

## **A Dolphin Dive into the Shimmering Waters of Debussy's Impressionism**

*An exceedingly well-named essay by Tim Min*

Hailed as a figurehead of French music, Claude Debussy has persisted as an important musical figure even a century after his death. He is often seen as music's equivalent of Claude Monet, the great artist whose painting *Impression, soleil levant* inspired the original (satirical) term for the Impressionist movement. The comparison extends further to Debussy's christening as the father of musical impressionism; Debussy is seen as the start in a line of French composers who resisted against the increasingly forward motion of harmonies, opting instead for static harmonies featuring various instrumental timbres and obscure (or absent) melodies. However, while Monet and the his fellow group of French painters embraced the term "Impressionism", Debussy vehemently rejected it, considering it "a term employed with the utmost inaccuracy". A foray into the literature behind the Impressionism in the painting world, the surrounding social cultures at the beginning of the respective movements in art (1874, with the exhibition of the painting *Impression, soleil levant*) and music (1894, with the premiere of the symphonic poem *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*), and an analysis of the inspirations and musical features found in Debussy's music demonstrates that Debussy's dislike of the term "Impressionist" is appropriate.

There is extensive writing and research on Debussy's sudden shift in style starting from the mid-1890s. In Botstein's essay "Beyond the Illusions of Realism", from *Debussy and His World*, Debussy's sudden shift in style is discussed right at the very beginning of the essay. The root of Debussy's inspirations from Wagner, Mussorgsky, Schumann and Chopin is mentioned before noting a leap in a seemingly arbitrary music direction with *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. This discrepancy is explained as follows, by proponents of the application of the term "musical impressionism": the culture of Parisian society in 1894 had already accepted and embraced Impressionist painting as a valid art form; subsequently, Debussy's appeal to the use of timbres and textures in the way a painter would for colors and tones fit perfectly with the contemporary shift in art style. However, Debussy's own objections to his music being seen as Impressionists are numerous; particularly, he criticized the application of the term "impressionism" being used in relation to the late paintings of J. M. W. Turner, who is commonly known as the "painter of light". Yet, his music is drenched in evidence of impressionism, from both the sound and the visual presentation; editors for his music note that his notational style has elements of "impressionism" to it. This is apparently damning evidence of his ties to impressionism.

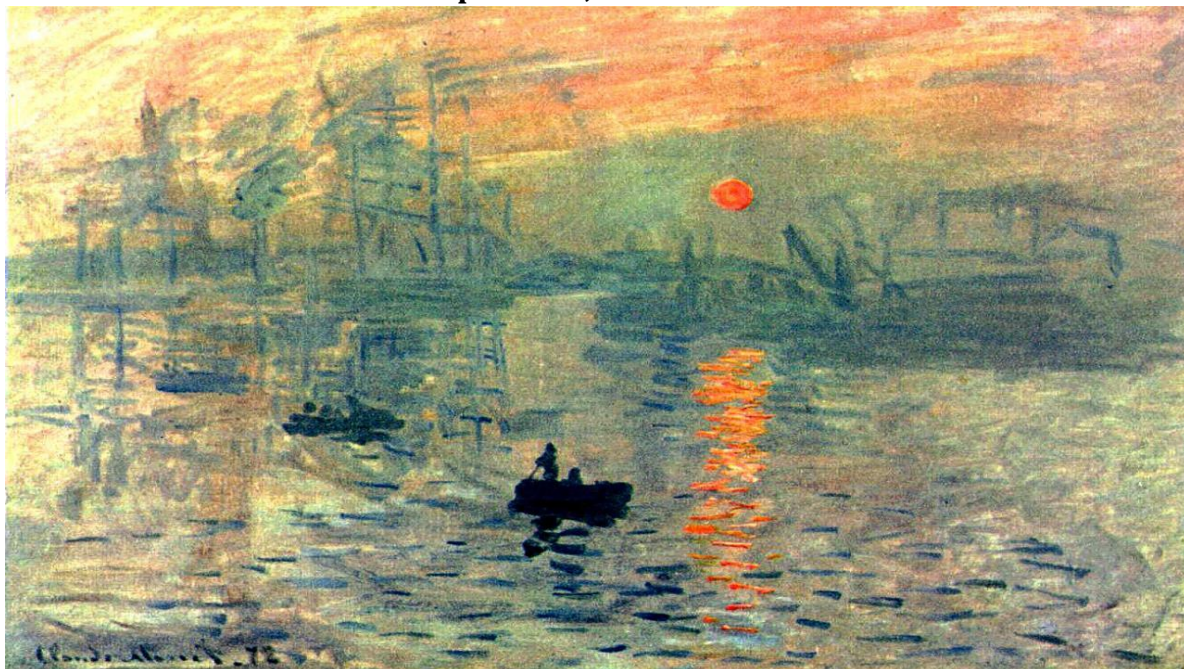
However, there is a major oversight in this conclusion found by so many pro-"musical impressionism" scholars: a critical social and cultural milestone took place in the years before Debussy's "impressionism" emerged. The Exposition Universelle of 1889 (six years before the premiere of *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*) introduced many foreign innovations and cultural centrepieces to a European audience for the first time in history, including the Javanese gamelan. Debussy was confirmed to have been in attendance at the Exposition, and had already seen a gamelan at the Conservatoire de Paris (which received a gamelan from the Dutch government). His first time hearing the complete gamelan orchestra, played by skilled native musicians, marked a turning point in his musical style; Debussy incorporated many gamelan themes into his music for the three decades to come, even praising the free-spiritedness of Javanese music in 1913, writing that "[t]heir traditions are preserved only in ancient songs, sometimes involving dance, to which each individual adds his own contribution century by century."

The two paintings included in the appendix (Monet's *Impressions* and *Saint-Georges majeur au crépuscule*) are fitting examples of the artistic Impressionist movement which can be compared to works of Debussy's "musical impressionist" movement. Both paintings exhibit Monet's signature Impressionist style, with their focus on free composition and vivid color choices as well as softer brushstrokes. Departing from Romantic-era paintings, which are focused on bringing out the realism and depth of human nature, and instead bringing out the gracefulness of nature and architecture, distinguish his artwork. Two Debussy pieces to be examined are Debussy's *Ballade slave* (L 90, written one year after the Paris Exposition) and *Brouillards* (excerpt from *Preludes Book II*, L 123). The former is considered an excellent example of both Debussy's earlier style (which drew from the German composers Schumann and Wagner, the French composers Chopin and Liszt, and the Russian composer Mussorgsky) as well as the emergence of his later style. The undulating arpeggios and alternating notes in the left hand of *Ballade* are an evident homage to the gamelan which he heard but one year before, using freestyle rhythmic compositions just like in the improvisatory and intuitive nature of Javanese music. All the while, the soaring narrative nature of the themes fits right in with the European traditions of lush, harmony-driven Romantic melodies. This piece is a baffling and inherently beautiful transitory step, with both artifacts of the past and emerging new traits to be seen in the future. Meanwhile, his *Brouillards*, the most harmonically-complex of all his preludes, is a fitting sample of his ultimate rejection of traditional harmony and melody and a complete immersion into the world of tone colors and non-monotonicity. The use of dissonance and precipitated left hands are a direct imitation of gamelan functions, replicating both the microtonal clashes of Javanese music and the jarringly percussive yet consistent support of the rhythm section.

In a way, Monet and Debussy are comparable to sharks and dolphins: although they both have fins, swim in water, and even have similar general anatomical features, their evolutionary origins are completely distinct. While Monet's "shark" is a large fish which took their form 100 million years ago (or, rather, twenty years before Debussy's *Faune*), Debussy's "dolphin" first traversed on land as a mammal before making its way back into the vast ocean of impressionism and taking on a semblance of a fish. However, a taxonomical inquiry of these two animals, just like with Monet's Impressionism and Debussy's own musical style, reveals a much deeper (and frankly, more interesting) truth. Although the name "impressionism" does indeed serve as a good model for the general functions and features of Debussy's music, important truths are lost through an obsession with this (mis)nomer. Debussy himself was extremely wary of defining music through excessive scholarship, decrying it as a "religion founded to excuse the ubiquity of imbeciles." His harsh words are surely a fitting aesop for the end of our plunge.

## *Appendix*

**Impression, soleil levant**



**Saint-Georges majeur au crépuscule**

