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Debussy and His Music: A Retrospect

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"DEBUSSY AND HIS MUSIC: A RETROSPECT"

On the 22nd of August, 1862, was born near Paris the child who was to become Claude Debussy, French musician. In this year of 1962, the centenary of his birth, it seems a fitting time to reconsider the music and writings of this man whose life was so stormy and whose career was marked by the extremes of adulation and censure.

The immediate impact of the man and his music on his contemporaries is now a matter of history. His family and those whose lives he shared are gone; the storm and fury of the scandals which surrounded his personal life have lost their force. His music has assumed a place in the every-day repertory of the concert-hall and the teaching studio, and is with a few exceptions readily available to us in both printed and recorded form. His writings are edited and translated, and there is a large and growing bibliography of comment, analysis, and study of his life and his art. It is possible now to examine with some objectivity the more essential and universal aspects of his art and its relation to the general stream of music.

Debussy's span of activity covered the turn of the century. His student days could be said to have ended with his return home from the academy at Rome in 1887 and his death occurred in 1918. There is a theory about the evolution of music which recognizes cycles of activity at intervals of three hundred years. There was the so-called "new" music about 1300, which led to the music of the renaissance. Then the era of tonality, as we know it, began about 1600 and encompassed the baroque, classic and romantic periods. Thus, 1900 has been suggested as the nominal time for the beginning of a contemporary movement in which the most apparent aspect is atonality, or at least, the demise of the old, established rules of cadential tonality as practiced in the 18th and 19th centuries. This then is the time of Debussy's activity. It was the twilight period of a great romantic era, an era of the large tonal canvas, the complex chromatic-laden sonorities of Wagner and his followers. It was a time when composers who were forward-looking were stretching to the limit the concepts of tonality and tone-relations as practiced by their predecessors. Debussy and his music acted as an antidote to the excesses of the late romantic composers, and seems to have served as a transition and a stimulus to the practice of the first part of this century.

The impact of the chromaticism that Wagner employed in "Tristan and Isolde" and his other later works was a predominant force in the music of the late 19th century. Gustav Mahler, Richard Strauss, and the young Schoenberg were treating the accepted chords and progressions to all the stresses possible by the use of chromatic tones, suspensions, and other embellishing devices. And yet, notice that the point of emphasis was always the chord, the harmony, and in the background was the organizing force of the tonality. Notice, too, that this was a time of predominance for all that was German in musical art. The line of com-

posers was from Bach to Mozart and Haydn, to Beethoven, to Brahms and Wagner. These were the masters. And their rationalists, the theorists and the analysts, were likewise German. There had risen and was gaining in importance that development known as nationalism in many sections of Europe, but it was difficult for the musicians of any country or race to escape the all-pervasive influence of this predominant practice and viewpoint toward music.

In his early years, Debussy was an enthusiast and an eager student of the music of Wagner. As a student of the Conservatoire, he studied the scores of the operas with his teachers, and for a few years at the beginning of his career, he helped support himself by giving lectures and playing the music of the great master. He joined the group of pilgrims to the festivals at Bayreuth, but after several such pilgrimages, there seems to have been a gradual but definite turning away from the philosophies and aims of this art.

In writing of his days at the Academy he reveals his early enthusiasm by the following: "At that time I was a Wagnerian to the pitch of forgetting the simplest rules of courtesy." Later he can write of the "grandiloquent hysteria which ravages the Wagnerian heroes" and refer to the use of the leit-motif as "vague and high-flown charlatanism." His criticisms are sharp and merciless of much of Wagner's art but in a review of some performances held in Paris he can say: "I do not mean that the performance will hasten a final eclipse; for Wagner's art can never completely die. It will suffer that inevitable decay, the cruel brand of time on all beautiful things; yet noble ruins must remain, in the shadow of which our grandchildren will brood over the past splendour of this man who, had he been a little more human, would have been altogether great." In this same article, he continues a devasting critique of "Parsifal": "Look at Amfortas, that melancholy Knight of the Grail, who whines like a shop girl and whimpers like a baby. Good heavens! A Knight of the Grail, a king's son, would plunge his spear into his own body rather than parade a guilty wound in doleful melodies for three acts!" And later, "Here in short is a Christian drama in which nobody in willing to sacrifice himself, though sacrifice is one of the highest of the Christian virtues!" But the final paragraph of the article makes clear the object of his scorn. "The above remarks only apply to the poet whom we are accustomed to admire in Wagner and have nothing to do with the musical beauty of the opera, which is supreme. It is incomparable and bewildering, splendid and strong. 'Parsifal' is one of the loveliest monuments of sound ever raised to the serene glory of music."

Debussy can be moved by the beauties of Wagner's music, by the sheer sound of many of his harmonies and melodies; what he does not like is the "affectation of German profundity or over-emphasis or impatient explanation, as if to say: 'You are a collection of utter idiots who understand nothing unless you are first compelled to believe that the moon is made of green cheese.'" In place of this he is envisioning an art that he feels is distinctly French—French in its clarity, its balance,

its good taste, and French, also, in its return to the principles and viewpoints of the early French clavecinists, especially Rameau and Couperin. His writings are especially enthusiastic about the music of Rameau and on the occasion of a certain revival he waxes eloquent to an extent that approaches chauvinism. In his reviews of his colleagues' music he is also unsparing in his criticism of those aspects of the prevailing musical scene which he feels is foreign to the spirit and ideals of a Frenchman. He writes: "And why encourage an increase of the taste for the tedious music that comes to us from the neo-Wagnerians and which might well favour us by returning to the land of its origin?" Also, "We are bound to admit that nothing was ever more dreary than the neo-Wagnerian school in which the French genius has lost its way among the sham Wotans in Hessian boots and the Tristans in velvet jackets."

Debussy was by nature a rebel. He was a nonconformist, an individualist. His career at the Conservatoire was an unceasing battle against the formalism and pedantry of that institution. And this battle did not cease after his student days were ended. In 1903 there was much publicity about the economic plight of a budding young genius of the piano and Debussy has this advice to give to the father: "M. Chagnon complains that his son has not a good piano and that he can afford to attend the Conservatoire but once a week. Both ills are easily remedied. Let his son stay away from the Conservatorie altogether. The money thus saved can be spent in buying a better piano. In this way he will combine utility and pleasure."

He could rebel not only against the formalism and institutional aspects of the Conservatoire. He was equally adamant against accepting the pedantic procedures of music as set forth by those in authority. As Leon Vallas has written in his book "The Theories of Claude Debussy", "He saw the defects of an out-of-date system which blindly follows along old paths—be they good or bad—and takes its lessons from dead books rather than from life that is ever new. The natural reaction of his liberty-loving nature threw him into theories that were utterly opposed to those of his masters, or rather, professors." Debussy himself wrote "I did my best to write music for its own sake and it was logical that I should run the risk of displeasing people who are so devoted to one musical method that they remain faithfully blind to its wrinkles of cosmetics." In the year 1911, a journalist recorded this interview: "I myself love music passionately; and because I love it, I try to free it from barren traditions that stifle it. It is a free art, gushing forth, an open air art, an art boundless as the elements, the wind, the sky, the sea! It must never be shut in and become an academic art." Similarly, he writes, using the tongue of his imaginary friend, Monsieur Croche, the Dilettante Hater, "Discipline must be sought in freedom, and not within the formulas of an outworn philosophy only fit for the feeble-minded. Give ear to no man's counsel; but listen to the wind which tells in passing the history of the world." In another place, "Music is the sum total of scattered forces. People have made of it a song composed of theories! I prefer a few notes

from the flute of an Egyptian shepherd. He collaborates with the scenery around him and hears harmonies of which our textbooks are ignorant. Musicians listen only to music written by skillful hands; they never hear what is written in Nature. There is more to be gained by seeing the sun rise than by hearing the 'Pastoral Symphony.'"

Specifically, he did not see why each chord had to proceed in a specified manner, why progressions must march in a routine pattern, why music must always proceed in conformity to the accepted formulae derived from the composers of the past. In 1902 he wrote "There is nothing one could more sincerely desire for French music than the suppression of the study of harmony as practiced at school,—which is indeed the most pompously ridiculous method of assembling sounds. It has in addition this grave fault, that it standardizes composition to such a point that all musicians, with but few exceptions, harmonize in the same manner . . . For the sake of greater clearness, let us compare sounds to words. Everybody uses the same words. But whence comes the charm, the new light which these same words acquire when employed by some writers, if it is not from their particular setting? Similarly, how can we account for the unexpected charm of chords that are met with throughout music, if not by this fitness from the point of view of sound—which cannot be learnt, since nowhere is it visibly inscribed?"

He was dead-set against the twin yokes of "musical forms" and musical "development." For him the symphony was an out-moded development of composition. He writes: "It seems to me that the proof of the futility of the symphony has been established since Beethoven. Indeed, Schumann and Mendelssohn did no more than respectfully repeat the same forms with less power. The Ninth Symphony none the less was a demonstration of genius . . . Beethoven's real teaching then was not to preserve the old forms, still less to follow in his early steps. The fact that here and there a genius succeeds in this form is but a poor excuse for the laborious and stilted compositions which we are accustomed to call symphonies . . . The young Russian school has endeavored to give new life to the symphony by borrowing ideas from popular melodies; it has succeeded in cutting brilliant gems; but are not the themes entirely disproportionate to the developments into which they have been forced? . . . A symphony is usually built up on a song heard by the composer as a child. The first section is the customary presentation of the theme on which the composer proposes to work; then begins the necessary dismemberment; the second section seems to take place in an experimental laboratory; the third section cheers up a little in a quite childish way interspersed with deeply sentimental phrases during which the song withdraws as is more seemly; but it reappears and the dismemberment goes on; the professional gentlemen, obviously interested, mop their brows and the audience calls for the composer. But the composer does not appear. He is engaged in listening modestly to the voice of tradition which prevents him, it seems to me, from hearing the voice that speaks within him." Debussy felt that music should try to distill the essence of

an emotion, a feeling, or a picture. He would have the composer be an evocative poet, calling forth an impression, a mood.

Opposed to the accepted philosophies and practices of the music of his time as dominated by Wagnerism, opposed to any sort of formalism and regimentation in his art, scornful of the obeisance to alien music by his countrymen and colleagues, sarcastic and not always objective in his writings and statements to the press, and certainly not always tactful in his remarks concerning his colleagues who ranked high in public esteem—how then did this man win the acclaim he now has and on what solid basis does he merit a rating as a leading composer?

First of all, he had a love of sound and the ability to work with and manipulate the sounds of music that must be the first and basic requisite of a composer. Oscar Thompson, in his book on Debussy, says: "With Debussy, the secret of musical personality was to be found in his ear for unorthodox combinations, successions, and concatenations." This accounts for much of his dissatisfaction with the traditional teaching of harmony and his bitter tirades against "barren tradition" which had made a routine of harmonic progression. As we have mentioned, he was born in an era when the chord was the real basis of musical thought and for most of his life he seems to have thought from this standpoint. One writer has commented that if he had been a violinist or a singer he could not have written music as he did, perhaps not written at all, for he needed the simultaneity of musical tones (that we call chords) to express his musical ideas, and his early training and experience as a pianist helped consolidate his facility and genius in this area.

He did not write easily and in a facile manner. There is ample evidence that he worked minutely, carefully weighing the effect of a chord, a phrase, a rhythm, before he was satisfied with the effect he achieved. Although he sometimes wrote or spoke in a scornful manner about "technique" or craftsmanship, at least when it was used in a routine or casual manner, in his own writings it is the almost chiselled perfection of many of his works that are the delight and despair of his admirers and students.

His love for musical sounds rebelled against the thick and massive orchestral colors made popular by Wagner and Strauss and imitated by almost all other composers. For him, the music of the post-romantic era had become too big, too well organized, too massive, and therefore too impersonal. He referred to the orchestration of Beethoven as a formula of blacks and whites resulting in a whole exquisite gamut of grays. His term for Wagner's orchestral sonorities was "polychromatic putty spread almost uniformly." His description of Strauss' "Til Eulenspiegel" is even more extreme. It is "an hour of original music in a lunatic asylum. The clarinets leap in frenzied curves, the trumpets everlastingly choke and the horns, forestalling a latent sneeze, hasten to rejoin: "God bless you!" while a big drum goes boom! boom! apparently emphasizing the antics of the clowns. One wants either to shout with laughter or to shriek with pain."

Debussy loved the woodwinds and the cool clear colors they could give the orchestral palette. Not for him were the massed effects of the

Wagner scoring. He gave to each of the instruments a chance to breathe and sing and to assert its own special brand of musical personality. Who can forget the flute at the opening of "The Afternoon of a Faun", the English Horn in "Nuages", or the bitter-sweet voice of the oboe in a half-dozen unforgettable moments. His treatment of the harp gave that instrument new meaning. Instead of its ordinary use as a filler of sonorities and climaxes, its distinctive voice added new resources of sound to the orchestral fabric. Paul Myers, in notes written for a new recording of Debussy's piano works, says "His treatment of the keyboard, and the tonal and harmonic construction of the music, gave the piano a totally new "sound"; a fresh and exciting language that expanded the expressive range of the instrument beyond all previous comprehension. Just as Chopin, at the beginning of the 19th Century, bridged the gaps in musical thought between the Classical and Romantic schools, so Debussy heralded the music of the 20th Century, with experiments and innovations in sound that are keys to modern composition. How many of our jazz musicians modulate with harmonies that are to be found in "La Plus Que Lente" or the "Sarabande" from "Pour le Piano", and how many present-day composers have been attracted to the Machine Age intoxication of "Mouvement"! . . . Strangely enough, for all he gave to the piano, Debussy was not a "pianistic" composer. He treated the instrument as though it were a symphony orchestra, making the interpretation of his music all the more difficult. In performance, the notes do not "fit the hands", each of which seems required to perform independently of the other. Sudden changes of rhythm and "shape" require awesome technical control, and the extraordinarily fine gradations of tone and dynamic create some of the severest pianistic tests in all music. Everything is demanded of the performer, and the success of the presentation lies so often in the artist's ability to follow the printed note and written direction rather than include a personal interpretation."

The second of his great talents was an acute poetic sensibility. It was this extraordinary attribute of "feeling" that was probably the basic cause behind the sharp and bitter attacks on so much that had become conventional and established. This aspect of planning and "technique" in the sense of organized form and procedure which had become much of the basis of 18th and 19th century music in the Germanic tradition was the irritant that provoked the rebellion of a spirit that demanded freedom and independence. Remember the words he put into the mouth of Monsieur Croche: "Discipline must be sought in freedom."

This refusal to accept the already discovered solutions to problems of musical form and speech was one of the reasons for Debussy's slow and painful methods of writing and re-writing. His sharp artistic conscience would not let him be satisfied with less than perfection and his feeling for the poetry inherent in his subject would not let him use conventional and accepted forms and idioms. But it was this determined and relentless searching for the right chord, the right melodic turn, the right rhythm, which gave the world such works of beauty as "The After-

noon of a Faun", "La Mer", many of the piano pieces, and those of the songs that makes one want to catch his breath. It took ten years of work and thought, and more work and more thought, but the opera "Pelleas and Melisande", beside its novel and effective theatrical presentation, and its solution of the problems of combining words and music, has moments of sheer musical and emotional beauty hard to forget.

This emphasis on "feeling" or emotional reaction earned for his music the term "impressionism" and this is probably as good as any to describe the result of his creative process. Debussy himself often objected to the word—it had first been used as a rather derogatory term in connection with the paintings of Monet, and was used to suggest what seemed vagueness of expression and style. One writer has suggested that Debussy would probably have preferred a term such as "perceptivism", suggesting a transmutation into musical terms of all sensory and mental perceptions: objects, forms, sounds, savors, perfumes, light and color, legends, distant landscapes, and the like. The variety of subjects that acted as stimuli for his amazing musical imagination is in itself a source of wonder.

To quote Paul Myers again, "In the literature of keyboard music, few composers have succeeded in communicating their innermost thoughts with the facility and the directness of Debussy, who achieves, seemingly effortlessly, a union of poetry and music, of fact and fantasy, of impression and realistic pictorialization . . . The Preludes are evocative rather than pictorial. They express an emotion—a reaction to a place or situation—rather than an attempt to create a "visual" reproduction in musical terms. It is interesting to note that, although each is labeled, Debussy placed the title at the end of the piece, for it was not his intention that the music should be programmatic. Each work is to be accepted on its own terms, and the source of its inspiration is incidental—an intriguing afterthought; almost a diffident revelation on the part of the composer."

Perhaps this last idea contains a clue to the real greatness of Debussy as a composer. His music is rich in fantasy, in poetry, in imagination, but to the musician who studies and plays his music, and to the serious listener who gets to know its beauty, the best of his work assumes a beauty wholly independent of the external or extra-musical idea. "Reflections in the Water" from the first set of "Images", to cite an example, may at first seem to be a musical reaction to a visual image, but gradually the piece becomes an absorbing revelation of sonorities and effects never before experienced in keyboard music. This illustration might be multiplied many times, choosing other piano works, some of the orchestral works, some of the songs, the string quartet, or his only opera.

As a conclusion, we might then make this estimate of his worth: He labored as a composer to free music from tendencies that, to him, seemed to stifle its expression. He sought to re-emphasize the poetic and the beautiful in his art, but to do so always by musical means. And his success was such that we can say (in a wholly favorable light) that after knowing the music of Debussy, our concepts of music and musical beauty can never be the same.