

La mer

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

BORN 1862, St-Germain-en-Laye, France

DIED 1918, Paris, France

FIRST PERFORMED 5 October 1905, Paris, by the Lamoureux Orchestra conducted by Camille Chevillard

DURATION 25 minutes

1 *De l'aube à midi sur la mer*

2 *Jeux de vagues*

3 *Dialogue du vent et de la mer*

Claude Debussy famously completed the orchestration of his 'three symphonic sketches' that comprise *La mer* not on a storm-tossed liner in the mid-Atlantic, nor gazing into the gently rippling waves of the balmy Mediterranean. Instead, he was looking out across the English Channel from genteel Eastbourne, on the south coast of England. It was March 1905.

He'd begun work on the piece two years earlier while on holiday in Bichain, Burgundy – which is itself about 200 miles from the coast. But that's rather the point. Instead of attempting to depict the sea in music – and despite its movement titles highlighting specific times of the day and the effects of wind and water – *La mer* is a work of memory and imagination, not picture-painting.

Memories of the sea

'I have an endless store of memories of the sea,' Debussy wrote to a friend, referring to childhood summers in Cannes on the Mediterranean, as well as to later trips to the Brittany coast, 'and, to my mind, they are worth more than the reality, whose beauty weighs down thought too heavily.' He resented being termed an 'impressionist', but there are undeniable parallels between



the evocative yet elusive, sensuous musical images that Debussy conjures in *La mer* and what painters such as Monet were attempting, especially in their images conveying the reflections and shimmering textures of water. There are also echoes of Turner, whose seascapes from several decades earlier Debussy had admired on a trip to London in 1902 (although, ironically, he'd hated crossing the Channel). And of Japanese artist Hokusai, whose famous image *The Great Wave off Kanegawa* Debussy insisted should be used on the cover of his score.

Debussy's work on *La mer* came after the huge success in Paris of his single opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 1902, and he was hoping for even greater acclaim with the orchestral piece, which he felt was more robust, more assertive than his delicate, pastel-shaded stage work. At its premiere, however, *La mer* had a rather cool reception. In fact, it had been controversial even in rehearsal, when the Lamoureux Orchestra's violinists tied handkerchiefs to the tips of

their bows in protest at having to play such supposedly nonsensical music.

A figure of scandal

Any negative reaction to *La mer*'s first performance, however, was probably tied up more with Debussy's private life at the time than with a proper appraisal of the music itself. In 1905 he was a figure of scandal. While working on *La mer*, Debussy had moved in with his lover Emma Bardac, the wife of a banker, abandoning his wife Lily, who attempted suicide. Two weeks after *La mer*'s premiere, Bardac gave birth to their daughter Claude-Emma, later known affectionately as Chou-Chou (and dedicatee of Debussy's famous *Children's Corner* piano suite).

La mer has gone on, however, to become one of the composer's best-loved and most respected works, for both its unmistakable watery evocations and its forward-looking approach to musical themes and form. It's been described – provocatively – as the greatest symphony ever written by a French composer (which wouldn't have pleased Debussy, declared enemy of the Germanic symphonic form and everything that came with it). And although *La mer* might sound nothing like Beethoven or Brahms, the careful if unconventional structuring of each movement and cross-references between its themes make the piece far more than a simple tone poem. Instead, it's a unified, truly symphonic creation.

The music

Despite its title 'From dawn to midday on the sea', *La mer*'s **first movement** does not slavishly depict a particular timeline – even if Debussy's friend Erik Satie quipped that he 'particularly enjoyed the bit at a quarter to 11'. There is, however, an undeniable progression from the muted, half-lit opening to the blaze of sunlight at its conclusion. On that journey, the movement introduces themes that will recur throughout the piece, the first of which is a mysterious,

curling melody on cor anglais and muted trumpet heard right near the start. The movement's second main section begins with a sumptuous, dancing theme on eight solo cellos, leading to a murkier, more veiled passage and then the quiet return of the cor anglais and muted trumpet's curling theme. The texture suddenly clears, however, for a hushed chorale on four horns – the first, brief announcement of the music that will close *La mer* in shining glory. The movement ends grandly with the sun blazing on the ocean.

The playful **second movement**, 'Play of the waves', is a flashing, quicksilver *scherzo*, an ever-changing mosaic of orchestral colours that seems to proceed spontaneously rather than obeying any traditional ideas of musical form. There's a scampering cor anglais and oboe theme, some fanfare-like interruptions from the trumpets, a couple of big swells of orchestral sound, and the movement ends mysteriously with a glitter of harp and glockenspiel.

Debussy unleashes the full force of his orchestra in the **third movement**, 'Dialogue of the wind and the sea'. It opens restlessly with music suggesting the mightily surging of the ocean, or the rumble of an approaching storm, in which we can just about hear fragments of the first movement's themes, later cried out by a solo trumpet as if in distress. An aggressive climax heralds the final movement's restless main theme, first heard as the woodwind obsess over just a couple of notes. This builds to a thundering climax, and when the storm abates, it's with the first movement's glowing horn chorale, heard quietly again. There's an ecstatic restatement of the woodwind's obsessive theme, cast again a stratospheric tone from the violins, a brief playful interlude that takes us back to the world of the second movement, then the horn chorale returns in all its glory, now across the whole brass section, and *La mer* races to an extrovert conclusion.