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In Rethinking Debussy editors Elliott Antokoletz and Marianne Wheeldon gather the research of an international group of Debussy scholars with the goal of introducing readers to several new perspectives on Debussy’s music. In an examination of Debussy’s early musical influences, his opera Pelléas et Mélisande, his career and creativity, and his reception, the editors succeed in assembling new and significant essays directed at an audience with a highly specialised knowledge of the composer.

In the first section of Rethinking Debussy, “Early Encounters,” author Marie Rolf examines Debussy’s three works composed for the Prix de Rome, noting their similarities and their relation to the growth and development of Debussy’s musical technique. Through a complex analysis of the three aforementioned works, Rolf concludes that Debussy found his true compositional niche and became a true French composer during the composition of his final piece for the Prix de Rome, Printemps (25). Several scholars disagree, such as Barbara Kelly, who maintains in her essay, “Debussy and the Making of a Musicien Français,” from French Music, Culture, and National Identity, 1870-1939, that Debussy’s opera Pelléas et Mélisande, composed five years later, was the
composition that made him a French national symbol. ¹ Arthur Wenk also argues that it was in Pelléas et Mélisande, “more than in any previous work, that Debussy assembled the materials that would constitute his twentieth-century musical language,” thereby making it his most significant work.² I believe it is not impossible to merge these two opinions by viewing Printemps as the piece in which Debussy achieved his goal of setting a new musical precedent, but that it was not until Pelléas et Mélisande that his work became publicly recognized and appreciated as distinctly French. Regardless of which side of the argument one is on, this successful essay presents the reader with a new vision of Debussy’s compositional style, including both an analysis of the theoretical progression throughout Debussy’s ‘Spring’ works, and an analysis of timbral elements in his compositions, such as his progressive use of voice as a new tone colour instead of simply as a method of delivering text.

Rolf’s colleague, Roy Howat, in turn guides the reader through the process by which Russian music influenced French composition in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Howat notes Debussy’s early encounters with Russian compositions during his time at the Conservatoire, and demonstrates Debussy’s subsequent imitations of Mussorgsky and other Russian composers in many of his works.³ Though Robert Orledge briefly discusses later Wagnerian and Mussorgskian influences on Debussy’s Pelléas et Mélisande in his book Debussy and the Theatre, Howat’s work includes newly founded and more specific comparisons. While Orledge describes Mussorgsky’s “spontaneous art, free from arid formulae, and his form” as the Russian aspects that most heavily influenced Debussy’s opera, Howat discusses specific harmonic and stylistic choices in much more depth.⁴ For example, Howat explores the Russian term nega, which many define as “the decadently seductive effect of a perceived


³ Though the book uses the spellings ‘Musorgsky’ or ‘Moussorgsky’, I have chosen to include the spelling ‘Mussorgsky’ in my paper as it is the more widely recognized English spelling of the composer’s name.

sensual orient,” (37) but Howat adds that it also means the combination of “a drone bass, a sighing melodic descent, the 5-5#-6 inner-voice chromatic rise, and the resultant sideslip to the relative minor” (38). Howat’s argument appears sound as it is supported by examples and external sources.

The following section presents several analyses of Debussy’s opera Pelléas et Mélisande. The first, by Jann Pasler, describes the opera in the context of the preexisting French musical tradition, diverging from the customary analyses that examine it as a model for future French opera. Pasler specifically analyzes the character of Mélisande and her depiction of traditional French womanhood, noting her naïve charm and strong association with truth throughout the opera. Next, Richard Langham Smith discusses the transition that Pelléas et Mélisande underwent from play to opera, before reviewing the various staging changes that the work underwent during its first years of production. He also explores Debussy’s motivations for creating this opera more thoroughly than scholars have previously done. For example, in David Grayson’s book, The Genesis of Debussy’s Pelléas et Mélisande, the author simply explains that Debussy “bought the slim volume [of Maeterlinck’s play], set about reading it, and saw in it a fine subject for an opera,” 5 while Smith suggests that Debussy was drawn to the play because he was empathetic to the inner feelings and sensations of the characters (84).

The next essay in Rethinking Debussy, written by David Grayson, discusses the vocally challenging role of Pelléas, described by many as too high for a baritone and too low for a tenor. He discusses Debussy’s supervision of productions and reluctant edits to the original score to make the vocal range more manageable (99). This subject area appears to have been discussed very little prior to this essay, and the author has had to rely on loosely related sources to draw conclusions; this is not to say that Grayson’s arguments are unfounded, indeed the proficiency of his research is as impressive as it is thorough, as evidenced by the sixty-nine sources he cites.

The “New Perspectives” section in Rethinking Debussy concludes with Elliott Antokoletz’s take on Pelléas et Mélisande. Antokoletz believes Debussy’s music to be a representation of the characters’ subconscious minds (127). He also uses theories by psychoanalysts Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud to explain the oddities of Debussy’s characters, specifically Mélisande as she exhibits various symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder (143). Antokoletz has previously explored this interpretation in his book, Musical Symbolism in the Operas of

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Debussy and Bartók, where he further considers her actions throughout the opera as a result of this condition. According to Antokoletz these include her marriage to Golaud even though she is afraid of him and her inability to contain her feelings for Pelléas, because as a victim of trauma she feels that she has no choice. While Antokoletz explains Mélisande’s symptoms as emanating from post traumatic stress disorder, Nicholas Attfield instead considers her condition hysteria. This diagnosis indicates that it is not the influences of men that have made her act as she does, but her fragility as a woman, a more contemporaneous diagnosis. In fact, a recent article by Julie Pedneault-Deslauriers sheds light on the traditional French attitude towards hysteria, specifically that it was “an illness bound up with gender...doctors had linked it to gynaecological causes.”

Antokoletz interprets Mélisande’s death as her defeat and ultimate submission to men; while Attfield agrees that Mélisande is defeated by death, he points to her daughter as a new beginning, even a portrayal of feminism. While I believe both authors bring valid arguments to light, they approach the issue from different perspectives. Antokoletz argues that for composers such as Debussy, the choice to include female characters with psychological trauma was a musical one, allowing for the “transformation of the more linear, defined quality...into the more diffuse, static effects.” Attfield instead approaches the study of these characters from a sociological point of view, as seen by his exploration of feminism in his text, and believes that the choice of an unstable female character resulted from cultural views of women at the time. Both authors produce reasoning for their positions, and so it is up to the reader to decide which stance they support.

The third section of Rethinking Debussy focuses on Debussy’s “Career and Creativity,” starting off with Denis Herlin’s summary of Debussy’s lifelong financial difficulties. Herlin explains the affect Debussy’s life choices, including his reluctance to accept any official position, had on his financial stability.

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10 Antokoletz, Musical Symbolism in the Operas of Debussy and Bartók, 143.
Remarkably, Herlin manages to provide a comprehensive account of Debussy’s lifelong income and debts, and is the first Debussy scholar to do so. He uses this information to argue that though Debussy may have found his constant need for money a hindrance to his compositional style, it is because of his debts that he created works that may not have otherwise existed (168).

This section also contains Robert Orledge’s interpretation of destiny in Debussy’s works and Debussy’s view of the role of destiny in his own life. Orledge spends most of his chapter discussing his own stylistic completion of Debussy’s unfinished opera *La chute de la Maison Usher*, perhaps not a subject of interest to those wishing solely to study Debussy himself. Orledge does, however, discuss the reasons why Debussy did not complete the opera himself, including his inability to create music different from that of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, his continuous redrafting of the libretto, and his general dislike for finishing works. Orledge discusses Debussy’s gloomy and sometimes suicidal demeanour (204), reflecting that the opera was an obsession for him because it was “a psychological study of the disintegration of a manic depressive” (207). Although Orledge never goes so far as to draw a connection between Debussy and Usher, the protagonist in this opera, Jean-Michel Nectoux does so in his essay “Portrait of the Artist as Roderick Usher.” It is not clear whether Nectoux believes that Debussy created these similarities consciously, but he indicates that Debussy was at least aware of the likeness, “[identifying] himself with the progression into anguish which is the essence of the *Fall of the House of Usher*.” It would appear that in Orledge’s essay the only new material presented by the author is Orledge’s own stylistic completion of the opera, while any further conclusions about the opera were simply restatements of previous research. I did not find this essay of particular interest or relevance to the rest of the book, because it does not deal as directly with Debussy’s own choices as the other chapters. An exploration of the themes and elements present in the incomplete opera, rather than a detailed account of Orledge’s completion of the piece, would have been a more worthwhile contribution to the book.

The final section of this book discusses “Reception Histories,” beginning with James R. Briscoe’s description of the arrival of Debussy’s music in America, which set the stage for the modernist movement in the United States. Briscoe assumes the position that it was in fact Debussy’s music, not that of Schoenberg, Stravinsky, or Copland, that served as a catalyst for the modernist project in America (226). He discusses the reception of Debussy’s music in Boston and

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Chicago, attributing his success mainly to progressive music critics. This essay was insightful and essential to the book as it presented Debussy’s music as viewed by the general public, not just musicologists. This widens the scope of the book to include reception by all audiences, and provides the reader with an additional interpretation of Debussy’s works. I found this essay very relatable to my own understanding of the discussed works. Rethinking Debussy’s final essay discusses the reception of Debussy’s late works, in the context of postwar France. Author Marianne Wheeldon argues that Debussy was very aware of the image he presented in his final compositions and concerned himself greatly with the legacy he was to leave behind. This is also a very interesting essay on a subject that many scholars have tended to overlook in favour of analyzing Debussy’s early works. Wheeldon very clearly explains the differences between Debussy’s early and late styles, which led to the differences between the composer’s desired legacy and the one that was instead created.

The editors of Rethinking Debussy bring together material from multiple authors to portray the wide range of research that continues to be conducted on Debussy’s music. This publication aims to challenge commonly accepted notions of Debussy’s music by introducing new material that contrasts traditional views about this famous French composer or presents new information, a goal that was ultimately achieved, although the authors did not always clarify how the material within their chapters related to the overall book. This information can instead be found in the introduction, which provides succinct descriptions of each essay and outlines the importance and significance of each one. The lack of clarity within the essays could be because the intended audience for the book is one that is familiar enough with the music and would be able to draw their own conclusions regarding the significance of the essays, however, I found this omission restrictive to my understanding of the collection as a whole.

Rethinking Debussy provides insight into many new facets of Debussy research, however, its potential audience is largely restricted because of the necessary background knowledge and command of music-theoretical knowledge required to thoroughly understand and interpret the information presented. The intention of the text, as the introduction states, is to “offer new insights for musicologists, theorists, and performers,” (xvii) and so the editors make it clear that the book is intended for a specialist audience, and the essays target this audience accordingly.

Overall, the text succeeded in educating the reader on new Debussy research, but the real impact of the book lay in the various scholars’ methodologies. Most of the essays summarized existing research on Debussy’s music and presented it either from a new angle than previous scholars or
presented it in such a way that their sources generated entirely new observations. The content of the essays was complex but generally laid out clearly, and the essays appeared in a logical order, however, the information was complicated and directed towards specialists in the field, and for this reason I would recommend this text only to those with either background knowledge of Debussy compositions and research, or to those willing to dedicate a great deal of time to completing further research on Debussy. Ultimately, I believe that this text is of great value, and is essential reading for anyone devoted to expanding their knowledge and views of Debussy’s life, works, and influence.

For Further Reading:


