Program Notes for VSO Concert – Mozart, Sibelius, and Debussy, September 18–19, 2026
Mozart – Sinfonia Concertante; Sibelius – Symphony No. 7; Debussy – La mer

By Jonathan Berkowitz

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)

Melody is the essence of music. – W.A. Mozart

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart may have been the greatest natural musical genius in Western history. Unlike many child prodigies, who dazzle briefly and then fade, Mozart astonished Europe before the age of six and continued to do so for the next three decades. He composed more than 600 works in nearly every major genre of his time—symphonies, concertos, operas, chamber music, sacred music, piano sonatas, serenades, divertimenti, and choral works—and left masterpieces in almost all of them. More remarkably, even his lesser-known works display an ease, elegance, and vitality that other composers struggled to achieve at their very best.

Mozart lived only thirty-five years, but the intensity of his life makes it seem much longer. His story combines astonishing brilliance, financial instability, family devotion, personal tragedy, artistic independence, and one of music's greatest mysteries: the unfinished *Requiem*.

Mozart was born in 1756 in Salzburg, then part of the Holy Roman Empire and now located in Austria. His father, Leopold, was an accomplished violinist, composer, and teacher whose treatise on violin playing became one of the 18th-century's most influential instructional books. Leopold quickly recognized that both of his children possessed unusual musical gifts. He called Wolfgang "the miracle whom God allowed to be born in Salzburg." Mozart's older sister, Nannerl, was also a remarkable keyboard virtuoso and, during childhood, was considered every bit as gifted as her brother. She was born a century too soon to have her own international career. Social expectations kept her at home, while Wolfgang became Europe's musical sensation.

Stories of Mozart's childhood often sound exaggerated, but they are largely true. At three he was picking out harmonies on the keyboard. At five he composed little minuets. By six he was performing before royalty throughout Europe. The family embarked on tours lasting months or even years, travelling thousands of kilometres by carriage over dreadful roads. The young Mozart was exposed to every important musical style in Europe, and he absorbed everything rapidly.

One charming anecdote illustrates his gifts and his personality. In 1770, during a visit to the Vatican, 14-year-old Mozart heard Gregorio Allegri's famous *Miserere*, a work whose score was so carefully guarded it was forbidden, under pain of excommunication, to copy it. After hearing it once, Mozart returned to his lodging and wrote out nearly the entire piece from memory. At a second performance he corrected a few minor errors. The Pope, rather than punishing him, honoured him with the Order of the Golden Spur.

But the childhood tours carried a hidden cost. Mozart grew up entertaining kings, emperors, and aristocrats, but without a stable education or the ordinary friendships of childhood. He spent much of his youth in coaches, inns, and unfamiliar cities. Thus, while he developed extraordinary musical maturity, he never entirely lost a certain emotional innocence.

As an adult Mozart struggled with the dilemma of accepting the security of aristocratic employment or pursuing artistic independence. He increasingly chose the latter. His relationship with the Archbishop of Salzburg deteriorated, and in 1781, he was dismissed. Mozart settled in Vienna as one of history's first major freelance composers, supporting himself through teaching, public concerts, subscriptions, and commissions. It was an exciting but financially precarious existence.

Mozart's greatest creative achievements were produced in Vienna. In one extraordinary decade he composed many of his finest piano concertos, the six string quartets dedicated to Haydn, his final three symphonies, and a succession of operatic masterpieces including *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, *Così fan tutte*, and *The Magic Flute*. His friendship with Joseph Haydn became one of the happiest relationships in musical history. Haydn, more than 20 years older than Mozart, famously told Leopold Mozart, "Before God and as an honest man I tell you that your son is the greatest composer known to me either in person or by name."

Mozart's operas transformed musical theatre. Before him, opera often consisted of attractive melodies connected by formulaic plots. Mozart and his librettists created living human beings who possessed emotional complexity, psychological depth, and senses of humour. His characters still seem like real people more than two centuries later.

His instrumental music was also transformational. Mozart's piano concertos reinvented the relationship between soloist and orchestra and created genuine conversations among equals. His mature symphonies combine Haydn's structural discipline with an unprecedented richness of melody and emotional range. Beneath the graceful surface lay extraordinary sophistication. Robert Schumann commented that Mozart's music appears effortless only because perfection leaves no visible trace of effort.

Modern audiences mistakenly imagine classical composers as solemn geniuses. Not so with Mozart. He had a mischievous sense of humour. His letters overflow with puns, practical jokes, playful nonsense, and rather earthy humour. He delighted in word games, invented languages, and comic canons with titles that respectable Victorian biographers quietly omitted. This lighter side coexisted comfortably with the sublime spirituality of works such as the *Great Mass in C minor*, the *Clarinet Concerto*, and the unfinished *Requiem*.

Financially, Mozart's life was considerably less dramatic than legend suggests, although he was frequently short of money. He earned substantial sums during his most successful years but spent freely on elegant clothing, comfortable apartments, billiards, entertaining friends, and educating his family. His recurring financial difficulties reflected irregular income more than permanent poverty. The romantic image of Mozart dying abandoned in complete destitution greatly exaggerates the historical reality.

Mozart's life and music are familiar to many listeners partly because of the 1984 Academy Award-winning film *Amadeus*, based on Peter Shaffer's stage play. The film is historical fiction rather than biography. It vividly captures Mozart's astonishing productivity, irreverent humour, variable freelance income, the extraordinary quality of his music, and Vienna's competitive musical culture. It also conveys the admiration many contemporaries felt for his genius. But the central dramatic premise—that Antonio Salieri bitterly hated Mozart and plotted his destruction—is almost certainly false. Modern scholarship presents Salieri as a respected composer and teacher who occasionally

competed with Mozart but also supported him professionally. There is no credible evidence that he poisoned Mozart or deliberately ruined his career. Indeed, Salieri later taught Mozart's son. Shaffer himself repeatedly emphasized that *Amadeus* should be understood as a dramatic meditation on genius and mediocrity, not as historical reconstruction.

Mozart's death in 1791 remains surrounded by speculation. Modern medical historians have proposed many illnesses and causes of death. The infamous poisoning theories lack evidence. Equally mythical is the image of Mozart being buried in a pauper's grave. He received what was then a normal middle-class Viennese burial in a common cemetery, not a mass grave for the indigent.

Mozart's legacy is far more than a catalogue of masterpieces; he reshaped nearly every genre he touched. Beethoven built upon Mozart's piano concertos. Schubert inherited his gift for melody. Chopin admired his clarity. Tchaikovsky revered him, calling Mozart "the Christ of music." Even 20th-century composers who abandoned tonality continued to study his balance, proportion, and economy. Perhaps Mozart's greatest achievement was making complexity sound inevitable. His music never flaunts its craftsmanship. Counterpoint, harmonic innovation, structural perfection, and emotional depth appear with such naturalness that listeners often notice only the beauty. The more deeply one studies Mozart, however, the more astonishing the architecture beneath the surface becomes.

Describing his own creative process, he wrote, "When I am … completely myself … ideas flow best and most abundantly. Whence and how they come, I know not." That mystery remains unsolved. Mozart's music often seems less composed than discovered, as though he simply heard what already existed and wrote it down.

More than two centuries after his death, Mozart's legacy extends far beyond concert halls. His operas remain central to every major opera company. His symphonies and concertos anchor orchestral seasons worldwide. His chamber music forms the foundation of the classical repertoire. His music has been used to teach children, comfort the dying, accompany films, inspire scientific studies, and introduce countless listeners to classical music.

The miracle of Mozart is not simply that he was a prodigy, nor even that he died so young. It is that in only thirty-five years he created a body of work whose freshness seems inexhaustible. Every generation discovers something new in Mozart. Few composers have written with greater elegance. None has written with greater humanity.

Sinfonia Concertante for Violin, Viola, and Orchestra in E-flat major, K. 364 – Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1779)

Orchestration: *2 oboes, 2 horns, and strings, with solo violin and solo viola*

The *Sinfonia Concertante* is at once a symphony, a double concerto, and an intimate chamber work. It has long been treasured by violinists and violists alike, not only because they are treated as equals, but because Mozart transforms their conversation into one of the most sublime dialogues in all music. In the late 18th century, a *sinfonia concertante* was a fashionable hybrid genre, combining the scale and architecture of the symphony with the virtuosity of the concerto. Many composers wrote examples, but Mozart's surpasses nearly every other surviving work in the genre.

The origins of the work lie in one of the most unsettled periods of Mozart's life. In 1777–78, the 21-year-old composer left Salzburg, frustrated by the restrictions imposed by his employer, Archbishop Colloredo, and travelled in search of a more rewarding position. His journey took him through Mannheim—home to Europe's most celebrated orchestra—and eventually to Paris. Musicologist Jan Swafford suggests that Mozart's miserable mood may have arisen because "… he was no longer a prodigy but a young musician among many in need of a better job."

In Mannheim, Mozart encountered an astonishing level of orchestral discipline and virtuosity. The famous "Mannheim orchestra" pioneered dynamic effects, expressive crescendos, and orchestral precision that profoundly influenced his writing. Paris, however, proved a disappointment. His mother died there unexpectedly. Commissions failed to materialize, forcing Mozart to return reluctantly to Salzburg in early 1779.

The Sinfonia Concertante was almost certainly composed soon after his return, inspired by the popularity of the new genre and brilliant musicians he had met. The emotional experiences of the preceding two years—professional frustration, personal grief, and artistic growth—may help explain why this work possesses such unusual emotional richness.

One fascinating detail concerns the viola. Mozart has the violist tune each string one semitone higher than normal, a technique known as *scordatura*, while still reading music written in D major. The instrument therefore plays in E-flat major with the orchestra, but gains a brighter, more brilliant tone that allows it to balance the more penetrating violin. It is one of Mozart's most ingenious solutions to an orchestral balance problem. The technique is used most often in performances on original instruments with gut strings; it is less common on the modern viola with steel strings.

Unlike many concertos of the period, this work is not about dazzling solo display. The violin does not dominate. Neither does the viola. Instead, the two soloists engage in an extended dialogue. At various points they imitate one another, complete one another's musical thoughts, and merge into a single expressive voice. Meanwhile, the orchestra participates as an equal conversational partner rather than merely providing accompaniment. The work resembles an ideal discussion among friends rather than a debate to determine a winner.

The opening movement—***Allegro maestoso***—begins with an orchestral introduction that immediately establishes confidence and grandeur. Unlike Haydn's wit or Beethoven's drama, Mozart's nobility seems effortless. The orchestra presents a wealth of musical ideas before the

soloists enter together. Even with modest forces, Mozart creates a full sonority through octave writing and divided inner string parts.

Rather than competing for attention, violin and viola make their first entrance almost collaboratively. Their dialogue begins immediately. The viola certainly does not play "second fiddle." Themes pass seamlessly between the two instruments. Occasionally one leads while the other comments. Frequently they sing together in glorious thirds and sixths. The orchestra also joins in. The movement follows Classical sonata form, yet Mozart's genius lies in making formal architecture feel entirely natural. Although technically demanding, the solo writing never calls attention to its difficulty.

Notice the remarkable equality of the solo instruments. Listen for musical conversation rather than virtuoso display: elegant ornamentation, transparent orchestral textures, and the effortless balance between lyricism and formal clarity. Listen also for the "Mannheim crescendo," a dramatic swelling from quiet to loud that Mozart absorbed from the celebrated orchestra in Mannheim.

The second movement—***Andante***—is an operatic duet and one of Mozart's greatest slow movements, with an emotional depth that anticipates Beethoven. It is written in the mournful key of C minor, a rare choice for Mozart. Some have heard it as a memorial for his mother, who had died shortly before.

Muted strings create an atmosphere of quiet introspection. The violin introduces the principal melody of sorrow and grief. The viola gives a consoling answer. Almost immediately the two instruments begin weaving one of Mozart's most poignant conversations. The movement unfolds through continuous transformation. Passing shadows briefly darken the harmony before sunlight quietly returns. Yet the melancholy never completely disappears.

Listen for the extraordinary vocal quality of both solo lines and for the way the violin and viola seem almost to breathe together. This is not theatrical tragedy, but quiet acceptance. The movement reminds us that Mozart was as skilled at expressing sorrow as joy. It is a remarkable elegy from a composer only 23 years old.

The gloomy introspection of the Andante instantly evaporates in the finale—***Presto***. The mood becomes playful and exuberant, built on a breathless, high-speed tempo. The movement has a rondo design. A lively principal theme repeatedly returns between contrasting episodes. The soloists display dazzling technique, trading rapid-fire phrases as if in a game of musical copycat, with the orchestra as an active participant.

Listen for sparkling exchanges between violin and viola with brilliant passagework and clever rhythms, graceful orchestral interjections, and Mozart's astonishing lightness of touch. Even at its most virtuosic, the music never becomes heavy. It dances all the way to an exhilarating and joyful conclusion.

The Sinfonia Concertante fascinates because of its extraordinary orchestral balance. The orchestra never overwhelms the soloists, nor does it retreat into the background. Instead, Mozart achieves perfect transparency. The work combines symphonic architecture, concerto brilliance, chamber music intimacy, operatic lyricism, and emotional depth.

This work is fundamentally about listening. The soloists must constantly listen to one another; the orchestra must listen to both. The audience, in turn, is invited into the conversation. Few works better demonstrate Mozart's brilliance: he makes the most difficult artistic achievement of all—perfect balance—appear entirely effortless.

Jean Sibelius (1865–1957)

"It is as if the Almighty had thrown down pieces of a mosaic from Heaven's floor and asked me to discover what the original picture was." – Jean Sibelius

Some composers become famous because they change music. Others become beloved because they seem to speak for a nation. Jean Sibelius did both. To Finns, he became the musical embodiment of their country's struggle for identity and independence. To the wider world, he showed that the symphony, more than a century after Beethoven, could still evolve in startling new directions. His music combines elemental power, structural originality, and profound emotional restraint. It seems to grow rather than unfold, evolving like a forest or glacier instead of proceeding by conventional musical logic.

Born in 1865 in a small Finnish town, Sibelius entered a country politically tied to the Russian Empire and culturally shaped by both Swedish and Finnish traditions. Although he would become Finland's national composer, his first language was Swedish. He learned Finnish later, partly through a growing fascination with his country's language, literature, and mythology. That dual heritage gave him a broad cultural outlook while deepening his commitment to creating a distinctly Finnish musical voice.

His given name was Johan Julius Christian Sibelius, but family and friends called him "Janne." The name "Jean" emerged in his 20s after he discovered engraved visiting cards belonging to an uncle who had adopted the more cosmopolitan French version of the name. Sibelius liked its elegance and kept it for the rest of his life.

Music was not initially destined to become his profession. As a boy he showed considerable promise on the violin and dreamed of becoming a concert soloist. He practised obsessively, later recalling that he could scarcely sleep for excitement before lessons. Yet he began serious violin study relatively late and, although gifted, he eventually recognized that a performing career was beyond his reach. "My tragedy," he once admitted with characteristic honesty, "was that I wanted to become a celebrated violinist at any price." That disappointment proved fortunate for music history.

Sibelius first studied law before transferring to the Helsinki Music Institute, later continuing his education in Berlin and Vienna. Biographers often note that in both cities he developed a taste for fine wines and cigars. Like many ambitious young composers, he absorbed the traditions of Beethoven, Wagner, Bruckner, and Tchaikovsky, yet he never became an imitator. His earliest works reveal Romantic influences, but even there one hears distinctive fingerprints: long melodic spans, unusual harmonic progressions, and an instinct for organic musical growth.

His breakthrough came in 1892 with the choral symphony *Kullervo*, based on Finland's national epic, the *Kalevala*. Although Sibelius later withdrew the work for many years, it established him

overnight as Finland's leading composer. Throughout his career the *Kalevala* would remain a rich source of inspiration, producing masterpieces such as *The Swan of Tuonela* and others.

Perhaps no single composition is more closely associated with Sibelius than *Finlandia* (1899). Although conceived as incidental music for patriotic pageants protesting Russian censorship, its noble concluding hymn became an unofficial national anthem long before Finland achieved independence in 1917. Remarkably, the title *Finlandia* itself was initially avoided in public performances so as to evade Russian authorities.

Yet Sibelius would probably have been disappointed had posterity remembered him only as a nationalist composer. His seven symphonies trace one of the most remarkable journeys in orchestral history. Rather than becoming larger and more extravagant, as did Mahler's symphonies, Sibelius' symphonies became increasingly concentrated. The youthful First and Second still inhabit the broad emotional landscapes of late Romanticism. The Third introduces a leaner, more Classical style. The austere Fourth ventures into psychological depths almost unprecedented in 1911. The Fifth, with its magnificent "Swan Hymn," achieves monumental grandeur through astonishing economy. The Seventh compresses what once required four movements into a single continuous span of barely twenty-two minutes—a masterpiece of structural unity that many musicians consider one of the greatest symphonies ever written.

One of Sibelius' greatest innovations was his concept of organic growth. Instead of presenting clearly defined themes that are developed later, he allowed tiny musical fragments to evolve naturally into larger structures. The listener often has the impression that the music is growing before one's ears, like branches extending from the trunk of a tree. This approach profoundly influenced later composers, even those whose musical language differed greatly.

His working habits reflected extraordinary discipline. Sibelius composed almost exclusively at Ainola, the beautiful wooden house near Lake Tuusula where he and his wife Aino raised their family. The house, surrounded by forests and lakes, became both sanctuary and laboratory. Sibelius frequently walked for hours through the woods, absorbing the rhythms and silences of nature before returning to his desk. Visitors often remarked that his music seemed inseparable from the Finnish landscape itself.

In 1908, a throat tumour was diagnosed and removed, requiring Sibelius to give up cigars and alcohol for several years. Andrew Barnett writes that "the predominantly dark mood of Sibelius' major works from the ensuing years" has often been linked to his fear that the cancer might return. In 1914, Sibelius made a highly successful visit to the United States. Then the First World War intervened. Because most of his publishers were German firms, his income dwindled and travel became difficult. By the age of fifty, Sibelius was already an iconic cultural figure in Finland and highly respected internationally.

Less well known is Sibelius' lifelong struggle with self-doubt. Despite international acclaim, he continually questioned his own work. He revised scores obsessively and destroyed many manuscripts. Most famous of all is the mysterious fate of the Eighth Symphony. For decades Sibelius hinted that the work was nearly complete, raising expectations among conductors worldwide. Then, probably in the 1940s, he is believed to have burned the manuscript—and perhaps many other compositions—in the fireplace at Ainola. His daughter later recalled watching

bundles of papers consumed in what the family called "the great bonfire." Whether fragments survive remains one of music's enduring mysteries. His Seventh Symphony was left to stand as his final statement about what a symphony could be.

Equally remarkable was Sibelius' long musical silence, the so-called "silence from Järvenpää." One writer described it as "perhaps the most profound silence in musical history." After completing *Tapiola* in 1926, he lived for another thirty-one years yet published almost no major new works. During those decades he became a legendary figure, revered throughout the musical world while tending his garden, entertaining visitors, smoking his beloved cigars, and continuing to revise earlier compositions. His silence became almost as famous as his music. Sibelius was full of contradictions: a solitary lover of nature and birds who craved the isolation of the Finnish countryside, yet also a worldly figure who enjoyed high society and attention in Europe's great cities. He died peacefully at home in 1957 at the age of ninety-two.

His reputation has undergone fascinating shifts. During the mid-20th century some critics regarded him as conservative beside the modernism of Schoenberg and Stravinsky. Yet the later 20th century witnessed a remarkable reassessment. Today Sibelius stands not as an opponent of musical modernism but as an alternative path toward it. His revolutionary handling of form, texture, and musical process has influenced composers from Ralph Vaughan Williams and William Walton to modern symphonists such as Robert Simpson and Per Nørgård. Conductors now regard the Sibelius symphonies as indispensable pillars of the orchestral repertoire.

Few composers spoke more memorably about their own art. Among Sibelius' most revealing observations is the wry advice, "Pay no attention to what the critics say. No statue has ever been put up to a critic." Even more profound is his statement that "Music begins where the possibilities of language end."

In a 1948 interview, Sibelius offered younger composers a simple command: "Never write a superfluous note; every note must live." His music is compelling proof that he followed that principle throughout his long and distinguished career.

The quotation that opens this biography is one of the most evocative metaphors in music, and it beautifully captures Sibelius' genius. Unlike composers who seem to invent music from nothing, Sibelius often gives the impression of uncovering something already present in nature—revealing patterns hidden beneath forests, lakes, and northern skies. More than half a century after his death, his music continues to speak with a voice that is unmistakably Finnish yet profoundly universal: music of vast landscapes, quiet strength, and enduring humanity.

Symphony No. 7 in C major, Op. 105 – Jean Sibelius (1924)

Orchestration: *2 flutes, both doubling piccolo; 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; 4 horns; 3 trumpets; 3 trombones; timpani; and strings*

There is an old saying that every great composer eventually writes the symphony he was destined to write. For Jean Sibelius, that work may be Symphony No. 7. Lasting barely twenty-two minutes, it is the shortest of his mature symphonies, yet many musicians regard it as one of the great symphonic achievements of the 20th century. Every note seems inevitable, every transition organic, and every musical idea part of a single living process.

Unlike the sprawling symphonies of Mahler or Bruckner, Sibelius achieves grandeur not through size but through concentration. Symphony No. 7 is often described as a mountain compressed into a crystal: monumental in conception, economical in expression.

Sibelius began work on the Symphony around 1918, in the aftermath of the First World War and the bitter Finnish Civil War. Finland itself was a young nation, having declared independence from Russia only in 1917. Although the Seventh contains no overt nationalism, it emerged about the time Sibelius became an international symbol of Finnish cultural identity. The work evolved slowly. At various stages Sibelius imagined it as a three-movement symphony, then as a fantasia, and finally as a single continuous movement. Even after the premiere in 1924, he continued making small revisions before declaring the score complete. The Seventh would prove to be Sibelius' final completed Symphony--a remarkable culmination of four decades of musical evolution.

Perhaps its most striking feature is its form. There are no separate movements. Instead, Sibelius fuses what would traditionally have been four movements into one uninterrupted span. Attentive listeners will hear familiar symphonic functions emerging naturally: a spacious introduction, faster sonata-like music, lyrical slow episodes, scherzo-like activity, and an affirmative conclusion. The seams disappear. Ten major tempo changes flow smoothly into one another; the music evolves continuously, like a winding, rushing river. Sibelius often compared composition to nature, and no work better illustrates that philosophy.

The Symphony is written in C major, a key often associated with brightness and affirmation. Here, however, it sounds deep, grave, and newly discovered. Ralph Vaughan Williams observed that only Sibelius could make C major sound completely fresh, while Peter Franklin called the dramatic conclusion "the grandest celebration of C major there ever was."

Beginning with a soft timpani roll, quiet strings emerge almost imperceptibly, playing a C major scale. Then the woodwinds answer. The harmony seems suspended, neither fully settled nor uncertain. Gradually the music gathers weight and grows, with no abruptness. Listen for how Sibelius avoids obvious themes at first. Instead, he develops fragments, rhythmic cells, harmonic colours, and changing orchestral textures. The music resembles a landscape slowly appearing through morning mist.

One of the defining moments arrives with the first appearance of the famous trombone melody. It enters with extraordinary dignity, broad and noble, almost hymn-like. This great theme appears three times during the Symphony, each marking a structural milestone. In sketches, Sibelius labelled the trombone theme *Aino*, after his wife. Listen for the richness of the brass sound and how

its arrival transforms the surrounding music. The theme becomes an architectural pillar supporting the entire work.

Unlike traditional sonata form, where themes are presented and later developed, here the ideas evolve almost imperceptibly. A rhythmic figure becomes a melody. A melody becomes accompaniment. Fragments combine into entirely new ideas. The listener often realizes only afterward that the music has entered a different emotional landscape. This seamless transformation is one of the work's greatest marvels.

Gradually the tempo accelerates with animated strings and chattering woodwinds, acquiring tremendous momentum. There are no conventional climaxes, just a natural accumulation of energy. Listen for shifting rhythms, subtle tempo changes, and balance among orchestral sections. Every instrument contributes to the evolving texture. Several times the music broadens into expansive lyrical passages that provide breathing space without functioning as separate slow movements. Notice the long phrases for the strings and the warm writing for the horns.

As the conclusion approaches, earlier ideas return transformed. The final appearance of the trombone theme carries enormous emotional weight. This is not Beethoven's triumph through conflict. Rather, it conveys inevitability—both in the progress of the music and in the presence of forces larger than the individual will. The final pages grow increasingly majestic before ending with six massive C-major chords, each separated by silence, each sounding like a declaration. It is an astonishingly simple and profoundly satisfying ending.

Every Sibelius symphony has devoted admirers. The Second remains the most popular. The Fifth contains perhaps his most famous finale. The Fourth is often considered his most psychologically searching. Yet many conductors and scholars regard the Seventh as his supreme achievement because it solves problems composers had wrestled with since Beethoven: how a symphony can remain unified while sustaining contrast, how large-scale architecture can feel inevitable rather than constructed, and how musical ideas can grow naturally instead of being mechanically developed. Sibelius answers with extraordinary economy. Every note belongs.

This is not a symphony best understood by trying to identify themes or formal sections on first hearing. Instead, surrender to its flow and experience one of the most perfectly integrated symphonies ever composed.

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

Works of art make rules; rules do not make works of art. – Claude Debussy

A list of great musical revolutionaries might begin with Beethoven and Wagner before turning to Stravinsky or Schoenberg. Between them stands another revolutionary whose innovations were equally profound, though quieter. Before Claude Debussy, harmony usually propelled music toward resolution; after Debussy, it could linger for the sake of its own colour, beauty, and atmosphere.

His music seemed discovered rather than composed: shimmering, elusive, and suggestive. The label "Impressionist" has followed him throughout history, but Debussy himself disliked it intensely. He argued that "Impressionism" belonged to painters. He preferred to think of his music as an exploration of mystery, nature, poetry, and the limitless possibilities of sound itself.

Claude-Achille Debussy was born in 1862 near Paris. He did not grow up in a musical household. His family's finances were often precarious. Debussy's musical talent emerged almost by accident. During the Franco-Prussian War, when his family sought refuge with relatives, the young Debussy received his first piano lessons. His gifts were so obvious that, at the age of 10, he entered the prestigious Paris Conservatoire. His teachers quickly recognized both his brilliance and his independence. One teacher complained, "Debussy is extremely gifted, but terribly undisciplined." Where teachers expected conventional harmonic progressions, Debussy invented his own. He ignored the rules, reportedly replying that he preferred "what sounds beautiful." Fortunately for music history, he remained stubborn.

In 1884 Debussy won France's highest musical prize, the Prix de Rome, which required him to spend several years studying in Italy. It was a frustrating experience; Rome had lots of beautiful scenery but little musical stimulation. Debussy disliked its conservatism and longed to return to Paris, where poets, painters, and musicians were reshaping French culture. Ironically, the prize that established his reputation also convinced him that he must find his own artistic path.

A week after returning to Paris in 1887, Debussy heard the first act of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* and called it "decidedly the finest thing I know." The experience made a deep impression. Yet it also sharpened his conviction that French music needed another path: one less burdened by Wagnerian weight and more responsive to nuance, clarity, colour, and suggestion.

While Wagner revealed the intoxicating power of chromatic harmony and continuous musical drama, the Javanese gamelan he heard at the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle suggested another world altogether, built on colour, resonance, repetition, and subtle rhythmic flow. Debussy absorbed both lessons without imitating either. From Wagner he learned what he had to move beyond; from the gamelan he glimpsed new ways for music to suspend time and shimmer in sound.

Beginning in the 1890s, Debussy produced a remarkable succession of masterpieces. The revolutionary orchestral *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894) opens with perhaps the most famous flute solo ever written, dissolving traditional notions of musical time almost from its first notes. His opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902) abandoned grand operatic gestures in favour of natural speech rhythms and psychological subtlety. Then came orchestral masterpieces such as *La mer*, *Images*, and *Nocturnes*, along with two books of preludes for piano that remain among the greatest collections ever written for the instrument.

Although often described as a composer of atmosphere, Debussy was in fact an extraordinary craftsman. Beneath the apparent freedom lies meticulous structural control. His music rarely develops themes in the Germanic tradition. Instead, his ideas evolve, dissolve, and reappear like changing light on water.

Debussy's private life was often turbulent. He could be charming, witty, generous, and affectionate. He could also be aloof, sarcastic, and impulsive. His romantic relationships generated considerable scandal in Parisian society. His first marriage ended unhappily, and his second relationship began under painful public circumstances that damaged his reputation for many years. Yet friends often remarked on another side of his personality.

He adored his daughter Claude-Emma, affectionately nicknamed "Chouchou". His delightful piano suite *Children's Corner* is dedicated to her and remains one of the most enchanting portrayals of childhood in music. The movement titles are written in English rather than French—*Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum*, *Golliwogg's Cakewalk*, *Jimbo's Lullaby*—reflecting the fashionable English toys and books of the period.

Debussy's final years were overshadowed by tragedy. After a 1909 cancer diagnosis he endured years of painful treatment while continuing to compose remarkable works, including the Violin Sonata and the extraordinary Études for piano. The First World War deeply affected him. Intensely patriotic, he signed some letters "Claude Debussy, musicien français," emphasizing his belief that French music should preserve its own identity amid the conflict. He died at age 55 in Paris in 1918, while German artillery bombarded the city. Only a small funeral procession accompanied his coffin through nearly deserted streets. Today, he is honoured as one of France's greatest composers.

Several fascinating details illuminate Debussy's remarkable life. He never owned a piano of exceptional quality for much of his early career, despite becoming one of history's greatest piano composers. He loved cats and often allowed them to wander freely through his apartment, much to the annoyance of visitors. He disliked conducting his own music and frequently complained about performers who treated it too sentimentally. Perhaps surprisingly, Debussy was an enthusiastic admirer of the fiction of Edgar Allan Poe and hoped to compose operas based on *The Devil in the Belfry* and *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Neither was completed. He also had an impish sense of humour. Many of his letters sparkle with wit, irony, and gentle mockery of critics.

It is difficult to imagine 20th-century music without Debussy. His influence extends far beyond classical music. Composers including Maurice Ravel, Béla Bartók, Olivier Messiaen, and Toru Takemitsu all absorbed aspects of his harmonic language. Jazz musicians from Bill Evans to Duke Ellington admired his harmonic innovations. Even film composers owe an enormous debt to his ability to evoke atmosphere through orchestral colour. Above all, Debussy liberated music from the expectation that every chord must lead somewhere. He taught composers that sound itself could be expressive, that silence was as important as motion, and that mystery could be more compelling than certainty.

Perhaps Debussy's most memorable observation was, "Music is the space between the notes." And in a sentence that perfectly summarizes his lifelong artistic quest, he wrote: "I am trying to do something different—realities in some sense—what the imbeciles call Impressionism." Whether or not one accepts the label he rejected, Debussy forever changed the way we hear music. He taught

us that a melody could shimmer like sunlight on water, that harmony could suggest rather than declare, and that the deepest emotions are often expressed not through overwhelming force but through subtlety, colour, and imagination. Few composers have so completely transformed the language of music while leaving it sounding so effortlessly natural.

La mer – Claude Debussy (1903–1905)

Orchestration: *piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 2 cornets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, glockenspiel, tam-tam, triangle), 2 harps, and strings*

Remarkably few musical masterpieces depict the sea. There is Felix Mendelssohn's *Hebrides Overture*, Benjamin Britten's *Four Sea Interludes*, and Ralph Vaughan Williams's *A Sea Symphony*. Yet none approaches the originality of Claude Debussy's *La mer* (*The Sea*). Completed in 1905, it is neither a symphony nor a tone poem in the conventional sense. Debussy called it *trois esquisses symphoniques*—"three symphonic sketches"—a revealing description. These are not literal images of waves and storms, but musical impressions of the sea's endless transformation: light, movement, mystery, and power. *La mer* stands today as one of the supreme achievements of orchestral literature and as close as Debussy ever came to composing a symphony.

Ironically, Debussy composed much of *La mer* not on the French coast but in Burgundy, hundreds of kilometres inland. When friends questioned how he could write about the sea while surrounded by vineyards, Debussy replied that he carried the sea within him through an endless store of memories. His fascination dated from childhood holidays on the Normandy coast. In fact, Debussy thought he was destined to become a sailor, but that fate led him in another direction. Those memories, rather than direct observation, shaped the music. He wrote, "[M]y old friend, the sea; it is always endless and beautiful. It is really the thing in nature which best puts you in your place."

Composition coincided with one of the most turbulent periods of his personal life. Debussy had left his first wife to begin a relationship with Emma Bardac, causing a major Parisian scandal. Public opinion turned sharply against him, and when *La mer* premiered in 1905, some critics judged the work through the lens of the composer's private life rather than on its musical merits.

The premiere was greeted with respect but caution, and some early critics simply did not know how to hear the piece. Only gradually did musicians recognize that Debussy had created something genuinely new. Today *La mer* occupies a place beside Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*, Stravinsky's *The Firebird*, and Richard Strauss's greatest tone poems as one of the pinnacles of 20th-century orchestral writing. Each of these has been performed by the VSO in recent seasons.

Debussy rejected the label of impressionism, believing his music pursued something deeper. He wanted music to suggest rather than describe. The sea in *La mer* is never illustrated literally. There are no seagulls, crashing breakers, or shipwrecks. Instead, Debussy creates an ever-changing musical environment whose fluidity resembles nature itself.

One remarkable feature is the absence of obvious symphonic themes. Instead of memorable melodies that are developed in the German tradition, Debussy's characteristic style uses tiny motifs that continually transform, as if improvised, into new ideas. Like waves, no musical event ever returns quite the same way.

I. De l'aube à midi sur la mer (From Dawn to Noon on the Sea)

The opening movement is dark and mysterious, beginning almost imperceptibly, like a wave gathering before it breaks. Muted strings and divided cellos seem to emerge from silence. Gradually, fragments accumulate until the sea awakens and reveals itself. Later, a brass chorale suggests the ocean's depths. Quick changes in orchestral colour evoke a surface in constant motion above something vast and unchanging below. The great climax near the end conjures up sunlight finally breaking through morning mist.

The movement is often described as free in form—the orchestra is in constant motion—but it has architectural discipline. Small motifs continually evolve toward increasingly broad climaxes before subsiding again. Listen especially for shimmering strings, delicate harp figures, solo woodwinds, and subtle brass. Rather than searching for tunes, follow the changing colours.

II. Jeux de vagues (Play of the Waves)

While the first movement depicts the vastness of the ocean, the second captures perpetual motion. Debussy creates a musical equivalent of sunlight dancing across moving waves. The music rarely settles into predictable patterns. Everything sparkles and nothing stands still. Ideas appear briefly before disappearing.

Listen for constantly shifting rhythms and non-Western scales, the brilliant use of flutes and harp, and rapid exchanges among woodwinds. Every instrument contributes briefly before yielding to another. The movement seems almost weightless.

III. Dialogue du vent et de la mer (Dialogue of the Wind and the Sea)

The finale introduces conflict. The sea is no longer merely beautiful but powerful, unpredictable, and storm-threatened. The movement opens mysteriously before gathering tremendous energy. Themes from earlier movements return transformed, but the drama comes not from argument in the traditional symphonic sense but from accumulating momentum. A solo trumpet theme is answered by the brass chorale from the first movement, and later a new motif drives the music toward a radiant, overwhelming conclusion, like one final great wave.

Listen for the recurring wave-like motifs, sweeping string passages, forceful brass, and powerful timpani; the climaxes emerge naturally from earlier passages. Particularly impressive is how Debussy handles orchestral balance. Even at maximum volume, individual instrumental colours remain astonishingly clear. The conclusion celebrates nature's overwhelming vitality, not victory over nature.

La mer demands a sophisticated orchestra. Although the instrumentation appears conventional, Debussy uses it with unprecedented imagination. Many orchestral techniques that later composers would take for granted appear here in fully realized form. The work tells no story. Instead, it asks us to listen as we might watch the sea itself: patiently, alertly, and without expecting any moment to return exactly as before. Like the sea that inspired it, every hearing of *La mer* reveals something new. More than orchestral painting, it is a meditation on nature's motion, mystery, and power.