

The following pages contain definitions and descriptions of Impressionism as it relates to art and music as well as a biography of Claude Debussy. Credit and sources are provided prior to each excerpt.

Impressionism in music

<http://www.bartleby.com/65/im/impress-mus.html>

The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition. 2001.

in music, a French movement in the late 19th and early 20th cent. It was begun by Debussy in reaction to the dramatic and dynamic emotionalism of romantic music... Reflecting the impressionist schools of French painting and letters, Debussy developed a style in which atmosphere and mood take the place of strong emotion or of the story in program music. He used new chord combinations, whole-tone chords, chromaticism, and exotic rhythms and scales. In place of the usual harmonic progression, he developed a style in which chords are valued for their individual sonorities rather than for their relations to one another, and dissonances are unprepared and unresolved...

Impressionism in art

<http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/glo/impressionism/>

The impressionist style of painting is characterized chiefly by concentration on the general impression produced by a scene or object and the use of unmixed primary colors and small strokes to simulate actual reflected light.

Impressionism, French *Impressionnisme*, a major movement, first in painting and later in music, that developed chiefly in France during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Impressionist painting comprises the work produced between about 1867 and 1886 by a group of artists who shared a set of related approaches and techniques. The most conspicuous characteristic of Impressionism was an attempt to accurately and objectively record visual reality in terms of transient effects of light and colour. The principal Impressionist painters were Claude Monet, Pierre Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro, Alfred Sisley, Berthe Morisot, Armand Guillaumin, and Frédéric Bazille, who worked together, influenced each other, and exhibited together independently...

Biography (excerpts) of Claude Debussy by Charles K. Moss, M.M.Ed., M.Mus.

http://www.claude-debussy.com/claude_debussy/claudedebussy-biography1.html

Background

Growing up from humble beginnings to become the most important French composer of the early Twentieth Century, Achille-Claude Debussy (1862-1918) was born near Paris in the town of St. Germain-en-Laye, where his parents kept a china shop...

Debussy first entered the Paris Conservatory when he was only ten years old. Within a few years, he shocked his professors with "bizarre" harmonies that defied the rules. "What rules then do you observe?" inquired one of his teachers. "None-only my own pleasure!" "That's all very well," retorted the professor, "provided you're a genius." It became increasingly apparent that the daring young man was exactly that...

...From 1887 on, Debussy viewed himself almost exclusively as a composer, and he rarely appeared in public as a pianist or as a conductor of his own works. His circle of friends did not contain musicians; rather he enjoyed the company of the leading Impressionist poets and painters of his day who gathered at the home of the poet Stéphane Mallarmé. Their influence is felt even in Debussy's first important orchestral work, *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* (1892-1894), inspired by Mallarmé's poem, *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, which was performed at the Société Nationale on December 22, 1894. This work established the style of Impressionist music and initiated Debussy's most productive period, which lasted nearly 20 years...

His energies increasingly sapped by the ravages of cancer, Debussy worked on with remarkable fortitude. The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 robbed him of all interest in music. In France, he felt, "can neither laugh nor weep while so many of our men heroically face death." After a year of silence, he realized that he had to contribute to the struggle in the only way he could, "by creating to the best of my ability a little of that beauty which the enemy is attacking with such fury." One of his last letters speaks of his "life of waiting--my waiting-room existence, I might call it--for I am a poor traveler waiting for a train that will never come any more." His last work, the Fourth Sonata for Violin and Piano, was performed in May 1917 with Debussy at the piano. It was the last music that he played in public, at St. Jean-de-Luz in September.

Debussy's Music

Much of his most creative work as a composer was in the sphere of piano music. Like Chopin, he revolutionized the technique of piano playing. Apart from Schönberg there was no composer at the beginning of the Twentieth Century who exercised so great an influence on his contemporaries and on the generation that followed as Debussy. His discoveries in harmony and tone color have even entered into the field of film and popular music. For decades, Jazz has not succeeded in enlarging Debussy's stock of chords. But Debussy never became the founder of a school. His music was criticized as being "boneless tonal vibrato," but these persons were judging him far too generally. They overlooked the fact that this very subtle composer was capable of powerful, but controlled eruptions that he portrayed in his music whenever his compositional bent lay in that direction.

...During his own lifetime Debussy was connected with the older Impressionism of the painters. Since that time, the idea of him as a musical Impressionist has become inseparable from his name. He himself was just as allergic to this word as Schoenberg was to the word "atonal." Only in a few works at most was Debussy truly an Impressionist, and in none was he a mood-painter, as the popular cliché would have it. Nevertheless Debussy's works, particularly the piano music of his middle period, are full of rhythmic power and dynamic impulses. The freedom of form (not to be mistaken for its dissolution) does not indicate a rhapsodic gliding-over from one bar to another or a loose improvisation on a couple of sounds or scraps of melody. To the contrary, everything is most carefully composed; every detail is minutely indicated...

...Impressionism created what was virtually a new musical language, free of superimposed formal constraints and deterministic tonal harmony. A technique of the Impressionists in avoiding traditional harmonic progressions can be called "sideslipping" or "gliding chords." Parallel chordal movement (up or down) sometimes included chords of the same quality (i.e. all major, or minor). Parallel movement could also be according to a given diatonic scale. Even higher number chords of sevenths or ninths were candidates for this form of chordal movement. Many times a primary interval (octave, fourth, or fifth) was added in parallel fashion to a melody. This produced a thickening out of the melody much as in painting, the luminous haze is a thickening out of a single line. Impressionist composers juxtaposed pure chordal colors, leaving it to the ear of the listener to interpret the whole. Melodies were frequently elusive. The short brush strokes of an Impressionist painter were similar to the short melodic lines of narrow scope used by composers. Repeated melodic fragments were common. Impressionistic rhythms were frequently not clear-cut or predictable. They frequently lacked a strong pulse or were slightly irregular in manner. Rather, rhythms veiled the beat and helped to free music from the tyranny of the barline. Especially in the music of Debussy, unity of form was not demanded, nor was it desired. Maurice Ravel, on the other hand, was a classicist formally.

...The composer's own words offer the best explanation of his art:

"There is no theory. You have only to listen. Pleasure is the law. I love music passionately. And because I love it, I try to free it from barren traditions that stifle it. It is a free art gushing forth, an open-air art boundless as the elements, the wind, the sky, the sea. It must never be shut in and become an academic art."...