

The Cambridge Companion to
DEBUSSY

.....

EDITED BY
Simon Trezise



PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477, Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Cambridge University Press 2003

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Minion 10.75/14 pt System L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

The Cambridge companion to Debussy / edited by Simon Trezise.
p. cm. – (Cambridge companions to music)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 65243 X (hardback) – ISBN 0 521 65478 5 (paperback)

1. Debussy, Claude, 1862–1918. – Criticism and interpretation. I. Trezise, Simon. II. Series.

ML410.D28 C26 2002

780'.92 – dc21 2001043703

ISBN 0 521 65243 X hardback

ISBN 0 521 65478 5 paperback

Contents

- List of contributors* [page x]
Acknowledgements [xiii]
Chronology of Debussy's life and works [xiv]
Note on the text [xix]

Introduction *Simon Trezise* [1]

Part I • Man, musician and culture

- 1 Debussy the man *Robert Orledge* [9]
- 2 Debussy's Parisian affiliations *Barbara L. Kelly* [25]
- 3 Debussy as musician and critic *Déirdre Donnellon* [43]

Part II • Musical explorations

- 4 Debussy on stage *David Grayson* [61]
- 5 The prosaic Debussy *Roger Nichols* [84]
- 6 Debussy and expression *Nigel Simeone* [101]
- 7 Exploring the erotic in Debussy's music *Julie McQuinn* [117]
- 8 Debussy and nature *Caroline Potter* [137]

Part III • Musical techniques

- 9 Debussy's tonality: a formal perspective *Boyd Pomeroy* [155]
- 10 The Debussy sound: colour, texture, gesture *Mark DeVoto* [179]
- 11 Music's inner dance: form, pacing and complexity in Debussy's music *Richard S. Parks* [197]
- 12 Debussy's 'rhythmicised time' *Simon Trezise* [232]

Part IV • Performance and assessment

- 13 Debussy in performance *Charles Timbrell* [259]
- 14 Debussy now *Arnold Whittall* [278]

- Notes* [288]
Select bibliography [315]
Index [318]

1 Debussy the man

ROBERT ORLEDGE

Creating a balanced picture of such a deliberately enigmatic character as Claude Debussy is no easy task. But so great is the fascination that his life and music have exerted that ‘performers, writers and analysts have been peeling away the layers of the onion that is Debussy’¹ ever since Louise Liebich first approached the chopping board way back in 1907. And as Roger Nichols aptly continues: ‘I think it is some measure of his greatness that the more we peel, the more we find.’ Coincidentally, both Liebich and Nichols ninety years on begin by quoting Debussy’s veiled warning to future biographers that ‘Another man’s soul is a thick forest in which one must walk with circumspection’,² and I make no excuse for reusing this ideal quotation here, or for assuming that readers will refer to the accompanying chronology on pp. xiv–xviii above for the well-known landmarks in Debussy’s career.

Debussy very rarely bared his own secretive soul, and if he was hardly a model of circumspection himself, he disliked its absence in others. The thick forest in which his shadowy operatic masterpiece *Pelléas et Mélisande* begins can be seen to have parallels with his own life, for it surrounded a dream-world controlled by destiny in which happiness was rare, and from which there was no escape except in death. If Maeterlinck’s Symbolist play provided Debussy with a musical way forward in 1893 and eventually brought him the fame he had dreamed of when it was staged in 1902, it nevertheless did not satisfy the cravings of the ‘happiness addict’³ who, for a variety of reasons, became increasingly reclusive and miserable during his final years.

The frustrated desire to be a man of action provides an important key to Debussy’s elusive inner world. As the first of the following, strikingly similar, revelations predates *Pelléas*, it can be seen that his focal opera solved none of his underlying psychological problems. As he told the banker and writer Prince André Poniatowski in September 1892,

alongside the man who spends his days at the work-table, whose only delight is catching butterflies at the bottom of an inkwell, there is another Debussy who is receptive to adventures and mixing a bit of action with his dreams. As long as he can return to them afterwards and not have to watch them being mown down, as they so often are, by worthless reality.⁴

On 8 July 1910 we again find Debussy lamenting his fate to his chief *confidant* of the post-*Pelléas* years, his publisher Jacques Durand, as follows:

Those around me simply don't understand that I've never been able to live in a world of real things and real people. That's why I have this insurmountable need to escape from myself in adventures which seem inexplicable because they reveal a man that no one knows; and perhaps he represents the best side of me! Besides, an artist is by definition a man accustomed to dreams and living among apparitions. . . . In short, I live in a world of memory and regret. . . . They are two gloomy companions! But at least they are faithful ones, more so than pleasure and happiness!⁵

Outwardly, Debussy was now an acclaimed composer, whose transformation from the poor left-wing Bohemian of the 1890s to the apparently wealthy bourgeois in his well-appointed and luxuriously furnished house on the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne was now complete. But very few people knew that he was continually in debt and that his second marriage to the possessive and capricious Emma Bardac was already floundering. From these letters it is also clear that Debussy saw himself as set apart from ordinary mortals by his talents as a composer, although the only artistic escapism he now felt able to indulge in lay in his operas based on stories by Edgar Allan Poe. And if Debussy's only real 'adventures' that we know of before 1900 were amorous ones which merely produced short-lived periods of happiness, then we need to look farther back into his psychological make-up to find the root causes of his prevailing melancholy.

One such cause lay in his difficult relationship with his parents before the success of *Pelléas*. If he kept it secret during his lifetime, he felt deeply ashamed that his father was imprisoned for revolutionary activities after the defeat of the Commune in December 1871, and that prior to this he had had difficulties holding down even menial jobs. Debussy's unsettled working-class background made him selfish, stand-offish and insecure. His lack of any regular education contributed to this (though it made him into a voracious reader of everything from Mallarmé to adventure stories), and his mother's strictness helped make him an 'affection addict'⁶ too, who desperately needed friends throughout his career. Moreover, his father wanted his eldest son to rescue the family fortunes by becoming a virtuoso pianist, but even if he was snobbishly billed as 'Achille De Bussy' and hailed as 'this little Mozart [sic]' at his first public concert at the age of thirteen,⁷ he secured only a single Second Prize in piano during his unhappy years at the Paris Conservatoire, gaining greater success in *solfège* and as a sensitive (though not entirely reliable) accompanist. His switch to studying composition with Ernest Guiraud in 1880, of course, led to his winning the Prix de Rome with his cantata *L'enfant prodigue* in 1884. Here he played the official game with skill, but was horrified when he discovered he had won and would have to leave Paris and his mistress, Marie-Blanche Vasnier, for several years. We still find him trying to please his father by setting Catulle Mendès's

uncongenial libretto for *Rodrigue et Chimène* in 1890–2, and it was only after he was made a Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur in 1903 that the sincere affection he showed his parents in their declining years seems to have developed.

The second cause of Debussy's unhappiness was also linked to his parents, whose precarious financial situation was carried to the verges of bankruptcy by their irresponsible son. Doubtless because they were always having to move house, Manuel and Victorine never acquired many luxury items, and Debussy developed a passion for these from an early age. If anything, collecting oriental artefacts was his true passion throughout his life, whether he could afford them or not, and his first known letter of 1884 was to borrow 500 francs from Count Primoli, ostensibly to buy flowers for Mme Vasnier before leaving for Rome.⁸ Earlier that year, Paul Vidal (who had won the Prix de Rome in 1883) told Henriette Fuchs that

He's incapable of any sacrifice. Nothing has any hold over him. His parents aren't rich, but instead of using the money from his teaching to support them, he buys new books for himself, knick-knacks, etchings, etc. His mother has shown me drawers full of them.⁹

Debussy's first wife, Lilly, frequently despaired when he selfishly spent the money from piano lessons in an antique dealer's shop on the avenue Victor Hugo while she 'was anxiously awaiting his return to be able to go out and buy the dinner',¹⁰ and Raoul Bardac recalled that, after marrying his mother in 1908, 'he never went out anywhere if he could possibly avoid it, except to the bookseller's or to shops that sold Chinese *objets d'art* and engravings'.¹¹

Debussy was nevertheless well aware of the pitfalls inherent in the 'Cult of Desire' as he followed the dictates of his *plaisir* in his life as well as his music. As he told André Poniowski in February 1893,

You have this crazy but inescapable longing, a need almost, for some work of art . . . and the moment of actual possession is one of joy, of love really. A week later, nothing. The object is there and you spend five or six days without looking at it. The only time the passion returns is when you've been away for several months . . . You could write down a formula for desire: 'everything comes from it and returns to it'. By a rather elegant piece of trickery, the desire to be happy works pretty much on the same lines. One is never happy except by comparison or by giving oneself a certain limit to aim at . . . to provide some relaxation from the onward drive to glory.¹²

This artistic quest, of course, he pursued with utter dedication. In the periods when he escaped from the 'usines de Néant' and his compositions flowed freely, as in his final productive summer at Pourville in 1915, he came as close as he ever did to achieving true inner happiness. But if his oriental

collection, in the end, only inspired a single piano piece, 'Poissons d'or', it was nonetheless vital in creating the refined, luxurious surroundings Debussy needed to be able to compose. Like *Le Cousin Pons* in Balzac's novel, he was smitten by the collecting bug, and the quest for the exquisite also provided an essential antidote to the mediocrity and shabbiness of the world about him, of which he frequently complained.

Another fundamental need was a circle of close friends, preferably ones he did not need to explain things to. His moral irresponsibility and pursuit of pleasure rather than passion with women caused many of his male friends to desert him (chiefly after Lilly's attempted suicide in 1904). Only three remained faithful despite everything: Paul Dukas, Robert Godet and Erik Satie – though even Satie broke off relations for a while in 1917 when Debussy kept on making fun of his ballet *Parade*. As Louis Laloy later observed, their friendship was 'tempestuous . . . each constantly on his guard against the other, without being able to stop loving him tenderly. A musical brotherhood, yet a rivalry of musicians.'¹³ Debussy got on best with Satie before he achieved fame on his own account in 1911. While Debussy loved playing games like cards and backgammon with Satie and others, he was, from all reports, a bad and rather childish loser who was not averse to cheating.

By and large, Debussy required his friends to come to him (especially after 1905) and regarded each friendship as exclusive, with a set weekly visiting time. As he was often depressed and there was invariably someone ill in the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne in later years, it is small wonder that his circle remained small. Visitors were more likely to be performers (who were invariably in awe of him), younger composers (whom he encouraged) and journalists. But if he welcomed diversions from the difficulties of composition, it was not from his musical colleagues, for he always preferred discussing the other arts. He could be charming (especially when cultivating wealthy potential patrons), but in the main he was shy and reclusive, not a fluent conversationalist, and often appeared grumpy and opinionated.

Moreover, it cannot have escaped other than the least perceptive that Debussy was two-faced, especially about performers and conductors (except for a very few, like Mary Garden, André Caplet and Walter Rummell, whom he admired unreservedly). In short, he had a public and a private persona. Thus, however much he may have praised Maggie Teyte to her face, he complained to Durand on 8 June 1908 that she 'continues to show about as much emotion as a prison door' and was 'a more-than-distant Princess'.¹⁴ But this must have been after a particularly unsatisfying performance of *Pelléas*, for he added that 'Périer [in the title-role] mimes admirably to my music' and 'Dufranne [as Golaud] thunders away'. In reality, these barbs rather show how concerned he was about the future of his creations, which

he saw as his children, who grew ever more difficult to control after they had left the nest. The way that he blurted out his immediate reactions is confirmed by his vacillating opinions of Rose Féart, who did not always match up to the ideal Mélisande he had originally found in Mary Garden (despite or even because of her Scottish accent). On 6 December 1908 he wrote that 'her voice and musicality please me enormously', whereas on 18 May 1909 he found Féart's London performance 'indescribably ugly and lacking in poetry', though five days later she was miraculously 'transformed and almost pretty!'¹⁵

It is doubtful if Debussy's views were any more sexist or racist than the rest of his politically incorrect generation. Both aspects reached their nadir in his strained relations with the exotic dancer Maud Allan, who had commissioned the ballet *Khamma* in 1910 and persisted with her irrational demands for Debussy to make the score he had sent her both twice as long and scored for half as many players.¹⁶ Apart from wanting to give 'la "Girl" *anglaise* . . . a good spanking', he complained to Durand that she had supplied him with 'a scenario so boring that a Negro could have done better'.¹⁷ And when he had not heard from her for a while in 1913, he imagined that 'the undulating Miss Allan was dancing for some Negro race in darkest West Africa!'¹⁸ As always, Debussy's letters to his long-suffering publisher contain his frankest and most personal admissions, many of which (as above) Durand wisely chose to suppress when he published them in 1927.

Amongst Debussy's more endearing traits were his love of children and animals, and the chief joy of his later life was his daughter Chouchou. But if this sounds like a standard apology for a thoroughly unpleasant character, it is far from the truth, for there are numerous tributes to Debussy's essential kindness and perceptive encouragement towards artists he considered worthwhile. The violinist Arthur Hartmann was one such recipient who received a signed photograph of the composer after his first visit, and even managed to get the reticent Debussy to accompany him in public in 1914 (in a concert which included his specially made arrangement of 'Minstrels'). Hartmann also gives some good examples of Debussy's delightful sense of humour. As he recalled:

One morning I found him in his garden with his little girl, and a trowel in his hands. Suddenly the gate bell rang and ere I was aware of what was happening, he had seized me by the neck and dragged me with himself behind a bush. Peering forth to see who it was, while we heard the servant calmly saying, 'Monsieur is not at home', he winked at me and we emerged.¹⁹

Then, when Hartmann remarked that 'Vincent d'Indy's religious fanaticism coupled with medieval learning made of him quite a figure of, let us say,

the fourteenth century', Debussy immediately brought him down to earth with the brief retort: 'Oui, en bois!'²⁰ No composer was exempt from his ready wit, especially Wagner, and his French love of puns and fantastical imagination can be seen in the following recollection by René Peter:

He wrote to me, speaking about Siegmund and Sieglinde: 'They love each other . . . very *wälse*!' (*Wälse* being, as you know, the name of their father) 'and he issues her with an invitation to the *wälse* . . . upon which she invites him to lunch; pale ale and *wälse* rarebit!'²¹

Although he was an Anglophile, it is unlikely that Debussy would ever have chosen this sort of fare in a restaurant (even in its French form of *Croque Monsieur*). All accounts testify that he was a gourmet of refined tastes rather than a gourmand and, as early as the 1870s, Gabriel Pierné remembered

the way he used to savour the cup of chocolate which my mother would buy him at Prévost's, when he came out of the Conservatoire; or the way at Borbonneux's, where there was a window reserved for de luxe items, he would choose a tiny sandwich or a little dish of macaroni, instead of gorging himself on more substantial cakes, like his colleagues. Poor as he was, and from the humblest of origins, he had aristocratic tastes in everything.²²

Similarly, around 1912, Alfredo Casella frequently came across Debussy scrutinising the food displays 'in the avenue Victor Hugo, accompanied by his favourite dogs and much engaged in selecting some choice fruit and superfine cheese to take home for luncheon.'²³ And it was Debussy's 'delightful lunches' on Fridays that Satie recalled in 1921 as the high spot of his visits to the rue Cardinet in the later 1890s:

Eggs and lamb cutlets were the centre of these friendly occasions. But what eggs and what cutlets! I'm still licking my cheeks – on the inside, as you can guess. Debussy – who prepared these eggs and cutlets himself – had the secret (*the innermost secret*) of these preparations. It was all washed down with a delicious white Bordeaux whose effects were touching, and put us in just the right mood for enjoying the pleasures of friendship and of living far from 'Mutton Heads', 'Mummified Relics' and other 'Old Chaps' – those scourges of Humanity and the *poor in pocket*.²⁴

Lunches and dinners *chez* Debussy were always intimate affairs, never exceeding a total of eight.²⁵ In congenial company the dinners could last until the early hours of the morning, and the pianist Ricardo Viñes found him

neither pompous nor austere. At times he could enjoy himself in quite childish ways. I remember on one occasion, after dinner, we spent the

whole evening, with two other guests, drawing pigs with our eyes closed, and being allowed to take the pencil off the paper only once, to make dots for the eyes!²⁶

This comes as a stark contrast to the ‘official’ lunch arranged by his publisher in 1906 when Richard Strauss reduced Debussy to ‘obstinate silence’ with his lengthy account of the workings of the German copyright society he had founded.²⁷ But if Debussy really preferred playing party games, he was nonetheless prepared to expound on the ‘damage done by the mediocrities’ at the Schola Cantorum with Louis Laloy and Viñes the following year, and his discussion of ‘the Chinese and their revolution’ with the latter in 1912 shows that he did at least read the papers and keep abreast of major political events.²⁸

Debussy’s anglophilia led him to attach great importance both to afternoon tea and to the regular consumption of Scotch whisky. ‘A simple tea at Debussy’s was as lavish as most dinners’, Hartmann recalled,²⁹ while Mme Gérard de Romilly says that ‘At tea, he had the habit of absent-mindedly tracing imaginary patterns on the table with his knife while he was talking’; he was well aware of the anguish it was causing to the owner of the tablecloth.³⁰ ‘He was fond of his whisky’, Raoul Bardac remembers, ‘which he used to drink every evening around ten o’clock, served in *his* special graduated decanter, and of *his* tea, which he drank only out of *his* teacup.’³¹

This fastidious and quasi-superstitious ritual was even more evident in the studio in the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne where Debussy composed. Numerous accounts attest to its almost obsessive neatness, and most agree that there was never a music manuscript in sight, either on his piano or work desk (or an ink stain on his blotter). ‘The objects of his work-table were arranged in an order which never changed’, Dolly Bardac recalls. ‘He was never parted from a big wooden toad, a Chinese ornament, called “Arkel” . . . he even took it travelling with him’³² when he went on the lucrative conducting trips he hated so much, ‘claiming he could not work unless it was in sight.’³³ In fact, his expansive desk was cluttered with these essential familiar objects, most of them oriental, which were complemented by the Japanese prints on the walls – including Hokusai’s ‘Hollow of the Deep-sea Wave off Kanagawa’, part of which he used as the cover of the first edition of *La mer*. Nothing, of course, could ever be out of place, and Maggie Teyte was involved in two (apparently) separate occasions when rehearsals were delayed by a stray pin and a piece of thread on the carpet.³⁴ Meticulous carpet care was equally in evidence in the 1890s at 58 rue Cardinet, according to René Peter. Discovery of additional impressions to the four he allowed his chair to make led to the following, almost incredible demonstration of how Debussy reached his composing position without shifting the chair from its habitual place:

It was a simple piece of acrobatics. It consisted of carefully tipping up the back so that the front legs were clear of the floor, thereby creating a little space between it and the desk. Into this space Claude gradually inserted himself, facing the desk, until he judged that he had moved far enough to be able to sit in the middle of the chair. At that point he lowered (1) the chair, (2) himself into it. After which:

‘Well then, what do you think?’

‘Magnificent’, I replied admiringly. ‘You’re the composer of *Pelléas*, all right!’³⁵

The same meticulous attention to detail that characterises his music and manuscripts also applied to Debussy’s garden, when he eventually acquired one in the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne. Again, Raoul Bardac gives the best account of the way it provided him with both inspiration and some much-needed exercise:

He loved his garden, laid out to his own plans, which contained flowers and shrubs chosen by him, and which he looked after himself. He would walk round it slowly for a long time, in silence, then, suddenly, he would turn back towards the house where he would ask the upright Bechstein or the Blüthner [grand] . . . to repeat for him the musical idea he had just had. At other times he would rapidly and clearly jot this idea down (always in ink) in a bound notebook, or perhaps he would just come back to the house to arm himself with garden implements, with which he would perform a painstakingly delicate operation on some undesirable growth or some withered twig.³⁶

As always, everything had to be exactly in place, and in this at least he was at one with Ravel and his self-designed, though more Japanese-inspired, garden at Montfort l’Amaury. Both composers chain-smoked too, even when engaged in their horticultural diversions, though Debussy meticulously rolled his own.

For all his reticence (and at times disdain), Debussy made a memorable impression on those he met. At the age of sixteen, Paul Vidal was ‘immediately struck by his singular appearance, his burning eyes and the fierce concentrated expression on his face.’³⁷ Nine years later, Raymond Bonheur was impressed by his

powerful forehead with the strange faun-like cast, which he thrust ahead of him like the prow of a ship . . . With his dark hair, sensual nose and pale face surrounded by a light fringe of beard, Debussy in those days made you think of one of those noble portraits painted by Titian.³⁸

Artistic comparisons, which no doubt pleased Debussy, frequently emerge: for the poet Léon-Paul Fargue in 1895 ‘he resembled a faun-like version of Jean Richepin, or better still Solario’s “Head of St. John” in the Louvre,’³⁹

whereas for Jacques-Emile Blanche in 1900 his ‘sculptured face looked . . . like a fourteenth-century mask’.⁴⁰ Georges Jean-Aubry also commented on his physical resemblance to Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1908.⁴¹ The protruding forehead, which Debussy hated to be photographed at close quarters,⁴² contributed to an exotic impression that was variously described as Moorish, Asiatic, or ‘like an Assyrian prince’.⁴³ Apart from his exceptionally large ears and thick black, curly hair (which he never lost), his other most striking feature was his dark, penetrating eyes. ‘From the shadows of his forehead, two immense, catlike eyes kept watch, casting ironic and ambiguous looks’, Ricardo Viñes recalled,⁴⁴ and another pianist, George Copeland, spoke of them as ‘like two pieces of shiny black jet’.⁴⁵ He invariably wore a smart, dark, three-piece suit and a bow tie (even on the beach) and, like Satie in later life, appeared in public as a typical French professional member of the bourgeoisie. But whereas Satie retained his left-wing views to the end, he observed after his friend’s death that

Debussy was far more inconsistent in his political and social tastes than he was musically. This artistic revolutionary was extremely bourgeois in his daily life. He disliked the ‘eight-hour day’ and other social customs . . . Raising salaries – other than his own, of course – was disagreeable to him. He had his own fixed ‘opinions’. A strange anomaly.⁴⁶

For someone as widely read and cultured as Debussy, who wrote some of the most perceptive letters that ever came from a composer, this indeed seems strange until we remember that Debussy’s only real interest lay in artistic matters and that the mundanity of everyday life was not there to be argued about, especially in ever-diminishing social circles. He simply did not have the time or the energy for this, and it seems unlikely that he entered into detailed discussions (of which Satie had a similar horror) even with the most intelligent of his friends. Thus René Peter, to whom he gave lessons in writing for the theatre around the turn of the century, also found that Debussy

held more or less categorical opinions about everything in life, principles from which he would not depart lightly: for instance, that superficial kindness is often no more than laziness; that obliging a borrower in whom you have no personal interest is in most cases the result either of the embarrassment you feel about getting rid of him, or else of your fear of appearing attached to money . . . that if a man holds to one idea in the face of everyone, he is necessarily in the right, given the fallibility which is the defining element of the human spirit – from which it follows that the more people agree about something, the more chance it has of being wrong.⁴⁷

In fact, one of the best descriptions of Debussy’s character came from a perceptive acquaintance rather than a close friend. His fellow composer Alfredo Casella remembered him as being

extraordinarily nervous, impulsive and impressionable, and he was easily irritated. The oddity of his appearance, his unprepossessing voice, a strong dose of *gaucherie*, and finally an almost incredible shyness which he disguised under a show of paradox and often sarcastic and unkind irony, all made for a certain awkwardness in one's first relations with him. But then he was capable of deep and loyal friendship, and his affection for a few persons was boundless. He was generous, and he delighted to aid the needy – not seldom anonymously and with exquisite delicacy.⁴⁸

On the other hand, as Paul Dukas observed, some found him 'heartless, an egoist, a trifler with the feelings of others', but 'you had to have known him in his adolescence really to understand him and, indeed, really to love him'.⁴⁹

In general, Debussy's slowness of movement and uninterested manner often suggested laziness, an aspect that was reinforced by the numerous theatrical projects he embarked upon in bursts of enthusiasm but never completed. It might well be said that we owe much of his later piano music to the need to pay off at least part of his enormous financial debt to his publisher Durand, though he never relaxed his high standards in the process. In reality it was Debussy's perfectionism, his hours spent in spacing a single chord and making each work new and utterly distinctive, which led to what might be regarded as a relatively slender output. What Roy Howat has aptly described as the 'fineness', and Nichols as the 'transience' of his work was, in fact, laboriously achieved, for Debussy found composition far more difficult than Satie and Koechlin, and probably even more so than the equally secretive Ravel and Dukas. Indeed, as Debussy left few sketches, it is only recently that musicologists have even begun to understand his complex creative processes and his musical 'onion' still has many layers to be peeled away.

Debussy's reputation for immorality, as 'a trifler with the feelings of others', is less easily dismissed. We have already seen him as a man in quest of pleasure rather than passion, and one has only to read his letters to Lilly Texier to see such passion as existed evaporating after his marriage to her. Even so, his reputation as a roving Don Juan, especially in the 1890s, has been much exaggerated, for he had fewer affairs (or 'adventures') than most of his contemporaries. Pierre Louÿs told his brother Georges in 1915:

I don't know a man who was less of a rake than Debussy. In 1896, aged thirty-five, he was a handsome man, very masculine and extremely ardent; but in fifteen or twenty years of love-life he only knew five women, one of whom (Mme Hochon) ravished him. Therefore, five was the total. No prostitutes whatsoever. He used to say: 'It was purely by chance, but all five of them were blonde. I don't know what a brunette is like.'⁵⁰

Several of Debussy's conquests were, however, married women. The first was Marie-Blanche Vasnier, whose civil servant husband, Henri, was eleven

years older. When Debussy first met her in 1880 (as accompanist for the singing classes of Mme Moreau-Sainti) he was eighteen to Marie-Blanche's thirty-two. If there seems to be an element of artistic toy boy meets bored housewife here, the truth is that Mme Vasnier, with her agile coloratura soprano voice and professional standards, turned Debussy into a serious songwriter, inspiring twenty-three songs (with devoted dedications) over the next four years. 'Everything he writes is for her and owes its existence to her', Paul Vidal observed,⁵¹ and if she actually had reddish hair, she had the green eyes that were to attract Debussy to Gaby Dupont in the 1890s. Enforced absence in Rome, of course, gradually cooled Debussy's ardour, though while he was there his long, friendly letters to Henri Vasnier suggest that he was either a willing accomplice in the affair or was ignorant of its existence (which seems unlikely). As his daughter Marguerite recalled, 'when he [Debussy] came back for good [in 1887], the intimacy was no longer there. He had changed, as we had.'⁵²

Whilst in Rome, however, Debussy's existence was not as dreary and unfulfilling as his letters make out. As the diaries of Gabrielle Hébert (the wife of the director of the Villa Medici) show, Debussy led an active social life with society figures, like Count Primoli and the Princess Scilla, after Hébert took over in June 1885, and the arrival of the Hochons in January 1886 livened things up still further. Louise Hochon – known to her intimate friends as Loulou – developed a crush on Debussy, and on 9 February Gabrielle Hébert recorded in her diary that Count Primoli 'tells me that they have seen Loulou and Debussy kissing in the Villa.'⁵³ As Lesure suggests, the contemporary setting of Verlaine's 'Green' (published in the 1888 *Ariettes*), with its restrained ecstasy, may well have been inspired by the brief Loulou affair rather than 'the lady far away in Paris'.⁵⁴

Between 1890 and 1898, Debussy pursued a much longer relationship with the alluring Gaby Dupont, finally leaving his parents to set up house with her at 42 rue de Londres in March 1892. To all outward appearances, these were Debussy's happiest and most carefree years, though we have to remember that they were years of artistic struggle (with the uncongenial *Rodrigue et Chimène*, the operatic revolution of *Pelléas*, and the problematic *Nocturnes*). They also saw Debussy's two rather unconvincing attempts at a respectable marriage, which (coupled with his financial irresponsibility) caused havoc in his domestic life.

First came the soprano, Thérèse Roger, whom he accompanied in the last two of his *Proses lyriques* at a Société Nationale concert on 17 February 1894, but who was no second Marie-Blanche in the looks department. Within days Debussy had proposed to her, to the amazement of his friends and, it would seem, principally to impress his benefactor Chausson, who disapproved of his living in sin with Gaby. What was worse was that Debussy lied both

to Chausson and to Thérèse's mother about their engagement, which was equally quickly broken off. But if he lost Chausson as a friend, he gained another in Pierre Louÿs (who stood by him until he deserted Lilly in an equally hypocritical way in 1904).

Debussy's second proposal to Catherine Stevens shows him in a rather better light. The family of the painter Arthur Stevens had run into severe financial difficulties in early 1896 and, according to Lesure, Debussy proposed to his daughter to alleviate her distress, promising her that *Pelléas* would secure their future financially. 'She refused prettily, telling him they would speak of the matter again once *Pelléas* had been performed.'⁵⁵

Then, in a letter to Louÿs of February 1897 (which brings his feminine total up to eight, counting Lilly and Emma), Debussy confessed that

Gaby of the piercing eye found a letter in my pocket which left no doubt as to the advanced state of a love affair, and containing enough romantic material to move even the hardest heart. Whereupon . . . scenes . . . tears . . . a real revolver and *Le petit journal* there to record the lot . . . It's all so uncivilised and pointless, and it changes absolutely nothing: you can't wipe out a mouth's kisses or a body's caresses by passing an india-rubber over them. But all the same, it would be a handy invention, a rubber for expunging adultery.⁵⁶

Gaby's attempted suicide was also exacerbated by the death of her father on 7 February, and if things were never the same again in the rue Cardinet, Gaby soon recovered and, rather unexpectedly, became a close friend of Debussy's next affair, the beautiful mannequin Lilly Texier, whom he met in the spring of 1899. As well she might, Gaby warned her of Debussy's roving eye. But to no avail, for he married Lilly on 19 October (with Satie as a witness), paying for the wedding breakfast from the proceeds of a piano lesson that morning!

Although Lilly remained devoted to Debussy, jealously guarding his privacy and remaining content to live in poverty in his shadow, he soon found her unstimulating and overly possessive. It is tempting to see a glimpse into their domestic life in his contemporary play *Les 'Frères en art'* for, according to its co-author René Peter, Marie represents Lilly, and the main character, Maltravers, has views which strongly resemble those of Debussy at the time (in terms of intellectual anarchy, elitism and pantheism). Debussy's revised version probably dates from 1903 because of its references to telephones and cinematographic techniques, and here he adds the remark that Maltravers and Marie 'are as silent as little goldfish', implying that they have little to say to each other and live an enclosed, goldfish-bowl existence. Marie is 'a delightful woman, nothing more', with an ideal of cosy domesticity that threatens to stifle her creative partner. At the only moment when

the couple embrace, Debussy adds the cool stage direction ‘nothing more, nothing less’, and the demise of his relationship with Lilly was surely hastened by her inability to bear children.⁵⁷

On 1 October 1903 he met yet another soprano, Emma Bardac, who was no stranger to extra-marital affairs herself. Indeed, her liaison with Gabriel Fauré had inspired his song-cycle *La bonne chanson* in the early 1890s. Emma was intellectually far more of a match for Debussy, and their friendship developed rapidly during the early months of 1904. By June at least they were lovers. On 15 July, Debussy packed Lilly off by train to her parents in Bichain, referring ominously to the ‘new path’ he had found which ‘he dare not abandon’ in an ostensibly caring letter to her the following day.⁵⁸ Late in July he and Emma eloped to Jersey (the ‘*Isle joyeuse*’ of his most extrovert piano piece) and Dieppe for the summer, and in October they set up house together in the fashionable sixteenth district of Paris. But their idyll was short-lived for, just before what would have been her fifth wedding anniversary, Lilly shot herself in the breast. Although she survived, the bullet remained with her until she died in 1932. Thanks to his growing international fame, Debussy’s personal life now received extensive press coverage, and his treatment of Lilly before and during their protracted divorce settlement does him little credit. He kept her entirely in the dark about Emma, for instance, until 13 September 1904, and had pretended he was going to London with the painter Jacques-Emile Blanche a month earlier.⁵⁹ In February 1908 the whole Lilly scandal even reached the stage in a thinly disguised melodrama by Henry Bataille called *La femme nue*, just over a month after his eventual marriage to Emma. Equally seriously, Emma’s uncle, the financier Osiris, had disinherited her in his will a year earlier, even though they now had a fifteen-month-old daughter to support. So Debussy had good reason to be pessimistic about his future prospects.

In fact, married life with Emma was anything but idyllic. She was frequently ill, constantly possessive and extravagant, and far less easy to pacify than the naively devoted Lilly had been. Debussy frequently retreated to the sanctuary of his study and wrote notes to Emma in preference to the fraught confrontations he so loathed.⁶⁰ Financial pressures forced him to undertake conducting trips abroad between 1908 and 1914, but Emma sometimes insisted on coming too, and equally insistently stopped him going to the States in 1912 to hear Caplet’s superb Boston production of *Pelléas*. Family holidays proved a particular trial, and although Debussy loved the sea and playing games with his young daughter, we find him telling Durand from Houlgate in 1911 that ‘the truth is that at the end of this holiday we have to admit we don’t know why we came. Is it really that we’ve lost the ability to enjoy things together?’⁶¹ The fault was by no means all Emma’s. It was she, not Debussy, who wrote to her lawyer to enquire about a trial separation

during a matrimonial crisis in 1910, and as Mary Garden concluded in her autobiography: 'I honestly don't know if Debussy ever loved anybody really. He loved his music – and perhaps himself. I think he was wrapped up in his genius.'⁶² The external signs of devotion remained to the end: the touching letters from abroad, the affectionate dedications 'A La Petite Mienne', and so on. But as early as March 1905 we find the dedication of *La mer* to Emma, 'whose eyes sparkle in the dawn',⁶³ withdrawn in favour of his publisher Durand, and even during their 'honeymoon summer' in 1904 we find the composer nostalgic for 'the Claude Debussy who worked so enthusiastically on *Pelléas*'.⁶⁴

The truth is that Debussy brought many of his problems on himself. However often he maintained that he was 'as simple as a blade of grass',⁶⁵ for him that grass was always greener somewhere else, and Emma must have come to despise his inaction, moral cowardice, self-pity and much-vaunted hypersensitivity. As he admitted to Durand after another, particularly bad crisis in July 1913,

Struggling on one's own is nothing! But struggling 'en famille' becomes odious! . . . In my case I only struggle to uphold a point of honour . . . Perhaps I'm to blame, because my only energy is intellectual; in everyday life I stumble over the smallest pebble, which another man would send flying with a light-hearted kick!⁶⁶

One might well wonder why Debussy got married once, let alone twice, for he seems to have been well aware of the pitfalls. He tried, for instance, to placate Lilly in 1904 with the observation that 'an artist is, in short, a wretched indoors man and perhaps also a wretched husband. Besides, the reverse, a perfect husband, often produces a contemptible artist . . . It's a vicious circle.'⁶⁷ Perhaps his chief reasons for marriage lay in his selfish desire for outward respectability, and in Emma's case there was also the need to make Chouchou legitimate. But within his own circles no one achieved lasting happiness through his action (or inaction), least of all himself.

The war years only brought more misery as the patriotic Debussy lamented his inability to be of practical use to his beloved France and found his inspiration drying up. Only in the summer of 1915 did he experience a return of his former creative powers, but that winter his rectal cancer became serious and, apart from the Violin Sonata and a draft setting of Louis Laloy's *Ode à la France*, his composing career was over and his existence was only made bearable through morphine.

As for his philosophy of life, this is more difficult to determine. He once told Pierre Louÿs that 'Life is a compromise between instinct and civilisation. The nobility of the human condition consists in aspiring to the freedom which nature has given us.'⁶⁸ Certainly, he was artistically at

his happiest in nature, as he delightedly told Caplet in 1910, noting ‘how naturally the transition works between “Parfums de la nuit” and “Le matin d’un jour de fête”. *It sounds as though it’s improvised.*’⁶⁹ But if he composed some of the most evocative and spontaneous nature music ever written, he could still say just after he had finished his orchestral *Images*: ‘Only souls without imagination go to the country for inspiration . . . I can look into my garden and find there everything that I want.’⁷⁰ Similarly, he admitted in an interview in 1914 that

the sea fascinates me to the point of paralysing my creative faculties. Moreover, I’ve never been able to write a page of music under the direct, immediate impression of this great, blue sphinx, and my ‘symphonic triptych’ *La mer* was entirely composed in Paris.⁷¹

So it would seem that the ideal surroundings he found in the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne, after a lifetime of changing addresses, more than compensated for the trauma of his second marriage; for which posterity must be grateful.

All of this reinforces just how interiorised Debussy was both as a man and as a composer. As Roger Nichols says: ‘This reluctance to engage with what the material world calls “realities” was something that all the women in Debussy’s life had to try to accept, with greater or lesser success.’⁷² As increasing age and the fame thrust upon him after *Pelléas* made him ever more reclusive, it would seem that Emma suffered the most. For in the 1890s Debussy was perfectly gregarious, enjoying the daily round of cabarets, cafés, bars, salons and bookshops. If his musical motive was ‘*toujours plus haut*’, then the same cannot be said about his personal life, where his immorality and deviousness caused innumerable problems. He wanted his life to be straightforward, but his desires made it complicated. If his desires led to the experiences he craved, then few remained unaffected in the process: friends were compartmentalised or lost. He could take Gaby to bars and cabarets, but not to bourgeois salons or public concerts, which is one reason why he had to marry Lilly. Then, when her child-like devotion palled, his initial desire for Emma led him to feel trapped in a world of domestic upheaval, in which what are frequently described as his own childish attitudes only exacerbated matters. From this imprisonment there was now no escape except into the inner world of creativity, though deep down this may have been what Debussy really wanted in the end. When even this creativity deserted Debussy it is easy to see why he considered suicide on more than one occasion, especially in 1916–17.

None of this, of course, detracts from the greatness of his music, but it surely accounts for some of the sinister undercurrents that lurk beneath its attractive surface, and which contribute so much to its mystery and profundity. As Debussy told another interviewer, in 1910:

There will always be an enormous breach between the soul of a man as he is and the soul he puts into his work. A man portrays himself in his work, it is true, but only part of himself. In real life, I cannot live up to the ideas I have in music. I feel the difference there is in me between Debussy the composer and Debussy the man.⁷³

Yet if many people during his life wanted Debussy the man to be different, there are few who would now seek any changes in Debussy the composer.