

## 11 *Entering the Last Style*

### Debussy's *Poème dansé: Jeux*

We have seen in our lifetimes a reversal of critical taste over the late works of Debussy. Now we understand that in his last years Debussy was not continuing to do what he had always done only somewhat less well: but rather that he was trying to do something different – and that sickness and death simply interrupted him. For forty years the work which stands at the entrance to this last period lay under a cloud of obscurity: an early book by an eminent Debussy specialist was written in a manner such as to suggest that the writer had never heard a live performance of *Jeux* – or certainly never evaluated it.

So rightly distinguished a place in Debussy's work is now held by the score of *Jeux* that it seems almost a paradox that it was very much a child of necessity. Debussy's cancer was diagnosed in 1909, when he was 47: his second wife, Emma Bardac, had been disinherited upon her marriage to him. Debussy was burdened with both debt and illness: he dragged himself round Europe on conducting engagements: he had no talent for conducting. He wished to complete his Poe opera *The Fall of the House of Usher*: instead he found himself collaborating with the egregious d'Annunzio in *Le martyre de St. Sébastien* (produced on 22 May 1911) and – further *descensus averno* in the composer's view – with 'la girl anglaise' Maud Allan on *Khamma* (first version February 1912, second version completed 1913).

More positively, these are also the years of the First (1910) and Second (1913) books of *Préludes*: and of these latter '... *Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses*' is the closest relative of *Jeux*. And two new, interconnected stimuli appeared in these years. Diaghilev – with whom, on his first appearance, Debussy promptly quarrelled in 1909 – and his Russian Ballet: and, in particular, the young genius of Igor Stravinsky, whose *Firebird* première in 1910 Debussy had greeted with some reserve, but whose *Petrouchka* (1911) had certainly impressed him.

Diaghilev now wanted to make a ballet out of *L'après-midi d'un faune*: Nijinsky was to make his début as a choreographer, albeit a Nijinsky schooled in the methods of Dalcroze (the Eurhythmics man) for whose theories Diaghilev had a current and disastrous enthusiasm. Debussy acceded, without enthusiasm and without more than a minimum of cooperation: the ballet version (première on 29 May 1912) was a success because it was a scandal – and this suited Diaghilev. It did not suit Debussy.

So the omens for their next collaboration were hardly propitious. How, then, did it come about? Debussy gives the best account in a letter to *Le Matin* of 15 May 1913:

Why then did I launch myself, being by nature reserved, into an undertaking of which one simply does not know the outcome? Because at

lunchtime one has to eat, and because one day I happened to lunch with Serge Diaghilev, a terrifying but irresistible man ...

This lunch was (as lunches tend to be) the outcome of a previous lunch, between Diaghilev, Nijinsky, Bakst and Jacques-Emile Blanche, the painter, at the Savoy Hotel (why the Savoy?). Nijinsky's original scenario, according to Blanche, ran:

There should be no *corps de ballet*, no ensembles, no variations, no *pas de deux*, only boys and girls in flannels and rhythmic movements. A group at a certain stage was to depict a fountain, and a game of tennis was to be interrupted by the crashing of an aeroplane.

Debussy found this (as well he might) silly; Diaghilev doubled his fee; the fountain and the aeroplane episode disappeared. So:

The scene is a garden at dusk; a tennis ball has been lost; a young man and two girls are searching for it. The artificial light of the large electric lamps shedding fantastic rays about them suggests the idea of childish games: they play hide and seek, they try to catch one another, they quarrel, they sulk without cause. The night is warm, the sky is bathed in a pale light; they embrace. But the spell is broken by another tennis ball thrown in mischievously by an unknown hand. Surprised and alarmed, the young man and the girls disappear into the nocturnal depths of the garden.

Now we are close not only to the final scenario but also to the essential atmosphere of the score. Tennis was an English game in an era when Proust's heroines used the occasional English words to show how smart they were: tennis clothes, rather than *tutus*, not to mention the electric lamps (they disappeared too), were daringly up-to-date. This 'plastic vindication of the man of 1913' was *à la page* in every detail, and so has dated accordingly with equivalent speed – though we have perhaps now come round to the point where there is a certain fascination with the *chic* on the edge of the abyss. In any case, the ballet originally possessed an even more premature trendiness: as Nijinsky in his (not so entirely mad) journal points out, Diaghilev would have preferred the characters to have been three boys. However,

Debussy did not like the subject either, but he was paid 10,000 gold francs for this ballet and therefore had to finish it.

So Debussy pulled himself out of a bad depression in July 1912, and in the first three weeks of August wrote the 700 bars of this enchanted score. Ending it was

a problem, as a whole series of concluding dates show – the last of which was 2 September. Wryly he wrote of his obvious embarrassment: the end was

very difficult to get right, for the music has to convey a rather risqué situation. But of course, in a ballet, any hint of immorality escapes through the feet of the danseuse and ends in a pirouette.

And he was, after all, quite pleased:

How was I able to forget the cares of this world, and manage to write music that is nevertheless joyous and alive with droll rhythms? Nature, so absurdly harsh, sometimes takes pity, it seems, on her children.

The first performance was on 15 May 1913 – it started the Russian ballet season. Debussy disliked Nijinsky's choreography so much ('The man adds up demisemiquavers with his feet, and proves the results with his arms ... it is ugly; Dalcrozian in fact') that he left in the middle to smoke a cigarette at the stage door. And in any case, any hostility or acclamation that the ballet provoked was to be drowned within a fortnight by a new sensation: 29 May 1913 was the date of the première of *Le sacre du printemps*.

On 1 March 1914 *Jeux*, conducted by Gabriel Pierné, was played in the surroundings which have proved to be its more natural home – the concert hall: but not to any more conspicuous success than the mixed reception which had greeted its première as a ballet. Two revivals as a ballet in 1920 and 1923 – and then a long oblivion. It came back into the concert repertoire in the late 1950s, when trendy conductors would tend to play it without expression, or phrasing, and rather too fast.

Was it influenced by Stravinsky? The latter, always a dab hand at limiting judgements on his contemporaries, especially senior ones, claimed not only to be in close contact with Debussy during the composition of the piece, but also that the 50-year-old master had 'frequently consulted me about problems of orchestration' – which seems a bit unnecessary on Debussy's side. Stravinsky goes on rather grandly: 'I still consider *Jeux* as an *orchestral* masterpiece [it must have been that helping hand], though I think some of the music is "trop Laliqne"'. In a footnote to *Memories and Commentaries* (p.122) he gives a more measured, if still self-centred, judgement.

The eternal triangle of the plot turns out to be quite simple and inoffensive, as some copies of the score which exactly chart each choreographic move of the action will readily prove. The gesture that is most unequivocally translated into music is that of the mysterious tennis ball falling on to the scene: a marvellous Debussyian C major triad bounding high with an added sixth, some 70 bars into the score – and then, with perfect symmetry, again some 20 bars before the end

of the work. The tennis metaphor has been amusingly taken further by a recent writer on Debussy, Roger Nicholls:

a vulgar forehand drive from the string section is deftly turned by a mysterious lob from the solo flute.

But it is really as a piece of absolute music that we can most usefully approach *Jeux*. The originality of its formal structure may be derived in the first instance from the stage action, but it creates something absolutely new. To call it an 'on-going associative form' (Eric Salzman) is really to duck the problem. Herbert Eimert, in an analysis surprisingly musical for a contribution to *Die Reihe*, sees *Jeux* as variations, but not the 'administrative sort' that Debussy despised so heartily (as Lockspeiser points out) – but the perpetual variation that would serve to link it, for Eimert anyway, with the work of the Viennese masters contemporary with it. Eventually Eimert finds a recurrence of a dominating motif, with its variants, in an endlessly unrolling rondo-like structure.

If Debussy undertook this commission because he had to, if he felt an abiding distaste for the story-line, then there is certainly no trace of this in the music. Few historical images could be more moving than that of this mortally ill and debt-ridden composer pouring so much of his reticent self into this score – and at the same time striding ahead into the imaginative future of music itself with that essentially instinctive tread which he trusted so daringly, so absolutely. The invention, delicacy, colour and power of instrumental thought, the ebb-and-flow of rising climax and retreat is masterful: and in the mounting tension of the final climax, when the latent waltz-tune emerges in full and is only dispelled after several pages of wild abandon, and the music recedes to the mysterious portico-like chords of the opening – there this great composer shows us as nowhere else that which lay under his fastidious temperament: the wish to evoke mystery and nostalgia, the delight in sound, rhythmic drive, and above all, passion.

Source: Programme book for the Promenade Concert held on 27 August 1977 at the Royal Albert Hall, London. Christopher Seaman conducted the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra in a programme that also included Brahms's *Academic Festival Overture*, Beethoven's Concerto in C major for violin, cello, piano and orchestra, and Tchaikovsky's *Fantasia after Dante: Francesca da Rimini*. The author wrote all the notes.