

Water music, music on water or water in music? A short outline of the meaning of water for musical culture

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The importance of water for human beings needs no justification: its validity could not but leave marks also in the art and the meaning of water has been widely recognized in creative activities. Hence water has been discussed in a multitude of ways – as a source of inspiration, as a symbol, its emulation (sound and flow), etc.¹.

Raising the question of the validity of water for musical culture may seem strange at first and provoke doubts, even suspicions, however this issue has been already recognized, with such tangible proofs as a project entitled *Water Music*². The 2003 book, also entitled *Water Music*³, features photographs of water by Marjorie Ryerson accompanied by short texts by sixty six renowned musicians such as Vladimir Ashkenazy, Dave Brubeck, Randy Newman, Pete Seeger and many others, who explicitly wrote about the meaning of water to them. What seems striking in this publication is the intimacy and uniqueness of experiencing the phenomenon of water by any single person, be it artists or musicians. Similar to the arts also in the realm of – widely understood music – water has been interpreted in a number of way and consequently differently harnessed by individuals serving particular artistic proposes. Not only ‘hearing’ water but also ‘seeing’, ‘feeling’, ‘tasting’ it can be revealed in music testifying the multitude of possibilities how humans experience water. Water is not only a chemical phenomenon but also a catalyst of human diversity exposed in its defining, fathoming, and internalizing in the form of subsequent artistic expression.

The tradition of associating music and water as a concept established is not only well established but also it functions on various platforms. What is then the value of water for music? Of course it has always served as a source of inspiration for composers. There are various dimensions of this inspirational effect, among others one can name: water as a pretext for commercial venture, romanticising water, ‘translating’ water into the language of music, emulating water, water as a symbol, and even water as ... provocation.

¹ Among other elements fire seems popular as a source of inspiration to composers. Suffice to name a few titles featuring various reference to fire: *Music for the Royal Fireworks* (1749) by Handel or *Feux d'artifice* (1910-1912) from (piano) *Préludes* by Debussy or *Poem of Fire. Prometheus* and *Vers la Flamme* by Scriabin. Also Stravinsky composed (in 1908) an orchestral fantasy entitled *Feu d'artifice/Firework*. It needs to be stressed that the same composers also referred in the titles of their compositions to water.

² see: <http://www.water-music.org/>. Access: 12.05.2012.

³ Marjorie Ryerson, *Water Music*, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2003.

Commercial value of water for music

As the most well known example of associating water and music can be cited a collection of orchestral movements by Georg Haendel called *Water Music*. These short movements are sometimes treated as three suites in F major, D major, G major. Musically they are interesting because of their instrumentation. However, even this aspect of the composition is connected with its 'waterly' genesis. Supposedly, Handel composed *Water Music* in order to please the king George I as the composer already felt that he was losing the royal support. On the request of the king Haendel created music to be played during the concert held on...the river Thames. On July the 1st 1717 around fifty musicians were situated on a barge and performed the works by Haendel. Consequently the instruments suggested by the composer were duly adjusted to this specific condition: no harpsichord or timpani were used as it would be difficult to carry them (because of their size, delicacy, risk of damage) to the barge, not to speak to play them on such an unstable ground. The other important factor determining the choice of instruments was the acoustic of the place. Hence, except for strings, also wind instruments whose sound is well heard in the open air, play in this composition adding to its specific sound.

Water appearing in the title of the work by Haendel explains then circumstances under which it was composed, and can be treated as a mere pretext to present a commercially successful piece of music. Also the 'watery' situation in which it premiered justifies the novel choice of instruments. It may be interesting in that moment to note that the tradition of performing on the river Thames had been established long before 1717. As Julia K. Wood says performances on the river "became a custom at some time during the 15th century"⁴. Having examined a considerable number of sources, she established that music making on the river was a normal part of celebrating various festive occasions, including the river processions on Lord Mayor's Day⁵. For example a special aquatic pageant called *Aqua Triumphalis* took place on 23 August 1662. Such aquatic concerts were then nothing extraordinary for Londoners listening to 'water music' either from barges or while situated on embankments. Aquatic music was purely instrumental (with trumpets and drums prevailing), and as Wood suggests the barges carrying instrumentalists "may well have been anchored in each place of performance. The lack of oar sound would have improved audibility, and the concert was evidently intended to be heard from the bank as well as by the nobility and gentry on the water"⁶. It is worth adding that aquatic concerts took place also during winter, on the frozen Thames.

Perhaps less renowned, but still quite well known composition of the Baroque period also alluding to aquatic associations is 1723 *Wassermusik* – an orchestral suite in C major called *Hamburger Ebb und Fluth* by Georg Philipp Telemann. It consists of typical for suites dance movements, i.e. 1. Ouverture 2. Sarabande 3. Bourrée 4. Loure 5. Gavotte

⁴ Julia K. Wood, 'A Flowing Harmony': Music on the Thames in Restoration London', *Early Music*, Vol. 23, No. 4, Music in Purcell's London I (Nov., 1995), p.556.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 558.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 568.

6. Harlequinade 7. Eolo 8. Menuet 9. Gigue 10. Canarie) and is to be performed by two oboes, four flutes, bassoon, two violins, cello and basso continuo.

The tradition of composing works entitled ‘water music’ survived and in the 20th Ned Rorem composed one in 1966 (for clarinet, violin and orchestra). As no surprise should come then the fact that playing on ships, for example during the times of their arrivals and departures at ports (also during the time of unloading, etc.) was a well known custom in non-European cultures, for example since the Heian period (794 to 1185) it had been practiced in China⁷.

Water as a romantic metaphor

Water seen as one of the elements, indispensable part of the nature was both adored and feared in the romantic period. Many composers, especially of the late romantic era used water references in the programmatic titles of their compositions. For example American composer Edward MacDowell (1860–1908) often referred in titles to the nature and one of his 1893 *Eight Songs* for voice and piano op. 47 is accordingly entitled *The Sea* while the other –from 1897 – bears the name *Three Choruses* for male voices op. 52 (1897) – *From the Sea*. American musicologist Dolores Pesce suggests that in another work – *Sea Pieces* op. 55 (for piano) MacDowell evoked the vastness and eternal qualities of the sea by the means of “the exploitation of the extreme high and low ranges of the piano, used both alone and in conjunction”⁸ as well as by rhythmic solutions. For the American composer the sea is not so much a threatening physical force eliciting dark emotions but a metaphysical symbol of human condition⁹.

Around the same time, in 1899, a song cycle *Sea Pictures* op. 37 for contralto (sometimes mezzo-soprano) and orchestra by a British composer Edward Elgar (1857 – 1934) premiered. Some singers, while performing these songs, characterised as mermaids in order to strengthen the aquatic effect. As Pesce says, in this composition the sea is “a reflection of man's unsettled emotional state” evoking the “image of the sea as a sought-after resting place, a refuge from life's struggles”¹⁰.

‘Translating’ water into the language of music

Another famous piece of music referring to water is *The sea* by Claude Debussy stemming from a completely different time and representing totally different technique of composing. It took Debussy two years between 1903 and 1905 to finish his symphonic

⁷ Keiko Suzuki, *When westerns were Chinese: Visual Representations of Foreigners*, in: Evgeny Steiner (ed.) *Orientalism - Occidentalism. Languages of Cultures vs. Languages of Description*, Moskva: Sovpadenie, 2012, p.119.

⁸ Dolores Pesce, ‘The Other Sea in MacDowell's Sea Pieces’, *American Music*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Winter, 1992), p.413.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 430 and 414.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 440.

sketches for orchestra fully titled *La mer, trois esquisses symphoniques pour orchestre*. As in the case of Heandel's *Water music* this piece again favours wind instruments (alongside strings). However, Debussy was not tempted to use the arpeggiated triads often employed by composers (e.g. Wagner and Schubert) trying to evoke the movement of water. The composition is rather hailed for its unusual orchestration and subtle impressionistic harmonies that may be interpreted as a flow of tonal colours. The most striking feature of the piece is its formal layout, willingly compared with the concept the sea. A French composer Jean Barraque described *La mer* as the first work to have an "open" form, and stresses its "sonorous becoming... a developmental process in which the very notions of exposition and development coexist in an uninterrupted burst."¹¹ The openness of the form, according to some authors, does remind the openness of the sea. For a British musicologist Simon Trezise the development of musical units in the pieces is reminiscent of water as he writes of "motifs [that] are constantly propagated by derivation from earlier motifs"¹². He also stresses that "for much of *La Mer*, Debussy spurns the more obvious devices associated with the sea, wind, and concomitant storm in favour of his own, highly individual vocabulary"¹³. Caroline Potter researching 20th century French music 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"¹⁴. The musicologist and pianist Roy Howat noted that the formal layout of *La mer* can be interpreted in reference to the mathematical ratio called The Golden section (based on Fibonacci sequence)¹⁵. Much as other authors find this supposition fascinating, they also express their reservations about the hypothesis, pointing the lack of evidence. It needs to be added that the cover of the original edition with *La Mer* features *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, also known as *The Great Wave* or simply *The Wave from 1820s* by Katsushika Hokusai (1760 –1849) depicting either okinami or tsunami. The picture itself has been the subject of interest for various European intellectuals.

Water as a symbol in musical culture

20th century Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu, who was influenced by Debussy (especially in reference to orchestration emphasizing the choice of instrumental colours). revealed his fascination, among others, in direct quotations from Debussy's *La Mer* in his *Quotation of Dream* (1991). Furthermore, Takemitsu –just like Debussy – favoured the water as the source of his inspiration. Indeed, many of his compositions bear 'watery' titles (*I Hear the Water Dreaming* 1987). Takemitsu saw water in many forms and shapes, for example as sea (*Toward the Sea* -- 1981) or rain (*Rain Tree* or *Rain Coming* -- 1982).

¹¹ Jean Barraque, "La Mer de Debussy," *Analyse musicale* 12 :3, June 1988.

¹² Simon Trezise, *Debussy: La Mer*, Cambridge : Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 52.

¹³ Simon Trezise, *Debussy: La Mer*, Cambridge : Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 48-49.

¹⁴ Caroline Potter, "Debussy and Nature", in Simon Trezise (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 149.

¹⁵ Roy Howat, *Debussy in Proportion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 53.

However, even more interesting is the composer's attempt to create what he called the sea of tonality or tonal sea. He jotted in his notes for the score of *Rain Coming* that it was his wish to write works, which like their subject, "pass through various metamorphoses, culminating in a sea of tonality".¹⁶ Additionally the sea had one more inspirational effect on the composer. Just like some composer, for example, Johann Sebastian Bach used the pitches B-A-C-H to base on them some of his compositions, Takemitsu did the same using pitches *ES* (in English e flat) E A to depict musically. It may be understood as a musical "transliteration" of the word "sea". In a consequence the composer created a three-note ascending motive consisting of a half step and perfect fourth. By means of expanding it with additional notes (e.g. in *Far Calls* upward) he was able to find the melodic kernel for his "sea of tonality"¹⁷. The S-E-A motive can be heard in many of his works, obviously in ones with titles referring to water (*Towards the sea; Rain Tree Sketch; I Hear the Water Dreaming*).

However, symbolical usage of the concept of water, can be encountered in musical literature quite often. For example the sea as "a magical realm"¹⁸ appears in Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy's 1833 concert overture *Das Märchen von der schönen Melusine* op. 32 or Nikolaj Rimsky-Korsakov's 1888 symphonic suite *Scheherazade* op.35 (the first movement entitled *The Sea and Sinbad's Ship*). The sea plays important role in numerous operas. For example Richard Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* (1843) "presents the sea in a [...] symbolic role"¹⁹. Pesce claims that the indefinite waters of the sea represent here the sailor's fate. The author suggests that also Wagner's tumultuous music reminds of the sea. However the sea does not influence the life of the Dutchman in contrast to a much earlier opera by Carl Maria Weber *Oberon* (1826) where the stormy sea and its representatives (fairies, mermaids, and water nymphs) impact the hero's destiny.

Water as a symbol – though completely differently – was alluded to by Igor Stravinsky in his dance-drama (for television) *The Flood* (1962) with the text compiled by Robert Craft (partly from *The Genesis*). The movement entitled *The Flood* depicts the disaster by means of its symmetrical formal construction. The mirror symmetry of the formal layout can be associated with the effect of accumulating and subsiding waters.

Water as a musical provocation

An American avant-garde composer John Cage, the father of aleatorism, resorted to water as a means of provocation in his musical endeavours. He treated water as a sound changing medium. For example in his 1977 *Inlets* he asked the performers to use conch shells filled with water and produce certain sounds (the moment when these could occur

¹⁶ Preface to score of *Rain Coming* (1982), in: Peter Burt, *The Music of Toru Takemitsu*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 176.

¹⁷ Toru Takemitsu, "Dream and Number", *Confronting Silence*, Berkeley: Fallen Leaf Press, 1995, p. 112.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p.418.

¹⁹ Dolores Pesce, 'The Other Sea in MacDowell's Sea Pieces', p.417.

was left to pure chance). Similarly in his numbered compositions Cage used water: in 1990 *One*⁶ the ice sculpture with pebbles inside was meant to melt down and drop into a pool of water producing a certain sound effect. In 1991 *Two*³ Cage used the same strategy as in *Inlets*. Cage also used water in his happenings like in 1959 *Water Walk* for one performer with various objects, as well as other compositions: for example *Water Music* for pianist supposed to use various objects (1952) or *But what about the noise of crumpling paper which he used to do in order to paint the series of "Papiers froisses" or tearing up paper to make "Papiers déchires?"* Arp was stimulated by water (sea, lake, and flowing waters like rivers), forests (for percussion ensemble from 1985).

Water in correspondence of arts

There are of course, more links between water and music than above mentioned: except from compositions and performative practices, also names of popular music bands refer to aquatic connotations (among others, punk group Hot Water Music). Even record labels use it like in the name of Water Music Records from LA or Sea of Tunes which was founded in 1962 by the Beach Boys relative – Murry Wilson. Pop music artists also willingly refer to aquatic titles of their songs or albums, suffice to mention *The Sea* by English singer Corinne Bailey Rae (2010). Additionally the actual sound of water is introduced in various compact discs featuring music for relaxation and meditation: for example *The Music of Nature for Relaxation and Meditation* (1991) features the sounds of nature including water (*Ocean Surf, Rain, Thunderstorms*) as well as carefully chosen classical music pieces (by Debussy, Chopin, Mozart, etc).

Water is also perceived as a means of joining various arts, and accordingly plays an important role in the correspondence of arts. Colourful fountains ‘dancing’ to the sound of music are to be found in Tbilisi, and in many other cities the water/light/music shows attract hundreds of tourists (to remind the Sankt Petersburg show on the river Neva). Also novels and poems feature water music, at least in their titles, e.g. the first novel by T.C. Boyle *Water Music* (1982) or a minimalist book being a collection of short stories by Charles Bukowski from 1983. The title ‘water music’ has been not only widely applied for novels²⁰ but also used in collections of poems²¹.

Furthermore, poems about water have continued to inspire composers to set them to music, to mention Wolfgang Goethe’s “Meeresstille” (Calm Sea) or “Glückliche Fahrt” (Prosperous Voyage) set to music by Franz Schubert (a song “Meeresstille” from 1815), Ludwig van Beethoven (his 1815 cantata *Meeresstille und glückliche Fahrt* op. 112 for chorus

²⁰ See among others: Bianca Van Orden, *Water music*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958; Mieko Shiomi, *Water music*, New York, N.Y.: ReFlux Editions, 1964; Tom Coraghessan Boyle, *Water music*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1981; George Bernstein, *Water music*, Kamloops, B.C.: Permission Press, 2001; Melanie Kershaw, *Water music*, New York: Avocet Press, 2002; Polly McCrillis, *Water music*, Baltimore : Publish America, 2004.

²¹ See for example: Robert Haight, *Water music*, Roseville, Mich.: Ridgeway Press, 1993; Jane Yolen, Jason Stemple, *Water music: poems for children*, Honesdale, Pa.: Wordsong/Boyd's Mills Press, 1995.

and orchestra). It also influenced Mendelssohn and his 1828 concert overture *Meeresstille und glückliche Fahrt* op. 27. Interestingly a theme from this overture is quoted by Elgar in his *Enigma variations* (in the 13th variation).

In lieu of conclusion

Variety of interpreting water in music may serve as an ultimate proof of the diversity of human natures, different attitudes, approaches and interpretations of water as represented by individual musicians and artists. Studying how water is interpreted in music (the imitation of its sound and flow, allusions to the openness of the sea, applying texture reminiscent of water, using rhetoric figures, etc) helps to realize the multi-faced nature of human relation with water serving as a catalyst for human creativity.

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