
H-France Review Vol. 22 (December 2022), No. 193

Deborah Mawer, ed., *Historical Interplay in French Music and Culture, 1860-1960*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2018. 270 pp. Bibliography, index, and list of contributors. \$49.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-78-0367881641; \$160.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-1472474759; \$49.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9-78-1315586847.

Review by Michael Strasser, Baldwin Wallace University.

The idea of “historical interplay” in the arts has a long pedigree. For centuries, painters, sculptors, and architects have drawn on models from the past, often with the intent of using them to make subtle points about more contemporary trends or concerns. One finds overt manifestations of this practice in, for example, the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites of the late nineteenth-century or, more recently, in the post-modernist architecture of Philip Johnson and Michael Graves. Twentieth-century composers from Stravinsky and Prokofiev to Alfred Schnittke, George Rochberg, and Arvo Pärt have also drawn from the past in various ways and for various purposes, and of course one sees a popular music version of this phenomenon in the sampling of older music by hip-hop artists.

The ubiquity of such musical borrowings over the past century or so can lead one to forget that for most of Western musical history, there was very little interest in music of the past. In the fifteenth century, the theorist Johannes Tinctoris (c.1435-1511) famously articulated the historically common attitude when he opined that there was no composition written over forty years ago old which was thought by the learned as worthy of performance. Through most of Western history, composers were not viewed as artists. They were instead considered to be craftsmen, creating the sonic equivalents of glassware or silverware, objects that were certainly to the admired and valued, but ultimately utilitarian in purpose, and to a certain extent, disposable. New music was composed for church or court, was performed and appreciated, but then forgotten as new styles superseded the old.

This attitude began to change as the ideals of Romanticism began to take hold in the late eighteenth century, and after 1800, music increasingly came to be thought of, and often described as, “the newest art.” Coupled with the growing fascination with history of all sorts, musicians and audiences began to manifest an interest in music of past generations, and over the course of the nineteenth century, so-called “ancient” music (i.e. that predating the mid-eighteenth century) was increasingly revived in various settings and for various purposes.

Katherine Ellis, in her landmark 2005 study *Interpreting the Musical Past*, explored the history of this phenomenon in France, from its early manifestations in the first half of the century through

the last decades of the century, when patriotic feelings unleashed by the Franco-Prussian War found expression in the revival of older French music, especially that of the ancien régime, that evoked the nation's past glories.[1]

Inspired by Ellis's pioneering work, a symposium was held at the Birmingham Conservatory in the UK in the summer of 2014 that explored the idea of historical interplay in French music from 1860-1960. The aim of the conference, and of the eleven essays presented in the volume under review (most, but not all, of which were first introduced at the conference), was to "explore 'historical interplay': the nature of relationships in French musical culture operating between one main historical period, broadly the 'long' modernist era 1860-1960, and its various historical 'others,' engaging with topics from the immediate past through the medieval period and before" (p. 1).

The book is divided chronologically into two sections, the first dealing with topics from 1860-1930, and the second focusing on the years 1930-60. The essays are illustrated with occasional music examples, tables, and various reproductions of art works, programs, musical scores, etc. There is a select bibliography, a general index, and short biographical sketches of the contributors.

The essays approach the idea of "historical interplay" from many different directions, some of which are more obvious or convincing than others. The lead essay, by Katherine Ellis, is based on her keynote address to the conference, and offers an excellent introduction to the subtle ways in which composers drew on music of the past and the various effects of such allusions. She begins by examining a passage from Francis Poulenc's 1924 ballet *Les Biches*, demonstrating how his referencing various Stravinsky works exhibits decidedly different uses of the past, creating multiple layers of allusion and meaning. The prime focus of her essay, however, is on two late nineteenth-century French operas, each of which employs traditional or early French music in a different way. The first, Déodat de Séverac's *Le Cœur du moulin* (1910), deals with the conflict between rural, traditional life and that of urban, progressive France, representative of both modernity and the centralizing power of the government in Paris. Musically, Séverac represents this friction through a juxtaposition of folk-like dance and song and Debussyan harmonies, with the ultimate aim, as Ellis sees it, of reconciling not only the political rifts that inform the opera's plot, but also the antipathy between two opposing musical camps, led respectively by Claude Debussy and Vincent d'Indy. In the second opera, *Le Pays* (1912) by Guy de Ropartz, the juxtaposition of traditional and modern music is more subtle and layered, and impossible to summarize here. Suffice to say that in her essay Ellis ably demonstrates the varied and often sophisticated ways in which fin-de-siècle French composers approached the use of old or traditional music in their compositions.

Other essays in the first section of the book demonstrate that composers can also draw on nonmusical aspects of past culture. Richard Langham Smith explores the connection between Jean-Antoine Watteau's *fête galante* paintings, the poetry of Théodore de Banville and Paul Verlaine that was inspired by those paintings, and Debussy's settings of that poetry, offering new insights into the ways Debussy evoked the alluring nocturnal world imagined by Watteau.

Caroline Potter takes up Erik Satie's *Trois petites pièces montées* which were inspired by François Rabelais's sixteenth-century stories about a mythical giant named Pantagruel and his father Gargantua. She traces the genesis of this unassuming little work (its three movements last

around five minutes), examining the rich web of influences and connections that played a role in its composition, and demonstrating that even his simplest music “exemplifies Satie’s unique blend of popular and art music cultures” (p. 96).

Helen Julia Minors takes as her point of departure *La Revue musicale*, a journal founded by Henry Prunières in 1920, that sought to promote music of the present and, at the same time, stimulate interest in music of the past. Over the course of its twenty-year existence, several issues were conceived as *tombeaux*, usually to a recently deceased composer, beginning with an issue dedicated to Debussy in December 1920, which included a musical supplement consisting of ten new works memorializing the composer. The May 1924 issue served as a *tombeau* not to a musician, but to the sixteenth-century poet Pierre de Ronsard. Minors builds a fascinating essay around two songs, composed by Maurice Ravel and Paul Dukas to poems by Ronsard, that were among the works included in that issue’s musical supplement. She delves into the history of musical *tombeaux*, the function of memory in recalling a figure from the distant past, and the ways “a collective cultural memory of sixteenth-century art informs” the settings by Ravel and Dukas (p. 97).

Camille Saint-Saëns once declared that Jean-Philippe Rameau was “the greatest musical genius that France has ever produced” (p. 64). He often programmed works by the Baroque master on his concerts, and he served as editor for the first critical edition of Rameau’s music. Graham Sadler offers an investigation into the genesis of one volume of the *Œuvres complètes*: the opera *Zoroastre*, edited by Vincent d’Indy. Relying heavily of correspondence between Saint-Saëns and Auguste and Jacques Durand, whose firm was publishing the series, Sadler details the history of the edition and discusses Saint-Saëns’s objections to some of d’Indy’s editorial decisions. The undertaking of a complete edition of Rameau’s works stands as evidence of the newfound interest in music of the ancien régime in fin-de-siècle France, and Sadler’s essay offers insights into the strained relationship between Saint-Saëns and d’Indy, who had vastly different ideas as to how to approach the editing of Rameau’s music. It will be of value to anyone interested in the history of historical editions.

The second section of the book, dealing with the years 1930–60, begins with an examination of an important work by a neglected early twentieth-century composer. Elsa Barraine was the fourth woman to win the prestigious *Prix de Rome* in composition. A contemporary and friend of Olivier Messiaen, she was associated with a group of young composers who in the 1930s described themselves as La Jeune France and “regarded neoclassicism as a false path for musical modernism and were scathing in their attacks upon it” (p. 121). Laura Hammer focused her essay on Barraine’s Second Symphony, composed in 1938. Barraine was of Jewish heritage on her paternal side and, increasingly concerned with the gathering clouds of fascism and anti-semitism in the 1930s, intended her Second Symphony as a commentary on the increasingly dangerous situation. On a superficial level, Barraine’s choice to cast her work as a three-movement symphony might seem to be an example of neo-classicism and therefore at odds with the aesthetic principles promoted by La Jeune France, but Hammer insists that the Second Symphony may instead “be viewed as extending that nineteenth-century idea of writing a symphony as an act of purging and release, at a time of personal or national crisis” (p. 136).

The next two essays deal with musical life during the Occupation. The early French reception of Wagner’s operas has been much discussed, but Rachel Orzech argues that performances of these works during the Occupation has garnered scant attention. She points out that the German

authorities, cognizant of the Parisian public's love of Wagner in the pre-war decades, saw an opportunity to promote their policy of Franco-German Collaboration and, at the same time, demonstrate German artistic superiority by staging performances of Wagner operas in Paris that featured German musicians. Thus in 1941, two performances of *Tristan und Isolde*, featuring soloists, chorus, and orchestra from the Berlin Staatsoper, were staged at the Palais Garnier. The glowing reviews in the press were obviously heavily influenced by German censors and thus should be taken with a large grain of salt. Nevertheless, Orzech concludes that "for French Wagner lovers, who had often struggled to reconcile their deep attraction to Wagner's music with his German nationalistic associations, an approach to his music as a means of reconciliation and cooperation was an immensely appealing solution, [allowing them] to indulge their love of this music without feeling as though they were betraying France" (p. 156).

Isabel de Berrié discusses the use of music from the past in two French films produced during the Occupation: *La Symphonie fantastique*, which focuses on the life of Hector Berlioz, and *Les Visiteurs du soir*, set in Medieval times. De Berrié offers some interesting and subtle insights into the music of these two films, but unfortunately, she falls into the trap that too often ensnares scholars of film music by assuming that her readers are as intimately familiar with the films as she is, casually mentioning numerous plot situations and the names of various characters in order to make her points about different musical cues. The problem is that many of these mean nothing to anyone who does not know the films and merely lead to confusion. Perhaps her arguments would have been better served if she had provided fewer examples and took more a bit more care to inform her readers of the context in which they occur.

There follow a pair of essays dealing with André Jolivet and his writings about two important composers from the past: Jean-Philippe Rameau and Ludwig van Beethoven. Deborah Mawer begins her essay with a rather involved discourse on time and temporality, delving particularly into the theories of Henri Bergson, before offering a brief introduction to Jolivet's theoretical writings and works. She attempts to establish correspondences between ideas articulated by Rameau in his famous *Traité de l'harmonie* (1722) and those expressed by Jolivet in a 1946 article. One can certainly see some parallels but, given the central place that Rameau's concepts have in the history of Western music, this would have been the case with many other composers as well. Mawer cites, for example, Rameau's pronouncement that "music without movement loses all its grace, for we cannot invent beautiful melodies without it," arguing that this statement "would have been received sympathetically by Jolivet" (p. 185). But one would be hard pressed to identify any Western composer of the past two hundred years who would not have agreed with it. The primary focus of Mawer's essay is a short four-page biographical sketch on Rameau that Jolivet contributed to what might be thought of today as a "coffee-table book" offering brief essays on the history of music and major composers, intended primarily (one assumes) for a general audience. She identifies several "themes" that correspond to topics she broaches in the first half of her essay and looks to Jolivet's choice of Rameau quotations as evidence of what she calls a "congruence" between the two composers.

The following essay, by Jun Zubillaga-Pow, begins with a "critical discussion on the semantics of historiography as well as its theoretical foundation and framework" (p. 199) which is burdened rather heavily-handedly with high academic jargon. A sample sentence: "If a historian's paradigm is limited by the very collection of epistemic signs that could be amassed and reconstructed, then the permutations of one or other factual units become liable to a hermeneutic play that is already deflected from the former syntagmatic narrative" (p. 200). Once Zubillaga-Pow moves on to

Jolivet's monograph on Beethoven, the rhetorical thickets clear, and one finds an insightful examination of the historical and political context of Jolivet's rather conservative take on the master's life, one that would have been at odds with the ideals of many in the leftist circles within which Jolivet moved.

The final essay in the collection, by Christopher Dingle, offers a detailed and insightful exploration of Olivier Messiaen's personal canon. Which composers did Messiaen admire and why? Did the omission of certain composers indicate hostility or, perhaps, unfamiliarity? In the course of his investigation, Dingle touches on larger issues related to canon formation and the various ways familiarity with the works of his predecessors, even those with which he feels no real sympathy, can influence a composer's work.

This diverse collection of essays illustrates the variety of ways one can approach the question of historical interaction. Several offer new insights into the sophisticated and often subtle ways in which composers make use of music and other cultural artifacts from the past (essays by Ellis, Langham Smith, Potter, and Minors are notable), and others introduce new ways of thinking about the many connections between past and present, as in Hamer's essay on Barraine's Second Symphony, or Dingle's investigation into Messiaen's personal canon. The essays in this volume may vary in quality, but in showing the many ways that composers, editors, and audiences have interacted with the music and culture of past eras, they should stimulate further interest and research into such interactions, not only in music, but in the other arts as well.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Deborah Mawer, "Introduction: revisiting French musical history"

Part one: French music and culture, 1860–1930

Katharine Ellis, "*Patrimoine* in French music: layers and crosscurrents from the Romantics to the 1920s"

Richard Langham Smith, "'Le Paradis deux fois perdu': Debussy, Watteau and the *fête galante*"

Graham Sadler, "Saint-Saëns, d'Indy and the Rameau Oeuvres complètes: new light on the *Zoroastre* editorial project (1914)"

Caroline Potter, "Adventures in gastromusicology: Satie, La Sirène and *Trois petites pièces montées* (1919)"

Helen Julia Minors, "*Le Tombeau de Ronsard* in *La Revue musicale* (1924): memory and historical interplay"

Part two: French music and culture, 1930–1960

Laura Hamer, "Beyond neoclassicism: symphonic form, catharsis and political commentary in Barraine's *Deuxième symphonie* (1938)"

Rachel Orzech, “*Tristan und Isolde* in occupied Paris, 1941: a convenient solution to France’s Wagner problem?”

Isabel De Berrié, “Historical French music in French feature films of the Occupation years”

Deborah Mawer, “Jolivet’s Rameau: theory, practice and temporal interplay”

Jun Zubillaga-Pow, “Jolivet’s Beethoven: supplementarity, topicality and alterity”

Christopher Dingle, “Commission and omission: the canon according to Messiaen”

NOTE

[1] Katherine Ellis, *Interpreting the Musical Past: Early Music in Nineteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Michael Strasser
Baldwin Wallace University
mstrasse@bw.edu

Copyright © 2022 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 republication 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