

## CLAUDE DEBUSSY & MAURICE RAVEL

### INTRODUCTION

The Paris World Exhibition of 1889 brought a new light and perspective to that of Impressionist music "Music of the Impressionism era." It was this Exposition that changed the way musicians thought of music, and therefore wrote their compositions. The instruments that musicians heard here came from various countries around the world. One of the most popular was that of Java "Indonesian island" and the gamelan; the gamelan being an ensemble of mostly percussion. It was the results of using these instruments to create sounds, including timbres and textures that had not been used before. Other cultures included that of Russia, Hungary and Spain, the sounds of which can also be heard in the music of this era.

In this section, I will give a breakdown/an overview of the two most important composers in this era: Claude Debussy & Maurice Ravel. They were the two composers that helped contribute the most to create this new style. For these two important composers of the Post-Romantic/Impressionist era, I have had thoughts about how best to present the information. I have decided to give a brief chart comparing the two, then do a separate section for more specifics and any other relevant information to give more overview. The musical works of these two composers are generally typical of what you would find in this era in regard to tonality, modulation, rhythms, melody, harmony, and others.

I have set the chart up as best I could, using the points in "What is Music Theory" Section as a guide for the first part.

### A GENERAL COMPARISON OF WRITING STYLES & CHARACTERISTICS

	<b>DEBUSSY</b>	<b>RAVEL</b>
<b>Years of Life</b>	1862-1918	1875-1937
<b>Tonality &amp; Key</b>	Absence	Stronger emphasis, firmer
<b>Modulation</b>	Unprepared (no bridge to set-up)	
<b>Rhythms/Rhythmic Structure</b>	Changes to Western Music	Marked & driven Incisive
<b>Melody/Melodic Style</b>	More melodic tonality	Span: Very broad Bright & dissonant
<b>Harmony/Harmonic Style</b>	Bitonal chords, Parallel chords More daring exploration Very dissonant with no resolution Piano Preludes - rich, unusual & daring	Bright & dissonant
<b>Scales &amp; Modes</b>	Whole-Tone, Pentatonic	Medieval scales & modes
<b>Form &amp; Structure</b>	Single, continuous theme Both symphonic forms and other forms used Late works: Irregular, Fragmented	Traditional, such as Ternary (ABA) Generally Classical forms & structure used
<b>Styles</b>	Many changes: Early to Late	

<b>Compositional Writing</b>	Changes in style - Early to Late Early works: Ensembles smaller & focus on colour and timbre Many piano works - Middle Period (Poetic & Nostalgic) Late piano works: very difficult	Virtuosic orchestral works 19 <sup>th</sup> Century Romantic type
<b>Orientalism</b>	Exoticism used in some piano Music from Javanese Gamelan From Spain: Allusions & fleeting impressions	From Spain: dance rhythms and instruments
<b>Influences: Countries</b>	Russia (Colourations & Modes) Java (Javanese Gamelan) France (Beauty, Visual Art & Theater)	Far East & East Asia (Inc. Persia) Scotland Italy Flemish (Belgium, Netherlands) Russia Spain France Hungary Basque Hebrew Madagascar
<b>Influences: Composers</b>	Francois Couperin Jean-Philippe Rameau J.S. Bach Frederic Chopin Franz Liszt	Hector Berlioz Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov Richard Strauss Franz Liszt
<b>Specific Concepts Used</b>	Colour more prominent Ragtime music	Various African American styles (Eg. Ragtime, blues, jazz) Fairy & folk tales Romantic orchestration

### COMPOSITIONAL OUTPUT

Not all of Debussy's and Ravel's compositions will be listed. That being said, I will include the total number for each composer, and noted/more well-known compositions for each.

	<b>DEBUSSY</b>	<b>RAVEL</b>
<b>Total Number</b>	Over 120	Over 100
<b>Piano Music</b>	38 Total, including: Pour the Piano (For the Piano) Estamps (Prints) Preludes: 2 books Images (2 books, 3 pieces each)	33 Piano Solo, including: Miroirs (Mirrors) Gaspard De La Nuit Le Tombeau De Couperin 16 Piano Duo
<b>Piano Concerti (Concertos)</b>		Three, including one for the left hand
<b>Chamber Music</b>	String Quartet Sonatas (Cello, Flute, Flute, viola and harp being most known)	10, including: Five for Violin & Piano Two for Violin & Cello One for String Quartet

		One for Piano, Violin & Cello
<b>Orchestral Music</b>	14, including: Prelude a “L’apres-midi d’un faune” (Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun) Nocturnes, La Mer (The Sea) Images <sup>1</sup>	19, including: Rapsodie espagnole (Spanish Rhapsody) Pavane pour une infante déunte (Pavane for an Infant) Valses nobles et sentimentales (Noble & Sentimental Waltzes)
<b>Vocal Works</b>	Cantatas (including L’Enfant Prodigue (The Prodigal Son)	12 in Total, including: La Nuit (The Night) Saint François d’Assise Trois Chansons (Three Chansons)
<b>Operas</b>	5, including Pelleas et Metisande (Pelleas and Metisande)	Two completed: L’heure espagnole (Spanish Time) L’enfant et les sortilèges (The Child & The Spells) <sup>2</sup> Three Unfinished
<b>Ballet</b>	4, including Jeux	7 <sup>3</sup> , including: Ma mère l’oye (Mother Goose) Daphnis Et Chloe (Daphnis & Chloe) La Valse (The Waltz) Bolero
<b>Song Cycles</b>		Eight, including: Don Quichotte à Dulcinée
<b>Other Works</b>		Solo Voice with Orchestra: 7 Solo Voice with Piano: 30 Orchestration of Mussorgsky’s Pictures at an Exhibition 1 Violin Concerto

### SPECIFICS & OTHER INFORMATION

Like prior composers, both Debussy and Ravel developed their own individual musical language over time. Both men did not use the traditional tonality and chordal structure seen in that of say, Romantic era composers (excluding that of Wagner and other late Romantic composers). For example, Debussy’s earlier works already showed his daring exploration with regard to tonality and modal usage, including scales leading to harmonies not previously heard of in prior music. Both composers also did not use traditional forms, instead making modifications to both the theme and overall form of their works.

Another difference is that of the overall focus of the works themselves. For example, some of Debussy’s works focused more on colour and timbre of the individual instruments themselves; others focused on harmony & texture, and yet others on scale modes. Debussy’s works tended to focus on softness; Ravel’s focused on brightness.

---

<sup>1</sup> Debussy had initially planned these compositions to be a sequel to the set of “Images” he did for Solo Piano, which was to be written for two pianos. Instead, he arranged these compositions for orchestra.

<sup>2</sup> Is an Operetta-Ballet. Could be placed in either Opera or Ballet categories

<sup>3</sup> One of these is an Oratorio-Ballet “Morgiane”

It is Debussy's earlier works that helped motivate and pave the way for later Impressionist composers, including that of Ravel himself. That being said, some of his works were divided among critics, some praising his use of musical elements and others not liking the sounds that they hear.

Debussy's use of Javanese Gamelan started with a trip to the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle \*Universal Exposition\*, and it is the pentatonic structures in Javanese music which is heavily seen in his work Pagodes "Pagodas". He was also both interested and influenced by the instrumentation found in this music and found ways to create these effects in his own works. Later, he returns to Classical roots in his Suite "Children's Corner". This suite was written for his daughter Claude-Emma.

Other notable pieces of Debussy include his first book of Preludes (for solo piano), his orchestral piece Iberia, and his music for the mystery play *Le Martyre de Saint Sebastien* "The Martyr of Saint Sebastian."

Debussy's final works in his late period mark a distinct and sudden shift with concepts and styles used to his prior works. Not only that, but as seen in his two final volumes of works for the piano, the Etudes are very difficult to play, not only in terms of style & texture, but also by that of form. His final orchestral work, the ballet "Jeux", along with Igor Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring", also showcased 20<sup>TH</sup> century elements in their respective writings.

Debussy's second set of Preludes for piano show his composition at an extreme level, using much dissonance and tonal ambiguity. As well, his use of varying scale modes, such as whole-tone scale, octatonic and other modes further heighten any sense of tonality and tonal center.

Debussy focused on learning from artists, then from actual musicians. His musical influence was heavily marked by art forms, namely that of literature and visual art, rejecting naturalism and realism. His works also show how he was inspired by nature, and using those images as a basis for some of his works.