

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)



Born: 1862 (Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France)
Died: 1918 (Paris, France)

FAST FACTS

- Attended the Paris Conservatory for piano and composition
- Music was influenced by different national styles
- Became instantly famous with his opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*
- Characterized the “impressionist” sound and influenced many composers with musical approach

Claude Debussy is regarded as one of the most influential composers of the early 20th century. The approach he took to music composition inspired a completely new genre of music and impacted composers for decades to come.

Debussy attended the Paris Conservatory when he was only 10 years old, studying piano and composition some time later. Nadezhda von Meck, Russian composer Tchaikovsky’s patroness, hired him as a music teacher for her children; Debussy learned much about Russian music’s style and orchestration through her. Other travels influenced Debussy’s evolving musical style: he won a composition prize in Italy and spent two years there, and later visited Bayreuth, Germany to experience Wagner’s operas. He also became friends with some of the leading “symbolist” poets and musicians in Paris (the symbolist movement rejected all things that were very real and obvious in art, literature, theater, and music).

In his 30s, Debussy lived in an area of France called “Bohemia”, where he began to find his musical voice and produce many famous works. He wrote two large-scale pieces, the *Prelude to “The Afternoon of a Faun”* for orchestra, and the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*, which gave him instant success and popularity. The music in *Pelléas et Mélisande* is described as an “iridescent veil” covering the story. He also wrote a great deal of piano music, including a collection of pieces called *Children’s Corner* for his daughter. Debussy’s musical style in these works is distinctly impressionist, meaning that he focused more on sound and overall feeling than on specific melodies. He also used dreamy-sounding scales, medieval chords, and ambiguous keys to bring an imaginative and atmospheric quality to his music. He even put the titles for his piano Preludes at the *end* of the pieces to allow listeners or performers to freely choose their own interpretation of the piece.

Debussy’s idea to oppose standard musical practices had a profound effect on many composers in his time and after his death throughout the world. Many composers in the mid and late 1900s were also influenced by his attention to sound itself, and applied this idea to writing music for percussion instruments, which is a standard practice today.



Let’s Listen!

- World-renowned conductor Leopold Stokowski conducts the *Prelude to “The Afternoon of a Faun”*: [click here](#).
- *Clair de lune* is one of Debussy’s most famous and most beautiful impressionistic piano pieces: [click here](#).