

# Claude Debussy His Musical Style and Influences

## *Estampes and Nocturnes*

by Professor Julian Johnson, Regis Professor of Music, Royal Holloway University of London

### Historical Context

Debussy's early works (from the 1880s) can be heard as part of musical Romanticism but his late works overlap with the start of the 1<sup>st</sup> World War in 1914 and the beginnings of musical Modernism. His music thus bridges the gap between two very different musical worlds – on the one hand, the rich harmony and orchestration of composers like Wagner and Tchaikovsky at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, on the other, the bold new rhythmic language of Stravinsky and the atonal music of Schoenberg at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

But it wasn't just music that saw such rapid changes in style and technique. Across the arts, this was a time in which, as the French poet Arthur Rimbaud put it, 'You have to be absolutely modern!' (*Il faut être absolument moderne*). Just think of Debussy's contemporaries in Paris at this time: including painters like Picasso and Matisse, poets like Verlaine and Mallarmé, as well as the Lumière brothers, pioneers of the brand new art of film.



Whistler's Nocturne: Blue and Silver – Chelsea

### Key Ideas

The first thing everyone tells you about Debussy is that he was an 'impressionist' composer. But what does that mean? It wasn't a label he liked at all, because art critics of his time tended to use it negatively, as a kind of insult. It's true that we might find some parallels between his music and famous impressionist painters like Claude Monet. Their fascination with colour, texture, light, movement, and evoking a single moment in time, find some obvious echoes in Debussy's musical language. But Debussy's interest in visual art was much wider than that. One of his favourite painters was the early Romantic English artist, J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851), another was the French baroque artist Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721). In the case of Debussy's *Trois Nocturnes* for orchestra, the obvious parallel in painting is the work of the American artist, James Whistler (take a look at some of his paintings he titled 'Nocturne' in the 1870s). In the case of *Estampes* we know the reference is to visual art from Japan that became readily available in Paris in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. Debussy used a famous print by Katsushika Hokusai on the cover of his orchestral work *La mer* and photographs of his study show him surrounded by Japanese prints including one of a leaping fish assumed to be the starting point for his *Poissons d'or* (from the second book of *Images*).

## Things to Listen For

The three piano pieces that make up *Estampes* neatly illustrate the unusually wide range of Debussy's influences.

In *Pagodes*, it's impossible not to hear the distinctive sounds of the Javanese gamelan – one of the East Asian musical ensembles Debussy famously heard at the Paris Exhibition in 1889 (he was also really taken by traditional Vietnamese opera and one of his closest friends, Louis Laloy, was one of the earliest western scholars of oriental musical cultures). The gamelan is referenced by the prominent use of a pentatonic set (B C# D# F# G#), the conjunct movement of the melodic line, the repeated little neighbour-note figure, and the low 'gong' sounds imitated by the bass notes of the piano, all held in a kind of resonant wash of sound by keeping the sustaining pedal down. But as always in Debussy, the reference to some external reference is just the starting point for something that is never merely imitation and always a work of the imagination. Very quickly Debussy uses chromatic harmonic inflections and introduces new material that have nothing to do with the gamelan.

In the second piece, *Soirée dans Grenade*, the musical reference may be closer to home (Grenada is a city in the south of Spain) but the evocation of Spain was always a kind of exotic topic for French composers (think of Bizet's *Carmen*, for example). The reference is made immediately by Debussy's use of a musical sign – the *habanera* rhythm – to denote an idea of 'Spanishness', and then the haunting inflection of the melody that begins in bar 7 with its 'Moorish' scale featuring an augmented fourth (F# to B#). As in *Pagodes*, here too Debussy makes use of the sustaining pedal and long passages of unchanging harmony to create a sense of a static musical space – a sonic environment in which we hear details come and go, just as if we were sitting in a city square listening to the changing sounds around us. Notice Debussy's skill at creating effects of distance by fading out on repeated ostinato figures or his use of the extremes of the piano's register in the closing bars. Note too how the habanera rhythm works like a kind of ear-worm, running through the whole piece. It helps create the sense that this piece is not a literal representation of the city (like a photo) but the *memory* of a place.

Ostinato figures play a similar role in *Nuages*, the first of the *Trois Nocturnes* for Orchestra. Notice how the repeated chordal pattern at the start builds a background of sound that goes nowhere, but just circles around itself (like the clouds of the title). Incidentally, Stravinsky must have remembered hearing this music when he started writing his opera *Le rossignol* in 1908, because the two pieces begin almost identically. The link between music and painting can be difficult to discuss in any detailed way, but as you listen to *Nuages* think about how the little Cor Anglais figure (first heard in bars 5-7) recurs like a foreground object against the background of the string 'clouds'. It comes seven times in all, always at exactly the same pitch. Now take a look at Whistler's painting 'Nocturne: Blue and Silver – Chelsea'. See how the painting is made of a kind of unchanging screed of blues and greys moving horizontally across the picture just like those string chords keep rolling slowly through Debussy's piece with very little change. But Whistler's picture is also punctuated by a few vertical objects – the silhouette of the fisherman in the foreground, but also the lights on the far shore reflected in the water. They break up the horizontal sameness just like the Cor anglais does in Debussy's piece.

## Legacy and Reception

We think of composers like Schoenberg and Stravinsky as prominent and often noisy 'revolutionary' composers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. We might think of Debussy, by contrast, as a *quiet* revolutionary (this was the title of a book about the composer by Victor Lederer, published in 2007). His music is almost always shaped by triadic harmony, and is often tonal, but he uses familiar musical materials in quite new ways. Above all, he took elements of musical sound that had earlier been thought of as less important or secondary (such as musical timbre, texture, or register) and used them as the primary materials of his music – just as contemporary painters like Matisse, Seurat or Gauguin, made colour and texture more important than line, perspective, or ideas of naturalistic representation.

In this he often took his inspiration from outside the formal tradition of Western art music as it was taught at the Conservatoire. He drew on popular musical forms (like the 'cakewalk' dance), on non-western music (like the gamelan), and he took inspiration both from poetry (as in his *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*), painting and – above all, perhaps, from nature. Debussy drew some of these elements together in an article he wrote in 1913 for a music journal called *SIM* (Société Internationale de Musique):

'There used to be – indeed, despite the troubles that civilization has brought, there still are – some wonderful peoples who learn music as easily as one learns to breathe. Their school consists of the eternal rhythm of the sea, the wind in the leaves, and a thousand other tiny noises, which they listen to with great care, without ever having consulted any of those dubious treatises. Their traditions are preserved only in ancient songs, sometimes involving dance, to which each individual adds his own contribution century by century. This Javanese music obeys laws of counterpoint that make Palestrina seem like child's play. And if one listen to it without being prejudiced by ones' European ears, one will find a percussive charm that forces one to admit that our own music is not much more than a barbarous kind of noise more fit for a travelling circus.' (15 February, 1913)

## Other Resources

For a discussion of the paintings of James Whistler, see Tate Online

For a discussion of the cultural movement known as *Japonisme*, see Khan Academy

## Further Listening

Trois Nocturnes, movements 2 (Fêtes) and 3 (Sirènes);

La mer;

Images for Piano (Books 1 and 2)

Produced by Department of Music at Royal Holloway University of London

[www.royalholloway.ac.uk/music](http://www.royalholloway.ac.uk/music)

@RHULMusic; [study@royalholloway.ac.uk](mailto:study@royalholloway.ac.uk)



ROYAL  
HOLLOWAY  
UNIVERSITY  
OF LONDON