

The Fourth Concerto is expressively perhaps the weakest of the Hough–Oramo recordings. In particular the first movement (*Allegro moderato*) includes passages that invite the interpreter to experiment with the slowest possible tempi (for example in the style of Ivo Pogorelich's Chopin), an invitation which seems too much of a risk for Hough and Oramo.

Hans von Bülow's oft-quoted casual opinion of Saint-Saëns's Fourth Piano Concerto made in 1890 – it 'may cure you of the disgust of music' – hits the nail on the head.⁷ There is no ethically suspect monumentalism nor a sense of vulgar circus in this composition but a timeless, formal modernity of two great movements, the latter of which could occasionally be associated with Brahms's op. 15. Bülow's enthusiasm may indeed be due to certain elements of conservative innovation. Here again the question of getting the tempo just right becomes relevant. In my opinion, Saint-Saëns's Fourth Concerto would deserve the same weight of articulation as anyone would give to a 'German symphonist' like Brahms. Hough and Oramo aim to achieve weight through the magnitude of the sound and amplification of speed. The brilliance and clarity, as well as the flexibility of the gestures, deserve full respect, but the danger is that those most personal and subjective qualities of the concertos are sacrificed in favour of technical perfection (which also includes the recording equipment). In phrasing the choral melody in the *Allegro vivace*, I personally prefer Pascal Rogé's old recording because of its lyrical flexibility and 'vocal' intonation. On the other hand, this very passage also exhibits the finest nuances and professional intonation of Hough, Oramo and the CBSO. The image is simply more 'neo-classical', dance-like, playful, easy-going, and far less tragic than it could be. The human tragedy of late nineteenth-century culture can only be seen as a 'mise-en-scène' (or as a secondary dimension of the interpretation), not as a significant topic of the score.

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Debussy

Songs

Christopher Maltman *bar* Malcolm Martineau *pf*
Hyperion CDA67357 (73 minutes: DDD)
Notes and translations included.

These recordings of Debussy songs have a lot going for them, not least because of the questions they raise about the criteria by which the singing of Debussy's music can be evaluated. The centrepiece of Maltman's disc, a commanding if sometimes mannered rendering of the composer's challenging and central Baudelaire songs, is complemented by a recording of three of the same songs in an intriguing orchestration by John Adams, which could be categorized as

⁷ Cited by Stegemann, *Camille Saint-Saëns*, 2.

thoroughly Debussian, yet are not remotely like any orchestration Debussy would have made.¹

The *Cinq poèmes de Charles Baudelaire*, dating from 1887 to 1889, have suffered a mixed reception in the hands of the composer's twentieth-century biographers, largely because they have been regarded as the work in which Debussy got uncomfortably close to Wagner. Debussy's influential biographer and commentator Léon Vallas bolstered this view in his 1930s 'Life and Works', claiming to reveal for the first time the true chronology of the songs and exploiting this to point out how their composition coincided with the composer's 'pilgrimages' to Bayreuth – a loaded word if ever there was one. After all, Debussy may well have gone to Bayreuth to see what the enemy was up to rather than 'à genoux'. Vallas concludes, however, that Debussy 'had reached the crisis of his transformation at the time he wrote these songs' and his final word is a dismissal of the songs as 'laboratory experiments of a complicated chemical nature'.²

To some extent the young Robin Holloway follows Vallas in his singular and brilliant exploration of Debussy's relationship with Wagner.³ Although he is a great admirer of the songs and his enthusiasm shines through his writing, he not only shares Vallas's view but convincingly shows the songs' relationship with the harmonies of *Tristan* in detailed diagrams, estimating that it is in these songs that 'Debussy comes nearest to a traditionally Wagnerian fullness of motivic development'. He regards this quality as 'uncharacteristic', and even finds a Straussian 'Schwung' in the set (which I have to say I don't).

These lines of approach subscribe to a view which to my mind is tainted by a teleological approach to the composer's output. Holloway regarded the Baudelaire songs as 'one of the paths by which Debussy became non-Wagnerian and eventually in practice anti-Wagnerian'. It's as if the songs are devalued because it was here that Debussy went through a process of purging himself of the 'Wagnerian influence' and somehow came out the other end 'purified', more French and truer to himself.

Such a reading, although only implicitly with regard to his own work, may well have been fuelled by the composer himself, particularly in his journalistic articles of the early twentieth century which are shot through with the ideal of a quest for the de-Germanization of French music; its de-Wagnerization; and its return to rose-coloured ideals of concision, lightness and purity.

Against this, another view of the set may be put forward: firstly that they stem from a period of considerable fertility where the style of Debussy's language – particularly in these songs and more extensively in *Rodrigue et Chimène* – is deepened by an exploration of vagrant, chromatic harmony triggered by contact with *Tristan* and *Parsifal*, and secondly that they are quite simply the closest and most perfect parallel to *Les Fleurs du mal* imaginable.

In his more recent, and seminal, biography, the late François Lesure cites an 'enquête' with Debussy conducted in 1889. When asked who was his favourite poet he replied with one word: 'Baudelaire'.⁴ Rather than a trajectory which in the late 1880s veered dangerously close to what he himself called 'the ghost of

¹ BBC MM239 DDD, 2004. CD to the February issue of the *BBC Music Magazine*, London, UK.

² Léon Vallas, *Claude Debussy*, trans. Maire and Grace O'Brien (London, 1933), 67.

³ Robin Holloway, *Debussy and Wagner* (London, 1979).

⁴ François Lesure, *Claude Debussy* (Paris, 2003), 103.

old Klingsor', Debussy's compositional output was more a series of explorations which was constantly refreshed by encounters with other genres, sometimes vernacular, sometimes exotic and in this case with operatic and symphonic processes whose transformation proved to be long-lasting (for example in *Pelléas*) and central to his later work.

So much for the position of these pieces in Debussy's output (I purposefully avoid the word 'development'). With what criteria can a performance of them be judged? Certainly not with any notion of the 'historically informed': a criterion which has become satisfyingly clear-cut, at least to etch the perimeters of the applicable parameters in earlier music. The problem is not that we have no idea of the sound-ideals of the composer in such repertoire: we have plenty of recorded evidence. Primary among these are the recordings of the *Ariettes oubliées* made by Mary Garden with Debussy at the piano in 1904.⁵ Through the sound of legion pans of frying eggs a good deal can be discerned: the essential lightness of Garden's voice (not to mention her wrong-note entries); her refined and occasionally expressively overt use of portamento; and Debussy's accompaniment which can be pushy, tightening up rhythmic phrases with sometimes unexpected rubato. Essentially it is passionate and the reverse of reticent.⁶

Later essential recordings include those of *Pelléas* made with members of the original cast: Maggie Teyte's recordings with Cortot; and Inghelbrecht's book on the performance of *Pelléas*.⁷ So what's the problem? Simply that no one can recapture that style or dare to do the slides and the slithering that, certainly in Garden's and Teyte's recordings, seem to capture the nostalgia, the *langueur* and the *tristesse* of many of the poems that Debussy set. Nor would many of us want them to. However much we might like baroque violinists to whizz around like Corelli, Mozart pianists to improvise *Eingänge* and cadenzas, or Berlioz recordings to ooze with ophicleides and lay their orchestras out in quaint old ways, 'authenticity' in Debussy has to be sought elsewhere.

Strangely, but entirely predictably, it is easier to recreate the distant past than the more recent. While we *know* how to slide like the strings did in 'Nimrod', it hardly sounds convincing if we try to do it nowadays (*pace* those orchestras who have tried). On the other hand, without the 'benefit' (or hindrance) of recordings we can only reconstruct (or construct) how we think baroque articulations were done, and we come up with a solution which convinces, even though both critics and different schools of performers apply sometimes opposing yardsticks. Debussy songs fall into the 'Nimrod' category: we have to admit that expressive portamenti – a central part of expression less than a century ago – are a lost tradition not easily regained.

Try the other ways in which vocal performances are currently judged. For example the notion of a 'good' and 'developed' voice upheld by the panels at the top colleges and at international singing competitions. What is a 'singer of the year'? Who would be a '*mélodie* singer of the year' and, still more refined, 'a Baudelaire-song singer of the year'? The norms of juries should not be entirely

⁵ Available on CD: EMI Références CHS 7 61038 2.

⁶ See Richard Langham Smith, 'Debussy on Performance: Sound and Unsound Ideals', and Brooks Toliver, 'Thoughts on the (Re)interpreting of Debussy's Songs', in *Debussy in Performance*, ed. James R. Briscoe (New Haven, 1999), 3–27 and 135–54.

⁷ Désiré-Emile Inghelbrecht, *Comment on ne doit pas interpréter 'Carmen', 'Faust' et 'Pelléas'* (Paris, 1933).

despised: they like a full, varied, flexible sound, are less worried about articulation, but with luck someone will speak up for diction. Intonation is taken for granted, but what about size and that vexed question of 'vibrato'? Small is not generally considered beautiful. Medium is OK and some covering of vibrato is desirable. Such criteria are not for me strong enough. Having dispensed with any performance-practice precedent there is only one recourse: the poem, its atmosphere and whether its essence is projected in song, having *derrière la tête* some notions from those recordings above which have ideals retained from Debussy's experience.

While we cannot have the refinements of portamenti we can have sensuality, eroticism, intimacy and *langueur/tristesse*. Isn't the fundamental criterion for judgement the projection of every aspect from overall mood to local detail of the poem? There is also the question of who sings the songs: an area musicology has considerably explored. No less than *Frauenliebe und -leben* are 'women's' songs, the Baudelaire poems (or at least, three of them) are a man's. *Le Jet d'eau* is post-coital: a man has an immediately post-organic woman in his arms, just 'surprised by pleasure'. The fountain, spurting permanently, prolongs his thoughts of the climax, a symbol, if ever there was one, in that its meanings are myriad. In *Le Balcon*, where perhaps the poet is sitting bereft, he recalls his lover's breasts, lingering on them even, remembering evenings of love-making in front of the coal fire. More intimately even, 'buried between her knees' the poet's past comes flooding back to him. The intimacy of this poetry, penetrating sexual depths which no poet had yet dared to probe, no doubt captivated the composer at his peak in his mid-thirties. *La Mort des amants* has at its centre the idea of the 'odeurs légères' of the bed where lovers have loved. No wonder Debussy took a long time to find a publisher for these daring settings.

Yet unlike *Frauenliebe*, whose recorded interpreters are for the vast majority female also, the recorded interpreters of these 'male-voiced' Baudelaire songs are for the most part female. Refreshing, therefore, to have a recording with the performer's voice being that of the poet. We do not yet know whether it was a man or a woman who gave Debussy's own first performances of the songs in private *chez* Chausson in 1890. The first public performance of any of the songs was not to be until 13 years later, in 1903, when a man, Victor Debay, also a critic, performed *Le Jet d'eau* (clearly a 'man's song') and *Recueillement* (which is ungendered). Subsequent premieres of the other songs were done by a woman, Jeanne Raunay, over 15 years after their composition. As an appendix, it should be mentioned that Debussy himself began an orchestration of *Le Jet d'eau*, as if, perhaps, it was too important to be confined to the recital room.

So good though it is to hear the songs refreshingly sung by the performer/poet, the nineteenth-century dissociation of the performer from the poet's voice is still in operation. Does Maltman fulfil the only criteria I can distil: the projection of the sensuality and *tristesse* of the poem? Yes, I'd say, but not the *langueur*. He sacrifices line for local emphasis, slightly hesitating before key words and then self-consciously letting the voice vibrato. The result is dramatic, but it at times effaces the reflective calm, the nostalgic reverie and the possibly drugged synaesthesia of the poems. There is much to be admired: strong accompaniment; clear motivic transformation; atmosphere and strength.

John Adams's orchestrations (he is clearly a fan) are remarkable: not Debussian, but a brilliant continuation of what is an unfinished poetic, performing and interpretative approach. Upper voices envelop where bass-oriented

harmonies in the piano part overwhelm: a kind of cocoon rather than a support from beneath,

For a comparative version my favourite to date is Véronique Dietschy, who would not get very far with a jury ('too thin' 'too bland' 'no variation of colour') but whose pillow-talk diction is not only impeccable but seductive, and whose high notes do it for me like no man's could ever.⁸ Sopranos take you up there: men have to strain. There lies the convolution of singing, quite regardless of the nuances of the French *mélodie* or the voice of the poet.

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Meyerbeer

Meyerbeer in Italy

Extracts from: *Il crociato in Egitto*, *Romilda e Costanza*, *Semiramide riconosciuta*,
Emma di Resburgo, *Margherita d'Anjou*, *L'esule di Granata*

Yvonne Kenny *sop* Bronwen Mills *sop* Maria Bovino *sop* Linda Kitchen *sop*
Della Jones *mezzo* Diana Montague *mezzo* Patricia Spence *mezzo* Anne Mason
mezzo

Bruce Ford *ten* Chris Merritt *ten* Paul Nilon *ten* Harry Nicoll *ten* Geoffrey
Dolton *bar* Alastair Miles *bass* Russell Smythe *bass* Ian Platt *bass* Ugo Benelli
bass

Philharmonia Orchestra, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Geoffrey Mitchell
Choir

David Parry

Opera Rara ORR222 (71 minutes, DDD)

Notes and translations provided.

Lovers of Meyerbeer, and of many other lyric composers of Italian (and French) opera of the early nineteenth century, have long been acquainted with the recordings of Opera Rara. Loyal support by the Peter Moores Foundation, Opera Rara, over the last 20 years, has released a considerable number of CDs of whole operas, compilations of extracts, and recitals by individual artists of 'forgotten works' by composers such as Meyerbeer, Donizetti and Rossini, but also of lesser-known operas by Mercadante, Pacini, Carafa, Mayr and Pavesi to mention but a few. Such an adventure requires and delivers often painstaking reconstitution of scores and orchestral parts and in-depth musicological research of the highest integrity which is eruditely conveyed to its audience through well-presented, well-illustrated and thorough sleeve notes. Artistic director Patric Schmid works in close collaboration with Opera Rara's conductor David Parry to produce quality recordings of operatic gems that, without their enterprise, would remain unknown to all.

⁸ Ades 464 208–2.