

# Claude Debussy—The Master Impressionist

by Rose Marie Iñigo

*From The Orion*

A contemporary once described Debussy as "a musician of genius, who has the forehead of a Pekinese dog, a horror of his neighbor, a fiery glance and a slightly husky voice" Not a very attractive or sociable man, one might say. But this can only assure us that Claude Debussy was extraordinary even down to the unimportant externals. He was a man of genius—one of the greatest of a century which teemed with geniuses. Although he was too strong an individual to found a school, he is considered the founder of the so-called "impressionism" in music. He gave it a form, a language, and a spirit, and he endowed it with most of its finest works. To French music in general he provided an impetus which had been sadly lacking for many years; he released it from the excessive romanticism and cloying sentimentalism which had predominated it, and bequeathed it a style with the character of the French. For this alone, Debussy may be called the liberator of French music.

If he had a bulging forehead, then it was simply the outward evidence of a powerful intellect. If he had a

horrar of his neighbour, it was merely one of the phases of his solitary nature. The obvious and the hackneyed repelled him; he was drawn instead to the internal and the hidden. There lay the inspiration for his impressionistic art. If he had a fiery glance, so too, did he have stubborn courage. His was a soul in rebellion and he needed a certain obstinacy and disdain of his inferiors if he was to achieve his revolutionary ends.

This is the man who gave to the world that wonderful little lyric "Clair de lune". Although very often played as a piece in itself, this composition is in reality only one of the movements of the four-movement "Suite Bergamasque". Debussy was very sensitive to suggestion and successful in translating the emotions aroused in him into music. There is a certain part in the "Clair de lune" movement which becomes very intangible and atmospheric, suggesting the shimmer of moonlight on a hot summer night. Surely, no person less than a genius could obtain such a richness of effect.

In his opera "Pelleas and Meli-

sonde", Debussy succeeded in carrying out the ideal which another great composer set up but never fully realized himself: that is, the perfect union of poetic text, dramatic actions and music. In "Pelleas and Melisande" the music moves hand in hand with the drama.

Although he wrote an opera, a ballet and some songs, much of Debussy's best music is written for the pianoforte, but it requires an advanced technique for performance and most specially, for interpretation. This is a fact often overlooked by ambitious young musicians.

In his early youth Debussy came under the influence of those great Russian composers of the nineteenth century who had achieved an almost

complete isolation from the leading influences of the day. But Debussy's most potent early influences came from the sister art of painting, where a group of men known as the impressionists sought to interpret not so much the direct or photographic representation of an object as the impression which it left upon them. Yet, all these influences did not lessen Debussy's originality. His music was thoroughly French and very much his own.

Wherever the fairy-like tones of "Clair de lune" are sounded on the pianoforte, whenever "Pelleas and Melisande" is performed behind the footlights, Claude Debussy lives again through his music.

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### THE TRUCE OF GOD

In the days of chivalry it was a matter of excommunication to fight on certain holydays. This dictum of the Church was an affirmation of one of the nobler laws of chivalry. The sanctification of Sunday gave direct rise to the action of the councils for it was always agreed upon not to fight on that date. The Council of Elne, in 1207, forbade hostilities from Saturday night to Monday morning. Later, it was forbidden to fight on Thursday, Fridays or Saturdays. Still later Advent and Lent were named as times when Christians might not engage in battle.

The first Truce of God was proclaimed in 1031 by the Council of Limoges at the instigation of Abbot Odoric and threatened with excommunication those lords who refused to live up to it. Coordinate with the proclamation of the Truce, was the successful attempt on the part of the clergy to make use of the chivalric laws that insisted upon protection of women, children, the weak and dependent. Christians under arms were required to observe the laws of chivalry and at the same time the protection of the Church was added to the list.

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