

Improbable Impressionism

From "Children's Corner" Suite (1906-08) Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum Jimbo's Lullaby The Snow is Dancing	Claude Debussy (1862-1918)
Prelude de la Porte Heroique du Ciel (1894) (Prelude to the Heroic Gate of Heaven)	Erik Satie (1866-1925)
From "Impresiones Intimas" (Intimate Impressions) (1914) Pajaro Triste (Sad Bird) Gitano (Gipsy)	Federico Mompou (1893-1987)
From "Trois Morceaux" (1914) D'un Jardin Clair (From a Bright Garden) Cortege (Procession)	Lili Boulanger (1893-1918)

Intermission

Preludes nos.1 and 2 (1923)	Frederick Delius (1862-1934)
Poem in F-sharp Major, Op. 32, no. 1 (1903)	Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915)
From the Suite "Le Tombeau de Couperin" (1917) Prelude Menuet Rigaudon	Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)
From "Roman Sketches" (1917) The Fountain of the Acqua Paola, Op. 7, no. 3	Charles T. Griffes (1884-1920)
Jeux d'Eau (Fountains) (1901)	Maurice Ravel

Introduction to Impressionism

The term "Impressionist" was first used as an insult in response to an exhibition of new paintings in Paris in 1874. The painters included Monet, Renoir, Pissarro and Degas. Some years later the impressionism label was applied to music of Debussy, Ravel and others. They, too, disliked the term. However, when a critic compared Debussy's music to the paintings of Monet, Debussy said "You do me a great honor by calling me a pupil of Claude Monet." Despite the protests, "impressionism" is still the word used to describe certain paintings and music from the late 19th century to the early 20th century.

How can we describe this musical style? Distinguished musicologist and music historian, Donald Jay Grout, states 3 characteristics of impressionism, paraphrased here:

- 1) As program music it does not seek to tell a story, but to evoke a mood or an "atmosphere" with the help of suggestive titles.
- 2) *Impressionism relies on allusion and understatement instead of the more forthright or strenuous methods of the Romantics.*
- 3) It employs melodies, harmonies, colors and rhythms to make a musical language radically different from that of the German Romantic tradition. For example, pentatonic, whole tone, or modal scales may furnish the material of melodies and chords. A common device is the parallel movement of chords, conceived as a sonorous unit determined more by color value than by the movement of the harmony.

Although Debussy and Ravel are the two great composers whom we associate with impressionism, musicologists will agree that not everything they wrote falls into that category including, perhaps, their suites presented in this program. Likewise, many other composers were influenced by impressionism but might not be labeled "impressionists". The pieces by the 8 composers of this program were chosen because it was felt that they exhibit impressionistic characteristics, but will that elusive term be an accurate description of their music?

Therefore, you are invited to enjoy this sampling and consider how to classify the music for this program titled "**Improbable Impressionism**".

Composer Notes

Claude - Achille Debussy (1862-1918) is considered to be music's dean of impressionism. However, this is only one aspect of his music. His earliest compositions might be categorized as Late Romanticism or Proto-impressionism, even though his fingerprints are clear. His latest works, likewise, would not be labeled impressionism either. His impressionistic piano works basically fall into a 10 year period from 1903-1913. Debussy hated the term and said, "I'm trying to do something else - in a way realities - what imbeciles call 'impressionism', a term misused as it could possibly be". Regardless of the term, he influenced dozens of composers with his changes to the harmonic system. When Debussy entered the Paris Conservatory at age 10 he studied there for the next 11 years. His piano teacher, Anton Marmontel, noted his artistic temperament and despite being "scatterbrained and inaccurate" predicted he would become a distinguished musician. Debussy refused to be constrained by his professors' rules but in 1884 was able to win the Prix de Rome, the highest honor the Conservatory conferred. He absorbed many influences including French poets and artists, English painters, Oriental art and music, especially the gamelan orchestra. He also admired many composers including Palestrina, Rameau, Chopin, Mussorgsky and even Wagner. In the end he was a proud Frenchman, calling himself simply a "musicien francais" and summed up the virtues of art and music like this: "Painters and sculptors can only present us with the beauty of the universe in their own free, somewhat fragmentary interpretation. They can capture only one of its aspects at a time, preserve only one moment. It is the musicians alone who have the privilege of being able to convey all the poetry of night and day, of earth and sky".

Erik Satie (1866-1925) was one of the most unusual characters in the history of music. He's been called an eccentric genius as well as an uneducated poseur. He's been labeled an early impressionist and also an anti-impressionist. *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians* describes him as a "celebrated French composer who elevated his eccentricities and verbal virtuosity to the plane of high art". He entered the Paris Conservatory at age 13 but was expelled 3 years later. His piano teacher called him the laziest student there. He earned a modest living as a cabaret and cafe pianist. In 1891 he met and befriended Debussy. Both were bohemians who didn't respect established rules of music. Debussy admired Satie's now famous *Gymnopedies* (1888) and orchestrated nos.1 and 3. Satie wrote many satirical pieces with humorous and surrealistic titles such as: *Genuine Flabby Preludes (for a dog)*, *Dehydrated Embryos*, *Sketches and Provocations of a Portly Wooden Mannikin*, *Bureaucratic Sonatina* to name a few. He also wrote ridiculous instructions in the music for the performer. In response to Debussy and other critics saying that his pieces

had no form he published *Three Pieces in the Form of a Pear* with a large pear on the cover. When he was almost 40 he decided to go back to school and this time was more serious in his studies of counterpoint and orchestration. Perhaps his best compositions are from this later period and he influenced many composers of the next generation such as Milhaud, Poulenc and Honegger. In later years Satie wrote for as many as 25 publications including *Revue Musicale* and *Vanity Fair*, in most cases not as a music critic. His lifelong love of drink caught up with him in 1925 when he died of cirrhosis at the age of 59.

Federico Mompou (1893-1987) was born in Barcelona to a mother of French ancestry and a father from Catalonia. He was equally comfortable with French and Spanish living in both countries for long periods. He was inspired by concerts that Gabriel Faure gave in Barcelona in 1909 and went to study at the Conservatory in Paris which Faure headed. He wrote primarily for the piano and was influenced by French Impressionism as well as folk music from Catalonia. He was shy and not interested in virtuosity. His music is intimate, lyrical and understated. He is considered one of the most important Spanish composers of the 20th Century and by one French music critic a disciple and successor to Debussy.

Lili Boulanger (1893-1918) was born to a distinguished family of musicians, her mother a Russian Princess and her father and grandfather both teachers at the Paris Conservatory. Her 6 year older sister, Nadia, also became a renowned teacher there. Lili was a child prodigy and discovered to have had perfect pitch at age 2. She sang, played piano, violin, cello and harp. As a composition student at the Conservatory she won the prestigious Prix de Rome at age 19 and was the first woman to do so. Her father had also won and her sister Nadia had won 2nd prize. Aspects of Faure and Debussy can be heard in her compositions. She suffered from chronic illness beginning with bronchial pneumonia at age two, leading to intestinal tuberculosis that ended her life at 24. Her setting of *Psalm 130* (1917) for orchestra was dedicated to the memory of her father and has been suggested that with its powerful emotion was composed in reaction to WW1. On her death bed she dictated her choral *Pie Jesu* to her sister. Despite her short life, she wrote over 50 striking works, orchestral, vocal/choral, and chamber but only a few short pieces for piano solo.

The parents of **Frederick Delius (1862-1934)** emigrated from Bielefeld, Germany and he was born in Bradford, England. He studied violin and piano growing up. His father was a successful wool merchant who hoped Frederick would follow into the business. He sent his son to Germany, Sweden and France as the firm's representative but Frederick was more interested in music than the family business. At age 22 he went to Florida to manage his father's orange plantation. Again, he wasn't interested and studied counterpoint and

music composition with Thomas Ward in Jacksonville, a teacher he later praised as the most useful he ever had. His earliest musical influence was hearing negro spirituals and folk song and he wrote the orchestral suite *Florida* from his experiences there. In 1885 he moved to Danville, VA. to teach music before leaving in 1886 to study music formally at the Leipzig Conservatory. His father finally agreed to let him pursue his passion. There he was influenced by the music of Wagner and Grieg. Delius settled in Paris in 1888, moving to the nearby town of Grez-sur-Loing in 1897 where he remained for the rest of his life. After the English conductor, Sir Thomas Beecham began to perform Delius' works in London in 1907 his music became popular in England and to a lesser extent in Germany until WW1. Delius wrote mostly orchestral and vocal music with some chamber music and just a few piano pieces. The influence of impressionism is apparent and many of his orchestral works evoke the bucolic serenity of the English countryside, such as *North country Sketches*, *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring*, and *A Song of Summer*. Sadly, a syphilitic infection slowly developed into paralysis and blindness, and eventually took his life.

Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915) was born in Moscow. His mother was a concert pianist who unfortunately died of tuberculosis when he was an infant. At the Moscow Conservatory in 1888, he studied in the same piano class as Rachmaninoff. Except for a few orchestral works, his compositions are almost exclusively for piano solo. His earliest are in a style and genres that Chopin used such as preludes, etudes, nocturnes and mazurkas. He also wrote 10 Sonatas which show the rapid evolution of his unique style, featuring original scales and his famous "mystic" chord. During this evolution some pieces may sound impressionistic. His melodic and harmonic style became influenced by theosophic doctrines and synesthesia, which in his case meant associating colors with certain notes or keys. He considered music and the arts a means of transforming humanity, accelerating his spiritual evolution. He planned to compose a work titled *Mysterium* which would synthesize music, dance, scent, light, poetry and religion in one huge performance in the Himalayas. Only the text of a preliminary poem was completed upon his premature death at 43 from blood poisoning, resulting from an abscess on his lip. Immediately after his death, Rachmaninoff toured Russia in a series of all-Scriabin recitals. It was the first time he had played music other than his own in public and introduced many to Scriabin's works.

Charles T. Griffes (1884-1920) is a largely ignored American composer of genius who again died too young at age 35. He started piano lessons with his older sister, then as a teenager studied with Mary Broughton at Elmira College in Elmira, New York where he was born. She recognized his talent and arranged for him to study in Berlin at the Stern Conservatory. He started composing in the German Romantic style and wrote songs to German texts that sound

Brahmsian. In 1907 he returned home to help his family after his father died. He worked as music director at the Hackley School for Boys in Tarrytown, NY. The job was not rewarding but gave him financial stability so he could compose in his spare time. He was influenced by French impressionism, Asian music, American modernism and Scriabin's use of original scales. He wrote mostly piano and vocal music with some orchestral pieces, many of which were arranged from the piano originals. One of his last works was a piano sonata (1919) which shows him perhaps finding his own original style. Unfortunately, he was to be one of the later casualties of the 1918 flu pandemic.

After Debussy's death, **Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)** was regarded by the 1920's to be France's greatest living composer. He was rather ambivalent to criticism or praise, secure in his own talent and intelligence. Although he is associated with impressionism and admired Debussy, he didn't think the term applied to himself. He more often infused classical forms with his modern language. However, when it was said that Debussy's impressionism influenced him, he pointed out that he wrote his impressionistic piece, *Jeux d'Eau (1901)* before Debussy established his impressionistic style. Ravel's progressive modernism did not go over well in the Paris Conservatory where he was a student on and off from 1889-1903, having been expelled twice. Despite trying to win the Prix de Rome 5 times he was never successful and the last rejection even caused a scandal which led to the head of the Conservatory being replaced by Gabriel Faure, Ravel's composition teacher who appreciated his talent. Ravel was a slow, methodical and perfectionist composer, perhaps inheriting that trait from his Swiss-French engineer father. His mother, who was Basque-Spanish provided the strong Spanish influence in many of his works. Most of Ravel's oeuvre is for piano or vocal, including 2 operas, song cycles and choral works. His piano music is largely quite difficult including 2 piano concertos. Despite being very good at orchestration he wrote only a few original compositions for orchestra. The majority are orchestral arrangements of his piano pieces. He also orchestrated other composers' works, most famously Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Many composers approached him for lessons and he usually demurred, encouraging them to find their own style. When Gershwin asked he basically said "Why would you want to be a bad Ravel when you're already a good Gershwin?" As an example of his own self-criticism, he commented to Arthur Honegger "I've written only one masterpiece - *Bolero*. Unfortunately there's no music in it".

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