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Barbara L. Kelly, *Music and Ultra-Modernism in France: A Fragile Consensus, 1913-1939*. Woodbridge and Rochester, N.Y.: The Boydell Press, 2013. x + 257 pp. Illustrations, music examples, footnotes, bibliography, and index. £55.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN 9781843838104.

Review by Laura Hamer, Liverpool Hope University.

Barbara L. Kelly's *Music and Ultra-Modernism in France: A Fragile Consensus, 1913-1939* presents a rich and nuanced exploration of musical Modernism within interwar France that challenges received, and accepted, understandings of this period. Accounts of musical Modernism—focused both on and beyond France—have tended to present the First World War as a moment of complete rupture that created an irreconcilable divide between the generations. By extending the standard demarcation of the interwar period backwards to include the First World War—1913-1939—and by highlighting musical and aesthetic concerns that flourished both pre- and post-conflict, Kelly convincingly challenges this entrenched view of the impact of the war. Through probing contemporary debates concerning the direction French music should take, to which composers, critics, and musicologists all eagerly contributed, Kelly suggests a much higher level of continuity before and after the First World War, and a much greater consensus between the generations than has hitherto been acknowledged. Kelly builds her compelling argumentation on extensive archival and analytical research. Her expertise in reception and criticism is much in evidence. She draws skilfully upon the press to demonstrate not only the liveliness with which aesthetic and musical debates were played out in print, but also both the care taken by many composers to exploit the media to their full advantage and the important relationships developed between critics and composers. In acknowledging the key role played by the press, Kelly situates her work within the wider context of many scholars of French music who pay close attention to reception. This concentration upon the press has brought together many of our colleagues, including Kelly, on the Francophone Music Criticism Project (established, under the direction of Katherine Ellis and Mark Everist, in 2006).^[1]

Kelly clearly lays out her revisionist agenda in her well-crafted introduction. Firstly, her text aims to challenge received historical narratives of interwar music history. As already highlighted, the study concerns itself with questions of continuity and rupture, particularly between “Debussy’s generation and the one that followed” (p. 9). This new monograph also reminds us that the frivolous image of Parisian musical life in the 1920s—hard though it is to evade—is only “one side to a richer and more complex musical environment” (p. 4). In addition to contesting accepted narratives of French music history, Kelly also confronts the position often accorded to French music in more general accounts of musical Modernism. Whilst acknowledging the more pluralistic understanding of musical Modernisms that has developed over recent years, she also, rightly, points out that “for a long time interwar music in France has been largely absent from many narratives of musical modernism, which have tended to prioritise Austro-German traditions and composers” (p. 6). Secondly, Kelly’s text probes notions of French musical identity; issues highly pertinent to successive generations of French composers. By “examining the complex ways in which successive generations of composers set and challenged the musical agenda in France” (p. 4), Kelly’s book taps directly into contemporary debates on the direction French music should take. Through tracing “the evolution of sonority as a distinctive French modernist strand” (pp. 8-9) she cuts to the heart of contemporary (and persisting) concerns over the nature of musical

“Frenchness,” as a fascination with sonority and timbre have been identified as distinctly French musical traits since the time of Berlioz. In describing the French desire to create a musical-cultural identity in terms of sound, Richard Taruskin has specified “that cluster of values—purity, sobriety, objectivity, grace, impersonal precision, etc.—by which the French defined themselves,”^[2] Kelly’s identification of the musical priorities of the interwar period as “simplicity, the ‘stripped-down style’ (*style dépouillé*), counterpoint, melody, sonority (with its concern for tonality, modality and polytonality) and classicism” (p. 9) reveals a high degree of continuity in the pure and precise musical-aesthetic aims of French music.

These revisionist aims recur throughout the narrative of Kelly’s book. Although divided into seven discrete chapters, many of the main strands of her argument are interwoven, with the development of various discussion points relating to key debates, figures, works, and texts occurring in different chapters. Whilst this gives the book, taken as whole, a very high level of cohesion, it could (at least partially) deter potential readers seeking self-standing chapters.

In chapter one, Kelly considers the debates around remembering Debussy in the interwar period. Already recognised as a composer of national (and international) stature during his lifetime, Debussy was quickly constructed as a national symbol after his death. How Debussy’s memory should be honoured, however, was hotly contested, and musicologists played key roles in this debate. Kelly contrasts the approaches taken by his early biographer, Léon Vallas, with others, notably Henry Prunières, who wrote about him shortly after his death.^[3] Kelly astutely observes that the contemporary debates surrounding controlling how Debussy should be remembered hinged around where the authority to record his achievements lay. Controversially, Vallas had not known Debussy; he based his scholarship on working with primary sources, largely scores and press items. For some contemporary observers, this lack of a personal connection to the dead composer undermined his authority to shape his memory. As Kelly aptly comments, Debussy “became a spectre that hung over French music of the interwar period” (p. 15). In chapter two, she explores the question of leadership that arose following Debussy’s death, and examines the competing claims of Satie and Ravel. In observing that both Debussy and Ravel acknowledged Satie as an important precursor to their own innovations in the pre-war period, Kelly makes a convincing case for viewing Ravel’s early circle, focused on the SMI and the Apaches, and not Les Nouveaux Jeunes, as the first to elect Satie as their figurehead. Satie, of course, was a notoriously difficult figure. Relationships between him and Ravel became increasingly strained, particularly following the war, when Ravel came under pressure to conform, and Satie was famously proclaimed as the leader of the emerging avant-garde, focused on Les Six, by Cocteau.^[4] Satie’s tenuous position as leader was to be short-lived, as relations between him and several members of Les Six also quickly deteriorated.

In chapter three, Kelly turns her attention to the central role played by the press in shaping the musical aesthetics of the interwar period. The importance of press debates to French musical life and aesthetics, and the centrality of critics in forming public opinion, had been well established in the nineteenth century, and both continued unabated throughout the interwar period. Strengthening her claim for a greater continuity pre- and post-World War I than is often acknowledged, Kelly points to the enduring importance of composer-critic partnerships, such as that established between Emile Vuillermoz and Georges Migot. Building on the sorts of polemical writing and criticism which Debussy engaged in during the *fin de siècle*, she also highlights the survival of younger generations of composers, notably members of Les Six, exploiting the press for self-promotion. Interestingly, Kelly’s discussion also touches upon the relationship between the emerging discipline of musicology and music criticism which developed during the interwar period, when, alongside the older tradition of the composer-critic, the new breed of professionally-trained musicologist as critic, including such scholars as Vallas, Prunières, and André Coeuroy, also established itself. Moving slightly away from thick textual analysis and reception studies, Kelly engages more directly with her musical sources and scores in chapter four, which is richly illustrated with musical examples.

Kelly identifies three specifically musical characteristics that connect French interwar music with that which pre-dated it: sonority, exoticism, and abstraction. Experimentation with sonority, a key aspect of Debussy's compositional palette, continued to fascinate such figures as Ravel, Koechlin, Milhaud, Messiaen, and Jolivet; as Kelly observes, "the quest for sonority became an enduring French preoccupation" (p. 95). Exoticism was a well-established trait of French music, from at least the later nineteenth century. Composers, however, tended to create imaginary exotic sound worlds, rather than attempting to engage directly with music from other cultures. As Kelly shows, this trend began to shift during the interwar period, when some composers—though famously not Ravel—began to engage with authentic non-French sources. (Messiaen's use of aspects of Indian music provides a well-known example of this.) Kelly also shows that the emergence of abstract, pure forms, so beloved of the interwar period, which found their ultimate expression in Neoclassicism (both within and beyond France), was a gradual process. Usually presented as a reaction to the horrors of World War One, Kelly points to Debussy's late Sonatas in particular as antecedents to the formalism that would take hold following the war.

In chapter five, Kelly explores how composers, critics, and musicologists arrived at the "fragile consensus" hinted at in her title. Through examining the aesthetic debates played out between key figures, including Roussel, Landormy, Roland-Manuel, Ravel, Vuillermoz, Milhaud, and Ansermet, in public print and private letters, she convincingly demonstrates that simplicity, the "stripped-down-style" (*style dépouillé*), melody, and counterpoint emerged as the most desirable attributes of post-war music. She comments that "the consensus over musical priorities continued to hold until Jeune France posed a direct challenge in 1936" (p. 183). In chapter six, Kelly convincingly demonstrates that the famous image of the frivolous nature of music in 1920s France, drawing its inspiration from popular sources, jazz, and the everyday, is only one side of a much more nuanced picture. As she asserts, "a strain of religious thinking pervaded and sustained the period, working with the collective sense of post-war trauma and infiltrating into what we often term neoclassical thinking about the nature and purpose of the work of art and the role of the artist" (p. 189).

Ironically, in light of France's secularism law of 1905, the strong tradition of sacred music in France—focused upon the organ tradition, the Church-music-training emphasis of the Schola Cantorum and the Ecole Niedermeyer, and the plainchant revival—continued unabated into the interwar period, with musicians such as Dupré and Messiaen playing key roles. She points to the connection between the widespread impact of Jacques Maritain's neo-Thomist philosophy upon intellectuals and the composer-as-artisan trope of Neoclassicism.^[5] This is notably present in Stravinsky; one of the most important influences on contemporary French composers throughout this period. In this context, rather than appearing as an abrupt break with the immediate past, the spiritual concerns of Messiaen and Jolivet in the 1930s appear to represent a continuity of underlying sacred concerns consistently present throughout the interwar years. Kelly rounds off her new monograph with a closely-written conclusion which draws together and resolves the disparate and interwoven strands of her argument.

Music and Ultra-Modernism in France: A Fragile Consensus, 1913-1939 is a fine achievement. With the exception of some considerations of Jane Bathori and Lili and Nadia Boulanger, however, the key figures discussed throughout the book are all male. Unfortunately, this tends to make this study another patriarchal history of music. (I do admit myself to be biased on this point.) Amongst the many female musicians of interwar France, Germaine Tailleferre would have been an apt figure to consider, not least because the activities of Les Six are of central importance within Kelly's narrative, although only Milhaud, Poulenc, Auric, and Honegger are given detailed attention. The exclusion of Durey, who withdrew from the group and from mainstream French musical life early on, is justifiable, that of Tailleferre much less so. With regards to Les Six's relationship with Satie and Ravel, as relations between them deteriorated and their respective advocates tussled over who should emerge as the new leader of the avant-garde immediately following Debussy's death and the end of World War One, Tailleferre, who managed to maintain close connections with both (whilst fellow members of the group

either chose sides or fell out with the pair) and whose music clearly shows the imprint of each mentor-figure, could have made a fascinating study.[6] In terms of the role played by critics and criticism in shaping public opinion of the younger generation, Tailleferre could again have made an intriguing case-study, as the press attention she attracted—whilst extensive—also tended to be complicated by the gendered language which dogged the reception of female composers well into the twentieth century.[7] Tailleferre’s compositional language also exemplifies the simplicity and attention to melody and counterpoint that emerged as key musical features of the period.

Music and Ultra-Modernism in France: A Fragile Consensus, 1913-1939 presents both a challenging and a compelling study of the musical culture of interwar France. In contesting the received notion of the First World War creating a moment of complete rupture, by exploring the greater continuity which spanned the years of conflict, Kelly presents a nuanced and revised understanding of the period. Her study also boldly opposes those who remember only the more flippant, “art-and-the-everyday” aspect of interwar French music and downgrade French contributions to musical Modernisms throughout this period by privileging the dominant Austro-German narrative stemming from Adorno. *Music and Ultra-Modernism in France: A Fragile Consensus, 1913-1939* makes an important contribution to French music studies. Beyond those with a particular interest in France, it will also be essential reading for all scholars of music’s Modernisms.

NOTES

[1] <http://music.sas.ac.uk/fmc> (accessed 26 June 2014).

[2] Richard Taruskin, “Back to Whom? Neoclassicism as Ideology,” *Nineteenth-Century Music* 16(1992-1993): 290.

[3] Léon Vallas, *Debussy* (Paris: Plon, 1927); Léon Vallas, *Les Idées de Claude Debussy* (Paris: Les Editions musicales de la Librairie de France, 1927); Léon Vallas, *Claude Debussy et son temps* (Paris: Alcan, 1932). Kelly particularly contrasts the approach taken in Vallas’s early biographies with that of contributors to the 1920 Debussy special edition of *La Revue Musicale*, which was initiated by Henry Prunières: ‘A la mémoire de Claude Debussy’, *La Revue musicale* 1/2(December 1920).

[4] Jean Cocteau, *Le Coq et l’arlequin* (Paris: Sirène, 1918).

[5] This idea is also explored in Stephen Walsh, *Stravinsky, A Creative Spring: Russia and France, 1882-1934* (New York: Knopf, 1999).

[6] See Germaine Tailleferre, “Mémoires à l’emporte-pièce,” *La Revue internationale de la Musique française* 19(February 1986): 7-82.

[7] For a consideration of the impact of gendered criticism on Tailleferre’s reception during the interwar period see Laura Hamer, “Germaine Tailleferre and Hélène Perdriat’s *Le Marchand d’Oiseaux* (1923): French Feminist Ballet?,” *Studies in Musical Theatre* 4/1(August 2010): 213-220.

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