

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

- Studied music at Paris Conservatoire, won *Prix de Rome* at age 22, went to Rome to study and in Rome wrote his first piece that has been called impressionistic (*The Blessed Damsel*)
- Returned to Paris in 1887, became acquainted with Impressionist painters and Symbolist poets.
- **Impressionist movement** is named for a painting of **Claude Monet** ([Impression: soleil levant](#)). Many other artists: Degas, Renoir, Manet, early Van Gogh and Gaughin
 - these painters attempted to record impressions of nature by refracting light into primary components (colors of spectrum), and juxtaposing them onto canvas, where they were later reassembled by viewer. Forms and outlines were obscured, creating dreamy atmosphere. Sharply drawn contours avoided; effect is like viewing an object through haze or smoke
 - Debussy's impressionist style in music has some parallels with visual arts movement:
 - instrumental colors are finely-graded rather than clearly drawn;
 - melodies are static and non-climactic, sometimes circling around single pitch
 - harmonies are conceived as coloristic, not functional
 - forms are continuously evolving without sharp divisions
 - Debussy's works between *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894) and the *piano preludes* (1910-13) are described as Impressionistic (though he didn't like the term)
- Another influence on Debussy was **Symbolism**: literary trend in poetry emphasizing lyric nature of French language; emphasis is on sound rather than syntax. Nuance of human feeling suggested through illusion, understatement, vagueness; main goal is sonority

- One Symbolist poet is **Paul Verlaine** (1844-1896); he wrote set of poems ***Ariettes Oubliées*** (forgotten little songs), which Debussy set in 1885-7. There are many parallel chords in first song, ***C'est l'extase***; also prolonged 9th chord at beginning
- Debussy also composed other works that were inspired by Symbolists but not direct setting of text, e.g. his first orchestral work: ***Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*** (a faun is a mythological character: half man, half goat [ears, horns, hind-quarters]). Faun also plays flute, dictating instrumentation of opening of the piece. Poem by **Stéphane Mallarmé** (1842-1898); a portion of poem serves as suggestion for the piece
- Other Techniques of Debussy that depart from Tonal System
 - Fine sound detail blur clarity of musical outlines
 - Prominent use of Tritone
 - Alternate Scales used prominently; sometimes used to define sections
 - Alternate scales are usually temporary assertions; seldom is a whole piece in a certain mode
 - Planing: parallel motion in two or more voices
 - Leitmotives: used in his opera ***Pelléas et Mélisande*** (1893-1902); based on a play by **Maurice Maeterlinck** (1862-1949), a Belgian Symbolist playwright.
 - Exoticism: Debussy used suggestions of non-western music such as Javanese Gamelan. Example: ***Images*** vol. 2, movement 2, ***et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut***
 - Bitonality: last of the piano ***Preludes*** is ***feux d'artifice*** (fireworks), containing several examples of bitonality