

Pierre Monteux (April 4, 1875 - July 1, 1964)

Monteux studied violin from an early age, entering the Paris Conservatoire at the age of nine. He became a proficient violinist, good enough to jointly win the Conservatoire's violin prize in 1896 with Jacques Thibaud. However, he later took up the viola and played at the Opéra-Comique, leading the viola section in the premiere of Claude Debussy's opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 1902.

In 1911, with a little conducting experience in Dieppe behind him, Monteux became conductor of Sergei Diaghilev's ballet company, the Ballets Russes. In this capacity he gave the premieres of Igor Stravinsky's *Petrushka* (1911) and *The Rite of Spring* (1913) as well as Maurice Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*. This established the course of his career, and for the rest of his life he was noted particularly for his interpretations of Russian and French music.

With the outbreak of World War I, Monteux was called up for military service, but was discharged in 1916, and he travelled to the United States. There he took charge of the French repertoire at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City from 1917 to 1919, conducting the American premiere of Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *The Golden Cockerel* while there.

Then he moved to the Boston Symphony Orchestra (1919-24). He had a big effect on the Boston ensemble's sound, and was able to fashion the orchestra as he pleased after a strike led to thirty of its members leaving. He also introduced a number of new works while there, particularly by French composers.

In 1924, Monteux began an association with the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam, working alongside Willem Mengelberg. In 1929, he founded the Orchestre Symphonique de Paris, which he conducted until 1935. In the year the orchestra was founded, he led them in the world premiere of Sergei Prokofiev's third symphony.

Monteux then returned to the United States, and worked with the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra from 1935 to 1952. In 1943, he founded a conducting school in Hancock, Maine, the childhood home of his wife, Doris Hodgkins Monteux, where Monteux was now living. There he taught such future luminaries as Andre Previn and Neville Marriner. In 1946 he became a United States citizen.

Monteux made a number of records in his life, most of which are widely admired. He himself claimed to dislike them, however, saying they lacked the spontaneity of live performances. From 1961 to 1964 he was principal conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra, before dying in Hancock, Maine in 1964. Pierre Monteux was the father of the flautist and conductor Claude Monteux.



Pierre Monteux conducts

Mendelssohn

Incidental Music

to a *Midsummer Night's Dream*

Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra

Debussy

Nocturnes

Boston Symphony Orchestra

A Midsummer Night's Dream, incidental music by German composer Felix Mendelssohn written to accompany performances of Shakespeare's play A Midsummer Night's Dream at the Prussian royal court.

Mendelssohn became familiar with Shakespeare by reading German translations as a boy, and in 1827, at age 17, he was inspired to write a piece capturing the atmosphere of Shakespeare's comedy. The piece, a concert overture, quickly became a popular favourite throughout Europe.

Mendelssohn returned to Shakespeare in 1843 at the request of Prussian King Frederick William IV, an admirer of the overture, who wanted a set of incidental music for an upcoming production of A Midsummer Night's Dream. Mendelssohn crafted 14 short pieces based on themes and moods from the earlier piece. The complete work was first performed with the play on October 14, 1843.

Mendelssohn's new creations, such as the "Song with Chorus," a lullaby for the fairy queen Titania, and the "Wedding March," written to accompany the multiple weddings at the end of the play, recaptured the magical spirit of the overture. The complete set also includes a nimble fairies' scherzo, a haunting nocturne rich with horns, a buoyant clowns' dance, and a farewell finale. The best-known movement is perhaps the "Wedding March," which is often played in modern wedding ceremonies.

Claude Debussy's Three Nocturnes for Orchestra went through several incarnations before eventually assuming their final form. They were sketched under the title "Trois scènes au crépuscule" as early as 1892, and prior to their completion in 1899, Debussy toyed with the idea of casting them as vehicles for solo violin and orchestra. Debussy's developing skill as an orchestral colorist, first hinted at in 1892 with the Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun, comes to the fore in the Nocturnes, particularly the second, "Fêtes," which is regarded by many as one of the composers supreme creations.

A special role is allotted to the English horn in "Nuages" (Clouds), the first piece of the group. Thin, two-voice counterpoint in steady quarter notes provides a background for the English horn's rather plaintive gesture. The same melodic fragment

is repeated several times with very little alteration or extension, interrupted occasionally by comments from the French horn section. A stark contrast is provided by a pentatonic interlude, scored for flute and harp against a sustained chordal background and marked "Un peu animé." The English horn raises its quiet voice again, only to dissolve against the pianissimo tremolo background as the flute takes up its melody one more time. The quietly pulsating pizzicati of "Nuages" conclusion provide a sense of "grey agony," as Debussy put it.

"Fêtes" (Festivals) will be friendly ground to any listener familiar with the final movement of Respighi's 1929 work along the same lines, Feste Romane. The juxtaposition of a forceful, even percussive, rhythmic ostinato in 12/8 time with the earthy tune of the brass band (representing the Garde Républicaine) provides for the same kind of multi-textural feel that Respighi would exploit even further three decades later. Through sheer repetition the music builds to several swaggering climaxes, only to be deflated each time and have to begin the process all over again. The music trails away into nothingness as the brass band finally completes its journey through the heart of the celebration. Remarkable about "Fêtes" is Debussy's ability to hint at raunchiness and vulgarity within the context of his own extremely refined soundworld.

A vocalizing (i.e., textless) women's chorus is added to the ensemble for "Sirènes," the last, and in many ways the most evocative of the Nocturnes. One must not be misled by "Sirènes" repetitiveness and apparent simplicity -- a simplicity meant to parallel the deceptively innocent charm of the mythological sea sirens -- for here is a work of great subtlety indeed. The dense intricacy of the orchestral effects contained throughout the piece, set almost exclusively at a piano or pianissimo dynamic indication, has reminded more than one listener of the techniques of that most accomplished of orchestrators, Maurice Ravel. Debussy's methods, however, are entirely his own. Not surprisingly, the music drifts away into the sea, floating upon the few sparse harmonics of the two harpists.

Pierre Monteux conducts

Mendelssohn

**Incidental Music
to a Midsummer Night's Dream**

Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra

- 1 Overture 11:37
- 2 Scherzo 4:51
- 3 Nocturne 6:54
- 4 Wedding March 4:03

Debussy

Nocturnes

Boston Symphony Orchestra

- 5 Nuages 7:04
- 6 Fêtes 6:04
- 7 Sirènes 9:32
- Total Time: 50:05

Mendelssohn: Recorded by Decca for RCA 1957 at Sofiensaal, Vienna

Producer Erik Smith Engineer James Brown

Debussy: Recorded by RCA October 22, 1955, at Boston Symphony Hall Orchestra



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