The Life of Debussy and the Faun

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Abstract

Claude-Achille Debussy lived an interesting life that continues to live on after his death through his music and legacy. Debussy was a prodigy from seven years old when he started taking a few piano lessons. During his early life he also encountered artistical inspirations that would serve to be important in his later life. In order to prepare for his time at the Paris Conservatoire, he took lessons with Mme. Mauté de Fluerville. While attending the Paris Conservatoire he won the honor of the Prix de Rome and found some of the poetical inspirations he would use frequently in his later life. Some of his famous masterpieces created after his time at the Conservatoire include *La Mer, Noel des enfants qui n’ont plus de maison,* and *Pelléas et Mélisande.* One of his earliest and most famous works is Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun (Prélude à "L'après-midi d'un faune"). The piece is based upon a beautiful poem and features some truly diverse and original musical ideas. His use of poetry in his most famous pieces can be attributed to his early artistical inspirations during his summers at the Arosa mansion and at the Paris Conservatoire. This shows the importance of artistical education from a young age, which can have many benefits for a child, such as the young Debussy. As Debussy aged, he continued to produce masterpieces until he passed away from cancer at the age of 56. Though he lived a relatively short life, his memory will live on forever.

The Life of Debussy and the Faun

Claude Achille Debussy lived an extraordinary life full of highs and lows. His early life as a musical prodigy and the son of China shop owners shaped him to make some of the masterpieces listeners from all over the world hear today. If Debussy had not started music so early in his life or experienced artistical inspiration so early, he may not have produced some of his later music that made him even more of a landmark in musical history. This shows the importance of art education from a young age and its benefits for children, such as the young Debussy. One of these famous masterpieces, Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun, was created early in Debussy’s career. From an early age Claude Debussy was a musical prodigy and he continued to reach new heights in music throughout his life, such as Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun. These new heights may not have been able to have been reached without the exposure to art he had at such a young age, which makes Debussy an example of why children should be exposed to art education from early on.

Claude Achille Debussy was born on August 22, 1962 to Manuel-Achille and Victorine Debussy, who were owners of a small china shop in St Germain-en-Laye, France (Holmes, 1989). From a young age Debussy began to grow fond of high-quality objects. His sister claimed that he loved small objects, ornaments and butterflies, which he displayed around his bedroom (Holmes, 1989). Gabriel Pierne, a classmate and friend of Debussy, claimed that Debussy “liked nice things, but quantity didn’t matter to him,” (Nichols, 1992 pg. 4). Pierne continued to discuss that Debussy heavily enjoyed the collection of *Monde Illustré* Pierne’s father owned. Debussy gravitated toward the images in the collection that did not take up much space and featured a margin left around the entirety of the picture (Nichols, 1992).

Debussy’s affinity for quality over quantity may have sprung from his roots as a young boy. His parent’s ownership of the modest china shop did not make them rich with money, but they were flowing with intellectual wealth. Paul Vidal, another classmate and friend of Debussy, claimed that Debussy’s parents, Manuel-Achille and Victorine, came from modest classes themselves but could not be classified as so because they were interested in every topic and very well informed (Nichols, 1992). His mother, Victorine, sheltered Claude heavily and even did not allow him to attend school. Rather, she homeschooled him and gave him all of the elementary instruction he needed (Holmes, 1989). Despite being sheltered by his mother early on, he had the opportunity to be exposed to many forms of art. His aunt, Mme Rostan, took him on a trip during his sixth summer to the Arosa mansion in the South of France, which belonged to his aunt’s lavishly wealthy lover, Achille-Antoine Arosa (Holmes, 1989). These summers would go on to be crucial in Claude’s development, both as a musical prodigy and as an adult.

During Claude’s time at the Arosa mansion, he experienced paintings created by Theodore Rousseau, Boudin, and Corot as well as those painters classified as “Impressionists.” The Impressionist paintings and use of color, technique, and the expression of light inspired Claude so much that he first set off to be a painter (Holmes, 1989). Although Debussy had aspirations of being a painter, the people in his whirlwind of a life had other plans. His father, Manuel-Achille Debussy decided that Claude was best fit to join the Navy; however, his aunt sent him to take piano lessons with an Italian teacher named Cerutti (Holmes, 1989). This caused Claude to be exposed to many different things, making him well-rounded. At only seven years old Claude-Achille Debussy was splashing paints on a canvas, taking piano lessons, and wearing a small sailor’s hat his father gave to him (Holmes, 1989). It is hard to grasp the image of such a young child balancing so many things at once, but if any child could manage it was Debussy. He seemed to truly wow people with all of his talents, making him the definition of a prodigy. At nine years old, Claude was introduced to Mme. Mauté de Fluerville after Claude’s father met her son at *Chat Noir*. Her salon attracted many famous musicians, proving the quality of her teaching. After hearing Claude play, she declared that Claude would be a musician, and even offered to give him lessons in order to prepare him for the Paris Conservatoire (Holmes, 1989).

After three years of lessons from Mme. Mauté de Fluerville Claude entered the Paris Conservatoire, which was a major attribute, both to Claude’s talent and to Mme. Mautéde Fluerville for getting him into the academy despite her messy personal life (Holmes, 1986). Debussy was brilliant from the start. Many of his teachers and classmates identified his gifts from early on in his days at the Paris Conservatoire. Raymond Bonheur, a composer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, recalled that Debussy had clear exceptional gifts from very early on. When discussing Debussy, Bonheur claimed that no matter what he was given to work from he “rarely failed to produce an ingenious realization, enlivening its banality with subtle and unexpected harmony,” (Nichols, 1992 pg. 9). Debussy was also well received by Albert Lavignac, his *solfege* teacher at the Paris Conservatoire. Lavignac noticed Debussy’s talent in ear-training and spent long hours with him after class to discuss the many questions that arose in music and music theory as new composers, such as Wegner, began to arise (Holmes, 1989). Debussy himself would begin to push the general definition of “music” at the Paris Conservatoire, which led many to misunderstand or dismiss him as a student who was talented, but did not understand how the elements of music fit together.

In contrast to some who praised Debussy’s affinity to push the musical envelope, were more traditional teachers and musicians alike who favored the classical or traditional qualities and order of music. Antoine Marmontel, the fifty-seven-year-old man in charge of the advanced piano class at the Paris Conservatoire, was among those who were not in favor of Debussy’s wild imagination. Marmontel described Debussy as a boy who “is not fond of the piano, but he is fond of music” (Holmes, 1989 pg. 10). Marmontel described him this way because of the clash of their musical ideals. Marmontel was a traditional man who favored classical technical exercises, which highly contrasted with Debussy who favored the more experimental side of music. The boy was constantly testing odd chords and tonalities that never resolved. Although Marmontel and others took Debussy’s imaginative playing as a sign that he did not understand music, others embraced this chaos that Debussy introduced to music. Gabriel Pierne claimed that Debussy amazed the class with his bizarre music (Nichols, 1992).

Debussy’s continuous exploration of sound and noise, and their connection to music resulted in one of his most famous masterpieces, Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun. In French, Prélude à "L'après-midi d'un faune", was a work first performed by Debussy in December 1894 (Nichols, 1992). It was one of his first famous masterpieces and featured musical aspects that were highly unorthodox, but, nonetheless, beautiful. It was the first work of Debussy’s that was featured on other composers’ programs and was also the first of his pieces to be played internationally (Holmes, 1989). The composition is a retelling of a poem written by Mallarmé about a faun that is trying to decide how best to value the memory of two nymphs and plays a tune on its flute. The score starts off by mimicking the exact music the faun plays on its flute with a descending tritone that rises again. The harmony then rests on a resonant B-flat dominant seventh. The melody repeats as the new texture huddles around it (Ross, 2007). This is odd because in musical theory a B-flat dominant seventh note would resolve to an E-flat, but in Debussy’s piece the note never really resolves. This mirrors his early days at the Paris Conservatoire where he would play notes on the piano that were considered odd because they did not resolve like tonal music was supposed to. Although it was musically considered odd, Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun was well received. Raymond Bonheur looked back on the first time he ever heard the piece by saying, “I shall always remember how dazzled I was when he showed me *L'après-midi d'un faune* in its original state, rippling with light, aflame with all the heat of the summer, giving off a blinding radiance which was to be resisted in certain quarters for many a year,” (Ross, 2007 pg. 11). Some critics did not dislike the piece but missed its subtlety. A critic of Le Ménestrel wrote that Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun was, “finely and delicately orchestrated but one seeks in vain any heart or any strength. It is precious, subtle and indefinite in the same way as the work of M. Mallarmé,” (Holmes, 1989 pg. 47). This mirrors the thoughts of some of his teachers at the Paris Conservatoire, who misunderstood Debussy’s continuous exploration of chords not considered musically correct. Such a complex and talented man and piece of music is likely to be misunderstood and disliked by some, but that may be a part of their beauty. Debussy found this curiosity and misunderstanding of music inspirational. He continued to use poetry in his pieces and to test new sounds and noises in works after Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun.

Debussy creating a musical composition from a poem could be attributed to his early life in which he viewed Impressionist paintings in the Arosa Mansion. In fact, the illustrations for Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun were done my Manet, an Impressionist painter. The Impressionist movement also included many famous poets as well as painters. Debussy was said to have enjoyed literary figures as company over musicians. He frequented *Le Chat Noir* where he would converse with Maurice Vaucaire, Maurice Donnay, and others. Debussy even agreed to write music for Maurice Vaucaire’s adaptation of *As You Like It* (Wenk, 1976). Debussy encountered many other literary figures in his lifetime whom he was simply inspired by, collaborated with, or attempted to collaborate with. One of the first poets to really influence Debussy was Théodore de Banville, which Raymond Bonhuer recalls seeing his impact on Debussy in the form of a bundle of poetry under the sixteen-year-old Debussy’s arm at the Conservatoire (Wenk, 1976). His literary admirations were heavily ingrained in his music in the forms of compositions named after poems, lines from poems, sound like names of poems, sound like lines from poems, or contain literary references (Wenk, 1976). In his adult life Debussy mirrored the multitasker he was as a child by also dabbling in literature works himself. He never completed a full cycle of texts, but he did complete a few individual texts and one to go along with one of his last works, *Noel des enfants qui n’ont plus de maison* (Wenk, 1976).

Debussy’s fame for Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun allowed him to rise in rank to that of which of many famous French composers, such as Dukas and Chausson; however it also made him afraid to produce more musical pieces because of the thought that they may be inferior to that of Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun (Holmes, 1989). The next work that was actually completed by Debussy was not accomplished until twenty years after the introduction of Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun. Through its twenty years of development, the work finally formed into an opera called *Pelléas et Mélisande.* As Debussy worked on what would be the famous opera, he frequented bookshops, cafés, friends’ houses in which art and literature were topics of many conversations, and picnics or outings in the woods around Paris. As Wenk discussed, Debussy did not, however, frequent places filled with other musicians by choice and it was unusual for him to play in public (Wenk, 1976). This may have been due to the fact that throughout his musical career Debussy was always pushing boundaries, making it hard to predict a crowd’s reactions and after the success of Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun he had another fear of not reaching the same acclaim. Nevertheless, he continued to work on his opera and, surprisingly, unlike his colleagues, he did not physically rip apart his first version of *Pelléas et Mélisande.* He did, however,rewrite almost every bar which resulted in an additional two years to be spent on the piece (Holmes, 1989). After the first version was finished, Maeterlinck, the person who inspired the opera, authorized Camille Mauclair to listen to the score at Debussy’s flat where he played piano and sang all parts of the opera. Mauclair responded to the piece by saying to Maeterlinck “I have just heard one of the most beautiful masterpieces in all music, be proud and happy to have inspired it, send your authorization immediately,” (Holmes, 1989 pg. 51). The piece was performed and was a success, despite Debussy’s fear of its failure.

Despite good and bad reviews, Debussy continued on with major successes such as his pieces *La Mer, Claire de Lune, Nocturnes,* and many more. His rise to fame and clear historical importance as a key figure in music may not have been possible without his artistical influences he experienced at a young age. His famous summers at the Arosa mansion, time taking lessons from Mme. Mauté de Fluerville, and studies at the Paris Conservatoire shaped the musical genius that was Claude-Achille Debussy. These early exposure to art forms resulting in an individual who was so musically talented and well-rounded makes Debussy an example of the importance of art education from a young age. It is important for children to experience art at a young age because if they have creative or artistical experiences in early elementary school, then they are more likely to continue being creative for the rest of their lives (Davis, R. W., 1996). All children will not grow up to be famous composers, but art education can benefit children by enrich their learning in other subjects and give them a chance to express themselves, resulting in a more well-rounded individual.

Art education in schools can enrich learning in other subjects because arts can be taught as curriculum, used to enhance curriculum, or be integrated into curriculum (Duma & Silverstein, 2018). The idea of teaching art with the curriculum puts art at the focus of the lesson and builds knowledge and skills in an art form. Art education that is used to enhance curriculum has core subjects at the focus of the lesson but uses art to support the concept. This develops another way to teach the material that may reach out to students that learn differently than others. For example, a student that enjoys music and is an auditory learner may learn his or her ABCs better by hearing and singing the song than by writing them down over and over again. Art can also be integrated into curriculum by allowing students to learn through creative experiences. These creative experiences can connect an art form and a core subject in order to gain a better understanding in both (Duma & Silverstein, 2018). There have been many studies on programs primarily focused on art and the use of an art focused lesson to teach core subjects. One of the studies was done in New York public schools by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum called “Learning to Read Though the Arts,” (Davis, R. W., 1996). The program valued the importance of both the reading and artistical aspects included in the program. The use of art in order to teach children how to read was a brilliant way to combine art and core education. Reading is considered a dynamic, child-based process and using art to reinforce the ideas of literature to such a high-achieving and highly interested group, such as children, allows for a multisensory learning experience (Davis, R. W., 1996). Through these many ways of including art education in traditional instruction, children are exposed to new experiences and ways of thinking that will allow them to be better students and people. Debussy mirrored this in his life because he was not enrolled in school, but he was exposed to artistical inspirations at the Arosa mansion and from early lessons. This early integration of arts into Debussy’s life may have allowed him to grasp concepts, such as reading and writing, better as he wrote and read music and literature.

Art education also allows children to experience new things and become well-rounded individuals. Students may have artistic experiences outside of the classroom that they can use during classroom activities that include artistical aspects; however, there may be students in the classroom with little to no musical background. The students with some experiences can bring their ideas into the classroom and share them with the students who have little to no experience. Both students can share their ideas and build off one and other’s ideas in order to expand their thoughts on art and the core subject or subjects, making them more aware of other’s thoughts and allowing them to shape their own (Duma & Silverstein, 2018). Art also allows students to become more well-rounded by allowing them to escape from the traditional ways of learning core concepts and express themselves. Drawing, singing, and dancing can allow a student to reach beyond the learning they would experience while sitting at a desk listening to a teacher explain a concept with simple words. Art education also helps students become well-rounded people by teaching them how to express themselves. It is important to incorporate art early in order to impact children when they are still forming their concepts of themselves (Davis, R. W., 1996). The previously mentioned New York program implemented their program during early elementary school when children are learning how to read. This allowed for students to experience art early to help build their concepts of themselves, art, and literature. Although there are many important things that need to be taught in a classroom, art needs to be included because it nurtures self-esteem and creativity (Davis, R. W., 1996). As students continue to build a concept of themselves and of learning, including art education in regular instruction can help to boost children’s self-confidence and better develop concepts. This creates a child that is not only artistically informed, but one that has reached the heights of learning expected at each level and a self-confident one that will be prepared to tackle concepts inside and outside of the classroom. This can be seen in Debussy’s life because he did not have much education, but because he was informed artistically, he was prepared to handle the challenges of the Paris Conservatoire and life. Not every child can be lucky enough to spend their summers at grand mansions viewing art or their free time being trained by famous piano teachers, so that is why it is so crucial that schools offer opportunities for children to have artistic experiences in order to make them better individuals in the future.

In conclusion, Claude-Achille Debussy lived an extraordinary life that included some of the most beautiful pieces of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Throughout his early childhood growing up in the china shop his parents owned, he dabbled in many things. Whether he was painting, making music, or running around with a sailor’s hat on, it was no doubt he was brilliant and destined for greatness. His teacher saw this in him and prepared him for his time at the Paris Conservatoire where he would experiment with sounds and learn ways to develop his sound. One of his earliest and most famous works, Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun, shows this exploration of sound with its descending tritone and unresolved chords. Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun is also a poem, which shows the impact that other art forms had on his life, especially literature. The importance of art in Debussy’s life began at a very young age and allowed him to explore creativity and blossom into the famous French composer he is known as today. The importance of art education is not only seen in Debussy’s life, but also in the life of everyday people. Art education and its inclusion in regular instruction allows students to thrive in other content areas and become more well-rounded individuals. As one of these well-rounded individuals, Debussy was able to make his mark on the musical scene during his time. He is known today as a musical genius and his memory continues to live on through his music and legacy.

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