

# ***Poème de l'amour et de la mer***

## ***Fin de Siecle Symbolism***

### ***DeepSeek's Introduction***

Chausson's ***Poème de l'amour et de la mer*** is a beautiful and evocative song cycle for voice and orchestra (or piano) by French composer **Ernest Chausson (1855–1899)**. It is one of his most celebrated works, blending lush harmonies, rich orchestration, and deeply expressive melodies.

### **Overview:**

- **Composed:** 1882–1892 (revised 1893)
- **Text:** Poems by **Maurice Bouchor**
- **Scoring:** Voice (usually mezzo-soprano or baritone) with orchestra or piano
- **Duration:** ~30 minutes

### **Structure:**

The work consists of **two main parts**, framed by a brief orchestral introduction and interlude:

- 1 **"La Fleur des Eaux" (The Flower of the Waters)** – A dreamy, lyrical meditation on love and nature.
- 2 **Interlude (orchestral)** – A melancholic, flowing passage that transitions into the second song.
- 3 **"La Mort de l'Amour" (The Death of Love)** – A darker, more dramatic reflection on lost love and sorrow.

### **Musical Style:**

- **Post-Wagnerian** influence (rich chromaticism, leitmotif-like themes).
- **French Impressionist** touches (fluid harmonies, evocative orchestration).
- **Expressive vocal writing**, with long, arching phrases.

### **Notable Recordings:**

- **Janet Baker** (mezzo-soprano) with André Previn / London Symphony Orchestra
- **Susan Graham** (mezzo-soprano) with Yan Pascal Tortelier / BBC Philharmonic
- **José van Dam** (baritone) with Armin Jordan / Orchestre de la Suisse Romande

## Legacy:

Often compared to Duparc's *mélodies* and Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, *Poème de l'amour et de la mer* is a masterpiece of late Romantic French music, blending poetry and music in a deeply moving way.

Would you like recommendations for specific recordings or more details on the musical analysis?

## Question

Are Maurice Bouchor's *Les poèmes de l'amour et de la mer*, and *La mort de l'amour* symbolistic works of art and what does this tell us about the times of their creation

## DeepSeek's Answer

Excellent and insightful question. Yes, Maurice Bouchor's poems, which form the text for Chausson's *Poème de l'amour et de la mer*, are quintessential examples of **Symbolist** art. Analyzing them as such reveals a great deal about the cultural and intellectual climate of France in the late 19th century.

## 1. Why Bouchor's Poems are Symbolist Works

Symbolism was a reaction against the dominant movements of the time: the literal description of **Realism/Naturalism** and the emotional overflow of **Romanticism**. Instead of describing the external world, Symbolists sought to evoke the internal, subjective world of ideas, emotions, and spiritual states through suggestion and symbolism.

Bouchor's poems in this cycle exhibit key Symbolist traits:

- **The Sea as a Central Symbol:** The sea is not just a setting; it is a multi-layered symbol. It represents:
  - **The Unconscious and the Soul:** Its vast, deep, and mysterious nature mirrors the hidden depths of human emotion and the subconscious mind.
  - **The Flux of Life and Time:** Its constant ebb and flow symbolize the passage of time, the changing nature of feelings, and the inevitability of change.
  - **Love itself:** Love is depicted as a powerful, natural force—beautiful and life-giving ("La Fleur des Eaux") but also capable of turning destructive, tragic, and all-consuming ("La Mort de l'amour").
- **Synesthesia (The Blending of Senses):** Symbolist poets often fused sensory experiences. Bouchor does this to create a dreamlike, immersive atmosphere. We see this in lines that describe how things sound, look, and feel as part of a single experience, a technique Chausson mirrors in his music by having the orchestra "paint" the text.

- **Evocation Over Description:** The poems don't narrate a linear story of a love affair. Instead, they evoke the *sensations* of love: the idyllic, dreamy euphoria of its beginning and the profound, existential despair of its end. The focus is on the internal psychological state, not external events.
- **Mysticism and Idealism:** There's a search for a higher, ideal truth beyond the visible world. The beloved is often an idealized figure, and the loss is not just personal but feels like a fall from a spiritual grace. The final lines of "La Mort de l'amour" — "J'entends mon coeur qui pleure / Et sanglote dans l'ombre... / C'est le passé qui meurt / Dans une plainte sombre" ("I hear my heart weeping / And sobbing in the shadows... / It is the past dying / In a sombre lament")—frame the end of love as a metaphysical death, not just a personal disappointment.

## 2. What This Tells Us About Their Time (c. 1882-1893)

The creation of these works sits at a fascinating crossroads in French history, reflecting several key fin-de-siècle (end-of-the-century) preoccupations:

### 1. Reaction Against Materialism and Scientism:

The late 19th century was dominated by scientific progress, positivism (the belief that only scientific knowledge is valid), and materialism. Symbolism was a direct artistic revolt against this. By focusing on dreams, the soul, the subconscious, and ideal worlds, artists like Bouchor and Chausson were asserting that the most important human experiences—love, loss, beauty, melancholy—could not be measured, dissected, or explained by science.

### 2. The "Mal du siècle" (The Illness of the Century) Evolves:

The melancholy of the Romantics evolved into a more profound and introspective pessimism in the Symbolist era. This was a period of political instability (after the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune) and a growing sense of decadence. The profound sadness and inevitable tragedy in *La Mort de l'amour* reflect a broader cultural mood of fatigue, disillusionment, and existential anxiety.

### 3. The Birth of Modern Psychology:

While Freud was just beginning his work, the intellectual ground was fertile for exploring the inner workings of the mind. Symbolist art, with its focus on dreams, symbols, and the subconscious, was a direct engagement with this new frontier of human understanding. This work is a map of a psyche in love and in mourning.

### 4. The Ideal of the "Total Work of Art" (Gesamtkunstwerk):

Influenced by Wagner, artists of this time dreamed of synthesizing different art forms into one overpowering experience. Chausson, a devoted Wagnerian, didn't just set Bouchor's poems to music; he used the orchestra to become the sea, the atmosphere, and the unconscious voice of the narrator. The music *is* the symbol. The harmony, orchestration, and vocal line work together to *become* the emotional and symbolic content of the poem. This creates a

complete, immersive world, which is a primary goal of Symbolism.

### 5. Introversion and Interiority:

In an increasingly industrialized and urbanized world, artists turned inward. The grand external gestures of Romanticism were replaced by the intimate, intricate, and often obscure exploration of the self. The scale of *Poème de l'amour et de la mer* is vast in emotional scope but deeply intimate in its execution—it's a personal tragedy played out against the immense, symbolic backdrop of the sea.

## Conclusion

Labeling Bouchor's poems and Chausson's musical setting as **Symbolist** is crucial to understanding them. They are not simple love stories but are profound explorations of the inner self using complex symbols (the sea, the flower, death). This tells us that their time was one of:

- **Intellectual and artistic revolt** against materialism.
- **Deep psychological curiosity** and introspection.
- **Cultural pessimism** and fin-de-siècle anxiety.
- **A striving for synthesis**, aiming to use art to access a higher, more truthful reality beyond the physical world.

The enduring power of the work lies in this perfect fusion: a Symbolist poem finding its ultimate expression in a Symbolist musical score, each amplifying the other to capture the ineffable essence of love and loss.

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