

Weekly Volcano

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Au naturel

A trio of pastoral classics for Tacoma Symphony Sunday

By Christian Carvajal on February 25, 2016



Conductor Sarah Ioannides. Photo credit: sarahioannides.net

The name of French composer Claude-Achille Debussy may not rattle off your tongue, but you do know his work. "Clair de Lune," from Suite Bergamasque, boasts one of the most beautiful and adored melodies in Western history. Almost as well-known is "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun," a 10-minute symphonic poem that appears in such diverse entertainments as *Flashdance*, *Ren & Stimpy*, and *True Blood*.

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The Tacoma Symphony Orchestra conductor Sarah Ioannides (pronounced "Ee-oh-NEED-eez") offers this classic, along with the equally familiar "Symphony No. 6" or "Pastoral Symphony" by Ludwig van Beethoven, Feb. 28. She's also thrown in a bridging piece, "Harp Concerto in G Minor" by Elias Parish Alvars, featuring Valerie Mussolini-Gordon, principal harpist for the Seattle Symphony.

"The common theme in this program," Ioannides explained, "is (the composer's) connection to nature ... They're nature lovers. Being out in the countryside, or, for Debussy, being by the sea, was important to them. To them, nature is the world."

The Debussy piece, employed for a controversial ballet by Vaslav Nijinsky 18 years after it was written, is itself based on a poem by Stephane Mallarmé. It uses limited orchestration with striking tonalities to convey the experiences of a faun - or horned satyr - as it interacts with the forest and creatures living therein.

"It's impressionist," Ioannides said. "Debussy paints, as it were, the color of a sleepy afternoon. To produce that effect requires an understanding of impressionist art and style. The music, in a way, needs to sound improvised, and yet it's very carefully written out, rhythmically. So striking that balance between a precise rhythm and having it sound organic is a goal. For example, the opening flute solo (has) a very measured rhythm, which comes out as this delicious yawn. The faun is waking up and stretching. It's a magical, mystery world, the kingdom of creativity."

Beethoven characterized his sixth symphony as a straightforward "Recollection of Country Life," more "an expression of feeling" than a literal representation.

"How happy I am to be able to walk among the shrubs!" he once wrote. "For the woods, the trees and the rocks give man the resonance he needs."

Every summer, he moved from Vienna to spend time away from the chaos of city life. A close friend, Countess Theresa of Brunswick, recalled, "(Beethoven) loved to be alone with Nature, to make her his only confidante. When his brain was reeling with confused ideas, Nature at all times comforted him."

According to music site Bachtrack, only five of the top 150 conductors in 2014 were female. The *Los Angeles Times'* Chloe Veltman referred to Ioannides as one of several women who "Crack the Glass Podium." Ioannides humbly demurs.

"The challenges are being addressed all the time now," she said. "The glass ceiling is broken, in my opinion. There are many women conducting, and it's a matter of time before positions change and people move up the ranks."

DEBUSSY & BEETHOVEN, Tacoma Symphony Orchestra, 2:30 p.m. Feb. 28, Rialto Theater, 901 Broadway, Tacoma, \$12-\$80, 253.272.7264