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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.

Response by Catherine Kautsky, Lawrence University.

I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to Professor Code's review and would like to start by saying that I respect the thoughtfulness of the review and do not feel we have many fundamental disagreements. I do feel that he has exaggerated various aspects of my book or, occasionally, taken them out of context, and I would like to respond briefly to those instances.

It seems to me that he takes issue with me on three major points: "dreaminess" as the primary characteristic of Debussy's music; "Frenchness" as a significant aspect of his work; and the identification of his work in the context of French attitudes toward race and colonization.

As regards, Code's insistence that it is enormously reductionist to emphasize the "dreamy" aspect of Debussy's music, I could not agree more, and the quotes he shares from my book about various bombastic, virtuosic, or flamboyant moments in the piano music are certainly critical to hearing and understanding the music. That, however, does not undo the fact that this is a composer whose piano music, to a degree unknown until the recent music of composers like Morton Feldman, often unfolds in the realm of pianissimo and below, with barely a trace of louder dynamics. Debussy's favorite indicator is *lointain*, or far away, and the other-worldliness he strives for is attained through an interior quiet and receptiveness to the barest shimmer of sound. I am extremely sympathetic to Code's aversion to the silly idea that Debussy merely creates pretty "reveries" (to lift the title of one of the earlier and less probing piano pieces), but if one considers dreams in a less prejudicial manner, as a way to glide through discontinuity and access remote interior and exterior worlds by barely touching on them, then I think one would be hard-pressed to deny that Debussy, in his own words, is indeed a man who "lives among apparitions" [1] and strives to create "Music...[as] a dream from which the veils have been lifted." [2]

His overwhelming commitment to Frenchness is also supported through his own statements: he repeatedly lauds his French clavecinist forebears to the detriment of Germanic composers, enthusiastically applauding, for example, a friend's "enthusiasm for Rameau...[who] deserves it for all the qualities in his music which ought to have protected us against Gluck's deceitful grandiloquence [and] Wagner's bombastic metaphysics..." [3] It is no secret that Debussy was

obsessively ambivalent about the music of Richard Wagner, and we can watch as, throughout his career, he pursues a French retort to the centuries of German musical supremacy. The piano music does so by referring back repeatedly to Couperin and Rameau, employing old French dance forms in conscious emulation of their style, making the homage explicit in the middle movement of *Images, Book 1*, entitled, “*Hommage a Rameau*,” but pursuing it also in the entirety of *Suite Bergamasque* and *Pour le Piano*. In the wake of the First World War, Debussy’s nationalism became yet more virulently anti-German as he averred angrily that “30 million Boches can’t destroy French thought” [4] and feared that “beauty” is being “destroyed” by the “meticulous brutality that is unmistakably ‘Made in Germany.’” [5] He is determined that “French art needs to take revenge quite as seriously as the French army does!” and, proudly, in the same letter, announces that “I’m doing a little piano-playing again, notably on a Bechstein; my only excuse is that it’s not paid for! It can go under the heading of “War Contributions.” [6] Again, his thoughts find voice in his music: the quote of “*La Marseillaise*,” for instance, in the final Prelude of Book 2, *Feux d’artifice*, is surely a plea for French artistic and political triumph and, as such, it is fundamentally different from his parody of “*God Save the King*” in *Hommage à Pickwick*, to which Code compares it. Most strikingly, *En blanc et noir*, the large-scale two-piano work written in the midst of World War 1, is born of overwhelming loyalty to his nation, averring consciously to French heroes and preceding each movement with quotes honoring the French.

Code’s point that Debussy does not limit himself to French subject matter, happily referring as he does to Shakespeare, Dickens, and Arthur Rackham as well as to numerous other characters, events, and objects of non-French origin (“*Les Fées sont d’exquises danseuses*,” by the way, is based on an illustration by Arthur Rackham to *Peter Pan* by J. M. Barrie; it is not based on Dickens as Code suggests) in no way lessens Debussy’s avowedly French sympathies, both musical and otherwise. I would never claim that his circle of reference is entirely French—indeed the point of my book is to show how wide a net he cast in gathering inspiration. Interestingly, however, a number of the examples Code picks as decidedly un-French are fascinating precisely because the French had adopted them with a passion unknown in their native land. Commedia dell’arte, Edgar Allen Poe, and the cakewalk all fit this rubric. The Commedia was far more of a hit in France than in Italy. Edgar Allen Poe was the darling of nineteenth-century Parisian poets while he was considered second-rate in the United States. And the cakewalk was a minor hit in the United States, but was adopted by the French with such passion and unanimity that traditional French dance schools were in terror for their livelihood, watching as centuries of aristocratic dance decorum crumbled in the face of New World freedoms.

None of this is to take away from the internationalism of Debussy’s art—were we not to identify the anthem or the dance forms or translate the quotes, we would be just as moved by the music, and here I completely agree with Code. The point is that Debussy would have written different music were he himself not concerned to be a *musician français* (his own signature). As to Code’s point that we are not prone to discuss the earlier Viennese masters, Mozart, Schubert, and Beethoven in the light of their native city, Vienna, but rather to see their message as universal, I would point out first of all that there are masterful books about both Schubert and Mozart in Vienna but, more importantly, that Vienna in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was a far more closed and hierarchical society than Paris, circa 1900, and these composers had nowhere near the opportunities for interactions with other artists or a cosmopolitan society that Debussy enjoyed in Paris at the turn of the twentieth century. [7] As for Robert Schumann, Code’s example of another composer whose works, like those of Debussy, are referential but who does not use them to parade his nationality—Schumann lived in a Germany that had not yet been

united, and a Germany that had no capital. Not only was his non-nation itself non-centered, but Schumann himself was non-centered. He was peripatetic, in fact, and one could hardly expect him to draw on his surroundings as Debussy did. It is the singularity of Debussy's Paris and the Belle Epoque that is precisely the point of my book.

The interaction between this city and this composer is especially compelling because Debussy was so particularly adept at absorbing the cues of the society around him. I cite numerous instances of such interactions and some of them are decidedly unflattering to French values, but in no case do I claim that the music itself is inferior because its inspiration was morally suspect. A case in point is *Danseuses de Delphé*, the opening prelude of *Book 1*, which alludes to a Greek statue unearthed in Delphi, a model of which Debussy saw in the Louvre. Code is offended by my statement that "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." The fact, however is, that the archeological digs which uncovered statues such as this one at the end of the nineteenth century were undertaken by French archeologists at the expense of poor Greek villagers. They were one manifestation of a French colonialist mentality. There is no question that the art and artifacts thus unearthed were magnificent, and there is also no question that Debussy probably took little interest in the pros and cons of digging beneath far-off villages. My purpose is not to hold him responsible, but simply to point out the context in which he worked. Likewise, the issues of race that undeniably arise in works like *The Little Nigar*, *Golliwogg's Cakewalk*, "*General Lavine—excentric—*, and *Minstrels* are not so much questions about Debussy's own attitudes, but rather those which clearly permeated his society. I will note, however, that here I disagree with Code that Debussy cannot be called a racist. A comment such as the one Debussy levelled at Maude Allen, sniffing disdainfully that "She supplies a scenario so boring a negro could have done better," is just one of several blatantly pejorative statements he made.[8] I would claim also that, although it is certainly dangerous and often mistaken to make claims for an entire society, it is hardly far-fetched to comment on "French" attitudes toward race—those attitudes are explicitly and shockingly portrayed in the hundreds of cakewalk cartoons published in contemporary journals (some of which are in my book and others on the accompanying website) which picture blacks as lechers, wild men, and monkeys. Though the attitudes may not have been held universally, there can be no doubt of their prevalence. And more obviously yet, there can be no question that the tradition of minstrelry and blackface, stemming as it does from the era of American slavery, is permeated with racist assumptions. I have not stopped performing Debussy *Preludes* because of this association, but I would hardly wish to deny or ignore it.

In closing: the relationship between historical context and great art is a complex one with moral ambiguities everywhere. Debussy is hardly the first or last great artist to have himself harbored attitudes we now find abhorrent or to emerge from a deeply flawed society. Indeed, there are no other kinds of societies. Understanding context does not mean abjuring the music or even listening with that context always in mind; it is an exercise in understanding history and the far reach of assumptions that often go unspoken or unrecognized. I would argue that I can harbor both a love for Debussy's music and a critical understanding of the times that brought it forth. And I am also convinced that investigating context, like studying any history, is one way in which we learn to look critically at our own contemporary world.

NOTES

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- [1] Letter to Jacques Durand 8 July 1910, in François Lesure and Roger Nichols, eds., *Debussy Letters*, translated by Roger Nichols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).
- [2] Letter to André Poniowski, February 1893, in Lesure and Nichols, *Debussy Letters*.
- [3] Letter to Louis Laloy, 10 September 1906, in Lesure and Nichols, *Debussy Letters*.
- [4] Letter to Jacques Durand, 5 Aug., 1915, in Lesure and Nichols, *Debussy Letters*.
- [5] Letter to Robert Godet, 14 Oct., 1915, in Lesure and Nichols, *Debussy Letters*.
- [6] Letter to Nicolas Coronio, Sept. 1914, in Lesure and Nichols, *Debussy Letters*.
- [7] See the following: Simon P. Keefe, *Mozart in Vienna: The Final Decade* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Raymond Erickson, ed., *Schubert's Vienna* (Princeton, NJ: Yale University Press, 1997) and Volkmar Braunbehrens, *Mozart in Vienna, 1781-1791*, translated by Timothy Bell (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991).
- [8] Letter to Jacques Durand, 12 September 1912, in Lesure and Nichols, *Debussy Letters*.

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