

***Pacific 231 (Symphonic Movement No. 1)***

**Arthur Honegger (1892–1955)**

Written: 1923

Movements: One

Style: Contemporary

Duration: Six minutes

As a young man trying to figure his way in the world of music, Miklós Rózsa (a Hollywood film composer) asked the French composer Arthur Honegger “How are we composers expected to make a living?”

“Film music,” he said. “What?” I asked incredulously. . . . I was unable to believe that Arthur Honegger, the composer of *King David*, *Judith* and other great symphonic frescos, of symphonic poems and chamber music, could write music for films. I was thinking of the musicals I had seen in Germany and of films like *The Blue Angel*, so I asked him if he meant foxtrots and popular songs. He laughed again. “Nothing like that,” he said, ‘I write serious music.’

As a young man, Honegger was part of a group of renegade composers in Paris grouped around the avant-garde poet Jean Cocteau called “Les Six.” Unlike the other composers in “Les Six,” Honegger’s music is weightier and less flippant. In the 1920s, Honegger worked on three short orchestral pieces that he called *Mouvements symphonique*. In his autobiography, *I am a Composer*, he recounts his intent with the first:

To tell the truth, In *Pacific* I was on the trail of a very abstract and quite ideal concept, by giving the impression of a mathematical acceleration of rhythm, while the movement itself slowed.

It was only *after* he wrote the work that he gave it the title. “A rather romantic idea crossed my mind, and when the work was finished, I wrote the title, *Pacific 231*, which indicates

a locomotive for heavy loads and high speed.” Given a title, people heard things that weren’t there. One person, mistaking the title for the ocean, said that the music “evoked the smells of the open sea.” The press joined in: “People of great talent wrote wonderful articles describing the driving-rods, the noise of the pistons, the grinding of the brakes, the oval balloon, the release of steam, the commotion of the front wheels, etc., etc.”

Giving up, Honegger included the following in the published score: “the quiet breathing of the machine at rest, its effort in starting, then the gathering speed, the progress from mood to mood, as a 300-ton train hurtles through the dark night, racing 120 miles an hour.”

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***Old and Lost Rivers***

**Tobias Picker (1954–)**

Written: 1986

Movements: One

Style: Contemporary

Duration: Six minutes

Tobias Picker was born in New York City. He began composing when he was eight. While still a child, his parents arranged for him to study at the Manhattan School of Music and the Juilliard School. He attended Princeton University. His principal teachers were Charles Wuorinen, Elliott Carter and Milton Babbitt. He has earned numerous awards including a Charles Ives Scholarship, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Award in Music from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He was the first composer-in-residence of the Houston Symphony and served in the same capacity for the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival and the Pacific Music Festival.

In Dr. Oliver Sacks' fascinating book *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*, there is mention of Tobias Picker. "I live my life controlled by Tourette's," Picker told Sacks, "but I use music to control it. I have harnessed its energy—I play with it, manipulate it, trick it, mimic it, taunt it, explore it, exploit it, in every possible way." Sacks goes on to report that "Picker writes in every mode—the dreamy and tranquil no less than the violent and stormy—and moves from one mood to another with consummate ease."

Tobias Picker provides the following summary of his *Old and Lost Rivers*:

Driving east from Houston along Interstate 10, you will come to a high bridge which crosses many winding bayous. These bayous were left behind by the great wanderings, over time, of the Trinity River across the land. When it rains, the bayous fill with water and begin to flow. At other times—when it is dry—they evaporate and turn

green in the sun. The two main bayous are called 'Old River' and 'Lost River'. Where they converge, a sign on the side of the highway reads: 'Old and Lost Rivers'.

In 1986 the state of Texas was engaged in a celebration of its sesquicentenary. This event was to be marked by the commissioning of a series of concert openers for the Houston Symphony, of which I had just been appointed Composer in Residence. Though not a traditional fanfare, Old and Lost Rivers took its place in what came to be known as the 'Fanfare Project', alongside 20 other compositions from around the world. I composed this piece . . . as a tribute to my new home.

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## ***La Mer***

**Claude Debussy (1862–1918)**

Written: 1903–05

Movements: Three

Style: Impressionistic

Duration: 23 minutes

“Perhaps you don’t know that I was really destined for the wonderful life of a sailor and that it was only chance which diverted me. I have nevertheless retained a sincere passion for the sea.” Those are the words of a man who was born nowhere near the ocean (actually in a suburb of Paris), was the son of a traveling salesman (who did have a sailor background) and a seamstress, and who—at the age of 12—was already playing Chopin’s piano concertos with a view towards a career as a piano virtuoso. He may have been destined to become a sailor, but Claude Debussy turned out to be one of the most revolutionary composers of the late nineteenth century. Debussy’s musical experimentation opened the doors for much of the new sounds of the twentieth century.

Debussy’s music may strike us as merely beautiful and colorful. But when he wrote it, Debussy broke the cherished rules of composition established through hundreds of years of tradition. Dissonance which must be resolved properly into a relaxing consonance (according to the rules) became an opportunity for new color. Rhythm disintegrated under Debussy. “Barlines are like children; they should be seen and not heard,” he said. Even the long soaring romantic melody of the nineteenth century came under pressure by Debussy.

Debussy succeeded in using sound in a similar way that the Impressionist—and later, Fauvist—painters used color. Your aural experience of Debussy’s *La Mer* may be similar to your visual experience of a John Turner seascape.

The three movements of *La Mer* almost make up a symphony, minus the standard

second slow movement. Each of the movements has a title that gives only an initial impression of what you might be hearing. The first movement, "*From dawn to midday at sea,*" begins with utter stillness and ends with tremendous crashing of waves. The second, "*Play of the waves,*" is a sort of scherzo, in which light dances off the surface of the water. The final movement, "*Dialogue of the wind and sea,*" is a stormy representation that also includes themes from the first movement.

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