

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.” So wrote Claude Debussy to his friend and fellow composer André Messager on September 12, 1903, by which 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 goal for his first-born son. But then the china shop went out of business and Debussy *père* got into trouble 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 be moved 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 toward the Paris Conservatoire.

“Even so,” Debussy continued 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.

Debussy was ensconced just then at his in-laws’ house in the town of Bichain on the western fringe of Burgundy. And 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. “jeux de vagues” (“The 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 stick as Debussy worked on his 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

IN SHORT

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

Died: March 25, 1918, in Paris

Work composed: begun summer 1903; rough draft completed March 5, 1905, at 6 o’clock in the evening; orchestration completed that summer; revisions continuing through 1910; dedicated to Jacques Durand, Debussy’s publisher

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

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

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: May 28, 2012, at The Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine, Alan Gilbert, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 25 minutes

description “From Dawn till Noon on the Sea,” and “The Wind Makes the Sea Dance” would also move away from the specific to become an undisclosed “Dialogue of the Wind and the Sea.”

A famous sea image from the world of art also stimulated the composer: the much-reproduced Hokusai woodblock print “The Great Wave Off Kanagawa,” widely known simply as “The Wave.” Recalling Debussy’s house on the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne in Paris, 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.

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, encountering the piece in 1907, jumped into the breach 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!”

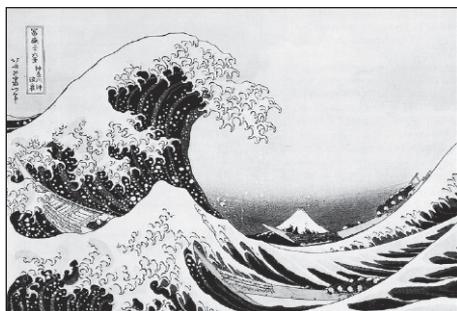
Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, three bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets and two cornets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, tam-tam, orchestra bells, two harps, and strings.

Views and Reviews

La Mer was not successful at its premiere, due in part to a blockish interpretation that was at odds with the piece’s inherent lyricism. Pierre Lalo — the influential critic of *Le Temps* and a general supporter of Debussy’s music — was exasperated after the first hearing, writing:

For the first time, listening to a descriptive work by Debussy, I have the impression of standing, not in front of nature, but in front of a reproduction of nature; a wonderfully refined, ingenious, and carefully composed reproduction, but a reproduction nonetheless. ... I do not hear, I do not see, I do not smell the sea.

Debussy responded with supreme grace:



The Great Wave Off Kanagawa, by the Japanese artist Hokusai

Mon cher ami,
There’s no problem in your not liking *La Mer* and I’ve no intention of complaining about it. I shall perhaps suffer regret that you haven’t understood me and astonishment at finding you (although one such occasion doesn’t establish a habit) in agreement with your fellow music critics. ... I love the sea and I’ve listened to it with the passionate respect it deserves. If I’ve been inaccurate in taking down what it dictated to me, that is no concern of yours or mine.