

Claude Debussy. *Nocturnes*. Édition de Denis Herlin. (Œuvres complètes, ser. V, vol. 3.) Paris: Durand, 1999. [General preface in French and English, p. ix; foreword, pp. xi-xxv; select bibliography, p. xxvii; score, 137 pp.; abbreviations, pp. 139-141; critical notes, pp. 143-153; variants, pp. 155-211; appendix, pp. 213-222; facsimiles, pp. 223-239. Clothbound, Durand & Fils 15217. Price 995 francs.]

Claude Debussy. *Nocturnes: I. Nuages X II. Fêtes X III Sirènes*. 1898-1899. Édition de Denis Herlin. Paris: Durand (T. Presser), 2000. [Foreword in French and English, 1 page; nomenclature, 1 page; score, pp. 1-135. Durand & Fils 15235. Price 199 francs.]

Reviewed by Mark DeVoto

[revised from *Notes*, September 2001]

Claude Debussy's *Nocturnes* for orchestra (1898-99) are arguably this composer's farthest-reaching forward leap into the future of music, and, especially in *Nuages*, his single most radical exploration of previously unknown realms of tonality – a resplendent beginning to the new twentieth century that Debussy's art did so much to change. And in the realm of pure sound, no less than in tonality, the *Nocturnes* proclaim a new world. Certainly it is true that in the *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune* (1894), Debussy made genuinely new discoveries in timbre; but the pathbreaking originality of that work lies principally in its Art Nouveau melody and form, and in its orchestration. *Faune* more than anything else shows Debussy's transforming mastery of a kind of sound that Richard Wagner had perfected in *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*. It was in the *Nocturnes* that Debussy, building upon some tentative earlier attempts in *La Damoiselle Éluë* and the *Fantaisie*, invented the heterophonic orchestra that dominates the character of all his later orchestral works. The invention was fully successful, but the *Nocturnes* reveal that it was a continuing struggle. Revisions of the *Nocturnes* occupied Debussy at various times even up to his final years. As a result, and because of a complex history of publication, the score of the *Nocturnes* has presented more varied and minutely difficult editorial problems than any other major work published in the twentieth century.

One hundred and two years after Debussy finished the score (probably for the first time), some documentary questions still remain. It will never be possible to arrive at a definitive, final version of the score of the *Nocturnes* as Debussy would have wanted it, because, as now seems clear, Debussy himself did not know what this would be. But in this new critical edition for the Debussy *Œuvres complètes*, all of the most important questions concerning the establishment of a text of the *Nocturnes* for practical performance have been confidently answered. Denis Herlin, whose doctoral research at the École pratique des Hautes-Études in Paris was a comprehensive study of the *Nocturnes*, and whose publications on the subject go back to 1988, has made this edition as authoritative as possible. His effort has been enormous; the list of corrections and variant readings, fifty-seven pages in double columns, is testimony to his painstaking precision.

The problems of the *Nocturnes* begin with the genesis of the work, which is still mysterious, continue through its long gestation and birth, and endure for years afterward. Most writers, taking their cues from Debussy's early biographer Léon Vallas and from more or less vague clues in Debussy's published correspondence, assume that what Debussy referred to in 1892 as *Trois scènes au crépuscule*, based on poems by Henri de Régnier, was an early version of the *Nocturnes*, and that a violin concerto for Eugene Ysaÿe that Debussy claimed to have "nearly finished" was a later manifestation. Unfortunately, neither of these supposed versions survives—at least not in a form that can in any way be connected with the *Nocturnes* as we now have them, which date from 1897 at the earliest. Thus, although Debussy may well have had the idea of composing three orchestral pieces at the same time that he was deep into his never-finished *Rodrigue et Chimène* and a year before he wrote his String Quartet, the *Nocturnes* did not begin to achieve concrete form until the end of the decade, by which time Debussy had already composed all but the orchestration of his longest work, the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*.

The composition of the *Nocturnes* proceeded slowly and with difficulty, but the work was complete in full score by the end of 1899, with a dedication to Georges Hartmann, who had supported Debussy financially since 1894. Debussy was under contract to Hartmann's associated publisher E. Fromont and engraving began almost immediately. When printed copies actually became available is not known, but it was probably not later than the date of the first complete performance on 27 October 1901. Debussy could not have been happy with the score, which despite two proofreading stages emerged in print with dozens of errors.

In the meantime, Debussy's financial situation had been complicated by Hartmann's death in 1900, and by the demands of Hartmann's heirs for repayment of the money that he had advanced to Debussy. When Debussy could not meet these claims, the heirs sold all of the composer's unpublished manuscripts in their possession to Fromont—who, in turn, found that Debussy's growing fame following the premiere in 1902 of *Pelléas et Mélisande* created a market for the older unpublished pieces. Debussy no longer wanted these works printed but could not prevent their publication, and so it was that in 1905 Fromont brought out the *Suite bergamasque* in a poorly proofread edition. (There is a warm irony here that Debussy would have detested: the third number of the *Suite bergamasque*, "Clair de lune," eventually became the composer's single best-known piece.) Also in 1905—the same year that he finished composing *La mer*—Debussy signed a permanent contract with the Parisian firm of Durand, which published—and continues to publish—nearly all of Debussy's later works.

Herlin's commentary identifies four printings of the score of the *Nocturnes* under Fromont's imprint ("identical in all respects," p. 150), the last in 1922. In that year, Fromont's catalog was acquired by the (still active) firm of Jean Jobert, and Jobert's scores of the *Nocturnes* began to appear. Herlin identifies the first of these as a pocket score, with text based on Fromont's fourth printing, published sometime between 1922 and 1930. In 1930, Jobert published a new score with Debussy's extensive revisions, using the original Fromont plates newly numbered "J.J. 419" (*Nuages*), "J.J. 420" (*Fêtes*)

and "J.J. 421" (*Sirènes*). At least three different versions of this score, labeled "Édition définitive réorchestrée par l'auteur," have appeared in print; what is probably the most recent version bears the additional marking "Nouvelle édition après corrections / Novembre 1964," but significant errors remain uncorrected even in this score. In 1977, Edition Peters of Leipzig published a full score of the Nocturnes in a newly engraved semifolio edition by Max Pommer (Peters Ed. 9156a, E.P. 12908), based on the 1964 Jobert corrected edition. About a dozen corrections are noted in an afterword, none based on autograph sources.

The uncorrected Fromont score of the Nocturnes is easy enough to examine today in the reprint by Dover Publications (Debussy: *Three Great Orchestral Works in Full Score* [New York, 1983]) and in an older and frequently reissued E. F. Kalmus reprint originating from the 1920s (Kalmus Miniature Orchestra Scores, nos. 100-102 [individual movements], Kalmus Orchestra Scores no. 103 [entire work]). Herlin's commentary in the *Œuvres complètes* fails to mention a Jobert edition that apparently represents an intermediate stage between the uncorrected Fromont edition and the 1930 revised score, as is evident in the reprint issued by the International Music Company in 1950 (pub. no. 1055). (We know that this issue stems from a Jobert edition because International neglected to erase Jobert's plate number from the bottom of page 78.) There are approximately one hundred differences between the International reprint and the Fromont score. Most of these are of minor importance—but some are substantial, such as the elimination of *retenu* at m. 23 of *Fêtes* (though the dotted line in m. 24 is retained). The 1930 Jobert score gives *Le double plus lent* at m. 23, which Herlin retains in his edition. (I suspect, however, that if Fromont or Jobert had been willing to authorize the re-engraving of even one page of the score, Debussy would have kept the tempo unchanged, added one extra measure, and doubled the note values.) Durand's new study score reproduces the text of the Herlin edition for the *Œuvres complètes* in reduced format without the accompanying critical commentary and now supersedes all of the previously issued editions. Although the quality of the reduction is excellent, both right and left margins are a bit too narrow and may present problems for binding.

The problems of correction are illustrated by the odyssey of just one note—the first in the upper half of the second violins at m. 70 of *Nuages*. In the original Fromont score, this is given as C#, with the sharp sign attached as an accidental despite the six sharps in the key signature. C# is clearly wrong, especially while the second violas have B#. In the intermediate Jobert score (and International reprint), the C# is adjusted to D#, likewise with a redundant sharp sign. In the 1964 Jobert score, the superfluous sharp is removed, leaving an uncomplicated D# as indicated by the key signature. Only in the *Œuvres complètes* does this note finally appear as B#—a reading that could be easily guessed even without reference to Debussy's autograph full score, which remained in Jobert's possession until it passed to the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Before now, or at least until the Peters edition, every conductor of *Sirènes* has had to discover unaided that the clarinets in A in mm. 1-49 abruptly become clarinets in B \flat at m. 50 (rehearsal no. 5); this exchange of instruments follows Debussy's autograph and

is not indicated in any of the Fromont or Jobert scores. Pommer's edition for Peters does indicate the change but postpones it to the three measures of rest beginning at m. 54, transposing mm. 50-53 accordingly. Herlin follows this wise decision for the *Œuvres complètes*.

Debussy's revisions in the *Nocturnes* are mostly small details in *Nuages* (the most familiar is the flute-harp doubling in mm. 64-76); significant and extensive changes in *Fêtes*; and a constant and vast battleground of indecision in *Sirènes*. The particulars are known from two Fromont scores with extensive corrections and alterations in Debussy's hand – variants Herlin exhaustively describes in his commentary. We can get some idea of what Herlin faced by reading Ernest Ansermet's account of his visit to Debussy in 1917 (as noted by Herlin in "Sirens in the Labyrinth: Amendments in Debussy's *Nocturnes*," in *Debussy Studies*, edited by Richard Langham Smith [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997], 51-77):

And then, after a quick survey of all our common friends, we got round to his orchestral works about which I had a good many questions to ask. When it came to the *Nocturnes* he showed me a score covered in all sorts of corrections, in ordinary pencil, blue pencil, red ink and green ink. "Which are the right ones?" I asked. "I'm not really sure," he replied, "they are all possibilities. Take this score with you and use whatever you like from it." (pp. 57-58)

In a separate commentary (pp. 208-11), Herlin describes the changes indicated in green ink and green pencil in Debussy's marked-up score of *Sirènes* and noted by Ansermet; a nine-page appendix gives a conjectural reconstruction in full score of mm. 1-25 made on the basis of these green changes. (But where are the horns in m. 4?) Herlin is careful to note that with very few exceptions, he has not incorporated any of these changes into his text of *Sirènes* for the *Œuvres complètes*: "These modifications bear witness to a desire on the composer's part to revise fundamentally the orchestration and to reconsider the importance of the vocal parts" (p. 152). Many of the green changes are only faintly sketched and are hard to read; six black-and-white facsimile pages (pp. 232-37) reveal some of the problems. One conductor who did attempt to make full use of these alterations was Ansermet, and some of the results can be heard in his recordings of the *Nocturnes* made in the 1950s (the 1957 recording with the Orchestre de la Suisse romande was reissued in 1984 on a London CD [414040-2]). Among the most prominent changes in *Sirènes* are the revised vocal parts in mm. 2-3 and 6-7 and the replacement of the voice parts at mm. 107-8 by oboes and English horn. (It is fair to note, however, that Ansermet's recorded *a tempo* at m. 264 of *Fêtes* is not supported by any score, autograph or printed.)

I did note a few errors in Herlin's commentary, some of them simple mistakes in the English translation. On page 151, for instance, "with the copyist Koussevitzky" should read "with Koussevitzky's copyist." On page xv of the *avant-propos*, the mention of the second posthumous edition of the score should read "vingt-cinq ans plus tard" instead of "quinze ans plus tard." Pages xii and 145 cite "Vendredi – 15.Oc.99 à 3^h du matin" as the date of completion of Debussy's short score of *Sirènes*, now held by the Library of

Congress. The month is difficult to read in a photocopy, but it definitely seems to be "D." rather than "Oc."X and, in fact, 15 December 1899 was a Friday.

But such slips are few and relatively unimportant. What is important is that this new edition of a great orchestral masterpiece is thorough and complete – and as accurate and as handsomely printed as any twentieth-century score can be. For Debussy's *Nocturnes*, after a hundred years, it is hardly too soon.

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