

## CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Born 2 August 1862 in St. Germain-en-Laye, near Paris; died 25 March 1918 in Paris.

*La Mer*, Trois Esquisses Symphoniques (“*The Sea, Three Symphonic Sketches*”) (1903-1905)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Paris, 15 October 1905; Concert Lamoureux; Camille Chevillard, conductor

PSO PREMIERE: 2 February 1940; Syria Mosque; Fritz Reiner, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 23 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, three bassoons, four horns, two cornets, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, two harps and strings.

“You may not know that I was destined for a sailor’s life and that it was only quite by chance that fate led me in another direction. But I have always held a passionate love for the sea.” With those lines written on September 12, 1903 to the composer-conductor André Messager, Debussy prefaced the notice that he had begun work on *La Mer*. Debussy’s father was a sailor and his tales of vast oceans and exotic lands held Claude spellbound as a boy. A family trip to Cannes when he was seven years old ignited his life-long fascination with the thoughts and moods evoked by moving water. Twenty years later, he discovered an aspect of the sea very different from the placid one he had seen on the resort beaches of the Mediterranean. In early June of that year, he was traveling with friends along the coast of Brittany. Their plans called for passage in a fishing boat from Saint-Lunaire to Cancale, but at the time they were scheduled to leave a threatening storm was approaching and the captain advised canceling the trip. Debussy insisted that they sail. It turned out to be a dramatic, storm-tossed voyage with no little danger to crew and passengers. Debussy relished it. “Now there’s a type of passionate feeling that I have not before experienced — Danger!” he declared. These early experiences of the sea — one halcyon, the other threatening — were captured years later in *La Mer*.

In addition to the memories of his own experience of the ocean, Debussy brought to *La Mer* a sensitivity nourished by his fascination with visual renderings of the sea. He was certainly in sympathy with the Impressionistic art of his French contemporaries, but more immediate inspiration for the work seems to have come from the creations of two foreign artists — the Englishman Turner, whom Debussy called “the finest creator of mystery in art,” and the Japanese Hokusai. A selection of Turner’s wondrous, swirling sea paintings, as much color and light as image, was shown in Paris in 1894 and probably seen there by Debussy. Eight years later, during the 1902-1903 Turner exhibit at London’s National Gallery, Debussy again sought out these brilliant canvases, and that visit may have been the catalyst for creating *La Mer*. (A half-century before Debussy, Turner experienced the violence of the sea first-hand when he had himself lashed to a ship’s mast during a furious storm just to see what it was like.) Japanese sea- and landscapes were popular in Paris during the 1890s as a result of their introduction there at the Universal Exhibition of 1889. The exquisite drawings of Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) so pleased Debussy that he chose one of them, *The Hollow of the Wave off Kanagawa*, for the cover of the score of *La Mer*.

*From Dawn to Noon on the Sea*, built around the play of thematic and rhythmic fragments rather than conventional melodies, is perfectly suited to expressing the changing reflections of the morning sun in the air, clouds and water. *The Play of the Waves* is a brilliant essay in orchestral color, woven and contrasted with the utmost evocative subtlety. *Dialogue of the Wind and the Sea* reflects the awesome power of the sea as well as its majesty.