

*Paris and the Nation's Politics**Federico Lazzaro*

From what can be inferred from the composer's correspondence and writings, Debussy was indifferent to political debate. It is noteworthy that the names of politicians are virtually absent from his letters and that none of the major affairs or terrorist episodes that shook French public opinion are the subject of his public or private writings. There is no mention of the anarchist attack on the Chamber of Deputies by Auguste Vaillant on 9 December 1893, nor of the assassination of the president of the Republic, Sadi Carnot, on 24 June 1894. Debussy never expressed himself on the bellicose and monarchist positions of General Boulanger (who threatened the Republic between 1886 and 1891), nor on the *coup d'état* by Paul Déroulède (23 February 1899). Nor did he mention the assassination of Jean Jaurès on 31 July 1914, who was killed for his pacifist positions at a time when Debussy, by contrast, was very explicit about his own inclination towards anti-German interventionism. François Lesure wrote in this regard that Debussy lived 'a little *hors du monde*' and that 'no real political opinion can be attributed to him';¹ although he was close to pro-Dreyfus circles (including the *Revue blanche*), he also had anti-Dreyfusards as friends (e.g. Pierre Louÿs) and undoubtedly shared a certain ambient anti-Semitism.² Debussy's nationalist positions became more and more explicit when he began to take up the pen as a music critic with an anti-German posture that first addressed the musical realm (its first manifestation was within the survey 'L'influence allemande sur la musique française', *Mercure de France*, January 1903) and finally became explicitly political during the First World War (the most famous public stance was 'Enfin, seuls! . . .', *L'Intransigeant*, 11 March 1915).

This chapter highlights a selection of instances where Debussy came into contact with the political. Such contact cannot be reduced to his sole

¹ François Lesure, 'Introduction', in *Correspondance*, p. ii.

² François Lesure, *Claude Debussy: Biographie critique* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), p. 422.

declarations: although some of the examples given are purely biographical, others relate rather to immediate reactions to his work. The fact that the composer does not seem to have been particularly interested in politics obviously did not isolate him from the effects of certain political events on a personal level. We will consider from this perspective two of the three violent episodes that struck Paris during the composer's life – the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune – in addition to certain fundamental laws adopted during the Third Republic up to 1918. The third major violent episode – the First World War – will be addressed, along with the Dreyfus affair, in connection with Debussy's works.

Indeed, in the process of reconstructing the history of a career, the political events surrounding the public manifestations of a composer (from the performances of their works to the publication of their writings) deserve to be retraced. Even if there is no direct relationship between the composition of the works and history, there is a contextual relationship – one of concordance – at the time of their creation. The context in which a work is first performed can contribute to its success or failure, as well as load it with political meanings. To paraphrase Hans Robert Jauss, when we study musical works from the past, we are dealing with traces of events that took place when the work was listened to by an audience, commented on by critics, and provoked creative reactions in other composers.³

The Franco-Prussian War

From the age of six, Debussy had his main address in Paris. It was the end of the Second Empire, the regime established in 1852 by Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, who proclaimed himself emperor under the name of Napoleon III. The Franco-Prussian War was declared on 19 July 1870, with the aim of strengthening the empire. The result was rather that it was wiped out: following the defeat at Sedan on 4 September, the emperor went into exile and, according to national mythology perpetuated in a famous phrase by Charles de Gaulle, the Republic 'offered itself to the country to repair the disaster'. But while the patriotic and republican forces in the capital were determined to continue the war until victory, the Government of National Defence, led by General Trochu, was leaning towards a rapid peace. Paris, under siege for four months (17 September 1870–26 January 1871, with the

³ Hans Robert Jauss, *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft* (Konstanz: Universitätsverlag Konstanz, 1967). A useful timeline paralleling the main political events of the Third Republic and French musical life can be found in Barbara L. Kelly (ed.), *French Music, Culture, and National Identity, 1870–1939* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2008), pp. xii–xix.

armistice being signed on 28 January) suffered the material consequences but did not abandon its positions. Debussy's father, Manuel-Achille, remained in Paris during the war, while the young Achille-Claude spent these troubled times in Cannes with his mother and siblings. It was there that he had his first music lessons.

The Commune

The elections of 8 February 1871 confirmed the republic that had de facto imposed itself in wartime, while increasing the distance between the provinces (monarchist or pacifist republican vote) and Paris (patriotic and revolutionary republican vote). For this 'Republic without republicans'⁴ led by Adolphe Thiers, an 'equilibrant of compromise'⁵ capable of federating all the pacifist currents around him, peace was well worth the sacrifice of Alsace-Lorraine, which was thus ceded to the Germans (the region became French again in 1919). It was against this government that Paris would rebel on 28 March. An alternative government – the Commune – was created; for some it was inspired by the armed resistance against the invader already experienced in 1792, while for others it offered an alternative, socialist model of society. These two souls of the Commune – the egalitarian Republic and the social Republic – were subsequently crushed by Thiers during the *semaine sanglante* (bloody week, 21–28 May), which resulted in between 7,000 and 15,000 deaths, depending on the sources. Rid of its more leftist components, the Third Republic could finally assert its conservative character (as affirmed by Thiers in his speech of 13 November 1872), defending *order* (i.e. peace, guaranteed by an army of professionals), *property* (defended by a protectionist economy), and *stability* (ensured by a presidential regime, among other things). Each of these elements was established progressively, leading to the constitution of 1875.⁶

Manuel-Achille Debussy had joined the National Guard just before the uprisings that led to the Commune broke out; he was arrested with 40,000 other *communards* and sentenced to four years in prison, but he benefitted from the amnesty of 1873, which allowed the Debussy family to come together again. Achille-Claude did not permanently leave home until twenty years later. These events are not without consequences for Debussy's instruction in music. The composer Charles de Sivry, whom Manuel met at the Satory camp where he was a prisoner, recommended his

⁴ Jean-Pierre Azéma and Michel Winock, *La Troisième République, 1870–1940*, rev. ed. (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1976), p. 68.

⁵ Arnaud-Dominique Houte, *Le Triomphe de la République, 1871–1914* (Paris: Seuil, 2014), p. 27.

⁶ We summarise here the analysis of Azéma and Winock, *La Troisième République*.

mother, Antoinette-Flore Mauté, as a piano teacher. Seventeen months after the defeat of the Commune, on 22 October 1872, Claude Debussy was admitted to the Conservatoire.

Divorce Act, Trade Union Act

Beyond these traumatic events, Debussy's life was paralleled, and sometimes directly affected, by some of the most important reforms of the Third Republic. From the 1880s onwards, the conservative tendency of the beginning gave way to a centrist, liberal, and secular orientation, complete with some important social measures (especially from 1906 onwards, when the Ministry of Labour was created). These laws embodied the ideals of the Radical Party, founded in 1901; the same year two socialist parties were born, which in 1905 converged in the SFIO (French Section of the Workers' International). The Divorce Act of 27 July 1884, for example, allowed Debussy to marry Emma (divorced from Sigismond Bardac in 1905), while at the same time imposing on him the alimony payable to his ex-wife Lilly Texier, which ate away at his finances. By contrast, another crucial law of the same year – the Waldeck-Rousseau Law of 21 March authorising professional unions – had no impact on Debussy, who never joined a union, whether as a musician or music critic.

Secularism and Public Education

The issue of secularism, which had as its major consequence the separation of Church and State formalised by a series of laws in 1905, intersected with the composer's biography on several occasions. On the very day of his birth, 22 August 1862, Parisian newspapers published and commented on (while denying its authenticity) a dispatch of 19 August concerning a visit by the French ambassador to the Pope in order to 'give His Holiness, in the name of the Emperor, the assurance that the French government, by guaranteeing its integrity, will not allow the invasion of the present pontifical territory'.⁷ This defence of the temporal power of the Church, threatened by the arrival of Giuseppe Garibaldi who sought to conquer Rome and annex it to the new Italian state, was one of the pillars on which Napoleon III based his regime, guaranteeing him the support of Catholics. As a consequence,

⁷ For a commentary on the authenticity of this dispatch, see Adolphe GaiFFE, 'Bulletin du jour', *La Presse* (Paris) (22 August 1862), p. 1. *La Presse* had published the dispatch the previous day, p. 3.

when the French Empire fell in 1870, the Italian army was finally able to seize its future national capital. The Republic would then completely reverse its position. In 1882, the year in which Debussy gave the first public concert of his works (with Marie-Blanche Vasnier) and failed his first Prix de Rome competition, the Jules Ferry Laws of 28 March established the secular character of primary schools, henceforth also compulsory and free (Debussy had not attended any school); the teaching staff would be exclusively non-religious from 1886 onwards (Debussy was by then in Rome as a recipient of the Prix de Rome, finally obtained in 1884).

The separation of Church and State, completed in 1905 (worship was free but in no way subsidised by the State, and diplomatic relations with the Vatican were severed), did not prevent the clergy from interfering with French citizens and their relationship with the arts. In May 1911, the Archbishop of Paris formally forbade Parisian Catholics to attend performances of *Le Martyre de saint Sébastien* by Gabriele D'Annunzio and Debussy because of its mixture of paganism, eroticism, and Christianity, and the fact that the saint was played by a woman, a Jew moreover (Ida Rubinstein).

Responding to the Politics

We have mentioned only a few key moments in the Third Republic that had a more or less direct impact on Debussy's life, yet there are different ways of approaching them, depending on how we consider a composer's career in relation to the political circumstances surrounding it. While politics are rarely reflected in composition (except in occasional pieces), they nonetheless form part of a work when it becomes an event. Curiosity could lead the historian to wonder what was being talked about during the interval at the premiere of an epochal work such as the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (22 December 1894), a few days after the creation of the protectorate of Madagascar and the birth of the first French trade union, the CGT (Confédération générale du travail), or to enquire what reactions the abolition of theatrical censorship inspired among the music lovers gathered at the Salle des Agriculteurs for a talk by Louis Laloy on Debussy's work followed by a performance of the first series of *Images* (6 February 1906). One option is to study the press from a broader perspective, and thus to look at Debussy's career in the context of the political debates that animated the Parisian press when it was read on the day of a premiere or carried the reviews

of his works. This approach, rather than isolating critical reviews, studies press discourse on music with the aim of situating such discourse (and thus the works commented on therein) in the lives of their readers.⁸

Consider the premiere of *Pelléas et Mélisande* on 30 April 1902. The front page of the daily newspapers – and possibly the principal subject of conversation for most of the audience at the premiere – was the result of the legislative elections of 27 April. The rise of the Nationalist Party was feared but did not happen, and instead the Radical Party emerged victorious from the elections. The fear of a nationalist upsurge was explained by the strengthening of the militarist, anti-Semitic, clerical, and anti-parliamentary (even monarchist) right, reflected in two electoral victories in Paris. The first, in January 1889, saw the triumph of General Boulanger, a populist anti-republican who encouraged military action against Germany to ‘avenge’ Alsace-Lorraine, and almost led to a *coup d'état* (the first performance of a work by Debussy at the Société nationale de musique – two of the six *Ariettes oubliées* – took place around this time, on 19 February). The second electoral victory of the right in Paris came in the municipal elections of 1900. It occurred shortly after the pardon granted to Captain Alfred Dreyfus by the president of the Republic, Émile Loubet (19 September 1899) as the concluding chapter in a case that had been going on since 1894 and which had divided French public opinion between Dreyfusards (defenders of justice and the law in the face of miscarriages of justice and army corporatism) and anti-Dreyfusards (anti-Semites and revanchists). Debussy had positioned himself in the middle and signed a petition ‘for peace’ (*pour l'apaisement*) in January 1899. One can thus see the victory of the radicals on the day of the premiere of *Pelléas* as a definitive affirmation of republican, secular, and pro-Dreyfus France after some fifteen years of risk for the Republic.

Jann Pasler's sociopolitical interpretation of the critical reaction to *Pelléas*, which takes into account some of ‘the [enormous] number of extra-musical issues capable of affecting how a critic formulated his message’,⁹ could be enriched by these considerations: the critics close to the right who were very hard on Debussy's opera were probably ill-disposed towards it on account of their indignation over the electoral results. Moreover, the perception of the gap between *Pelléas* and their expectations could have

⁸ A plea for the reading of music criticism ‘in context’ has been made by Katherine Ellis, ‘Music Criticism, Speech Acts, and Generic Contracts’, in Teresa Cascudo (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century Music Criticism* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), pp. 14–19.

⁹ Jann Pasler, ‘*Pelléas* and Power: Forces behind the Reception of Debussy's Opera’, *19th-Century Music* 10 (1983), p. 264.

been exacerbated by broader political considerations – an indication, among others, of the fact that the world was moving in a different direction from their values.

First World War

There are also cases where the circumstance of the execution of a work gives it an official, if not political (or politicised), patina. The two works by Debussy played at the Exposition Universelle of 1900 – the String Quartet and *La Damoiselle élue* – may fall into this category. But it was especially during the Great War that the intersection between Debussy's music and political events became greater. Five of the ten compositions completed by Debussy between November 1914 and March 1917 are occasional pieces (*Berceuse héroïque*, *Pièce pour l'œuvre du 'Vêtement du blessé'*, *Élégie*, *Noël des enfants qui n'ont plus de maison*, *Les Soirs illuminés par l'ardeur du charbon*);¹⁰ the others (three of the six sonatas he had planned to write, *En blanc et noir*, and *Douze études* for piano) all had their premiere in a charitable setting.

France and Russia (together with the United Kingdom in the Triple Entente from 1907) entered the war against Germany in early August 1914. Germany invaded Belgium in order to attack France from the north, and Britain joined the war. It is in this context that one can understand the initiative of the British writer Hall Caine to make an art album in honour of the king of Belgium, Albert I, and the Belgian soldiers who died during the German invasion. Debussy, who had taken refuge in Angers on 4 September, the day after the government left Paris for Bordeaux, participated in the album with his *Berceuse héroïque*.

From the very beginning of the war the French president, Raymond Poincaré, called for a 'Sacred Union' of political forces for the defence of the nation. Patriotism or nationalism became commonplace in political as well as artistic life, and not only for ideological reasons.¹¹ A protectionist decree of 27 September 1914 banned all trade with the enemy, including in music scores. As a result, editions of Beethoven, Mozart, and Schubert, to name but a few, had to be published in France, since the German editions commonly used were now 'Not to be opened during the war' (as stamped

¹⁰ For an analysis of the genesis, reception, and programmatic nature of these works, see Marianne Wheelon, *Debussy's Late Style* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009).

¹¹ See Carlo Caballero, 'Patriotism or Nationalism? Fauré and the Great War', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 52 (1999), pp. 593–625.

on their covers).¹² Debussy was in charge of Chopin's works for Durand's *Édition classique*.

On 21 March 1918, while Paris was under bombardment, the Opéra staged Rameau's *Castor et Pollux*, a sort of musical bomb launched in favour of French tradition. By this time, Debussy could no longer react to the German bombing, either musically (his *Ode à la France* did not go beyond a few sketches) or physically; he did not even have the strength to move down into the cellar to protect himself. He died on 25 March, an eerily musical day in Paris:

Something strange was heard, the sound of a tam-tam, of a tambourine. It sounded like belly dancing, the fandango, and the Tarasque parade.

The officers are good people, but most of them can't beat a drum. . . . They had been told, 'Go and sound the bombing alarm. . . .'

Never had Paris felt such joy since the war began. . . .

Listening to the drumbeat, people had completely forgotten about the shells, which, by the way, caused no turmoil. 'Public life continued.'¹³

Author's Recommendation

Berceuse héroïque, 'pour rendre hommage à S. M. le roi Albert 1^{er} de Belgique et à ses soldats' (1914).

The 185 pages of the *King Albert's Book: A Tribute to the Belgian King and People from Representative Men and Women throughout the World* (London: The Daily Telegraph, 1914) included, among letters, poems, short texts, and pictures, a dozen short musical compositions by celebrated composers from those 'civilised countries' that supported Belgium in its 'heroic and ever-memorable' resistance to the German invasion (as stated by Hall Caine in his introduction). The book was intended as a 'tribute of admiration' as well as an offer of 'prayers for the gallant little nation in [her] vast sorrow'. In keeping with this dual purpose, some pieces of music are triumphal marches (Edward Elgar's, for instance, or Ethel Smyth's *The March of the Women*), while others take the form of a prayer or a funeral lament (Pietro Mascagni's *Sunt lacrimae rerum!* or Peter Erasmus Lange-Müller's *Lamentation*).

¹² See Rachel Moore, *Performing Propaganda: Musical Life and Culture in Paris during the First World War* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2018), pp. 173–216.

¹³ Anonymous, 'Quelques obus hier sur Paris, puis le silence: "La vie publique continue"', *Le Journal* (Paris) (26 March 1918), p. 1.

Debussy's *Berceuse héroïque* (Heroic Lullaby), as its title suggests, combines these two approaches. Against the background of a funeral march, some bugle signals (echoes of battles) can be heard in the distance (an idea shared with André Messager's *mélodie* 'Pour la patrie'). In the middle of the piece, the theme of the Belgian national anthem, *La Brabançonne*, 'proudly' (*fièrement*) emerges as a song of encouragement. The orchestral version of the *Berceuse héroïque* was first performed in Paris on 25 October 1915 at a concert that included a work by a German composer for the first time since the beginning of the war: Beethoven's 'Eroica' Symphony.