

Timbre in the first movement of la mer



‘ Timbre is the quality of a musical note or sound or tone that distinguishes different types of sound production, such as voices or musical instruments’. Sometimes timbre is also known as tone quality or tone colour.

La Mer is an orchestral composition by Claude Debussy. The composition began its life in 1903 in France and was finished in Eastbourne in 1905. Its first performance had mixed reviews possibly due to the strained relationship he had with his wife and also some critics said it did not create any sensations of the sea. The orchestra that premiered the piece was also poorly rehearsed.

In this essay I am going to identify the basic categories of timbre employed by Debussy in the first movement, ‘ De l’aube à midi sur la mer’ from La Mer. I am going to show how timbre is employed structurally through the course of the work, with clear identification of structural points and relationships between the sections. I will also show how timbre in this first movement is fundamental compared to other parameters.

As we know Debussy was heavily related to impressionism which was dominated by atmosphere and the use of suggestion. Debussy uses timbre to suggest colour, mood and atmosphere, as would Monet or Renoir in their own paintings. In particular, one of Debussy’s greatest influences when composing La Mer was the Japanese artist Hokusai. In his painting ‘ The Great Wave of Kanogawa’ he shows a vivid but suggestive, powerful wave breaking with foam and spray crashing, creating a scene of terror. This painting is very similar to Debussy’s first movement, which is vague but also

has moments of terror in it. This can be seen at bar 84 here the new section starts.

Today, La Mer is highly regarded because of its powerful creation of colours and Debussy's replication of the sea. Debussy's unique employment of these creations have more than certainly gone on to influence many later scores, such as you might find within the film industry because of its suggestive atmosphere. For example, John Williams' Jaws. "Generally speaking, La Mer has been influential on many contemporary soundtrack composers because of its highly suggestive and moody atmosphere." The structure of this piece was quite different from other pieces composed around the same time. Debussy fits his structure around the moods, journey and life of the sea without any human element, just purely about nature.

We can see through many books and online articles how important timbre was to Debussy. 'Caroline Potter in "Debussy and Nature" describes that Debussy's representation of the sea "avoids monotony by using a multitude of water figurations that could be classified as musical onomatopoeia: they evoke the sensation of swaying, movement of waves and suggest the pitter-patter of falling droplets of spray.'" We know that musical onomatopoeia is closely associated with specific musical instruments, so Debussy probably chose the instruments with a timbre he felt related to the sea, such as the flute solo at the beginning of the movement at bar 44 which might give the impression of a bird soaring above the sea: "It has a lonely character, possibly a sea bird." Debussy also went a stage further when creating sounds related to the sea. Simon Trezise states in the Cambridge Companion to Debussy that "for much of La Mer, Debussy spurns the more obvious

devices associated with the sea, wind, and concomitant storm in favor of his own, highly individual vocabulary”

Debussy gives a pictorial title for his first movement ‘ from Dawn to Noon on the Sea’. Whether this was intentional to give a literal name for his first movement is unknown but the work certainly does create pictures of the ocean. Through the first movement we can hear the gentle swells and glistening surfaces of the sea to the breaking of the waves on the shoreline. Perhaps through the quieter parts of the movement it suggests that under the sea it is calm and unchanging yet on the surface is an ever-changing picture. La Mer is split into three different movements the first being “ From Dawn to Noon on the Sea with ‘ quick timbral changes to suggest the sea’s different, ever changing natures.’ “ From Dawn to Noon on the Sea” is built upon short episodes, which use different instruments to suggest the various timbres of the sea. Debussy develops this to a “ wonderful suggestion of the swelling of waves, as a theme for divided cellos swells and subsides” this is similarly copied by the “ timpani and horns.” These episodes can also be heard in the final stages of the final movement.

In the first movement of La Mer, Debussy remarkable use of timbre can be seen. As Paul Henry Lang notes, ‘ it’s “ a vibrating, oscillating, glimmering sound complex, caressing the senses” in which Debussy rarely uses the full mass of the orchestra, but approaches it with delicacy and resourcefulness to “ shimmer in a thousand colours.” As a result, Debussy splits his strings up into separate lines, combines the sounds of contrasting instruments, uses provocative harmonies with parallel chordal movement and unresolved progressions, and plays about with thematic fragments that never join

together into full-blown melodies, all to achieve unprecedented, yet wholly natural, sounds and timbres.’ Pierre Boulez calls the result “ an infinitely flexible conception of acoustical instrumental relationships” that avoided symmetry, “ a development conceived in feelings and irreducible to a formal classical plan.”

As noted in the introduction, La Mer was unlike any other piece composed at the time. He uses timbre as a relative to the structure of La Mer. The opening marked at *pp* starts with strings and harps. This timbre creates a still and calm opening, “ possibly representing the first light at dawn.” Instruments are then gradually added, such as the rolling of timpani, with the deep, dark sound of the double bass, perhaps giving a sense of what’s to come as well as contrasting with the harps and strings. Also at the opening our sense of pulse is ambiguous. The harps reflect this by playing in octaves in their lower register, together with the cellos also in octaves; producing a dark and resonant sound, which blends with the background. The beginning of this movement provides a pure harmonized and mystical effect to imitate the calm of the sea at dawn. As the sun slowly rises, at bars 1-5 the violas, doubled at the octave, add their ascending pentatonic melody, which gives sense of a fresh and clean start to the day.

At bar 31 the first principal section follows. This part of the movement grows and develops its own material, being mostly independent. However, we can see it is still based upon the opening, with a few different elements omitted. For instance at bar 33, we can see that the flute’s pentatonic motif is doubled by the clarinets at the octave below. The use of the pentatonic melody might suggest an oriental flavour. The use of the flutes that

dominate the hollow consecutive fifth have a similar timbre to that of the Chinese flute. As Debussy was closely related to the art movement of the time, this perhaps can be related to Debussy's preference to *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*. In the background to this, the second violins and violas wave-like ostinato figure suggests the shimmering, repetitive surface of the sea, while the cellos wider range and more active motion might begin to imply more movement of the sea below the surface. In this section, the harps also play rolling chords that add resonance and suggest the relentless rays of the sun.

The second principal section of the movement starts at bar 84. So far, the cellos have played only an accompanying role by suggesting the depths of the ocean. We can now see a new motif that Debussy uses at bar 86.

Debussy employs the four part divided cellos to dominate the sonority. This is something that is a very unusual arrangement in Debussy's orchestration. At the structural changing point, Debussy again uses the cellos to create a full, strongly articulated and intense sonority, combined with the swelling of the rolling timpani and the horns, to proclaim and bring us into a new section. This drastic change could suggest rumbling thunder or a slow but huge surge of the sea during a storm, gathering its power to strike out on a large rock. This is then followed by a short interlude from bars 122-133. This ten bar section consists of two strong points of four bars with only minor variation in the last four bars. A two bar extension is then added. At this point in the piece we can hear that the momentum is slack and the sea has become uneventful. This can be seen in the timbre employed in this particular section. If we look at the string section they are directed to play

Sur la Touch. This creates a soft, colourless tone quality, which reflects the uneventful sea below.

We then move into the final section (coda) of the piece. We can see that the harps light ringing timbre, as they play arpeggios in a high register, is used to employ an effect of light. This is contrasting to the low full and dark sound in the beginning. This effect produces a bright tone colour and adds a clear articulation to the ensemble. This suggests the midday image of the ocean filled with the strength of the sun at its highest point. The Trombones also make their first entry in La Mer, creating a tremendous sense of the alarming power of the sea. As the music advances towards a splendid tutti ending, the chorale symbolizes the midday sun bursting through the sea mist after the uneventful stillness of the interlude. The shining atmosphere of the midday suggested in the title is vividly presented.

Debussy's use of timbre is fundamental throughout La Mer and perhaps is more crucial than other parameters that other composers might usually rely on, such as tonality and structure. However for Debussy, the use of timbre is very important when reproducing and replicating the sounds of the great ocean. The timbres he has used throughout reflect the title of the first movement and do suggest characteristic features one might associate with the sea.

One of Debussy's greatest attributes is the way he creates musical colour. Susan Key, a writer for the LA philharmonic program books describes how " Debussy achieves his sonorities by augmenting the standard orchestra with some glitter: two harps and a large percussion section. But other musical

elements also become agents of colour. Harmonic changes serve as colour washes; chords dissolve rather than resolve. Short melodic motives rather than fully developed themes sparkle in brief solos, substituting timbre and movement for narrative coherence.”

Debussy's sophisticated use of timbre is shown in his orchestral scoring of the first movement of La Mer. The use of timbre and effect it has in Debussy's orchestration not only becomes an important part of his formal structure, but they also provide energetic pictorial images and emotional atmospheres demonstrating his close relationship of music with visual impressionism. In La Mer, a vivid landscape is suggested from the various wave figurations, shimmering light and onomatopoeic sound effects. The vagueness, ambiguity and effects of light he uses reflects the visual arts, and are vividly implied from his usage of instrumental echoing effects, tremolo strings, harp, and the special timbre of percussion instruments. Although Debussy's usage of instruments and most of his instrumentations are not as aggressive as his fellow composers such as Mahler, Strauss and Stravinsky, his delicate way of exploiting timbre is one of his most important contributions.

I have identified how Debussy has used timbre to suggest colour, atmosphere and emotion in the first movement of La Mer. I have also shown how timbre is employed structurally through the course of the work and how for Debussy, timbre is just as, if not more important than any other parameters in La Mer.