

## CLAUDE DEBUSSY

### *La mer* ("The Sea")

**BORN:** August 22, 1862, at Saint Germain-en-Laye, near Paris

**DIED:** March 25, 1918, in Paris

**WORK COMPOSED:** 1903–05

**WORLD PREMIERE:** October 15, 1905, in Paris. Camille Chevillard conducted the orchestra of the Concerts Lamoureux.

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The opening moments of this great musical seascape, besides being an uncanny evocation of dawn, present several motifs that prove to be the musical seeds from which the entire work springs. The rising-and-falling contours of the melodies Debussy fashions from these motivic kernels frequently suggest the shape or movement of waves. A notable example is the cello theme that appears midway through the first movement.

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"I am working on three symphonic sketches under the title *La mer* ... You may not know that I was supposed to have been a sailor, and only by chance did fate lead me in another direction. But I have always retained a passionate love for the sea."

So wrote Claude Debussy to a friend in September 1903. The sea was a natural subject for Debussy the tone-painter. He carried, he once said, "an endless store of memories" of the ocean gleaned from childhood sojourns on the Mediterranean and later visits to the Brittany coast. The movement of the waves, the play of sunlight on the water, the vast expanse of sea and sky surely would have impressed someone of Debussy's manifest sensitivity to nature's colors and rhythms. But while his attraction to the sea certainly had its roots in the composer's personal experience, it mirrored certain creative concerns that Debussy shared with a number of French artists of his day.

Water played an important role in the work of the French Impressionist painters, whose aesthetics were in many ways close to Debussy's. (Monet's water lilies and Renoir's "The Boat" and "The Seine at Argenteuil" provide merely a few of the more famous examples of Impressionist water scenes.) These artists' fascination with aqueous qualities was not just happenstance. Water provided the Impressionist painters with ever-changing patterns of light and form. They delighted in its visual ambiguities — its soft and shimmering reflections, its tremulous motion — and rendered these qualities, paradoxically, with precision.

Debussy similarly was fascinated by harmonic ambiguities and fluid, subtle rhythms. And like the Impressionist painters, he found inspiration in the irregular movement and muted colors of water. Far from being an isolated example, *La mer* crowns a body of water music by Debussy that includes the grotto scene from his opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*, the *Sirènes* movement from the orchestral *Nocturnes* and piano pieces bearing such titles as *In the Boat*, *Reflections in the Water*, *Gardens in the Rain* and *The Sunken Cathedral*.

The composer's description of *La mer's* three movements as "sketches" is an understatement that belies the true nature of the composition. Debussy undoubtedly intended this sobriquet to preclude any notions of a symphony in the Austro-German tradition. Yet while its character has almost nothing in common with the symphonies of Beethoven or Brahms, nor even those of Debussy's contemporaries like Mahler or Sibelius, the workings of this composition justify our thinking of it, at least to some extent, as symphonic. Each of its three movements is carefully executed on a large scale, and the important thematic cross-

references that occur within movements, and between the first and third movements, reveal a unified, over-arching conception.

Each movement has a distinct character. The first features pentatonic melodies and harmonies, the kind used in traditional Japanese and Javanese music, and various details of the orchestration also provide musical allusions to Asia. It is telling in this regard that Debussy chose a quintessentially Japanese image, Hokusai's famous print "The Wave," to appear on the cover of the first edition of the score of *La mer*. There follows a sprightly and dance-like second movement, while the third is, for Debussy, surprisingly violent. Together these "sketches" form a convincing triptych that remains, even today, remarkable in both its compositional craftsmanship and its originality.

*Scored for 2 flutes and piccolo; 2 oboes and English horn; 2 clarinets; 3 bassoons and contrabassoon; 4 horns; 3 trumpets and 2 cornets; 3 trombones; tuba; timpani and percussion; 2 harps; strings.*

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