

Debussy's "Sirènes" and *Les Apaches*

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"Sirènes," the third and final movement of Claude Debussy's *Nocturnes* (1897–99), presents a unique synthesis of two nineteenth-century traditions, the *vocalise-étude* and "dramatic" vocalization. The first of these existed as collections of difficult passages from opera arias *sans paroles*, or newly composed works as the many test pieces written for the Paris Conservatoire. The second tradition consisted of the wordless vocalizations of offstage choruses used for special effect in such operas as Verdi's *Rigoletto* (1851), Berlioz's *Les Troyens* (1863), and d'Indy's *Fervaal* (1893–95).

Debussy claimed that the wordless female chorus in "Sirènes" was to be understood as "another orchestra color," instrumental in conception, seated within the onstage orchestra. Debussy, however, conveys a "dramatic" interpretation of the chorus through both program notes written for the premiere and the obvious symbolic meaning of the movement's title. A similar ambiguity exists between an instrumental versus mythical conception of the chorus, finding expression within the music itself as motives pass subtly between the orchestra and the chorus throughout the movement.

The impact of Debussy's "Sirènes" in French musical culture found a particular resonance within *Les Apaches*, an informal Parisian group of musicians, poets, painters, and critics whose members included the composers Maurice Ravel, Déodat de Séverac, Florent Schmitt, and, after 1910, Igor Stravinsky. Members shared a common belief in Debussy as a musical visionary and in indigenous folksong as a source of artistic renewal. Inclusion of dramatic vocalization, references to the sea, and thematic/motivic similarities with Debussy's "Sirènes" in the works of *Les Apaches* members further illustrate Debussy's influence and the importance of this particular work.