

### **Debussy in Context: Continuity and Change in *fin-de-siècle* France**

The study of Claude Debussy's music poses a unique set of problems in the history of Western music. It has been viewed as the product of the dynamic artistic environment in France at the end of the nineteenth century, but also as the beginnings of the modern style that developed in the beginning of the twentieth century. However, interpretations of Debussy's work as simply "French" or simply "modern" are limiting. In this project, I am exploring the possibility that these conceptions of Debussy's identity are not necessarily opposed, and may even be understood as complementary. Debussy's "French" music, which was influenced by both musical and literary traditions in France, is synonymous with the ideas of progress and the development of modernism. Throughout his career, Debussy was immersed in a rich contemporary culture in which literary figures, composers, painters and art critics exchanged and disputed aesthetic ideas. He regularly attended salons hosted by important figures like the poet Stéphane Mallarmé, and wrote on the aesthetics of the day for a variety of journals. In addition to his musical settings of contemporary literature, Debussy also translated literary aesthetics of abstraction and expression, incorporating them in his new musical aesthetics. In Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, an instrumental piece based on Mallarmé's "L'après-midi d'un faune," Debussy evokes the atmosphere of Mallarmé's poem by experimenting with traditional and non-traditional tonalities, uses of orchestral color, and musical expression. Because literature plays a role as the sung text of vocal music, the subject of programmatic music, and as an important influence on aesthetic ideas about style and form in the development of Debussy's style, a study of both his vocal and instrumental music is essential to any exploration of his place in music history.

Debussy, like many in the French musical culture of his time concerned himself with debates over the characteristics of a truly "French" style and the future direction of French music. One primary concern was the problem of foreign influence on French music. In an article published on March 11, 1915, Debussy wrote: "We even think that French art will emerge from the fire purer, more brilliant, and stronger. The fate of our arms must resound immediately in the next chapter of our art; we must understand at last that victory will bring a necessary liberation to the French musical sensibilities."<sup>1</sup> Debussy addressed both of these problems in his writings, but his music still raises many questions about the role of foreign influence in French music and the status of "French" musical identity. For example, in his only complete opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Debussy seems to use Wagnerian models, but at the same time produces a new and specifically French operatic aesthetic.

Debussy's involvement in the complex literary and musical culture in France provides an important context in which to explore his music. Drawing on both literary and musical traditions of his day, Debussy created music that combines past and present. His new musical style also exhibits many of the characteristics of modernism. Understanding Debussy's immersion in the literary and aesthetic preoccupations of his time is essential to addressing the question of whether his work is better viewed as "French" or as "modern." To understand his music fully, he must be studied as a French modernist.

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<sup>1</sup> Claude Debussy, *M. Croche et autres écrits*, ed. François Lesure (Paris: Gallimard, 1987) 265. (translation mine)