
H-France Review Vol. 19 (December 2019), No. 269

Catherine Kautsky, *Debussy's Paris: Piano Portraits of the Belle Époque*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. 254 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$40.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781442269828.

Gurminder Kaur Bhogal, *Claude Debussy's Clair de Lune*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 166 pp. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$74.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780190696061.

Review by David Code, University of Glasgow.

Radically different in scope and contents, the two books under review read together as suggestive contemporary instances of a genre of writing—call it “public” or “popular” musicology—of long and honourable standing, which seems now, after the so-called “culture wars,” to be enjoying noticeably new prominence. Put simply: such works generally aim to gather together some set of relatively well-established ideas about music, in order to communicate them (no doubt with some degree of original inflection or elaboration) in terms accessible to a broad audience of non-specialist listeners. If the genre claims new vibrancy today, that is because it stands, to put it somewhat grandly, as a concrete embodiment of the widespread, programmatic urge across many disciplines to challenge once-rigid boundaries between “high and low” culture, and to question, at the very least, the status of “elite” knowledge about cultural forms generally created, in large part, for ostensibly simpler ends such as “entertainment” or “enjoyment.”

As we might expect, few archival or technical minutiae clutter the pages of Kautsky or Bhogal, whose methodological leanings tend more or less inevitably towards the approaches honoured not long ago, in the title of a 2011 Oxford Handbook, as “The New Cultural History of Music.” Putting aside an obvious question about how these “new” approaches might differ from older variants—which the editor, Jane Fulcher, considers from various angles in her introduction—more fruitful avenues for critical reflection emerge if we consider Fulcher’s plainest methodological précis alongside some closing thoughts from Michael Steinberg’s afterword to the same volume. Here is Fulcher: “The new cultural history of music seeks to investigate...arenas in which a close musical analysis must interact with a sophisticated understanding of the semiotic or linguistic dimension while maintaining a comprehensive grasp of the relevant social, cultural, and political dynamics.” [1] It may seem easy enough to calibrate Fulcher’s first three load-bearing adjectives—“close,” “sophisticated,” “comprehensive”—to a wide spectrum of specialist and non-specialist usage. But the last—“relevant”—carries a strong whiff of question-begging that clearly cuts to the heart of the methods at issue. And it is even harder to comprehend her pivotal modal verb, “must.” Which musical or cultural “arenas,” precisely, summon the interactive obligation here described, and who enforces it? Compare Steinberg: “The new cultural history of music strives to understand musical form and musical practice as modes of knowledge. Ours is a melancholy

knowledge because of the inarticulacy and untranslatability of the music in which we strive to hear and know the world. That melancholy is overcome, if only momentarily, when acts of listening succeed in translating the untranslatable." [2] Here, the project rests on no impersonal imperative or easy claim to relevance: it is, of course, *us*, "we," who "strive to hear and know the world" through music, *if we so choose*. And the closing contradiction (building on Walter Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator" [3]) finely distills the problems inherent to all interpretive acts that follow.

This clear-eyed sense of choices and problems offers a good opening to questions potentially directed just as fruitfully at erudite essays like those in the Oxford Handbook as at the more accessible variants in Kautsky and Bhogal. Put simply, to read them in this light is to ask how, if at all, they respect the essential inarticulacy of the music they investigate, and register the ineluctable limits of their efforts to translate its sounds and gestures as traces of a "world" of "social, cultural, and political dynamics"? The wider significance of such questions quickly emerges, furthermore, with the recognition that the largely secondary nature of the research in such books renders them suggestive, popularising sedimentations of cultural-historical tropes whose persistence in more specialist literatures, too, could well reward similar scrutiny.

Kautsky, a professional, university-tenured pianist, begins her highly engaged, often entertaining exploration of Debussy's Belle époque "piano portraits" with a preface that fortuitously encapsulates one exemplary question, perhaps best approached through another glance at Steinberg. His afterword, based largely on his own observations of rehearsals for a concert performance of *Fidelio* by the West-Östlicher Divan orchestra of Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said, closes the Handbook with thoughts about the "post-canonical" ramifications of those recent "culture wars." Following a "seismic shift" between generations, he suggests, we find ourselves in a world for which "[t]he canon belongs to no one. Beethoven is a foreign 'country' to young Germans as well." Further: "The question is not the de-Germanization of Beethoven but rather the ways in which his Germanness (among many other abiding, specific contexts) does or does not signify." [4] Consider, by contrast, Kautsky's candid early admission: "the music I first knew and loved is the music of Vienna--Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, and Schubert." Only much later, on a "sabbatical year in the midnineties," apparently, did she develop "a fascination with the intimate interactions between music and social history" that she finds "nowhere...more evident than in the music of Debussy and the city of Paris" (p. xii).

Note the implicit but unmistakable distinction. The "music of Vienna" undoubtedly includes that by the four named "greats." But however deeply social history must have affected their lives, too, nobody would think to present all their multifarious piano works as Mozart's (or whoever's) "Vienna: Piano Portraits of the Habsburg (or post-Revolutionary) Era." Somehow, the obligation to cultural history--or to some intimate interaction with a highly specific sustaining world--falls with much greater weight on Debussy, whose French identity forestalls, as if by definition, any pretensions to the universality so often granted his Austro-German forebears.

No doubt one reason readily comes to mind. Following the precedent of nineteenth-century character pieces, Debussy published many of his piano works with programmatic titles, rather than the generic labels (sonata, fantasia, *et al*) of the Viennese classics. [5] But to acknowledge the historical precedent is only to refine the question further. Several times, Kautsky singles out Robert Schumann as a key precursor, whose music bears "intriguing similarities" (p.xxvii), even a "kinship" (p. 19) with Debussy's--suggesting at one point that "[d]espite different nationalities,

eras, and musical styles, the affinities between the two men, both so fascinated with fluid identities and alter egos, are remarkable” (p. 138). Maybe so. But nobody would hear *Carnaval, Kreisleriana, Fantasiestücke, Waldszenen* and all the rest as piano portraits drawn from life in Schumann's Zwickau (or Leipzig, or Dresden, or wherever)—as if such precise geographical origin offered the most relevant hook to cultural history. When geography does gain substantive import for Schumann—*Fasschingschwank aus Wien* is perhaps the clearest case—it is not through some quasi-osmotic interaction with a world in which he happens to find himself, but through pointed, imaginative play with consciously selected communicative tropes. In many other cases (e.g. the nods to *commedia dell'arte* tradition), the programmatic hints bear little, if any connection to a location of composition.

Note, in this light, that amidst all the Debussy titles we encounter under Kautsky's programmatic chapter headings—e.g. “Pierrot Conquers Paris,” “Clowns, Poets, and Circus Daredevils,” “Asia on a Pedestal”—a great many are not of French origin at all. For just a few: “Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses” and “Hommage à M. Pickwick, S. S. M. P. C.” (both *Préludes* bk. II) acknowledge inspiration from the Englishman Charles Dickens; “Ondine” (*Préludes* bk. II) draws on the German E. T. A. Hoffmann (also, of course, crucial to Schumann); “Ce qu'à vu le vent d'Ouest” (*Préludes* bk. I) arguably nods to the Danish Hans Christian Andersen (and/or another Englishman, Percy Bysshe Shelley); the whole chapter on “Edgar Allan Poe's 'Imp of the Perverse’” traces an American line of inspiration also prominent, in much different guise, in the cakewalk pieces discussed (alongside various Italian and Spanish dances) under the heading “Dance Steps Out of Line.” To recall Fulcher's most contentious adjective, we might well wonder just how relevant Debussy's French identity proved to his creative musings on these richly diverse, pan-European and transatlantic aesthetic fascinations. No doubt he drew deeply on the cultural riches of a pre-eminent metropolitan capital; some few main lines of inspiration (his favourite poets; the folk songs he occasionally quoted) may clearly bespeak a French context. But many others—Dickens, Shelley, Hoffmann, Poe—would have been just as fascinating to readers in London or New York, or indeed Sydney or Cape Town.

To recall, further, Steinberg's question about Beethoven's Germanness is to note a larger problem concerning what Debussy's Frenchness comes to signify throughout Kautsky's book. It is as if an uneasy fault line opens, again and again, between what she clearly knows about Debussy (from her own musical experience) and what she seems to feel she should know (from her readings of musicological literature). An early warning sign comes with her introductory reference to “the dreamy French composer par excellence” (p. xxiii)—a cliché that sits awkwardly alongside the celebration, only a few pages later, of the vivid paradoxes apparent across all of Debussy's “chameleon”-like creative “masks” (p. xxvii). This is a pianist fully aware (for just a few examples) of “the bombastic [quasi-Beethovenian!] C major cadence” that closes the *Pour le piano* triptych (p. 91); the “strident” and “shrill” rendition of the English anthem in “Pickwick” (p. 159); the “positively triumphant” final cadence of “Jardins sous la pluie” (p. 127); the fortissimo climax “like a tidal wave” in “Reflets dans l'eau” (p. 129); the “full-blown fortissimo with massive chords” in “La Cathédrale Engloutie” (p. 131); and the “ecstatic” ending of *L'isle joyeuse*—in Kautsky's apt description, “the loudest joy that can be mustered from [Debussy's] chosen instrument” (p. 137). It is thus hard to see why she feels obliged to downplay this side of his art through repeated recourse—as if in a defensive tic—to the “dreamy” cliché: “Debussy's colors and sounds, and even dances, tend to be muted”; “his preferred musical mode was understatement” (both p. 39); he “was sometimes taken with a violence in literature that he abjures in his music” (p. 71); “He consistently eschews violence and celebration for introspection and regret” (p. 155). Surely, by now, it should

not be necessary--widening the lens just a little--to object that there is nothing at all understated about any of the three movements of *La Mer*, or the more extravagantly post-Wagnerian *tableaux* of *Le martyr de Saint Sébastien*; or that there are few more violent operatic scenes than the shocking abuse of Mélisande by Golaud in Act IV sc. ii of *Pelléas*--that is, what we might call "the other hair scene," given the more celebrated status of Act III sc. i.

There is no clearer evidence than this thread of deflating, over-familiar generality of the way established scholarly tropes--amounting to a pervasive atmosphere of reception--serve to forestall the valuable corrective that could have been built on Kautsky's vivid first-hand sense of Debussy's true creative multiplicity. But beyond the pervasive seepage of this "fog"--see also her sense of the "resignation, if not outright serenity" of "Brouillards" (*Préludes* bk. II) (p. 129), which effaces the brief, but terrifying virtuoso outburst--one specific episode that partly exemplifies her salutary sense of Debussy's endless inventiveness with dance rhythms (one of the main strengths of her book) also seems most telling for wider reflection about cultural musicology. From the sources quoted and illustrated throughout her discussions of the many exotic influences Debussy absorbed, it is clear that Kautsky has taken keenly to the hermeneutics of suspicion that grew up in the wake of Edward Said and his post-colonial followers. She readily turns this suspicion onto Debussy when, invoking the "long history of connections between the cakewalk and poisonous disease or degeneration" (p. 53), she claims to discern hints of "racism" (p. 45), "paternalism," and "amused superiority" (p. 53) in such pieces as "Le Petit Nègre," "Minstrels" (*Préludes* bk I) and "Golliwog's Cakewalk" (*Children's Corner*). Such works clearly traffic in musical materials with strong racial association. But their various inarticulate appropriations of a widely popular musical import can hardly be said to evince any remotely clear ideological position about racial difference at all.

The pursuit of such ideological diagnosis reaches something of a *reductio ad absurdum* in a passing reference to the "moral ambiguities" (p. 62) discernible even in a relatively innocuous, archaïcising piece like "Danseuses de Delphes" (*Préludes* bk. I). How is it morally ambiguous for a composer to imagine some ancient, faraway choreographic ritual, perhaps inspired by some fragment seen in a museum? The shaky foundations for such suspicions become all the clearer with Kautsky's oblique accusation that "[w]hile he was interested in assimilating cultural artifacts and delighted by exotic peoples and their art, Debussy didn't question his nation's *mission civilisatrice*, with its concurrent destruction of the culture, scenes, and institutions that gave rise to precisely those artifacts" (p. 64). Perhaps he didn't. But he did express sincere admiration for the exotic musics he heard, and surely embodied at least some of that admiration in the works he created under their inspiration. A reference to Poulenc's much later exotic work, *Babar*, is even more problematic: "though written in 1931, thirteen years after Debussy's death, French attitudes hadn't changed much in those intervening years" (p. 64). Surely "French attitudes" to race (or anything else), before and after 1918, were about as multifarious and contested as "American attitudes" to such things remain today. Perhaps the best response to this kind of all-embracing "guilt by association" is to borrow the words of the *éminence grise* Edward Said himself, who (as quoted by Steinberg) once invoked an optimistic vision of: "[W]hat I might call the long-range politics of culture that provides a literally wider space for reflection, and ultimately for concord rather than endless tension and dissonance. Literature and music open up such a space because they are essentially arts not of antagonism principally but of collaboration, receptivity, recreation, and collective interpretation." [6]

Might this sense of collaboration, receptivity, and recreation offer a better way to approach Debussy's compositional responses to music of many different cultures than a pious assumption of (inevitable?) complicity in all the geopolitical crimes of his nation?

To turn to the more slender and more focused volume Bhogal has written for the new Oxford "Keynotes" series on a single piano piece, "Clair de lune," is to find a partly intersecting, partly distinct set of questions about cultural musicology. In the first place, the editorial introduction to the series as a whole adopts a pointedly revisionist stance towards musical canons. Now, instead of Steinberg's sense that "the canon belongs to no one," we read of two notionally distinct canonical constructs: on one hand, the "lists of works that critics and scholars deem to have articulated key moments in the history of the art," and on the other, "lists of works that comprise the bulk of what consumers listen to, purchase, and perform today" (pp. vii-viii). The clear overtone of anti-elitism becomes all the stronger in the ensuing polemical claim that the "Keynotes" series "confronts the musicological canon with the living repertoire of performance and recording" (p. viii). From a glance over the titles published so far—which include *Appalachian Spring* and Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* as well as "Over the Rainbow" and *Music for Airports*—it seems, however, that the two canons may be rather less easy to distinguish than such polemics imply, and that the mooted confrontation really only amounts to a somewhat more inclusive repertorial purview than that previously found in, say, the Norton Critical Scores or Cambridge Handbooks.

Still, it could be that the distinction takes on more substance in the present case, for "Clair de lune," undoubtedly the most popular piece Debussy ever wrote, has so far featured minimally, if at all, in musicological accounts of the history of the art. The question remains, however, as to just how much of genuine cultural-historical interest can reasonably be derived from the constituent materials of a piece whose defining qualities Kautsky is able to pinpoint quite well in an efficient cameo: "the sentimentality is unabashed, and Debussy is at his most romantic as the downward glide of that beloved opening idea lulls the listener into a contented trance" (p. 32). While Bhogal labours admirably to extrapolate social, cultural, and political dynamics from these slender means, it is hard not to feel, at many points, that she is hunting a butterfly with a bazooka—not least because the piece's title, which serves her to open rich skeins of fin-de-siècle tropes about moonlight (notably including Debussy's song settings of Verlaine's poem of the same title) was in this case, by her own account, a late addition—indeed a replacement for the initial title, "Promenade solitaire" (p. 58).

If some devoted adepts of cultural musicology may not find this anomaly particularly problematic—the piece has come down to us with a moon in the title, and Bhogal does about as well as could be imagined in following that hint into a context—a larger question arises here, I suggest, about the polemically post- or neo-canonical thrust of the project as a whole. "My main motivation," Bhogal writes, "is to offer a preliminary reason for why this piece has achieved widespread appeal" (pp. 9-10). But it is perfectly clear why this piece, or Beethoven's "Für Elise," or Liszt's "Liebestraum," or certain Chopin nocturnes and preludes (but not others), have been found so appealing—and why Billy Joel chose to rip off the slow movement of the "Pathétique" sonata rather than, say, the "Hammerklavier"—which is simply that such pieces tend to have appealingly singable or croonable tunes; quite simple (if possibly "lounge-ily" enriched) harmonic accompaniments; and an unmistakable air of sentimentality—perhaps bittersweet, but tinged with complexity only minimally, if at all. Nobody would make heavy weather about the representative status of "Für Elise" for Beethoven; to recognise the obvious reasons why this tuneful little

bagatelle has so long served as a first introduction to his music need imply no scorn for those (like myself) who found that introduction both captivating on its own terms and suggestive of even more rewarding paths to follow in future. What seems decidedly odd, if not faintly contradictory, is the assumption that such relatively “lite” material must necessarily support equally heavy interpretive burdens as those more weighty and challenging works whose canonical status (for musicologists and everyone else) has derived in significant part from their more direct and substantive engagement with more contested realms of human understanding.[7]

Bhogal has much to offer: her passages of musical description (including an inspired retrospective reference to George Sand for a “note bleue” [p. 86]) are often admirably sensitive to subtle modal and harmonic detail; her musicological archaeology of the *Suite Bergamasque* (in which “Clair de lune” was first published) provides useful immediate context. It is only when this context becomes stretched out in more cultural directions that a sense of strain becomes impossible to ignore. Is anyone at all surprised, for instance, by the truism that “the afterlife of a musical composition can fall far from the vision of its creator” (p. 34)? The problem, as has been amply demonstrated, say, in reception histories of the *Ninth*, comes with the attempt to invest such malleability of attributed meaning with any significance for our understanding of the original creation. If some of the countless later arrangements of “Clair de lune” might be heard to articulate a “middle-class American identity in the postwar era” (p. 17), as Bhogal suggests, it is surely only because those mid-century middle-class Americans, like many of the rest of us, liked listening to sweetly sentimental things.

Slightly more specifically, we also find here at least a few nods towards the “Frenchness” more pervasively and problematically in play for Kautsky. Here, this identity supposedly carries forward from the fin-de-siècle origins of “Clair de lune” to colour at least some of its literally countless later appearances in TV adverts or films. Again, while there may be one or two instances in which this national identity “signifies” for some small handful of potential listeners, it seems to me that the more interesting challenge for cultural musicology audible in any such musical cliché (to borrow Bhogal’s term) remains quite the opposite: to confront in all honesty the ungrounded, freely circulating inarticulacy of this well-worn sounding material in a world of madly proliferating recorded distribution; perhaps even to *resist* easy resort to the earnest discursive translations once native to a more text- and material-based world of music, in order to address the (non-verbal) orders of experience truly on offer.

To face up to the limits of cultural musicology in this way need not be wholly melancholy, for it might allow us to make useful distinctions between, on the one hand, those comparatively banal uses of cliché that minimally reward critical scrutiny, and on the other, those more truly collaborative and recreative accomplishments – to recall Said – whose use of even the most wildly familiar material opens truly satisfying challenges to collective interpretation. In the first category I would readily place, for instance, the recent trashy low-budget Netflix production *#Horror*, whose few randomly infused background snippets of “Clair de lune” must surely frustrate even the most determined cultural hermeneut. For the second, by contrast, I think for example of Gus van Sant’s brilliant and disturbing 2003 film *Elephant*, which deploys “Für Elise” and the first movement of the “Moonlight” Sonata, in recorded and live versions, as a cannily interlocking formal frame for its quasi-documentary take on a fictionalised version of the Columbine massacre. Some ears may successfully strain to discern Germanness even in these two timeworn greatest hits. But the possibility that van Sant’s gnomic point has more to do with

unanswerable questions about culture *sans* identity receives strong reinforcement when we find both pieces identified in the credits as “traditional, composed by Ludwig van Beethoven.” This is the sort of teasing inaccuracy that invites us to think again about the hope or presumption that musical form and practice can ever really promise “modes of knowledge” about the worlds through which they haphazardly circulate—and to wonder whether there may be better ways to describe whatever it is that can still be heard in Debussy’s (or Beethoven’s) inarticulate forms, as gnomic precipitates from long-lost cultural contexts, and open invitations to present musical experience.

NOTES

[1] Jane Fulcher, “Introduction: Defining the New Cultural History of Music, Its Origins, Methodologies, and Lines of Inquiry,” in Fulcher, ed., *The Oxford Handbook to the New Cultural History of Music* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 12.

[2] Michael P. Steinberg, “Afterword: Whose Culture? Whose History? Whose Music?,” in Fulcher, ed., *The Oxford Handbook*, p. 560.

[3] Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), pp. 69–82.

[4] Steinberg, “Afterword,” pp. 552, 555.

[4] At one point Kautsky bluntly locates the “key” to her sense of “artist/place symbiosis” in “Debussy’s titles” (p. xxix). But the point is somewhat muddled when, for instance, she extends interpretive hearing beyond explicitly titled references to the *commedia dell’arte*, to embrace the abstractly titled *Etudes* as works that “seesaw more delightedly than any others between Pierrot’s wit and his melancholy, Harlequin’s duplicity and Columbine’s naiveté, and the Commedia as both slapstick entertainment and profound commentary” (p. 2). The point is not that such vivid, highly characterised hearing is wrong—quite the contrary—but rather that its recourse to audible stylistic continuities across the *oeuvre* does not differ that much, in the attempt to translate musical inarticulacy into cultural signification, from the topical hearings many eighteenth-century music specialists have traced from Mozart’s operas into his instrumental corpus.

[5] Quoted from a lecture in Steinberg, “Afterword,” p. 559.

[6] To be clear, I’m not just thinking here of *Die grosse Fuge* or *Le sacre du printemps*, but also of many a seductively melodious and harmonious aria or song whose surface appeal brings in tow various thematic resonances to do with racial prejudice, or marital infidelity, or mortality, or whatever else.

David Code
University of Glasgow
David.Code@glasgow.ac.uk

Copyright © 2019 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 redistribution/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