

## **Nocturnes**

### **Claude Debussy (1862–1918)**

Written: 1892–99

Movements: Three

Style: Impressionistic

Duration: 25 minutes

Debussy disliked having the term *impressionism* applied to his music. However, there are similarities between the great impressionistic painters like Monet and Renoir and the music of Debussy. Monet's paintings are not so much about a particular subject as they are about light and color. Debussy continuously experimented with harmony and various combinations of orchestral instruments to develop a huge palette of musical color.

The *Nocturnes* started out in 1892 as "Three Twilight Scenes." Debussy never finished them but tried to recast them as a violin concerto for Eugène Ysaÿe. He claimed he was experimenting with "the different shades that can be obtained of one color—like a study in gray painting."

Debussy abandoned the violin concerto idea and finally finished the piece—for orchestra and wordless women's chorus—in 1899. The new title was *Nocturnes* but he cautioned that the title was "not meant to designate the usual form of a nocturne, but rather all the impressions and special effects of light that the word suggests." He continued to describe the three *Nocturnes* in almost painterly terms:

*Nuages* (Clouds) renders the immutable aspect of the sky and the slow, solemn motion of the clouds, fading away in gray tones slightly tinged with white.

*Fetes* (Festivals) gives us the vibrating, dancing rhythm of the atmosphere with sudden flashes of light. There is also the episode of the procession (a dazzling fantastic vision) which passes through the festive scene and becomes merged in it. But the background remains persistently the same: the festival with its blending of music and luminous dust participating in the rhythm.

*Sirenes* (Sirens) depicts the sea and its innumerable rhythm. Among the waves, silvered by moonlight is heard the mysterious song of the Sirens as they laugh and pass on.

Work on the *Nocturnes* was not easy for Debussy. His personal life was also a wreck. He was in financial trouble and he broke up with his longtime mistress. "The three *Nocturnes* have been infected by my private life, first full of hope, then full of despair, and then full of nothing!" he wrote. "I've never been able to work at anything when my life's going through a crisis; which is, I think, why memory is a superior faculty, because you can pick from it the emotions you need. But those who write masterpieces in floods of tears are barefaced liars."

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## **Rapsodie espagnole**

### **Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)**

Written: 1907

Movements: Four

Style: Impressionist

Duration: Sixteen minutes

Maurice Ravel was the son of a Swiss engineer father and a Basque mother. He was born just on the French side of the Pyrenees, and even though the family moved to Paris when Maurice was just a baby, he held a lifelong fascination with all things Spanish. He wrote lots of Spanish-sounding music. Of course there is *Bolero*, written in 1928. But as early as 1895 he wrote a *Habanera* for two pianos, and in 1907 (his “Spanish year”) he chose Spanish themes for his first opera (*L’heure espagnole*) and his first full-scale orchestral work (*Rapsodie espagnole*).

When you listen to a piece like *Rapsodie espagnole*, you might understand why Ravel was classified as an *impressionist* composer. Even though Ravel and his fellow Frenchman Debussy wrote their music long after the French Impressionist painters hit the scene, they do share certain traits with painters such as Monet, Sisley, Pissarro and Renoir. First and foremost is the musical color; it’s almost as breathtaking as the color of the impressionist painters. Then there is a certain vagueness of form in the music that is reminiscent of Monet and Turner. “Suggestion and atmosphere” are key ideas for the musical impressionists.

*Rapsodie espagnole* has four short movements. *Prélude à la nuit (Prelude to the Night)* is full of the atmosphere of the evening. A repetitive downward scale throughout the movement provides a mysterious background for voluptuous melodies almost dripping with the scented perfumes of the evening. Like perfume, the movement dissipates and moves directly into the second movement, a Spanish dance, the *Malagueña*. The spirited dance stops briefly for the English horn to utter a melancholy melody. Then the downward scales from the first movement return, and again the music disappears into thin air.

The third movement is an orchestration of the *Habanera* that Ravel wrote for two pianos in 1895. This dance is not extroverted but slow and sensuous. It tries to gather steam. Instead, the movement ends as quietly as it began. In the final movement, *Feria (Festival)*, the night finally gives way to full, boisterous day. Spanish flavors permeate the music. Suddenly, there is a break in the action, and the English horn and clarinet play luxurious melodies. The descending scales from the first movement return, but the festival music is more powerful than the night music, and the movement comes to a powerful close.

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### ***Tabuh-Tabuhan***

**Colin McPhee (1900–1964)**

Written: 1936

Movements: Three

Style: Contemporary

Duration: Sixteen minutes

In the late 1920s, the Canadian composer Colin McPhee “quite by accident heard [a] few gramophone records that were to change my life completely. They were of Balinese gamelan music. As he wrote in his autobiographical sketch, *A House in Bali*

The clear, metallic sounds were like the stirring of a thousand bells, delicate, confused, with a sensuous charm, a mystery that was quite overpowering . . . I knew little about the music of the East . . . but the effect of the music was deeper than I suspected . . . my imagination took fire, and the day came when I determined to make a trip to the East to see them for myself.

McPhee moved to Bali where he quickly absorbed the culture. He started incorporating Balinese materials into his own music and later wrote the authoritative treatise *Music in Bali. Tabuh-Tabuhan* was his first large-scale orchestral work to use Balinese musical material. He provided his own [here somewhat condensed] description of the work:

The title of the work derives from the Balinese word *tabuh*, originally meaning the mallet used for striking a percussion instrument, but extended to mean strike or beat – the drum, a gong, xylophone or metallophone. *Tabuh-Tabuhan* is thus a Balinese collective noun, meaning different drum rhythms, metric forms, gong punctuations, gamelans, and music essentially percussive.

Although *Tabuh-Tabuhan* makes much use of Balinese musical material, I consider it a purely personal work in which Balinese and composed motifs, melodies and rhythms have been fused to a symphonic work. Balinese music never rises to an emotional climax, but at the same time has a terrific rhythmic drive and symphonic surge, and this partly influenced me in planning the form of the work. Many of the syncopated rhythms of Balinese music have a close affinity with those of Latin American popular music and American jazz—a history in itself—these have formed the basic impulse of the work from start to finish.

There is no place here to point out all the purely Balinese motifs. The flute melody in the Nocturne is an entirely Balinese flute melody, taken down as played. The syncopated finale is based on the gay music of a xylophone orchestra which accompanies a popular street dance. This is heard in its most authentic form at the beginning of the work and given the grand treatment at the end.

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***Ayin Raksi (Ritual Dance) for Orchestra, Op. 57***

**Ahmet Adnan Saygun (1907–1991)**

Written: 1975

Movements: One

Style: Contemporary

Duration: Ten minutes

The British newspaper *The Times* calls Ahmet Adnan Saygun “the grand old man of Turkish music, who was to his country what Jean Sibelius is to Finland, what Manuel de Falla is to Spain, and what Béla Bartók is to Hungary.” What *The Times* was really saying is that Saygun is perhaps the most important musician responsible for developing a type of music that combines the distinctive musical elements found in Turkish folk tradition with the “classical” music of what we call Western Civilization. Saygun did this at the same time that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk

wrested what is now called Turkey from the Ottoman empire and established a “modern, secular republic based on Western models and traditions.” Of course, music and art were part of those models.

As a child, Saygun studied both the piano and *Oud* (a Turkish lute). He started composing when he was fourteen, and when he was twenty-one he won a state scholarship to travel to Paris, where he studied composition with Vincent D’Indy. Back in Turkey in 1931, he taught at a school started by Atatürk to train teachers. Three years later, he was appointed conductor of the Presidential Symphony Orchestra. At about the same time, Atatürk asked him to write an opera, *Özsoy*, Turkey’s first. When Bela Bartok came to Turkey, Saygun joined him in collecting traditional Turkish folk songs. In 1942, he wrote his most important work, the hour-long cantata based on the poetry of the thirteenth century Sufi mystic *Yunus Emre*. He then taught at the Ankara Conservatory until his retirement in 1972. Saygun was a dedicated teacher and published several books on the teaching of music.

Like Bartok, Saygun’s music is no mere transcription of folk music. Instead, it is a complex integration of folk elements into a new language. In *Ayin Raksi*, Saygun combines the *makam* (a type of melodic mode) “Bestinigar” with others to form a new type of harmony. What begins with a melody that has interesting twists and turns become increasingly dense and complex. Rhythmically, the piece opens with a standard four-beat rhythm in a rather plodding tempo. It, too, becomes increasingly intricate and eventually starts incorporating the asymmetrical rhythms associated with the East. It’s like nothing you’ve ever heard.

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