

Mahler, Debussy and Schoenberg uncovered essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Uncovering Mahler, Schoenberg & Debussy In this essay I will talk about three composers who individually had their own take on music and have significantly aided the progression of music composition in the twentieth-century. These three composers are Gustav Mahler, Arnold Schoenberg and Claude Debussy. I will assess their compositional styles by investigating into some of the structures they used and the meaning and thinking behind their movements and symphonies.

Gustav Mahler (July 1860) was a late-Romantic composer and was a huge influence on modern music both with his music and his conducting. One piece of music that he is forever recognized by is his Song of the Earth (Das Lied von der Erde) composed in 1907-1908. This was first performed later on, unfortunately not conducted by Mahler himself as it was performed after his death. It was a huge piece of work written for two soloists, which was very rarely done, and an all-mighty orchestra.

This would have been his ninth symphony but 'Mahler refused to call it No. 9. Out of superstitions dread: Beethoven and Brahms had got no further than nine, and he half-seriously hoped to cheat death by stopping his numbering at eight. (Cooke 1980, p. 04) However others say this isn't the whole truth and that it wasn't named No. 9 because this song meant a lot more to him.

The song was separated into six separate movements, each of these became their own individual song. However it is the first movement - Drinking song of the Earth's Wretchedness, will be analyzing.

Throughout Mahler's Song of the Earth there was completely full of a range of color and different moods and emotions. In his first movement, Drinking song
<https://assignbuster.com/mahler-debussy-and-schoenberg-uncovered-essay/>

of the Earth's Wretchedness, it started off with such a great display and sense of alcoholic bravado as it begins with this fanfare and bleak, harsh, Irish woodwind sounds. The tenor then enters in a more brighter major key before sinking back into the dark minor.

'The First A minor movement... There is an exquisite central section for orchestra, a shimmering vision of earth's beauty...

The ending is uncompromisingly black'. Cooke, 1980) These extreme mood swings are very typical of Mahler's work but also this bleakness of life to the immense joy of the drunkard is something that must have really spoken to him through the poetry. I found this particularly interesting because, people say that everything about Mahler's music is about himself or room within himself and the reason he wasn't quite considered as great a composer as a conductor was because great composers can step outside of themselves. I find this very interesting because research does not suggest Mahler to be a drunk, in fact on the contrary he was a very professional and self-disciplined man.

Many people were influenced by Mahler's compositional and conducting work for many years and even still to this day, we study him and his music in great depth for more understanding and to perform them ourselves. One person that took a great inspiration from Mahler, was Arnold Schoenberg, my second composer.

Arnold Schoenberg (September 13, 1894) is perhaps one of the most renowned composers to this day as he was very controversial and his work prior and

during the war was not forgotten. Schoenberg is among the greats because of his importance in expressionism and his pioneering of atonal music.

I did a great deal of research into Schoenberg because out of these three particular composers I have chosen, he fascinates me the most. A certain piece or pieces that I particularly enjoyed was called 'Five Orchestral Pieces' which is simply a symphony split into five individual pieces and one of them is 'Prettier', to which I was very fond of.

Schoenberg composed this in 1909, so not long before the world war started, and it was first performed in 1912. Similarly to Mahler it was composed for a rather large orchestra (90 people are needed to perform it to be exact).

Like a lot of his music, this piece was atonal (it has no key). This means there is often a lot of dissonant harmonies that can cause an overwhelming feeling of unpleasantness and insupportableness, but all his work wasn't atonal, he did compose other pieces that weren't, like Vergeret Nacho. I found this to be the case the whole way through Prettier, its variety of instrumentation and timbres being played gave a sense that the mood of the song was constantly changing. Also adding to this sense of mood change was the melody.

It was constructed of lots of individual and concise melodies creating at times confusion but also attention and interest. Prettier itself is a reasonably short piece as compositions go, but nevertheless in my opinion is equally as substantial musically with its sudden changes in dynamics leading to great and minimal extremes, certainly expressing his feelings as intensely as
<https://assignbuster.com/mahler-debussy-and-schoenberg-uncovered-essay/>

possible. My final composer is Claude Debussy. A man who shares fewer similarities than Mahler and Schoenberg yet is often compared to and likened to them and others for different reasons.

Many people have tried to put a label on the type of music he made, whether it be Impressionism, Naturalism or Neo-Classicism, none of these categories give a great understanding of the nature behind his music, because each song was very much its own.

The piece we have studied is 'La Mer' which when translated from French to English is 'The Sea'. It was composed in 1903-1905, not massively far off the time as Mahler's 'Song of the Earth', and Schoenberg's 'Prettier'. One of the inspirations behind this piece was from a memory of a trip he had taken when he was younger, down by the coast of France.

Throughout this piece, there is a real sense of nature and as a result the piece, the orchestra and the music, all become forces of nature in their own right. 'In his music Debussy is most skilful in maintaining an equilibrium between Nature and Man, without ever granting supremacy to one side or the other, with the result that his creations are rarely marred by furious explosions of the forces of Nature, or by sudden surges of violent passion, whether the music is pursuing a solidarity of its own, or interpreting the music.' (Carolinians, 1976).

So through all of this that feeling of nature or in this particular case of nature, the sea or ocean, remained permanent. La Mer is made up of three symphonic sketches: From Dawn to Midday on the Sea, Play of Waves,

Dialog of the Wind and the Sea. These individual parts are usually referred to as <https://assignbuster.com/mahler-debussy-and-schoenberg-uncovered-essay/>

to as 'Movements' however going in hand with impressionism and this idea of art and music being one, Debussy took these parts literally as different sketches, and I will talk about his first sketch. 'From Dawn to Midday on the Sea' in fact has little reference to clock-time, but more so to the movements and impressions of the sea itself on a whole.

For example, from what we know at dawn, there is a sunrise. It's a time of day where light is often on the change, when the waves, sea-mist and the sun are different every single moment.

This is what I imagine Debussy has attempted to achieve in the compositional structure of his music by beginning with a sustained sound of pure darkness. Then, as instruments begin to blur in, like the harp and the cello, its angularity gives a feeling of fog or mist to which I live to be Debussy's exact interpretation of how he saw the sea mist from that memory.

It is things like this that show us Debussy's Impressionism. As he paints his picture on paper and in his mind, he has the ability to paint the exact same picture through his music and allows others to hear this music perhaps as clearly as they would see the physical, painted image.

Mahler, Schoenberg and Debussy are influential composers of a similar time yet all have their own take on composing music. Mahler with his Romanticism, Schoenberg with his Expressionism and Debussy with his Impressionism and they are definitely individuals.