

Debussy's Late Style. By Marianne Wheelton. (Musical Meaning and Interpretation.) Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. [ix, 170 p. ISBN 9780253352392. \$34.95.] Music examples, bibliography, index.

Writers on music, and indeed many performers, have commented on the special qualities and originality of Claude Debussy's last works, with varying degrees of sympathy, understanding, or plain bewilderment, comparing their inner-directed refinement and rarefied atmosphere to the last works of Beethoven. In this short book, Marianne Wheelton examines Debussy's late style from several standpoints: the historical and cultural context of Debussy's late works, his idiosyncratic reinvention of the sonata form as an emblem of French

national pride, his preoccupation with specifically pianistic problems, and the effects of failing health and World War I on his state of mind. A final metacritical chapter discusses the impact on the musical world of Debussy's last compositions themselves, which even today have never achieved the popularity of his earlier works.

The year 1914 was one of darkness for Debussy the composer. His score for the Diaghilev-Nijinsky ballet *Jeux*, a large-scale effort and one of his finest accomplishments, had been poorly received at its premiere the year before. Already seriously ill with cancer that had appeared five years earlier, Debussy was haunted by awareness of frustrated inspiration and decreased productivity, and had to reach back to unpublished fragments, composed in 1900 to accompany recitations from Pierre Louÿs's *Chansons de Bilitis*, expanding them into the six *Épigraphes antiques* for piano, four hands in July 1914. The outbreak of war a month later depressed him still further, and his only other composition from that year was the *Berceuse héroïque* for piano (also orchestrated) commissioned for a charity album honoring King Albert and the war dead of the Belgian army.

Nevertheless this otherwise barren year set the stage for Debussy's final period of evolution as a composer, which included, in 1915, a last brave burst of brilliant creativity—a heartening example to composers everywhere that even in the awareness of world catastrophe and approaching death one could grow and evolve, and to produce works of remarkable richness and originality.

Chapter 2 covers Debussy's works motivated by the war. Three of these were short piano pieces, of which the *Berceuse héroïque* is the most substantial. Another short piano piece is examined in detail because it is a recent discovery: "Les soirs illuminés par l'ardeur du charbon," which Debussy gave to his coal dealer early in 1917 in lieu of payment for a delivery. (The title is a line from Baudelaire's "Le balcon," which Debussy had set in 1888 as no. 1 of his *Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire*; the piece itself has brief echoes of "Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir" [*Préludes*, book 1, no. 4, 1910], whose title in turn is from Baudelaire's "Harmonies du soir," no. 2 in Debussy's cycle.) For another charity

album, Debussy composed a song in December 1915, "Noël des enfants qui n'ont plus de maison," later arranged for children's chorus and piano; the text is Debussy's own. But the most poignant of Debussy's war pieces is no. 2 of *En blanc et noir*, for two pianos; this is dedicated to the memory of Debussy's friend Jacques Charlot, killed in battle in March 1915. The distorted chorale "Ein' feste Burg" as an emblem of the German invasion in this grim piece is obvious to every listener (Debussy had already whimsically combined this melody with Chopin's Mazurka op. 7, no. 1 in a letter to Louÿs from 1901), but the inclusion of an altered *Marseillaise* melody is much more subtle; in a letter to his publisher Durand, Debussy referred to it as a "pre-Marseillaise" in the form of a "modest carillon call." Wheeldon points to the brusque interruption of the octatonic chord in m. 5; this chord is no less than a widely-spaced *Petrushka* chord of the F# major and C major triads superposed.

Urgently in need of income when he was unable to compose, Debussy accepted Durand's commission to prepare a new edition of the works of Chopin, whose music he had loved and performed since he was a student at the Paris Conservatoire. The task went hand in hand with the composition in 1915 of the twelve études in Chopin's memory. These studies, which lack impressionist titles, have always remained among Debussy's least-known works. Chapter 3, "Compositional Personae in the Piano Etudes," reviews Robert Godet's comparisons of Chopin's and Debussy's études, and Roy Howat's specific comparison of Chopin's *Nouvelle étude* in A-flat major with Debussy's "Pour les sixtes." Citing a letter to Durand, Wheeldon finds a basis for comparison with Couperin among those of Debussy's études for which Godet did not find parallels with Chopin.

Chapter 4, "*Les Sonates cycliques*," emphasizes the cyclic aspects of Debussy's three late sonatas as part of Debussy's inheritance from the cyclic works of Franck. Debussy's string quartet of 1893 is significantly modeled on Franck's quartet, whose premiere Debussy had heard three years earlier. Wheeldon is doubtless correct in suggesting that Debussy's cyclicism in the late sonatas in part results from an effort to identify the cyclic sonata as a French adap-

tation of the Austro-German sonata genre, as demonstrated not only by Franck but by Saint-Saëns, d'Indy, Magnard, and Debussy himself (Debussy's quartet had been preceded by his *Fantaisie* for piano and orchestra of 1890 in its use of cyclic form). At the same time, Debussy's cyclicism in the late sonatas is different from his earlier practice. Wheeldon points out that the Cello Sonata includes a cyclic treatment between first and last movements that is thematically pervasive, while in the Sonata for Flute, Viola, and Harp the cyclic return is a flashback, and in the Violin Sonata only a brief, evanescent gesture. The irony is that the cyclic principle is historically a late and postclassical aspect of sonata form, emerging first in the fantasias of Mozart and Beethoven before it appears in the sonata, and later in Schubert; and in Debussy's late sonatas there is cyclicism but little of classical sonata form itself. Indeed, specific sonata-form features appear most prominently in the first piece in *En blanc et noir*, though this has not been noted by most writers on Debussy.

This book, so admirable in its historical insight and depth of detail, would nevertheless have benefited from greater inclusiveness. Some of the most important pieces within its scope receive less attention than they deserve, for instance the first and third pieces in *En blanc et noir*, which rate among the finest music ever composed for two pianos. The *Épigraphes antiques* for piano, four hands (arranged in 1915 for piano solo), are barely mentioned; even though derived from earlier and much shorter pieces, they clearly belong with the other works of Debussy's well-demarcated final period. It would have been interesting, for instance, to see an examination of no. 1 of this set, "Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été," thirty-six measures in mixed-modal D minor, G minor, and F major, in which not a single accidental sign appears; or of no. 5, "Pour l'Égyptienne," whose E♭ minor harmony seems closely allied to the *Berceuse héroïque* that followed just a few months later.

A final chapter critically examines the special Debussy issue of *La revue musicale* that appeared in December 1920, with its famous supplement, *Le tombeau de Claude Debussy*, of commissioned works by ten composers (Dukas, Satie, Roussel, Florent

Schmitt, Ravel, de Falla, Bartók, Malipiero, Stravinsky, and Eugene Goossens). It is interesting to see the critical opinion from Debussy's own time, including the musical tributes by his fellow composers, as representative of greater or lesser understanding of his music; but, as Wheeldon points out, Debussy's last works were poorly understood then, if they were even known at all, by his contemporaries. Stravinsky wrote in his memoirs that when he first saw the

third piece in *En blanc et noir*, dedicated to him, he was "delighted to see that it was such a good composition." The overarching lesson of *Debussy's Late Style* is that today, especially, we should be delighted but certainly not puzzled by the rich variety of Debussy's invention during his last years.

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