

28 Claude Debussy

Claude Debussy (1862–1918) is considered by many the most important composer of the early twentieth century in establishing an esthetic orientation independent of Romanticism. Employed as a writer and critic throughout much of his career, Debussy actively espoused the need for widespread renewal in music. The first of these three pieces, dating from 1902, responds to a question posed in the first issue of a new periodical, *Musica*: “Is it possible to predict where the music of tomorrow will be?” The second and third, both written in 1913 for a prominent French music journal, *La revue musicale S.I.M.*, cover a broad spectrum of ideas. Collectively, these writings articulate many of Debussy’s principal esthetic positions: that traditional training leads to standardization; that music should not slavishly imitate nature but evoke its fluidity, freedom, and mystery; that composers should adopt innovative approaches, such as techniques borrowed from cinematography; and that they should seek inspiration in music by earlier composers, such as François Couperin, and in music beyond the Western tradition, such as that of Java and Indochina.

Three Articles for Music Journals

[I]
(1902)

The best thing one could wish for French music would be to see the study of harmony abolished as it is practiced in the conservatories. It is the most ridiculous way of arranging notes. Furthermore, it has the severe disadvantage of standardizing composition to such a degree that every composer, except for a few, harmonizes in the same way. We can be sure that old Bach, the essence of all music, scorned harmonic formulae. He preferred the free play of sonorities whose curves, whether flowing in parallel or contrary motion, would result in an undreamed of flowering, so that even the least of his countless manuscripts bears an indelible stamp of beauty.

That was the age of the “wonderful arabesque,” when music was subject to laws of beauty inscribed in the movements of Nature herself. Rather will our time be remembered as the era of the “age of veneer”—although here I am speaking generally and not forgetting the isolated genius of certain of my colleagues.

Contemporary dramatic music, however, embraces everything from Wagnerian metaphysics to the trivialities of the Italians—not a particularly French orientation. Perhaps in the end we will see the light and achieve conciseness of expression and form (the fundamental qualities of French genius). Will we

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rediscover that abundant fantasy of which music alone is capable? It seems to have been forgotten under the pretext of research, which at first sight makes it seem as if the days of music are numbered.

Art is the most beautiful deception of all! And although people try to incorporate the everyday events of life in it, we must hope that it will remain a deception lest it become a utilitarian thing, sad as a factory. Ordinary people, as well as the élite, come to music to seek oblivion: is that not also a form of deception? The Mona Lisa's smile probably never existed in real life, yet her charm is eternal. Let us not disillusion anyone by bringing too much reality into the dream. . . . Let us content ourselves with more consoling ways: such music can contain an everlasting expression of beauty.

[II]
(1913)

Our symphonic painters do not pay nearly enough attention to the beauty of the seasons. Their studies of Nature show her dressed in unpleasantly artificial clothes, the rocks made of cardboard and the leaves of painted gauze. Music is the art that is in fact the closest to Nature, although it is also the one that contains the most subtle pitfalls. Despite their claims to be true representation-ists, the painters and sculptors can only present us with the beauty of the universe in their own free, somewhat fragmentary interpretation. They can capture only one of its aspects at a time, preserve only one moment. It is the musicians alone who have the privilege of being able to convey all the poetry of night and day, of earth and sky. Only they can re-create Nature's atmosphere and give rhythm to her heaving breast. . . . We know that it is a privilege they do not abuse. It is a rare thing when Nature wrings from them one of those sincere love cries of the kind that make certain pages of *Der Freischütz* so wonderful; usually her passion is somewhat tamed because they portray her green beauty in such a lifeless way. It comes out like pressed leaves festering in dreary old books. Berlioz made do with such an approach all his life; otherwise sweet delights were soured because he insisted on patronizing artificial flower shops.

The music of our time has learned how to free itself from the romantic fancies of this literary view of things, but other weaknesses remain. During the past few years we have seen it tending toward an indulgence in the mechanical harshness of certain combinations of landscape. We can certainly do without the naïve aesthetics of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but all the same we can learn great things from the past. We should think about the example Couperin's harpsichord pieces set us: they are marvelous models of grace and innocence long past. Nothing could ever make us forget the subtly voluptuous perfume, so delicately perverse, that so innocently hovers over the *Barricades mystérieuses*.

Let us be frank: those who really know the art of expressing themselves symphonically are those who have never learned how to do it. There is no conservatoire or music school that holds the secret. The theater offers a happy

alternative, however, in its resources of gesture, dramatic cries, and movements; they come to the aid of many a perplexed musician. Pure music offers no such easy way out: one should either have a natural gift for evocation or give up the struggle. And in any case, where did the symphonic music of our country come from? Who are those ancestors who urge us toward this form of expression? . . . First of all, our musicians willingly allowed themselves to be inspired by the symphonic poems of Liszt and of Richard Strauss. And note, furthermore, that any attempts at emancipation were soon forcibly quelled. Each time anyone tried to break free from this inherited tradition he was brought to order, crushed beneath the weight of the more illustrious examples. Beethoven—who ought really be permitted to take a well-earned rest from criticism—was brought to the rescue. Those severe old critics passed judgment and threatened terrible punishments for breach of the classical rules whose construction—they should have realized—was nothing less than mechanical. Did they not realize that no one could ever go further than Bach, one of their judges, toward freedom and fantasy in both composition and form?

Why, furthermore, did they not so much as try to understand that it really would not be worthwhile having so many centuries of music behind us, having benefited from the magnificent intellectual heritage it has bequeathed us, and trying childishly to rewrite history? Is it not our duty, on the contrary, to try and find the symphonic formulae best suited to the audacious discoveries of our modern times, so committed to progress? The century of aeroplanes has a right to a music of its own. Let those who support our art not be left to waste away in the lowest ranks of our army of inventors, let them not be outdone by the genius of engineers!

Dramatic music is also directly involved in this change in symphonic ideals; its fate is governed by that of pure music. If it is suffering at the moment it is because it has wrongly interpreted the Wagnerian ideal and tried to find in it a formula. Such a formula could never be in tune with the French spirit. Wagner was not a good teacher of French.

Let us purify our music! Let us try to relieve its congestion, to find a less cluttered kind of music. And let us be careful that we do not stifle all feeling beneath a mass of superimposed designs and motives: how can we hope to preserve our finesse, our spirit, if we insist on being preoccupied with so many details of composition? We are attempting the impossible in trying to organize a braying pack of tiny themes, all pushing and jostling each other for the sake of a bite out of the poor old sentiment! If they are not careful the sentiment will depart altogether, in an attempt to save its skin. As a general rule, every time someone tries to complicate an art form or a sentiment, it is simply because they are unsure of what they want to say.

But we must first understand that our fellow countrymen have no love of music. Composers are therefore discouraged from doing battle or starting afresh. Music is simply not liked in France; if you doubt this, just listen to the tone in which the critics speak of her. How obvious it is that they feel no love for her at all! They always seem to be taking it out on the poor unfortunate

creature, assuaging some nasty deep-seated hatred. Such a feeling is not peculiar to our own time. Beauty has always been taken by some as a secret insult. People instinctively feel they need to take their revenge on her, defiling the ideal that humiliates them. We should be grateful to those few critics who do not hate her: for the scrupulous severity of Sainte-Beuve, who himself cared passionately for literature, and for Baudelaire, who was not only a critic with a unique understanding but a fine artist as well.

There remains but one way of reviving the taste for symphonic music among our contemporaries: to apply to pure music the techniques of cinematography. It is the film—the Ariadne's thread—that will show us the way out of this disquieting labyrinth. M. Léon Moreau and Henry Février have just supplied the proof of this with great success.¹ Those hordes of listeners who find themselves bored stiff by a performance of a Bach *Passion*, or even Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, would find themselves brought to attention if the screen were to take pity on their distress. One could even provide a film of what the composer was doing while composing the piece.

How many misunderstandings would thus be avoided! The spectator is not always to be blamed for his mistakes! He cannot always prepare for each new piece he listens to as if he were engaged on a piece of research, for the normal routine of an ordinary citizen is not well suited to include matters of aesthetics. In this way the author would no longer be betrayed; we would be free from any false interpretations. At last we would know the truth with certainty—the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth!

Unfortunately we are too set in our ways. We are reluctant to renounce the boring! On we go in the same old way, imitating one another.

What a pity Mozart was not French. He would have really been worth imitating!

[III]
(1913)

In these times, when we are so preoccupied with trying out various different ways of educating people, we are gradually losing our sense of the mysterious. The true meaning of the word "taste" is also bound to be lost.

In the last century, having "taste" was merely a convenient way of defending one's opinions. Today the word has come to mean much more than that: it is now used in many different ways. It generally signifies something that involves the kind of argument usually settled with knuckle-dusters; one makes one's point, but in a way somewhat lacking in elegance. The natural decline of a "taste" concerned with nuance and delicacy has given way to this "bad taste," in which colors and forms fight each other. . . . But then perhaps these reflections are rather too general, for here I am only supposed to be concerned with music—a difficult enough task in itself.

1. Debussy refers to a film directed by Louis Feuillade, *L'Agonie de Byzance*. [Tr.]

Geniuses can evidently do without taste: take the case of Beethoven, for example. But on the other hand there was Mozart, to whose genius was added a measure of the most delicate "good taste." And if we look at the works of J. S. Bach—a benevolent God to whom all musicians should offer a prayer before commencing work, to defend themselves from mediocrity—on each new page of his innumerable works we discover things we thought were born only yesterday—from delightful arabesques to an overflowing of religious feeling greater than anything we have since discovered. And in his works we will search in vain for anything the least lacking in "good taste."

Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* speaks of a music that everyone has within them: "The man that hath no music in himself . . . let no such man be trusted." Those people who are only preoccupied with the formula that will yield them the best results, without ever having listened to the still small voice of music within themselves, would do well to think on these words. And so would those who most ingeniously juggle around with bars, as if they were no more than pathetic little squares of paper. That is the kind of music that smells of the writing desk, or of carpet slippers. (I mean that in the special sense used by mechanics who, when trying out a badly assembled machine, say, "That smells of oil.") We should distrust the *writing* of music: it is an occupation for moles, and it ends up by reducing the vibrant beauty of sound itself to a dreadful system where two and two make four. Music has known for a long time what the mathematicians call "the folly of numbers."

Above all, let us beware of systems that are designed as dilettante traps.

There used to be—indeed, despite the troubles that civilization has brought, there still are—some wonderful peoples who learn music as easily as one learns to breathe. Their school consists of the eternal rhythm of the sea, the wind in the leaves, and a thousand other tiny noises, which they listen to with great care, without ever having consulted any of those dubious treatises. Their traditions are preserved only in ancient songs, sometimes involving dance, to which each individual adds his own contribution century by century. Thus Javanese music obeys laws of counterpoint that make Palestrina seem like child's play. And if one listens to it without being prejudiced by one's European ears, one will find a percussive charm that forces one to admit that our own music is not much more than a barbarous kind of noise more fit for a traveling circus.

The Indochinese have a kind of embryonic opera, influenced by the Chinese, in which we can recognize the roots of the *Ring*. Only there are rather more gods and rather less scenery! A frenetic little clarinet is in charge of the emotional effects, a tam-tam invokes terror—and that is all there is to it. No special theater is required, and no hidden orchestra. All that is needed is an instinctive desire for the artistic, a desire that is satisfied in the most ingenious ways and without the slightest hints of "bad taste." And to say that none of those concerned ever so much as dreamed of going to Munich to find their formulae—what could they have been thinking of?

Was it not the professionals who spoiled the civilized countries? And the

accusation that the public likes only simple music (implying bad music)—is that not somewhat misguided?

The truth is that real music is never “difficult.” That is merely an umbrella term that is used to hide the poverty of bad music. There is only one kind of music: music whose claim to existence is justified by what it actually is, whether it is just another piece in waltz time (for example, the music of the *café-concert*) or whether it takes the imposing form of the symphony. Why do we not admit that, of these two cases, it is very often the waltz that is in better taste? The symphony can often only be unraveled with great difficulty—a pompous web of mediocrity.

Let us not persist in exalting this commonplace invention, as stupid as it is famous: taste and color should be beyond mention. On the other hand, let us discuss, rediscover our own taste; it is not as if we have completely lost it, but we have stifled it beneath our northern eiderdowns. That would be a step forward in the fight against the barbarians, who have become much worse since they started parting their hair in the center. . . .

We should constantly be reminding ourselves that the beauty of a work of art is something that will always remain mysterious; that is to say one can never find out exactly “how it is done.” At all costs let us preserve this element of magic peculiar to music. By its very nature music is more likely to contain something of the magical than any other art.

After the god Pan had put together the seven pipes of the syrinx, he was at first only able to imitate the long, melancholy note of the toad wailing in the moonlight. Later he was able to compete with the singing of the birds, and it was probably at this time that the birds increased their repertoire.

These are sacred enough origins, and music can be proud of them and preserve a part of their mystery. In the name of all the gods, let us not rid it of this heritage by trying to “explain” it. . . . Let it be enhanced by delicately preserving our “good taste,” the guardian of all that is secret.

29 Béla Bartók

In addition to being a leading composer of the first half of the twentieth century, Béla Bartók (1881–1945) was a pioneer in the study of folk music, helping establish the discipline now known as ethnomusicology. The two aspects of his professional life were intimately connected, as Bartók drew upon his knowledge of native music for both technical and expressive enrichment of his own work. In the following two articles, Bartók considers relationships between folk music and twentieth-century concert music. In the first, dating from 1931, he discusses

the use of folk music as an aid to breaking away from traditional musical conceptions and the different ways such music can be incorporated into contemporary works: through quotation, imitation, or—most ideally—total stylistic absorption. In the second, written a decade earlier, Bartók expresses his disdain for the use of folk materials merely to provide an “exotic” effect—covering the surface of a traditional substance with “foreign” color—thus destroying the essential nature of the borrowed materials.

FROM Two Articles on the Influence of Folk Music

THE INFLUENCE OF PEASANT MUSIC ON MODERN MUSIC (1931)

There have always been folk music influences on the higher types of art music. In order not to go back too far into hardly known ages, let us begin by referring to the pastorals and musettes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which are nothing but copies of the folk music of that time performed on the bagpipe or the hurdy-gurdy.

It is a well-known fact the Viennese classical composers were influenced to a considerable extent by folk music. In Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony, for instance, the main motive of the first movement is a Yugoslav dance melody. Beethoven obviously heard this theme from bagpipers, perhaps even in Western Hungary; the *ostinato*-like repetition of one of the measures, at the beginning of the movement, points to such an association.

But it was only a number of so-called “national” composers who yielded deliberately and methodically to folk music influences, such as Liszt (Hungarian Rhapsodies) and Chopin (Polonaises and other works with Polish characteristics). Grieg, Smetana, Dvořák, and the late nineteenth-century composers continued in that vein, stressing even more distinctly the racial character in their works. In fact, Moussorgsky is the only composer among the latter to yield completely and exclusively to the influence of peasant music, thereby forestalling his age—as it is said. For it seems that the popular art music of the eastern and northern countries provided enough impulse to the other “blatantly nationalistic” composers of the nineteenth century, with very few exceptions. There is no doubt that such music also contained quite a number of peculiarities missing till then in the higher types of Western art music, but it was mixed—as I have said previously—with Western hackneyed patterns and Romantic sentimentality.

TEXT: *Béla Bartók Essays*, ed. by Benjamin Suchoff (London: Faber & Faber, 1976), pp. 322–23, 340–44. Reprinted by permission of Faber & Faber Ltd. and the University of Nebraska Press.