

## PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

### Claude Debussy

Born August 22, 1862, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France.

Died March 25, 1918, Paris, France.

### *La mer*

Debussy began *La mer* in 1903 and completed it in March 1905. The first performance was given on October 15 of that year in Paris. The score calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets, three bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets and two cornets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, cymbals, tam-tam, triangle, glockenspiel, bass drum, two harps, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-three minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Debussy's *La mer* were given at Orchestra Hall on January 29 and 30, 1909, with Frederick Stock conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on January 22, 23, and 24, 2009, with Esa-Pekka Salonen conducting. The Orchestra first performed this work at the Ravinia Festival on July 8, 1937, with Ernest Ansermet conducting, and most recently on July 22, 2007, with Andrew Litton conducting.

Although Debussy's parents once planned for him to become a sailor, *La mer*, subtitled Three Symphonic Sketches, proved to be his greatest seafaring adventure. Debussy's childhood summers at Cannes left him with vivid memories of the sea, "worth more than reality," as he put it at the time he was composing *La mer* some thirty years later. As an adult, Debussy seldom got his feet wet, preferring the seascapes available in painting and literature; *La mer* was written in the mountains, where his "old friend the sea, always innumerable and beautiful," was no closer than a memory.

Like the great British painter J. M. W. Turner, who stared at the sea for hours and then went inside to paint, Debussy worked from memory, occasionally turning for inspiration to a few other sources. Debussy first mentioned his new work in a letter dated September 12, 1903; the title he proposed for the first of the three symphonic sketches, "Calm Sea around the Sanguinary Islands," was borrowed from a short story by Camille Mauclair published during the 1890s. When Debussy's own score was printed, he insisted that the cover include a detail from *The Hollow of the Wave off Kanagawa*, the most celebrated print by the Japanese artist Hokusai, then enormously popular in France.

We also know that Debussy greatly admired Turner's work. His richly atmospheric seascapes recorded the daily weather, the time of day, and even the most fleeting effects of wind and light in ways utterly new to painting, and they spoke directly to Debussy. (In 1902, when Debussy went to London, where he saw a number of Turner's paintings, he enjoyed the trip but hated actually crossing the channel.) The name Debussy finally gave to the first section of *La mer*, From Dawn to Noon on the Sea, might easily be that of a Turner painting made sixty years earlier, for the two shared not only a love of subject but also of long, specific, evocative titles.

There's something in Debussy's first symphonic sketch very like a Turner painting of the sun rising over the sea. They both reveal, in their vastly different media, those magical moments when sunlight begins to glow in near darkness, when familiar objects emerge from the shadows. This was Turner's favorite image—he even owned several houses from which he could watch, with undying fascination, the sun pierce the line separating sea and sky. Debussy's achievement, though decades later than Turner's, is no less radical, for it uses familiar language in truly fresh ways. From Dawn to Noon on the Sea can't be heard as traditional program music, for it doesn't tell a tale along a standard time line (although Debussy's

friend Eric Satie reported that he “particularly liked the bit at a quarter to eleven”). Nor can it be read as a piece of symphonic discourse, for it is organized without regard for conventional theme and development. Debussy’s audiences, like Turner’s before him, were baffled by work that takes as its subject matter color, texture, and nuance.

Debussy’s second sketch too is all suggestion and shimmering surface, fascinated with sound for its own sake. Melodic line, rhythmic regularity, and the use of standard harmonic progressions are all shattered, gently but decisively, by the fluid play of the waves. The final Dialogue of the Wind and the Sea (another title so like Turner’s) captures the violence of two elements, air and water, as they collide. At the end, the sun breaks through the clouds. *La mer* repeatedly resists traditional analysis. “We must agree,” Debussy writes, “that the beauty of a work of art will always remain a mystery, in other words, we can never be absolutely sure ‘how it’s made’.”

*La mer* was controversial even during rehearsals, when, as Debussy told Stravinsky, the violinists tied handkerchiefs to the tips of their bows in protest. The response at the premiere was mixed, though largely unfriendly. It is hard now to separate the reaction to this novel and challenging music from the current Parisian view of the composer himself, for during the two years he worked on *La mer*, Debussy moved in with Emma Bardac, the wife of a local banker, leaving behind his wife Lily, who attempted suicide. Two weeks after the premiere of *La mer*, Bardac gave birth to Debussy’s child, Claude-Emma, later known as Chou-Chou. Debussy married Emma Bardac on January 20, 1908. The night before, he conducted an orchestra for the first time in public, in a program which included *La mer*. This time, it was a spectacular success, though many of his friends still wouldn’t speak to him.

*Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.*

#### **For the Record**

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra recorded Debussy’s *La mer* in 1960 with Fritz Reiner conducting for RCA, in 1976 and 1991 with Sir Georg Solti conducting for London, in 2000 with Daniel Barenboim conducting for Teldec, and in 2001 with Barenboim conducting for EuroArts (on DVD). A 1978 performance with Erich Leinsdorf conducting is included on *Chicago Symphony Orchestra: The First 100 Years*.

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