

Underwater Soundscapes: Exploring Debussy's *La Cathédrale Engloutie*

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Introduction

Claude Debussy's piano piece *La cathédrale engloutie* is an example of musical Impressionism, a style which seeks to evoke emotions and atmospheres through subtle and innovative use of harmony, texture, and timbre. Using unconventional compositional techniques, Debussy crafts a captivating musical narrative depicting the mythical City of Ys.

Impressionism

Impressionism is a 19th-century artistic movement, first in painting and later in music, that developed chiefly in France during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In painting, it is characterized by small, visible brushstrokes that offer the bare impression of form, unblended color and an emphasis on the accurate depiction of natural light. In music, Impressionism describes a style of composition in which clarity of structure and melody is subordinate to coloristic and harmonic effects. An impressionist composer will sacrifice certain musical elements in order to widen their tonal palette, allowing them to paint vivid musical landscapes that suggest images and moods, while also leaving room for interpretation by the listener.

Analysis of the Score

- Debussy employs unusual expression markings throughout the score, opting for more suggestive and evocative markings.
 - “Profondément calme” - “profoundly calm”
 - “dans une brume doucement sonore” - “in a softly sonorous haze”
 - “doux et fluide” - “soft and fluid”
 - “peu à peu sortant de la brume” - “little by little leaving the mist”
 - “sonore sans dureté” - “sonorous without hardness”
 - “flottant et sourd” - “floating and muted”
- Debussy composes several harmonically ambiguous chords built on fourths and fifths that represent the mysterious or ambiguous atmosphere of the vast ocean. At the moment when the cathedral emerges from the water, Debussy composes very stable chords built on triads.
- As chords are sustained, they clash with subsequent chords, depicting the murkiness of the water.

The Legend of the City of Ys

The City of Ys is an old Breton tale of a prosperous city located on the coast of Brittany, France. The city was said to have been built below sea level and was protected by massive gates. However, the city's downfall was attributed to the pride and arrogance of its ruler, King Gradlon, and his daughter Dahut, who was believed to have caused the city's destruction. According to the legend, the city was inundated by the sea due to Dahut's reckless actions, disappearing beneath the waves.

Acknowledgements

We thank Wabash College for generous support through the Department of Modern Languages.

Wabash Always Fights!



Intersection with Sound Studies

- A Specific Way of Listening
 - Composer Pierre Schaeffer describes *musicianly listening* in his *Traité des objets musicaux*. By musicianly listening, one pays attention to the timbre or texture of the sound, without referring to music theory.
- Visual Sound
 - French Philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy discusses visual sound in his book *À l'écoute*.

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(... La Cathédrale engloutie)