



Achille-Claude Debussy

(August 22, 1862 – March 25, 1918)

Achille-Claude Debussy was a French composer. Along with Maurice Ravel he is considered the most prominent figure working within the style commonly referred to as Impressionist music, though he himself intensely disliked the term when applied to his compositions. Debussy was not only among the most important of all French composers but also a central figure in all European music at the turn of the twentieth century. His music virtually defines the transition from late-Romantic music to twentieth century modernist music. In French literary circles, the style of this period was known as Symbolism, a movement that directly inspired Debussy both as a composer and as an active cultural participant.

Early life and studies

Claude Debussy was born in St. Germain-en-Laye in 1862. His father owned a china shop and his mother was a seamstress. Debussy began music instruction when he was seven years old. His talents soon became evident and at age ten Debussy entered the Paris Conservatoire. During Debussy's twelve years at the Paris Conservatoire beginning in 1872, he studied with Ernest Guiraud, César Franck and other significant figures of the era. From 1880 to 1882 He was employed by the patron of Tchaikovsky, Nadezhda von Meck, giving music lessons to her children.

As the winner of the Prix de Rome, he received a scholarship by the Académie des Beaux-Arts, which included a four-year residence at the Villa Medici, the French Academy in Rome to further his studies (1885-1887). According to letters from this period, Debussy often was depressed and unable to compose, but he also met Franz Liszt, and finally composed four pieces, which were sent to the Academy; the symphonic ode *Zuleima*, after Heinrich Heine, the orchestral piece *Printemps*, and the cantata *La damoiselle élue* (1887-1888), which was criticized by the Academy as "bizarre" and in which some stylistic features of Debussy's later style emerged for the first time. The fourth piece was the *Fantaisie* for piano and orchestra, which was still indebted to César Franck's music and withdrawn by the composer himself.

With his visits to Bayreuth (1888, 1889) Debussy was exposed to Wagnerian opera, which was to have a lasting impact on his later work. Wagner's influence is evident in the *La damoiselle élue* and the *Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire* (1889) but other songs of the period, notably the settings of Verlaine—*Ariettes oubliées*, *Trois mélodies*, *Fêtes galantes*—all are in a more capricious style.

Later, during 1889 the Exposition Universelle in Paris, Debussy heard Javanese gamelan music. Although direct citations of gamelan scales, melodies, rhythms, or ensemble textures have not been located in any of Debussy's own compositions, the equal-tempered pentatonic scale appears in his music of this time and afterward.

Early works

Beginning in the 1890s, Debussy developed his own musical language largely independent of Wagner's style and heavy emotionalism. In contrast to the enormous works of Wagner and other late-romantic composers, Debussy chose to write in smaller, more accessible forms. Debussy's String Quartet in G minor (1893) paved the way for his later, more daring harmonic exploration. In this work he utilised the Phrygian mode as well as less standard scales, such as the whole-tone, which creates a sense of floating, ethereal harmony.

The *Suite bergamasque* (1890) recalls rococo decorousness with a modern cynicism and puzzlement. This suite contains one of Debussy's most popular pieces, *Clair de Lune*.

Influenced by the contemporary symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, Debussy wrote one of his most famous works, the revolutionary *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. In contrast to the large orchestras so favoured by late-romanticism, Debussy wrote this piece for a smaller ensemble, emphasizing instrumental colour and timbre. Despite Mallarmé himself, and colleague and friend Paul Dukas having been impressed by the piece, it was controversial at its premiere. Composer Camille Saint-Saëns thought it "pretty" but lacking any "style".[citation needed] *Prélude* subsequently placed Debussy into the spotlight as one of the leading composers of the era.

Middle works

The three *Nocturnes* (1899), include characteristic studies in veiled harmony and texture as demonstrated in *Nuages*; exuberance in *Fêtes*; and whole-tones in *Sirènes*. *La Mer* (1903-1905) essays a more symphonic form, with a finale that works themes from the first movement, although the middle movement, *Jeux de vagues*, which proceeds much less directly and with more variety of colour. The three *Images pour orchestre* (1905-1911) are more loosely linked, and the largest, *Ibéria*, is itself a triptych medley of Spanish allusions and fleeting impressions.

In reaction to Wagner and his extremely elaborate late-romantic operas,[citation needed] Debussy wrote the symbolist opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*, which would be his only complete opera. Based on the play by Maurice Maeterlinck, the opera proved to be immensely influential to younger French composers, including Maurice Ravel. These works brought a fluidity of rhythm and colour quite new to Western music.

During this period Debussy wrote much for the piano. The set of pieces entitled *Pour le piano* (1901) utilises rich harmonies and textures which would later prove important in jazz music. His first volume of *Images pour piano* (1904–1905) combine harmonic innovation with poetic suggestion: *Reflets dans l'eau* is a musical description of rippling water; *Hommage à Rameau*, the second piece, is a slow and yearningly nostalgic. It takes as its inspiration a melody of from Jean-Philippe Rameau's, *Castor et Pollux*.

The evocative *Estampes* for piano (1903) give impressions of exotic locations. Debussy came into contact with Javanese gamelan music during the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle. *Pagodes* is the directly inspired result, aiming for an evocation of the pentatonic structures employed by the Javanese music.[2] Debussy wrote his famous *Children's Corner Suite* (1909) for his beloved daughter, whom he nicknamed *Chou-chou*. The suite recalls classicism—the opening piece *Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum* refers to Muzio Clementi's collection of instructional piano compositions *Gradus ad Parnassum*, as well as a new wave of rag-time music. In the popular final piece of the suite, *Golliwog's Cakewalk*, Debussy also pokes fun at Richard Wagner by mimicking the opening bars of Wagner's prelude to *Tristan and Isolde*.

The first book of *Preludes* (1910), twelve in total, proved to be his most successful work for piano. The *Preludes* are frequently compared to those of Chopin. Debussy's preludes are replete with rich, unusual and daring harmonies. They include the popular *La Fille aux Cheveux de Lin* (*The Girl with the Flaxen Hair*) and *La Cathédrale Engloutie* ("The Engulfed Cathedral"). Debussy wanted people to respond intuitively to these pieces and so he placed the titles at the end of each one in the hope that listeners would not make stereotype images as they listened.

The music for Gabriele d'Annunzio's mystery play *Le martyre de St. Sébastien* (1911), a lush and dramatic work and written in only two months, is remarkable in sustaining a late antique modal atmosphere that otherwise was touched only in relatively short piano pieces.

Late works

Debussy's harmonies and chord progressions frequently exploit dissonances without any formal resolution. Unlike in his earlier work, he no longer hides discords in lush harmonies. The forms are far more irregular and fragmented. The whole tone scale dominates much of Debussy's late music.

His two last volumes of works for the piano, the *Études* (1915) interprets similar varieties of style and texture purely as pianistic exercises and includes pieces that develop irregular form to an extreme as well as others influenced by the young Igor Stravinsky (a presence too in the suite *En blanc et noir* for two pianos, 1915). The rarefaction of these works is a feature of the last set of songs, the *Trois poèmes de Mallarmé* (1913), and of the *Sonata for flute, viola and harp* (1915), though the sonata and its companions also recapture the inquisitive Verlainian classicism.

With the sonatas of 1915–1917, there is a sudden shift in the style. These works recall Debussy's earlier music, in part, but also look forward, with leaner, simpler structures. Despite the thinner textures of the violin sonata (1917) there remains an undeniable richness in the chords themselves. This shift parallels the movement commonly known as neo-classicism which was to become popular after Debussy's death. Debussy planned a set of six sonatas, but this plan was cut short by his death in 1918 so that he only completed three (cello, flute-violin-harp and violin sonatas).

The last orchestral work by Debussy, the ballet *Jeux* (1912) written for Serge Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*, contains some of his strangest harmonies and textures in a form that moves freely over its own field of motivic connection. At first *Jeux* was overshadowed by Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, composed in the same year as *Jeux* and premiered only two weeks later by the same ballet company. Decades later, composers such as Pierre Boulez and Jean Barraqué pointed out parallels to Anton Webern's serialism in this work. Other late stage works, including the ballets *Khamma* (1912) and *La boîte à joujoux* (1913) were left with the orchestration incomplete, and were later completed by Charles Koechlin and André Caplet, who also helped Debussy with the orchestration of *Gigues* (from *Images pour orchestre*) and *Le martyre de St. Sébastien*.

The second set of *Preludes* for piano (1913) features Debussy at his most avant-garde, sometimes utilising dissonant harmonies to evoke moods and images, especially in the mysterious *Canope*; the title refers to a burial urn which stood on Debussy's working desk and evokes a distant past. The pianist Claudio Arrau considered the piece to be one of Debussy's greatest preludes: "It's miraculous that he created, in so few notes, this kind of depth."

Musical style

Rudolph Réti points out these features of Debussy's music, which "established a new concept of tonality in European music":

1. Glittering passages and webs of figurations which distract from occasional absence of tonality;
2. Frequent use of parallel chords which are "in essence not harmonies at all, but rather 'chordal melodies', enriched unisons";
3. Bitonality, or at least bitonal chords;
4. Use of the whole-tone and pentatonic scale;
5. Unprepared modulations, "without any harmonic bridge."

He concludes that Debussy's achievement was the synthesis of monophonic based "melodic tonality" with harmonies, albeit different from those of "harmonic tonality" (Reti, 1958).

The application of the term "impressionist" to Debussy and the music he influenced is a matter of intense debate within academic circles. One side argues that the term is a misnomer, an inappropriate label which Debussy himself opposed. In a letter of 1908, he wrote "I am trying to do 'something different'-in a way realities-what the imbeciles call 'impressionism' is a term which is as poorly used as possible, particularly by art critics." The opposing side argues that Debussy may have been reacting to unfavorable criticism at the time, and the negativity that critics associated with impressionism. It can be argued that he would have been pleased with application of the current definition of impressionism to his music.

Debussy in film and pop culture

Debussy's music has been used many times in film and television.

It was first used legally in 1948 in the David O. Selznick film *Portrait of Jennie* in which various compositions ("Reverie," "Arabesque" the "Nocturnes" and "La fille aux cheveux de lin" inter alii) can be heard. His music has featured in numerous films, plays, and television programs ever since. The film director Ken Russell made a visually stunning film about Debussy for the famous BBC arts programme *Monitor* in the late 1960s. It featured a particularly evocative staging of *Fetes* (from *Nocturnes*) showing a crowd of revellers with torches coming out of the night onto a beach.

Clair de lune is especially popular, having appeared in George Stevens's *Giant* (1956) when played on the organ in the mansion featured in the film, *Casino Royale* (1967), *The Right Stuff* (1983), *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997), *Ocean's Eleven* (2001), *Ocean's Thirteen* (2007), *Man on Fire* (2004) and *Dog Soldiers* (2002), to name a few. Terrance McNally's play *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* uses the work as remedy to a wounded relationship, and the British Granada TV drama series *Jewel in the Crown* (1984) invokes Walter Gieseking's recording of this piece played on a Victrola during Daphne Manners' date with Ronald Merrick.

Arabesque No 1 has featured in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963) -- played by the Tippi Hedren character -- and in *A Good Year* (2006), and used as the theme to the TV programme *Star Gazer*. It is frequently referenced by characters in Shunji Iwai's film *All About Lily Chou-Chou* (2001). *Rêverie* was adapted by American bandleader Larry Clinton into a popular song, "My Reverie", which was recorded on several occasions in the late 1930s and '40s by musicians Bing Crosby, Ella Fitzgerald, Mildred Bailey, and others.

La Cathédrale Engloutie, from 'Preludes', takes an electronic rendition in John Carpenter's *Escape from New York* (1981) as underscore for a futuristic Manhattan. The melancholic *Des pas sur la neige* was used as incidental music in the BBC's 1978 adaptation of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* starring Joanna David and Anna Massey.

Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir is used along the credits of *The Usual Suspects*, both at the start and at the end.

The Seduction of Claude Debussy (1999) by the Art of Noise is a concept album depicting the life and works of Debussy. Featuring narration from the actor John Hurt and guest vocal performances from Rakim and Donna Lewis, this ambitious concept album blends excerpts of Debussy's music with a diverse range of 20th century musical influences such as drum and bass, opera, hip-hop and jazz.

The Pet Shop Boys produced a song called "Left to My Own Devices" in which Neil Tennant sings, "Che Guevara and Debussy to a disco beat." In the late 1980s, when the duo toured Great Britain, a dancer dressed as Debussy when this song was performed.

In 1940 Walt Disney prepared a short movie based on Debussy's *Clair de Lune* to add to the famous movie "Fantasia". But due to the excessive length of the film, the part was cut off. In the latest release of the movie in DVD the piece has been restored as special feature.

In 1976 The Alan Parsons Project featured Debussy's unfinished "Le Projet", inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," on their album *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* dedicated to Edgar Allan Poe. This being the first album of the duo Parson-Woolfson, Debussy's operatic work may have inspired the name of the group itself.