

Our new composer is Claude Debussy. He and Claude Monet have the same first name is Claude, were born and raised in France in the mid 1800s, and died in the early 1900s. Debussy was twenty years younger than Monet. Like the artist Monet, Debussy was trying to break from rigid rules for music and to make shape his music into an experience lacking in pattern. One of his most famous piano compositions “Clair de lune” — French for moonlight — is based on a French poem. It is the third movement (part) of a four-part composition called the *Suite bergamasque*.

Claude Debussy did not have an easy childhood. His parents lived in Paris and they did not have much money. During the Siege of Paris in 1870, his mother took the children to live with an aunt to be away from the city. She lived on the Mediterranean Sea and days spent at the beach left an impression on him. His aunt paid for the seven-year-old boy to take piano lessons. His father picked the wrong side in the battle and spend one year in prison. Claude continued to take lessons and his teachers saw his talent. He was admitted to the Paris Conservatory at the age of ten and only the best musicians studied there. He studied piano, Sol-fa, composition, harmony, organ, and music history and theory. Some teachers liked him and wrote, “A charming child, a truly artistic temperament; much can be expected of him.” Other teachers was less impressed: “Debussy would be an excellent pupil if he were less sketchy and less cavalier.”

If you were going to write music about the sea, where would you go? Debussy loved the sea but he was inland when he first began writing “La mer.” He drew from his memories of many happy days at a beach along the Mediterranean Sea with his mother, sister, and aunt. Ironically, his father wanted Claude to go to sea as a sailor when he grew up. Fortunately he did not for Debussy never learned to swim! Being inland in a place called Burgundy seems an odd location for writing about the sea, but this is what Claude wrote to a friend:

“You’ll tell me that the ocean doesn’t exactly wash the hillsides of Burgundy...! And that this could well turn out like some studio landscape! But I have countless memories: that’s better, to my mind, than a reality whose charm generally weighs too heavily on one’s consciousness.”

Debussy started writing the piece in 1903 and did drive to a couple of locations by the sea on the English Channel during the two years he worked on “La mer.” It was not a happy time in his life. He was not in the best of health and his wife did not have the same love for his music as he did. While she was loving toward him and well liked by Debussy's friends, he was annoyed that they did not discuss the things that mattered most to him. These challenges were rippling through his marriage and threatening to tear it apart. Their letters to one another while he traveled were short and not at all sweet.

Debussy began his music studies at the Paris Conservatory at the age of ten and he continued to study there through his late twenties. When he was only twenty-two years old, Claude submitted a composition to a competition and, in spite of the fact that he broke all kinds of musical rules, he won France's most prestigious award. The prize included an extended stay at the French Academy in Rome, Italy where only France's top students in art, architecture, and music were allowed to study.

What did he think of Italy? The French academy smothered his creative freedom. He thought the people boring, the food bad, and the rooms abominable. He found no delight in Italian opera which was all the rage and found 300-year-old church music by Palestrina more appealing. He was depressed most of the time during his two-year stay in Rome and he could not compose and music. The atmosphere depressed him so much that he could not compose. What irked him the most was the strict rules of music — “I am sure the Institute would not approve, for, naturally it regards the path which it ordains as the only right one. But there is no help for it! I am too enamored of my freedom, too fond of my own ideas!”

Not long after he returned to Paris, Debussy wrote his “Two Arabesques.” What is an arabesque? It is a type of music which uses melodies to express Arabic architecture musically. Since the architecture is ornamented with flowers and leaves and curves, the music has a natural feel that is beautiful, flowing, and flowery. Debussy seems to wander through modes and keys, and achieves evocative scenes through music. His view of a musical arabesque was a line curved in accordance with nature, and with his music he mirrored the celebrations of shapes in nature. Debussy explained, “That was the age of the ‘wonderful arabesque’ when music was subject to the laws of beauty inscribed in the movements of Nature herself.”