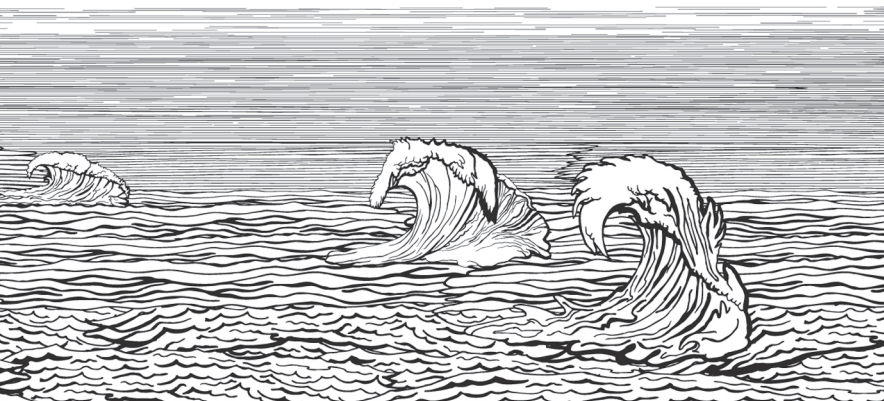


# The Sea in Music



## The Sea in Music

Man's relation with the sea is profound. For composers it has been the focus of ideas and feelings, sounds and colours, journeys both actual and metaphorical, and more even than these, a source of mystery, not only on the surface but in the depths below. For some composers the sea has proved descriptive; in the eighteenth century Vivaldi called one of his Violin Concertos 'La tempesta di mare', and here he focused on the volatile idea of a storm in music, much as Beethoven was later to do in a graphically different way in the *Pastoral Symphony*.

For other composers a singular event determined their compositional approach. Mendelssohn's tour to Scotland, which included a voyage by steamer (which made the composer sea-sick), produced *The Hebrides*, also known as *Fingal's Cave*, a romanticised evocation of his journeying. What contemporary painters tried to evoke on canvas, so Mendelssohn tried to summon up in his music and the result was just as thrilling. Mendelssohn's music was based on an actual voyage, but Richard Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* is a figure of legend. Wagner binds leitmotifs in the overture to his opera but doesn't fail to illustrate the rush and the visceral tang of seascape and wind, features that are especially popular for composers. They encourage a great wash of colour, vitality of rhythm and genuine excitement.

A later generation of composers turned to stillness, refraction and mystery. The impressionists, led by Debussy in *La Mer*, give us symphonic sketches of great breadth,

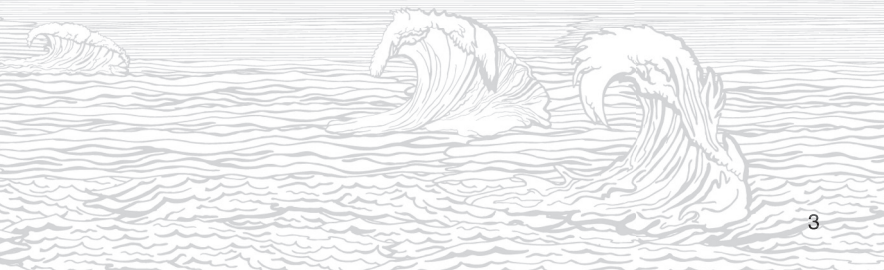


using a large orchestra to explore a mosaic of sounds and textures, from dawn stillness through an evocation of the lapping waves, to a final conversation of wind and sea. This dazzling exploration of the sea's immensity and its mysterious stillness appeals to composers. The English composer John Ireland explored the sinister aspects of the sea in some of his piano pieces, Arnold Bax celebrated its drama in *Tintagel*, and Alexander Glazunov made the connection between the sea's torrent and eventual calm and the effect it has on a man's soul in *The Sea, Op. 28*. Benjamin Britten's *Four Sea Interludes* are painterly in their precision, and in aligning and reflecting the world of nature – torrid, unexpected and dangerous – with the turmoil of a man's mind.

Composers such as Frank Bridge and Ralph Vaughan Williams have also explored the symphonic implications of the sea, utilising calm, passion, storm and resolution in their sketches or movements – whilst hinting at mystery, and the unknowable chasms between the world of the human and the world of watery nature – which elsewhere include whales, mermaids, and submerged cathedrals amongst others.

Of course songs celebrate the sea too. There are many sea shanties and art songs – John Ireland's *Sea Fever* is one of the best known – and poetic texts fuse with salty windswept music depiction to heighten the drama. And the sea continues to exert its hold on composers of our generation, whether in isolated songs or in the deployment of all the forces of the modern orchestra and its possibilities for surging opulence. The sea has taken on a character, and has proved the centrepiece in its own musical depiction.

**Jonathan Woolf**



## CD1

### ARNOLD BAX (1883–1953)

#### **1 Tintagel**

14:32

Royal Scottish National Orchestra; David Lloyd-Jones • 8.557599

Arnold Bax was inspired to compose *Tintagel* after a visit to the ruined castle on the north coast of Cornwall, with his lover, the pianist Harriet Cohen, in 1917. The passion of their relationship fused in his imagination with the tempestuous Atlantic waters buffeting the legendary castle to produce a tone poem of evocative depth and drama. Bax offers an impression of the castle and of the Atlantic in all its vastness, summoning up the sea's listless movement into a tumultuous frenzy, quoting from Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* as he does so, and summoning the shades of mythic characters such as King Arthur and King Mark who haunt the ground around Tintagel.

### FRANK BRIDGE (1879–1941)

#### **The Sea:**

#### **2 I. Seascape**

7:25

New Zealand Symphony Orchestra; James Judd • 8.557167

*The Sea* is one of English composer Frank Bridge's best known works. Composed between 1910 and 1911, it represents a notable example of his mastery of orchestration. This orchestral suite, in four nature pictures – *Seascape*, *Sea-Foam*, *Moonlight* and *Storm* – operates on a vast arc, opening and ending with reference to the same material. *Seascape* sets the scene. The music moves with compelling logic and great sonic allure from calm to a swelling climax with Bridge allocating a solo voice to the clarinet. Throughout, Bridge ensures an absolute flow of feeling and expression.

## CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862–1918)

### La mer:

#### **3** III. Dialogue du vent et de la mer

8:17

Orchestre National de Lyon; Jun Märkl • 8.570775

The three symphonic sketches that comprise Debussy's 1905 *La mer* form, in effect, a symphonic whole. Starting with a movement that depicts dawn to noon, the central sketch is scherzo-like in its brilliant freedom before ushering the last of the three. *The Conversation of the wind and the sea* shows the delicacy of Debussy's orchestration, here revealed as fully as his ability to conjure a climax of glittering hedonism.

## CLAUDE DEBUSSY

### Petite suite (arr. Henri Büsser for orchestra):

#### **4** I. En bateau

3:47

Orchestre National de Lyon; Jun Märkl • 8.572583

The *Petite suite* was written for piano duet in 1899 but it has become very popular in the orchestration by the French conductor Henri Büsser, not least its opening movement, *En bateau*, which depicts a slow and gentle ripple on the waters.

## EDWARD ELGAR (1857–1934)

### Sea Pictures:

#### **5** III. Sabbath Morning at Sea

5:49

Sarah Connolly, mezzo soprano; Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra;  
Simon Wright • 8.557710

The *Sea Pictures* were composed in 1899, soon after the *Enigma Variations*, which had made Elgar's name. The words of the third picture, *Sabbath Morning at Sea*, are by the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Elgar responds with solemnity and stirring grandeur to parallel the poem's gravity.

## JOHN IRELAND (1879–1962)

### 6 Sea Fever

2:28

Roderick Williams, baritone; Iain Burnside, piano • 8.570467

Perhaps better remembered for his orchestral and chamber works, John Ireland also wrote an admired body of songs. *Sea Fever* (1913) is one of the most loved and best and is a setting of one of the poet John Masefield's *Salt-Sea Ballads*. Yearning and richly coloured though it is, the song – inspired by the island of Jersey – has a darker emotion at work throughout.

## FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809–1847)

### 7 The Hebrides, Op. 26 'Fingal's Cave'

10:53

Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra; Oliver Dohnányi • 8.554433

*The Hebrides* was inspired by a tour of Scotland undertaken by Mendelssohn in 1830. It's also known as 'Fingal's Cave', which is a cavern on the island of Staffa in the Hebrides, off the west coast of Scotland. Mendelssohn wrote to his sister that the scene had affected him 'extraordinarily' and his response was to compose a concert overture that evoked powerful romantic solitude as well as the steady rolling and coiling of the sea.

## MAURICE RAVEL (1875–1937)

### Miroirs:

### 8 III. Une barque sur l'océan

6:01

François-Joël Thiollier, piano • 8.550683

Ravel wrote *Miroirs* in 1904 and 1905, and he dedicated each of its movements to good artistic friends. The third, *Une barque sur l'océan* (A Boat on the Ocean) was dedicated to the painter Paul Sordes. As the centrepiece of the five, it is also much the most technically difficult. Ravel depicts the ocean's constant agitated movement and the boat pitching in its tumult in piano writing of exceptional virtuosity. Finally, the ocean relents and subsides.

## NIKOLAY ANDREYEVICH RIMSKY-KORSAKOV (1844–1908)

### The Tale of Tsar Saltan (Suite), Op. 57:

#### **9** II. The Tsarina in a Barrel at Sea

7:19

Seattle Symphony Orchestra; Gerard Schwarz • 8.572693

Rimsky-Korsakov's fairy tale *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* – which includes the famous *Flight of the Bumblebee* in Act III – was heard first in the form of a sequence of musical pictures from the opera. One of them depicts how the Tsarina and her baby were cast out into the sea in a barrel, an incident to which the composer responds with typically vivid imagery and rich orchestration.

## RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS (1872–1958)

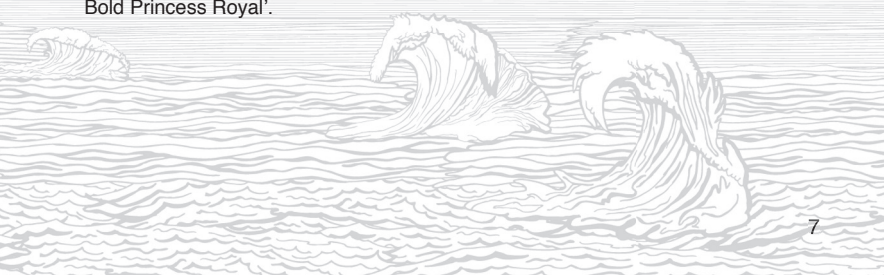
### Symphony No. 1 'A Sea Symphony':

#### **10** III. Scherzo: The Waves

7:42

Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra; Paul Daniel • 8.557059

Vaughan Williams completed his *First Symphony* in 1909 and for this choral symphony he set verses by the American poet Walt Whitman. The whole work evokes the sea – its exultation, its calm, the shanties sung by sailors – in music which is symphonically artful but also looks to folk melodies, one of the composer's groundbreaking steps in redirecting British music away from prevailing German models. The third movement is called *The Waves*, a scintillating and dramatic Scherzo, which sets two folk songs for the chorus, 'The Golden Vanity' and 'The Bold Princess Royal'.



## **ANTONIO VIVALDI (1678–1741)**

### **Violin Concerto No. 5 in E flat major, RV 253 'La tempesta di mare':**

#### **11 I. Allegro e presto**

2:51

Béla Banfalvi, violin; Budapest Strings; Oliver Dohnányi • 8.553231

Vivaldi's Op. 8 consists of twelve concertos for violin and orchestra. The first four are the famous *Four Seasons*, but for many years the remaining concertos were largely ignored. No. 5 is, however, *La tempesta di mare*. This descriptive work isn't obviously imitative of a sea storm, but is more indicative of a visual picture for music that is both vivid and tempestuous.

## **HENRY WOOD (1869–1944)**

### **Fantasia on British Sea Songs:**

#### **12 I. The Saucy Arethusa**

1:09

English Northern Philharmonia; Paul Daniel • 8.553981

The founder of London's famous Promenade Concerts wrote his *Fantasia on British Sea Songs* to mark the centenary of the Battle of Trafalgar in 1905. Generous with solos for his orchestral principals he starts the fantasia of much-loved pieces with *The Saucy Arethusa*, which features the euphonium.

## **CD 2**

## **ERNEST BLOCH (1880–1959)**

### **Poems of the Sea:**

#### **1 III. At Sea (Allegro vivo)**

3:34

István Kassai, piano • 8.223288

Bloch's *Poems of the Sea* was composed in 1922 with some of the material having been written during an earlier stay in the village of Percé on the Canadian Gaspé Peninsula. This leisurely period was far removed from Bloch's experience of the sea



in 1917 during a fraught wartime Atlantic crossing. Bloch explores the roll and sway of the sea in his music, summoning simple and even folk-like melodies. In the third movement, *At Sea*, he gives full rein to nature's surge and drama conveying with exhilarating orchestration and rhythm the sea's elemental energy.

## **BENJAMIN BRITTEN (1913–1976)**

### **Four Sea Interludes:**

- |   |                  |      |
|---|------------------|------|
| <b>2</b>  | <b>I. Dawn</b>   | 3:09 |
| <b>3</b>  | <b>IV. Storm</b> | 4:42 |
| New Zealand Symphony Orchestra; Myer Fredman • 8.553107 |                  |      |

The *Four Sea Interludes* divide the scenes of Benjamin Britten's 1945 opera *Peter Grimes* which, when it was staged at Sadler's Wells Theatre in London in that year, generated huge enthusiasm. The title role of Grimes is the eternal outsider, a fisherman hounded to death during the space of the opera. *At Dawn*, the first Interlude, summons up the cry of seagulls over the early morning roll of the waves and introduces Act I. The fourth of the Interludes – the middle two are *Sunday Morning* and *Moonlight* – is *Storm* and this comes between the first and second scenes. The rising intensity of the music mirrors the increasing psychological tension of the opera's characters that will inexorably lead to disintegration and to death.

## **CLAUDE DEBUSSY**

### **Preludes, Book 1 (arr. Peter Breiner for orchestra):**

- |   |                                   |      |
|---|-----------------------------------|------|
| <b>4</b>  | <b>X. La cathédrale engloutie</b> | 7:11 |
| Royal Scottish National Orchestra; Jun Märkl • 8.572584 |                                   |      |

Debussy's first book of *Préludes* was composed in 1910. The submerged cathedral of the title is Ys, and the setting is a medieval one in which the bell rings and chants are evoked through sea-mist. Like Bax, Debussy draws on a legendary scene. Here, though, the mood is pregnant with mystery, an effect intensified by Slovak-born Peter Breiner whose orchestration brings out rich melodies.

## FELIX MENDELSSOHN

### **5 Meeresstille und glückliche Fahrt**

**(Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage), Op. 27**

13:34

Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra; Oliver Dohnányi • 8.554433

Mendelssohn's two concert overtures depicting the sea are amongst the most famous in the repertoire. *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage* was premiered in 1828. In it Mendelssohn took two poems by Goethe, joining them together in his title the better to depict the stasis of a windless sea (and the fear this brings to a sailing ship), followed by the welcome arrival of a healthy breeze. The overture ends with a flamboyant fanfare and a sincere thanksgiving.

## NIKOLAY ANDREYEVICH RIMSKY-KORSAKOV

### **Sheherazade, Op. 35**

#### **6 I. The Sea and Sinbad's Ship**

10:44

#### **7 IV. Festival at Baghdad – The Sea**

12:47

Seattle Symphony Orchestra; Gerard Schwarz • 8.572693

Inspired by the literary stimulus of the *Tales of the Arabian Nights*, Rimsky-Korsakov completed his masterly symphonic suite *Sheherazade* in 1888. Originally the movements were to have borne only simple titles, such as Prelude, Ballade, Adagio and Finale but (though he was later to regret the fact) he agreed to add much more evocatively descriptive titles. The opening movement is *The Sea and Sinbad's Ship* (the 'Prelude') which summons up the image of the sea and Sinbad's ship, and the last, the 'Finale', witnesses a dramatic, tumultuous episode where the ship, buffeted by the unyielding waves, is dashed to pieces on the rocks.

## **JEAN SIBELIUS (1865–1957)**

### **8 The Oceanides, Op. 73**

10:17

Iceland Symphony Orchestra; Petri Sakari • 8.555299

Composed in 1914, *The Oceanides* is based on a Homeric theme. Sibelius, who wrote the work for a tour of America, depicts the sea through tremulous strings, and later evokes the cry of birds on the wing before reaching a surging and dramatic outburst, full of great colour and vehemence. From there the music calms, rises and falls and ends almost in silence.

## **HENRY WOOD**

### **Fantasia on British Sea Songs:**

#### **9 II. Tom Bowling**

2:00

English Northern Philharmonia; Paul Daniel • 8.553981

The founder of London's famous Promenade Concerts wrote his *Fantasia on British Sea Songs* to mark the centenary of the Battle of Trafalgar in 1905. Generous with solos for his orchestral principals, the affecting ballad *Tom Bowling* is crafted with a beautiful cello solo.

## **RICHARD WAGNER (1813–1883)**

### **Der fliegende Holländer (The Flying Dutchman):**

#### **10 Overture**

11:01

Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra; Michael Halász • 8.550136

Wagner took the figure of the Flying Dutchman from a work by Heine. It was after a torrid sea voyage to England, during which his ship was forced to put into a Norwegian fjord, that Wagner turned to the subject in his 1841 opera. The overture describes the passage of the ghostly ship as it is buffeted by the sea, its horn call rising to signify the Dutchman himself, as motifs from the opera appear and reappear.



8.578269-70



# The Sea in Music

Composers have been inspired by the sea for centuries. For some the stimulus is the sea's volatility and power to destroy, whilst for others it's the rhythmic and colouristic opportunities that allow them to paint pictures in sound. These composers take us on journeys both actual and metaphorical, discovering immensity and stillness, and hinting at mystery, and the unknowable chasms between the world of the human and the world of watery nature.

**BAX • BLOCH • BRIDGE • BRITTEN • DEBUSSY • ELGAR • IRELAND  
MENDELSSOHN • RAVEL • RIMSKY-KORSAKOV • SIBELIUS  
VAUGHAN WILLIAMS • VIVALDI • WAGNER • WOOD**


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**Playing Time:**  
**2:38:57**


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