



Impressionism

Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel

Impressionism

- ▶ A style of music associated with a style of painting (particularly Monet)
- ▶ The goal of impressionism is to create a mood or an atmosphere, using light and color in nontraditional ways
- ▶ In music, this is achieved by turning away from preset forms and tonal plans and focusing on timbre, instrumentation, and colorful harmonies
- ▶ The music often sounds tonal, but avoids traditional harmonic progressions, often using modes and scales other than major or minor or using planing effects

Claude Debussy



- ▶ Debussy was an influential French composer in the early twentieth century
- ▶ He was far more influenced by Symbolist poetry and Impressionist painting than by German composers such as Brahms or Wagner
- ▶ Debussy's style is lyrical and evocative of mood or atmosphere through an unconventional use of rhythm, form, and orchestral and harmonic color
 - ▶ Orchestral music: *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, *La Mer*
 - ▶ Piano music: two books of *Preludes*, many other collections
 - ▶ Art songs, one opera, and some chamber music

Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun

- ▶ Debussy's first orchestral work, inspired by Stéphane Mallarmé's symbolist poem, "Afternoon of a Faun"
- ▶ The poem captures the ruminations of a mythological faun (half-man, half-goat) who thinks about his earlier encounter with a pair of wood nymphs; it floats between dreaming and consciousness, between illusion and reality
- ▶ The most striking feature of the work is its unique timbre (string orchestra with flutes, horns, English horn, two harps, and antique symbols)
- ▶ The principal theme is stated by the flute (representing the faun)—a languorous, wandering chromatic line that is harmonized in many different ways

Maurice Ravel



- ▶ A French composer who combined the influences of Impressionism, Spanish music, earlier music, and jazz in his compositions
- ▶ Best known for his *Bolero*, which he wrote as an orchestration exercise (and came to loathe)
- ▶ He combined classical forms and functional harmony with modality, extended tertians, and brilliant orchestration
 - ▶ Piano music: many works, including *Le Tombeau de Couperin*
 - ▶ Orchestral music: 6 ballets, 2 piano concertos, other orchestral works such as *La Valse* and *Bolero*
 - ▶ Chamber music: a string quartet, a piano trio, and sonatas
 - ▶ Art songs and song cycles