

**Debussy and the Veil of Tonality: Essays on His Music** is published by Pendragon Press, Box 190, Hillsdale, New York 12529. It may be ordered online from [www.pendragonpress.com](http://www.pendragonpress.com)

# **Debussy and the Veil of Tonality: Essays on His Music**

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## PREFACE

This book originated as a compilation of several essays I had written over the years, generally for informal oral presentation, and now appearing as Chapters 2, 5, and 8. Chapter 2 originally was presented as a paper before a joint meeting of the New England chapter of the American Musicological Society and the Northeast chapter of the Society for Ethnomusicology, at Tufts University in 1993; Chapter 5 was written for a similar joint meeting, also at Tufts, in 1985; Chapter 4 expands on my detailed notes for a colloquium given at the University of Pittsburgh; and Chapter 8 was a guest lecture at the University of Connecticut. Chapters 1, 3, 4, 6 and 7 are newly written for this book. Every thought has been reconsidered, to put forward ideas only embryonically realized as long as thirty years ago, and to weed out unnecessary duplication.

[...]

Appendix 2, the score of *Rondel chinois* by the twenty-year-old Debussy, is offered as an Easter egg in this book. To my knowledge, it has not previously been published anywhere. It has been recorded, however, by Mady Mesplé, soprano, and Dalton Baldwin, piano, EMI Classics CMS 7 64095 2 (1980, 3 compact discs), and possibly elsewhere.

### *Acknowledgments*

I am ever grateful for the constant exhortations of colleagues and friends that sustained me during the long process of putting this book together. It is a first and special pleasure to thank Claire Brook and Robert Kessler of Pendragon Press; our editorial and personal association has endured and flourished through many books, many years, and many kitchens.

Several colleagues and friends gave me invaluable suggestions and advice on one or more individual chapters as they emerged in draft. Among those long known as experts on Debussy, I extend special thanks to Ira Braus, Isabelle Cazeaux, Sharon Prado, and Marie Rolf.

George Perle, friend and colleague through nearly 40 years of working on the music of Alban Berg, suggested in 1980 that I write a book on Debussy. This volume is my long-delayed reply.

Wayne Shirley, most expert and most versatile of researchers in twentieth-century musical documents and a friend ever since college, was of invaluable assistance to me in work that took me to the Music Division of the Library of Congress.

Sarah Bowen was one of those who, many years ago, helped me to understand that Debussy's music might be susceptible to intelligent analysis. She read an early draft of this book, to my lasting gratitude.

Sam Rechteris and Janet Packer gave me welcome encouragement when they asked me to arrange

Debussy's *Fêtes* for violin and piano; the colloquy that resulted has had echoes in Chapters 2 and 4.

I am particularly grateful to colleagues in Britain and Ireland, today's leaders in the study of twentieth-century French music. A number of them I have never met in person but only by E-mail and snailmail, but I consider them all my generous friends. I mention here particularly Roy Howat, Douglas Jarman, Deborah Mawer, Robert Orledge, and Simon Trezise.

I thank Lily Ladewig for pointing out to me the presence at Harvard's Fogg Museum of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painting, *The Blessed Damozel*, which is reproduced in this book.

For a long time I grappled with refinements of the term that eventually became the subject of Chapter 2. In the course of an electronic discussion on the AMS List, Bill Rosar came up with "aural images," for which I am grateful.

Margaret Cobb, peerless researcher of Debussy's literary and personal life, gave me invaluable references relating to *Nuages*. Larry Berman will immediately discern in this book the extent to which I have been expropriating his ideas for thirty years; if this volume turns out to be half as valuable to Debussy studies as his own dissertation, I will feel amply rewarded.

Robin Lehman generously gave permission for use of the excerpt from the unpublished sketches of Debussy's *Rodrigue et Chimène* at the Pierpont Morgan Library.

For diverse assistance and encouragement in ways too numerous to mention, I thank Paul-André Bempéchat, Gregory Biss, David Cohen, Eglal Henein, Noël Lee, Lewis Lockwood, Claire McCarthy, John McDonald, Suzanne Moulton-Gertig, Vickie Paine, Janet Schmalfeldt, Joel Sheveloff, and Joan Smith.

I have received regular encouragement from my daughters, Emily and Marya, both of them knowledgeable lovers of Debussy's music. Lois Grossman has sustained and supported me in my efforts through all the years since this book began and longer. She will always know how grateful I am.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the century after Claude Debussy composed the works that have permanently defined his reputation, the history of music, like everything else, has been exploded and reassembled repeatedly under the impact of world events and the emergence of technological cultures that permuted five thousand years of civilization. Yet Debussy's compositional legacy is secure for all time, and, no less important, musicians are now beginning to understand, much better than was possible before, the ways in which his achievement has permanently transformed the evolution of tonal music. This transformation can now be seen to be as important to our own time as Wagner's before him, and as Schoenberg's after him. It is possible, however, that neither the influence nor the understanding have outdistanced Debussy's own achievement on its own terms; many of Debussy's works are less widely performed than others, and certainly less than the best-known works of Ravel and the early ballets of Stravinsky, works on which Debussy's influence can be most directly perceived.

Debussy himself was a very private person, reserved and even shy, whose personality has been all the more tantalizing to those who study his life and work. Many writers have sought to discuss the man Debussy in the light of his contemporaries in literature and the visual arts, and to draw conclusions about him and his music from the evidence of his letters and published writings and the testimony of his friends. Debussy's pioneering biographer, Léon Vallas, was one of the first to do this,<sup>1</sup> and after him Edward Lockspeiser, whose *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, in two volumes (1962, 1965), includes not only a wealth of personal historical detail about Debussy and his musician friends, but also offers a rich portrait of the arts in Debussy's time and of how these influenced Debussy's aesthetics.<sup>2</sup> The biographical task was greatly hindered by the sale of Debussy's musical and literary documents after his death and their disappearance into a multitude of libraries and private collections; it is a tribute to the persistent effort and skill of Vallas and Lockspeiser that they succeeded as well as they did.

Lockspeiser's pioneering work has been amplified and supplemented by several valuable publications in recent years. Marcel Dietsch's *La Passion de Claude Debussy* (1962), published in English as *A Portrait of Claude Debussy*, is the best Debussy biography currently in print<sup>3</sup>; Roger Nichols's new *Life of Debussy* (1998) is an excellent short biography.<sup>4</sup> These are well supplemented by Roger Nichols's *Debussy Remembered*, a collection of *portraits-mémoires* by many who knew Debussy personally.<sup>5</sup> Examination of Debussy's widely scattered documentary record has been facilitated by comprehensive, if not yet definitive, editions of Debussy's own critical writings and correspondence.<sup>6</sup> James R. Briscoe's *Claude Debussy: A Guide to Research* (1990)<sup>7</sup> is an indispensable starting point for study of the vast and widely distributed Debussy bibliography.

These admirable books do not, however, go deeply into Debussy's music. It remained for scholars of the past thirty years, chiefly in England and America, to confront the music directly with coherent analytical and comparative methods, and these approaches vary widely in their consistency and applicability — which is not surprising, considering the constantly evolving scope of Debussy's tonality and form in his major works. Many excellent articles have been published on an almost regular basis in

several British and American journals and in *Cahiers Debussy*;<sup>8</sup> a new volume of *Debussy Studies* is particularly valuable<sup>9</sup>; and monographs have appeared on individual works, notably on *Pelléas et Mélisande* and *La mer*.<sup>10</sup> Robert Orledge's *Debussy and the Theatre* is outstanding for its detailed coverage of Debussy's many unfinished projects in opera and ballet as well as of *Pelléas et Mélisande*.<sup>11</sup> Roy Howat's *Debussy in Proportion: A Musical Analysis* is a uniquely original study of Debussy's approach to form.<sup>12</sup> Two recent symposia, *Debussy and His World* and *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, testify to the increasingly active state of Debussy studies today.<sup>13</sup>

Richard Parks's large-scale study, *The Music of Claude Debussy*, discusses many individual works; notwithstanding some useful and even penetrating insights in individual cases, Parks's generally set-theoretical approach fails significantly, in my view, to enlarge or assist our understanding of how to hear Debussy's music.<sup>14</sup>

An early examination of Debussy's works, still unsurpassed for its comprehensiveness and penetration, is Laurence Berman's doctoral dissertation for Harvard University (1965); though much referred to by later investigators, this profoundly valuable analytical study remains unpublished.<sup>15</sup>

Performers and scholars alike now rejoice in the launching of the new *Oeuvres Complètes de Claude Debussy*, to be published in 36 volumes by Musica Gallica and Éditions Durand and encompassing all of Debussy's musical works including sketches; about one-third of these volumes have already appeared. This landmark series is the first ever French-published edition of the works of any composer that meets modern critical and editorial standards. The editor-in-chief, François Lesure, was able to point with pride to the significant progress of the new edition before his tragic and unexpected death in 2001.<sup>16</sup> Of all the Debussy scholars active in France in the last fifty years, Lesure was the most expert and the most productive. His *Catalogue de l'oeuvre de Claude Debussy* (1977)<sup>17</sup> marks the beginning of systematic documentary study of Debussy's works as a whole; his large-scale biography of Debussy is currently planned for publication in English.

What is now emerging from the various studies of Debussy's music is that the uniqueness of his art resides not in his harmonic vocabulary, nor in the specialized heterophony of his instrumental textures, nor even in the idiosyncrasies of his anticlassical thematic and formal approach in different works; it resides in the synthesis of all of these and more. Considered in isolation, Debussy's harmonic discoveries are no more radically new than Fauré's in the early works or Ravel's in the later (indeed, rather less so); Debussy's approaches to modulation, overall tonality, even thematic treatment, have plenty of antecedents in Chopin, Liszt and Wagner. But in Debussy's music, subject to the control of a masterly instinct for uniquely significant formal structure, these elements combine to form a whole that is incomparably more than the mere synthetic sum of analytic parts.

If there is a unifying thread in this book, it is the attempt to elucidate tonal structure, which is much the same thing as harmonic coherence. Tonality, for Debussy no less than for other composers, represents the projection of a chosen pitch-class hierarchically through time; but for Debussy, more than for any other composer of his era, the individuality of the harmony generates the tonality and the form.

Debussy's works from *Faune* and after provide vivid examples of the ways in which a particular chord, and especially a particular or central pitch-class within the chord, is selected for a formal structural importance. The centering structural role of C sharp as a nonclassical tonic in *Faune* has been recognized for a long time; the function of A flat as a structural center in the middle section of *Fêtes* goes far beyond the simple idea of a classical pedal point.

Without flattering myself that I have absorbed the significance of all of the isolated facets of Debussy's multicolored art, I still claim to have identified aspects that are particularly important, and that may have been insufficiently addressed in the past. My own examinations of Debussy have been sporadic rather than systematic, but in their totality, over the years, they amount to my greatly increased understanding of his music. It will be obvious that I stress certain aspects of Debussy's individuality not widely remarked by others, especially absolute-pitch values, preferred sonorities, and aural images. In my search, I have regularly relied on my own instincts and intuitions as a composer rather than on formalized theoretical or analytical systems, although I have not hesitated to refer to Schenker, French theory, and pitch-class set theory when I felt these would be useful. I can only hope that most of the time, knowing that Debussy's approach to composition results in an autonomous origin of form, and that every work presents something new and different, my instincts have led me in the right direction.

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## ENDNOTES

1. Léon Vallas, *Claude Debussy et son temps*, second edition, 1958. English translation of the first edition, under the title *Claude Debussy: His Life and works*, by Maire and Grace O'Brien, Oxford University Press, 1933; reprinted by Dover Publications, New York, 1973.
2. London, Cassell & Company. This was preceded by Lockspeiser's shorter book, *Debussy*, which remains valuable and has been updated in many details since Lockspeiser's death in 1973 (London, Dent, Master Musicians Series, 5th edition revised by Richard Langham Smith, 1980).
3. Marcel Dietschy, *A Portrait of Claude Debussy*, edited and translated by William Ashbrook and Margaret G. Cobb, Oxford University Press, 1990.
4. Cambridge University Press, 1998.
5. London, Faber & Faber, 1992.
6. *Monsieur Croche et autre écrits*, ed. by François Lesure, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1971; English edition translated and edited by Richard Langham Smith, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1977; paperback edition, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1988. *Claude Debussy: Lettres 1884-1918*, selected and edited by François Lesure and Roger Nichols, Paris, Hermann Éditeurs, 1980; revised and augmented edition in English, translated by Roger Nichols, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1987. The English edition adds 56 letters not included in the 1980 French edition; it also lists the main published French sources for Debussy's letters to André Caplet, Ernest Chausson, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Jacques Durand, Emma Bardac, Robert Godet, Georges Jean-Aubry, Louis Laloy, Pierre Louÿs, André Messager, Victor Segalen, and Paul-Jean Toulet.
7. New York, Garland Press.
8. I call particular attention to two valuable articles. David Kopp's "Pentatonic Organization in Two Piano Pieces of Debussy," *Journal of Music Theory* 41/2 (fall 1997), pp. 261-287, on *Pagodes* and *Les collines d'Anacapri*, is remarkable for its aurally persuasive approach. David Lewin's "Some Instances of Parallel Voice-Leading in Debussy," *19th Century Music* 11/1 (summer 1987), pp. 59-72, discusses passages in the Violin Sonata, *Le vent dans la plaine*, and *Canope* in detail.
9. *Debussy Studies*, edited by Richard Langham Smith, Cambridge University Press, 1997, with articles by Myriam Chimènes, David Grayson, Denis Herlin, Roy Howat, Jean-Michael Nectoux, Roger Nichols, Robert Orledge, Marie Rolf, and Richard Langham Smith.
10. *Claude Debussy: Pelléas et Mélisande*, edited by Roger Nichols and Richard Langham Smith, Cambridge Opera Handbooks, Cambridge University Press, 1989; Simon Trezise, *Debussy: La Mer*,

Cambridge Music Handbooks, Cambridge University Press, 1994. David Grayson's *The Genesis of Debussy's Pelléas et Mélisande* (Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1986) is an expert and thoroughly detailed study of the complex documentary issues.

11. Cambridge University Press, 1982.

12. Cambridge University Press, 1983.

13. *Debussy and His World*, edited by Jane F. Fulcher, Princeton University Press, 2001. With contributions by Jane F. Fulcher, John R. Clevenger, Marie Rolf, David Grayson, Leon Botstein, Brian Hart, Gail Hilson Woldu, Rosemary Lloyd, and Christophe Charle. *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, edited by Simon Trezise, Cambridge University Press, 2003, features articles by Simon Trezise, Robert Orledge, Barbara L. Kelly, Déirdre Donnellon, David Grayson, Roger Nichols, Nigel Simeone, Julie McQuinn, Caroline Potter, Boyd Pomeroy, Mark DeVoto, Richard S. Parks, Charles Timbrell, and Arnold Whittall.

14. Yale University Press, 1989.

15. Laurence David Berman, *The Evolution of Tonal Thinking in the Works of Claude Debussy*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 2 vols., Harvard University, 1965. Interlibrary loan from Harvard University, the Eda Kuhn Loeb Music Library, cat. no. Mus T. 65.32, with permission of the author. Berman's analyses cover most of the works before *Pelléas et Mélisande*, plus *La mer*. See my review of this dissertation in *Current Musicology* 9 (1969), pp. 200-208.

16. Lesure's successor as editor-in-chief is Denis Herlin, formerly *rédacteur-en-chef adjoint*. Herlin is also the editor for the *Oeuvres complètes* of the full score of Debussy's *Nocturnes* (series 5, volume 3); see Chapter 4, note 11.

17. Éditions Minkoff, Geneva.