



2024-2025 Musical Interludes
From the Natural World | Water

Program Notes
By Brian Lauritzen

For today's program, we're in the splash zone. This afternoon we explore the many facets of water – from the playful to the sublime, reflecting its beauty, power, and spiritual resonance in musical expression across different periods and styles. Each piece offers a glimpse into different composers' unique way of interpreting one of nature's most elemental forces.

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937) – *Jeux d'eau*

Ravel's *Jeux d'eau* (1901) is a dazzling piano piece, a quintessential example of French Impressionism in music. The literal translation of the title is "Water Games," but a more idiomatic translation is simply, "Fountains." Ravel's score captures the brilliance and fluidity of cascading water, drawing inspiration from Liszt's *Les jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este* which we will hear later in this program. Ravel's innovative use of harmony, shimmering textures, and rhythmic complexity evokes the dynamic, sparkling movement of water, transforming the piano into an instrument of pure color and light. Ravel himself described the piece as "inspired by the sound of water and the musical sounds one can hear between the noise of its flow and its splashing."

Claude Debussy (1862–1918) – *Jardins sous la pluie*

From Debussy's *Estampes* (1903), *Jardins sous la pluie* ("Gardens in the Rain") is a vivid depiction of a garden caught in a sudden downpour. In this short yet brilliant work, Debussy blends impressionistic brushstrokes with fragments of French folk melodies, creating a playful and rhythmic atmosphere that alternates between the delicate patter of raindrops and the rushing gusts of wind. The piece showcases Debussy's mastery of piano colors, immersing the listener in a sensory experience where the interplay of nature and sound comes alive.

Amy Beach (1867–1944) – *By the Still Waters*, Op. 114

Amy Beach, one of America's most prominent female composers of the late Romantic era, created a rich legacy of piano works. *By the Still Waters* (1925) is a contemplative, serene piece that captures the quiet beauty of a calm body of water. With its flowing melody and lush harmonies, the piece reflects Beach's deep affinity for nature and her ability to convey profound emotional depth. The tranquility and meditative qualities of the work provide a poignant contrast to the more turbulent water-themed works on the program.

Franz Liszt (1811–1886) – *Les jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este*

Liszt's *Les jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este* (1877) is part of his *Années de pèlerinage* (Years of Pilgrimage) and it paints a vivid sonic picture of the fountains at the Villa d'Este in Tivoli, Italy. This work foreshadows the Impressionist movement with its intricate textures and flowing lines, demonstrating Liszt's mature style. The piece represents not only the physical beauty of the water but also carries spiritual significance, as Liszt experienced a religious

transformation during his time at the villa. The shimmering arpeggios and cascading scales make this one of the most evocative and innovative water-themed works in the piano repertoire.

Claude Debussy – *Première rhapsodie for Clarinet and Piano*

Written in 1910 as a conservatory test piece for the Paris Conservatoire, Debussy's *Première rhapsodie* stands as a masterpiece of the clarinet repertoire. The work combines both lyrical and technically demanding passages, perfectly showcasing the clarinet's versatility. Debussy explores a wide range of timbres and colors in this single-movement work, moving from languid, dreamlike sections to lively, playful moments. The piece feels fluid and organic, much like water itself, fitting beautifully into this water-themed program.

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943) – *The Fountain, Water Lily, and Spring Waters*

Rachmaninoff's fascination with nature, and specifically water, permeates several of his compositions. Known for his prowess on the piano, Rachmaninoff also wrote some of the most beautiful music for voice, many of them Romances. *The Fountain* comes from his set of 15 Romances, Op. 26; *Water Lily* from the Six Romances, Op. 8; and *Spring Waters* is part of the set of 12 Romances, Op. 14. Each of these early works showcase Rachmaninoff's signature lush harmonies, expansive textures, and deep expressiveness. For example, *Spring Waters* is a rousing and exuberant song capturing the rush of melting snow and the vitality of spring's arrival, with virtuosic piano writing that mirrors the surging power of flowing water.

Karen Tanaka (1961–) – *Water Dance III*

A film and contemporary classical composer, Tanaka serves on the faculty at the California Institute of the Arts. Many of her compositions are minimalistic and inspired by nature. *Water Dance III* comes from a set of three pieces (2008) that, according to Tanaka, "suggests cool, transparent water flowing freely. The work is a joyful dance with pleasant feelings of a pulse, where the water occasionally whispers to us through its shimmering play with light. The music presents a rich, flickering, and changing texture". (Notes by Erica Lee)

Claude Debussy – *La mer for Four Hands*

Debussy's orchestral masterpiece *La mer* (1905), here arranged for piano four hands by Debussy himself (and deemed "unplayable" by Debussy's wife), is one of the most celebrated depictions of the sea in music. Across its three movements, *De l'aube à midi sur la mer* ("From Dawn to Noon on the Sea"), *Jeux de vagues* ("Play of the Waves"), and *Dialogue du vent et de la mer* ("Dialogue of the Wind and the Sea"), Debussy explores the vast, mysterious, and ever-changing nature of the ocean. The four-hands arrangement retains the work's grandeur and depth while offering a more intimate, yet still evocative, rendering of Debussy's vision of the sea in all its moods—from serene to tempestuous.
