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Alexandra Kieffer, *Debussy's Critics: Sound, Affect, and the Experience of Modernism*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. viii + 317 pp. Bibliography and index. \$78.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-19-084724-1.

Review by Andrew Pau, Oberlin College & Conservatory.

This book is an engaging account of the intellectual history of (and behind) *debussysme*, a loosely defined critical movement centered around the musical compositions of Claude Debussy, as told through an examination of the words of French music critics writing mostly between the turn of the twentieth century and the beginning of the First World War. Pride of place is given to the critics Jean Marnold (1859-1935) and Louis Laloy (1874-1944), who co-founded the *Mercur musical* in 1905 and whose writings “largely defined the sphere of legitimacy for *debussyste* criticism” (p. 191). Alexandra Kieffer locates the brief flowering of *debussysme* within the broader historical context not only of contemporary movements in the arts (e.g., Symbolism in literature and Impressionism in painting), but also of contemporary scientific debates on the nature of perception, affect, and cognition in empirical fields such as acoustics, physiology, and psychology. She argues cogently that the novelty of Debussy’s music, as represented in such works as the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*, served as a catalyst for critics of the time to re-examine and reimagine the relationship between music as material sound (sensation) and music as emotional effect (sentiment). In attempting to make the experience of hearing Debussy’s music intelligible, Debussy’s critics ended up defining an aesthetics of music that was “appropriate to a modern, fully embodied self” (p. 73).

The first chapter, “*Wagnérisme* and the Aesthetic of Sentiment,” sets out a prehistory to *debussysme* in the form of aesthetic theories propounded in the *Revue wagnérienne*, a Symbolist publication that appeared between 1885 and 1888. The chapter focuses on the writings of Édouard Dujardin (1861-1949) and Téo-dor de Wyzewa (1862-1917), especially as they relate to the relationship between music and emotion (or sentiment). Kieffer points out that for earlier nineteenth-century critics like François-Joseph Fétis (1784-1871), “[s]entiment, as a feature of human interiority, was indelibly aligned with beauty and the ideal” (p. 32). Those critics accordingly used “realism,” as applied for instance to Wagner’s music, as a term of disparagement. Dujardin and Wyzewa, by contrast, were influenced by the rise of empirical psychology in French intellectual circles in the 1870s and 1880s and redefined (psychological) realism to include interiority and emotion. For Wyzewa, “neither notions nor emotions are conceivable apart from sensation” (p. 59). Music, as an expressive medium, functions as a sign that takes on a conventional association with the signified emotions. And yet, perhaps paradoxically, Dujardin and Wyzewa did not consider the sonic materiality of music to be integral to its emotional effect. Instead, they insisted that the

sign character of music, or music-as-sound, must ultimately be disregarded in favor of the emotions that they signify (p. 54). In Kieffer's account, it was up to the *debussystes* to take the next step and elevate sensation to the same ontological level as sentiment (p. 73).

The next chapter, "*Pelléas et Mélisande* and the Aesthetic of Sensation," traces the reception history of Debussy's opera in the immediate wake of its premiere at the Opéra-Comique in 1902. Kieffer argues that the arrival of *Pelléas* on the Parisian music scene coincided with an evolving "shift in conceptualizing music and sound, convention and materiality, sentiment and sensation" and that the critical reception to the opera further contributed to that shift in musical thought (p. 85). Debussy's score for *Pelléas* departed from convention in various ways that served to emphasize the music's sonic materiality. Maurice Maeterlinck's text contains numerous invitations for the characters (and by extension the audience) to attend to sounds and noises (e.g., "Entendez-vous la mer?" and "Quel-est ce bruit?") and Debussy's setting often blurs the distinction between music-as-sound and music-as-sentiment (pp. 75-83).<sup>[1]</sup> In addition, Debussy's vocal writing eschewed melodic lyricism in favor of speech-like inflections and rhythms, and his orchestral language largely avoided predictable chord progressions and other traditional conventions of tonal harmony. Since critics were deprived of conventional musical signifiers, they were in a way forced to contemplate the nature of the sign (i.e., musical sound) itself. Using words like "landscape," "atmosphere," and "color," some reviewers of *Pelléas* identified in Debussy's score a faithful representation of the external natural world, in addition to the inner emotional world of the characters. Pierre Lalo (1866-1943), for instance, described passages in the score as "the quivering of the wind and the water" and the "muted beating of the waves" (p. 104). For sympathetic critics such as Lalo, Debussy's rejection of historical convention in *Pelléas* expanded the scope of music beyond the (mere) signification of interior emotion: "Debussy's music involved not only sentiment but 'sensations' and 'impressions'" (p. 114). The critical reception of *Pelléas* in 1902 set the stage for the *debussystes* Marnold and Laloy later in the decade.

Chapter three, "Marnold: Music as Epistemology," is devoted to the writings of Jean Marnold (né Jean Morland) in publications such as the *Mercure de France*, the *Courier musical*, and the *Mercure musical*. Under the influence of the work of the German physicist Hermann von Helmholtz (1821-1894) on acoustics and the physiology of hearing, Marnold viewed Debussy's innovations in harmony as "the next logical step in the evolution of music" (p. 138). For Helmholtz, the process of hearing is a malleable one and the ear can be trained over time to hear frequencies that it habitually disregards. Marnold extrapolated from Helmholtz's work an evolutionary view of harmony in which "the hearing of new intervallic relationships required a heightened sensory discernment that Marnold identified as the essence of musical genius" (p. 147). The "genius" of Debussy thus lay in his ability to discern previously unperceived acoustical possibilities (such as new ways of forming and combining chords) and to present them in musical compositions that would expose audiences to new modes of hearing. In contrast to critics such as Lalo, Marnold downplayed the importance of Debussy's compositional sensibility and rejection of musical convention, conceiving of Debussy's innovations in harmony as quasi-scientific discoveries (along the lines of the Curies' discovery of radium) rather than inventions (p. 179). While Marnold acknowledged the emotional effects of Debussy's music, he viewed these effects as historically transient (i.e., dependent on the changing sensory capacities of audiences). True beauty lies not in emotional effects but in "the timeless and objective qualities of musical sound in itself" (p. 153). Although Marnold's views represented a fringe position at the time of

*Pelléas's* premiere, they would ultimately transform Debussy criticism in the early years of the twentieth century (p. 138).

Chapter four, "Laloy: Music as Truth," covers a series of essays that Louis Laloy wrote on Debussy's music between 1901 and 1910. Laloy was a close friend of Debussy's and a critic with diverse interests, but his "eclectic array of source material did not always add up to a coherent whole" (p. 242). In contrast to Marnold's view of Debussy's music as the culmination of a teleological progression, Laloy's critical writings on Debussy contain frequent references to the music of the distant past (e.g., ancient Greek scales and Gregorian chant) as well as to the music of distant lands, most notably China. [2] Laloy prized Debussy's music for its simplicity and "naturalness," specifically in the way it discloses "the natural truths of emotional experience" (p. 208). Indeed, Laloy conceived of "a general movement observable across the arts from the artificial to the 'natural'" (p. 220) that would lead to a "music of the future" (*musique de l'avenir*) that is governed less by human conventions ("notes") and more by the noisy sonic world of nature ("sounds"). In his 1910 article "Claude Debussy et le debussysme," Laloy concluded that *debussysme* was to music what Symbolism was for poetry and Impressionism was for painting: namely, "the apotheosis of sensation" (p. 229). Debussy's music is "a music that obeys no precepts, only the laws of sensation: a purely auditory music, as Impressionist painting is entirely visual" (p. 230). For Laloy, as for Marnold, the "radical sonic materiality" that characterized Debussy's music meant that "the entire category of 'music' and its encounter with the human person needed to be rethought" (p. 247). Laloy's 1910 article was arguably the high-water mark of *debussysme*.

The last chapter, "Rewriting Modernism," takes a retrospective look at *debussysme*, focusing on the period between 1910 and 1914. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first part charts the ways in which Debussy's own writings on music may have been influenced by *debussyste* critics like Marnold and Laloy. According to Kieffer, Debussy's thinking developed over the first decade of the twentieth century to mirror that of the *debussystes* in two main ways: "[F]irst, the development of a particular kind of listening, born from a collapse of the distinction between music and noise, as the foundation for his compositional practice; and second, a reconsideration of the psychology of music and emotion" (p. 249). The second part of the chapter charts the decline of *debussysme* after about 1910, by which time Debussy no longer occupied a central place in music criticism. Marnold had moved on to the consideration of composers such as Richard Strauss, Maurice Ravel, and Igor Stravinsky, and Debussy's works were no longer regarded as the self-evident future of music. Laloy, for his part, revisited *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 1914 and suggested that Debussy's score, like a Beethoven sonata or string quartet, was held together by its own "internal logic" (p. 284). Kieffer argues that Laloy's turn away from *debussysme* towards the more universal values of formalism reflected the influence of Henri Bergson's philosophy, as well as a broader political and intellectual shift towards universality that would take hold especially after the First World War (pp. 283–286). Finally, as a coda, Kieffer offers a critique of the musical philosophy of Vladimir Jankélévitch, whose writings on "*mystère*" and "ineffability" have become influential in current musicological scholarship, and suggests that a reading of Debussy's critics and a consideration of the rise and fall of *debussysme* can offer "an intellectual-historical corrective to a [scholarly] conversation that has tended to play out in exclusively philosophical terms" (p. 295).

Kieffer's book is a valuable addition to the extensive bibliography on Debussy and his music. It masterfully combines elements of the genres of reception history and intellectual history, and its discussion of the complex relationships between sensation, sensibility, and sentiment provides a

productive frame through which to (re)consider the music of Debussy and its impact on both historical and present-day audiences. The examination of early twentieth-century accounts of the embodied listening experience provides a helpful historical supplement to current scholarly work on music and embodied cognition.[3] In addition, Kieffer's elevation of Debussy's critics to center stage offers a corrective to an older school of historical musicology that tended to de-emphasize things like "critical reviews of *Pelléas et Mélisande*...because these relate to Debussy only at second-hand." [4] After all, as Kieffer points out, subjective accounts of musical experiences can be "real" to the historical subject and offer insight even if they cannot be verified to be objectively "true" by the historian (p. 16). [5] The book provides a vivid demonstration of how the exchange of intellectual and musical ideas between Debussy and his critics was a two-way affair, and it was enlightening to reread familiar extracts from Debussy's own writings in the final chapter after spending time with the words of the critics. A project of this kind necessarily involves a fair amount of "he said, he said." However, Kieffer manages to skillfully weave a cohesive narrative around her wide range of sources. If some passages appear at times to veer off on tangents (the discussion of Albert Bazaillas around pp. 270-276 comes to mind), that is a small price to pay for the encyclopedic scope of the book's coverage.

## NOTES

[1] One of Kieffer's musical examples (Example 2.4) perfectly encapsulates this blurring of distinctions. In act 2, scene 1 of *Pelléas*, the harp plays twelve consecutive attacks of the same note just after Mélisande accidentally drops her wedding ring into a well. The harp passage may initially be heard to "convey an ominous sense of dramatic stillness" (music as sentiment), but later on in the scene, Pelléas mentions that "midi sonnait au moment où l'anneau est tombé," thus "retrospectively identifying the harp motif as the distant ringing of the bell" (music as sound) (p. 83).

[2] These diverse references arose out of Laloy's own scholarly work. He completed a doctoral dissertation at the Sorbonne in 1904 on the ancient Greek music theorist Aristoxenus of Tarentum and published a book on Chinese music (*La musique chinoise: étude critique* [Paris: H. Laurens, 1910]).

[3] See, e.g., Arnie Cox, *Music and Embodied Cognition: [Listening, Moving, Feeling, and Thinking](#)* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016).

[4] Robert Orledge, *Debussy and the Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. xi ("Accounts of Debussy reacting to events in the theatre...take precedence over such things as critical reviews of *Pelléas et Mélisande*...because these relate to Debussy only at second-hand").

[5] Kieffer draws here on the distinction between the "real" and the "true" articulated in the work of the scholar of religion Amy Hollywood (p. 15). See Amy Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia and Other Essays: Mysticism, History, and the Study of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 3.

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