

2015

## Claude de France: Debussy's Great War of 1915

Arun Rao

*Technological University Dublin*, [arun.rao@tudublin.ie](mailto:arun.rao@tudublin.ie)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/aacomusbk>



Part of the [Music Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Rao, A. (2015). Claude de France: Debussy's great war of 2015. In France and Ireland:notes and narratives (Hunt, U. & Pierse, M. eds.). Bern, Peter Lang.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Conservatoire at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Books/Book Chapters by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact [arrow.admin@tudublin.ie](mailto:arrow.admin@tudublin.ie), [aisling.coyne@tudublin.ie](mailto:aisling.coyne@tudublin.ie), [vera.kilshaw@tudublin.ie](mailto:vera.kilshaw@tudublin.ie).

ARUN RAO  
(edited by Drs. Mary Pierse & Una Hunt)

## ‘Claude de France’: Debussy’s Great War of 1915

In August 1915, exactly one year after the start of the conflict, Debussy signed his *Sonata for Cello and Piano* - the first of his intended six sonatas for various instruments - *Claude Debussy, musicien français*. In Bertrand Dermoncourt’s *L’univers de l’opéra*, the opening lines of the entry on Debussy read:

He who became, by some regrettable nationalistic twist, known as ‘Claude de France’ - as if his music embodied the national cultural identity - was in many respects an atypical artist in the French musical landscape of his time.<sup>1</sup>

These two statements evoke an apparent contradiction in the last creative phase of this fascinating composer: how his yearning to contribute in a meaningful way to the war effort ended up with the composition of works whose features, both formal and stylistic, display the sort of modernism that was castigated in nationalist discourses. Concurrently and paradoxically, Debussy’s correspondence testifies to his leaning towards the more extreme form of nationalism, while the writings he collected early in 1914 (under the title *Monsieur Croche anti dilettante*) underline his obsession with setting himself apart from his compatriots. Just as his very personal take on French musical tradition produced mixed reactions in 1915, posterity judged his *anti-boches* ramblings quite severely until a clearer understanding of his idiosyncrasies came to light in more recent years<sup>2</sup>. Ironically, in a curious twist of fate, Maurice Ravel’s moral issues with post-1918 patriotism had been slated by none other than Erik Satie, who famously quipped that ‘Ravel refuses the *Légion d’Honneur* but all his music accepts it’<sup>3</sup>. That Debussy should have been spared such professional backstabbing was hardly providential, for unlike Satie and Ravel, he did not survive the Great War. Diagnosed with bowel cancer before 1910, he died peacefully under morphine in March 1918 during a ferocious spell of German bombardment on the capital.

This study will posit that, while the entrenched xenophobia of the man tended to manifest itself in periods of relative sterility, the instinctive genius of the musician set him on a different ‘warpath’ than he might have originally intended. On the centenary of this rich crop of masterpieces, this paper will offer some insight into how Debussy’s sense of patriotic duty became articulated in those works.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bertrand Dermoncourt: *L’univers de l’opéra* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2012)

<sup>2</sup> This took place thanks to the scholarship of Debussy authorities François Lesure and Richard Langham Smyth. From the late 1990s, these contradictions were also analysed perceptibly by a number of American scholars, including Jane Fulcher, Glen Watkins, Marianne Wheeldon, Jann Pasler and Barbara Kelly.

<sup>3</sup> Satie’s remarks appeared in the first issue of Jean Cocteau’s periodical *Le Coq* (1 May 1920). Comments by Satie in 1919 reveal another, more fundamental, contradiction: ‘Socially and politically, Debussy was far from having the exacting taste as musically. This revolutionary in Art was very bourgeois in his daily life. He did not like “eight-hour working days” or other social improvements. I can assure you of it. He was not very favourable to a rise in salaries - except his own, of course...’; Erik Satie, *Écrits*, ed. Ornella Volta (Paris: Champs libre, 1977), 50. (my translation).

## Retreat

‘Y aura-t-il jamais un dernier Allemand?’<sup>4</sup>

Born in 1862, Claude Debussy was a relatively ‘senior’ citizen when the German troops invade Belgium in early August 1914. This, along with his deteriorating health, forced him to be a bystander following Germany’s declaration of war against France on August 3. Other slightly younger composers like Ravel (b. 1875) or André Caplet (b. 1878) and those of his generation like his friend Satie (b. 1866), wore French Army uniforms with various degrees of pride. Repulsed by German mentality, Debussy nonetheless took a dim view of fellow composers Camille Erlanger (b. 1863) and Paul Dukas (b. 1865) and their readiness to ‘get [their] heads blown off as the next man’, declaring that he would himself be of very little use except ‘to man a barricade!’<sup>5</sup>

As the German offensive continued well into French territory, news of atrocities against Belgian civilians and the deliberate destruction of countless medieval manuscripts in Louvain (Leuven) caused outrage in France, Britain and neutral Italy. On August 30, a German plane dropped three bombs over the French capital, killing seven people. In the ensuing panic, Debussy’s wife Emma insisted on their leaving Paris. In early September, and after a difficult train journey, the family reached the town of Angers, a few hours from the Atlantic coast; they stayed there for the best part of a month. Upon hearing news of the bombardment of Rheims cathedral - a revered historical landmark since the days of Joan of Arc - Debussy vented his ire:

I won’t get on the subject of German barbarity. It’s exceeded all expectations. They’ve even found it convenient not to distinguish between brutishness and intellectualism - a charming combination. [...] I think that we are going to pay dearly for the right not to love the art of Richard Wagner and Schoenberg. For Beethoven, one made a happy discovery that he was Flemish! As for Wagner, it will be over the top! He will always be gloriously remembered for squeezing centuries of music into a nutshell. That is something, and, without question, only a German could have tried it. Our mistake was, for too long, to attempt to follow in his footsteps.<sup>6</sup>

Was he being disingenuous in rescuing Wagner from the likely backlash of nationalism? After all, in 1908, Debussy had confided in the American violinist Arthur Hartmann his intention to write ‘a French Tristan’, suggesting that Wagner’s hero lacked the ‘manliness’ of a true warrior and dismissing its sentimentality.<sup>7</sup> Wagner’s music had become less fashionable in France around the mid-1890s, at a time when Debussy’s music was starting to gain favours with

---

<sup>4</sup> ‘Will there ever be a last German? I’m convinced their soldiers reproduce among themselves!’ Debussy to Igor Stravinsky, 24 October 1915. *Debussy Letters*, selected and edited by Roger Nichols and François Lesure (London: Faber & Faber, 1987), 309

<sup>5</sup> *Debussy Letters*, 239. Debussy to Jacques Durand, his close friend and exclusive publisher since July 1905, on 18 August 1914.

<sup>6</sup> Debussy to Nicolo Coronio, friend and former piano student, September 1914. *Debussy Letters*, 293.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Hartmann: *Claude Debussy as I knew him and other writings of Arthur Hartmann* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2003), 15.

audiences and critics<sup>8</sup>. Defending Wagner at the height of nationalistic fever gave further proof of Debussy's *parti-pris* against mainstream opinion, a *parti-pris* he fully articulated in the collected writings he had planned for publication earlier in 1914 under the title *Monsieur Croche anti dilettante*:

I dared to tell him [M. Croche] that men had tried, some in poetry, others in painting (I struggled to include a few musicians) to shake the dust of traditions and that this had only resulted in their being labelled symbolists or impressionists; handy words to despise your kindred ... 'They are reporters, men of the trade who labelled them so', Croche went on unperturbed, 'a beautiful idea, as it takes shape, can be ridiculous for imbeciles ... Be sure that these men have a greater aspiration for beauty than that sort of herd of sheep which nonchalantly makes its way to the slaughter house.'<sup>9</sup>

Debussy was actually far from sectarian in musical matters. His animosity towards the German did not preclude a recognition of Wagner's achievements, unlike the more senior Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) whose early enthusiasm for the Bayreuth master had turned to hatred following the debacle of the Franco-Prussian war in 1871 and the publication of a most incendiary pamphlet by Wagner.<sup>10</sup> The letter above nevertheless conceded that Wagner's influence had hampered the regeneration of native talent, a well-trodden paradigm already formulated in the early 1900s by writers and critics Romain Rolland, Jean Marnold and Paul Landormy among others<sup>11</sup>. Beethoven's relative safety from any associations with Kultur 'warfare' owed probably more to Rolland's fervent tribute in the 'roman-fleuve' *Jean-Christophe* (1903-12) than to recent findings concerning his possible Belgian ancestry.<sup>12</sup> Rolland's pacifist pamphlet *Au-dessus de la mêlée* had caused adverse reactions but nonetheless earned him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1915, proving that intellectuals could position themselves above petty nationalism with expressive elegance and clarity of thought, qualities that were conspicuously absent from Debussy's private utterances.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Its influence was nevertheless still strong by 1913 when, as Michael Taruskin comments, "Lili Boulanger's prize cantata [...] was not dangerously original: a salad of near quotations from Parsifal and Siegfried, it shows that the "default mode" for young French musicians, the style that came with the least resistance to a harried prize contestant working on a deadline, was still tinged with Wagnermania'. *Music in the early twentieth century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 126.

<sup>9</sup> Claude Debussy: *Monsieur Croche antidilettante* [Mister Quaver, dilettante-hater] (Paris: Librairie Dorbon-ainé, 1921), 16. (my translation). In this book, Debussy writes in the first person, so that whenever his *alter ego* 'Croche' makes an appearance, Debussy refers to him as a third party.

<sup>10</sup> Wagner had chosen this inopportune moment to exact revenge for his failure to conquer Paris in the 1860s with *Eine Capitulation*, 'a cruel and tasteless parody of Parisian sufferings during the Prussian siege'. See review by Lisa Norris of Mark Weiner's *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination* (1997) <<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1318>> accessed 13 December 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Marnold defined Wagnerism as being essentially concerned with extra-musical meanings (textual, poetic, anecdotal, etc) which, in his opinion, denied a work its true musical significance. See Jacques Morland: *Enquête sur l'influence allemande* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1902), 533-4. It is noteworthy that Marnold, like d'Indy and Debussy, considered that Berlioz exerted a nefarious influence on French music.

<sup>12</sup> Debussy was unconventional in his admiration of Beethoven's music. For more on Beethoven's origins, see *The history of Beethoven's family* in <[www.lvbeethoven.com](http://www.lvbeethoven.com)> accessed 12 December 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Written in September 1914, this pacifist text was originally entitled *Au-dessus de la haine* [Above hatred]. While the change attenuated the strength of Rolland's sentiments, it unwittingly carried a nuance that led to widespread condemnation since it was perceived as complacent, haughty and anti-patriotic. Its reception probably contributed to his decision to live in neutral Switzerland during the war. An eminent musicologist, Rolland had extolled the 'authentic French declamation' of *Pelléas et Mélisande* in the early 1900s and lauded Debussy as the one true perpetuator of French musical tradition. This enthusiasm waned by 1914, however, as he, like many others, grew tired of waiting for a second opera.

On his return to Paris in October 1914, Debussy welcomed his publisher's offer to prepare an original French edition of Chopin's Piano Works, as German editions could no longer be imported. This would occupy him until the following August. Later that month, Durand asked if he would contribute a short piece to *King Albert's Book*, a collection of testimonials by Western European artists and published by the *Daily Telegraph* in aid of the Belgian war relief, at the initiative of British author Hall Caine. Initially dismissive, Debussy set to work the next month on a small offering for solo piano: *Berceuse Héroïque*.<sup>14</sup> One of a handful of overtly occasional pieces he produced in wartime, Debussy's *Berceuse* depicts the plight of Belgium by squeezing a quote from its national anthem, *La Brabançonne*, between slices of menacing, heavy-footed march music. The solemn counterpoint of its beginning briefly alludes to what was then (and still is) considered a quintessential Germain trait. After a reprise of the opening military motives - this time more restrained and subdued - the coda relaxes the tension completely by sounding a gentle clarion in the treble over a low dissonance, before the quiet, hopeful ending. The *Berceuse* was criticised in England for being both trite and contrived. A glance at the volume of tributes to the valiant king and his afflicted compatriots shows just how inadequate it must have seemed when seen alongside the choral numbers by Edward Elgar, Jules Massenet and Charles Villiers Stanford, or the rhetoric of Anatole France and American novelist Winston Churchill (his more famous namesake also appears), and the grand lithography of J.J. Shannon, Frank Dicksee and others.<sup>15</sup> Although he went to the trouble of orchestrating the piece in December - perhaps in an effort to make it more palatable - Debussy was quick to recognise its shortcomings, arguing in his defence that 'the *Brabançonne* stirs no heroic thoughts in the breasts of those who weren't brought up with it'.<sup>16</sup> Later in the same letter, he again confessed that he 'wouldn't know how to use a gun'. His distance from military matters compounded his dilemma: how to make a statement on the horror of war while making use of a military-sounding national anthem?

This was not the only caveat: Debussy's stance was also compromised by his profound aversion to the 'obvious'. The loosely suggestive titles he had given virtually all his piano pieces up until the war are good examples: some are plainly confusing (*Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut* or *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest*); others are deliberately vague (like *Voiles* or *La cathédrale engloutie*). Arguably, such titles are best interpreted as reflecting sonorities in those pieces rather than functioning as inspiration towards their interpretation. Debussy's own admission that the absence of piano in Pourville helped his focus, as he was not at liberty to improvise, coupled with the absence of such descriptive titles from his wartime music, seems to be consistent with this opinion.

Debussy, like the vast majority of artists, writers, and composers on either side of the enemy lines, was consumed by the desire to participate in some capacity to the war effort. In his invaluable book on the state of world music during the war years, *Proof Through the Night*, Glenn Watkins states that even the most progressive musicians (such as Ravel, Stravinsky,

---

<sup>14</sup> 'If I dared to and if, above all, I didn't dread the sense of going down a beaten track which haunts this kind of work, I'd be happy to write a *Marche héroïque* ...but as I said, to play the hero while sitting peacefully a long way from the action seems to me ridiculous...' Debussy to Durand, 9 October 1914. *Debussy Letters*, 294 (my translation)

<sup>15</sup> Although he excelled in the genre and later wrote a song *Honneur à l'Amérique* (1917) and a *Marche interalliée* for piano (1918), the 'patriarch' of French music Camille Saint-Saëns sent no music, preferring to laud the royal couple in an open letter. (*King Albert's Book*, 128). 1915 was a relatively barren year for Saint-Saëns, although he played a part in the campaign to secure American entry into the war, with a work for orchestra, band and organ: *Hail! California*.

<sup>16</sup> 'Ça a été très dur, d'autant que la Brabançonne ne verse aucun héroïsme dans le coeur de ceux qui n'ont pas été élevés "avec"'. Debussy to Robert Godet, 1 January 1915. English version in *Debussy Letters*, 295; original in François Lesure, *Claude Debussy. Biographie critique* (Paris: Fayard -2003), 388.

Webern, Schoenberg) were seized by nationalist frenzy.<sup>17</sup> Not to be outdone, Debussy's correspondence chronicles his own descent into base chauvinism. In creative terms, his procrastination tells of an enormous difficulty with producing the gravitas, the pity and the bombast intrinsic to war music. This was in complete contrast with Ravel (eager to enlist and obsessed until 1916 with becoming a fighter pilot) in whose wartime music these qualities feature prominently.<sup>18</sup> Would Debussy eventually rally to the cause with similar panache?

In truth, Debussy had been musically sterile since the sketching of a new work for the stage, *Le Palais du Silence*, in January 1914. He eventually cast it aside along with a dozen -or-so other projects. Even had his introverted nature risen to the task of at least matching Ravel's unfailing ear for effect, it is likely that a number of other extenuating factors would have kept him in this unproductive state. For instance, in December 1913, the relationship with his second wife Emma (Bardac, née Moyses) had been close to breaking point due to the emotional strain caused by his precarious financial situation; in addition, health issues made it more and more difficult for him to honour commitments abroad, in spite of his keenness to conduct his own works. Moreover, already isolated since the aftermath of his disastrous marriage to Lily Sexier in 1905, Debussy's working relations with a number of colleagues (Ravel, Satie, Diaghilev and Nijinsky) had notably deteriorated in recent times.

It stands to reason that, given such an unfavourable situation, Debussy might have considered joining the Front a form of escapism. This is counterbalanced by his self-confessed ineptitude in military matters and his profound aversion for time-wasting. By 1916, even the thought of taking up those chauffeur duties that had been Ravel's lot since November 1914 seemed to exhaust him:

If I could force my body to concentrate on avoiding accidents, perhaps the rest would follow? But I'm too old... I know nothing of the skills of using the terrain and I'd get myself killed like a rabbit in a field.<sup>19</sup>

The image is compelling: constricted by his lack of resolve, the man once called 'Dieubussy' by the great iconoclast Satie was indeed caught like a rabbit in the headlights. In 1915, it was precisely in order to escape from the malaise provoked (externally) and exacerbated (psychologically) by the war that Debussy found, albeit temporarily, the inspiration and the purpose that had been eluding him for some time.

## Counter-Attack

*Qui reste à sa place  
Et ne danse pas  
De quelque disgrâce  
Fait l'aveu tout bas*<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Glenn Watkins: *Proof Through the Night: Music and the Great War* (University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> Completed in September 1914, Ravel's *Piano Trio in A minor* includes an eloquent clarion (in the last movement) that reflects that eagerness to enlist; his rare efforts while on the Front, where he served as lorry driver, produced the songs for choir 'a capella' *Trois beaux oiseaux du Paradis*, the completion of his *Tombeau de Couperin* for piano (notably the scintillating *Toccata*), and also *Frontispice*, a short and very striking composition at the behest of poet and aesthete Ricardo Canudo, scored for two pianos on five staves (probably intended for a mechanical piano, the 'Pianola').

<sup>19</sup> Debussy to André Caplet, 10 June 1916. *Debussy Letters*, 314.

<sup>20</sup> 'He who stays put/ And does not dance/ Of some loss of face/ Confession he makes'. (my translation). Jules Barbier & Michel Carré, *Roméo et Juliette*, libretto for the opera by Charles Gounod (Paris: Chowders Fils, 1867).

In January 1915, Debussy was staring down the barrel of 'Dicke Bertha'<sup>21</sup> as he contemplated his options. Writing the *Berceuse Héroïque* had certainly not brought him any joy; at least he was working again, and back at his Bechstein piano where he felt most comfortable and intuitive. There was renewed purpose in his playing too, for he now had the task - daunting, but relished by the pianist and interpreter that he was - of revising the vast array of Nocturnes, Waltzes, Polonaises, Preludes and Mazurkas from his idol Frédéric Chopin.

The music of Chopin had always been held in the highest esteem in France, the country of adoption of the Polish genius. However, it was to another 'honorary French' artist that most young aspiring composers turned from 1850 upwards: Franz Liszt.<sup>22</sup> Highly sought after as a virtuoso the world over, Liszt had retained a string of French connections by the time he had settled in Weimar in the 1840s, and his efforts to promote new music were still earning him tremendous respect in France when Debussy was making his first attempts at composition. His pioneering work in formal matters, tonal relationships, the handling of orchestral textures as well as the deep mysticism of his instrumental works were a major influence on Franck, Saint-Saëns, Prokofiev, Skryabin, Busoni, and to an extent Ravel. Debussy was unusually reserved concerning the piano music of the Hungarian and equivocal in his assessment of his symphonic poem *Mazeppa* which he voiced through *Monsieur Croche*.<sup>23</sup> Although, in his youth, Debussy had met the ageing legend (at the Villa Medici during his *Prix de Rome*), his recall of the event was recorded just once, some time after the Chopin revisions.<sup>24</sup>

Debussy's cult for Chopin was somewhat against the grain, compositionally-speaking. The antithesis of Liszt and Wagner, Chopin's concentrated expression had only aroused limited interest in French composers, Gabriel Fauré being a notable exception. Debussy's initial encounter with Chopin's music had been as a twelve-year-old in the class of the renowned Conservatoire teacher Antoine Marmontel (1816-98); his end of year exam had then consisted of a performance of the second Concerto, for which young Achille (as he was then called) was awarded a worthy *deuxième accessit*. This remarkable affinity as pianist later prompted Satie to remark that 'nobody could play Chopin better than Debussy'.<sup>25</sup> By all accounts, the personalities of both men were similar: reclusive, self-centred, uncompromising, they also shared a profound aversion to effusive performances. Sensing a kindred spirit must have added substance to the Frenchman's admiration.

Unsurprisingly, virtually every piece Debussy wrote in his last years featured the piano, either exclusively or prominently. Less predictable was his scoring of the first of these, *En blanc et noir*, for not one but two pianos. Relatively few composers had given this combination much thought except the prodigal Saint-Saëns, whose best effort in the genre had been a typically brilliant, Mendelssohnian *Caprice Héroïque* (Op.106) from the late 1890s. This was unlikely to

---

<sup>21</sup> 'Big Bertha' was the nickname given to the heaviest German artillery by the Allies; the German nickname only really applied to the 12-calibre-length heavy mortar developed by Krupp in the early 1900s.

<sup>22</sup> Both Liszt and Chopin settled in Paris in their twenties: Liszt in 1827, Chopin in 1831.

<sup>23</sup> 'This symphonic poem is full of the worst defects; it is even common in places, yet the tumultuous passion that jerks it relentlessly, eventually seizes you with such force that one finds it very nice without needing to know why... The undeniable beauty in Liszt's oeuvre owes to, I think, his love of music besides all other feelings. If he behaves casually with it at times or goes as far as to put it on his knees, it still beats the affected mannerisms of those who act as if they have just met her. Very proper, admittedly, but lacking boldness. Boldness and sloppiness often touch genius with Liszt, and that is more preferable than perfection, even dressed in gloves.' *Monsieur Croche anti dilettante*, 85-6. (my translation).

<sup>24</sup> "Chopin recommended practising without pedal and, in performance, not holding it on except in very rare circumstances. It was the same way of turning the pedal into some kind of breathing which I observed in Liszt when I had the chance to hear him in Rome.' Debussy to Durand, 1 September 1915. *Debussy Letters*, 301.

<sup>25</sup> Erik Satie, *Écrits*, 67. Cited in Lesure, *Claude Debussy*, 28.

inspire Debussy given the wretched history of bad relations between the two men. It is possible that Durand suggested that particular combination, since the provision of orchestral music was extremely limited in wartime as stage pits and concert halls had not been spared the general mobilisation, thereby making the piano duo (or duet) a necessary substitute. Moreover, another *Caprice Héroïque* would have been a fitting addition to his catalogue in that climate. Working vigorously through June and July, the composer at last contributed a worthy musical counterpart to his passionate outcry.

Debussy's choice of title (*En blanc et noir*) for 'his' Caprices gave rise to a multiplicity of interpretations, the most accepted being hinted at by the composer himself when he compared the 'colour' of the second piece, *Ballade de François Villon contre les ennemis de France*, to the harsh chiaroscuro of the works of Spanish master Goya.<sup>26</sup> British scholar Jonathan Dunsby, in a study from 1992,<sup>27</sup> perceives an element of pathos in the use of the preposition 'en' as the piece sadly had to be scored for keyboards (black and white keys). He then investigates with utmost thoroughness some other, if arguably more tenuous, explanations including that the piece as a whole makes striking uses of black and white cinematic techniques which would explain the proliferation of certain visual 'assists' such as *lointain* or *en se rapprochant*. These had been pointed at by Debussy himself in an article for the *Revue SIM*.<sup>28</sup>

Dunsby also unveils connections between this musical 'yin & yen' and each of the movements 'sub-titles' in the form of epigraphs. The first and most enigmatic, quoted in the title of this chapter, was from the opera *Roméo et Juliette* by Gounod. The second (*Prince, porté soit des serfs Eolus En la forest où domine Glaucus. Ou privé soit de paix et d'espérance Car digne n'est de posséder vertus Qui mal voudroit au Royaume de France*<sup>29</sup>) and third (*Yver, vous n'êtes qu'un vilain*<sup>30</sup>) quoted poets from another age, respectively Villon (the 'bad boy' of Renaissance poets) and Charles d'Orléans, whose grief with 'enemies of France' was considerably greater as he lived as captive of King Henry V on English soil for a quarter of a century.

The need for artists from the Parisian avant-garde to overtly embrace classic French tradition(s) as had been defined and redefined in the latter stages of the *Belle Époque* in order to maintain credibility has been well documented. This allows yet another plausible reading of *En blanc et noir* as referring to Pierrot, a key figure from the *commedia dell'arte* and 'sanctioned' by mainstream and nationalist opinions as an integral part to those traditions; the Pierrot white and black costume was, and still is known the world over<sup>31</sup>. The facetious nature of the music, its mood swings and extreme 'gestures' thus become part of a theatrical experience, captured in the 'Caprice' tag. This would also account for the first incipit, which speaks of being marginalised for not joining the 'dance' - a sensitive issue with Debussy since he was isolated

---

<sup>26</sup> 'I must confess I've made a slight change in the colour of the second Caprice; it was too profoundly black and almost as tragic as a "Caprice" by Goya!' Debussy to Durand, 14 July 1915. *Debussy Letters*, 197. See also below.

<sup>27</sup> 'The Poetry of Debussy's En Blanc et noir', in Craig Ayrey & Mark Everist (eds), *Analytical Strategies and Musical Interpretation: Essays on Nineteen- and Twentieth-Century Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 149-68.

<sup>28</sup> *Revue SIM*, November 1913. From 1907, the *Revue SIM* (Société Internationale de Musique) brought together some of France's most perceptive commentators and scholars when the bulletin of the Parisian section of the Society joined with the *Mercur musical*, founded in 1905 by Debussy's ardent supporter and first biographer Louis Laloy.

<sup>29</sup> 'Prince let thy be carried by the winds/ To the forest where righteousness rules./ Or be deprived of peace and hope/ For none are worthy of virtues/ Wo dare bid ill to the kingdom of France'. (my translation).

<sup>30</sup> 'Winter, you are such a rogue.' (My translation).

<sup>31</sup> To a native French speaker, the description 'en blanc et noir' can be readily understood to qualify the way somebody dresses up, or is costumed. For more on the Pierrot avatars during the Great War, see Arun Rao, *Pierrots fâchés avec la lune: Debussy, Fauré & Ravel during World War I* (2013) <[www.arrow.dit.ie](http://www.arrow.dit.ie)>.



both socially and professionally. Opening the piece with a torrent of triplets *avec emportement* [tempestuously], Debussy evoked less the sound-world of his beloved Chopin than that of Liszt, whose temperament was much closer to Latin exuberance. For now, his modernist stance was resolute: the absolute priority was to meet the enemy *Kultur* head-on; programmatic content had to override aspirations of 'pure' music. The homage to Chopin would have to wait a little longer.

It is clear that this multiplicity of meanings was carefully calculated. No doubt the failure of the rather one-dimensional *Berceuse Héroïque* had forced the composer to rethink his strategy. From the first bar to the last, *En blanc et noir* brims with heroic energy and passion, driving home the notion that the battleground had truly spread to music and other arts:

I must admit that I too [...] am feeling the desperate anxieties of this war. It's got to the point where I daren't open a newspaper [...]; I want to work - not so much for myself as to provide a proof, however small, that 30 million Boches can't destroy French thought, even if they've tried undermining it first, then obliterating it.

I think of the youth of France, wantonly mown down by those Kultur merchants, and of its contribution to our heritage, now forever lost to us.

The music I'm writing will be a secret homage to them; what's the use of a dedication? Whichever way you look at it, it's the mark of an ego in a state of uncertainty and that won't bring anyone back to life.<sup>32</sup>

Completely side-stepping his earlier scruples<sup>33</sup>, Debussy dedicated the second Caprice to Durand's young assistant Jacques Charlot, 'tué à l'ennemi en 1915, le 3 mars'. Dates of this kind are usually perfunctory, but the emphasis provided a compelling link to the famous Goya painting, *El Trés de Mayo*, which ironically described the brutality of Napoleonic campaigns<sup>34</sup>. Strikingly descriptive, this long central movement is a scholar's delight. Its master stroke lies in the spectacular tactical change from the *Berceuse*: whereas the earlier piece had been somewhat weakened by its empathy for the victims, the appearance of Luther's chorale melody *Eine feste Burg ist unser Gott* [*A mighty fortress is our Lord*], superimposed over an aggressive rumble in the second piano part, turned the Teutonic propaganda into a caricature.<sup>35</sup>

Shortly after its release, this triumph of sarcasm over pity may have inspired Igor Stravinsky to similar tactics in a short piano piece intended for another relief publication, *Le Livre des sans-foyer*, the brain-child of American author and poet Edith Wharton whose compassion for orphaned children from war-ravaged Flanders had awoken America's conscience. Although the book was meant to be apolitical, Stravinsky's *Souvenir d'une marche boche* is so sarcastic as to make its presence slightly awkward, positioned as it was between a sonnet by W.B. Yeats entitled *A reason for keeping silent* and a stern portrait of the devout Catholic Vincent d'Indy by the Belgian artist Théo van Rysselberghe.<sup>36</sup> The participation of Stravinsky and Leon Bakst, both pivotal to the success of the *Ballets Russes* and the implantation of the Russian avant-garde in France, reflected a confraternity of allied nations which then extended to Tsarist Russia. A

---

<sup>32</sup> Debussy to Durand, 5 August 1915. *Debussy Letters*, 298.

<sup>33</sup> See footnote 13 above.

<sup>34</sup> See footnote 27 above.

<sup>35</sup> Despite using the chorale melody for derisive purposes, Debussy did not consider it barbaric, claiming that its 'poisonous vapours' were caused by 'what it represents, because it is still a fine tune'. See *Debussy Letters*, 299.

<sup>36</sup> 'I think it better that at times like these/ We poets keep our mouths shut, for in truth/ We have no gift to set a statesman right;/ He's had enough of meddling who can please/ A young girl in the indolence of her youth/ Or an old man upon a winter's night.' W.B. Yeats, *A reason for keeping silent*. Yeats's 'young girl' might be an allusion to the patriotism that was stirring Ireland at the time. Vincent d'Indy (1851-1931) had been a disciple of César Franck and a rival of Saint-Saëns from the 1880s. A religious, conservative *anti-dreyfusard*, he presided over the *Schola Cantorum*, an influential private establishment where music was taught somewhat archaically. The *Schola* was a beacon of anti-modernist thought through the early 1900s.

few weeks earlier, Debussy had responded to this Franco-Russian entente by dedicating the first and third Caprices to, respectively, the Russian émigré conductor Serge Koussevitzky and to Stravinsky.

Would this be enough to reconcile him with the spirit of the Parisian avant-garde? One person who thought so was his arch-enemy Saint-Saëns, a man equally on a mission but quite a different one. Saint-Saëns's acerbic opinion on modernism - perceived in nationalist quarters as a foreign trademark - was a reliable gauge of one's positioning in the 'pecking order' of the avant-garde. This was his verdict:

It is beyond belief, and we must at all cost bar the doors of the Institute to a Monsieur capable of atrocities of this kind; this must be placed alongside cubist paintings.<sup>37</sup>

This hostility was exacerbated by a decision earlier that year that the composer of *La Mer* would be nominated for election to the *Institut de France*, the prestigious grouping of state academies, on the recommendation of the celebrated organist Charles-Marie Widor (1844-1937). It is difficult to imagine how the luminous evocation of Cathedral stained glass, the crushing power of Luther's melody and the resoundingly victorious final clarion could have so displeased Saint-Saëns, erstwhile protégé of the master of French programmatic music, Hector Berlioz. In truth, the formal liberty and strained harmonic relationships of the Caprices would have puzzled more progressive minds. Debussy recognised this, warning friends to 'bring [their] brain to bear on *En blanc et noir*'.<sup>38</sup> Remarkably for a musician forever determined to follow his own muse, this work displayed an elemental rawness so far only witnessed in Stravinsky's contemporary ballets; yet Debussy's Caprices remain true to the same 'authentically French' qualities which Rolland had noted in his music some years earlier: 'its clarity, its elegant simplicity, its naturalness, and especially its grace and plastic beauty'.<sup>39</sup>

Immediately after he had completed the Caprices, Debussy started on a much anticipated cycle of sonatas with a more deliberate and calculated aim: the rejuvenation of French chamber music, a genre that had been hitherto in steady decline, after two centuries of operatic precedence. There was more than a touch of irony in his sitting through the Conservatoire's 'lyrical declamation' competitions in June as jury member (the notes he jotted were decidedly lukewarm). When Fauré, its director, invited him to sit on another jury for the light opera category the following month, Debussy declined, citing his daughter's chickenpox. Around the end of July, having firmly turned his back on stage projects (albeit temporarily), he was safe from distractions in the little town of Pourville -sur -mer, a seaside resort near Dieppe where he would spend the next three months.<sup>40</sup> Here, he resolutely set to work on a sonata for cello and piano, a work which he later claimed, not without pride, to have written 'in the ancient form, so supple, void of the inflated grandeur of modern sonatas'.<sup>41</sup> The speed with which it was completed - a mere two weeks - bears witness not only to his renewed appetite for composing (the absence of piano helping his focus), but to a greater clarity of purpose and, no doubt, the realisation that time was against him. Indeed, virtually every letter from that period expresses his joy at 're-discovering' music.

---

<sup>37</sup> Jean-Michel Nectoux, *The correspondence of Camille Saint-Saëns and Gabriel Fauré: sixty years of friendship* (Ashgate 2004), Letter no.109.

<sup>38</sup> Debussy to Godet, 4 February 1916. *Debussy Letters*, 314.

<sup>39</sup> Romain Rolland, *Musiciens d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Hachette et Cie, 1908), 272.

<sup>40</sup> Debussy, Emma and Chou-Chou stayed at a friend's villa from July 12 to October 12, which he nicknamed 'Mon coin'.

<sup>41</sup> Debussy to Bernardo Molinari, friend and conductor, 6 October 1915. In Lesure, *Claude Debussy*, 391. (my translation).

The decision to compose for the cello in wartime was not unique to Debussy: his was the first of four cello sonatas from that period - or five, if one includes that for violin and cello which Ravel undertook as his homage to Debussy after the armistice.<sup>42</sup> Surprisingly - and without prejudice to the efforts of Albéric Magnard from 1908 and Louis Vierne from 1911 - it was also the first major work for those instruments since the sonata from 1872 by Camille Saint-Saëns. In another unlikely 'meeting of minds', this too had been the instrumentation of choice in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war; coincidentally, both men were also mourning the loss of a close relative.<sup>43</sup> The low range of the cello may have been entirely suited to the brooding character of the former, but Debussy was keen to eschew any sense of convention. His was a refreshingly atypical work, eliciting short flights of fancy and playful *pizzicati* rather than the long lyrical phrases generally associated with that instrument. Once again, morbidity made a cameo appearance in the Prelude and the Finale; the middle movement, 'Sérénade', bears the hallmark of another stylish and mischievous Pierrot. Once again, Debussy appropriated the main elements of the nationalistic canon, giving it a highly stylised and personal twist, and at the same time maintaining his reputation as foremost *avant-gardiste*. Miraculously, this tour-de-force was repeated in the twelve *Études* for piano, which took their cellular idea from his own *Clair de lune* from the early 1890s (thus establishing a clear lineage with his earlier works, with those of Chopin, and with the Baroque masterpieces of "nos" vieux maîtres clavecinistes' as he called them in his foreword to the Durand edition)<sup>44</sup> and again in the second of the *Six Sonates pour divers instruments*, scored for flute, viola and harp, which he also signed 'Claude Debussy, musicien français'. Both these works display the same authoritative handling of this highly complex integration of seemingly contradictory elements - the miracle being the complete concealment of any agenda, be it artistic, personal or patriotic.

Conscious of the enormity of the task, and weakened by the growing cancer that hindered his every move, Debussy worked himself to the bone up until his return to Paris in October. To all intent and purpose, the holiday had given him the vital energy to not only carry out his ambitious plan, but to reconnect with the spirit of his youth - something he alluded to when comparing the sound of his latest sonata with his *Nocturnes* for orchestra from a now distant past. In his own poignant words,

I've been staying by the sea in a place which bemoans its lack of cosmopolitan brilliance (...). There I rediscovered my ability to think in music, which I'd lost for a year ... Not that my writing is indispensable but it's the only thing I know how to do, more or less well, and I confess its disappearance made me miserable ... Anyway, I've been writing like a madman, or a man condemned to die the next morning. Certainly I have not forgotten the war during these three months ... indeed I've come to see the horrible necessity of it. I realised there was no point in adding myself to the number of wounded and, all in all, it was cowardly just to think about the atrocities that had been committed without doing anything in return; by re-fashioning, as far as my strength allowed me, a little of the beauty these 'men' are destroying, with a meticulous brutality that is unmistakably *Made in Germany*.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> The others are: from 1916, the *Sonata* by English-born but French resident Frederick Delius (written in London shortly after his departure from Paris); the *Sonata Op.66* by Charles Koechlin, a student of Fauré and friend of Ravel; from 1917, Fauré's own *Sonata Op.109 in D minor*, the second of his wartime sonatas (after the *Violin Sonata Op.108*).

<sup>43</sup> Debussy's mother, Victorian Debussy, passed away in March 1915; Saint-Saëns's aunt Charlotte Masson, to whom he owed his musical education and spiritual guidance, died the year he wrote both the *Cello Sonata in C minor Op.32* and the *Cello in A minor Op.33*.

<sup>44</sup> Debussy alluded to Rameau whose revival had been instigated by the composer Albéric Magnard in 1894 and supported by Durand (publisher), Busser (editor), Malherbe (texts) and Saint-Saëns (keyboard expert) from 1895; he also admired François Couperin's poetic finesse and that of Daquin, Chambonnières, Lully, Destouches and Dandrieu.

<sup>45</sup> Debussy to Godet, 14 October 1915. *Debussy Letters*, 305.

The last outpourings from that prodigal year were two more occasional pieces, composed with the same dispassionate spirit as the *Berceuse Héroïque* and almost a year to the day, The *Elégie* for piano was destined for another prestigious collection of accolades, this time in honour of British Queen Alexandra: *Pages inédites sur la femme et la guerre*, for the benefit of orphans of the war in France. Children were again the inspiration for his last work from 1915, *Le Noël des enfants qui n'ont plus de maison* for soprano and piano, whose 'soapbox' success later caused him some irritation. Following medical examination by his doctors at the end of November, an operation which he feared might be his last finally ended this prodigious run of creativity, all the more heroic since it was undertaken by a man so disinterested in heroism.<sup>46</sup> Despite constant pain, Debussy struggled through the completion of a third sonata in 1916, that for violin and piano, which was less a testimonial to French musical heritage than a painful evocation of his hopeless predicament. It would be his last published work.

If his mission was, with genuine modesty and just a trace of affectation, to forge a lasting link to what he had considered his essential musical inheritance (French or otherwise), the quality of his labour was such that, much more pertinently, Claude Debussy's 'Great War' of 1915 came to probe not so much into the past as to advance into the future of French music. For at no other point of that nation's history did a voice so singularly capture the dichotomy of the French character, its passionate egocentricity and its insatiable curiosity.

---

<sup>46</sup> The operation was one of the very first colostomies ever attempted and it was only partially successful. The composer complained of 'suffering like a condemned man!' a few weeks later. See *Debussy Letters*, 310.