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Dear Maria,

I hope you've had a restful Easter break!

As I already mentioned, please find the first draft of my mini-essay on Debussy, as well as one of my preliminary musical analyses which follows from its conclusions. I hope it can be of interest to your institution and that you will consider working further on it with me in some capacity. (Sadly, there is no such institution for musical reinterpretation in France...)

In any case, I'd be very grateful for any feedback you can provide.

Best wishes,

Louis

Debussy's Secret Devotions
Louis d'Heudières

In an unpublished letter dated 21 January 1910, the French composer Claude Debussy (1862–1918) writes to his friend and publisher, Jacques Durand:

Dear friend,

*Did you see the waters rise? Blue as a waltz, grey as sheet metal?
Is our lady making her arrival?*
C. D.

Assuming this cryptic note is significant, what should we make of it? Is the image of water rising simply a metaphor, or does it refer to a physical body of water? Are the colours significant? And who is "our lady"? I aim to show that this note in fact holds secrets, confessed within the bonds of friendship, that are of high musicological, aesthetic and historical significance, casting a new light on the father of modern French classical music, Claude Debussy.

First, the water. Given the timing of the letter, it seems unlikely that this reference to "waters rising" is merely figurative. France had already received higher than usual rainfall in the summer and autumn of 1909. Later that year, the rain intensified, reaching unprecedented levels in December 1909. By this time, the soil in the basin of the river Seine and its tributaries was so thoroughly saturated that it could no longer absorb moisture. As historian Jeffrey H. Jackson puts it, "France was like a wet sponge that could hold no more." In January 1910, all the rivers in the Paris region flooded (the Seine, Marne, Yonne, Bièvre), as did the rivers of the Rhône, Rhine, and Saône basins. First came towns lying upstream, before Paris itself was hit.

The mood was apocalyptic. In rural areas, landslides wiped entire neighbourhoods from the map. The Seine became a high-speed conveyor belt of cumulative destruction, carrying with it debris from the towns it had devastated along the way. Parisians watching from the banks were treated to a grim spectacle of dislodged stones, wayward signposts, uprooted trees, and leftovers of buildings mingling with rotting food, human faeces, and long-dead corpses which had been flushed out of their graves. The murky fluid proliferated through the city’s sewers and subways, swelling into people’s basements, filling public buildings, soaking the streets, and dredging up filth. Roads buckled, collapsing from below.

The flood even stopped time. By 1907, a network of pneumatically-operated pipes covered Paris from Point du Jour to the Bassin de la Villette, from Bercy to Batignolles. Making use of existing underground tunnels built for the sewers and Métro, it consisted of hundreds of kilometres of interconnected steel tubes and allowed Parisians to send pneumatic post at 60 kilometres an hour. Factories also used the system to regulate multiple clocks in public and private spaces by pumping bursts of compressed air to them on the minute. Once the water had clogged these pipes as well, residents’ clocks stopped still on 21st January at 10:53 p.m.² The city’s power plants would follow suit within a week.

In all, the flood of Paris is reported to have cost 400 million francs, or \$1.5 billion in today’s money. It was world news. Foreign countries rose to the aid of Parisians, sending money to help the efforts, carried out in near unanimity, towards saving and rebuilding the city. It is to this day the biggest natural disaster to have beset the French capital.

Further evidence that Debussy is referring to this event can be seen in his own music. The same year of the flood, he publishes *La Cathédrale Engloutie* (The Sunken Cathedral), the tenth piece in his collection of *Préludes* for solo piano. The piece makes extensive use of large chords moving up and down over the full range of the piano and features distinct bell-like sonorities. Ernest Hutcheson has suggested that the inspiration for the piece comes from the Légende d’Ys, a Breton myth in which the city of Ys, lying on the Baie de Douarnenez, is submerged underwater in an act of divine punishment. According to the legend, the city would one day rise again out of the sea and be visible through the mist. The chords in *La Cathédrale Engloutie* evoke, he suggests, the pealing of bells from the city as it climbs out of the water.³

Breton scholar and musician Alain Stivell adds a twist to the idea: that when Ys, the rebel, emerges from the sea, it would cause Paris to be submerged in the resulting tide.⁴ In this version of the story, the Celtic Ys is set in opposition to the French capital, bastion of modern civilization. The two are intertwined in an anti-symbiosis, the one thriving whilst the other drowns. Given that in January of that year, Debussy witnessed first-hand the cathedral of Notre-Dame being submerged underwater, it seems even more convincing to posit that his *Cathédrale* is that of Paris’s iconic Notre-Dame as it is the one of Ys.

To know more about what inspired Debussy, we must look closer at the physical and spiritual source of the Seine. It is to be found 20 kilometres northwest of Dijon, beside the small D103 route, in a small vale lined by trees. Behind a row of cypresses, a spring provides the source for the water, which follows its course northwest, winds its way through northern France in a series of bends, and finally spills out into the English Channel. In the vicinity “stands a monument raised in 1867 by the citizens of Paris in honor of the stream that has contributed so much to the city’s life.”⁵ Around the spring itself, there once stood a complex of buildings, with courtyards, shrines, and sanctuaries, marking what was, in the first century AD, a sacred Gaulish centre of spirituality.

In 1970, archaeologists excavated the source of the Seine, uncovering a treasure trove of wooden, bronze, and stone sculptures dating back some 2000 years. Among them are clear representations of parts of the human anatomy: eyes, arms, legs, heads, and internal organs. Historian Simone-Antoinette Deyts charts the relevance of these objects to the belief in the goddess of the Seine, Sequana. Portrayed in one of the bronze sculptures as a majestic woman riding a boat shaped like a duck, she was thought to have the ability to heal. The objects, Deyts argues, are votive offerings left by Gaulish followers of Sequana at the goddess’s shrine. Inscriptions provide clues as to the precise function of these objects. On one of them is written “De Sequana Sienulla Vectii filia VSLM [Votum solvit libens merito],” which Deyts translates as “Sienulla, daughter of Vectius, fulfills her vow to Sequana.”⁶ This suggests the followers, after recovering from an illness or injury, paid due respect to the goddess for helping them overcome it.

The use of Latin is noteworthy since it is the tongue of Gaul’s conquerors rather than their own. Where the Latin is coherent, Deyts offers the explanation that the Gauls felt it honoured Sequana even more.⁷ In other inscriptions, the Latin characters are used simply to phonetically convey the Gaul’s native language. All in all, Latin or no Latin, the goddess was a thoroughly Gaulish entity (sadly, we have lost the connection to her name in Gaulish and are stuck with the Latin remnant). After Julius Caesar conquered Gaul in AD 41, the Gauls were forced to submit to Roman ways and to pray to Roman gods. Sequana and her worshippers were forced underground.

Nevertheless, a belief system around the goddess did survive. A secret society emerged, longing for a return to the ways of Gaulish life, opposing all that bore the influence of Roman ways, and viewing Caesar as the devil who set Europe on a path of misery and destruction. They called themselves the Sequanae—followers of Sequana. The fact they kept the Latin name is a puzzle, perhaps a defence mechanism in times of Roman oppression or a flourish of ironic wit. The most radical branches of the group sought actively to bring about a “great reset,” believing that one day, through Sequana’s

power, a gargantuan flood would sweep across Europe, ridding it of its adherence to civilized Roman life (the sect’s perseverance in modern times testifies to the idea that they did not see the fall of Rome as sufficient retribution). They held regular rituals, combining dress, choreography, music and special objects filled with symbolic meaning, exhorting Sequana to take her revenge.

Therefore, while she was originally a goddess of healing, under the auspices of the sect, the sense in which Sequana *healed* was gradually warped until it took on an explicitly destructive meaning. It is in this vein that Bernardo von Höch, scholar of secret societies in France and Europe, has called the Sequanae “part religious sect, part anarcho-primitivist activist group, and part terrorist organisation.”⁸

By the 20th century, the sect was going strong, with important chapters in Rouen, Troyes, and Paris. Members of the Sequanae who witnessed the flood of Paris saw it as a clear message from Sequana, an omen that the “great reset” was imminent. Von Höch reports that activity in the group was frenetic at this point.⁹ During this time (and in general), there are frequent references to Sequana as “lady S.,” “our lady of the water,” or “our lady Sequana.”¹⁰ While von Höch finds no direct evidence of communication from Debussy himself, it is very hard to read the “our lady” of his letter as a purely coincidental similarity. It seems more convincing to conclude that Debussy is adopting phraseology typical of the sect and that he is indeed referring to the goddess. After all, which other “lady” could plausibly be “making her arrival” at the height of this catastrophic flood?

Which leads us to the next question: assuming that he was part of the sect, was Debussy a partisan of its more radical factions? Did he, too, long for Europe’s destruction? The timing and wording of the letter seem again to provide the clearest clues for his intentions. France was under siege, battered by the forces of nature. Why would he ask about Sequana’s “arrival” if he were not, on some level, anticipating it? He seems to look forward to her coming—and, therefore, to the disaster—without trepidation or fear. The language in his letter both welcomes and praises the waters: they are both graceful (“like a waltz”) and powerful (“like sheet metal”). But nowhere does it condemn them. Shouldn’t a more rational person cry in despair at the destruction of homes and lives the water has inflicted?

Given these facts, it seems conclusive that Debussy and Durand, his publisher to whom the letter is addressed, themselves worshipped the goddess of the river Seine in secret, were likely part of the sect’s more radical branches and would have sought to reset civilization through catastrophe. While scholars have commented on his obsession with water,¹¹ what they miss, and what this evidence shows crucially, is that water was for Debussy a medium through which a destructive revolution could be achieved.

What does this mean for how we interpret Debussy’s music today? While the entire ramifications of this revelation are yet to achieve their full impact, what they indicate clearly is that, at the very least, his œuvre should be re-examined. In particular, we should investigate the possibility that his music is so thoroughly imbued with dangerous sentiment that it will incite listeners to hate all that is civilized and to long for that same catastrophic reset of civilization. It may even include forms of subliminal messaging, targeting and radicalising listeners. All of these are very real and serious potential dangers, and I hope I have convinced the reader that they should be addressed with utmost urgency before catastrophe strikes us all again.

1) Jeffrey H. Jackson, *Paris Under Water: How the City of Light Survived the Great Flood of 1910*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2010, p. 46.
2) *ivi*, p. 39.
3) Ernest Hutcheson, *The Literature of the Piano*, rev. Rudolph Ganz, Knopf, New York 1964, p. 314.
4) Alan Stivell and Thierry Jolif, *Sur la Route des Plus Belles Légendes Celtes*, Arthaud, Paris 2013, p. 12.
He even speculates that the etymology of Paris derives from Par-Ys, meaning something like “similar to Ys”.
5) Simone-Antoinette Deyts, *The Sacred Source of the Seine*, Scientific American, Vol. 225, No.1, 1971, p. 66.
6) *ivi*, p. 68.
7) *ibid*.
8) Bernardo von Höch, *Surviving Conquest: Inside the Secret Celtic Societies of France*, Ubiquity Press, London 2002, p. 12.
9) *ivi*, p. 98.
10) *ibid*.
11) See for example: *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, Cambridge University Press, edited by Simon Trezise, Cambridge 2003, p. 90, pp. 147–151.

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April 19, 2021

Dear Louis,

My Easter break was blissful, thank you! Just relaxing in the sun in Morocco with Tobias and little Jakob. My heart sank as I landed in Hamburg under the rain...

Thank you for sending me the essay. It was a fascinating read. I am broadly convinced, but just had a few questions: where did you find this unpublished letter? Was it at the Musée or somewhere else? It might be useful for your readers to know. And how exactly do you think Debussy's music should be reinterpreted?

Nevertheless, this is the kind of project that we usually do at the DIMN. I'd therefore like to invite you to come and work with us on a part-time basis to continue your research. (My colleagues know we go way back, but still, I don't think it will come across as too nepotistic!) Maybe it could even be in partnership with the Musée? Do they do that kind of thing?

Seeing as your thesis was primarily concerned with water, I indulged my curiosity and had my assistant compile a list of all of Debussy's pieces that are in some way linked to or inspired by water, including references to sea, river, pond, lake, well, spring, rain, mist, fog, cloud or snow. I'm sure you're aware of this, but anyway, here it is in full:

Hélène: Franchis les mers icariennes (1881);
Rondel chinois: Sur le lac bordé d'azalée (1881);
Fleur des eaux: non, les baisers d'amour (1881);
Chanson triste: On entend un chant sur l'eau dans la brume (1881);
Flôts, palmes et sables: Loin des yeux du monde (1882);
Aquarelles 1. Green (from *Ariettes oubliées*, 1885–87);
Aquarelles 2. Spleen (from *Ariettes oubliées*, 1885–87);
Le Jet d'eau (from *Cinq poèmes de Charles Baudelaire*, 1887–89);
Nocturnes (1897–99);
En bateau (from *Petite Suite*, 1888–89);
La Mer est plus belle que les cathédrales (from *Trois mélodies de Verlaine*, 1891);
Le Tombeau des Naiades (from *Trois Chansons de Bilitis*, 1897–98);
L'Eau pure du bassin (from *Musique de scène pour Les Chansons de Bilitis*, 1900–01);
La Pluie du matin (from *Musique de scène pour Les Chansons de Bilitis*, 1900–01);
Pelléas et Mélisande (1893–1902);
Jardins sous la pluie (from *Estampes*, 1903);
L'isle joyeuse (1903–04);
Rondel: Le Temps a laissé son manteau (from *3 Chansons de France*, 1904);
Reflets dans l'eau (from *Images I*, 1901–05);
La Mer (1903–05);
Poissons d'or (from *Images II*, 1907);
La Cathédrale Engloutie (from *Préludes, Book 1*, 1909–10);
The Snow Is Dancing (from *Children's Corner*, 1910);
Brouillards (from *Préludes, Book 2*, 1912–13);
Ondine (from *Préludes, Book 2*, 1912–13);
Pour remercier la pluie au matin (from *Six Épigraphe antiques*, 1915).

Depending on how you want to reinterpret the music, do you think this is a manageable amount of work for you? We could look into funding to get you a Ph.D. student as an assistant. I'd be very curious to see how it turns out either way. Let me know what you think. And thanks again for sending.

All my best to you and your family,

Maria

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Claude Debussy, *Reflets Dans L'Eau* manuscript (1905), annotated by Louis d'Heudières.
Some of the piece's more dangerous associations are highlighted.