

Achille-Claude Debussy was born in France in 1862. His father, Manuel-Achille, served in the Marine infantry for seven years before marrying Debussy's mother, Victorine Manoury. During Debussy's early years his family lived in Cannes with his aunt Clementine. This is where he received his first musical training under Italian musician Jean Cerutti. In 1870, Debussy's father was imprisoned for one year of a four-year sentence for fighting with the Commune in the Franco-Prussian war after which his sentence was commuted to a suspension of civil rights for the remainder. Debussy referred to his early piano training as his aunt's "strange idea," which indicates that he had previously given little interest in music (Nichols 6). However, because of the family's instability and his father's imprisonment, "one might hazard Achille-Claude might easily have fixated on the piano and on music as constants in a disturbingly mobile world" (Nichols 8). During Manuel-Achille's stay in prison he met a man named Charles de Sivry who connected him to Claude's next major musical influence, Mme Mautè. She claimed to be a pupil of Chopin, which is disputable, but her merit as a teacher cannot be denied and some of Chopin's style can be seen throughout Debussy's entire career. It was with her help that Debussy was accepted to the Paris Conservatoire in his first attempt at age ten.

At the Conservatoire Debussy's individualism became apparent. A fellow student described Debussy's playing by saying that "he literally used to charge at the piano and force all its effects. He seemed to be in a rage with the instrument...and occasionally he would achieve effects of astonishing softness" (Nichols 11). He impressed his piano teacher by playing a "highly original" performance of an F minor Prelude by Bach in a

“spontaneous, romantic manner” (Lockspeiser 28-9). Debussy’s father now hoped that Claude had a future as a concert pianist. However, Debussy was already moving in the direction of composition and referred to his father’s aspirations for him as “castles in the air”(Nichols 12). This was apparent to his piano teacher who noted that, “he doesn’t care much for the piano, but he does love music” (Nichols 12). After a summer working for Nadezhda von Meck, Tchaikovsky’s patron, Debussy returned to Ernest Guiraud’s composition class. A friend of Debussy refers to Guiraud as the only person who could influence Debussy and often only through Debussy’s predictable opposition to him (Nichols 22). Thus, it can be said that Debussy was fiercely individual and didn’t hesitate to operate outside of convention even at a young age.

Debussy won the Prix de Rome with his cantata L’enfant prodigue in 1884. He then spent the next two years at the Villa Medici, which he believed were lost years (Dietschy 39). Being always of an unsociable type and resenting his presence in Rome because it involved leaving Mme Vasnier in Paris, for whom he described himself as having a “love which is mad,” he managed to convince one of the directors of the Villa to let him live apart from the other students in a cottage in Fiumicino by the sea (Dietschy 41). He was satisfied in this situation where he was allowed to take walks by the sea and read and absorb its energy. It was the comfort he took in the sea that foreshadowed the three movement orchestral work La Mer. Dietschy writes, “in Cannes when he was eight he dreamed wordlessly beside the sea, and absorbed it. In Fiumicino at twenty-three, the sea moved him deeply, he talked to it. In Cancale when he was twenty-seven, he reveled

in it, he summoned it; later, it inspired him. ‘Surely it is the thing in nature that heals the most’” (42).

It was not only his love of nature and his staunch individualism but also the influence of the symbolist movement on him that contributed to the style of composition that he was famous for when he composed La Mer. After he returned from Rome he lived a life of financial struggle. He spent much of his time in literary and artistic cafés that were frequented by symbolists. Symbolism in France, while lasting only about twelve years starting in 1885, opposed naturalism, realism, and clear-cut forms. It celebrated mystery, the indefinite and the esoteric while possessing a hatred for emphasis and an indifference to the public. The movement was primarily within the poetic, artistic, and theatrical circles (Lesure and Howat 101). Debussy often pulled influence from outside the music scene as he felt that artists could teach him much more than musicians who, “know nothing but music and obey barbaric laws” (Lesure and Howat 101). Lesure and Howat and Lesure refer to this symbolist period in the New Grove article on Debussy as his “most enduring education” (101). During this period he delved deeply into studying Wagner, but by 1890 he, “recognized that he had to free himself from Wagner’s influence” (Lesure and Howat 97). Laloy wrote in 1909 that, “he received his most profitable lessons from poets and painters, not from musicians” (Lesure and Howat 101). This influence of visual artists was evident as Debussy often referred to music regardless of style in visual art vocabulary and, in turn, his work came to be described by many as Impressionism, a term applied first to painting.

After a few hard years of trying to make money through composition to help his parents and himself and struggling to take what he could from his influences and create his own original style, Debussy began work on his opera Pellèas et Mèlisande. Debussy's style had congealed with this work and, “Pellèas et Mèlisande does stand out as the central work of his life for which his earlier works served as experiments” (Lockspieser 54). Debussy struggled during the sketching of this work to avoid what he referred to as the “the ghost of old Klingsor, alias Richard Wagner, appearing at the turning of a bar” (Lesure and Howat 103). This drove him to become almost anti-Wagner announcing that he would write an article entitled, “The Futility of Wagner.” While he never actually made good on this statement he managed to alienate many of his Wagnerite friends. This is not to say that Debussy ever succeeded or really wanted to completely excise his Wagnerian influence but instead “subsumed it to his own ends” (Lesure and Howat 109). However, in the process of turning away from Wagner, he fell into Russian, Asian, and Javanese influences, which he described as making Palestrina's counterpoint look like “child's play” (Lesure and Howat 104).

After 1896, most of the work on Pellèas that remained involved staging it. This process stalled until 1902 when Pellèas was finally staged. However, during the year of 1898 Debussy lost his lover and many of his friends and plunged into the depths of loneliness. It was during this time that he met Lilly Trexier, and while “he knew she was not the woman he needed,” he determined to marry her (Dietschy 106). He expressed doubts about marriage to his poet-friend Louÿs but after Louÿs's marriage Debussy feared losing Lilly and returning to the depths of his loneliness and so he wrote her a

stirring letter of proposal that she accepted (Dietschy 107). While Debussy sincerely cared for Lilly, his marriage of desperation would prove to be a mistake.

He began work on La Mer in August of 1903 while he was still married to Lilly. In October of the same year, he met Emma Bardac. While Lilly and Debussy's marriage appeared to be happy, in July of 1904, he fled to Jersey with Emma who would eventually become his wife. Lilly attempted suicide in October, 1904 in an effort to bring Debussy back to her, but it had the opposite effect of pushing him further away. Several of his friends deserted him under the impression that he was attracted to Bardac only for money. His resentment was so that he scribbled down a ferocious attack upon Lilly and his friends, "If Madam D. had not been a whore, had been an honest woman, it is probable that my friends would not have supported her so much!!" (Trezise 4). Lilly's wrath came through the press: Debussy told his publisher that he had been hounded by a press campaign that Madam Debussy had been "kind enough to launch against me" (Trezise 6). Their divorce was not settled until August of 1905. Debussy lost the divorce suit. Lilly continued to litigate for the rest of his life and even after his death. During all of this personal upheaval, Debussy finished La Mer (Trezise 6).

On October 15, 1905 La Mer was performed for the first time at the Concerts Lamoureux. The performance incited intense controversy attributed not only to Debussy's private life but also to the revolutionary nature of the music. Debussy was not pleased either. He found the conductor's, Camille Chevillard's, efforts unsatisfactory. "The combination of an unsatisfactory performance, a hostile audience still seething over Debussy's private life, and the novelty of the music, militated against a successful

outcome” (Treize 21). However, what many regard as the first performance of La Mer did not occur until January 1908 when Debussy himself conducted the work (Treize 22) and after the press had turned warm to the composer (Smith 143).

La Mer has since been called “the first great impressionistic work in music” (Lockspeiser 17), “passionate and vigorous” (Smith 119), and a “sentimental storm” (Treize 10). *The Musical Times* reported on March 1, 1908:

Such atmosphere strains, so unlike what one is accustomed to, must be listened to in a passive frame of mind, perchance in a darkened room.

There can be no question as to the cleverness of the music or its poetic import; the only thing is to get one’s ears educated, so to speak, in order to appreciate its strange idiom. (Smith 144)

Many refer to this musical dialect as Impressionism. The Institut de France was the first to call Debussy’s music Impressionistic in 1887 but the title did not stick until La Mer. Even the original programme note for La Mer states, “it is, in a word, musical impressionism, following an exotic and refined art, the formula for which is the exclusive property of the composer” (Lesure and Howat 102). The term Impressionism derives from Monet’s Impression: lever du soleil that shows water and sky merging creating a formless “impression”(Lockspeiser 18). La Mer can be said to contain similar merges as the constantly changing motifs overlap creating a smooth and flowing but ever-transitory feel. Debussy did not compose the work by the seaside, “he believed that his ‘countless recollections’ were worth more than ‘a reality whose charm generally weighs too heavily””(Dietschy 126). La Mer was not intended as direct representation of the sea and

furthermore, to interpret it as a representation is to devalue it (Trezise 36). Debussy's impressionistic harmonic style is arguably more impressionist than the impressionist paintings that created the word. Because music takes place in time and not space, Debussy used his variety of ideas and quickly changing themes that are vague enough to keep the listener from fully understanding any structure while allowing them to completely understand the emotional moment. Each emotional instance is followed by the next and while the orchestral effects change they leave behind imprints of their emotional notions. Thus, Debussy preferred that the listener be passive because the active analysis wantonly destroyed the mystery that was the core of the music (Trezise ix).

The three movements of La Mer are titled as "Three Symphonic Sketches." This is because Debussy disliked the idea of following the established symphonic form but the pieces were certainly not symphonic poems. In fact, the word "sketches" is an obvious visual reference, hinting that the work has a more "free-hand" type of form. Vallas claims that the movements might as well be called a symphony because despite its extraordinary embellishments the harmony is fairly simple (Lockspeiser 193). While La Mer can be twisted into eccentric forms of old models, the music, like the man was really his own model and this "symphony" marks a new stage among orchestral works (Lockspeiser 193).

The first movement exhibits some characteristics of an Allegro sonata but in the end is its own beast. The movement fulfills the tonal requirements of a sonata form by moving away from and back to Db but is different because there is no development of

themes. Themes are repeated but only, like Monet's studies of stationary objects at different times of the day, to show them in a different perspective. This is not to say that there is no development section but given that new motifs are being introduced even in the coda, Debussy creates an environment where development and exposition are occurring simultaneously. The two are merged and so the music flows along unconfined by a preexisting model (Trezise 53). It opens with pentatonic figures rising up through the middle strings symbolizing the sun rising in the east. The motivic activity then comes in spurts, rising and falling while the next but different "wave" of activity quickly follows. The tonality while grounded around Db is quite ambiguous much of the time. Different voices are added to build before changes of tonal center and each voice generally has its own motif, although the motifs are switched between voices. The movement seems to be going nowhere but at the coda a wane in energy is broken by the midday sun and its new motif. The movement returns to Db before the coda but at the end of the coda a Bb is emphasized leaving room for a response to this unresolved issue (Trezise 54-60).

The second movement is characterized by flowing foundational motive that are constantly deflected by diversionary interruptions of instruments in other registers. Tonality is scarce and is hinted at much more often than it is actually achieved. Several different methods of analysis have been proposed but none seem to be adequate. The movements moves along just as the sea would; some things repeat themselves but many seemingly unrelated bits of information appear out of nowhere and rapidly return to the same place. Images come to mind, but they are not necessarily specific. This movement

explores the mystery of the sea. This is why no analysis of form or tonality suffices. The music is created to defy analysis because it is written to evoke feelings of mystical wonderment. These feelings are “killed in cold blood” by the analysis of the methods used to create them (Trezise ix).

In the third movement, which is titled “The Dialogue of the Wind and the Sea,” two forces are at odds: a chaotic rhythmic force and melodic contrasting theme. The music is more violent and motifs from earlier in the work are returned and transformed into more aggressive manifestations (Trezise 69). It is in this movement that the work climaxes in a great whirling and churning of instruments but not at the very end. A second group of motifs then swirls around the principle theme until the two groups become synthesized and the work ends in a series of falling cadences that finally resolve the great storm that has formed (Trezise 73).

There are sections of La Mer that with respect to the interrelated proportions of sections within the movements seem to follow the Golden Ratio. This usually occurs at the climactic points (Lesure and Howat 110). This could explain why sections of the work are confounding analytically but quite logical to the ears. There is no proof that Debussy planned these proportions conscious of the Golden Ratio and the fact that it shows up in other works as well would be counter to Debussy’s obsessive aversion to repeating himself. However, it is quite possible that the presence of the Golden Ratio within Debussy’s work is more of an indication that the level he functioned on compositionally was more in tune with the innate nature within humans. Much of La Mer seems random under the microscope of analytical study, but the work tells a story.

While the details of the story are up for interpretation the feeling that it is a narrative holds the work together. The listener may not always hear everything twice, but the end of the journey is reached in a carefully planned manner (Trezise 76). This journey was a reality created by Debussy and he grew to disdain the term Impressionism when applied to him, “what imbeciles call impressionism, just about the least appropriate term possible” (Lesure and Howat 102). Using the title of impressionist blurred the true originality of Debussy’s work. La Mer was a turning point in Debussy’s aesthetic development, in which he no longer looked to poets or visual artists for ideals or model for his music. After La Mer he even began to completely reject the stimulus of other music, “There comes a moment in one’s life when one wants to concentrate, and now I’ve made a resolution to listen to as little music as possible”(Lesure and Howat 102). The composition of La Mer was the accomplishment that established Debussy as an original forever.

In Retrospect, La Mer was a work that was inevitable for Debussy. His father was a sailor and until Debussy’s musical talent was discovered his father dreamt of Debussy becoming a sailor as well (Lesure and Howat 96). It was a dream shared secretly by Debussy and in response to the question, “If not yourself, who would you be?” He replied in a questionnaire, “A sailor” (Dietschy 56). It was his deep life long love of the sea that was the origin of La Mer, “The sky and sea thrilled him; their immensity, their restless majesty held for him something implicitly unique and mysterious” (Dietschy 58). The sea and sky that Debussy created in La Mer continues to thrill generations as “we have seen La Mer acquire the appeal and significance...of such a

work as the Beethoven fifth Symphony at...the beginning of the century”(Lockspeiser
196).