Third Skin

Stefan Maier
For synthesis

PROGRAM NOTE

Despite its elemental theme and the fact that it was composed on the heels of a century of Romantic nature worship, Debussy's *La Mer* manifests an artificial sonic ocean, a possible world of mediated abstraction that presages the displacement later in the media-saturated twentieth century of the natural world by the domain of culture as the subject matter of art. Although a few tenuously onomatopoeic elements tether the work to its namesake—swelling, swaying motifs, cymbals crashing like waves—and its chord progressions drift without resolution in a metaphorically aqueous fashion, the discretized tonality, constrained timbral affordances, and complex syntactic formalism of early 20th-century orchestral music necessitated that *La Mer* be a highly abstract evocation, its connotative legitimacy predicated upon the conditioned listening of concertgoers familiar with the conventions of classical music, rather than from any analogical relation to the sounds of the sea. In a letter to a friend, Debussy explained that the direct reality of the sea was less important to him as source material than his "innumerable memories,"[1] thereby justifying his decision to compose the piece for the most part far from the coast. After the work's premiere, the critic Pierre Lalo wrote, "I have the impression of standing, not in front of nature, but in front of a reproduction of nature; a wonderfully refined, ingenious, and carefully composed reproduction, but a reproduction nonetheless."[2] There was indeed one such reproduction that was undoubtedly contemplated at length by Debussy while composing *La Mer*, which may even have been an unacknowledged subject: Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, which not only hung on the wall in Debussy's studio, but also adorned the cover of the score for *La Mer*.

Although the invention of the camera had in Debussy's time already driven Impressionist painters on the path away from verisimilitude, inaugurating Modernism's branching forays into abstraction, the advent of sound recording technology decades later did not precipitate a crisis for composers—for whom documentary depiction had anyhow never been an option—but rather an opportunity to at last compose with the concrete sounds of the world. Sixty-odd years after *La Mer*—the first movement of which is titled *De l'aube à midi sur la mer*, or From dawn to noon on the sea—Luc Ferrari's *Presque Rien No1 ou le lever du jour au bord de la mer* (Almost Nothing No1 or sunrise by the sea) slyly constructs a new world from the materials of this one. Regarding the difference between his seascape and *La Mer*, Ferrari observed, "Debussy wanted to draw a musical outcome from this spectacle—I am content with showing it. He had no microphone, that's the difference. When faced with the qualities of nature, why transcribe them through an orchestra if you can just replicate them?"[3] However, Ferrari's claim to simple replication is misleading. Although to the casual listener *Presque Rien No1* presents itself as a straightforward field recording of a village by the Black Sea, it is in fact meticulously assembled from many individual recordings of the various elements heard. Ferrari excluded sonic elements in the environment he considered ugly and focused on those sounds that recurred each morning.[4] By first decomposing the scene into discrete components before resynthesizing them into a condensed abstraction that never occurred in reality, Ferrari reduced the scene to a kind

of anti-music that in its idealized, composite nature perhaps resembles an externalized version of one of Debussy's many memories of the sea. Despite its superficial fidelity to reality, then, *Presque Rien No1* constitutes no less speculative a flight into sonic worlding[5] than *La Mer*.

Leap ahead nearly another six decades and we arrive at Stefan Maier's *Third Skin*. Recording is no longer necessary to evoke the sounds of the world in all their objective immediacy. Digital synthesis now provides the means by which scenes of maximal realism can be synthesized ex nihilo with sample-level precision, and therefore warped with the same exactitude along parametric arcs that bear no correlation to known forces in the material world. Released from its state of enslavement as the world's vibrational shadow, sound is now free to assume an ontologically primary status, from which speculative worlds wholly incongruous with lived experience may be projected. *Third Skin* targets the listener with stimuli that confound the relationship between auditory perception and spatial imagination, in the process suggesting novel circumstances of embodiment in domains subject to exotic laws of physics: the sensation of simultaneously falling and rising is induced; otoacoustic emissions efface the boundary between inner and outer hearing, as though the sounds were fusing with the listener's thoughts; quasi-vocal jabber suggests geometrically impossible resonating bodies, triggering unstable impressions of abstract personae. The tightly wound knot of theorems, rules, perceptual habits, and beliefs from which the seamless constancy of the actual world derives is unraveled by *Third Skin*'s perceptual antinomies.

—RM Francis

NOTES

1 Simon Trezise, *Debussy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 12

2 François Lesure and Roger Nichols, eds., *Debussy Letters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 164

3 Brunhild Ferrari, ed., *Luc Ferrari Complete Works* (London: Ecstatic Peace Library, 2019), 202

4 https://paristransatlantic.com/magazine/interviews/ferrari.html, retrieved August 16, 2025

5 See Anil Bawa-Cavia and Patricia Reed, "Site as Procedure as Interaction," in Amanda Beech and Robin Mackay, eds., *Construction Site for Possible Worlds* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2020) for an elaboration of the concept of worlding.