Seems to
date from
July 1998

Sent to
Eberhard Groner

Music and Oceans

Throughout recorded history, the oceans and man's relationship to the oceans have inspired architects, painters, musicians and. Writers

Ships have been a favourite subject of paintings and miniatures almost as long as there has been painting, from the Egypt of the Pharaohs to the present time. Seascapes, though not too frequent in classical painting, show wave crests stylized into almost tapestry-like patterns (*The Birth of Venus*, by Botticelli) or dwell on the chiaroscuro of billowing mountains and vales merging with, and reflecting, an equally photodynamic cloudscape, as in Tintoretto's magnificent *Christ at the Sea of Galilee*.

But it is with the Romantics and post-Romantics, Impressionists, Fauves and Expressionists, and their new and intense relationship with nature - with Monet, Césanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Turner, Watteau, the Germans, the Dutch, to mention only a few, and Hokusai in Japan. -- that the ocean becomes an inexhaustible model for the painter, a looking-glass for his soul as it mirrors firmament and stars.

I want to pick just one example -- to show what painting can do with the ocean, and what it cannot do: :Hokusai's famous print, the *Hollow of the Wave at Kanagama* -- which, incidentally, was the picture chosen by Debussy for the cover of the orchestral score of *La Mer*. It was eloquently described by Edmond de Goncourt, in a study published in 1896.

> The design for the Wave is a sort of deified version of the sea, made by a painter who lived in a religious terror of the overwhelming sea surrounding his country on all sides: It is a design which is impressive by the sudden anger of its leap into the sky, by the deep blue and the transparent inner side of its curve, by the splitting of the crest which is thus

scattered into a shower of tiny drops having the shape of animals' claws.[1]

Hokusai's *Wave*, nevertheless, has something rigid and static about it, revindicating Lucien Favre's statement, "*La peinture est, se l'on veut, une musique des couleurs sans mouvement.*" (Painting is, if you will, a music of colours without movement.)

Music, instead, can be seen as the art closest to nature; music has a time dimension so that it can capture not only the sounds of the sea, its colours and textures, but their teasing changes and variations, their rhythms in time. "Music has this over painting," Debussy wrote, "it can bring together all manner of variations of colour and light -- a point often observed though it is quite obvious."[2] And Vallas, in his *Theories of Claude Debussy, wrote:*

> Although they claim to be nature's sworn interpreters, painters and sculptors can give us but a loose and fragmentary rendering of the beauty of the universe. Only one aspect, one instant is seized and placed on record. To musicians only is it given to capture all the poetry of night and day, of earth and heaven, to reconstruct their atmosphere and record the rhythm of their great heartbeats.[3]

The playing of silvery ripples, the crashing of surf are easily located in orchestration; the swelling of storm and its exhaustion find expression in established modes of crescendo and decrescendo. The rolling of waves, their eternal cadences, are readily translated into the measures of musical time. The multiple layers of ocean space, from the mysterious sea floor through submerged waves, submarine rivers, to the bobbing scintillating surface, can be captured in counterpoint, vertically; its flux in time reflected in the duration of horizontal, melodic,

---

[1]*Ibid.*

[2]*Ibid.*

[3]L Vallas, *The Theories of Claude Debussy,* New York: Dover Publications, 1967.

development.

The sea is onomatopoetic to the highest degree, as generations of composers have known. Good examples are Richard Wagner's treatment of the sea, his musical characterizations of *The Flying Dutchman* -- "And roaring and whistling and surging round them all is the Sea," as Ernest Newman observes, "not so much as the mere background of the drama as the element that has given it birth:"[4] -- the longing strains of *Tristan and Isolde* reflecting a leaden Irish Sea over which the vessel must come -- "*das Schiff, sahst Du's noch nicht*" (the ship, see you it not yet) -- and the sensuousness of drowning in love, in the *Liebestod*, as in the sea:

In the long-drawn, single E-flat opening of *Rheingold,* water symbolises the beginning of all things; water from which, through sequecces of empty fifths, the flow of the Rhine takes its course, and which is the beginning of the gods and the creation of men in their complex interaction with eternity.

The onomatopoetic possibilities created by the new technologies of electronic synthesizers and concrete music are infinite. A good example is Alan Hovhaness' well-known *And God Created the Great Whales,* a composition counterpointing the lugubrious, lonesome, unearthly song of the humpback whale, in its manifold shades and modulations, with ominous, pentatonic strains (of obvious Japanese inspiration); swelling, climaxing in confrontation and ultimate tragedy. Surprisingly, this effect seems not to have been intended. Throughout his work prone to the seduction of Japanese styles of music, Hovhaness was apparently unaware of the drama he set up between Japanese whalers and their tragic victims. He wrote:

---

[4]E. Newman, *Wagner as Man and Artist,* New York: Dover Publications, 1967.

> Pentatonic melody sounds openness of wide ocean sky. Undersea mountains rise and fall in horns, trombones and tuba. Music of whales also rises and falls like mountain ranges. Song of whale emerges like giant mythical sea bird. Man does not exist, has not yet been born in the solemn oneness of nature.[5]

The composer who epitomizes the influence of the sea on music, is Claude Debussy, whom Robert Godet defined as "an island, surrounded by water on all sides."[6] Debussy wrote of himself: "You may not know that I was destined for a sailor's life and that it was only quite by chance that fate led me in another direction I always retained a passionate love for [the sea]."[7] Of his many major and minor works permeated by the sea, mimicking, reflecting the sea, certainly the most important, the culmination and synthesis, is *La Mer.* Harkening back to early impressions of the sombre North Atlantic and the more suave Mediterranean, this symphonic composition is articulated in three movements entitled *De l'aube à midi sur la mer, Jeux de vagues,* and *Dialogue du vent et de la mer* ("From dawn to noon at sea," "Play of waves," "Dialogue of the wind and the sea"). The last movement reflects, as one critic put it, "those ever delightful frolics in which [the sea] exhausts her divine energy, and the spell of foam and waves and spray, swirling mists and splashes of sunlight."[8] Music, as Baudelaire put it, ravishes you like the sea: *La musique souvent me prend comme une mer.*

---

[5]A. Hovhaness, programme notes to *And God Created the Great Whales,* World Premiere Recording, Columbia Stereo Masterworks, M:30390

[6]Lockspeiser, op.cit.

[7]L E. Newman, *Wagner as Man and Artist,* New York: Dover Publications, 1967.

[8]Lockspeiser, op.cit.

We find music and the sea intimately linked in the writings of my father, Thomas Mann. Reminiscing on his childhood summers in the small Baltic town of Travemünde, he writes in an occasional essay,

> In that place the sea and music entered a sentimental union in my heart, forever, and something was born of this union of feeling and ideas, and that is narrative, epic prose, Epic. For me, that always has been a concept closely linked to that of sea and music, in a way, composed of them, and as C.F. Meyer could say of his poetry that everywhere in it there was the great, calm light of the glaciers; so, I should think that the sea, its rhythm, its musical transcendance, somehow is present everywhere throughout my books -- even then, often enough, when it is not mentioned explicitly. Yes, I should hope I have indicated my thankfulness to the sea of my childhood, the Bay of Lübeck. Maybe it was its palette that I used, and if my colours have been found opaque, without glow, abstemious -- well, one may ascribe it to certain perspectives, through silvery beeches, to the pale pastels of sea and sky on which my eyes rested when I was a child and happy.[9]

Epic narrative, composed of sea and music! No wonder the annals of literature are as full of the oceans as those of painting and of music -- from Homer and the Greek tragedians to Joseph Conrad, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Melville, Thomas Mann, and after. Religions have been the greatest inspirers of the arts. The ocean provides religious inspiration.

Although I was not conscious of it until much later, my father's love affair with the ocean must have influenced me powerfully. Rereading his works in my mature years, when I have myself become so deeply involved with the oceans, I find his analysis of the human relationship to nature, and especially the sea, the most profound I have come across.

But that would take us too far from my subject, "the ocean and music" -- and it would encroach too much on the beautiful programme before us this evening. I am therefore happy to

---

[9]T. Mann, "Lübeck als geistige Lebensform," *Collected Works,* Vol.XI, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1960.

yield the floor to our musicians. I know, subconsciously, the flow in time of the many-layered ocean is somewhere in their bains or hearts as they unfold for our ears the many-alyered scores in the rhythmic flow of time of Mozart, Brahms, and Rachmaninov.