
Foreword: The Impressionistic Period

Impressionism, as a musical movement, was an outgrowth of Romanticism, but it drew much of its inspiration from contemporary trends in art and literature. Most of the credit for evolving this new music goes to Claude Debussy (1862–1918), who developed its theories and composed many of the pieces that shocked the critics and public of his day, as Claude Monet's (1840–1926) paintings had done 20 years earlier. Debussy's style is as ambiguous as the feelings aroused by his music.

Early Influence

The development of the school of Impressionist painters in the mid-19th century was a natural outgrowth of the desire for new forms of sensation and for new subtleties of refinement. Claude Monet's painting entitled *Impression, Sunrise*, produced in 1872, led to Monet and his colleagues Alfred Sisley (1839–1899), Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919), Joseph Mallord Turner (1775–1851), and others being called "Impressionists." *Sunrise* was a picture of a harbor seen through early morning mist, which created the effect of merging sky and water imperceptibly into each other. The aim of the artist was to capture a fleeting "impression," together with its unique atmosphere, often caused by an unusual combination of light and shade. The Impressionists were naturally drawn to scenes of mist, fog, haze and snow, and especially to water, with its reflection of images and suggestion of unknown depths, mystery and dreams. Turner's works especially contain dream elements.

This dreamlike atmosphere of Impressionist art is one factor that links the movement with contemporary trends in literature, notably symbolism. One of the founders of the symbolist movement was the American writer Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849). Many of his stories are disguised dream-tales that blend dream with reality and precision with vagueness, and use words to create atmosphere rather than to express reality. Music was the ideal vehicle through which to explore the symbolist's theories with such writers as Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898), Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949) and Paul Verlaine (1844–1896).

Many of the theories from the painters and writers were absorbed by Claude Debussy, the musical Impressionist par excellence.

Pre-Impressionist Composers

The earliest example of a consistent leaning toward an Impressionistic aesthetic is found in the music of Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849). Impressionist composers came to favor many of the harmonic techniques used earlier by Chopin. For example, Chopin used various elements of folk music in his melodies, such as the raised fourth, characteristic of Polish folk music, and bare or open fifths, found in his mazurkas. Techniques such as Chopin's frequent use of added-note chords, especially the added sixth, and his use of unresolved chords, such as the final chord of his *Mazurka in A Minor*, Op. 17, No. 4, are other examples of Chopin's harmonic

contributions that led to the development of Impressionistic harmony. Chopin was among the most influential pre-Impressionist and the earliest piano composer for whose works Debussy expressed unqualified admiration.

Franz Liszt (1811–1886) follows Chopin as the next important pre-Impressionist composer, and he, like Chopin, was first and foremost a great pianist. In 1884, the young Debussy heard Liszt play in Rome, an experience that made a deep impression on him. The pieces of Liszt that most strongly reflect Impressionist characteristics are those that evoke nature. The movement of trees and the sound of bells vibrating also held much interest for him. *Cloches du soir* (Evening Bells) from the *Christmas Tree Suite* is such a piece. Bells chime in a typically Impressionistic pentatonic sonority; the coda gives the impression of chiming bells in the distance—a special appreciation of the way that sounds vibrate in the atmosphere.

One of the first composers to use Impressionist techniques more consistently was the Norwegian, Edvard Grieg (1843–1907). It was Grieg's attempt to express in music the lyrical essence of the country he loved so much that led to many of the innovative concepts of harmony and timbre in which he anticipated the Impressionists. *Klokkenklang* (Bell Ringing)—a pure bell piece—is perhaps the most remarkable of all pieces of pre-Debussyan Impressionism.

Claude Debussy and Impressionism

It was Debussy's keen response to developments in the areas of painting and literature that led him to attempt to find their equivalents in music. He, too, often drew his inspiration from nature. His music frequently suggests atmospheric qualities and subtle gradations. Much of Debussy's work is infused with the spirit of pictorial Impressionism, which he successfully translated into musical terms.

His desire was to reproduce what he heard, a subject where action is sacrificed to feeling. Feeling was basic to Debussy's aesthetic and he wanted to make his music sound like a continuous improvisation. He made music create atmosphere, evoke and suggest.

Musical Techniques Used by the Impressionists

Plainsong. This offered the use of old church modes with their varied arrangement of internal sequence. Modes produced "non-functional" harmony—harmony that doesn't function according to the rules of traditional tonal relations, or chords that move in parallel motion.

Whole-tone scale. This evocative scale is of oriental origin. It is elusive, for each tone is just as important as the next; therefore, no one tone predominates. Debussy used it in many of his works.

Folk music. Debussy loved the pentatonic scale found in the folk music of Russia and the Far East. The arabesques of oriental monody often determine the shape and direction of his unusual melodic lines. He also used folk tunes in his work.

Floating chords. Debussy used these for atmospheric color, free modulation and mood. They required no preparation or resolution.

MICHEL BLOCK (1937–2003)

Block was born in Belgium, made his debut at age 9 and completed his training at The Juilliard School. He won high praise at the Chopin International Competition in Warsaw in 1960 and a fine career as a concert pianist followed. He taught, the last years of his life, at the Indiana University School of Music.

***Rendez-vous manqué* (The Rendezvous We Missed) 14**

Form: Introduction = measure 1; A = 2–17; B = 18–26; coda (repeat of most of introduction) = 27.

This lovely piece is a “love song” from a collection entitled *Un beau jour* (One Fine Day), written to introduce students to the Impressionistic style. Long pedals are necessary in the introduction and the coda. Impressionistic harmonies abound: ninth chords (measures 1, 4, 5, 9, 10, etc.), added seconds (measures 1, 4, 8, etc.), parallel chords (measures 7, 8, 10, 13, 15, etc.). Commas are used to indicate phrase endings. Take much rubato in the sections marked “free” and a little rubato in the section marked “with regret.” The entire piece must not be rushed.

ALEXANDER BORODIN (1833–1887)

This Russian composer was sensitive to timbre and was harmonically ambitious. His attention to sensuous sweetness (with its sixths and seconds) bears some relationship to the writings of Debussy. Borodin was a member of the group known as “The Five,” who were eager to create a distinctive nationalistic school. He was a scientist until 1862 when he met Mily Balakirev (1837–1910), who persuaded him to devote more time to music. Franz Liszt provided much encouragement to Borodin.

***Daydreams* 16**

Form: Introduction = measures 1–2; A = 3–10; B = 11–22; coda = 23–25.

This piece is from his *Petite suite*, composed in 1885. Use fairly flat fingers while playing the piece since much of it is written on the black keys. Let the final D-flat sonority sound for a full two measures at the end of the piece.

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN (1810–1849)

Chopin was a Polish composer and pianist whose faultless grace in his piano writing was his personal stamp. He was a great and highly original pianist, largely self taught; his grasp of the capabilities of his instrument was unrivaled. Chopin’s works are reflections of his own style of playing. The Chopin repertoire determines, to a large extent, the character of pianistic art today and is played by most great pianists.

***Mazurka in A Minor, Op. 17, No. 4* 18**

Form: Introduction = measures 1–4; A = 5–36 (part I = 5–20; I¹ = 21–36); B = 36–44; A¹ = 45–60; C = 61–92 (part I = 61–68; I¹ = 69–76; I² = 77–84; I³ = 85–92); A' = 93–108; coda = 108–132.

This piece was completed during 1832 and 1833 as the last in a group of four mazurkas. A mazurka is a Polish dance in triple meter with an accentuation of beat 2 of each measure, and phrases that end

on that beat. Dotted notes are featured. During the 19th century, the seventh chord became “emancipated,” meaning that its resolution to a triad was no longer always necessary. Chopin carried the emancipation to the very edge of tonality. This can be seen at measure 9 forward in this mazurka, where Chopin places an intermediate sixth chord between two seventh chords. The manner in which the piece dies away and ends on a first-inversion F major triad (which gives the impression of being suspended in air) is very unusual for its time and very Impressionistic in style. Chopin’s use of the word *espressivo* at measure 5 indicates a rubato-like freedom in the Introduction and A B A¹ sections (measures 1–60). The C section (measures 61–92) should gradually build in intensity and tempo (a slight accelerando throughout), only to return to the opening mood and tempo when the A² section returns at measure 93. This editor suggests the right hand be used to play the middle voice (melody) of the chords in measures 1–4 and 129–132.

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862–1918)

French born Claude Debussy is the best-known of the Impressionist composers. A seminal figure in 20th-century music, he extended the heritage of Liszt by his daring exploitation of the keyboard. Debussy is the primary composer whose works are explored in this anthology.

***Bruyères* (Heather), L. 123:5 30**

Form: A = measures 1–22; B = 23–37; A¹ = 38–51.

This piece, from *Préludes, Book II*, begins much like *La fille aux cheveux de lin* and continues in a similar mood. Heather is a low-growing plant that creates rose-mauve carpets that spread out in thickets and clearings. This quaint, pastorale-like piece portrays nature in a tranquil, tender and happy mood. It is mainly diatonic with pentatonic touches in the opening and closing melody. The entire piece is a delicate and gracious bit of fancy with autumnal color, where the flute of an unseen shepherd seems to come from a distant surrounding countryside. Do not rush the bass triplet 32nd notes in measure 49.

***Clair de lune* (Moonlight), L. 75:3 24**

Form: A = measures 1–26; B = 27–50; A¹ = 51–65; coda = 66–72.

This contemplative piece comes from the *Suite bergamasque*. Composed in 1890, *Clair de lune* was originally titled *Promenade sentimentale*. It is filled with delicate romantic feelings and its beautiful harmonies convey the silvery atmosphere of moonlight. Count one measure silently before you begin so that you feel the eighth-note beat. The opening eight measures with their gradual descent may suggest the gentle reflection of light from the moon’s rays. Avoid the impression of rushing and use some rubato in measures 15–26 and 66–72. Careful use of the pedal and legato touch are essential.

***Danseuses de Delphes* (Dancers of Delphi), L. 117:1 38**

Form: A = measures 1–10; B = 11–20; C = 21–31.

This piece is from the *Préludes, Book I*. A slow, solemn and hypnotic dignity permeates this sarabande-like prelude, inspired by a statue in the Louvre museum in Paris. It reminds this editor of the

Rêverie

(Dreaming)

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)
L. 68

Ⓐ Andantino sans lenteur ($\text{♩} = \text{ca. 104}$)

(very gentle and very expressive)
pp très doux et très expressif

4

8

11

meno p

mf

Ⓐ A little faster than Andante and without slowness or delay.