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Debussy & Fin-de-siècle France
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Debussy At This Very Moment

Impressionism is an artistic movement that is often hard to define. Most definitions of the term are arguable on some level. Claude Debussy rejected the label of impressionism all together and described it as something that was made up by art critics. There are, however, common themes in people's understanding of what it means to label something as impressionistic. Impressionism is raw, suggestive, dynamic, and temporal in that it seemingly has the ability to manipulate time. French symbolist and poet, Jules Laforgue, once described impressionism as extreme realism. He felt that what an impressionistic painter paints is exactly what he is seeing in front of him at that given moment. It is something based entirely on what is happening "right now" and in a state of flux. Based on Laforgue's idea of impressionism, it is clear to see why Claude Debussy's *La Mer* is commonly thought of as one of the most impressionistic pieces ever written.

It is quite hard to partition Debussy's *La Mer* into sections to analyze. There rarely seems to be a section that could be considered the "climax" of the movement. The music is constantly moving into a new direction but one section rarely seems to have priority over what had just happened before it or what will happen after it. It gives the listener a sense of immediacy. The listener is given no clues as to what is about to happen and no time to pause and reflect on what had just happened earlier. This idea is common in impressionistic art. Paul Cézanne, for example, is known for painting with a style that is very similar. In many of his paintings, he manipulates perspective to make it seem as if the viewer is seeing objects from more than one point of view at a time. Every object is being held up towards the viewer as if it is the main focus of the work. In Cézanne's *Still Life with Peaches and Pears*, a plate holding peaches sits on top of a cloth on a table. Next to the plate are two pears, a teakettle, and a pitcher. All of these objects are painted to seem as if the viewer is seeing them from different angles. Each one of the objects seems to stand up, grab the viewer's attention, and proclaim its dominance over the other objects in the scene.

Even with the ever-changing style of *La Mer*, Debussy still manages to use motifs that creep in and out of the piece. There rarely seems to be any sort of main melody that dominates everything else that is going on. It is made up of only textures and passages. The instrumentation is modeled in such a way that it still seems completely natural. These motifs get passed around from instrument to instrument and placed on top of and within completely differing textures every time they are brought up. However, it is still fairly easy to pick most of the motifs. Many of the themes of the third movement, *Dialogue du vent et de la mer*, are actually reincarnations of themes from previous movements. The first noticeable theme of the third movement is the sixteenth-note followed by a dotted quarter-note rhythm in measure 25 in the woodwinds. This theme was originally found in the first movement. The next theme that begins in the trumpets in measure 31 is also taken from the first movement. However, hearing these themes in a

completely different setting from the first movement brings out an entirely new experience.

Debussy constructed this piece much in the same way as human thought works. When a person is viewing a painting or listening to music, the thought process is linear in that developments are occurring and working towards a goal or an understanding of what it is the person is looking at or listening to. However, in order for the human mind to understand something, it has to reach back and grab experiences from the past to compare it to the “right now”. Debussy’s themes in *La Mer* seem to have the same purpose. They are not coming back in a simply repetitive form; they are being used in comparison with what is going on at that very moment in the piece. This ability to morph time and perception is another example that makes Debussy, by Jules Laforgue’s definition, an impressionist.

Texture plays an important role in impressionistic paintings. Before this period, it was not common to see paintings in a three-dimensional form. The brush strokes of the artist coming out from the canvas became part of the work. This style brought an entirely new aspect into the painting. Debussy was doing the same thing in his music with *La Mer*. The title of the piece translates to “The Sea”. Debussy portrayal of the sea, however, is different than the popular techniques used. Commonly, the sea would be portrayed in music with rising and falling scales, cymbal crashes, and timpani rolls. In *La Mer*, Debussy, paints a picture in the listener’s mind by using dynamics and textures. He often layers the instrumentation, especially in the strings and harp throughout the third movement, in ways that promote the ideas of the wind and waves. This different approach to layering and texture is more evidence to support that Debussy’s *La Mer* is by definition “impressionism”. It stands out of the piece in the same way the paint stands out of the canvas of impressionistic paintings.

Debussy may have had his problems with the term impressionism, but it is very easy to draw parallels between his work and the work of other artists of his era that were also labeled as impressionists. His music and their paintings brought entirely new ways of thinking about art. It focused everything down to what was important right there and then.