Debussy's Musical Alchemy Through Water

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> Nature isn't at the surface; it's in the depth.
>
> - Paul Cézanne

Of all the elements traditionally considered from an esoteric point of view, water is perhaps the most enigmatic. Indomitable, though sometimes giving the illusion of being controlled, through its elusive and often furtive presence, its imprint is felt directly and indirectly in various phases of human action, consciously and subconsciously affecting our interaction with the world.

Claude Debussy

In the Jungian universe, and especially in that of alchemy, water is closely associated with dissolution, often characterizing periods of crisis or revolution. However, it is also the operation that allows processes of expansion that would not occur otherwise—which, extrapolated to a mystical reading, leads to the opening to a subtle reality, to contact with the Greater Being, making possible a transcendental experience of the Whole. Spiritual experience is therefore, par excellence, within the scope of the alchemical operation of water.

Music is an artistic manifestation that interacts with emotions in a particular way, due to that are essential for its production. It is not crystallized in a closed space, but requires a temporal window for its revelation, a space in which interactions with the psychological landscape of the performer and the listener take place. This unique dynamic is particularly conducive to opening the window of the subconscious. The association between music and water is therefore particularly relevant from the perspective of mysticism, and no composer was as prolific and fascinated by the theme of water as Claude Debussy (1862-1918). In fact, although water as a source of inspiration has long existed in Western music, it is through Debussy that it is embodied and instrumentalized beyond the realm of inspiration, becoming the very essence in action, in such a way as to produce an unprecedented revolution in the history of music, while also enabling the existence of an effective bridge between the art of sound and spirituality.

However, before approaching Debussy the composer, his importance for music, and the leading role of water in his work, let's consider for a moment the question of the "pictorial" representation of extra-musical elements in music.

Suggestion vs. Representation

Strictly speaking, music does not convey a specific and defined message, since the perception and interpretation of the musical phenomenon are profoundly

Paul Bril, Fauns in a Wooded Landscape*, ca. 1626.*

subjective and can vary from one individual to another, even within a homogeneous cultural context, and even for the same individual at different times. That is, the sound event operates physically and according to established intrinsic rules, but the message (if that is the right word to use) that emerges from it results in a particular way depending on the listener, since it depends on and interacts with other factors (memory, physiology, psychological state, etc.).

Therefore, it must be said that the very association between a given element of nature and its possible musical representation is fundamentally debatable at its root. However, from the point of view of musical syntax, it is legitimate to argue that throughout history a series of compositional procedures and characteristic figurations have been established which, often supported by context or suggestive titles, have forged a somewhat archetypal and vernacular sonic aspect of the element of water in its most diverse forms, such as watercourses, waterfalls, snow, waves, rain, and, going a step further, creatures—mythical or not—associated with the aquatic universe.

> *Those who listen to the piping of the birds, to the murmur of the breeze among the foliage, to the laughter of the pebble-studded stream, and try to catch their elusive harmonies, must realize that the keynote of Nature's music is its extreme subtlety. All is enchantingly indefinite, between the notes. ... It always eludes us, and that is why we love it. If one thinks of the opening phrase of Debussy's* **L'après midi d'un faune** *(***The Afternoon of a Faun***), this same subtlety is noticeable; all is subdued, delicate, nebulous—for Debussy was the first composer to turn entirely from the human and write Nature-music pure and simple.*
>
> *- Cyril Scott*

From Nature and Towards Nature

This intriguing quotation by the British composer and occultist Cyril Scott is a calling card for the universe of the great French composer. It is also pertinent to talk a little about the historical period in which the silent revolution led by Debussy, perhaps in spite of himself, takes place.

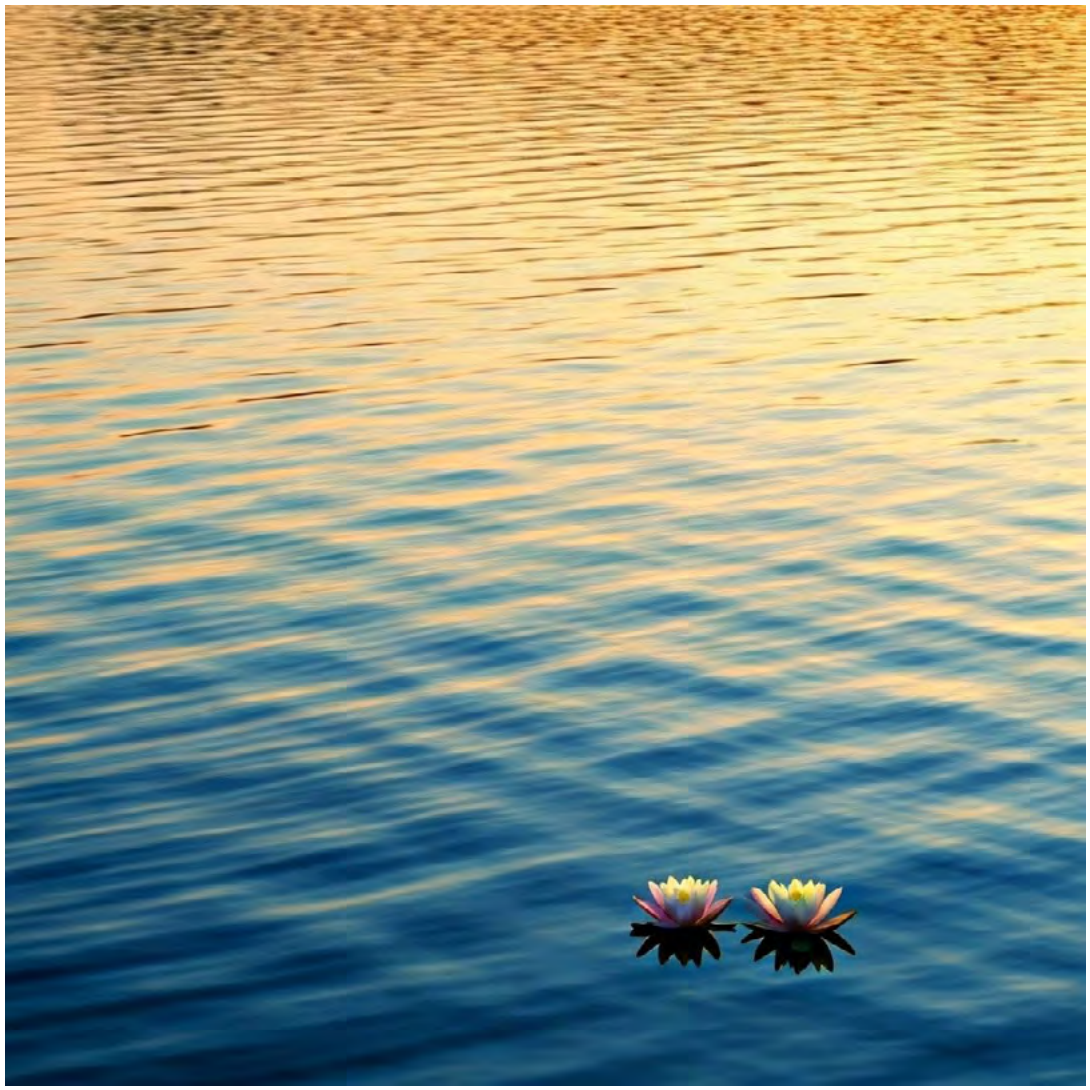
It is not at all surprising that the musical moment of rupture, which was foreshadowed in the years immediately preceding the turn of the twentieth century, contained a certain tendency toward liquefaction, we could dare say. Since the tonal-musical system, from its very birth, contained at its core the formula for its own dissolution, given its exhaustible possibilities, this dissolution could be accomplished in two ways: from the outside, by a vertiginous rupture of opposition and negation; or from within, by a disaggregation of its intrinsic logic, as happens to a living body in the twilight of old age, when its Vital Force abandons it and it ceases to be a suitable vehicle for the expression of life. From this point of view, there could not have been a more propitious moment for Western music to make a leap in perception, to add a supernatural element, because the momentum allowed and demanded the manifestation of a new reality.

It is nonetheless curious to observe that in Debussy, the one who played the decisive role in this "change of frequency" to which we inexorably attach the word "new," there was a sense not of worship, but of reverence for the past. This is borne out by pieces such as "Hommage à Rameau" ("Tribute to Rameau"—a reference to the great French Baroque composer), in the ancient forms invoked in *Suite Bergamasque* (which features the famous "Clair de Lune" ("Moonlight")), or in the adoption of traditionally consecrated musical structures such as those in the suite *Pour le Piano* (*For the Piano*) or the *Préludes*, which unequivocally reach out to a formal, inspirational past. With Debussy, however, it is a matter of evoking, not of invoking: the substance that is coated with the established formulas is of an originality never seen in previous generational transitions. The clothing here does not define the content; it only gives it materiality. This coexistence of an original substance within a traditional structure undoubtedly contributed to the paradoxical subtlety of the musical revolution represented by Debussy: it is astonishing that one of his exact contemporaries, Gabriel Fauré (1845 - 1924), whose refinement and aesthetic sense also possess great originality, fell short of being a revolutionary.

John William Waterhouse, Gather Ye Rosebuds While Ye May*, 1909. This is a classic example of Pre-Raphaelite art.*

There was, however, something in the air, and analogous revolutions were also taking place in painting. Let us think for a moment of movements such as Impressionism and the recourse to Symbolism embodied, for example, by the Pre-Raphaelites, with whom the French esotericists were particularly associated. René Peter, Debussy's friend in the 1890s, said of his music: "To judge by his works, and by their titles, he is a painter and that is what he wants to be; he calls his compositions pictures, sketches, prints, arabesques, masques, studies in black and white. Plainly it is his delight to paint in music."

Despite this pictorial pretension, often supported by highly suggestive and inducing titles, on other occasions the composer seems to want to distance



himself from any prefabricated reading and subsequent listening. Notorious examples of this are the famous *Préludes*, the titles of which, in the manuscript and in the first edition, appear only at the bottom of the last page of each prelude, in brackets and after ellipses. This deliberation, eccentric to be sure, is practically an emancipation from the conventional "title-consequent interpretation" arrangement. With this simple but decisive change in the position of the title (which will perhaps no longer be a title), the musical discourse is also emancipated from a predetermination dictated even before the first note resonates. It is a gesture of dissociation from the trodden path and a redirection towards something beyond the musical phenomenon itself. At this point, water serves us as a connecting element.

Sailing Through Alchemical Waters

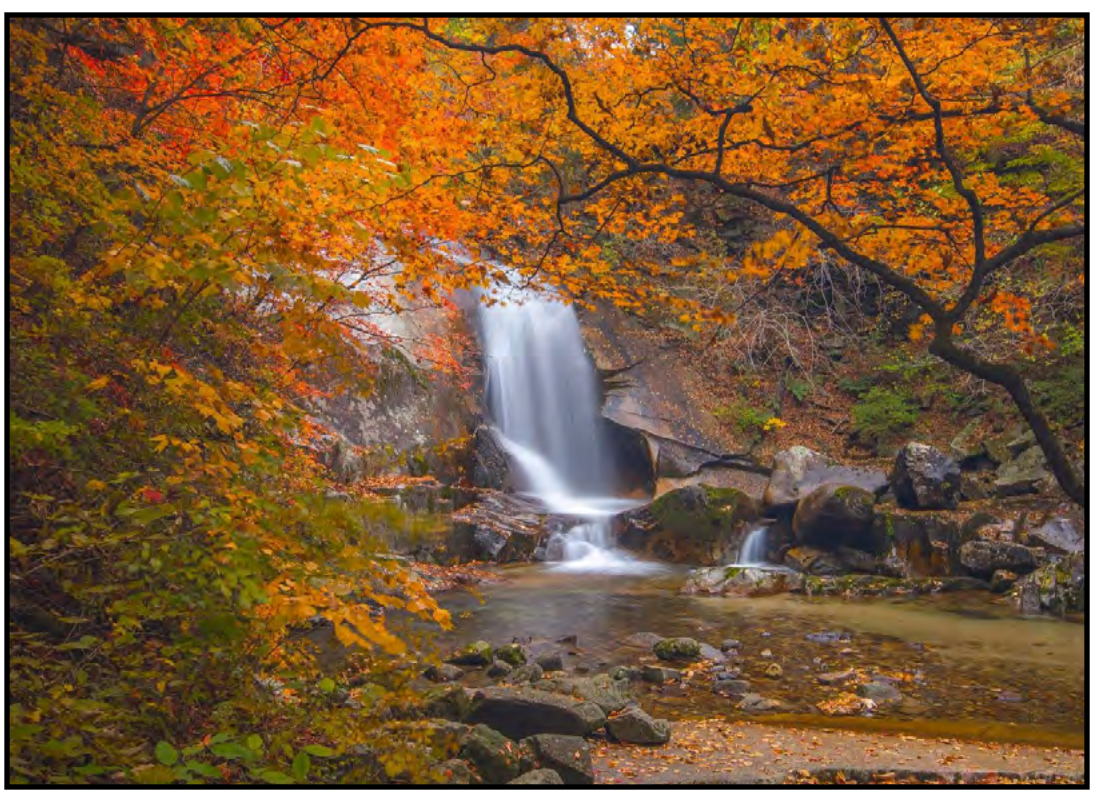
As we said in the introduction, alchemically, water is associated with dissolution, which, applied to the context we are studying here, means a dissolving of the personalization of "canonical" music, so to speak, as it had been until then, and of its traditional and academic boundaries. From a holistic perspective, the interpolation of Asian music (especially Javanese and the pentatonic and whole-tone scales) into Debussy's compositional processes was no accident. This eventuality accelerated the fragmentation of the existing language and favored the infiltration of a music that, according to

the aforementioned Cyril Scott, had been inspired to him by the "Higher Ones."

From this perspective, the presence of water as a central figure in so many of Debussy's creations materializes this impregnation of the element in the foundations of music. Water no longer appears as a pictorial, framed notion of which the music merely "speaks," but becomes the very substrate, the very materiality of musical language. It is worth noting the symmetry of this approach with that proposed by François Jollivet-Castelot, an alchemist and Rosicrucian who gravitated in the same convivial circle as Debussy and who drew a parallel between the knowledge of matter and the spiritual path.

Debussy glimpsed, or at least felt in his core, this immaterial nature of music, or this latent capacity to transpose, at least in part, a Music with a capital "M" from a more subtle, suprasensory reality. In a letter to his publisher Jacques Durand, the composer stated: "I am becoming more and more convinced that Music, by its very essence, is not something that can flow into a strict, traditional form. . . . It's a very young art, both as a means and as 'knowledge.'" This expansion of the formal boundaries of music was inevitable, but it required the existence of a genius like Debussy's. His choice of the verb "to flow" (*couler*, in the original French) also leaves a hint of slyness in the statement. Michel Imberty, a French scholar specializing in the psychology of music, notes: "Debussy's water becomes the authentic dynamic of his work. Water possesses a material evidence of sound which, for him, is a fundamental archetype from which all other transformations, changes, and forms proceed."

Cyril Scott, in his thought-provoking *Music and its Secret Influence Throughout the Ages*, argues that it is precisely this aesthetic reorientation that makes Debussy above all others the musician able to recreate, in the earthly form of music, its spiritual counterpart, and also advocates that further proof of this aptitude—or openness to another form of manifestation, we might say—is the way in which this "new music," though revolutionary, imposed itself through



Hokusai, The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, 1831. Japanese prints were one of Debussy's main sources of inspiration.*

subtlety, not through rupture or harsher contrasts with the musical production in force until then, characteristics that would become those of later musicians such as Stravinsky or Bartók, all tributaries in some way of the author of *La mer* (*The Sea*).

Debussy himself spoke of music as "a dream from which the veils have been lifted," and that one should have "the courage to go on living in one's dream, and the energy to go on searching for the Inexpressible, which is the ideal of all art." These are two ideals dear to the adept of mysticism. The capital letter itself in "Inexpressible" makes us think of a level of reality that cannot be accessed through objective and banal means. But let us return to the Debussyan water.

Reflections in the Water (Or Rather, from the Water)

In another letter to Durand, Debussy evokes a suggestive childhood memory of Cannes, where the train tracks seemed to emerge from the sea, or submerge in it. This is a curious analogy of the interpenetration of two worlds, for whose achievement he would be the high priest. His compositions marked by the sign of water are numerous. Several of the famous mélodies (such as "Il pleure dans mon Cœur" ("Tears Fall in My Heart"), "Le jet d'eau" ("The Water Jet"), and "La mer est plus belle" ("The Sea is More Beautiful")) stand out, dating from the period of his closest contact with Joséphin Péladan and the Rosicrucian Order of the Temple and the Grail, but the aquatic element is also lavish in his output for the piano. For this instrument, he wrote works that have become staples of the repertoire, such as "Poissons d'or" ("Golden Fish"), a delicate and ingenious figuration with an Asian flavor; "Jardins sous la pluie" ("Gardens in the Rain"), a masterful representation of Parisian gardens in the rain; "The Snow is Dancing" or the *Ondine* from *Préludes*—in which a mythological aquatic figure is evoked in a hauntingly realistic way; —and *Des pas sur la neige* (*Footsteps in the Snow*), a notable exception in which Debussy deliberately indicates in writing on the

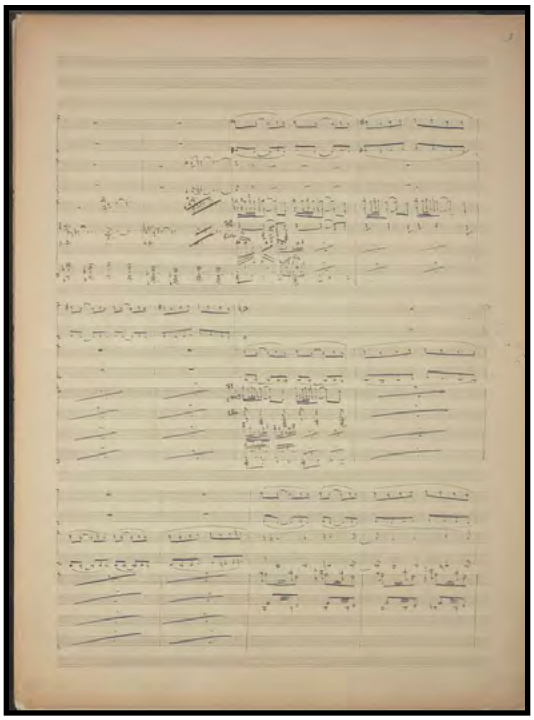
score the association of the rhythmic figure with a wintry landscape: Water in its glacial state!

In Debussy's universe, however, water itself is subject to ambiguity. The title *Voiles*, the second prelude of the first series, is disconcerting for its duplicity, as it can mean either "veils" or "sails." Its little more than static pulsation suggests, if we think of the sails of a boat, a seascape lightly touched by the breeze. The marine association seems to prevail among performers and scholars, a notable exception being Siglind Bruhn, who in her remarkable *Images and Ideas in Modern French Piano Music*, argues that the composer Edgard Varèse claimed that Debussy was actually inspired by an American dancer who was very fashionable in Paris at the time and who performed in her numbers wearing tulle veils.

It is in this imprecision—or rather, in these illimitable possibilities—that lies the very key to the greatness of musical language, as well as to its accessibility. Each person receives the musical message with their own sensitivity, with the capacity of the spirit that animates them, and absorbs it, incorporates it, re-signifies it, and through it builds new phases of perception and experience. It is precisely this dynamic capacity that determines the endurance of musical discourse.

Among the *Préludes*, *La cathédrale engloutie* (*The Submerged Cathedral*) occupies a key position. This marvellous page of the Debussyan repertoire—much more symbolist than impressionist, by the way—offers significant aural sensations to even the least prepared listener. According to British pianist Paul Roberts, an authority on Debussy, we have here the evocation of "a potent image of water as a symbol of interior experience, of the subconscious (submerged) impressions of a dream." It evokes the mysterious waters and the experience of the supernatural. In "Reflets dans l'eau" ("Reflections in the Water"), on the other hand, we have a somewhat nocturnal pianism, in which the interaction between water and image is mainly descriptive, through the compositional mechanisms to which we alluded earlier.

Compositions like *La cathédrale engloutie*, however, suggest rather than depict ideas and realities - landscapes that are more interior than material and pictorial. Everything remains "liquid," never explicit, never fully conscious, because it must be apprehended subconsciously. Odilon Redon, a painter friend of Debussy's who participated in the Salons de la Rose-Croix,



A page from the "Sirènes" manuscript. The wordless chanting of the mermaids bonds the feminine to the aquatic universe.

left in this regard a reflection on his own work that echoes this artistic conception, as quoted in Paul Robert's *Images: the piano music of Claude Debussy*: "My drawings are not intended to define anything: they inspire. They make no statements and set no limits. They lead, like music, into an ambiguous world where there is no cause and no effect."

Beyond the confines of the eighty-eight ebony and ivory keys, *La Mer* (*The Sea*), three symphonic sketches for orchestra, is the most powerful musical translation of water produced by Debussy's pen. But it is interesting to note that two other elements are also present here: fire, represented by the midday sun in the first part, "De l'aube à midi sur la mer" ("From Dawn to Noon on the Sea"); and air, in its cinematic manifestation, the wind, in the third part, "Dialogue du vent et de la mer" ("Dialogue of the Wind and the Sea"). The French philosopher and musicologist Vladimir Jankélévitch states: "[*La Mer*] is the immemorial dialogue between the elements, in which everything is placed on a cosmic scale and where only the voice of primordial nature resounds".

With regard to the three *Nocturnes* for orchestra, the same Jankélévitch argues that Debussy celebrates three of the elements in them: air in "Nuages" ("Clouds"), fire in "Fêtes" ("Festivals") and, of course, water in "Sirènes" ("Mermaids"), where we once again have a mythical-peripheral association with the liquid element, concluding that of all the elements, earth is the least Debussyan of all. We couldn't agree more.

Finally, the action of his only opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, takes place entirely in the vicinity of a sinister sea that foreshadows storms and departures. The microcosmic counterpart to this sea is a well of shallow, dormant water, which in the plot is said to restore sight to those who cannot see.

Dormant Waters, Deep Waters

Between 1903 and 1905, a period that coincides with the composition of La Mer and "Jardins sous la pluie" ("Gardens in the Rain"), among others, Debussy lived his own personal *solutio*, beginning with the crisis and dramatic end of his first marriage and ending with the birth of his only daughter, Chouchou. It is during this same period that he composed "L'isle Joyeuse" ("The Joyful Island"), a projection of a chimerical paradise of ecstasy and consummation that makes us wonder of the ideal whereabouts in which he rested his artistic-prophetic vision when he crossed to the other shore of the mercurial waters.

For Debussy, according to Jankélévitch, "water is not transparent, but reflective; it is not a diaphanous crystal, but a mirror that restores to man his image and to his attentive self-awareness his concerns."

Water is an element that cannot be retained, that is fleeting, but whose traces are indelible. These are adjectives that apply to Debussy's work, which itself overflows its zeitgeist and is, in a certain sense, ephemeral in its originality, since it has never been reproduced by any composer in any temporal window, but has only been derived, quoted, and produced digressions. Yet his work is perennial by the very mark it has managed to chisel in the course of music since his time.

Rosicrucian philosophy advocates harmony between human beings and the universe. This search for a deeper connection with nature and the cosmos is mirrored in Debussy's work, which often reflects a subtle interaction with natural elements. Just as Rosicrucians seek inner understanding and spiritual evolution, Debussy explored complex emotions and sensations in his music, creating soundscapes that can be interpreted as introspective journeys.

In addition to the next generation of classical composers, it is in jazz that his footprint has been most fully amalgamated and metabolized. Born under the sign of fire, he will have reached the zenith of his genius sublimated by the complementary force of water, operating the mystery of the conjunction of opposites in such a masterly way that his pulse, his essence, and his mystique can still be felt today, more than a century after his transition.

Further Reading

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Claude Monet, Impression, Sunrise*, 1872.*