

Debussy LA MER / Ibert PORTS OF CALL  
BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA, Charles Munch

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# THE SEA

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## Debussy *LA MER* • Ibert *PORTS OF CALL (Escales)*

Boston Symphony Orchestra • Charles Munch, Conductor

There could be no denying Debussy's fondness for the sea: he frequently visited the coast resorts, spoke and wrote with constant enthusiasm about "my old friend the sea, always innumerable and beautiful." He often recalled his impressions of the Mediterranean at Cannes, where he spent boyhood days. It is worth noting, however, that Debussy did not seek the seashore while at work upon *La Mer*. His score was with him at Dieppe, in 1904, but most of it was written in Paris, a milieu which he chose, if the report of a chance remark is trustworthy, "because the sight of the sea itself fascinated him to such a degree that it paralyzed his creative faculties." When he went to the country in the summer of 1903, two years before the completion of *La Mer*, it was not the shore, but the hills of Burgundy, whence he wrote to his friend André Messager (September 12): "You may not know that I was destined for a sailor's life and that it was only quite by chance that fate led me in another direction. But I have always retained a passionate love for her [the sea]. You will say that the Ocean does not exactly wash the Burgundian hillsides—and my seascapes might be studio landscapes; but I have an endless store of memories, and to my mind they are worth more than the reality, whose beauty often deadens thought."

The work was first performed at the Concerts Lamoureux in Paris, October 15, 1905.

It would be hard to think of a score more elusive than *La Mer* to minute analysis. The cyclic unity of the suite is cemented by the recurrence in the last

movement of the theme in the first, heard after the introductory measures from the muted trumpet and English horn. A theme for bass, also in the opening sketch, becomes an integral part of the final peroration. Music to set the imagination aflame, it induced from the pen of Lawrence Gilman one of his most evocative word pictures:

"Debussy had what Sir Thomas Browne would have called 'a solitary and retired imagination.' So, when he essays to depict in his music such things as dawn and noon at sea, sport of the waves, gales and surges and far horizons, he is less the poet and painter than the spiritual mystic. It is not chiefly of those aspects of winds and waters that he is telling us, but of the changing phases of a sea of dreams, a chimerical sea, a thing of strange visions and stranger voices, of fantastic colors and incalculable winds—a phantasmagoria of the spirit, rife with evanescent shapes and presences that are at times sunlit and dazzling. It is a spectacle perceived as in a trance, vaguely yet rhapsodically. Here is a sea which has its shifting and lucent surfaces, which even shimmers and traditionally mocks. But it is a sea that is shut away from too curious an inspection, to whose murmurs or imperious command not many have wished or needed to pay heed.

"Yet, beneath these elusive and mysterious overtones, the reality of the living sea persists: the immemorial fascination lures and enthralls and terrifies; so that we are almost tempted to fancy that the two are, after all, identical—the ocean that seems

an actuality of wet winds and tossing spray and inexorable depths and reaches, and that uncharted and haunted and incredible sea which opens before the magic casements of the dreaming mind."

\* \* \*

The Mediterranean which Debussy knew as a boy in Cannes (although his musical sea is certainly unidentifiable) furnished Ibert with musical thoughts which became *Escales (Ports of Call)*. Like Debussy's *La Mer*, *Ports of Call* grew out of the sights and sounds its composer had experienced; Ibert was reluctant to fasten geographical labels upon his music and did not furnish any in the score. But when *Ports of Call* was first performed in Paris in 1924, Ibert admitted to the French publication *Courrier Musical* that the composition had emerged after a Mediterranean cruise where he had visited the ports of Palermo in Sicily, Tunis-Nefta on the African coast, and Valencia in Spain. He further explained that, although the musical material was entirely his own, he had willingly subjected himself to the tarantella rhythms of Sicily and to the dance music he had heard in the Spanish cabarets. For the second movement he had borrowed the Oriental rhythms and characteristic musical color which had attracted him in Tunis.

Notes by JOHN N. BURK

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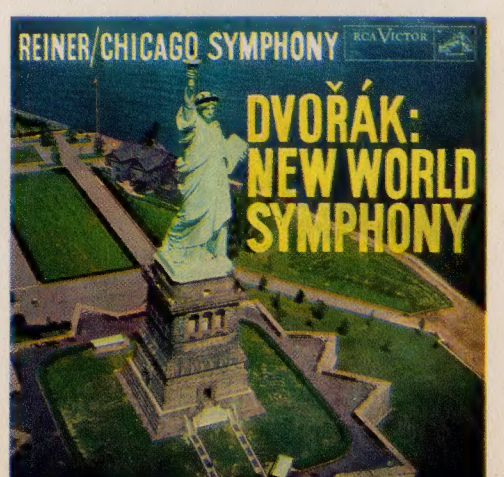
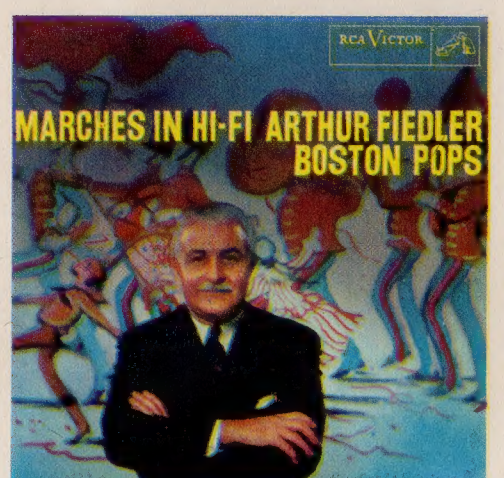
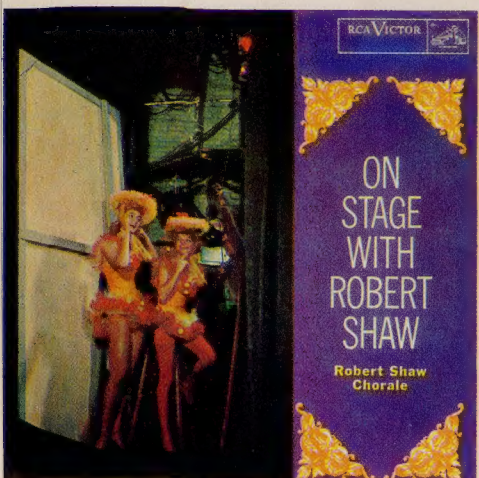
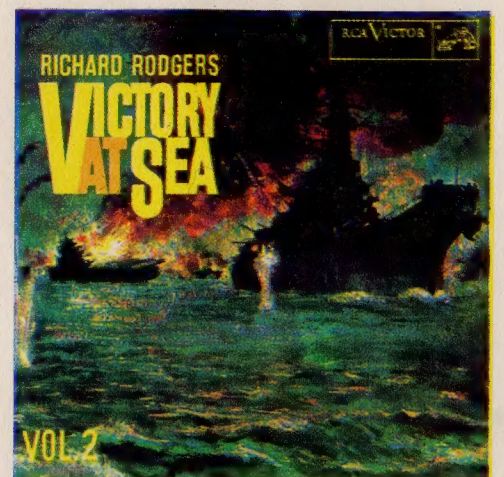
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SIDE 1  
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Debussy

LA MER (The Sea)

Band 1—DE L'AUBE A MIDI SUR LA MER

Band 2—JEUX DES VAGUES

Band 3—DIALOGUE DU VENT ET DE LA MER

Boston Symphony Orchestra  
Charles Munch, Conductor

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Thert  
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Band 2—TUNIS-NEFTA

Band 3—VALENCIA

Boston Symphony Orchestra

Charles Munch, Conductor

Ralph Bonolis, Oboe Solo

LONG PLAY

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