

## The Impressionist and Post-Impressionist Eras Discovering Debussy and Impressionism

"A century of aeroplanes deserves its own music. As there are no precedents, I must create anew."—[Claude Debussy](#)

"Debussy existed before Debussy. It is an architecture which moves upside down in water, clouds which form and disperse, branches which slumber, rain on the leaves, plums which in falling kill themselves and bleed gold--everything that only murmured or stammered before a human voice came to give it expression. A thousand vague marvels in nature have at last found their interpreter." - [Jean Cocteau](#)

"I am trying to do 'something different'- in a way realities- what the imbeciles call 'impressionism' is a term which is as poorly used as possible, particularly by art critics."  
- Claude Debussy in a letter of March, 1908

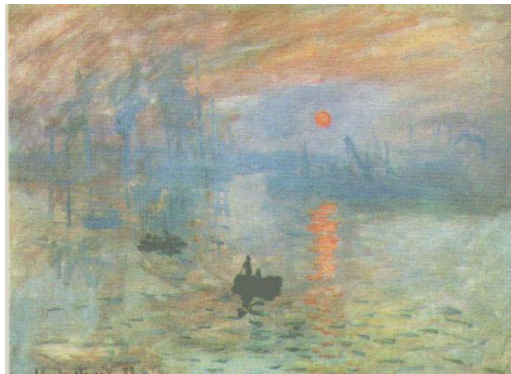


Fig. 1. *Impressions: Sunrise*. Claude Monet.

Claude Debussy was born in Paris, but spent much of his youth in Cannes, where his godmother, Clémentine, arranged for the future composer to take piano lessons. His father, who originally planned a sailing career for his son, agreed to allow nine-year-old Claude to study for a career as a concert pianist. In 1872, at ten years of age, Debussy was accepted into the Paris Conservatoire. He won two prestigious prizes for piano performances before switching his focus from piano to composition.



Fig. 2. *Rain, Steam, and Speed*. Joseph Turner.

He often frustrated his teachers by not following the rules of harmony and improvising his own instead. He was very influenced by hearing Javanese music at the Paris Exposition of 1889 and incorporated some of those music techniques in his music that followed.

Debussy is considered to be one of the innovators of the Impressionist movement in music and was often seen in the company of poets and painters employing similar techniques in their prospective arts. His philosophy of his music was as follows:

*"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."*

Parisian painters strove to capture their first impressions of a scene on canvas and found new subjects that focused on light and on everyday life. "Impressionism" was at first a term of derision applied to a painting by Claude Monet. In literature, writers sought to suggest an idea or image, using symbolism rather than direct statement. Thus the writers of the Symbolist movement achieved a new kind of abstract language. Musical impressionism arose as a means to move away from the traditional major-minor system: it looked back to medieval music in its use of parallel chord movements, and it adopted new scales (whole-tone, pentatonic) that composers heard in non-European music. It also featured new chords built in thirds to include the dissonant interval of a ninth. Instruments were used for color much like an artist applied different hues to a painting, and the music moved in a gentle, floating rhythm. The most important exponent of Impressionism in music was Claude Debussy, who preferred smaller, free forms to the traditional large forms of earlier eras. His best-known orchestral work is the *Prelude to "The Afternoon of a Faun,"* written for a ballet but now usually performed as a programmatic tone (symphonic) poem.

**Note these important points:**

- The term "impressionism" derives from a painting by [Claude Monet](#).
- The painting style was centered in Paris, with works by [Pissaro](#), [Manet](#), [Degas](#), and [Renoir](#).
- Characteristics of the style include
  - juxtaposition of pure colors.
  - studies in light and use of luminous sheen.
- Symbolism was a parallel movement in French literature.
- Symbolist writers include [Verlaine](#) and [Mallarmé](#).
- Their style used indirect language, free verse, and loose suggestions.
- Impressionism in music is characterized by
  - parallel chord movement and some stacked (ninth) chords.
  - non-Western influences, including new scales (whole tone, pentatonic).
  - interest in instrumental color.
  - floating rhythms and meters.
- Debussy was the most important Impressionist composer.
  - He was attracted to non-Western scales and sounds.
  - He wrote programmatic music and used short lyric forms.
  - He is known for his symphonic tone poems, piano music, vocal music.
- Debussy and others were influenced by new world musics heard at the 1889 Paris World Exhibition.