

Music Inspired by the Sea: A Musical Parallel between *The Sea* by C. Debussy and *A Sea symphony* by R. V. Williams

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Abstract: *The sea has always represented a source of inspiration in art (especially in the visual arts), but also in music – which borrows many attributes, such as evanescence and fluency, specific to musical Impressionism. Music also took over the metaphor of the sea, especially through the Impressionist music of Claude Debussy (*The Sea*) and *A Sea Symphony* by R. V. Williams, composers who will be celebrated at 160 and 150 years, respectively, from their birth. The purpose of the work is to stylistically compare the compositional details of the marine theme in the two proposed repertoire elements, from the 20th century. The work is structured in such a way that it involves a brief analysis of each of them, ending with comparative elements.*

Key-words: *symphonism, Impressionism, modernity, sea, programmatism.*

1. Introduction

“When the mad sea is pushed by the waves/And shakes its foamy mane in the wind,/When the clouds chase the day away from the world drowning in tears,/When the thunder sings;/Then through clouds, through wind and waves/A golden ray is spun out softly/And the wild abyss of the seas is swept/Through wind and clouds” [our translation] (Eminescu, Poezii [Poems], p. 68): this is how Mihai Eminescu depicts the poetic metaphor of the sea in Romanian.

And, if it is true that the sound of the ocean is music for the souls, that a man’s heart is like the sea, it is beaten by storms, it is swept by tides, and, in its depths, it has its pearls (as Vincent van Gogh said), then we know that the sea is the closest experience we have of what another world means. Poets know that beauty is often hidden in life’s fleeting and fragile moments – and what is more fleeting and more fragile than the thoughtful sea at sun rise or the waves crashing on the shore? Music

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also depicts the metaphor of the sea, especially in the Impressionist music composed by Claude Debussy (*The Sea*) and in *A Sea Symphony* by R. V. Williams, composers who will be celebrated at 160 and 150 years, respectively, from their birth.

Rainer Maria Rilke also found himself closer to the sea: “when I do not feel at ease, when I feel anxious and have dark thoughts, I go to the sea, and the sea drowns them in its roar, and erases them and imposes a rhythm over all that is troubled and confused in me” (<https://www.postmodern.ro/articol/citate-despre-mare/>). The sea has always been, for every one of us, beautiful, mysterious, wild and free. By the force of the waves and the infinity of the sand particles, it always determines us reconsider life from a different perspective, making us feel like all the hardship fades away in front of its immensity, soothing egos, obsessions, ambitions.

At the sea shore, we feel free, and the great artists felt the same, resonating deeply with the metaphor of the sea: they cleared their souls and revisited all the happy moments of their life. Healing and silent, the sea is as discreet as a friend who is always waiting for the confession of our soul. And if we think tears and the sea have something in common, then we understand why Lucian Blaga feels the sea to be another HOME: “Red vines,/green vines strangle the houses in wild shoots/and strong as poplars which gather their pray in their arms./The rising sun washes in the sea/its spears, used to kill quickly the night as a wild beast./I sit on the shore and my soul is away from home./It has strayed on an endless path and cannot find its way back” [our translation] (<https://www.postmodern.ro/articol/citate-despre-mare/>).

Listening to the voice of the great poets who vibrate around the sea, we cannot omit Nichita Stănescu, who said, in *Love Song at the Sea Shore*: “With grazed ankles, I watch you as you pass/through the cold rocks on the shore./The sea will turn into white birds,/as many as can fit in the open eyes that watch it,/and they will fly away flapping their wings, when you come,/up to the highest sky, like a star” [our translation] (<https://www.postmodern.ro/articol/citate-despre-mare/>). The same poet saw the sea as the unreal setting in which teenagers live the adventure of their barely discovered life: “This sea is covered by teenagers/who learn to walk on the waves (...)” [our translation] (<https://www.postmodern.ro/articol/citate-despre-mare/>).

2. The issue: the sea as the inspiration in compositions signed by Debussy and Williams

Being part of the great French generation at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Debussy joins Faure, Indy, Saint-Saens and Ravel in the successful attempt to calibrate a modern discourse, but without shocking innovations.

Impressionism (one of the three great currents that irrigated the expressiveness of the 20th century) “proposed to capture the visual impression through barely sketched outlines, through the nuanced detail, the refined and blurred allusion” (Dediu, 2013, 165). A specific French style, Impressionism reflects the care for detail, for the subtle elements specific to the French cultural space, a fact that is reflected in all its artistic manifestations during the last 500 years: from the ornaments of the works of the Baroque harpsichordists to the orchestral transparency and instrumental color of 20th century.

Unavoidably, music also incorporated in its sounds the metaphor of the sea, especially in Claude Debussy’s (who will be celebrated at 160 years from his birth) impressionist music. At the beginning of the new century, Debussy refused the aggressive cruel dissonance and the incisive perpendicular sound, revealing the entire poetry of the various states of the sea in the composition with the catalogue number 109, *La mer*. Written during the first decade of modernity (1903-1905), the three symphonic sketches which cannot be classified in the symphonic genre (as symphonies or symphonic poems) are the second attempt by the composer within the tripartite symphonic framework, after the *Nocturnes* he had composed several years earlier.

Written close to other of his great orchestral works, the sketches were rather inspired by the impressions of great paintings and literature masterpieces of the time than by reality. The composer rendered the beauty of the sea in the three sections: "From dawn to noon on the sea", "Play of the Waves", "Dialogue of the wind and the sea". Debussy also composed a version for piano four hands, and completely revised it four years later.

The three programmatic sections (two fast external ones, which support the slow central section) are supported by an ample orchestra, with a complete structure of wood and brass wind instruments, of string instruments, and an extended percussion section, along with two harps.

Developing slowly, the first section (“De l’aube à midi sur la mer”) is – like most of Debussy’s style – marked by a predominantly expositive compositional process: a continuous development which becomes permanent under the audience’s eyes, absorbing the melodic-rhythmic-harmonic formulas which mirror the reflexes of the sea water in ample, free phrase, filled with solo segments, in the gold section, noticed by musicologist Roy Howat (Howat, 1986, 1-7).

Here is the beginning of the first symphonic sketch, which proposes a vague musical speech by suggesting two plans: the upper, melodic, reduced to a minimum by the priority interval placement of the second, and the lower - focused on creating an atmosphere through tremolo in the low register, amplified to the octave - an introductory model of typical impressionist discourse:

Example 1. C. Debussy, “La Mer”, p. I, measure 1-10

The second section, “Jeux de vagues” – *allegro* continues to reflect its attachment to contemporary impressionist paintings, “especially the marine landscapes painted by C. Monet and J. M. W. Turner” (Simeone, 2003, 101). The innovative suggestions refer primarily to the harmonic evolution, through the “successions of seventh and ninth chords, modal harmonies, exceptional solutions of dissonances, unresolved dissonances, escalating functions, all bringing a dilution of the tonal organization, very appropriate to the vague suggestion” (Pascu, Boțocan 2003, 497). Moreover, harmonic innovations are the most important in this context, along with those of orchestration.

The last section brings in the interaction between wind and sea “Dialogue du vent et de la mer” – *animé et tumultueux*, thus involving both the atmosphere and the aquatic environment – the favoured inspiration sources of the evanescence of the timber and of the Impressionist orchestration, of the tempered dissonance promoted by the composers of this musical current, of the delicate and transparent melody which characterizes them.

Effect of the intention of subjectivism and non-reality of a fantastic type, Debussy's impressionism proposes a discourse predominantly focused on expositivity of melodic material (not on development), on hexatonal modes and harmonic aggregations with added sounds, on laconic melodism, on musical forms that are not broad and severely constructed, avoiding sonata, fugue or symphony structures.

Unlike C. Debussy's masterpiece, Ralph Vaughan Williams composed a symphony entitled, modestly *A Sea Symphony*, dedicated to soloist soprano and baritone voices, to which he added a choir and a big orchestra, at the beginning of the 20th century: 1903 - 1909. As one of his first symphonies, not numbered in the catalogue of his creations, it is in agreement with Beethoven, who had united the symphonic and choral principles in the same unitary expression a hundred years before.

With a title referring to the ocean, the symphony has the four sections specific to the classic and romantic genre: *A Song for All Seas, All Ships* (for baritone, soprano and choir), *On the Beach at Night, Alone* (for baritone and choir), *Scherzo: The Waves* (for choir), *The Explorers* (for baritone, soprano, semi-choir and choir). A significant addition to the orchestral timber is the contribution of the organ (in the external sections of the symphonic cycle), next to the harp and a consistent section of percussion instruments.

Unlike, C. Debussy's similar composition, R. Williams' symphony uses the choral expression and, implicitly, the poetic text, extracted from Walt Whitman's metaphor (Leaves of Grass). The symphony is a late reflection of his compositional intentions in this genre, which he approached relatively late, after a creative experience motivated him for such an attempt. The ampler timber diversity in R. Williams' work (which combines vocality with the typically instrumental discourse) bears the influence of the studies he conducted the same as M. Ravel, even while working on the symphony. In the case of R. Williams the discourse is richer, more dynamic, and more consistent at the timber and orchestra level.

If we were to analyze the temporal reverberation of these masterpieces, which reflect – not onomatopoeically, realistically – the movement of the sea in its various hypotheses, we should add that they influenced the creation of composers such as Luciano Berio, who in his 1968 *Symphony* took over a quote by C. Debussy, but also one from *Sea Pictures* (1899) by E. Elgar.

3. Conclusions

The aesthetic conception is important in this case, because the approach of the two composers is completely different from each other. As in the case of the descriptivism in the Pastoral Symphony by L. van Beethoven, the question arises whether it is a suggestion of ideas or situations, or their strict, photographic, deliberately realistic description.

The more subtle approach refers to the suggestion of the marine atmosphere through other compositional means than the strictly onomatopoeic

ones, related to timbre and sound colour, reaching the sphere of impressionistic suggestion, imprecise lines and subtle details of sound discourse.

Although both compositions draw inspiration from the privileged metaphorical space of the sea (being programmatic), and although both of them are part of the first decade of creation in the 20th century, there are still certain features that set them apart and particularize each of them: the opposite of C. Debussy is located in a very free structural-formal area, typically impressionistic, using a diverse orchestration – but more transparent, included in a tripartite genre. On the other hand, R. V. Williams' creation highlights a more massive instrumental conception, with four sections which fit in the traditional symphonic genre.

4. Proposals

The research can be extended to the level of the entire history of musical creations around this topic, although the preferred space of marine inspiration is the musical Romanticism and the passage to the modern age. The musical resources are ampler and subtler than the ones used by the other arts, favouring an exceptional expression within such a topic.

The research can also be extended from this point of view, emphasizing the two different types of creative coordinates. In the area of suggestions (and not evidence) we will be able to discover works of greater value, belonging to compositional personalities attentive to the interiority and interiorization of the musical message: on this occasion, it is appropriate to remember Beethoven's message: *more suggestion than realism*.

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