bolshoi Opera from 1931 to 1937, with a stint at the Kirov from 1934. Mravinsky gave up these posts in 1938, after winning first prize in the All-Union Conductors' Competition in Moscow, to become principal conductor of the Leningrad Philharmonic. He remained there until his death, long ignoring many guest-conducting offers from abroad. Under Mravinsky's direction the Leningrad Philharmonic came to be regarded as one of the finest orchestras in the world, although the world had comparatively few opportunities to hear it aside from the rare tour (about 30 performances in 25 years, starting in 1956), some dim Soviet recordings, and a very few highly acclaimed records for such Western European companies as Deutsche Grammophon and, in the end, Erato. Mravinsky was made People's Artist of the U.S.S.R. in 1954, and in 1973, he received the order of Hero of Socialist Labor. But his more lasting international acclaim came for his performances of Mozart, Beethoven, Bruckner, Wagner, Sibelius, Bartók, Stravinsky, and anything Russian or Soviet. His reputation only rose upon his retirement from the Leningrad Philharmonic.



Mravinsky's rehearsal manner was said to be autocratic and brutal, and the resulting performances were tightly clenched. Yet they were also technically precise, finely detailed, subtly colored, and highly dramatic -- and this not always because he was in the habit of whipping fast finales into a frenzy. His readings had an intensity, concentration, and -- despite the arduous rehearsal -- spontaneity comparable to those of Wilhelm Furtwängler. In the West, Mravinsky was particularly noted as an interpreter of Shostakovich, whose Fifth, Sixth, Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth symphonies he premiered, and of Tchaikovsky. His recordings of the Tchaikovsky's last three symphonies, made in 1960 for Deutsche Grammophon while the orchestra was on tour in London, are touchstones of the Russian repertory.



Evgeny Mravinsky
conducts the
Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra

Bartok
Music for Strings,
Percussion
and Celesta

Debussy
Prélude À L'après Midi D'un Faune



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Bartók wrote some of his finest music for the Swiss conductor Paul Sacher, in whom he found a particularly sympathetic champion. *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, written for Sacher in 1936, explores with great refinement and mastery the musical concepts that Bartók had been developing since the mid-'20s. In the *Piano Concerto No. 1*, Bartók explored the percussive elements of the piano, coupling it effectively with percussion only in the introduction to the concerto's slow movement. In *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, Bartók ingeniously sets the piano with the percussion instruments, where its melodic and harmonic material functions in support of the two string choirs.

Since the early '30s, Bartók had also incorporated elements of Baroque music into his compositions, inspired partly by his exploration of pre-Classical keyboard composers such as Scarlatti, Rameau and Couperin. In reflection of this, *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* evokes the Baroque concerto grosso, with its two antiphonal string orchestras separated by a battery of tuned and untuned percussion instruments. The work's prosaic title was actually just a working title which was subsequently allowed to stand.

The opening movement, *Andante tranquillo*, is a slow fugue on a chromatic melody that springs from a five-note cell, each subsequent phrase growing in length and elaborating on its predecessor. At this point, the two string orchestras play together. As the string voices accumulate, the fugue's texture increases in complexity and the chromatic implications of the theme are brought to a rigorously dissonant fulfillment. The fugue climaxes at its apogee with an ominous rumble from the timpani and a loud stroke on the tam-tam. As the fugue folds in upon itself the celesta makes its first entrance with an arpeggiated chord, mysterious and remote. The work subsequently grows from the motivic material explored in this first movement.

Bartók deploys antiphonal string choirs for the second movement, a fast, fugitive piece in which the two orchestras chase each other through a breathtaking series of elaborations on the main theme. In the percussion section, piano, xylophone, and harp take the lead while two side drums (with and without snares) provide emphatic punctuation. The third movement is one of Bartók's most

accomplished "night music" pieces, with cricket-like notes from the xylophone, eerie timpani glissandi, fragmentary murmurs, and frightened exclamations from the strings, along with the always-mysterious notes of the celesta floating clear and sphinx-like over the nocturnal web. The finale, a dance of energy and abandon, restores the antiphonal deployment of the strings and juxtaposes the diatonic-aspects of the work's main theme with its chromatic elements. There are also some striking touches like the furious, strummed four-note chords in the violins, violas and cellos that opens the movement, a theme midway through that is based on a repeated note first hammered out on piano and xylophone, and then a grand peroration of the initial fugue theme, now with its intervals doubled and richly harmonized. In the quick coda there is a brief, suspended moment ("a tempo allargando") before the work tumbles to a conclusion in unabashed A major.

Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun, French *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, tone poem for orchestra by Claude Debussy. The original orchestral version was completed in 1894, and Debussy reworked it for performance on two pianos in 1895. The work is considered a quintessential example of musical Impressionism, a compositional style popular at the turn of the 20th century that was influenced by the artistic school of the same name.

Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun is a musical evocation of Stéphane Mallarmé's poem "Afternoon of a Faun," in which a faun—a half-man, half-goat creature of ancient Greek legend—awakes to revel in sensuous memories of forest nymphs.

Debussy begins with a sinuous flute melody evocative of a graceful female form. Gently swelling phrases for strings, harp, and horns are soon added. The music proceeds without abrupt shifts; themes blend into each other, slowly rising and falling. The middle section features clarinet and oboe solos before the flute gradually retakes the spotlight. In the final moments, airy touches of percussion from finger cymbals are heard.

Bartok

Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta

Debussy

Prélude À L'après Midi D'un Faune

Evgeny Mravinsky

Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra

Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta

1. Andante tranquillo 7:59
 2. Allegro 7:50
 3. Adagio 7:03
 4. Allegro molto 7:27
 5. **Debussy - Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun 9:55**
- Total Time 40:14

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