

contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Wintle, Christopher. 1981. 'Review of *Debussy and Wagner* by Robin Holloway'. *Contact*, 22. pp. 26-27. ISSN 0308-5066.

DEBUSSY AND WAGNER by Robin Holloway
Eulenberg, 1979

CHRISTOPHER WINTLE

Robin Holloway's study of the relationship between Wagner's music and Debussy's really comprises two books: an academic thesis on the one hand, and a personal, precompositional manifesto on the other. The second emerges most powerfully as he draws conclusions from the first, and its presence accounts not only for the highly selective, and even tendentious, approach to his materials, but also for the high degree of commitment which he brings to the undertaking as a whole. It is a curious book, but a remarkable one: impeccably literate (what other composer has ever written with this elegance?), fascinating in its methodology, and topical in its concern with the question of musical inheritance. It also provides a key to the mentality that governs Holloway's own fertile, allusive music.

Strangely, the declared subject of the book is its least novel feature. Debussy's work, Holloway reminds us, is parasitic upon three of Wagner's later music dramas: *Tristan, Parsifal* and, to a lesser extent, *Götterdämmerung*. This dependence can be traced throughout Debussy's life: it first became apparent in *La damoiselle élue* and the Baudelaire songs, emerged centrally in *Pelléas et Mélisande*, receded for a decade or so, only to surface again in two late stage works, *Le martyre de Saint Sébastien* and *Jeux*. Yet, Holloway argues, however deep this dependence may be, it is not a straightforward one, for Debussy's music appears to derive its individuality from denying the power of exactly that which it loves in Wagner.

To unravel the complexity of this proposition, Holloway unfolds his argument in stages. He begins by identifying, through simple comparative analysis, the self-evident musical echoes of Wagner in Debussy. He then suggests that these allusive fragments discharge into their new contexts essentially the same meanings that they embodied in their old ones. This provides the occasion for comparing the sensibilities of the two composers, which he does from a primarily literary point of view. The strikingly complementary contrasts that emerge lead to a depiction of Debussy's music in terms that also define the differences between French and German cultures at the turn of the century. The reserve, discretion, good manners, etiolation and so forth in Debussy's music mirror the opposite characteristics in Wagner's. These two oppositions – Debussy to Wagner, France to Germany – are finally interpreted in relation to the model of the father-son complex, according to which the son shows his greatest love through his most profound and sustained opposition. This Holloway sees epitomised in the attitudes of the two composers to the Tristan chord. What for Wagner represented the yearning for a life-enhancing eroticism became for Debussy a symbol of all that is 'repressive, inhibitory, harsh and claustrophobic'. (How interesting it is that 30 years later it meant the same thing in Act 3 of Berg's *Lulu!*).

How accurate is this picture of Debussy? To answer this question it is first necessary to ask another: what kind of self-portrait is Holloway presenting in the second of the books he is writing here?

In the reaction against Wagner that he imputes to Debussy, Holloway has drawn upon the comparable reactions of the turn-of-the-century literary world, and has discovered his own creative persona through them. The Debussy/Maeterlinck sexuality that depicts 'human loneliness, lack of connection... in the end a frigid nihilism' is E. M. Forster's. The erotic which 'lingers on the fantasy rather than on the act of love, then lingers in nostalgia for its own velleity' is the creation of a Huysmans decadent. The dreamer whose wan, enervate chastity argues a craven absorption with sensuality is a poet of the Celtic Twilight betraying his Pre-Raphaelite ancestry.

The same is true of Holloway's critical models. The interpretation of musical energy in terms of sexual intumescence and detumescence derives from Freud, not from Adler or Jung. The significance he attaches analytically to short musical fragments recalls not only Nietzsche (who saw in Wagner's oeuvre 'a host of short fragments from five to fifteen bars each': *The Case of Wagner*) but also Eliot ('These fragments I have shored against my ruins': *The Waste Land*). He is a critic in the line of Tovey, considering that the 'bloom' of music is 'inexplicable to analysis', and that 'the unutterable will be – unutterably – contained in what has been uttered'. And his appraisal of Wagner has all the introverted fervour of a Lawrence: 'in *Tristan* the external world doesn't count' (it does, of course, for Wagner resolves the inner/outer life dichotomy by – as usual – having his cake and eating it: Tristan and Isolde are united in the next life, and not in this).

But to defend a brave old world is not necessarily to carry a stigma. Holloway's sympathy with the turn-of-the-century culture leads to fruitful insights, just as, in his composition, it ensures a continuity with a tradition that others have been too anxious to renounce. He is very good when discussing librettos. He is right to insist upon the centrality of the *Jeux* scenario. He extends our idea of opera theory by proposing Debussy as a kind of *Wunschkind*, transforming opera into the drama that Wagner envisaged but never achieved. He articulates vividly the new, frenzied sexuality of Golaud's music. And he uncovers with great sensitivity the Wagnerian sources of Debussy's fragments (especially in *Pelléas*, Act 2, first prelude), only rarely lapsing into the factitious (Chapter VII, for example, Examples 1a, 1b). Indeed, the book's central theme highlights the shift in hermeneutic practice between the 18th and 19th centuries, as a universal system of conventionalised *Affekten* yielded to a universal obsession with the idiosyncrasies of a single composer – Wagner.

On the other hand, the book's problems arise from the circumscriptions inherent in the same critical approach. The ramifications of Debussy's indebtedness to Wagner are far greater than Holloway suggests here. It has nothing to do with the range of the echoes, which extends into the nature music, as well as to the Sirenes, Syrinxes, and Little Shepherds. Rather it concerns the nature of Debussy's musical language, which, along with that of Strauss, Schoenberg and Berg, responded deeply and permanently to traits found pre-eminently in Wagner.

Holloway describes, for example, the first simultaneity of *L'après-midi d'un faune*, a minor triad with an added sixth, quite accurately as a version of the Tristan chord. There is ample precedent for this in Wagner, notably Brangäne's tender, coaxing (but not, surely, 'narcissistic') 'Wo lebte der Mann' (Act 2 scene 3). The ambiguities of the whole opening passage, so often discussed, derive from this chord: the ambivalence of the tonic (C sharp minor/E major), and the suggestion of other, controlling formations (diminished seventh, whole-tone scale) that come to the fore later in the piece. But this framework of ambiguity – so much more complex than the relatively straightforward ambivalences of Brahms – persists even into those pieces whose surface is apparently quintessentially French, and which are excluded from Holloway's canon of 'Wagnerian' works. A case in point is the tenth of the late piano Etudes, 'Pour les sonorités opposées'. The ambiguous tonality is achieved by the infiltration of the prevailing C sharp minor/major by F minor/major in each section; the Tristan chord is used as a recurring pivotal harmony. This is Debussy's music at its most mature. At every level, the Wagnerian influence has been digested, absorbed, and surpassed.

Indeed, Holloway generally is elusive on the subject of tonality. He pays lip service to the symphonic logic of the Austro-German tradition, without pursuing the issue into the music of Wagner and Debussy, and without mentioning any of the relevant literature (Lorenz's *Tristan* of 1926, for example): 'Wagner's leitmotifs are his musical material, just as Beethoven in the first movement of the IXth Symphony had his material, which they both proceed, in their respective contexts, to develop. Wagner's context is, naturally, the development of the drama, and does not follow a scheme of tonal ratiocination.' Of course, parts of *Tristan* are difficult to encompass within a larger tonal framework. But other parts – and not only of *Tristan* – are not: Act 1, for example, is referenced throughout on C minor which cedes to C major with the arrival of King Mark.

The reasons for evading these issues are not hard to discern. To highlight the importance to his thesis of the Debussian borrowings, Holloway draws parallels with Musorgsky's 'prosody opera', and with 'moment form' (a derivation from Boulez's writings on Debussy). Both these

celebrate the concrete musical utterance at the expense of the less immediately apparent large-scale schema. This has been one theme of his writings about composition generally. Similarly, he has preferred to defend his own obscure, uncertain syntaxes in the face of some of the more straightforward certainties (particularly of twelve-note theory) thrown up in recent times. For all this, however it is still the case that he has not addressed himself to the richer proposition, that Debussy, especially in his instrumental works, is master of the larger breath, and a direct heir to the German techniques of prolongation.

It is his conclusions, though, that reveal the extent of Holloway's private, compositional involvement with the thesis. Debussy is presented as a proto-Stravinskian kleptomaniac, a magpie filching what he loves in Wagner in order to preserve and bury it in his own work. What appears in Debussy as - surely! - the common vice of unassimilated influence becomes in Holloway the principal virtue, as his various indebtednesses to Schumann, Schoenberg, Brahms, Debussy, Wagner and so many others testify. Holloway still retains the attitude of the early-20th-century modernist, caught in the spell of Wagner, searching for the path that will lead him away from Bayreuth. Debussy's father-son complex is in part also his own (and, more locally, is reflected in some recent remarks for and against his own teacher, Alexander Goehr). The eventual appearance, therefore, of his opera *Clairissa* will inevitably send critics back to this book as the most extended exposition of an attitude to composition that places music in its widest and most humane context. It also represents a stimulating and imaginative addition to Debussy scholarship.

The first two chapters, on Debussy's early work and on his relationship with Wagner, are particularly well written. The author's knowledge of Debussy's music is evident throughout, and his analysis of the composer's style is both clear and convincing. The book is a valuable contribution to the study of Debussy and his place in the history of music.

The first two chapters, on Debussy's early work and on his relationship with Wagner, are particularly well written. The author's knowledge of Debussy's music is evident throughout, and his analysis of the composer's style is both clear and convincing. The book is a valuable contribution to the study of Debussy and his place in the history of music.