

Introduction

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Debussy occupies a place apart from his contemporaries in the history of music. He is a composer who has, though the sheer quality and originality of his work, plus a character far removed from the average, 'run-of-the-mill' composer of the period, placed himself in a hallowed position in the richly coloured years around the end of the nineteenth century. I say this not because I find his music highly attractive – I do, of course – but because intellectual circumstances have conspired in Debussy's favour in a quite unusual way.

Before the Second World War, and even for a few years after it, one could legitimately find fault with Debussy. As far back as 1924, Cecil Gray, a cantankerous, erratic but often illuminating writer, acknowledged that Debussy was a Symbolist not an Impressionist, for Debussy's purpose was 'not to evoke a definite picture, but to suggest the mood or emotion which the particular image in question aroused in the artist's mind'.¹ All of which bodes well, but on the music itself he is less likeable: 'in his harmony, Debussy is as curiously limited, monotonous and restricted as in his melody. His rhythms too are singularly lifeless and torpid.'² Gerald Abraham fell into a trap Debussy set for musicologists when he wrote that 'Debussy's work was still for the most part far too closely linked with literature and painting and nature impressions to be absolute music. [It was] a half-way house between romanticism and a new classicism.'³

A few residual grudges against him might have trickled out in the years following Europe's orgy of destruction. I recall a distinguished and well-respected music analyst and musicologist in the late 1970s evincing some disdain for the solo-violin passages in 'Ibéria', which struck him at the time as trite – another example of the 'too pictorial' vein of criticism (he wasn't overly impressed by Debussy's orchestration either). But nowadays much has changed: no composer fits the modern psyche better than Debussy. Triteness is now just one facet of Debussy's independent brand of modernism, which we can accept because there are no rules in Debussy and no etched-in-stone critical yardsticks. If this sounds far-fetched, just think of current critical encounters with Richard Strauss, who is let away with far less and is regarded with greater suspicion than Debussy.

Late twentieth-century reductionism faced its most uphill struggle in Debussy. Boulez assured us of his paramount importance in the history of

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music and the profound effect he had had on the avant garde, but how was so much intellectual integrity going to 'explain' a composer who was openly contemptuous ('We must not turn it [music] into a closed and academic art' he declared⁴) of the intellectual rationalisation of music? It was also a contempt that was effectively composed into the music. Indeed, just as perplexing for the musicologist were the many contradictions in his character, which ranged from rebellious and anti-establishment to snooty, racist and exclusive, reaching the most ethereal realms of absolute quality in his 'fineness', as Roy Howat so eloquently puts it. For Debussy pleasure and associated instinct were the law: he wrote parallel dominant-ninth chords because they pleased him. However, the nature of that 'pleasing' was not random: Debussy wrote slowly and meticulously. If pleasure was the law, it was a very learned genus of pleasure. Nevertheless, compared with Strauss and Schoenberg, who gave ample evidence of intellect in their musical structures (not in the sense that they showed off, but simply that they used procedures that are easily understood as being manifestations of musical ingenuity, such as counterpoint, complex motivic development and so on), which we can disentangle rather more easily (or so we may often think), the intellectual properties of Debussy's music are located on a different plane to these contemporaries of his, and it is a plane we are still prone to tackle with less confidence, if we are even able to tackle it at all. It is a satisfying mystery. Debussy would have been pleased with himself and probably euphoric that strict Schenkerians found his music unanalysable.

All this makes Debussy a unique composer in the great canon of Western music. He occupies a position that seems to become more unassailable at every stride taken in theory and musicology. He must suit many post-modernists, post-structuralists and new musicologists to a tee. New approaches to analysis have been formulated in recognition of the failure of the old. New systems of thinking, not of course peculiar to Debussy, but better suited to his music than his contemporaries, are providing us with sophisticated, exciting areas for the mind to explore in the labyrinth of Debussy's 'rhythmicised time', his 'vegetative circulation of form'. But it is also a paradox that a man who pleased himself, who eschewed an intellectual style of composition in favour of instinct and pleasure, should have necessitated such a feast of intellectual activity. He places a mirror before us that can well prove disconcerting, for we may not always like what we see reflected back at us. As we 'perform' Debussy in multifarious attempts to explain the structure of his music through a long-overdue investigation of his association with *fin-de-siècle* eroticism, a re-evaluation of his links with painting and sculpture and so on, perhaps we should ask just how well we are able to know Debussy and how well the early twenty-first-century psyche is adapted to a union with such a mind. Then in the real performative zone

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Briscoe's ominous words from his stimulating chapter 'Debussy and orchestral performance' in *Debussy in Performance* come to mind:

Since 1950 with the exception of Ansermet, Inghelbrecht, and more recently Boulez, conductors' tempi have sagged noticeably. At the same time, the sense of the exquisite moment is too seldom conveyed for the early scores, and nuance becomes note-to-note tedium. Many recordings of the *Faune* are notorious in this regard. The remarkable art of the early conductors lay in balancing the aesthetic tendencies of nuance and of structural linearity in Debussy's music.⁵

The last sentence is especially worrying. If the sound conjured up in Debussy's name by conductors (and with them singers, pianists and other instrumentalists too) is as far removed from the spirit of the letter as Briscoe suggests, many concerns surrounding his reception now have to be confronted: analysis is only part of a broader cultural process of assimilation and understanding.

It is wholly consistent with these views that the contradictions in Debussy's character and music are so refreshingly and diversely traversed by contributors to this Companion. One conclusion that comes round several times is that we have a long way to go before the mysteries of Debussy the man and Debussy the musician are solved. Indeed, we are not given a great deal of encouragement to think that the man who made pleasure a principle – the law in fact – of the greatest art (and yet who became quite a bourgeois snob once ensconced in his fashionable suburb of Paris) will ever be fully explained in a set of essays. If this sounds discouraging we should hastily add that the attempt to explain and understand has been enthralling, and there are many new insights in the pages that follow. We are at an interesting time in Debussy studies, for the musicological bias of so much distinguished work has been redressed by several important analytical works, the number of which is set to increase. Richard Parks has given us a major study of his musical structures which complements the musicological slant of an excellent volume of *Debussy Studies* (ed. Smith). On the biographical side of things we at last have a single-volume biography that can gracefully supersede the long-established volume by Edward Lockspeiser in the Master Musicians series: we are all indebted to Roger Nichols for his *The Life of Debussy*. Two new studies, too late for references to them to be given in the Companion, include Jane F. Fulcher (ed.), *Debussy and His World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) and Mark DeVoto, *Debussy and the Veil of Tonality: Essays on His Music* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2002).

The Companion is divided into four parts, the first of which deals with the man, his cultural environment and his critical writing. Part II looks closely

at different aspects of his aesthetic outlook and approach to cultural forces around him. Part III is a theoretical and analytical study of different facets of Debussy's compositional technique. Part IV looks at two aspects of Debussy as he is displayed to us now: in performance and through scholarship – an evaluation of his impact in our own time.⁶

Chapter 1, 'Debussy the man', is a re-evaluation of Debussy's character in the light of the primary sources that became available to scholars during the twentieth century. Although it is an assimilation of printed information that is generally available, through the concentration on certain facets of his life, such as his collecting mania, his relationships with women, and others, a strikingly vivid and unusual portrait of him emerges.

Given the relatively uneventful character of Debussy's life, at least to outward appearances, it is important to understand his fixation on Paris, the city of most of his youth and all his adult life – nowhere else would do. In chapter 2, 'Debussy's Parisian affiliations', Barbara L. Kelly examines some of the intellectual currents that drew Debussy to the city and also his response to these currents, including the considerable influence of Baudelaire and the extent to which this literary figure stimulated Debussy's musical innovations with respect to timbre and form. His relationship with great Parisian institutions such as l'Opéra and the Conservatoire is explored, and a final section assesses his growing nationalism in the war years.

Throughout much of his life Debussy wrote about music, mainly as a reviewer, and he was interviewed on his music. Debussy's approach to the word was as uncompromising and controversial as his music. In chapter 3, 'Debussy as musician and critic', Déirdre Donnellon takes the important step of combining a survey of these writings, adding to the tally of known writings, and assimilating them as a basis for understanding Debussy as a musician – an important departure.

Chapter 4 is one of two exceptions from the overall plan of the companion, which is to eschew a generic treatment of the music in favour of a thematic approach. Debussy's numerous dramatic projects, and proto-dramatic projects in the early years, demanded extensive and separate treatment; and this is what they receive in chapter 4, 'Debussy on stage', which sheds light on Debussy in many ways. While Debussy's choice of, say, song texts was pretty much his own, when it came to theatre music, especially opera, the substantial social pressures that came into play (collaborators, institutions, etc.) caused him grave difficulties. Succumbing to pressures to conform may have helped him win the Prix de Rome, but thereafter he suffered whenever he compromised his principles. The chapter also offers fresh angles on *Zuleima* and *Pelléas*.

The other exception to the thematic approach is chapter 5, 'The prosaic Debussy'. Roger Nichols discusses Debussy's word setting in the light of

the brief period in his long-standing devotion to song writing when he chose prose poems. Given that his only completed opera was a setting of a prose libretto, this is a valuable addition to our understanding of Debussy's settings in general and his approach to rhythm in the French language. By extension, as Nichols shows, we can, in the light of these prose-poem settings, re-evaluate his many settings of verse poems.

Debussy used a great many poetic and evocative expression marks in his music that specify the expressive content of his music with a level of precision entirely new in French music. He was surprisingly ambivalent about being labelled an Impressionist composer; he was irritated by the term but proud to be described a disciple of Monet. Chapter 6, 'Debussy and expression', considers Debussy's use of expression markings as a vital component of his mature compositions, and examines the evidence for aesthetic concerns which have parallels in the work of Monet, Cézanne and others.

Chapter 7, 'Exploring the erotic in Debussy's music', ventures into a realm that is not usually believed to have an important place in the study of music. Yet it seems undeniable that elements of eroticism have always swirled around Debussy and his music, serving as tiny threads connecting life and art in a complex, reflexive manner. This chapter includes startling information about Debussy's friends and offers readings in the erotic nature of the music itself.

Few of Debussy's works are entirely independent of nature or other external sources (such as poems, the carnival, etc.), but as Caroline Potter argues in chapter 8, 'Debussy and nature', Debussy's music is not a conventional attempt to represent nature in musical language; neither is nature used as a metaphor for human emotion in the Romantic manner. We discover here a quite different relationship between composer and nature, which is pursued in discussion of passages from a number of works in which nature is evoked.

In chapter 9, 'Debussy's tonality: a formal perspective', application of certain traditional concepts of formal syntax to a composer usually thought resistant to them results in a reappraisal of what are now received views on Debussy, not least his status as a proto-avant-gardist.

Chapter 10, 'The Debussy sound: colour, texture, gesture', offers the only survey in this companion of Debussy's music from some of his earliest to the last works. Understanding the colour of the music is of great importance; indeed, for many years writers would argue that this was the main subject of the music. For all that our current theoretical understanding of Debussy may have proved them misguided, the sonority of Debussy's music is unique and quite evidently a primary structural element in his compositional process.

Much analytical-theoretical literature devoted to Debussy has focused in some fashion upon pitch, rhythmic materials, and forms despite lip service

to the notion that chief among his innovations was his attention to the structural properties of sound divorced from these three elements. Chapter 11, 'Music's inner dance: form, pacing and complexity in Debussy's music', examines the motive aspect of musical form. Easily understood and applied techniques for plotting tendencies in various domains are presented first in theoretical form and then in a series of practical analyses of three works (with reference to many others).

As an alternative to pitch-centred analyses of Debussy's music, chapter 12, 'Debussy's "rhythmicised time"', enters the maze-like domain of the temporal in music. Little attempt is made to construct a theory for the endeavour, though some theoretical precepts are reviewed; the chapter draws on various sources to underpin studies of several works. A clearer picture of how Debussy 'rhythmicised time' emerges, as does the fair prospect for future work in this rewarding field.

Chapter 13, 'Debussy in performance', is an overview of a large and sometimes elusive topic that provides some parameters for modern performers by reference to recordings and other documents by Debussy and those in his immediate circle, including the piano rolls and gramophone recordings made by the composer himself.

Finally, chapter 14, 'Debussy now', considers changing attitudes to Debussy, not least in theory and analysis, where major developments have taken place over the last decade or so. Arnold Whittall conveys the excitements of new discoveries as well as suggesting that there is still much to come. In particular he examines how Debussy successfully encapsulates a form of classicism and a form of modernism – a paradox that was not lost on his contemporaries.