

---

H-France Review Vol. 15 (February 2015), No. 16

Andrew Deruchie, *The French Symphony at the Fin de Siècle: Style, Culture, and the Symphonic Tradition*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2013. viii + 294 pp. Figures, notes, musical examples, bibliography, and index. \$85.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-58046-382-9.

Review by Keith E. Clifton, Central Michigan University.

The symphony in France has often lagged behind Germany and Austria where popularity with audiences, critical acclaim, available recordings, and box office receipts are concerned. While an orchestra season without works by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Mahler, or Bruckner is unthinkable, French composers such as Dubois, d'Indy, Ropartz, and Lalo are routinely overlooked. A partial explanation for this neglect stems from changes in the concert milieu itself during the nineteenth century. As Walter Frisch has argued, educated middle class audiences gradually replaced the aristocracy as the primary consumers of symphonic music. Consequently, programs became more conservative, emphasizing established Austro-German titans over French neophytes; the trend is clearly evident when examining the 1883-84 season of the Parisian Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, where only three musical selections out of nearly fifty were by living composers. Efforts to counter this trend emerged through several concert series in the capital, including the Concerts populaires founded by Jules Pasdeloup in 1861, the Concerts Colonne created by Édouard Colonne in 1873, and Charles Lamoureux's Concerts Lamoureux, begun in 1881.[1]

Perhaps most significant was the Société nationale de musique, founded in 1871 by Romain Bussine and Camille Saint-Saëns, and whose members included Jules Massenet and Gabriel Fauré. Société programs featured chamber and orchestral works, initially all French, with the goal of including as many native compositions as possible, thus reflecting its well-known motto, *Ars Gallica*. With the exception of Berlioz, whose hybrid orchestral pieces challenge the traditional, four-movement design, the genre did not reach its apex until the fin de siècle, briefly eclipsing its Teutonic counterparts in the estimation of some critics.

*The French Symphony* takes as its starting point seven "most familiar" examples (p. 3), although it can be argued that only three—by Saint-Saëns, Franck, and d'Indy—could be described that way to most listeners. Employing a case-study approach, Deruchie shows how all use cyclical devices of various types to connect the movements. The symphonies were composed between 1886 and 1903. An opening chapter on Saint-Saëns's third or "Organ" symphony illustrates the composer's longstanding quest to create a successful large-scale instrumental work. His penchant for eclecticism is clearly evident, including subsuming four movements into two larger units and employing Franz Liszt-style thematic transformation reminiscent of the symphonic poem *Die Ideale*. Reflecting Saint-Saëns's three principal vocations (pianist, organist, and composer), the symphony ultimately succeeds through charm rather than Germanic gravitas, a topic that merits closer scrutiny beyond Deruchie's brief comments. The symphony premiered in 1886 during a tense period that also witnessed Saint-Saëns's resignation from the Société (largely over the promotion of foreign music) and the election of Franck and his pupil d'Indy as presidents.

Deruchie's discussion of Franck's Symphony in D minor--his only proper symphony and arguably the best-known French example ever written--reveals that the work became popular only after the composer's death. The piece has also engendered its fair share of criticism, with Martin Cooper questioning whether it even deserves the appellation of symphony.[2] A gradual progression from darkness to light reveals a "redemption paradigm" (p. 71) common to numerous minor-mode symphonies including Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth. Deruchie also uncovers connections between the opening cyclic motto and music by Beethoven, Wagner, and Liszt. In this chapter, as throughout the book, he gives short shrift to cultural, historical, and reception issues in favor of dense analytical narratives that will challenge most readers, even with score in hand; fortunately, charts with more lucid summaries of selected movements appear throughout the book.

A multifaceted discussion of Édouard Lalo's Symphony in G Minor and Ernest Chausson's Symphony in B-Flat Major occupies chapters three and four. Lalo's extensive use of discarded themes from the opera *Fiesque* has led commentators to describe the work as little more than arrangements of previous music. Deruchie argues the opposite, praising Lalo's "real effort" (p. 93) in the Adagio and comparing the symphony with that of his contemporaries. Upending the typical *per aspera ad astra* (darkness to light) paradigm where minor key symphonies end in major, Lalo's concludes in minor, recalling Brahms's Fourth and Mahler's Sixth. In Deruchie's astute interpretation, "Lalo may also have hoped that a tragic conclusion would lend his extraordinarily concise work a seriousness that would better its chances of holding its own with the weighty canonized masterpieces" (pp. 116-17). Chausson's symphony, containing a less rigorous cyclical procedure than the other works discussed and criticized for its similarities to Franck's, reveals Wagnerian echoes, congruence with the literary symbolist movement, and a "voile de tristesse" (p. 122) through vacillations between the tonic major and its parallel minor.[3]

The next pair of chapters covers two symphonies by Vincent d'Indy, one of the most contentious figures in fin de siècle French music, largely because of his nationalistic and anti-Semitic views. Deruchie begins with the composer's most frequently performed work, the *Symphonie sur un chant montagnard français* or "Mountain" symphony. Displaying a rigorous use of cyclism--the folksong heard in the introduction is transformed into the main theme of each movement and the coda of the finale--the work reflects the composer's right-wing ideals by flaunting a distinctly un-Beethovenian style that rejects his stated disdain for the "decadent" (p. 157) symphonies of Schubert, Schumann, and Mendelssohn. The less familiar second symphony follows the established four-movement pattern while combining traditional and modernist elements. Rejecting the contention that the work eschews novel approaches, Deruchie posits that it contains "distinctly modern music" (p. 205) through the use of whole tone scales, atypical instrumentation, and innovative scoring.[4]

The regrettably small oeuvre of Paul Dukas features several important works, including the ballet *La Péri*--famous for its opening fanfare--and the symphonic poem *L'Apprenti sorcier*, used in Disney's 1940 film *Fantasia*. His sole symphony, however, is often neglected, a trend this author hopes might be reversed as the work has much to recommend it. Praised early on by critics for its "classical spirit" (p. 228), the symphony reflects the composer's respect for non-programmatic absolute music or *musique pure* (p. 233). Skeptical of cyclical devices, Dukas forged a personal approach to unification through the clever manipulation of thematic material and by using techniques reminiscent of Beethoven, Chausson, and Debussy.

There is much to admire in *The French Symphony*, a book destined to become a standard resource on its topic. The author is to be commended for his probing examination of a critical era in the history of French instrumental music and for exploring key works in more musical depth than any previous study to date. Numerous examples, generally in piano score, amplify the text. As a monograph derived from a doctoral dissertation, the book's main weakness is a focus on the analytical at the expense of cultural, historical, sociological, and reception issues.[5] Deruchie covers the same works in the same order as the dissertation with many passages simply condensed or rephrased. The following passage on Franck's

Symphony is representative, placing his observations largely out of reach for those without advanced musical training: “Expert listeners might relish how Franck converges on the tonic, revealing it as the axis symmetrically bisecting D-flat major and A Minor, and they might delight in the Schumannesque syntactic pun of prefacing the main theme with an authentic cadential progression” (p. 59).

Simply put, dissertations and books have different audiences and require unique methods of communication, not to mention a clear sense of balance. A glossary of important musical terms explaining, for example, *Freudenthema* (p. 23) and *Klangfläche* (p. 46) would have amplified the author’s observations and potential value to a broader swath of readers. Ultimately, many questions are left unanswered: how was the “Mountain” symphony received in southern France, closer to the region that inspired it, and how did these symphonies fare outside Paris? In what ways did they influence those that followed? Pertinent examples for consideration could include Dubois’s *Symphonie française*, Ropartz’s *Petite Symphonie*, and Honegger’s Symphony in C, a work with a title identical to Dukas’s, whom Honegger revered. The lack of any type of conclusion is also puzzling, especially after Deruchie’s perceptive introductory chapter.

In sum, this is a book for the initiated. Scholars, conductors, and others interested in exploring overlooked treasures of the French orchestral repertory will emerge with a deeper understanding of the scores and ample material for reflection. At the same time, given a frequently knotty prose style, it is less likely to inspire new converts.

#### NOTES

[1] Walter Frisch, *Music in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Norton, 2013), pp. 174-77 and 185-87. On the French symphony as a whole, see Brian J. Hart and A. Peter Brown, eds., “The French Symphony After Berlioz: From the Second Empire to the First World War,” in *The Symphonic Repertoire*, Vol. 3, *The European Symphony from ca. 1800 to ca. 1930: Great Britain, Russia, and France* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 527-722 and Timothy Jones, “Nineteenth-Century Orchestral and Chamber Music” in Richard Langham Smith and Caroline Potter, eds., *French Music Since Berlioz* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 82-89.

[2] Martin Cooper, *French Music from the Death of Berlioz to the Death of Fauré* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 49-50.

[3] The concept of *tristesse* is not confined to Chausson’s instrumental music, as a potent example may be found in his *Chanson perpétuelle* (1898) for voice and piano featuring Charles Cros’s lugubrious poetry and music reminiscent of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*.

[4] Here the author refutes and somewhat oversimplifies musicologist Brian Hart’s work, which highlights the composer’s ambivalence toward modernism. As Deruchie writes, “d’Indy did not consider tradition and progress irreconcilable opposites” (p. 188). See Hart, “The Symphony in Theory and Practice in France, 1900-1914,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1994), pp. 156-58 and 211-24 and “Vincent d’Indy and the Development of the French Symphony,” *Music and Letters* 87 (2006): 248-53. On d’Indy’s early career and its relationship to his later disrepute, see Jann Pasler’s “Deconstructing d’Indy, or the Problem of a Composer’s Reputation” in *Writing About Music: Essays on Music, Culture, and Politics* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 101-39.

[5] Andrew Deruchie, “The French Symphony at the Fin de Siècle: Style, Culture, and the Symphonic Tradition,” (Ph.D. dissertation, McGill University, 2008).

Keith E. Clifton  
Central Michigan University  
[clift1ke@cmich.edu](mailto:clift1ke@cmich.edu)

Copyright © 2015 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