

The Impressionist Era and its Influences

AMU 300 – Final Evaluation

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Impressionism, one of the later eras in classical music composition. An era where emotions are expressed vividly while still following musical structure, where music caused much political controversy, and where France became known for its musical talent. In this essay you will read of how impressionism set a lasting mark in musical and national histories, and how it influenced modern music as we know it.

The Impressionist Era all started with Claude Debussy, being tired of the formed classical structure, and the romantic informality. Of all of the musicians who ever lived Debussy (1862-1918) was known for his originality and adventurous style. His influences soon spread throughout the Western world. He, before long, became a “superstar” in Europe, North America, and Asia temporarily breaking the public’s fascination with the monolithic composers of the

classical and romantic eras. Because of Debussy's moving compositions Impressionism soon spread into churches, schools, ballrooms, along with respected theatres and concert halls.

Although Claude Debussy was an amazing orchestral composer, his works seemed to agree most with the piano. Today, one of the most known pieces of piano repertoire is the piano suite, *Claude Debussy's Clair de Lune*. Many composers started to become inspired by Debussy and thus The Impressionist Era was born. In the later years to come Debussy would have never guessed his music would be so powerful and destructive.

In 1876 unrest soon came to France, and ironically held in the middle was Impressionism. Today many would compare this to the sixties where more liberal habits cause social disturbance. Historians to this day are still shocked with how such an uplifting, and positive movement could cause so much strife. Riots and political vendetta soon aroused France, causing unofficial anarchy in which the government was powerless. This national misfortune was actually caused by feuding between the Socialists and Democrats using impressionism as their weapon of war. The Impressionist Era was said by political leaders to be expressing an opinion in France's politics,

and since most impressionists were French this point had a strong siding. Composers like Debussy, and Satie soon unwittingly became political figureheads. The music definitely was moving for the French people, and thus Debussy became even more famed.

The Impressionist Era claims to be a revolution in style and form. There was now more freedom in the rhythms, and symphonic style. Harmonies tended to overpower the melody, and chord progressions evolved. Impressionism was really a mix of romantic and classical concepts, mixing together the best qualities. That is why in Debussy's works you can sense an empowering emotion or tone, while still knowing that the piece is structured, and formed to composition rules. In the Impressionist Era a new principle in composition was founded: ▲ musical piece is not measured in greatness by its duration, its volume, the compelling rhythm, or its deep tone; but by its beauty and its idea.

The Impressionist Era doesn't only apply to the musical arts. The impressionist movement continued into literature, art, architecture, and dance. In fact, many composers used to use other impressionist art or literature to inspire their works. The era was known for the "swapping of arts" in which a poem would progress

into a painting, and the painting into a musical masterpiece. This concept took a fair amount of time before prestigious schools of the arts agreed to the practice; however the public loved how tone and description could be “translated” between the arts.

Some of the era's most reputed masterpieces are: *Die Ombres* – Arnold Schoenberg, *Le Sacre du Printemps* – Igor Stravinsky, *Jeux* – Claude Debussy, *La Mer* – Claude Debussy, and *Clair de Lune* – Claude Debussy. These pieces all became widely known and loved by the world in the early 1900's. However the composers had a lot of legal troubles with the orchestras at the time who continuously tried to cheat the composers out of their riches. In response to this, six musicians banded together naming themselves as *Les Six* (now presently known as the French Six, or the Paris Six) Together this group could achieve more, and explore more musical ideas. They were some of the era's best musicians, all working together. Soon they had their own orchestra (to “debut” their pieces) and later their own concert hall; but just as all celebrities do, they last their fifteen minutes of fame. Soon the formerly famous six became merely a historical landmark.

Finally, in 1915, the regimented music conservatories (like the Paris Conservatoires and the Royal Windsor Conservatory) officially approved of the liberal Impressionist styles, making way for it to be declared yet other era in musical history. Slowly Impressionist music evolved so that in the later years of Impressionism new techniques and ideas empowered a piece. Never-the-less the music of the Impressionist Era still continued to be publicly admired, and soon another era was born in musical history.

For many they listen to music composed in the Impressionist Era and they wonder: How does this influence modern day music? In fact, the influence from Impressionism abounds all around us. In soul, religious, contemporary, jazz, theatre, band and pop music techniques and styles which were founded during Impressionism are all employed. Even while watching a movie the background music often contains Impressionistic styling. ▲ prime example is Celine Dion's once popular song, My Heart Will Go On, this song contains almost every one of Impressionism's musical characteristics. Throughout the song harmonic chord progressions, a drifting melodic line, classical and romantic technique and tone, irregular chromatic intervals, and whole-tone scales are clearly defined in the

instrumental scores. ▲Also, many other songs are laden with Impressionistic styles; including some rock music. ▲Another modern day artist is Elton John who constantly uses themes from the Impressionist Era. The influence that Impressionism has on modern day music is actually quite phenomenal, all you have to do is listen closely and I guarantee that you will notice some similarity.

The Impressionistic revolution in music all started with one musician, one composer, named Claude Debussy - who alone turned his mind's sketches into another Era in musical history. Who knows, maybe you will lead the way into the next musical era.