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Gillian Opstad. *Emma & Claude Debussy: The Biography of a Relationship*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2022. xii + 361 pp. Illustrations, abbreviations and note, select bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-1783276585; \$24.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9-78-1800104044.

Review by Marie Rolf, University of Rochester.

In his authoritative biography of Debussy, François Lesure admits that the available information on the background and personality of the composer's second wife Emma Bardac (née Moyses) is "sparse" and "imprecise."^[1] He also suggests that previous biographers have oversimplified the relationship between Claude and Emma, claiming that he was interested in her money and she in his fame; the reality was more complex, and Lesure concedes that their life together was "far from idyllic."^[2] Gillian Opstad has addressed both of these issues in *Emma & Claude Debussy: The Biography of a Relationship*. Not only has she uncovered many facts about Emma's ancestral background, but she reveals the nuanced interpersonal dynamics within Emma's immediate family during her adult life.

The budding relationship between Emma and Claude was mired in scandal. Many accused Emma of luring him away from his first wife Lilly, who dramatically played the role of innocent victim when she subsequently shot herself in the stomach. The fact that Emma was Jewish and married at the time to a wealthy man set tongues wagging further. Claude was perceived to be upwardly mobile, callously rejecting Lilly for a life of luxury. He was castigated by the press and shunned by friends, many of whom sympathized with his first wife. Opstad's book attempts to rehabilitate Emma's reputation, demonstrating that, rather than being a scheming vixen, she was a sophisticated musician herself who was naturally drawn to creative artists, and that she did her best to support Claude emotionally, even though their relationship was fraught with challenges.

This book is organized chronologically and is divided into two parts. The first 255 pages focus on family and personal relationships, portraying Emma as wife, mother, and lover. The final 102 pages deal with Emma's life as a widow, in the years from Claude's death in 1918 to her own in 1934. While the first part tells the story of Emma's experiences from a domestic point of view, foregrounding family matters, attitudes, and health issues, the second part reads as a more traditional biography, chronicling Emma's life in light of her activities and travels, placed in historical context. Opstad relies on primary sources, including a close reading of Debussy's correspondence as well as the Hartmann letters and those of Emma's son Raoul Bardac and Louis and Chouchik Laloy. In addition, the author had access to a recording of an interview with Emma's daughter Dolly Bardac, shared by Philippe Lagourgue, Dolly's nephew on her husband

Gaston de Tinan's side. Finally, Opstad's research uncovered many little-known details about the Moyse and Bardac families.

These rich sources provide new information, corroborate several innuendos that have lurked in the background of Debussy's life, and in some cases challenge opinions that have been perpetuated by previous biographers of the French composer. Opstad shows how Emma grew up in a tightly knit Jewish enclave in Bordeaux, going so far as to track the neighboring addresses of her family members with those of other Jewish families (such as the Astrucs or the Colannes) who would become close associates with her and Claude later in life. Thanks to the author, our understanding of the importance of Emma's uncle Daniel Iffla (who took on the name of Osiris) in her life is expanded. Not only did Osiris own at least seven villas in Arcachon (the seaside resort approximately forty miles southwest of Bordeaux), but Emma was married to Sigismond Bardac in the new synagogue that Osiris had built there. This explains Emma's early memories of the Villa Riquet (which she recalled in a letter of 10 February 1910 to André Caplet, who was staying at that same villa), her furtive escape with Claude in 1904 to Arcachon (which Debussy revealed later on 6 October 1916 in a letter to Robert Godet), and their return trip to the resort town as they sought a restorative place during Debussy's illness in the last years of his life. The Bardac family likely knew Osiris through their synagogue and also from some apparently shady business dealing between Emma's father Jules Moyse and Osiris, in addition to their mutual work on the stock exchange, which offers context for how Emma met her first husband. Her marriage to Sigismond Bardac, at the tender age of seventeen, involved a substantial dowry and trousseau. The reader also learns that Sigismond Bardac was Russian, and that in marrying him Emma had to give up her French citizenship for a decade. The implication is that the Moyse-Bardac liaison had all the hallmarks of a business deal. Sigismond intimated as much in a statement, conveyed by Pierre Louÿs, at the time when Emma left him for Debussy: "I'm the one with the money. She'll come back to me."

While Sigismond carried on with actresses, Emma began to court composers, many of whom she met through Raoul. Her affair with Gabriel Fauré, followed by another with Claude Debussy, did nothing to ingratiate her to her uncle Osiris, who ultimately bequeathed the bulk of his estate to charities. If Dolly was the result of Emma's liaison with Fauré, as suggested by several biographers and even mentioned to me personally by Maître Henri Thieullent (who was the great-nephew of Dolly's husband Gaston de Tinan, and the executor of Debussy's estate), at least Sigismond accepted her as his own child. In the case of Chouchou (Claude Emma), the offspring of Emma and Claude Debussy, Sigismond took pains to declare that he was not legally responsible for her, documented in a judgment by the Civic Tribunal of the Seine on 16 March 1906 and added as a note to Claude Emma's birth certificate on 24 August 1906. It is clear that Emma and Claude subsequently married, on 20 January 1908, in order to legitimize Chouchou, and again a note was added to this effect on her birth certificate, on 19 April 1908. In addition to addressing these delicate matters of paternity, Opstad broaches the topic of a possible inappropriate relationship between Emma's daughter Dolly and Debussy, relying on Marcel Dietschy's notes taken from the Lalloys and also mentioned in his letter to André Schaeffner (22 December 1970). This would explain Emma's decision to contact a lawyer about potentially divorcing Claude in 1910, and Dolly's abrupt move from the Debussy home and hastily arranged marriage (at age eighteen) in 1911.

The tense atmosphere in the Debussy household, exacerbated by continual financial worries, Emma's chronic illnesses, and Claude's cancer diagnosis in 1909, led to constant bickering

between the couple. As pointed out by Opstad, at times they were so distanced that they resorted to sending each other messages even within their own house. Furthermore, they were not always in agreement on how to raise their daughter; Claude invariably took the child's side, leaving Emma to be the adult in the situation. According to Heinrich Strobel, some of Debussy's friends went so far as to call Emma "la Mère Claude." Her insistence that he decline Henry Russell's invitation to conduct *Pelléas et Mélisande* in Boston was a bitter disappointment that gnawed at him for months.

One myth that has been repeated by many authors is that Emma was to blame for the couple's staying at their lavish home near the Bois de Boulogne, a house whose upkeep proved far beyond their financial means, because she had become so used to a life of luxury in her first marriage. In fact, as Opstad notes, Raoul claimed it was Claude who had chosen the house and Gabriele d'Annunzio similarly reported that it was Claude who adamantly refused to move, even when the trains that passed nearby chronically disrupted Emma's sleep. Moreover, Emma's financial challenges continued unabated after Debussy died, leaving the family in debt to the tune of 189,452 francs, the equivalent of £7,280 in 1918, or £214,000 in 2020. Opstad recounts Emma's post-war efforts to generate some income, to honor Debussy's legacy with monuments in Paris and in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, and to increase the number of performances of his works (including early compositions as well as those left incomplete) by cultivating musicians such as Marius-François Gaillard, André Caplet, and Manuel de Falla. The significant sums that Claude had borrowed from Durand meant that they were now deducted from the publisher's royalties, and Emma could no longer afford to live in the house on the avenue du Bois de Boulogne. Her son Raoul offered to loan her a substantial sum of 257,021.61 francs, following the 1920 sale of his deceased father's art works, the proceeds of which had been divided between him and Dolly. Emma managed well enough to be able to spend her last years in an apartment at the Plaza Athénée Hotel, and to bequeath 99,624.98 francs to each of her surviving children when she died.

Through her painstaking research, Opstad uncovers many other details and facets of Emma's personal biography. Recent discoveries by Debussy scholars with respect to other women in Debussy's life can further enhance her contributions. For example, Denis Herlin has made a strong case for a secret liaison between Claude and Alice Peter (the divorced wife of Michel Peter and dedicatee of Debussy's erotic "La chevelure," from his *Bilitis* songs) from sometime around the beginning of 1897 through June 1899; their affair was likely the source of friction between him and Lilly Texier, whom he would marry just months later on 19 October 1899.[3] Opstad cautiously mentions that "Léon Vallas claimed to have seen a letter Debussy wrote to Lilly threatening to commit suicide if she did not marry him" (p. 41); surely this reference was to the letter, undated but ascribed to July-August 1899 by Lesure and Herlin (based on the color of Debussy's stationery), in which the composer was begging for Lilly's forgiveness, writing that her "pride can surely make this sacrifice *for someone who is going to die.*"[4] With respect to Debussy's early liaison with Marie Vasnier, Opstad writes that "one is left wondering what led to the ending of [Debussy's] close relationship with the couple [Marie and Henri Vasnier] on his return to Paris in 1887" (p. 37). In my English translation and revised edition of Lesure's biography of Debussy, I point out that, at a lunch in Paris in December 1885, Gabrielle Hébert (wife of the director at the Villa Médici) had revealed the "affaire Debussy" to Paul Baudry, who happened to be painting a portrait of Marie at the time. It is likely that Baudry shared this information with Henri, whose letters to the young composer in Rome immediately dwindled, stopping altogether by the end of 1886.[5]

Other less well-known facts might be intriguing to readers. Debussy's oft-used term of endearment for Emma, his "petite mienne"[6] (abbreviated as "p. m." in many of his dedications to her), was not used exclusively for Emma. He had already referred to his first wife Lilly as "ma petite Mienne" in a letter to her that Lesure and Herlin cautiously attribute to the month of June 1899.[7] And an indication of the composer's predilection for endearing abbreviations to his beloved may be found in his dedication to a "p. F. A.," possibly a secretive reference to a "petite Femme Aimée," which he penned in 1884 on the manuscript of "Apparition," intended for Marie Vasnier.[8]

Another tantalizing reference is to Debussy's comment, in a letter to Durand from 20 September 1913, that *La boîte à joujoux* should be performed by puppets rather than by humans. Opstad logically follows the composer's reference to Maeterlinck, suggesting that his decision was based on his exposure to the Belgian's early plays, written expressly for marionettes. But Debussy may have also been thinking of the puppets in Stravinsky's *Petrushka* as well as those in the little puppet theater in the passage Vivienne, which he enjoyed along with Maurice Bouchor, Ernest Chausson, Coquelin cadet, and others in the late 1880s.[9] Many other rich details in Opstad's book offer food for further thought.

On the whole, the picture portrayed of Emma's life with Debussy is one of chronic financial problems, illness, and depression in the years following their initial elated encounters and elopement. This accurate depiction lends credence to Debussy's confession that "an artist should not marry. The immense adoration I feel for my wife and my little daughter means that I have never regretted for one second the step I took, but...an artist must aspire to being as free as possible in life" (p. 205). It is hard to imagine what the composer's life would have been without the indispensable love, companionship, and support of Emma.

Opstad's book is a welcome addition to the literature on Debussy and his family life. Not only does it illuminate many significant details about Emma's background and early experiences, but it also traces the subsequent lives of her surviving children Raoul and Dolly and their families after her death. The presentation of *Emma & Claude Debussy: The Biography of a Relationship* is particularly thoughtful and attractive. It is generously illustrated with family photographs that are less well known. The cover photo, of Emma and Claude sitting on a bench in their garden, is accompanied by a nuanced title: the names of Emma, Claude, and Debussy are printed in large white font, while the ampersand between Emma and Claude is inserted inconspicuously between their names, in a gold color that matches the text of "The Biography of a Relationship." Readers will recall that Emma's full married name was "Emma Claude Debussy" (the reverse of their daughter Chouchou's name, Claude Emma Debussy), and that is what stands out in white lettering, as she is the focus of this biography. And yet her life cannot be told out of context from her husband Claude, so the ampersand commendably connects wife and husband in what Opstad calls "the biography of a relationship." The text of the book is eminently readable, including the author's own English translations and well documented footnotes (rather than endnotes) that are easily accessible on each page.[10] Last but not least, the lavishly annotated Index is a model of what informative indices should be.

NOTES

[1] François Lesure, *Claude Debussy: biographie critique* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), 258, and *Claude Debussy: A Critical Biography*, trans. and rev. Marie Rolf (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2019), pp. 212–213.

[2] Lesure, *Claude Debussy: biographie critique*, p. 421.

[3] Denis Herlin, “Un cercle amical franco-belge de Debussy: les Dansaert, les Lowenstein et les Peter,” in *Bruxelles ou la convergence des arts*, ed. Malou Haine and Denis Laoureux (Paris: Vrin, 2013), pp. 198–213. Reprinted in Denis Herlin, *Claude Debussy: Portraits et Études* (Hildesheim: George Olms Verlag, 2021), pp. 131–146.

[4] Claude Debussy, *Correspondance, 1872–1918*, ed. François Lesure and Denis Herlin (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), p. 514. The italics are mine.

[5] Lesure, *Claude Debussy: A Critical Biography*, p. 63.

[6] This appellation originated from the line, “Ô ma petite mienne, ô ma quotidienne,” in Jules Laforgue’s poem, “Ô geraniums diaphanes” (from his collection of *Derniers vers*, 1890).

[7] Debussy, *Correspondance*, p. 499.

[8] Claude Debussy, *Mélodies (1882–1887)*, ed. Marie Rolf, *Œuvres complètes de Claude Debussy*, série II, volume 2 (Paris: Durand, 2016), pp. 190–191.

[9] Lesure, *Claude Debussy: biographie critique*, p. 428.

[10] One minor translation issue involves Debussy’s comment to Durand, who in a letter from 20 July 1907 had cautioned him not to smoke so much. “Si je ne fumais plus ardemment, je penserais à des choses contradictoires et infiniment mauvaises à cette chère matière grise” is translated as “If I did not smoke so keenly, I would be thinking about contradictory things infinitely worse than this dear grey substance.” A more accurate translation, reflecting Debussy’s customary reference to his cerebral grey matter as his “matière grise,” would have him “thinking of different things that would be really terrible for this dear brain [of mine].”

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