

H-France Review Vol. 11 (October 2011), No. 237

Elliott Antokoletz and Marianne Wheeldon, eds., *Rethinking Debussy*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. xvii + 289 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$99.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-19-975556-9; \$45.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-19-075564-7.

Review by Pamela A. Genova, University of Oklahoma.

Clearly, it can be easily argued that Claude Debussy represents one of the most influential figures in late nineteenth-century European music, a composer whose aesthetic sense and innovative style changed forever the nature of a variety of genres of musical art. Perhaps the most engaging element of Debussy's artistic conception is the way in which he integrates a host of cultural elements from spheres that lie beyond the frontiers of the realm of music, such as literature and visual art, but also philosophy and psychology, in the creation of an aesthetic that embodies a genuinely interdisciplinary, multifaceted form of expression.

In this new collection of essays, the editors bring together the work of a number of authors from the world of Debussy Studies, who originally presented the ideas that inspired these essays at the Claude Debussy International Congress at the University of Texas-Austin. The group includes a number of noted professors of musicology and music theory, as well as accomplished musicians and composers, all of whom have extensive experience working with the art of Debussy. The individual essays included in the collection, ten in total, address a diversity of issues associated with Debussy's life and work, such as specific musical works (four of the essays focus on the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*, for example), questions of the reception of his art, and even the impact of his complicated financial history on his aesthetic sense. This mélange of perspectives allows for the emergence of a richly complex image of Debussy as a cultural figure whose thought and work are considered here in broadly-figured social and intellectual contexts.

As the editors point out, this is a good time to rethink Debussy, in part because 2012 will mark the 150th anniversary of Debussy's birth, but also because of a number of important critical collections that have appeared in recent years, such as *Debussy Studies* (1997), *Debussy in Performance* (1999), *Debussy and His World* (2001), and *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy* (2003).^[1] Additionally, the publication in 2005 of the composer's *Correspondance (1872-1918)* allows for easy and well-organized access to letters that were previously uncollected.^[2] The essays in the current collection are organized into four sections that follow Debussy's artistic production in roughly chronological order: "Early Encounters," "New Perspectives on *Pelléas et Mélisande*," "Career and Creativity," and "Reception Histories." This structural scheme presents the reader with a balanced and logical sense of internal development, as the career of the composer unfolds gradually throughout the volume, while it also groups together essays that are complementary in their core topics.

The two studies presented first in the collection focus on Debussy's earliest experiences with music, exploring how these encounters affect his later work. In Marie Rolf's study, entitled "Debussy's Rites of Spring," the composer's early works inspired by the poetically-evocative figure of the season of spring are examined in relation to his involvement with the Prix de Rome, which he was awarded in 1884 in his third attempt to compete for the coveted prize. In her analysis, Rolf shows how three early works, "Salut, printemps," "L'aimable printemps," and "Printemps," are closely linked one with the other, while

they have close connections as well to later works, for which they can be understood as prototypes. The second essay, written by Roy Howat and entitled “Russian Imprints in Debussy’s Piano Music,” equally treats the early years of Debussy’s musical career, beginning with the link between the composer and developments in the Russian music of his day, specifically underscoring the influence on Debussy of the work of such figures as Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Mily Balakirev, and Modest Mussorgsky. Howat then focuses more widely in his exploration of Debussy’s works for piano, revealing the impact of the work of many more composers, such as Debussy’s contemporaries Emmanuel Chabrier, Gabriel Fauré, and Maurice Ravel.

Among the four essays included in the second section of the collection, one of the most interdisciplinary in scope is Elliott Antokoletz’s study entitled “Music as Encoder of the Unconscious in *Pelléas et Mélisande*.” This essay fits into the well-researched area of critical study that focuses on the relationship between French fin-de-siècle literary and musical art, particularly with regard to the dynamics of Symbolist poetry, as Antokoletz explores the play by Maurice Maeterlinck which was first performed in 1893 and which served as springboard for Debussy’s 1902 opera. Tracing the relationship between the forces of the conscious and the unconscious in the human mind and examining the manners in which this relationship is played out symbolically in literary and musical form, Antokoletz accentuates the importance of the contemporary work of Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet, showing how the beginnings of psychoanalysis affected in a significant way both the dynamics of Symbolist writing and Debussy’s interpretation of the literary movement in the discourse of music.

Another interesting piece in this section is offered by Richard Langham Smith, who also concentrates directly on the Maeterlinck play, with the aim of reconstructing what it was that Debussy actually saw when he attended the play’s single 1893 Paris performance. By returning to the original drama, which Langham Smith describes as the opera’s “first life” (p. 78), we can understand how subsequent interpretive productions of *Pelléas et Mélisande* either do or do not express the playwright’s—and the composer’s—subtle and sometimes elusive conceptions of art. In a third essay, also quite engaging, entitled “Mélisande’s Charm and the Truth of Her Music,” Jann Pasler questions the long-standing view that *Pelléas et Mélisande* represents a radically new artwork marking a dramatic rupture from the conventional forms of French opera in place at the time. Pasler argues that despite the work’s undeniable originality, traces of French musical tradition are indeed discernable in the opera, related to such external influences as the requirements of the Prix de Rome, the repertory of the Opéra and the Opéra-Comique, and the training of the Paris Conservatoire. Suggesting that Debussy was working in fact both against and within the traditions of his art, Pasler examines works identified as predecessors to Debussy’s opera and offers an analysis of the important fin-de-siècle motif of charm, specifically in relation to the role of Mélisande, the simple, mysterious, and exotic female force in the work. Pasler offers without doubt an interesting view of the notion of charm from the perspective of musical art, relating it to the equally-pervasive aesthetic image of the feminine in the art of the era. Additionally, Pasler’s exploration of the dynamics of silence, conceived by the composer as a paradoxical form of expression, reveals Debussy’s inventive interest in unveiling the invisible, in making heard the absence of sound.

Finally, David Grayson’s “Debussy’s Ideal Pelléas and the Limits of Authorial Intent” rounds out the second section of the collection and focuses on the early performance history of the opera and on the role of Pelléas, providing a useful counterpoint to Pasler’s work on the principal female role. Grayson details the difficulty of casting a performer for the role, especially because of the remarkable vocal range required (light baritone for the first three acts, then a strong tenor tessitura for Act IV) and describes how the idea of casting a female as Pelléas became an option discussed on more than one occasion. Eventually Debussy was obliged to create two versions of the part, one written for tenor and one for baritone. Interestingly, too, the role of Pelléas was complicated by the nature of the personality of the figure; sensitive and gentle, he was rumored to have homosexual attributes and was lampooned by Jean Lorrain in an provocative article entitled “Les Pelléastres,” which incensed Debussy by its portrayal of highly effeminate dandies clearly linked to the composer’s artful conception of his hero.

In the third section, which investigates Debussy's career and the general social context in which he produced his art, Denis Herlin, in "An Artist High and Low, or, Debussy and Money," offers a thorough overview of the composer's difficult relationship to his financial situation, a subject that much preoccupied Debussy. Only during two short periods of his life did he seem not to worry incessantly about money: 1885-1889, when he benefitted from the stipend provided by the Prix de Rome, and 1902-1905, when the success of *Pelléas et Mélisande* provided him with ample funds to support him for some time. In the years between those two periods, Debussy received subsidies from close friends and advances from his publisher, Georges Hartmann, and fell subsequently into heavy debt. Later, when Debussy was an established figure in the music world and respectably paid for his work, his debts still increased, however, due to some extent to his taste for a comfortable lifestyle and his obligation to pay alimony to his first wife. Yet it is interesting to note that, as Herlin demonstrates, many of Debussy's financial woes stem from another source, in fact directly from his own deliberate choices to reject taking on any teaching, to refuse offers of official positions as a conductor or choral director, and to eschew the lucrative option of a performing career. We discover thus the conundrum of Debussy's economic circumstances: the more he earned, the more he spent and, ultimately, the more he owed. Bolstered by several meticulous charts detailing such elements as the sale of Debussy's works and the vagaries of his annual income, Herlin's study presents an in-depth view of the links between the composer's artistic production and the often restrictive conditions of his daily life.

Next, the second essay in this third part of the collection, written by Robert Orledge, is, frankly, quite unique. He divides his text into two parts; the first provides a comprehensive case study in which the discussion centers on the possible reasons for which Debussy never completed his opera *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Orledge suggests that Debussy's failure to finish the work results from a combination of elements: financial challenges, ill health, the imposing and apparently hard-to-follow success of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and, interestingly, the composer's incapacity to complete dramatic works without outside intervention. This final factor is linked to the second half of Orledge's essay, which presents the background of how Orledge himself undertook the challenge to complete *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Orledge explains that Debussy was quite interested in the classical idea of destiny, as he notes the composer's identification with the figure of Hamlet, as well as his fascination with the work of Edgar Allan Poe, in which destiny holds a considerable role. Orledge tells us that there are at least eight reasons why Debussy never completed even a first draft of the score of the *Usher* work—from domestic troubles with his second wife to the complications of translating Poe's prose into musical form to the constant distraction of financial concerns, and beyond—and he tells us of his own desire to "realiz[e] Debussy's destiny for him" (p. 209). For the *Œuvres complètes de Claude Debussy*, Orledge prepared thus an "Urtext version" (p. 209), which proved to be a complicated undertaking, given Debussy's tendency to omit clefs, key signatures, and accidentals, as well as his second wife's generous but intrusive gesture to give away to his friends, after Debussy's death, his sketches for the piece. By establishing repeated motifs, such as what he calls the "Usher chord" (p. 211), Orledge was ultimately able to complete the score in a manner satisfactorily *à la Debussy*.

With regard to the reception of Debussy's art, the collection proposes two essays that treat different facets of this important aspect of the composer's continued cultural importance. Marianne Wheeldon examines the contemporary impact in the critical press of the late works of Debussy, those produced between 1914 and 1918, the year of his death. She points out that in 1920 the first truly scholarly evaluation of his work appears in *La Revue Musicale*, accompanied by a musical supplement of ten commissioned works, entitled *Le Tombeau de Claude Debussy*. Wheeldon reviews these ten pieces, suggesting that together they form a kind of textual legacy to the composer. She also speculates on the striking lack of attention in the journal issue to Debussy's late works (there is apparently no mention of or allusion to them whatsoever). As for James R. Briscoe's essay, the focus is the reception of Debussy's work in the United States from 1902 to 1918. He shows the revealing sea change discernable in the viewpoint of the American professional critics, as their reactions to Debussy's innovations are

transformed from shock and incomprehension to understanding and appreciation. Additionally, Briscoe examines the reception of Debussy's music by city (Boston, Chicago, New York), as well as by genre (orchestral works, piano works, opera), in an approach that provides a useful view of the general American musical tastes of the early twentieth century and its relationship to European art.

In sum, the engaging perspectives and careful research that characterize these essays make for a very useful and innovative collection of work. Truly multidisciplinary in scope, the collection will appeal to students and scholars of Music and French Studies, as well as to a much broader public, as it truly offers a compelling rethinking of the life and work of the celebrated, inventive, and complex man who was Claude Debussy.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Elliott Antokoletz and Marianne Wheeldon, "Introduction: Debussy's Music and its Contexts"

Part I: Early Encounters

Marie Rolf, "Debussy's Rites of Spring"

Roy Howat, "Russian Imprints in Debussy's Piano Music"

Part II: New Perspectives on Pelléas and Mélisande

Jann Pasler, "Mélisande's Charm and the Truth of her Music"

Richard Langham Smith, "Aimer ainsi: Rekindling the Lamp in Pelléas"

David Grayson, "Debussy's Ideal Pelléas and the Limits of Authorial Intent"

Elliott Antokoletz, "Music as Encoder of the Unconscious in Pelléas et Mélisande"

Part III: Career and Creativity

Denis Herlin, "An Artist High and Low, or Debussy and Money"

Robert Orledge, "Destiny Should Allow Me to Finish It': The Problems involved in the Reconstruction and Orchestration of The Fall of the House of Usher (1908-1917)"

Part IV: Reception Histories

James R. Briscoe, "Debussy in Daleville: Toward Early Modernist Hearing in the United States"

Marianne Wheeldon, "Tombeau de Claude Debussy: the Early Reception of the Late Works"

NOTES

[1] Richard Langham Smith, ed., *Debussy Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); James R. Briscoe, ed., *Debussy in Performance* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999); Fane F. Fulcher, ed., *Debussy and His World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Simon Trezise, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[2] Claude Debussy, *Correspondance (1872-1918)*, ed. François Lesure and Denis Herlin (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).

Pamela A. Genova
University of Oklahoma
genova@ou.edu

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172