

contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Shepherd, John. 1977. 'Review of *Debussy: Impressionism and Symbolism* by Stefan Jarocinski, trans. Rollo Myers and *Claude Debussy and the Poets* by Arthur B. Wenk'. *Contact*, 17. pp. 31-32. ISSN 0308-5066.

1
2

DEBUSSY: IMPRESSIONISM AND SYMBOLISM, by Stefan Jarocinski, trans. Rollo Myers
Eulenburg Books, 1976 (hdbk. £3.50, ppbk. £2.50)

CLAUDE DEBUSSY AND THE POETS, by Arthur B. Wenk
University of California Press, 1976 (£14.65)

JOHN SHEPHERD

The notion that the art of any particular epoch both reflects and contributes to the social/cultural background of its creation is one that even today is unlikely to pass completely unchallenged. Yet for those wishing to substantiate such a claim, the artistic fervour that was to be found in Paris during the late 1880s and the 1890s is something of a godsend. For it would be difficult to deny that there was at that time a certain 'something in the air' which not only pervaded all the arts, but which also found expression in more general intellectual and political activity. It is in the light of this fervour that scholars have acknowledged a similarity of aesthetic outlook as evidenced in the (earlier) music of Debussy and the 'Impressionist' painters and writers who were his contemporaries.

But beyond assigning to Debussy the somewhat nebulous label of an 'Impressionist' and noting certain musical devices (pentatonicism, the whole-tone scale, parallel chord motion and so on) which, through a 'suspension of functional tonality', seem to be responsible for the creation of 'amorphous atmospheric effects', the exact nature of the aesthetic relationship between the composer and his literary and artistic contemporaries has itself remained cloaked in something of a haze. The books by Jarocinski and Wenk attempt, in their different ways, to dispel this. Jarocinski comes to grips with the central question by examining the adequacy of the 'Impressionist' label as applied to Debussy and then considering the precise points of contact between the composer's aesthetics and those of his literary colleagues. Wenk, on the other hand, seeks, through more rigorous analysis, to illustrate structural parallels between the music of Debussy's songs and the Symbolist poems that they set.

Jarocinski's point of departure is the definition of a symbol as something that 'conveys an imprecise meaning which can be interpreted in various ways' (p.23). Further, 'the transposition of its meaning has a dynamic character' (p.24). Whereas Symbolist poetry, with its emphasis on the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated and vague images and on the sonorous qualities of individual words, largely conforms to this definition of a symbol, Impressionist painting does not. Although there is a desire to move away from what the artist knows to what he 'actually sees', the Impressionist vision, based as it is on the play of light at a precise moment on a precise subject, still seeks to achieve a certain 'scientific objectivity'. There is little of the ambiguity obtaining in the *dialectic* perceptive situation, with its indissoluble interplay between the external world and the individual's psychological predisposition. It is because the simultaneous multiplicity of such moods and images does not lend itself to verbal-rational linear exposition that the Symbolist poets preferred to suggest, rather than to strictly delineate their subject matter.

Jarocinski goes on to argue that music is par excellence the symbolic mode of ambiguity and suggestion and that Debussy used these inherent characteristics to achieve an art-form which is closely related to the aesthetics of the Symbolist poets (with whom, indeed, he had a great deal more contact than with Impressionist painters). Debussy is not primarily concerned with portraying nature through sound, but with evolving in the listener's consciousness the correspondences that exist between different sensations (visual, olfactory, auditory and so on) and between those sensations and the dynamic mental states of the individual. Debussy's world is not one of concrete externals, but internal, fluid and intangible.

This line of thought is backed up not only by well chosen

selections from Debussy's writings on aesthetics (which are then compared with similar writings from the poets — most notably Baudelaire), but also by a highly perceptive discussion of the composer's musical language. Jarocinski is at pains to show that any traditionally based analysis of Debussy's music, even if only 'against the background of functional tonality' (that is, based on the assumption that Debussy merely suspends functional tonality in a 'colouristic manner'), constitutes a fundamental misrepresentation that inevitably leads to claims for a diffuse, sensuous and superficial 'Impressionism'. Such an approach stresses the 'negative' or 'destructive' elements of Debussy's art at the expense of positive aspects which display their own organisational principles. People who subscribe to the label of 'Impressionism', therefore, 'do not notice that all these [musical] procedures point to another and fundamentally different method of organising sound in both its formal and material aspects; to explain this music in terms of the methods and categories of a style hitherto accepted could only lead to dangerous generalisations. Debussy's detestation of 'developments', the ascetic sobriety of his melodic invention . . . were looked upon as a form of sensual naturalism . . . whereas in reality his musical thought was opposed to any form of illustration, anecdote or programme music, as well as to any kind of subservience to Nature' (p. 154). His whole object was 'to avoid that kind of clarity which Wagner aimed at in his *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in order not to conceal under too transparent musical symbols the obscure and ambiguous significance of men, things and situations' (p. 131).

Jarocinski does not, however, fall into the trap of supplanting one label (Impressionism) with another (Symbolism). While acknowledging that the influence of the Symbolist poets was probably crucial, the author is happy to accept that within the artistic milieu of the time Debussy's contribution is just as individual and just as important as that of his 'non-musical' contemporaries: 'we believe that we must respect [Debussy's] refusal to accept any "label": indeed, in our opinion it would be impossible to find one that could be applied to him. He had been in contact with all sorts of artistic movements: Naturalism, Impressionism, Pre-Raphaelitism, Divisionism, Symbolism, Synthesism, Fauvism, Expressionism. With the exception of Cubism, whose birth and development he had witnessed without enthusiasm, he had learned something from all these movements, and had sometimes been profoundly influenced by them (in the case of Symbolism, for example); but he never sacrificed to any of them his own artistic personality . . .' (p. 161).

This book is prodigious not only in putting forward an incisive view of Debussy's relationship with the artistic ambience of the time, but also in acting as an excellent introduction to Debussy, his music and his world. Indeed, one of the few criticisms that could be made of the book is that it at times displays a certain tension between the role of polemic and that of a textbook. On occasion, interesting and suggestive lines of thought become submerged in recitations of fact. Consequently, certain questions arise which perhaps require greater elaboration. One is left wondering, for example, exactly how Jarocinski sees the relationship between the inherent qualities of different symbolic modes (music, writing, painting and so on) and the socially or culturally grounded 'meanings' they articulate. One of Jarocinski's points, it will be remembered, is that music is highly suited to expressing the Symbolist aesthetic (it is no accident in this respect that Symbolist poets and poems alike make frequent reference to music). Yet that same symbolic mode was equally successful in articulating, through functional tonality, the teleological and rational/discursive outlook of educated post-Renaissance man. Conversely, the Symbolist poets managed to turn the inherently 'concrete' nature of referential 'rational' language against itself. It may well be that Debussy brought music (and, indeed, the artistic symbol) closer to its own intrinsic nature, but such implications need to be handled with care.

Criticisms such as these are, however, slight when put against the contribution made by this book. For it is an essential part of that contribution that the book, through an examination of Debussy's relationship with both the immediate and wider (pre-Wagnerian) cultural context, instigates discussions of topics which have for too long been ignored.

Wenk's book explores, at a rather more concrete level than Jarocinski's, Dukas' famous remark that 'la plus forte influence qu'ait subie Debussy est celle des littérateurs. Non pas celle des musiciens.' Through an examination of the relationship between words and music in a selected number of Debussy's songs (settings of Banville, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé, Louÿs and Debussy himself) Wenk attempts to gain insights into questions such as 'What was the effect of . . . literary associations on Debussy's music? Did it go any deeper than the title page? Did the poets influence Debussy's ideas on music — what it is, what it can do? How did these ideas affect his music?' (p. 6)

It should straight away be said that the book is rich and substantial in its analysis of poetic and musical devices, in its illustrations of the way in which different aspects of Debussy's music parallel poetic construction and in its view of the song as a springboard for the development of Debussy's style. It further demonstrates considerable knowledge of the aesthetic writings and correspondence of both Debussy and the Symbolist poets: the discussion of Baudelaire's influence on Debussy's aesthetic thought is in particular quite excellent. Having said that, however, one must confess to a sense of disappointment on finishing the

book. For although Wenk acknowledges at the outset that Debussy 'was not content with a music which would merely complement the mood of a text, (p. 6), analysis is carried out very much at this level. The connections made between music and poetry are either between a musical device (for example, a certain use of the chromatic scale) and a specific emotion (for example, 'intimacy') or between overall musical form and overall poetic form.

This is not to suggest that the analysis is without sophistication. In his analysis of *L'Ombredes Arbres* (Verlaine), for example, Wenk notes, by reference to Zimmerman's *Magies de Verlaine*, that the intricate system of mirror images and oppositions evidenced in the poem form a closed circle. Both oppositions and circle are directly revealed through Debussy's music. The interval of a tritone which forms a basic structural element of the song 'is the one interval which reflects into itself when inverted, an ideal device to represent the pure essence of reflection, Verlaine's central image' (p. 109). Further, 'a continuation by perfect fifths in either direction from a given note eventually returns to that note by way of the so-called cycle of fifths . . . In the chain of fifths at the end of the first half [of the song], Debussy moves outwards along the circle from C# to D. At the end of the piece he returns to C# from the other side, very nearly completing the circle that Zimmerman finds in Verlaine's poem of mirrors. The distance across the circle of fifths at any point is, of course, a tritone.' (p. 110)

Whether or not one finds this kind of analysis convincing is an open question. The point, however, is that Wenk seems unable to consider that musical devices may be significant of themselves, i.e. within a given cultural context. Whereas Debussy was concerned to evoke the fluid interplay of shifting moods and images from *within* his music, Wenk's analysis does not seem to delve beyond external and surface representation. That his method of approach is not terribly sympathetic to Debussy's aesthetic is evidenced in a concluding statement that 'such a strong influence' as that of the 'littérateurs' 'inevitably led to a certain dependence' (p. 272) on the part of Debussy's musical style. Surely the essential strength of Debussy's finest settings is that the music speaks from within itself to the kernel of poetic imagination?

Music which functions in this way nevertheless inevitably involves at the surface level a certain parallelism of construction with the poetic text, and for this reason alone the book remains valuable. Moreover, many people would maintain that the kind of analysis I am suggesting here is impossible simply because it attempts to go beyond the concrete and external. To suggest that the above criticism is a central weakness of the book might therefore be to chide the author for not attempting something he did not intend in the first place. Yet one cannot help feeling that a mode of analysis which on the one hand depends on explicit and reified descriptions of shifting poetic images, and on the other is largely drawn from categories of functional tonal analysis, is not entirely appropriate to the task. But whatever one decides about the methodological basis of this book, there is little doubt that it provides an extremely informative guide to those who wish to examine Debussy's songs for themselves.