

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

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I am heavily indebted to the musicologist David Drew (1930-2009) who was an expert on several composers such as Weill, Messiaen and an authority on Debussy. Drew promoted new music with an admirable devotion and we shall forever be in his debt.

The French composer, Claude Achille Debussy was born on 22 August 1862 and died of rectal cancer on 25 March 1918. He was a composer both of impressionistic music and symbolism. He studied at the Paris Conservatory with Ernest Guirand, Bourgault-Ducoudray, Emile Durand, piano with Marmontel, and organ with Franck.

Debussy was an argumentative, difficult and unpleasant man. His private life was both turbulent and scandalous as it was with Schubert, Chopin and Scriabin and many have opined that this is why some of their music is of poor quality since they wished to spend more time on sexual pursuits than attending to perfection in their music. Whatever protests are made about this statement, it is true.

An eight year affair with a married woman, Marie-Blanche Vasnier, began when Debussy was eighteen. This was followed by a torrid affair with Gabrielle Dupont and thereafter with a singer, Rosalie Texier, who threatened suicide if Debussy did not marry her and so he did in 1899. Then there was another affair with a married woman, Emma Bardac, which caused a dreadful scandal for all parties concerned.

It is easy for people to condemn me for recounting facts, but facts they are. There are stories of Debussy being fascinated by anything that was green because one of his mistresses had green eyes. It was claimed by many of his contemporaries that he would steal items if they were green.

But we are to consider this music, not his morals.

Drew reminds us that Debussy was sometimes considered a commanding figure but always troubled by the content of his music. His preoccupation with literary and pictorial associations had led him into the wilderness of self-indulgence, a weakness that is seen in other composers.

Debussy had unresolved problems with form and structure which encouraged a rhapsodic style, which, consequently, lacked substance. There are no real quality works of large forms, and it is accepted almost universally that his opera *Pelleas and Melisande* is one of the worst operas ever written, even the stars in the premiere said so. The twenty four Preludes for piano is not a large work, but twenty four short pieces which are deliberately opposed to traditional structure and form.

The composer was aware of these many shortcomings and, thereafter, wrote *Le Martyre de Saint Sebastian* which was successful because the anaemia of the Preludes is thereby made a thing of the past, but there are too many organum effects and an uncompromising austerity, but it is vastly better than his feeble impressionism.

Another work to be commended is the short ballet *Jeux* of 1912 with its sexual overtones of young women playing tennis. The symbolism is here of anguished voluptuousness with swoons and cries of sensuality, but its weakness may be due to the alleged influence of Scriabin.

In *La Mer*, there is no structure or form but everything evolves from brief sections with rhapsodic changes of tempo and texture. He may have been trying to be innovative or original, but he certainly did not have the insight or the immense skill of Schoenberg. There is, for example, nothing in *Jeux* that can compare with the greatness and tension of Schoenberg's *Erwartung* or Stravinsky's *Symphonies* for wind instruments. Impressionism does not really lend itself to drama, tension or originality.

Atmosphere alone is not enough.

Of the orchestral music, *Prelude à l'après midi d'un faune* is a strange title, but the piece has won friends for its sensuality. The *Nocturnes* of 1899 are also well liked and the *Fantasy in E minor* for piano and orchestra is somewhat neglected and the *Petit Suite* has some enchanting moments.

But Debussy had no original voice although some will comment favourably upon his harmony but that does a great disservice to composers of original and progressive harmony such as Liszt and Schoenberg. It is only in his three late sonatas that he approached anything like originality but these works have been described as sterile by many prominent musicians. Some have said that they are products of his waning powers and that he tried to be complex in his writing but that his attempted complexity does not work. Had he lived longer, he may have found an original voice and composed music of quality.

It has also been rightly said that other French composers looked to Debussy for a lead but did not find one in him. He did not inspire as did Roussel and Ravel. The craftsmanship in these two composers is vastly superior to anything that Debussy wrote which makes them far, far better composers and it is interesting to note that Ravel referred to Delannoy as France's greatest composer. There was genuine success with composers writing in both traditional structures and forms than rhapsodic impressionism which has its obvious and evident weaknesses.

Of course, there are works of his that have become popular. In the piano works, there is *Jardins sous la pluie* from *Estampes*, *Clare de lune* from the *Suite Beramasque* and *The Girl with the flaxen hair* from *Preludes* book 1. But this pictorial obsession misleads him as clearly shown in a prelude from book 2, *Feux d'artifice* (Fireworks), which does not sound anything like fireworks and could easily be called *Buying a toilet roll in Tesco's*, as someone has put it.

Listen to Stravinsky's *Fireworks* and hear the difference!

This justifiable essay will not diminish Debussy nor is it intended to, but will engender a rallying round with people who will give him more attention.

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