

Debussy: *La mer*



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Debussy: 1903–1905

Life

The sea's influence seems to have been with Debussy from his earliest years, for references to it recur like a leitmotif through his correspondence and writings. In 1889, as a young man a few years away from his first great successes, he was asked in a questionnaire what he would like to be if not himself, to which he replied, 'a sailor'.¹ René Peter, a friend, recounted this colourful portrait of the composer during a sea trip from St Lunaire to Cancale, described here by Keith Spence:

To get to Cancale by sea you have to round the dangerous headland of the Pointe de Grouin into the Bay of Mont St Michel, and the party was presumably at about this stage of the voyage (20 minutes from Cancale, says Peter), and feeling thoroughly miserable . . . A storm was getting up, and the boatowner and his mate were grumbling. First Germaine was sick, then the other passengers, except for Debussy and René himself. There was a cloudburst overhead, and in the midst of freezing rain the boat danced up and down 'like a porpoise'. Debussy was thoroughly enjoying himself, but the boatman got furious and accused him of risking all their lives for the sake of 'sensations fortes'. To which Debussy replied: 'There is one powerful sensation I have never experienced, the sensation of danger! It is not unpleasant. You are alive!'

They recovered and had lunch in Cancale, after which all but Debussy went for a walk. When the friends got back to take the carriage home to St Lunaire, they found a note from him that read, 'I have been smitten not with seasickness, but with sea-seeing-sickness'. It was several days before they saw him again.²

Water had featured in Debussy's music before *La mer* in 'En bateau' (*Petite suite*, 1888–9), 'Le jet d'eau' (*Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire*, 1889), 'La mer est plus belle' (*Trois mélodies*, 1891), 'De grève' (*Proses lyriques*, 1892), 'Sirènes' (*Nocturnes*, 1897–9), 'Jardins sous la pluie' (*Estampes*, 1903), and *L'isle joyeuse* (1904); the tranquil 'Reflets dans l'eau' (*Images I*, 1904–5) was completed after *La mer*, so prompting Dietschy to reflect that 'If *La mer* can be said to contain

the sentimental storm that then beset Debussy, “Reflets dans l’eau” can be said to mark its conclusion.’³ Nature had spoken to him and he allowed his emotional world to be absorbed in his response; he wrote:

Who can know the secret of musical composition? The sound of the sea, the outline of a horizon, the wind in the leaves, the cry of a bird – these set off complex impressions in us. And suddenly, without the consent of anyone on this earth, one of these memories bursts forth, expressing itself in the language of music. It carries its own harmony within itself.⁴

It is not surprising that one of the most impressionable and turbulent periods in his life should have produced *L’isle joyeuse* and *La mer*, his most consummate responses to the sea.

Before considering Debussy’s private circumstances at the time he began *La mer*, we should consider the state of his career. He was, as ever, in severe financial straits; his was a Bohemian existence that took sustenance when it was offered, and would rather spend the house-keeping on oriental trinkets than food. Although on the surface his life may have seemed to preserve the shadowy existence of the early years, in the musical world of Paris and beyond, Debussy had long been a semi-establishment figure, and he was now becoming a *cause célèbre* thanks to the astonishing success of *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 1902 (première at the Opéra Comique). Since 1888 he had been an active member of the respectable Société Nationale alongside the very man so often cited as his antipode, Vincent d’Indy (with whom he generally enjoyed cordial relations). The Société had been skilfully wooed by Debussy, and it was instrumental in arranging many first performances for him; in return, Debussy served on its committee in 1893–4 and later years.⁵ Connoisseurs had recognised in the *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* (1892–4) a masterpiece of French music, a triumphant musical incarnation of contemporary intellectual currents, but it took a success in the opera house – still the greatest prize of all – to set in train a movement that revolted the composer, Debussyism. In 1903 the Debussysts were only just getting into their stride; within a few years Charles Francis Caillard and José de Bérès published their infamous *Le cas Debussy* (Paris, 1910); the retiring man at the centre of it all had become coffee-table gossip.

The period of composition spans a time of upheaval and renewal in Debussy’s personal life, but when he began *La mer* he appeared still happily married to ‘Lilly’ née Rosalie Texier (they married on 19 October 1899). In August 1903, when we first hear of the composition of *La mer*, Debussy was staying with his parents-in-law at Bichain par Villeneuve-la-Guyard, where

he was with his 'little wife'. He seems to have been happy enough there, taking long walks in the country and visiting nearby beauty spots, including the cathedral at Sens.⁶

Returning to Paris on 1 October 1903, Debussy met Emma Bardac (*née* Moyses) for the first time. They continued to meet, often at Lilly's insistence (little did she know!). She was 'small, stylish, youthful in appearance, open to all emotions, simple, forthright' exuding 'an insinuating charm to which all sorts of men were responsive', including Fauré, who had been intimately associated with her; he wrote *La bonne chanson* (1892–4) for her.⁷

On 16 July 1904 Debussy wrote to Lilly in an intimate, apparently lovingly way after receiving a telegram from her, which he described as 'an extra dish . . . and the nicest of all'. He apologises for putting her 'deliberately on the train', and wishes her to understand that he thinks he has 'found a new path', which he dare not abandon, 'whatever the cost'. He begs her not to be resentful. There is also a potentially barbed reference to his need to support her in the manner to which she has become accustomed.⁸ After the break-up of their marriage, and possibly in preparation for the ensuing litigation, he jotted down a private record (in a notebook) of the events surrounding this trying time, hitherto little known, in which he criticises Lilly for her dissimulation and profligacy.⁹ The July letter, then, would have been a disturbing missive for Lilly, difficult to decode. In the same month, what had been darkly hinted at in the letter became painfully clear to Lilly: Debussy fled to Jersey with Emma. The letter was, it seems, an ingenious farewell. What makes Debussy's conduct seem duplicitous is the letter he wrote to Emma on Thursday [9 June 1904] requesting, 'with true feeling', a private talk. This is a sign that things were getting serious between them well over a month before their flight to Jersey when Debussy was still signing his letters to Lilly, 'Yours passionately, tenderly'.¹⁰

In May 1904 Debussy recorded five of his *Ariettes oubliées* and a single excerpt from *Pelléas* with his first and favourite Mélisande, Mary Garden, a friend of Lilly. She recalled that in June of that year Debussy had declared his love for her! She turned him down; having no feelings for Debussy as a man, she also felt that he was more in love with her Mélisande than her womanhood. If her testimony is reliable and the date correct – both are disputed – Debussy's state of mind in 1904 must, to say the least, have been confused (Garden mistakenly places the consolidation of his relationship with Emma in September, some months after his declaration to her).¹¹

Debussy saw Lilly's attempted suicide on 13 October 1904 as a staged event, for on his way to Dieppe he received a suicide note, possibly one of four (see

below), that was apparently intended to reach him after the event. He rushed back to their home in the rue Cardinet to find her wounded but fully conscious on the floor. In spite of the request that she be allowed to die unless he returned to her, Debussy summoned an ambulance – his last husbandly act. She finally entered a private clinic at 33, rue Blanche.¹² Garden describes a visit to her:

They took me into a tiny room, and there lay Lilly, with a bullet in her breast, wanting to die because her Claude had not come back to her . . . lying underneath Lilly's left breast was a round dark hole where the bullet had gone in, without touching anything vital – and Lilly didn't die. They never got the bullet out. That little token of her love for Claude Debussy stayed with her till she died.¹³

Lilly's action merely reinforced Debussy's bitterness. Several friends deserted him, perhaps believing that he was as attracted to the Bardac fortune as to Emma. His resentment was such that he scribbled down a ferocious attack upon Lilly and his friends, then, wondering at the vehemence of it, modified its language slightly, while leaving no doubt as to its import: 'If Madame D had not been a *whore* had been an honest woman, it is probable that my friends would not have supported her so much. !!'¹⁴ I have not found other direct references to Lilly's possible infidelity; perhaps the situation was so intolerable that he wrote down the first thing that came to mind. On the other hand, he took the trouble to change the wording and inscribed two large exclamation marks underneath.

A few weeks later, when he made the record of these traumatic events in the notebook, the news of her suicide attempt had reached *Le Figaro*, and Debussy's misdemeanours were public property. The most informative parts of the notebook are transcribed below. Some entries are bizarre, others cryptic; all of them give a unique glimpse of his state of mind at the time he was working on the last two movements of *La mer*; apart from some letters to Lilly recently brought to light, there is little else in his literary legacy to compare with this:¹⁵

On telephoning rue Blanche for news, it was never in accord with the news given to my father.

Madame D[ebussy] claimed that she wanted to allow herself to die from hunger. The maid, who never left her, claims that she took four egg yolks per day in tea.

The maid, who did not want to die of hunger, was only allowed one egg at each meal.

Suicide attempt on 13 October – with four warning letters – nothing in the newspapers until 3 November.

The partial [*illegible*] patient, but she was able to make visits ten days later.

Claims that I belittled rue Blanche. There is not a word of truth in that.

I never sought a medico-legal intervention, thinking that she would have nothing to assert in relation to past deeds, which *I* alone can tell, having had to bear them alone, and that a feature of Madame D is never to say or show anything in front of strangers.

Anger – even in front of her own people – violence towards the servants.

Disputes over money, although I had left her more than I could afford (debts) – the subject of bitter reproaches.

Lies of all kinds, saying that my part in it was slight.

Constant dissimulations. For example, has never loved me – has never sought anything other than an improved position. Moreover she was always wrong and avenged herself in exercising a daily tyranny on my thoughts, my contacts – the material proof of this is my production of the last four years.

Denied weakness to these medicos (*MM. de Santé*), since she finds new strength for questioning people.

Acting. Dissimulation.

Madame D did her father for six hundred francs, supposedly to pay for a supper which was given this month for her father. *Where did these six hundred francs come from?*

When a person seriously wants to die, they don't seek admission to a clinic like that in the rue Blanche.

Could the doctors not see that the clinic did not involve costs of this kind?

To preserve herself as a married woman (*Se conserver mariée*) !!!

The final humiliation came when Henri Bataille, following well-established literary tradition, based his play *La femme nue* on Debussy's marital affairs, drawing on intimate knowledge of the protagonists. The play was a great success and includes a scene in which Lolette (Lilly) asks Pierre (Debussy) in front of the Princess (Emma) if she (Lolette) must 'return to prostitution'.¹⁶

Even before these events, Debussy's mood had changed from elation to depression. From Dieppe (where he stayed after Jersey from August to September 1904) he penned these unhappy lines to André Messager: 'I feel nostalgia for the Claude Debussy who worked so enthusiastically on *Pelléas* – between ourselves, I've not found him since, which is one reason for my misery, among others.' After Lilly's suicide attempt, he confesses to his publisher Jacques Durand that he is beginning to be 'hounded' by the press

campaign ‘Madame Debussy has been kind enough to launch against me’ – all he wants is peace and freedom from ‘material complications’ (January 1905). Finally, on 7 August 1905, he is able to tell Durand that the nightmare is over – his divorce had come through on 2 August. He has done his duty as a gentleman and is determined ‘to live as I want to without bothering about the cheap literature my case will give rise to . . . the facts are really childishly simple’.¹⁷ In fact, Debussy lost the divorce suit, and for the rest of his life, and his heirs’ beyond it, litigation from Lilly continued.

Something closer to optimism surfaces in the letters from Eastbourne in 1905. Lilly Debussy had changed her name back to Texier (legally, at any rate), Paris was insufferable – a plague of litigation and scandal – but at least in Eastbourne he had the satisfaction of seeing *La mer* through to publication. Whatever else, his muse had reawakened. The first performance of *La mer* did not build significantly on the success of *Pelléas* at first. This keenly-anticipated event was an anti-climax; but for earlier compositions like *L’après-midi* and *Nocturnes*, ‘*La mer* washed up these shells and, as it withdrew, it revealed them’.¹⁸ Debussy was now regarded by many as Paris’s most important composer.

At the end of the *La mer* period, Debussy acquired limited financial independence after assigning rights of his future works, including *La mer*, exclusively to the publisher Durand in exchange for an annual stipend. Marriage to Emma (20 January 1908) after she divorced her banker husband (1905) should have made Debussy wealthy: she had a rich (and suitably aged) uncle. That he had disinherited her (4 February 1907) meant that Debussy was never to enjoy the material luxury he craved.

It would be foolish to leave the impression that *La mer* is ‘about’ the breakdown of his marriage. We cannot even say how much of it was composed during or after the breakdown, except for the valuable evidence that the notebook containing the ‘journal’ includes sketches for the latter part of the second movement and much of the third.¹⁹ It seems reasonable, therefore, to conclude that the troubled waters of the ‘Dialogue’ reflect the upheaval, while the first movement and much of the second were, in Dietschy’s provocative words, ‘the premonition of the personal events that would follow . . . Hearing the eternal rumble of the sea as it broke upon the shore, he saw from a distance the purplish waves charging like buffaloes.’²⁰ Given Debussy’s openness to change and the dynamism inspired by the liberating time on Jersey, it may well be that *La mer* became, even during its composition, one of his most personal works, and one of few to deal directly with such deep emotions, channelled through what was for him the most powerful force in nature.

Works

Throughout the known period of *La mer*'s composition (1903–5), Debussy was truly caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. In the month he announced the start of work on *La mer*, he told a friend he was working on his operatic version of Poe's *The Devil in the Belfry*, a project he worked on from 1902 to 1911.²¹ Together with an opera based on *The Fall of the House of Usher* (see chapter 4), this should have given the operatic stage a diptych of short operas with strongly contrasted stories. *The Devil in the Belfry* (1835) is the macabre story of a 'rascally little scapegrace' who inflicts chaos on the perfectly running and regimented calm of the Dutch borough of Vondervotteimittiss by making the belfry clock strike thirteen times at noon. One episode and virtually all the libretto were completed (sketches dated August 1903 survive). *La mer* and *The Devil* are related by little more than a thin thread, coincidental perhaps, but one that Debussy cannot have been unaware of: just as *La mer* plays out a natural drama that must have reflected something of the upheaval in his life, so the devil in Poe's story disrupts the routine of Vondervotteimittiss.

Debussy wrote several multi-movement works, most of which lean to the three-movement organisation of *La mer*. The earliest to survive are a movement of a youthful symphony, which exists only in piano-duet form (the manuscript indicates three movements, 'andante', 'air de ballet', 'final', but only an allegro survives), and a piano trio in three movements. Neither work can be accredited with much originality or interest, yet both show how Debussy's style was to develop. One of their most striking features is the lack of clear motivic definition of subject groups. Melodies move primarily by step without making a firm imprint motivically. Rhetorical antecedent–consequent continuations are few and far between, indicating that Debussy had already rejected the strong motivic gestures, with all their denotative import, that he would have heard *ad nauseam* in French and Russian symphonies (see Ex. 1). An effective method of melodic propagation – one that avoided the rhetorical means Debussy mistrusted while still possessing good developmental potential – had still to be found, but his dissatisfaction with the old is not in doubt.

The same problem arises in the undervalued *Fantaisie* for piano and orchestra (1889–90): the opening motif is unmemorable. Here, however, it is compounded by what Vallas and others describe as an excessively heavy adherence to traditional forms. Its most obvious shortcoming for Debussy would have been its close resemblance to d'Indy's *Symphonie sur un chant montagnard français*, especially in the finale; he would have been at his most

Ex. 1 Symphony in B minor, bars 1–5

Allegro ben marcato

sensitive in such a matter, not least because it was d'Indy who was proposing to give the première. Debussy withdrew it after rehearsals because d'Indy intended to give the first movement alone, though he may have welcomed this pretext for the other reasons cited. Following this relatively unsuccessful sortie into instrumental forms, Debussy wrote his String Quartet in Franckian cyclic form, achieving a brilliant success within the formal limitations he had set himself. One reason for this is Debussy's discovery of a melodic style that is both distinctive in its intervallic and rhythmic profile, and free from the rhetorical assumptions of his contemporaries. Having found his mature style in an unprecedented freedom of melodic generation, Debussy could now proceed with the string of masterpieces that mark his first maturity. Residual cyclic elements percolate through the multi-movement orchestral works that followed – *Nocturnes*, *La mer*, and *Ibéria*.

For many years it was customary, and acceptable, to perform the first two movements of the *Nocturnes* alone (partly to avoid the expense of a female chorus). David Cox articulates a commonly held view: 'There is no overall unity about the *Nocturnes* . . . because each movement is quite different in style and texture from the others. The same is not true of *La mer* – which is in fact the best symphony ever written by a Frenchman.'²² A point implicitly reinforced by Debussy when he objected to the dismemberment of *La mer*: "'Jeux de vagues" [second movement] played by itself doesn't seem to me to have the same significance . . . and when you have three children, you can't just take one of them to the Concerts Colonne! . . . The devil take your programme.'²³

Without claiming that *Nocturnes* is as close to the symphonic ideal as *La mer*, it is arguable that the links between the three *Nocturnes* are stronger than Cox allows. Towards the end of the second of them, 'Fêtes', Debussy's liquidation of the main motivic features brings with it references to both the first and third movements; the relaxation of the fast tempo also draws their expressive characters closer together. Similarly in 'Sirènes', the closing stages produce

a synoptic reminiscence of the previous movements in a manner quite distinct from that of *La mer*; yet the effect striven for is unity across the three movements. These convergences of movements run in harness with a cyclic use of a wave-like motif heard at the opening of ‘Nuages’. *La mer*’s sense of progression from the first movement to the last, characterised by Howat as a hybrid of sonata form in three movements, is not matched in *Nocturnes*, and in other respects they are characteristic of Debussy’s earlier style.²⁴ The form of all three movements is ternary, with the boundaries blurred in ‘Nuages’ and ‘Sirènes’. The harmonic palette is more conservative, and the polyphonic wealth of *La mer* is barely discernible. Counterpoint takes the form of combining motifs in ‘Fêtes’ in a manner reminiscent of Berlioz (Debussy engages in a similarly conventional display of contrapuntal technique in the last movement, ‘Ballet’, of his *Petite suite* for piano duet).

The three orchestral *Images* (1905–12) were first performed separately with the composer’s approval, though the three movements of *Ibéria*, the second *Image*, are bound together by motivic recurrences, exchanges of mood, and an *attacca* from ‘Les parfums de la nuit’ to ‘Le matin d’un jour de fête’, the last movement. Indeed, a basis of the work is the dissolution of one movement’s characteristics into the next. Unlike the movements of *La mer* and *Ibéria*, the three pieces that make up *Estampes* and the first series of *Images* do not seem to make strong claims on each other as a unity; they are, like the orchestral *Images*, collections.

The most substantial achievement of the period of *La mer*, apart from *La mer*, was Debussy’s formation of his mature piano style in *Estampes*, *L’isle joyeuse*, *Masques* (1904), and the first series of *Images*. This remarkable series of works reflected Ravel’s pioneering piano writing as well as Debussy’s own adjustment to the instrument. Here, at last, one finds the compositional outcome of the young Debussy’s much-documented experimentation with texture and harmony at the keyboard, which had so outraged and fascinated colleagues and teachers. *L’isle joyeuse* with its ecstatic lyricism and ‘symphonic breadth’ is the ideal companion piece to *La mer*. Its proportional structure is, on the evidence of Howat’s analysis, as carefully wrought as *La mer*’s, and it too makes use of the acoustic scale (see chapter 7). *D’un cahier d’esquisses* (1903) is in D \flat , the tonic of *La mer*, and makes extensive use of a rhythmic figure that dominates the cello theme of the second principal section (first movement); there is, therefore, a possibility that this piece, about whose genesis little is known, is a spin-off from the composition of *La mer*.

Two song publications, *Trois chansons de France* (1904) and *Fêtes galantes II* (1904), exhibit no obvious connections with *La mer* other than the use of

D \flat major harmony (*La mer*'s final tonic) in the central section of 'Colloque sentimental' (*Fêtes galantes*); significantly, the ghostly lovers address each other in lines like 'Does your heart always beat at the mention of my name'. There is no motivic connection with *La mer*, but the tonal parallel perhaps reinforces the claim that *La mer* encompasses Debussy's 'sentimental storm'.

Danse sacrée et danse profane (1904) is a minor work commissioned by the Maison Pleyel to demonstrate a new chromatic harp without pedals in 1904. The use of continual variation, culminating in cumulative motivic statements, is quite distinct from the style of *La mer*. In contrast, the *Rapsodie* for saxophone and orchestra (1901–11) was, for Debussy, one of the most hateful of commissions; it was begun in 1901 and apparently took up his time in 1903. It was finally sent to the American sponsor Elisa Hall in piano score with some of the bridge passages uncomposed. Its excellent completion and orchestration by Roger Ducasse (1919) reveal one of Debussy's most exotic and at times adventurous conceptions. Oriental sounding arabesque-like melodies make extensive use of modes incorporating intervals of the augmented second, a type wholly excluded from *La mer*. Nevertheless, many have detected an oriental influence upon *La mer* in such passages as the pentatonic melody at I/33, drawing parallels with the sound of gamelan ensembles that made such an impression on Debussy at the Paris Exhibition in 1889. A 1904 commission to provide incidental music for *King Lear* at the Odéon came to nothing. He completed just two orchestral interludes, a fanfare, and 'King Lear's Sleep'. Their main point of interest in a study of *La mer* is that Debussy was working on the project during the period he worked on the end of 'Jeux de vagues' (*La mer*'s second movement) and 'Dialogue du vent et de la mer' (third movement). The most astounding feature of this prolific turnover of works is the diversity of formal, tonal, and motivic procedures followed: even in such a short period, Debussy's abhorrence of self-repetition triumphed.