

## Claude Debussy

### “Le Mer,” Three symphonic sketches

ACHILLE-CLAUDE DEBUSSY WAS BORN AT ST.-GERMAIN-EN-LAYE, FRANCE, ON AUGUST 22, 1862, AND DIED IN PARIS ON MARCH 25, 1918. HE BEGAN WORK ON “LA MER” DURING THE SUMMER OF 1903 AND COMPLETED THE SCORE IN MARCH 1905, THOUGH HE CONTINUED TO MAKE REVISIONS FOR MANY YEARS. CAMILLE CHEVILLARD CONDUCTED THE LAMOUREUX ORCHESTRA IN THE FIRST PERFORMANCE ON OCTOBER 15, 1905, THE AMERICAN PREMIERE BEING GIVEN ON MARCH 1, 1907, BY THE BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA UNDER THE DIRECTION OF KARL MUCK.

“LA MER” IS SCORED FOR TWO FLUTES AND PICCOLO, TWO OBOES AND ENGLISH HORN, TWO CLARINETS, THREE BASSOONS AND CONTRABASSOON (THE LATTER IN THE THIRD MOVEMENT ONLY), FOUR HORNS, THREE TRUMPETS, TWO CORNETS À PISTON (THIRD MOVEMENT ONLY), THREE TROMBONES, BASS TUBA, TIMPANI, CYMBALS, TAM-TAM, TRIANGLE, GLOCKENSPIEL, BASS DRUM, TWO HARPS, AND STRINGS. THE STRING SECTION DEBUSSY HOPED FOR WAS AN UNUSUALLY LARGE ONE, INCLUDING SIXTEEN CELLOS.

Debussy had very little real experience of the sea, and that usually from the vantage point of a sandy beach. Yet among the few views of his childhood that the unusually private composer vouchsafed to the world was the occasional affectionate reference to summer vacations at Cannes, where he learned to love the sea. His parents even made plans that he should become a sailor (a life that could hardly have suited him for long), but they were scotched when a certain Mme. Mauté, who was giving the nine-year-old boy piano lessons, discovered his musical talent, and within a year he was studying piano and theory at the Paris Conservatoire.

Still, when he came to write *La Mer* thirty years later, Debussy commented that he was able to draw upon “innumerable memories” and that these were “worth more than reality, which generally weighs down one’s thoughts too heavily.” In the meantime, Debussy’s memories were charged with images drawn from literature and art. One hint of a source for the piece comes from the title Debussy originally thought of giving the first movement: “Calm sea around the Sanguinary Islands.” This was, in fact, the title of a short story by Camille Maclair that had apparently been published in 1893 (“Îles Sanguinaires” is the French name for Sardinia and Corsica). It is even conceivable that Debussy was thinking of writing a sea-piece using this title as early as the 1890s, though in fact the first clear reference to *La Mer* comes from a letter of September 12, 1903, to André Messager: “I am working on three symphonic sketches under the title *La Mer: Mer belle aux Îles Sanguinaires; Jeux de vagues; and La Vent fait danser la mer.*” Only the second of these titles (“Play of the Waves”) remained in the final version. The first came from Maclair’s story, to be changed in the end to “From Dawn to Noon on the Sea.” The last (“The Wind Makes the Sea Dance”) was later turned into the rather more neutral “Dialogue of the Wind and the Sea.”

But the most direct inspiration for *La Mer* was probably from art. Debussy had admired the sea paintings of Turner, with their misty impalpability, which had been on display in Paris and which he may also have seen during London visits in 1902 and 1903, shortly before he began composing *La Mer*. Still more influential were the Japanese artists Hokusai and Hiroshige, whose work became enormously popular in France by the end of the nineteenth century. When the score of *La Mer* was published, Debussy requested that the cover design include a detail of Hokusai’s most famous print, “The Hollow of the Wave off Kanagawa,” the part showing the giant wave towering above and starting to curve over in its downward fall, its foaming billows frozen in a stylized pattern that almost resembles leaves on a tree (see page 75).

Debussy came to *La Mer* soon after the great success of his one completed opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*, performed to great acclaim in April 1902. In the following years, he showed a new confidence in his art, prolifically turning out the second set of *Fêtes galantes*, the first set of *Images* for piano, and the brilliant piano solo *L’Île joyeuse*, as well as *La Mer*. Moreover he may well have expected *La Mer* to be even more successful with the public than the opera had been, if only because the music was more assertive than that of the opera (whose whole dramatic point is inactivity, faithfully mirrored in the music). *La Mer*, for all of Debussy’s modesty in calling it simply “three symphonic sketches,” is nothing less than a full-fledged symphony, with interrelationships between

the movements and an artful balance of tension and repose, climax and release. It has been called the greatest symphony ever written by a French composer.

But the work at its premiere caused violent controversy, with assessments ranging from “the composer’s finest work” to “lifeless as dried plants in a herbarium.” The rehearsals had been marked by overt objections from the members of the orchestra. Debussy later told Stravinsky that the violinists had tied handkerchiefs to the tips of their bows in rehearsal as a sign of ridicule and protest. Part of the reason may have been non-musical: Debussy was, at just that time, an object of scandal. In the autumn of 1903 he had met Emma Bardac, the wife of a banker. In June 1904 he left his wife and moved into an apartment with Bardac, where they lived for the rest of Debussy’s life. In October his wife attempted suicide, and a number of Debussy’s friends broke off relations with him.

The mixed impression of the premiere was reversed when Debussy himself conducted *La Mer* in Paris on January 19 and 26, 1908—even though he had never before conducted an orchestra. Yet, as he wrote later, “One of my main impressions is that I really reached the heart of my own music.” The two performances were spectacularly successful in a way Debussy had not seen since the premiere of *Pelléas*. (To give credit where credit is, at least in part, due, the orchestra had been prepared by Eduard Colonne before the composer took over for the last rehearsals.)

By that time Karl Muck had already led the Boston Symphony Orchestra in the American premiere, on which occasion the reactions also covered a wide gamut. Kent Perkins, in the *Boston American*, decided that “one can see and hear the ocean better at Nahant or Marblehead Neck.” Louis C. Elson, in the *Advertiser*, was sarcastically negative: “Frenchmen are notoriously bad sailors, and a Gallic picture of the sea is apt to run more to stewards and basins and lemons than to the wild majesty of Poseidon....If this be Music we would much prefer to leave the Heavenly Maid until she has got over her Hysterics.” But Philip Hale (later the BSO’s program annotator), in the *Sunday Herald*, though unable to “explain” the piece, found it full of fascination: “The sketches are more than a remarkable tour de force; they are something more than essays in a strange language. The hearer must cast aside all theories about how music should be written; he must listen in good faith.” Certainly *La Mer* has never been amenable to the simple summaries of formal elements such as “sonata form” that can at least give direction to the listener’s perceptions of, say, a classical symphony. The use of orchestral color is more immediately identifiable than melodic shapes, though these play a crucial role in the work as well, and the harmonies are *sui generis*.

The first movement’s title, “From Dawn to Noon on the Sea,” is not intended to prescribe a particular program but merely to indicate a progression from near darkness, in which objects are indistinct, to brightness, in which they are clearly perceptible. (Debussy’s friend Erik Satie, always a joker, and one who loved inventing elaborate titles for his own music, once commented to Debussy that he “particularly liked the bit at a quarter to eleven.”) Debussy’s pictorialism is wonderfully evocative in its suggestion of indistinct outlines that gradually appear to view, the light evidently breaking forth in the undulating tremolos of the strings just at the moment that the principal key, D-flat major, is established. The horns resound with melodic shapes using pentatonic scales over a moving cello line that is also pentatonic. Since this five-note scale is often used by composers to symbolize the orient, at least one commentator has suggested, possibly with tongue in cheek, that Debussy chose to open in this way because, of course, the sun rises in the east! A striking change comes with a new theme in the cellos, which seem at first to bring the motion to a halt and then proceed in wavelike triplets, which build to the movement’s climax.

The second movement, “Play of the Waves,” is a lighter scherzo, scored with extreme delicacy. It is a lighter interlude between the stormy and emphatic passions of the first and last movements.

“Dialogue of the Wind and the Sea” begins with an evident pictorial image: the waves softly surging up in the low strings, answered by the winds—the woodwinds, in fact—blowing high up in chromatic shrieks. The struggle of wind and waves is developed at length, turning to material drawn from the opening movement, and building to a brilliant sunlit conclusion.

Steven Ledbetter

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THE FIRST UNITED STATES PERFORMANCES—WHICH WERE ALSO THE FIRST BOSTON SYMPHONY PERFORMANCES—of “La Mer” were led by Karl Muck on March 1 and 2, 1907, subsequent BSO performances being given also by Pierre Monteux, Serge Koussevitzky, Dimitri Mitropoulos, Richard Burgin, Charles Munch, Ernest Ansermet, Vladimir Golschmann, Jean Martinon, Pierre Boulez, Michael Tilson Thomas, Eugene Ormandy, Erich Leinsdorf, Joseph Silverstein (including the BSO’s most recent Tanglewood performance, on August 20, 1982, though David Zinman led it there more recently on July 10, 1994, with the Minnesota Orchestra), Sir Colin Davis, Pascal Verrot, Seiji Ozawa, Marek Janowski, Robert Spano, Bernard Haitink, and James Levine (the most recent subscription performances, in November 2005).