

The Impressionist Period (c.1890-1920)

POLITICS & SOCIETY: THE MAIN EVENTS

- ★ 1893: Independent Labour Party founded in Britain.
- ★ 1896: The first modern Olympic Games held in Athens, Greece.
- ★ 1888-90: The partition of Africa almost complete, with Britain now dominating the centre and south.
- ★ 1901: Federation of Australia. Six separate, self-governing British colonies in Australia were brought together into one Federation: The Commonwealth of Australia.
- ★ 1906: Kellogs first put Corn Flakes on the market.
- ★ 1908: Lord Baden Powell established the Boy scouts
- ★ 1912: The Titanic, largest passenger ship in the world, sank on its first trip to New York.
- ★ 1914: the Panama Canal was completed, allowing large ships passage between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.
- ★ First World War: 1914-1918. The power of the German Empire led the European nations to form complex alliances. When the heir to the Austrian-Hungarian throne was assassinated in Serbia, this led to a series of events which pitted the various alliances against each other and finally resulted in world war.
- ★ 1917: the Russian Revolution. Czar Nicholas II was deposed and power was seized by the Bolsheviks led by Lenin and Trotsky. Russia was renamed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and was now governed by the Communist system.
- ★ 1919: League of Nations formed as a result of the destruction and horrors of the first world war.
- ★ 1920 -1933: Prohibition period in America. Producing and selling alcohol became illegal, which ushered in an underworld of gangsters and crime.

SCIENCE & PHILOSOPHY: THE GREAT SCIENTISTS & THINKERS

- ★ 1898: Viruses discovered by Beijerinck.
- ★ 1898: Radium and Polonium discovered by Marie Curie and her husband.
- ★ 1899: Radioactivity was found to include alpha and beta rays, by Rutherford.
- ★ 1899: Aspirin first marketed by Bayer.
- ★ 1900: Sigmund Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams*.
- ★ 1901: Austrian scientist discovered human blood groups, allowing patients to be given blood matching their own specific group.
- ★ 1928: Fleming discovered Penicillin.

GREAT INVENTIONS

- ★ 1888: The pneumatic tyre was invented by John Dunlop.
- ★ 1894: First escalator used.
- ★ 1895: Lumière brothers developed moving pictures, and held the first public 'movie' show in Paris.
- ★ 1895: The wireless invented by Guglielmo Marconi.
- ★ 1901: British inventor Booth designed the first electric vacuum cleaner.
- ★ 1903: Wright brothers succeeded in flying a plane for 23 metres.
- ★ 1908: Henry Ford made the first Model 'T' car. By 1913, his factory was turning out more than 1,000 cars per day.
- ★ 1913: a device to measure radioactivity, the Geiger Counter, was invented by Hans Geiger.
- ★ 1914: first traffic lights, which were only red and green, were put up in the USA.
- ★ 1920: radio broadcasting began in the USA.
- ★ 1928: television invented by Zworykin.

ARTISTS & ARCHITECTS

- ★ Cézanne: *Jas de Bouffan*
- ★ Degas: *The Dance Class*
- ★ Gauguin: *Woman with a Flower*
- ★ Manet: *House in Rueil*
- ★ Matisse: *Woman with a Hat*
- ★ Monet: *Impression, Sunrise*
- ★ Renoir: *Girls at the Piano*
- ★ Rodin: *The Thinker*
- ★ Turner: *Calais Pier*
- ★ Van Gogh: *Vase with Twelve Sunflowers*
- ★ Gaudi (architect): *La Sagrada Familia in Barcelona*
- ★ Sullivan (architect): *Prudential Building in New York*

LITERATURE: THE MAIN WRITERS

- ★ Frazer: *The Golden Bough*.
- ★ Freud: *The Interpretation of Dreams*
- ★ Hardy: *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*
- ★ Maeterlinck: *The Life of the Bee*
- ★ Mallarme: *Divagations*
- ★ Nietzsche: *Beyond Good & Evil*
- ★ Poe: *The Fall of the House of Usher*
- ★ Tonnies: *Community & Association*
- ★ Wilde: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

GENERAL ARTISTIC TRAITS

The term 'impressionist' was first used by a writer for a Paris magazine to characterise (derisively) a painting by Claude Monet entitled 'Impression: Sunrise' (1872). This was a painting of a harbour seen through the early morning mist, creating the effect of sky and water merging imperceptibly into each other. The term was officially adopted for the third exhibition of Impressionist painters' works in 1877.

It is worth noting that Debussy actually did not like the term as a description of his style.

In poetry, the corresponding movement was called 'symbolism'. Here the poet tried to recreate the feelings and impressions that a particular subject may have inspired in the past, rather than the literal depiction of that same subject. One of the founders of the Symbolist movement was the American writer, Edgar Allan Poe. Many of his stories are dream-tales that blend dream with reality, precision with vagueness.

Impressionism was in many ways a reaction to the sentimentality that characterized art and much music of the 19th century. Impressionism in painting especially, arose out of dissatisfaction with the classical and sentimental subjects and dry, precise techniques of paintings that were approved by the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris.

Impressionism was concerned above all with sensation rather than reflecting reality. What was important was the individual's fleeting sensation or impression of a visual experience - together with its unusual combination of light and shade. Rejecting previous standards, the impressionists preferred to paint outdoors, choosing landscapes and street scenes, as well as figures from everyday life.

The Impressionists based their techniques on innovative concepts of the functions of light and colour, the science of optics and the breakdown of the colour spectrum. A true Impressionist painting presents nature in a composite of coloured patches with carefully arranged minute strokes of pure colour that blend when viewed from a distance. Thousands of tiny dabs and dots cause the surface to shimmer and vibrate. The Impressionists often contrasted a primary color, such as red, with its complementary color, green, to bring out the vivid quality of each. Thus a greater brilliance of color and luminosity of tone was achieved than the previous blending of pigments ordinarily produced. The Impressionists believed that light tends to

diffuse the outlines of a form and reflect the colors of surrounding objects into the shadows. The Impressionists were therefore drawn to scenes of mist, fog, snow and especially water (as seen in Turner's work). The primary object was to achieve a spontaneous, undetailed rendering of the world through careful representation of the effect of natural light on objects. The foremost impressionist painters included Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Berthe Morisot, Camille Pissarro, Pierre Auguste Renoir, and Alfred Sisley.

IMPRESSIONIST MUSIC: AN OVERVIEW

The Impressionist movement in music was led by the French composer Claude Debussy. Influenced by the paintings of the French impressionists and by the poetry of Paul Verlaine, Charles Baudelaire, and Stéphane Mallarmé, musical impressionism emphasized tonal color and mood rather than formal structures as in the earlier sonata and the symphony. Debussy, an active critic as well as composer, viewed impressionism as a reaction to both the formal emphasis of such composers as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Ludwig van Beethoven and the emotional saturation of romantic composers such as Robert Schumann and Franz Schubert. In pursuit of this goal, Debussy developed a combination of new and ancient devices in his music. On the one hand he used the whole-tone scale and complex, hitherto unexploited intervals of the ninth and higher; on the other hand he returned to the parallel fourth and fifth intervals of the medieval church modes. These technical features were fully developed in Debussy's early orchestral work, *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* (1894), based on a poem by Mallarmé. The extensive piano literature composed by Debussy required new performing techniques, including generous but sensitive use of the pedals.

One of the strong musical influences informing the new Impressionist direction, was the music of Chopin. Chopin used various elements of folk music in his melodies, such as the raised 4th and bare 5th, as can be seen in many of his Mazurkas. Debussy also drew on folksong for melodic inspiration and certainly used bare 5ths in his music. Chopin used many extended chords, eg. the added 6th chord. This chord is also one of the most popular chords used in Impressionist music. The use of the pedal too in Impressionist music found its roots in the sonorous and evocative pedal effects throughout Chopin's music. Debussy expressed unqualified admiration for the music of Chopin. As a boy, Debussy actually studied piano with a student of Chopin's, Mme. de Fleurville.

Liszt's music also heralded the innovations of the Impressionist period. This can be seen in many of his compositions in which he made use of whole tone scales, pentatonic scales, altered chords and unusual harmonic progressions. Some aspects of Liszt's music greatly influenced Ravel and Debussy.

With impressionism, there is a break from the security and comfort of past tonal harmonies. The sound is now more slippery, misty and phantasmic. These affects were often created by the use of ambiguous and overlapping harmonies. Parallel movement in both hands was freely used, which was a clear departure from all the rules of traditional harmony. There was much use of the ancient church modes and whole tone scales that obscure tonality, and by general vagueness of form with long flowing melodies and free rhythms.

By the beginning of World War I, in 1914, the over-refinement and technical limitations of musical impressionism provoked adverse criticism from composers and critics alike. A new group of anti-romantic French composers, Les Six, influenced by Erik Satie, satirized and revolted against these excesses. Eventually, impressionism, which had been conceived by Debussy as a revolt against Romanticism, ironically came to be regarded as the final phase of Romantic music.

SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS OF IMPRESSIONIST MUSIC

- ★ Plainsong: the old church modes were now used extensively. Chords were conceived in terms of 'non-functional harmony', as abstract sonorities released from past restrictions. Debussy juxtaposed unrelated major and minor chords in root position and often used sequences of bare 5ths. He avoided the tonic-dominant relationship as much as possible.
- ★ The Whole Tone Scale: Of oriental origin, this scale creates quite an elusive sound, as each tone is just as important as the next. No one tone prevails. Debussy used it often.
- ★ Folk Music: Debussy loved using the pentatonic scale, which was so prevalent in the folk music of Russia and the Far East.
- ★ Floating Chords: the Impressionists often used 'floating chords', ie. chords which required no preparation or resolution. Often used in chains, eg. a chain of 7th chords in Debussy's Arabesque no.1.

- ★ Attraction to hazy sounds rather than clarity: Ravel recommended the use of the pedal in the higher registers, not to bring out the clarity of the notes but the hazy impression of vibrations in the air. Debussy worked on creating a controlled enveloping haze too, but was specifically influenced by Ravel's hazy sonorities first.

IMPRESSIONIST MUSIC: THE MAIN COMPOSERS

- ★ France: Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, Paul Dukas and Albert Roussel.
- ★ England: Ralph Vaughan Williams, Frederick Delius
- ★ Italy: Ottorino Respighi
- ★ Spain: Manuel de Falla
- ★ USA: Charles Griffes
- ★ Russia: Alexander Scriabin

PERFORMANCE HINTS

All notes within a particular sound need to be well balanced. We need to experiment with tones and tonal colours, and to consciously savor and enjoy their new and exotic flavors.

It is often appropriate to play a long series of chords and notes over the one pedal. Walter Gieseking, a famous Debussy exponent, maintained that the pedal should be changed only when the main bass note changed, i.e. the lower bass note. Often staccato dots are pedalled over, as are the rests, which suggests that the articulation markings are not always intended literally, unlike the assumption behind written music of earlier times.