

Vanessa Chang

Mark Seto

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Debussy as a Music Critic: Analyzing His Critical Writings and Their Influence on French Music

I. INTRODUCTION

Prior to the late 1800's, classical music in France could be characterized by an emphasis on a clear melody, decoration or ornate style, and was heavily influenced by the Baroque era and German composers such as Beethoven and Wagner. However, as the Romantic era progressed, composers began to experiment with tonality and novel styles of music by composing pieces that incorporated dissonant chords and poly-tones. This resulted in the production of new genres that deviated from traditional standards and prompted the evolution of music criticism. In order for music criticism to keep up with the advancement of French music, many critics implemented reforms, such as redefining the role of music criticism, who should write music criticism, and what criticism should contain. One of the significant changes was the increase in the number of composers participating in music criticism. Although there were a few influential composer critics such as Hector Berlioz and Felix Mendelssohn during 19th century France, music critics were typically scholars and non-composers. However, starting from the late early 20th century, many composers started a second career in writing criticism for music journals and newspapers. The increase of composer critics resulted in conflict due to the variety of new perspectives brought to the criticism scene and raised questions in the music criticism community regarding

how music criticism should be written, what it should contain, and its influence on the direction of music development.

Through a detailed exploration of the music criticism of Claude Debussy, one of the most renowned composer critics of his time, it is possible to gain insights into his artistic ideals and how they are reflected in his writing. By analyzing his distinct style of critique, which deviated from the conventional approaches of his peers, it is possible to uncover the unique perspectives that he brought to the field of music criticism. Additionally, by examining Debussy's criticism, it can be discovered how he played a role in shaping the direction of French music, particularly through his advocacy for a new national musical style.

II. DEBUSSY'S CAREER AS A MUSIC CRITIC

Debussy was one of the more prominent and influential composer critics, alongside Saint-Saëns and Fauré, in the early 20th century France. He started writing critiques in the early 1900's, mostly from 1901 to 1903. Under the pseudonym Monsieur Croche, Debussy wrote for journals such as *La Revue blanche*, *Gil Blas*, *Musica*, and *Mercure de France*. Monsieur Croche can be described as Debussy's alter ego¹, which he used to communicate his thoughts to the public. He wrote criticisms on various composers, genres, and institutions. His unconventional ideas provoked much discourse in the public and the music sphere. Debussy left a lasting influence in regards to what French music should be and how composers should seek to create works that truly embody their individuality.

Debussy took a unique approach when writing his music criticism. Prior to the change in the French music scene, criticism was mostly centered on defending an established culture.

¹ Déirdre Donnellon, "Debussy as Musician and Critic," in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, ed. Simon Trezise (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2.

However, as the music culture of France began to change, criticism developed to support continuous musical progress.² Boris de Scholoezer, a well-known musicologist during this time, stated that “Our predecessors had aesthetic criteria and they defended them; we do not have them.”³ However, due to experimentation and development of new music, these standards no longer applied. This change from defending traditions to defining a new set of standards opened the possibilities of music criticism to change its pre-existing role. As a result of this reassessment of music criticism, composers began to participate in criticism to disseminate their thoughts to an audience and provoked discourse. Debussy was such a composer that followed this trend and contributed many of his ideas and perspectives on music in his criticism.

III. DEBUSSY’S ARTISTIC IDEALS

One prominent theme throughout Debussy’s literary works is freedom. Debussy considered the element of freedom in music creation to be significant not just in his own compositions, but in others as well. Debussy highly encouraged composers to think unconventionally and not be bound by ideas prevalent in the works that were produced by masters such as Beethoven. In his first article that appeared on April 1, 1901 in *La Revue blanche*, Debussy stated that “Beethoven’s real lesson to us was not that we should preserve age-old forms, nor even that we should plant our footsteps where he first trod. We should look out through open windows into clear skies.”⁴ It is clear that Debussy believed in creating music that did not copy tradition and encourage others to do the same. Based on his remarks, it can be inferred that Debussy strongly believed that although previous composers may have established a precedent, it is important to not be bound by those paradigms and forge their own path.

² Duchesneau, Michel. “French Music Criticism and Musicology at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: New Journals, New Networks.” *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 14, no. 1 (2017), 18.

³ Ibid, 18-19.

⁴ Jensen, Eric Frederick. *Debussy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 247.

This concept of freedom and breaking away from tradition is also evident in Debussy's criticism of Beethoven and the symphony. Debussy believed that Beethoven was the last composer to properly compose a symphony. He stated that other composers "no more than respectfully repeat the same forms with less power"⁵, either lacking in complexity or failing to reach the same standards as the symphonies Beethoven composed. For example, Debussy "He described the symphonies of Schumann and Mendelssohn as "respectful repetitions but already with less conviction"⁶, emphasizing the idea that other composers were unable to create new and interesting works because Beethoven had already exhausted the symphonic form. This led Debussy to assert that the symphony form "belongs to the past by virtue" because of its limitations and restrictions on musical expression. He ends his criticism with a description of the symphony composer who is "engaged in listening modestly to the voice of tradition which prevents him, it seems to me, from hearing the voice that speaks within him."⁷, further promoting the idea that composers were confined by tradition and unable to freely express themselves. Debussy desired to see composers develop their own direction by breaking away from traditional forms rather than blindly following the success of the "masters".

Debussy had distinct inclinations towards particular aspects of music that he valued. Based on his praise of Modest Mussorgsky, a prominent Russian composer, it is clear that Debussy admired music that was capable of creating imagery and constructed in unique methods that did not necessarily follow pre-existing forms. In his criticism of Mussorgsky's *Nursery*—a suite of 7 movements, each depicting a scene from childhood—he writes that, "No one has given utterance to the best within us in tones more gentle or profound; he is unique, and will remain so,

⁵ Jensen, Eric Frederick. Debussy, 247.

⁶ Donnellon, "Debussy as Musician and Critic.", 49.

⁷ Debussy, "The Symphony", *Monsieur Croche, the Dilettante Hater*, 37.

because his art is spontaneous and free from arid formulas.”⁸ It is evident that Debussy highly valued individuality and freedom and felt that Mussorgsky’s unique approach to music embodied this. Debussy also states that in the piece, there is not “ever a question of any particular form” because the form of the piece is so varied that one cannot even be established.⁹ He was pleased with the fact that this work did not have an official form and that Mussorgsky was able to produce a distinct piece. This lack of conventional form in Mussorgsky’s *Nursery* is exemplary of one of Debussy's values in music where the composer does not follow traditional forms and uses their own creativity to compose music.

Another composer that Debussy admired was Richard Strauss, a well-known German composer. Debussy admired his ability to think in “color-pictures” and “draw the line of his ideas by means of the orchestra.”¹⁰ Debussy considers this composition method to be very uncommon, unique, and personal, as “it is no longer the rigid and architectural methods of Bach or Beethoven.”¹¹ Debussy’s appraisal of Strauss’s creative process reveals how he interpreted Strauss’s music to have imaginative qualities integrated into the way that it was created, breaking free from traditional molds. The music that Strauss produced was unique and described as “the most wildly discordant notes, quite regardless of their possibly painful effect as long as they satisfy his demand that they should live.”¹² This statement about Strauss’s work embodies how positively Debussy saw composers who chose not to limit themselves to pre-existing traditions and used their compositions to reflect their individuality. Strauss’s ability to put his own personality and style in his music matched Debussy’s ideals on individuality and freedom.

⁸ Debussy, “Mussorgsky”, *Monsieur Croche, the Dilettante Hater*, 41.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Debussy, “Strauss”, *Monsieur Croche, the Dilettante Hater*, 121.

¹¹ Ibid, 122.

¹² Ibid.

IV. DEBUSSY'S DISTINCTNESS IN MUSIC CRITICISM

Apart from Debussy's music criticism revealing his preferences and ideals, it also reveals his distinct style and approach to criticism, which did not align with the norms of music criticism during this time.

One of the main characteristics of Debussy's criticism that set him apart from others is the way in which he delivered it. Debussy's choice of words and unwillingness to compromise his personal views produced brutally honest reviews that clearly conveyed his preferences. For example, in his criticism of Saint-Saëns *Les Barbares*, he wrote, "How is it possible to go so wrong?" and that "the opera is worse than others just because it is by Saint-Saëns."¹³ Furthermore, in his criticism of the opera he stated that "[t]hey [the opera] continued to produce curious noises which the people who pay call music, but there is no need to believe them implicitly."¹⁴ While most music critics tended to be more gentle and bland, Debussy's harsh critiques stood in stark contrast such as that of Gabriel Fauré, who was described as producing good quality works but was not as jarring in language as Debussy's.¹⁵ The controversial and outspoken writings of Debussy drew the attention of critics and readers alike¹⁶, distinguishing his style of criticism from those around him and at the same time, establishing his opinions strongly in the mind of the public.

When comparing Debussy's criticism to works by other prominent composer critics such as Gabriel Fauré, there is a great difference in the language and delivery of their criticism. Tom Gordon, a professor in Bishop University's music department, described Fauré's criticism as lacking humor, ardor, and assurance while still providing a great deal of insight on both standard

¹³ Debussy, "Saint-Saëns", *Monsieur Croche, the Dilettante Hater*, 25.

¹⁴ Debussy, "The Opera", *Monsieur Croche, the Dilettante Hater*, 61.

¹⁵ Gordon, Tom. *Regarding Fauré*. London: Routledge, 2016, 16.

¹⁶ Donnellon, "Debussy as Musician and Critic.", 2.

and obscure works. Fauré's foremost objectives were to do justice to the music by providing a detailed analysis of the works and elucidating the music he was evaluating to his audience.¹⁷ In addition, Fauré's character was described as "never arrogant, distinguished, always careful by consideration."¹⁸ Debussy, on the other hand, was more focused on conveying his own thoughts, and unashamedly so. In fact, in *Monsieur Croche, the Dilettante Hater*, Debussy outright informs his reader, "what you will be finding here are my own sincere impressions, exactly as I felt-them."¹⁹ Debussy's character in criticism was described as "blunt, and a master at confrontation, but a much more skillful antagonist."²⁰ When comparing the characteristics of these two composers, there is a clear difference in the delivery of their criticism. Debussy's confrontational honesty gave audiences an intriguing new perspective as opposed to Fauré's more gentle criticism. Furthermore, the contrast between Debussy's expressive and Fauré's analytical approach reveals the progressiveness of Debussy's ideas and Fauré's philosophy of upholding the status quo.

Despite his harsh treatment of peer composers, Debussy's attitude towards younger composers was markedly gentler than that of his peers. Generally, critics felt no need to spare the feelings of young composers. However, Debussy tended to be a bit kinder because he regularly suffered at the hands of critics.²¹ For example, in his review of Gustave Samazeuilh's Piano Suite, Debussy states that he "felt [it] was 'un peu verte' (a little bit green) but nonetheless boded well for the future."²² Debussy may have been concerned that a harsh music critic on a relatively young composer, could have discouraged them from experimenting with new styles and may

¹⁷ Gordon, *Regarding Fauré*, 17.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Jensen, *Debussy*, 244.

²⁰ Ibid, 245.

²¹ Donnellon, "Debussy as Musician and Critic.", 2.

²² Ibid.

have pushed them to adherence to traditional forms instead. Alternatively, he combined negative criticism with encouragement to help them grow and develop their own styles of music in contrast to the behaviors of his critic peers.

Another unique aspect of Debussy's criticism was the lack of technical language when conveying his thoughts. He instead used figurative language which opposed traditional music criticism which typically involved music jargon. Boris Schloezer, a prominent non-composer critic, pointed out that "composers could use their ... technical knowledge to impress the reader with theoretical, aesthetic, or philosophical concepts, such an approach was generally not used, and their music criticism often resembled that of literary types."²³ Debussy's work included imaginative language like "the old lions, who yawn from the sheer boredom of gazing at everlasting soldier boys"²⁴, and "a flock of sparrows fluttered to the windows of the *Cirque* and twittered pleasantly."²⁵ His abundant use of figurative language for expression and lack of technical analysis was a direct contrast to the writing technique of typical critics. Schloezer, one of the main proponents of a differing viewpoint, believed that music criticism should be the result of reflective, or even methodical and scientific thought.²⁶ Instead of following this model, Debussy uses figurative and eloquent language to create a unique type of music criticism that heightens both the appeal and impact of his criticism to express his thoughts. His participation in the trend of writing literary music criticism instead of following the traditional guidelines reflected the changes that the community was experiencing and contributed to the ongoing evolution of the standards of criticism.

²³ Duchesneau, "French Music Criticism and Musicology", 23.

²⁴ Debussy, "The Peoples Theatre", *Monsieur Croche, the Dilettante Hater*, 114.

²⁵ Debussy, "Nikisch", *Monsieur Croche, the Dilettante Hater*, 71.

²⁶ Duchesneau, "French Music Criticism and Musicology", 24-25.

Debussy's criticism was unique in the sense that it constantly questioned traditional forms and standards. The purpose of music criticism was originally to defend the pre-established rubrics, but instead Debussy chose to use this platform to question the standard role of tradition in music. Eric Frederick Jensen writes that Debussy's criticism often contained ideas along the lines of, "Think for yourself - Question tradition - Be suspicious of what you are taught."²⁷ These questions that Debussy concerned himself were not the concerns of a typical music critic, thus making the content of his criticism different from others and provoking new types of thought. Debussy's large audience, coupled with his role as one of the few to openly criticize tradition, was able to convey new ideas to the public and stimulate change in thoughts of composers.

V. DEBUSSY'S IMPACT ON THE FRENCH MUSICAL IDENTITY

Before the First World War, Debussy had already begun to write criticism that involved encouraging the development of French music. As the war progressed, these feelings of nationalism only increased and Debussy continued to advocate earnestly for the establishment of the French musical identity.

Debussy advocated for the revitalization of French music before the start of the war by criticizing performance institutions like the opera and concert halls for constantly performing the same works. In his published collection of criticism, he stated that "the important thing is to perform a great deal of music and not to yield to the willful indifference of the public."²⁸ Debussy criticized genres like the opera for programming only popular works. According to him "there has been throughout no attempt at anything really new: nothing but a kind of machinery, a continual reiteration"²⁹, at this point, alluding towards the stagnant progress of French music in the opera. At this time, there was also an influx of German conductors who only programmed

²⁷ Jensen, *Debussy*, 248.

²⁸ Debussy, "The Opera", *Monsieur Croche, the Dilettante Hater*, 64-65.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 63.

popular works like Beethoven's symphonies, only contributing to the issue. Debussy argued that "if these gentlemen would only include some novelties in their programs; but, on the contrary, up to the present they make use of the same old stock."³⁰ Debussy believed that the repeated programming of the same works would not bring about any new developments to French music. He maintained the idea that promoting new music would further the development of French music and eventually aid in establishing a French musical identity. Debussy's advocacy for the creation of new French music was one of the very few conventions that he championed and reveals his nationalistic sentiments.

Debussy had a very particular idea of what French music should be and he revealed this in his criticism about Rameau, along with his feelings of patriotism. In his criticism of Rameau's work he wrote that "We have, however, in Rameau's work a pure French tradition full of charming and tender delicacy, well balanced, strictly declamatory in recitative and without any affection of German profundity."³¹ Debussy thought that Rameau's music embodied what French music should be and sincerely encouraged people to listen to his music. Debussy also maintained that current French music "followed paths which have treacherously led it away from that clarity of expression."³² He believed that French music was losing the qualities that made it distinctive which were the "precision and conciseness of form" and sought to emphasize these characteristics in his criticism by clearly stating that they were the "peculiar and significant quality of the French genius."³³ By defining what he thought was French music, Debussy could disseminate to his audience what his criteria for French music were and which composers they could listen to.

³⁰ "Debussy as Musical Critic." *The Musical Times* 59, no. 905 (1918): 297.

³¹ *Ibid*, 99.

³² Debussy, "Rameau", *Monsieur Croche, the Dilettante Hater*, 100.

³³ *Ibid*.

Another characteristic of French music that was emphasized heavily in Debussy's criticism was the composition's ability to be devoid of German or Wagnerian influences. In his criticism about Gounod, Debussy writes that "[Gounod] deserves our praise for having evaded the domination of the genius Wagner, whose particular German ideal was not clearly realized in his attempt at a fusion of the arts."³⁴ In his criticism of Rameau, he states that "[i]t was exempt from the German affectation of depth; it did not need to be emphasized with one's fist."³⁵ From his criticism, it can be inferred that Debussy greatly disliked the influence of Wagner and German music in the French musical scene and believed that true French music should be devoid of these influences. As a result, he persistently advocated for composers to not follow in their predecessors' footsteps. By advocating against the excessive influence of foreign composers on French music, Debussy contributed to the purist discussion of what true French music should be.

Debussy's persistence against German influences on French music was rather temperate until the First World war. Donnellon asserts that the start of the First World War fostered a climate of "cultural isolationism that increasingly found expression in open hostility to the 'Boche' music of contemporary German composers such as Strauss and Reger."³⁶ During this time, Debussy was influenced by wartime nationalism, and continued to plead for the renewal of French music. His only article from 1915 reiterated his sentiments toward the revitalization of French music and urged his fellow musicians to take action as well.³⁷ Debussy's calls to return to French music were better received during the war due to the rise in patriotism. He stated in a letter to Georges Jean Aubry that the wartime was "an opportunity to return, not to a narrow and contemporary French tradition, but to the true one; one which can be placed after Rameau, at

³⁴ Debussy, "Gounod", *Monsieur Croche, the Dilettante Hater*, 187.

³⁵ Debussy, "Rameau", *Monsieur Croche, the Dilettante Hater*, 99.

³⁶ Donnellon, "Debussy as Musician and Critic.", 55.

³⁷ Debussy, "Rameau", *Monsieur Croche, the Dilettante Hater*, 100.

which point it began to lose its way.”³⁸ Despite his attempts to encourage French musicians to re-discover French music, the music scene was dominated by the older, more stubborn generation of musicians because most of the younger generation went to war. The lack of impact of Debussy’s words on French composers shows how resistant the members of the French music scene were to change. Despite his best efforts, Debussy did not succeed in strongly influencing the development of French music during this period.

Debussy’s criticism reveals a lot about the state of music in France and the criticism scene as a whole. Debussy’s prominent ideas were in regards to freedom in music, breaking away from the status quo, and reverting back to France’s origins to create not only new music but re-construct the French musical identity as well. The resistance and novelty of these perspectives displays how progressive Debussy’s ideas were in comparison to other critics and exposes the conservatism present in the criticism sphere. The contrast in criticism styles reveals how music criticism clung onto past traditions regardless of the changes in music. For example, with the appearance of the Les Six and their works that experimented with tonality, critics were more focused on weakening the cultural positions of these young composers instead of embracing changes that they presented.³⁹ In addition, Debussy’s music which embodied ideas prevalent in his criticism was not as well received during the time. The criticism of Debussy’s music reveals the resistance to change despite all the new experiments in music that were taking place. This obstinance illuminates the conflicts French music culture was facing, and reveals the difficulty of trying to navigate a path of creating good French music.

Debussy’s critical works provide a window into his distinctive ideas and perspectives and how recurring themes of freedom and breaching of tradition may have influenced the

³⁸ Donnellon, “Debussy as Musician and Critic.”, 55.

³⁹ Duchesneau, “French Music Criticism and Musicology”, 33.

development of French music. His progressive outlook and aspiration for music that deviated from established norms stirred debates about the composition of music and the extent to which influences from other composers should be incorporated. Debussy's writing style, which was both literary and daring, set his critiques apart from those of other critics and contributed to the evolution of music criticism. His criticism also addressed very practical concerns such as concern about the extent of Wagner's influence on contemporary French music and the defining of French music to contain clarity and simplicity. Debussy's critiques are especially valuable as they reveal the composer's honest preferences and unique approach to music, as well as his willingness to challenge traditional musical conventions and explore new ideas.

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