



Milwaukee Symphony Musical Journeys

WEEKLY STREAMING PROGRAMS
Episode 10 Notes

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Born 22 August 1862; Sainte-Germain-en-Laye, France
Died 25 March 1918; Paris, France

La mer

Composed: 1903-05
First performance: 15 October 1905; Paris, France

"We must agree that the beauty of a work of art will always remain a mystery. In other words, we can never be absolutely sure 'how it's made.'" These words by Debussy seem especially appropriate when considering his set of three "symphonic sketches," *La mer*. Neither a "normal" symphony nor a complete disavowal of the form, it nevertheless is a brilliant opus in the orchestral repertoire. (The Russian pianist Sviatoslav Richter named it one his top three favorites, along with Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* and Wagner's *Ring* cycle.) These pieces are not programmatic in a traditional sense. That is, they don't tell story that follows a normal time line – though Debussy's friend Eric Satie wryly quipped that, in "From Dawn to Noon on the Sea," he "particularly liked the bit at a quarter to eleven." In this work, "the story" is all about color, texture, and nuance.

In the opening segment, as the morning progresses, listen for the sometimes obvious, sometimes subtle, changes in lighting and atmosphere. In "Play of the Waves," notice the shimmering surface of the water, feel the rocking of the waves and unexpected shifts of the current. "In Dialog of the Wind and the Sea," there's a storm a-coming. The orchestra swells in great washes of sound as air and water collide. Ultimately, though, the sun breaks through the clouds. Calm is restored. ☺

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.

JENNIFER HIGDON

Born 31 December 1962; Brooklyn, New York

"river sings a song to trees," from *City Scope*

Composed: 2002
First performance: 14 November 2002; Atlanta, Georgia

Jennifer Higdon has emerged as one of America's most distinctive musical voices, creating a body of work that has been widely lauded for its imaginatively colorful orchestrations and originality. As one of today's most frequently performed composers, Higdon has been commissioned to write works for several venerable institutions, including the Philadelphia and Cleveland orchestras and the Atlanta, Chicago, Baltimore, and Cincinnati symphony orchestras, among others. In 2010, Jennifer Higdon was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her Violin Concerto, written for the violinist Hilary Hahn.

When the conductor Robert Spano took over as music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra in 2001, one of the bold initiatives he fostered was an intensive relationship with a select group of composers, which would eventually become known as the "Atlanta School of Composers." Jennifer Higdon was among the first composers included in the Atlanta School, which also included Osvaldo Golijov, Christopher Theofanidis, and Michael Gandolfi. In 2002, the Atlanta Symphony commissioned *City Scope* from Higdon, a sweeping ode to the city of Atlanta and a defining work in her compositional output. Higdon dedicated the work to Robert Spano.

Each of the three movements of *City Scape* portrays a different aspect of Atlanta, from the infrastructure to the bustling roadways. The middle movement of the work, entitled "river sings a song to trees," is the most expansive of the three movements and the emotional crux of *City Scape*. The movement explores how rivers and parkways intertwine with the city's steely infrastructure to create as Higdon describes, "[a] giant green carpet with buildings poking out of it."

Higdon offers the following note for the work:

Every city has a distinctive downtown skyline: That steely profile that juts into the sky, with shapes and monumental buildings that represent a particular signature for each city... In contrast to the metallic and concrete structures lay the parks... both large and small, filling acres or sometimes just a few square feet. Feeding this greenery and sometimes lush carpet are tributaries, hidden streams, small creeks, and occasionally rivers. The waters represent constant change, under calm waters and over powerful currents, doing so with exquisite beauty. This is "river sings a song to trees." ☺

Program notes by Isaac Thompson.

OTTORINO RESPIGHI

Born 9 July 1879; Bologna, Italy

Died 18 April 1936; Rome, Italy

The Pines of Rome

Composed: 1923-24

First performance: 14 December 1924; Rome Italy

Born into a musical family in Bologna, Ottorino Respighi entered the Lice Musicale there at age 12, studying violin, viola and, later, composition. In 1900, he visited Russia for the first time; in St. Petersburg, he played viola in the opera orchestra and took lessons in composition with Nikolai Rimsky-Kosakov. (The latter experience proved to be a profound influence on the young Italian's approach to orchestration.) He was in Berlin in 1908-09, absorbing much from that city's abundant musical milieu and attending lectures by the composer Max Bruch. By his mid-30s, though, Respighi had settled permanently in Rome.

Respighi is best-known for what we might call "musical photographs." *The Fountains of Rome*, *The Pines of Rome*, *Botticelli Triptych*, and *Church Windows* – among others – are programmatic music in the truest sense of the word, colorfully and lavishly orchestrated, in a harmonic idiom firmly rooted in the 19th century.

The Pines of Rome offers musical depictions of his adopted city. The work is a virtuoso showcase in the art of symphonic instrumentation. The four movements are performed without a pause. Respighi described each in the first edition of the score, published by G. Ricordi:

The Pines of the Villa Borghese (Allegretto vivace) Children are at play in the pine groves of the Villa Borghese, dancing the Italian equivalent of "Ring around a rosie." They mimic marching soldiers and battles. They twitter and shriek like swallows at evening, coming and going in swarms. Suddenly the scene changes.

The Pines Near a Catacomb (Lento) We see the shadows of the pines, which overhang the entrance of a catacomb. From the depths rises a chant, which echoes solemnly, like a hymn, and is then mysteriously silenced.

The Pines of the Janiculum (Lento) There is a thrill in the air. The full moon reveals the profile of the pines of Gianicolo's Hill. A nightingale sings.

The Pines of the Appian Way (Tempo di Marcia) Misty dawn on the Appian Way. The tragic country is guarded by solitary pines. Indistinctly, incessantly, the rhythm of unending steps. The poet has a fantastic vision of past glories. Trumpets blare, and the army of the Consul bursts forth in the grandeur of a newly risen sun toward the Sacred Way, mounting in triumph to the Capitoline Hill. ☺

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.