

Fritz Reiner was one of the most acclaimed conductors of the 20th century -- noted for the vast range of his repertoire, which included both symphonic and operatic pieces spanning from the traditional canon to contemporary material, he was also an influential educator who counted among his pupils Leonard Bernstein. Reiner was born in Budapest, Hungary, on December 19, 1888; despite earning a law degree from the University of Bucharest, he pursued a career in music, and at age 21 was named chorusmaster of the Budapest Opera. A stint as conductor with the Budapest Volksoper followed before Reiner was chosen in 1914 to serve as principal conductor of the Royal Opera in Dresden, where he collaborated with Richard Strauss on productions of several of the composer's early operas.

In 1922 Reiner left Europe to relocate to America, settling in Cincinnati, OH, and signing on as conductor with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra; a decade later he was tapped to head the orchestral and opera departments at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute of Music, where his students included Bernstein. After next serving as the music director of the Pittsburgh Symphony between 1938 and 1948, he served five years with the Metropolitan Opera. While Reiner's frequent migration might have been attributed largely to a restless creativity, he was also a notoriously difficult personality who frequently alienated those around him -- many of the musicians under his command openly loathed him, although he inevitably inspired the best work of their careers.

Reiner's own best work was undoubtedly his tenure with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, which he elevated into one of the most celebrated ensembles in the world. Moving over to the CSO in 1953, he not only established the orchestra as a top-flight live attraction but also as a popular recording entity -- the countless albums they made for RCA's Living Stereo series during Reiner's decade-long tenure were much acclaimed by collectors for both the power of the performances and the unusually high fidelity of the recordings themselves. Releases like Fritz Reiner Conducts Richard Strauss and Fritz Reiner Conducts Bartók in particular remain definitive interpretations of the composers in question. Health problems forced Reiner to resign his position in 1962, and he died in New York City on November 15 of the following year.



# Debussy La Mer

Strauss Don Juan

Fritz Reiner

Chicago Symphony Orchestra



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La mer is a masterpiece of suggestion and subtlety in its rich depiction of the ocean, which combines unusual orchestration with daring impressionistic harmonies. The work has proven very influential, and its use of sensuous tonal colours and its orchestration methods have influenced many later film scores. While the structure of the work places it outside of both absolute music and programme music (see below on the title "Three symphonic sketches") as those terms were understood in the early 20th century, it obviously uses descriptive devices to suggest wind, waves and the ambience of the sea. But structuring a piece around a nature subject without any literary or human element to it – neither people, nor mythology, nor ships are suggested in the piece – also was highly unusual at the time.

As a young boy, Debussy's parents had plans for him to join the navy. Debussy himself even commented on his fond childhood memories of the beauties of the sea. However, as an adult composing "La mer," he rarely visited the sea, spending most of his time far away from large bodies of water. Debussy drew inspiration from art, "preferring the seascapes available in painting and literature..." to the physical sea. This influence lends the piece its unusual nature. Debussy called La mer "three symphonic sketches," avoiding the loaded term symphony. Yet the work is sometimes called a symphony; it consists of two powerful outer movements framing a lighter, faster piece which acts as a type of scherzo. But the author Jean Barraqué describes La mer as the first work to have an "open" form – a *devenir sonore* or "sonorous becoming... a developmental process in which the very notions of exposition and development coexist in an uninterrupted burst." Simon Trezise, in his book *Debussy: La Mer* notes, however, that "motifs are constantly propagated by derivation from earlier motifs".

Simon Trezise notes that "for much of La Mer, Debussy spurns the more obvious devices associated with the sea, wind, and concomitant storm in favor of his own, highly individual vocabulary". Caroline Potter adds that Debussy's depiction of the sea "avoids monotony by using a multitude of water figurations that could be classified as musical onomatopoeia: they evoke the sensation of swaying movement of waves and suggest the pitter-patter of falling droplets of spray" (and so forth), and – significantly – avoid the arpeggiated triads used by Wagner and Schubert to evoke the movement of water.

The author, musicologist and pianist Roy Howat has observed, in his book *Debussy in Proportion*, that the formal boundaries of La mer correspond exactly to the mathematical ratios called The Golden Section. Trezise finds the intrinsic evidence "remarkable," but cautions that no written or reported evidence suggests that Debussy consciously sought such proportions.

The piece was initially not well received – partly because of inadequate rehearsal and partly because of Parisian outrage over Debussy's having recently left his first wife for the singer Emma Bardac. But it soon became one of Debussy's most admired and frequently performed orchestral

works, and became more so in the ensuing century. The first recording was made by Piero Coppola in 1928.

The Grand Hotel, Eastbourne where La mer was completed in 1905.

In a book of interviews, the great Ukrainian/Soviet pianist Sviatoslav Richter called La mer "A piece that I rank alongside the St Matthew Passion and the Ring cycle as one of my favorite works". Richter said further, on listening to his favorite recording (by Roger Désormière), "La mer again; shall I ever tire of listening to it, of contemplating it and breathing its atmosphere? And each time is like the first time! An enigma, a miracle of natural reproduction; no, even more than that, sheer magic!" Richter also mentioned two other Soviet admirers of the work: "One day, after listening to this work, Anna Ivanovna exclaimed, 'For me, it's exactly the same miracle as the sea itself!'" . Richter also said that for his teacher, Heinrich Neuhaus, La mer was "the work by Debussy that he loved above all others ('Slava, put on La mer,' he almost always used to say whenever he came round here.)". Of the Désormière recording, which he played for Neuhaus, Richter said it is "The most beautiful in the whole history of the gramophone."

Don Juan, Op. 20, tone poem for orchestra by German composer Richard Strauss, first performed in Weimar on November 11, 1889. One of the earliest tone poems by Strauss, Don Juan tells of the legendary Spanish libertine Don Juan, who by then already had appeared in works by Mozart and other composers. For his tone poem, Strauss drew upon a version of the Don Juan story by the Austrian poet Nikolaus Lenau, published posthumously in 1851.

As the work opens, Strauss offers a theme that is forceful and energetic with bold interjections from the brass section. This theme soon gives way to one of romance, carried by a solo violin. A tranquil oboe suggests an evening liaison. Then the tender mood is broken by strident horns, presenting a confident and heroic theme. These themes are repeated and intermingled, always buoyed by Strauss's magnificent orchestration. The mood suddenly becomes soft and mournful as the piece nears its conclusion, the transition signifying the approaching end of Don Juan's life. Strauss seems to have followed his source, the poet Lenau, in opting for a wistful ending rather than a *grande finale*. Lenau's protagonist, having tired of the unending chase, allows his life to be taken in a duel. Similarly, the tone poem's final phrases taper away, ending in quiet tones evocative of dying breaths.

Don Juan was an immediate success, the first for Strauss, who was only 25 years old at the time. He conducted it in dozens of concerts throughout his career and included it in his first recordings, made in 1917.

# Debussy La Mer

## Richard Strauss Don Juan

**Fritz Reiner**

**Chicago Symphony Orchestra**

**La Mer**

**1. De L'Aube À Midi Sur La Mer 10:16**

**2. Jeux Des Vagues 6:26**

**3. Dialogue Du Vent Et De La Mer 8:09**

**4. Don Juan, Op. 20 15:54**

**Total Time: 40:45**

**Recorded by RCA 1961 Producer: Richard Mohr - Engineer: Lewis Layton**

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