

# Class 2 : The Blink of an Eye

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## B. Debussy and Monet

### 1. Class title: Debussy and Monet

I promised to offer some examples for discussion that might examine the question of whether it is possible to speak of Impressionist qualities in music or poetry of the period. But yes, you say, isn't the music of **Claude Debussy** (1862–1918) always described as Impressionist? Yes, but it is almost a whole generation later than Impressionism in painting, and the similarity is far from exact. All the same, I thought we might try a little exercise to see how far a piano piece can go in describing the same qualities of place and mood that painted Impressionism does so well. I am going to set two-minute excerpts from Debussy's *Préludes* for piano (1910–13) against three paintings by Monet. And see where that gets us.

### 2. Three Monet paintings

Here are the three paintings. I should say right now that Debussy is *not* illustrating any of them. In fact, he appended the titles of his Preludes after the last measure of each piece; he wanted you to listen first and perhaps pin them down later. All the same, I hope that having the pictures in front of you may focus your ears in ways that are less prescriptive. Look at them now, think of what qualities each seems to have, and then listen for those in the three excerpts. But be warned, you may not find them! I suspect the first and last will be relatively easy; the middle one may be a challenge. They are all played by the late Italian Debussy specialist **Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli**.

### 3. Debussy: *Brouillards, Bruyères, and Les collines d'Anacapri*, excerpts

### 4. Three Monet paintings

What did you think? The first piece is called *Bruillards*, which means “mists” or even “fogs.” Although it is relatively fast, there is a blurred shimmering quality to it. The second piece, the hard one, is a similar-sounding word, *Bruyères*, but its meaning is less clear; I think “heaths” or “heathers,” either the plant or the landscape. The third piece is indeed a travelogue, *Les collines d'Anacapri*, or the hills of Anacapri in the Gulf of Naples. The Monet picture is actually the Riviera, but at any rate it is Mediterranean.

Some time ago, for another course, I made a video of a rather longer Debussy piece, *Reflets sur l'Eau*, or “Reflections in the Water.” Now that is absolutely a Monet subject! So I have intercut shots of the pianist playing (**Marc-André Hamelin**) with some of the many Monet paintings of water. It's not intended for comparison with anything, just putting the two media together.

### 5. Debussy: *Reflets dan l'eau*, with Monet paintings

## C. Four Poems of Place

### 6. Section title (poets' portraits)

One of the features of Impressionist painting is the depiction of place, and the mood of being in it at that precise time. Poetry can do this too, but this particular combination comes into its own in the second decade of the 20th century, the period of the Debussy pieces. In my *Discussing the Arts* course last year, I had a comparison between **Six Poems of Place**. I am going to recycle the two of them that belong to the period; the poets are **Edward Thomas** (1878–1917) and **Robert Frost** (1874–1963), one English and the other American. To those I will add another American, **Amy Lowell** (1874–1925). Then after we have done comparing, I'll wind up with a video I made for a class last semester, *The Old Vicarage, Grantchester* (1910), an ode to England by **Rupert Brooke** (1887–1915), which I hope you won't mind watching again.

### 7. Adlestrop, Gloucestershire

A word about the first poem. **Adlestrop** is a village in the Cotswolds in Gloucestershire in England. It is pretty, but then most of the villages around there are. People remember the name now because one day a train stopped there unexpectedly and one of the passengers, poet Edward Thomas, wrote about it. Robert Frost stops by the woods on a snowy night in New England. Amy Lowell describes a lush formal garden. How does the language of each describe the setting? And (what is surely the point of all three poems) what does the poet feel about it? The readers, incidentally, are **Richard Burton**, **Frost** himself, and **Richard Mitchley**; I could not find a good female reader for the Lowell.

8. Edward Thomas: *Adlestrop* (Richard Burton)

9. Robert Frost: *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* (recited by the author)

10. Amy Lowell: *In a Garden* (Richard Mitchley)

11. Edward Thomas: *Adlestrop*, text

12. Robert Frost: *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, text

13. Amy Lowell: *In a Garden*, text

Let's compare them. My last poem is an exercise in homesick nostalgia. The date is 1912. **Rupert Brooke** is in Germany, writing from the **Café des Westens** in Berlin, tired of the rules and regulations of German culture, and longing to be home at Grantchester, a small village on the river just north of Cambridge, with a church clock that doesn't go. It is a longish poem, so I am giving you just the beginning and end. The reader is **Jasper Britton**. To link them, I have added a snatch of music by **Gustav Holst**.

14. Brooke: *The Old Vicarage, Grantchester*

15. Class title 3 (Honey still for tea)