

Achille-Claude Debussy by Rob Ryan

On 22 December 1894, the musical world shifted on its axis. Normally, when a live performance contains a startling innovation, there is an instant reaction from those not yet ready to embrace a new form – witness the mass audience walkout at the premiere of Bruckner's *Third Symphony* in 1877 or the riot at the premiere of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* in Paris, 1913.

On that chilly December day, Achille-Claude Debussy premiered something just as radical as the above, when a young Gustave Doret conducted 'Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune' ('Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun'). It was a work without obvious conventional form or easy harmonic resolutions, which offered instead a hazy, shimmering, sensual and sometimes uneasy soundscape where the melody seemed to shift and change like a mirage.

The sense of something not quite wholesome in the piece (which was based on a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé, where a flute-playing half-human, half-goat fantasises about seducing two sleeping nymphs) comes from the use of the tritone. This is an interval of exactly half an octave, also known as *diabolus in musica* ('the devil in music'), because of the jarring, unsettling sound that occurs when the two notes are played simultaneously. In the *Prélude*, a tritone first appears when the opening flute motif makes its unsettling chromatic descent to a half octave below the original pitch. Two other Debussy staples are present and correct in the short piece – the use of whole-tone scales, which give a floating, blurred harmony, resting on the borders of atonality, and the deft use of silence, which allow both the piece and the orchestra space to breathe.

So what was the audience reaction to this brave new musical landscape? Unsure, perhaps, of what they were hearing, they demanded the whole piece be performed again. The gentle but profound shockwaves set in motion by the 'Prélude' would eventually ripple through the jazz, rock and contemporary music worlds.

The man who created this quiet revolution was born in 1862, the son of a shopkeeper turned civil servant and briefly jailbird – his father spent a year in prison for his part in the failed Paris Commune. It was while he was imprisoned that Manuel Debussy met composer Charles de Sivry, who suggested his mother could teach young Achille-Claude piano. She was also the mother-in-law of poet Paul Verlaine – at least until he ran off with Rimbaud – whose writings later had a profound influence on Debussy.

Musically, Debussy was always something of a rebel, flouting convention and infuriating his teachers at the Paris Conservatory, which he joined in 1872, with statements such as, 'I have no faith in the supremacy of the C major scale. The tonal scale must be enriched by other scales. Rhythms are stifling...'

It was at the Conservatory that this liberal approach to musical orthodoxy generated the tag that he would come to loathe. 'Debussy's feeling for musical colour is so strong that he is apt to forget the importance of accuracy of line and form,' one report said. 'He should be aware of this vague impressionism which is one of the most dangerous enemies of artistic truth.'

And so began the association in many people's minds that Debussy's sound palette was the aural equivalent of a Monet or a Cézanne. In fact, he hated the term ('"Impressionism" is as poorly used as possible, particularly by art critics,' he wrote) and was in fact more taken by the works of Turner and Whistler. But his life's primary inspiration came from the Symbolist poets - Mallarmé, Verlaine, Maurice Maeterlinck and Charles Baudelaire. The Symbolists had the same free-form anti-establishment approach to language, verse and structure as Debussy had to music – it was sensual,



Debussy's handwritten score for 'Brouillards', from *Préludes Livre II*, completed in 1913. Hints of the polytonality of 1894's 'Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune'. ©Gettyimages

romantic, dreamy and yearning, yet suffused with a sense of decadence and rich in oblique metaphors. It was the Symbolist's multi-layered complexity he was striving to capture in his compositions.

In the late 1880s, though, Debussy was under the spell of Wagner in general, and *Parsifal* in particular – after attending the Bayreuth festivals of 1888 and 1889. It was just before his second visit that Debussy went to the Paris Universal Exposition, a gathering of exotic sights and sounds from across the globe. It was here he found the musical syntax that would enable him to create the perfect settings for the poetry he so admired. He heard the gongs of a Vietnamese theatre group and, more importantly, a gamelan ensemble from Java. Here was music outside the Western straitjacket he so railed against, floating and free, with

a hypnotic, ethereal quality where, as Debussy wrote 'tonic and dominant were nothing more than empty phantoms of use to clever little children.' Now he had the tools to create 'Faun'.

Debussy went on, of course, to compose many more works, including two books of *Préludes*, *La Mer*, 'Clair de Lune', *Nocturnes* and his only opera, *Pelléas and Mélisande*. His legacy, however, spreads well beyond the continued popularity of his own music: Scott Joplin, George Gershwin, Django Reinhardt, Anton Webern, Gustav Holst, John Cage, Bill Evans and *Kind of Blue*-era Miles Davis all owe a substantial debt to Debussy.

The composer died from rectal cancer in 1918. Before his death he said, 'I have still so much to say. There are so many things in music which have never been done yet.' As composer Pierre Boulez said, 'The flute of the Faun brought new breath to the art of music; what was overthrown was... the very concept of form itself... the reservoir of youth in that score defies depletion and exhaustion.'

There are still many musicians and composers continuing Debussy's explorations on his behalf, drawing from the seemingly bottomless reservoir of tone, timbre and colour that was unveiled in December 1894.