

La Mer: Trois esquisses symphoniques (The Sea: Three Symphonic Sketches)

Claude Debussy

"You are perhaps unaware that I was intended for the noble career of a sailor and have only deviated from that path thanks to the quirk of fate," Claude Debussy wrote to his friend and fellow composer André Messager on September 12, 1903. By this time he had been at work for about a month on the piece that would grow into *La Mer*.

Debussy's father, an ex-Navy man who ran a china shop, had thought that the Navy, or perhaps merchant seamanship, would be a splendid career for his first-born son. Then the china shop went out of business, and Debussy *père* got into trouble for fighting for the Paris Commune and was sentenced to four years in prison. The term was suspended after he served a year, but as part of the deal he relinquished his civil rights. Under the circumstances, it was generally agreed that young Claude should move to a less traumatized home; he was taken in by a friend of the family who happened to be the mother-in-law of the poet Paul Verlaine. She had no interest in sending her charge off to maritime pursuits, and instead steered him to the Paris Conservatoire. Nevertheless, as Debussy further explained to Messager:

I've retained a sincere devotion to the sea. To which you'll

reply that the Atlantic doesn't exactly wash the foothills of Burgundy...! And that the result could be one of those hack landscapes done in the studio! But I have innumerable memories, and those, in my view, are worth more than a reality which, charming as it may be, tends to weigh too heavily on the imagination.

At the time of this letter, Debussy was ensconced at his in-laws' house in the town of Bichain on the western fringe of Burgundy. The piece he was writing — born of memory rather than a work of *plein-air* portraiture — comprised, as he described it in the same letter:

three symphonic sketches entitled: 1. "mer belle aux îles Sanguinaires" ["Beautiful Sea at the Sanguinaire Islands"]; 2. "jeu de vagues" ["Play of the Waves"]; 3. "le vent fait danser la mer" ["The Wind Makes the Sea Dance"]; the whole to be called *La Mer* [*The Sea*].

Only the second of the movement titles would survive as Debussy worked on his

In Short

Born: August 22, 1862, in St. Germain-en-Laye, just outside Paris, France

Died: March 25, 1918, in Paris

Work composed: begun in the summer of 1903; completed in rough draft on March 5, 1905; orchestration completed that summer. Debussy continued to tinker with details for years. It is dedicated to Jacques Durand, Debussy's publisher.

World premiere: October 15, 1905, Camille Chevillard conducting the orchestra of the Concerts Lamoureux in Paris

New York Philharmonic premiere: February 18, 1922, Willem Mengelberg, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: January 10, 2009, Ludovic Morlot, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 24 minutes

Seaside Composition

There would be a fair amount of sea in Debussy's life while he was writing *La Mer*. In 1904 he deserted his wife to live with his mistress on the island of Jersey in the English Channel. "The sea has behaved beautifully toward me and shown me all her guises," he wrote to his publisher, Jacques Durand, from the Grand Hotel Jersey that July (adding as a postscript, "Go on telling everybody you don't know my address, including my dear family").

A month later Debussy wrote to Durand again, but from a different seaside locale, this time while staying at the Grand Hotel Eastbourne in Sussex, which overlooked the English Channel from the north. From there, he wrote, "The sea unfurls itself with an utterly British correctness."

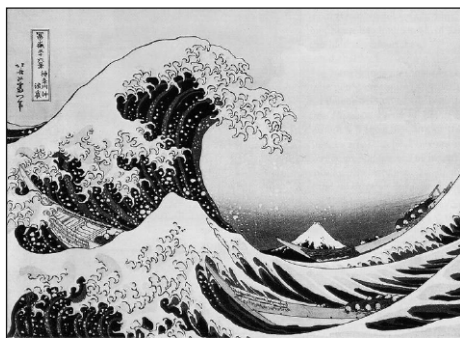
symphonic sketches over the next two years. The Sanguinaire Islands (a granitic archipelago near the entrance to the Gulf of Ajaccio in Corsica, which, by the way, Debussy never visited) would give way to the more general description "From Dawn till Noon on the Sea," and the third movement's title would also

become less specific, as an undisclosed "Dialogue of the Wind and the Sea."

When the composer titled the first movement "From Dawn till Noon on the Sea," he was leaving the door open to all manner of clever ripostes. The Boston critic Louis Elson, hearing the piece in 1907, jumped into the breach by exclaiming that he "feared we were to have a movement seven hours long. It was not so long, but it was terrible while it lasted." The wry but beneficent Erik Satie was wittier still in his assessment; after the premiere, he exclaimed to Debussy, "Ah, my dear friend, there's one particular moment that I found stunning, between half past ten and a quarter to eleven!"

Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, three bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets and two cornets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, tam-tam, orchestra bells, two harps, and strings.

Sources and Inspirations



A famous sea image from the world of art stimulated Debussy in the creation of this work: the much-reproduced Hokusai wood block print *The Hollow of the Wave off Kanagawa* (left), widely known simply as *The Wave*. Recalling the composer's house on the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne in Paris, his publisher, Jacques Durand, wrote that in the study one found "a certain colored engraving by Hokusai, representing the curl of a giant wave. Debussy was particularly enamored of this wave. It inspired him while he was composing *La Mer*, and he asked us to reproduce it on the cover of the printed score." This Durand did.