Impressionism In Visual Art And Music: Origin, Features, Key Figures

Impressionism was an artistic movement which came into form during the late 1800's. The movement began in Paris and was perhaps brought into being, but not embraced, by the painter Édouard Manet. 'The controversy he succeeded in causing led Manet to become a figurehead for the avant-garde. He was admired by the other Impressionists but did not spend a great deal of time with them, nor did he exhibit with them.'1

Manet is often credited with bringing alla prima painting into popularity. Instead of waiting for layers of paint to dry to apply new layers to build up colours, he carefully selected the colours that closely matched the final desired hue and painted all of the painting in one sitting without allowing the previously applied colour layers to dry, hence the name alla prima. This meant that his paintings were somewhat less defined than those prior to his time and resulted in many of his works being rejected by the salons.

His unique style triggered a new movement of artists in the area which eventually led to the birth of an artistic movement known as impressionism. The term impressionism was first used to describe the movement when an art critic from Paris, Jules Antoine Castagnary, released an artice in a daily newspaper at the time 'Le Siècle' on April 29th 1874. The article read '... if one wants to characterize them with a single word that explains their efforts, one would have to create the new term impressionists.'2

This was in referral to Claude Monet's painting “Impression, sunrise” which was displayed as part of what is now known as the exhibition of the impressionists. The only time that the term impressionism had been used prior to this was in connection with David Hume's philosophical system, however this did not in any way hold an association with painting or any of the other arts.3

As is the same with most artistic movements throughout history, the development of impressionism did not exclusively have an effect on the visual arts alone, it also saw new trends arise and take effect in the other arts such as literature and music.

Impressionist Features In Music

Many of the traits found in impressionist music come directly from those found in the world of impressionist visual arts. The overall goal of impressionism in visual art was to capture the essence of a moment almost like a quick glimpse, not focusing directly on a particular subject or object, but more to create the sense of a scene or an atmosphere. The paintings were often blurry and held a strong focus mainly on colours and shapes without a defined outline, Édouard Manet stated that “There are no lines in nature, only areas of colour, one against another.”4 The paintings usually focused on the effects of light and colour. The goal was not to capture a realistic image but more to create an impression of the scene and the mood.

The same is true for impressionism in music. Most impressionist music is not intended to

convey a vast collection of emotions and events, it is designed to create an atmosphere, a scene or mood. The music itself is often structured similarly to the impressionist paintings, vague imagery and atmospheres which were evoked by complex harmonies and the use of pentatonic and whole tone scales which were not common in music at the time. The music almost has a dreamy or faded quality as though looking into a memory of a melody because of it’s

Claude Debussy

Claude Debussy was a French composer born in France on the 22nd of August 1862. When he was seven years old, he received piano lessons from an Italian violinist named Cerutti. He was soon noticed in 1871 by Marie Mauté de Fleurville. In 1872, Debussy, who was ten at the time, went to study at the Paris Conservatoire to study composition, music theory and history, harmony, solfège, piano and organ.

In 1874 his potential was recognised when he received a comment following a piano exam from his tutor stating that he was a 'Charming child, true temperament of an artist; will become a distinguished musician; a great future.'5

Debussy's first public concert was held on the 16th of January 1876 in Aisne where he accompanied Léotine Mendés performing extracts of operatic works and some instrumental pieces.6

He spent eleven years studying at the Paris Conservatoire and somewhat similarly to Édouard Manet and the salons, he did not fully agree with the teachings of the academy and he retaliated by using experimental composition techniques, using unexpected progressions, dissonant intervals and unusual harmonies. One of his tutors once stated that Debussy was 'Extremely gifted in harmony but desperately careless'8 His time spent at the Paris Conservatoire eventually led him to develop a new, unique and individual composition style that would soon influence a new era of composers and musicians.

Despite being perhaps the most influential and important composers involved with the impressionist movement in music, Debussy greatly disapproved of the use of the term impressionism to describe his compositions. He was heavily influenced by the art and literature of his time and many works of art and poetry had a direct influence on his compositions. As the impressionist movement was active in the visual arts at the time the movement may have had an extremely powerful effect on his composition style. “I should like to see the creation…of a kind of music free from themes or motives…which nothing interrupts and which never returns upon itself. There will not be, between two restatements of the same characteristic theme, a hasty and superfluous ‘filling in’.”