

## Prologue

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To the reader

Do you play 'The Girl with the Flaxen Hair'? Or the 'Golliwogg's Cake Walk'? If so, and that is all, then you could well think of Debussy as a minor talent, a gifted miniaturist. But even within these narrow confines more is going on than you might at first suppose. The central section of the 'Golliwogg' is a (more or less?) affectionate skit on Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*; while Leconte de Lisle's poem 'La fille aux cheveux de lin', which inspired Debussy's seemingly cool prelude, is itself very far from cool – 'I want', says the poet, 'to kiss the blond of your hair and press the purple of your lips.' For more than a century now, performers, writers and analysts have been peeling away the layers of the onion that is Debussy. I think it is some measure of his greatness that the more we peel, the more we find. Certainly, if you ever thought being a composer was an easy road, a harmless hobby, an irrelevance, an opt out from the serious things of life, I would ask you to read on . . .

## 1 Childhood and musical studies (1862–1884)

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Another man's soul is a thick forest in which one must walk with  
circumspection

(Claude Debussy)

To understand something of the France into which Achille-Claude Debussy was born on 22 August 1862, we need to go back a few years – say, to 2 December 1851, when Louis-Napoleon dissolved the French Assembly and seized power in a *coup d'état*. Thirty years after Napoleon Bonaparte's death, the family name still had the power to move and what became known as the Second Empire began with high hopes in many quarters, political, social and artistic.

The forty-eight-year-old Hector Berlioz greeted the *coup d'état* as a 'masterstroke', and a month later could enthuse to his sister that Louis-Napoleon was 'going from strength to strength, he is realizing all my dreams about the government. He is sublime in his reasoning, his logic, his steadfastness and his decisiveness.' At the same time he felt obliged to sound one slightly cautionary note: 'I'm certain that for all official ceremonies . . . he will always choose men of the Establishment, old men and old works.'<sup>1</sup>

As it turned out, Berlioz's caution was better justified than his enthusiasm. Almost exactly four years later, and with exception made for only four composers including Saint-Saëns and Gounod, he confessed that on the musical front he saw 'nothing but flies hovering

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above this stinking bog called Paris'.<sup>2</sup> A look at the operatic premieres in Paris that year (1856) lend this jaundiced view some support: Bottesini's *L'assedio di Firenze*, Auber's *Manon Lescaut*, Clapisson's *La fanchonnette*, Adam's *Les pantins de Violette*, Maillart's *Les dragons de Villars*, Bazin's *Maître Pathelin*, Massé's *La reine Topaze* – where are they now?

Things improved somewhat towards the end of the decade, as Gounod lived up to Berlioz's hopes for him with *Le médecin malgré lui* in 1858 and *Faust* the following year. But the temper of the times can be more accurately read in the other hit of the decade, Offenbach's *Orphée aux enfers* (Orpheus in the Underworld), which in 1858 ran at the Bouffes-Parisiens theatre for 227 consecutive nights. In this and subsequent works, Offenbach achieved a blend of catchy tunes and social satire that would not be matched until the Brecht/Weill collaborations of sixty years later. In that insidious way that music has, Offenbach's operettas began to render criticism of Louis-Napoleon's regime increasingly respectable, so that when Bismarck visited the 1867 Paris Universal Exhibition and was encouraged by the manifest evidence of France's corruption and complacency to consider his own 'cleaning-up' operation, his views, if not his solutions, were shared by many Frenchmen.

All in all, the decade into which Debussy was born must rate as one of the low points of French musical life. In 1861, *Tannhäuser* had been whistled off the stage of the Opéra after only three performances and a year later Berlioz, writing indeed the day before Debussy's birth, reflected on the success of his opera *Béatrice et Bénédict* – in Baden-Baden; adding 'the cliques and detractors stayed in Paris'.<sup>3</sup>

We owe most of the details of Debussy's forebears to the meticulous research carried out by the Swiss scholar Marcel Dietschy for his biography published in 1962, the composer's centenary year.<sup>4</sup> Until the late 1790s the de Bussy family (as they then spelt the name) were Burgundian peasants. It was the composer's great-grandfather Pierre, born in 1768, who made the move to Paris. His fourth child,

Claude-Alexandre, the composer's grandfather and a carpenter, was born in 1812 and had nine children, the two eldest of whom, as Dietschy records, 'played a role in Debussy's life: Manuel-Achille, his father, and Clémentine, godmother, benefactress, and prophetess of his future'. After a move out of Paris in 1823, Claude-Alexandre moved back to the capital in 1848 and his daughter Clémentine opened a 'Maison Debussy, couture'. The more democratic spelling of the surname appears to date from this time (perhaps Paris was a hard place in which to maintain affectations of aristocracy), although a distant cousin of the composer, living in Leeds in 1960, was still calling himself de Bussy.

Debussy's father, Manuel-Achille, was twelve at the time of the family's return to Paris in 1848. One may, of course, speculate about the effects on a boy of that age of the year's revolutionary activities. Be that as it may, Manuel-Achille was to lead what may politely be termed an irregular existence, and for the first ten years of the composer's life made a living in turn as a seller of china, a broker, a clerk in a printing works and a civil servant.

Debussy's mother, born Victorine Manoury and also of Burgundian stock, had been Manuel-Achille's mistress before marrying him on 30 November 1861. They immediately moved to the western outskirts of Paris, to Saint-Germain-en-Laye, where Achille-Claude was born nine months later. In view of doubts expressed by later writers over the composer's paternity, it may be as well to say that a comparison of a portrait of Debussy on his deathbed with one of his grandfather Claude-Alexandre lays all such doubts to rest.

For some reason, Achille-Claude was not baptised until 31 July 1864, just before his second birthday. His godparents were his aunt Clémentine and her then 'protector' Achille-Antoine Arosa, a thirty-five-year-old Paris stockjobber. He seems to have taken some interest in his godson in his earliest years, at least until around 1866 or possibly 1868 when his liaison with Clémentine ended. After that Arosa seems to have developed an antipathy to his godson. His son Paul told Dietschy in 1954 that Arosa could not stand the young Debussy's

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'distant manner' (*l'air distant*) and behind his back referred to him as *l'Arsouille*, defined in Larousse as *voyou et debauché* (yob and debauchee).

According to a family friend, Debussy's mother was a very independent woman who 'found her children an irritating burden and kept out of their way as far as she could' and who farmed out at least two of them to her sister-in-law. But Achille-Claude was one of the ones she kept with her and there was no doubt that he enjoyed the dubious advantage of being her favourite: for one thing, he was alone of his siblings in not going to school and his first taste of formal tuition was to come at the Paris Conservatoire, when he was already ten years old. According to Debussy's step-daughter Mme de Tinan, who knew both his parents, he learnt to read and write from his mother, who 'was very severe with her children, frequently slapping them, an unpleasant memory that her sons recalled laughingly'.<sup>5</sup>

What music the young Achille-Claude may have heard in the 1860s remains a matter of conjecture. His father was quite fond of operetta but forty years later, in 1907, Debussy confided to his friend Victor Segalen in October 1907 that 'my father intended me for the sea. Then he met somebody . . . I don't know how it happened. "Ah! He can play that? Very good. But he must be taught music . . ." etc. So my father then got the idea that I should study just music, he being someone who knew nothing about it.'

Debussy's first documented musical experience dates from his visits to his aunt Clémentine in Cannes in 1870 and 1871. He later told his first biographer, Louis Laloy,<sup>6</sup> that in the latter year he began piano lessons with a violinist called Jean Cerutti. More precisely, he indicated to Laloy that his aunt 'eut la fantaisie' (had the strange idea) of getting him to learn the piano. Although typical of the mature Debussy's ironic way of expressing himself, this does seem to suggest that until that point he had given no particular indication of musical interests. Indeed, his sister Adèle, who was in Cannes with him, remembered that he would spend some time playing with her cardboard theatre (premonitions of the boy Messiaen forty years later!),



1 Debussy aged five years. © P. Willy, Paris

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but that more often he would spend 'entire days sitting in a chair dreaming, no one knew what about'. We may speculate that this early absorption of the piano into days of reverie was to leave its mark throughout his life.

Meanwhile, in Paris and northern France, events unfolded leading to the Franco-Prussian War and, in March 1871, to the Commune. Debussy referred, in a letter to his publisher Jacques Durand of 8 August 1914, to his 'memory of '70, which prevents me from yielding to enthusiasm', but it seems likely that it was the events of '71 which left a deeper scar – and that, not for the only time, Debussy was quietly re-arranging facts to suit himself. The real truth was that his father joined the Communards, became a captain and led an attack on the fort at Issy. He was arrested, released and then, when the Commune was defeated on 22 May, imprisoned. In December he was tried and sentenced to four years in jail. He served one year of the sentence, which was then commuted to four years' deprivation of civic, civil and familial rights. It would seem therefore that the family's visit to Cannes in 1871 (Laloy, relaying information from Debussy, says that he was there 'with his parents') must have taken place shortly after Manuel-Achille had completed his year in prison at Satory. Again, one may hazard that Achille-Claude might easily have fixated on the piano and on music as constants in a disturbingly mobile world.

While in the Satory prison, Manuel-Achille met a fellow prisoner Charles de Sivry, described in a police report (perhaps not unbiassed) as a 'distinguished musician, member of all the secret societies . . . bad poet . . . a very harmful person'. Harmful or not, he had a sister, Mathilde, who had married Paul Verlaine in 1870 and a mother, calling herself Mme Mauté de Fleurville, who claimed to have been a piano pupil of Chopin. (It could be said of every small French town in the latter part of the nineteenth century that it contained at least one *soi-disant* Chopin pupil, just as every small American town in the 1950s contained, if we are to believe Aaron Copland, a 10-cent store and a pupil of Nadia Boulanger.)

It has long been established that Mme Mauté does not figure on any official list of Chopin's pupils. But, perhaps more to the point, all Debussy's future references to her were to be marked by appreciation and gratitude. He explained to Alfredo Casella 'how considerable a part this instruction had played in his musical formation, not only as pianist, but also as creator' and to his publisher Jacques Durand that she recommended 'practising without pedal and, in performance, not holding it on except in very rare instances. It was the same way of turning the pedal into a kind of *breathing* which I observed in Liszt when I had the chance to hear him in Rome.'<sup>7</sup> Whether or not this recommendation came initially from Chopin, as Mme Mauté had claimed, a comparison with Liszt is no mean testimonial. Nor is the fact that the playing of the ten-year-old Debussy was good enough to get him accepted by the Paris Conservatoire at the first attempt on 22 October 1872.

The Conservatoire had been founded on 16 thermidor Year III (3 August 1795), incorporating the Institut national de musique founded two years earlier and the Ecole nationale de chant et de déclamation. The patriotic aim was to set up an institution to rival the best Italian conservatories. The *Journal de Paris* of 27 October 1796 expressed the hope that 'the tyranny of routine would be banished, as well as the licentiousness of innovations. The respect due to the works of deserving masters will be maintained, without refusing a warm welcome to the daring of genius and to the fruits of happy inspiration (*aux heureuses créations*).'

This balance looks very fine on paper (and, over two centuries later, is still accepted by Conservatoire Directors as an ideal to aim at), but in the course of the nineteenth century the Conservatoire came to stand more for conservation than for experiment, and as a centre for training composers rather of opera than of symphonies or chamber music – this last an unsurprising penchant since its three Directors until 1896 (Cherubini, Auber and Ambroise Thomas) had all made their names in the opera house. But whatever its faults, under Cherubini's firm guidance the Conservatoire soon become the place



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for an aspiring French composer to attend. Of the attempts to rival it, or to supplement its opera-based training, only two in the nineteenth century had any success: the Ecole Niedermeyer, set up in 1853 to train organists and choirmasters, and the Schola Cantorum, founded in 1894 by Vincent d'Indy and others to study the music of the past and in general to give a more rounded training than the Conservatoire could provide.

When Debussy entered the institution in 1872, Ambroise Thomas had been in post for only a year. If he is remembered at all nowadays, apart from his opera *Mignon*, it is because he refused to appoint Fauré as a composition professor, or for the quips of Satie and Chabrier ('there are three sorts of music: good music, bad music and the music of Ambroise Thomas'). But even if his directorship of the Conservatoire, ended by his death in 1896, was not marked by any revolutionary experiments, he was at least highly conscientious and in 1894 he became the first musician to be elevated to the Grand Croix of the Légion d'honneur.

On Friday, 25 October 1872 Debussy attended his first Conservatoire piano class. His teacher was the fifty-six-year-old Antoine François Marmontel (not to be confused with his son, Antoine Emile, who taught the piano at the Conservatoire from 1901). Marmontel père had been a piano professor there since 1848 and was highly regarded as a teacher: apart from Debussy, his pupils included Bizet, Albéniz, d'Indy and the virtuoso Francis Planté. He seems to have been an exacting master and relations with Debussy were sometimes strained, especially when Marmontel insisted on fitting the words 'O mère, douleur amère!' to the Rondo theme in Beethoven's *Pathétique* Sonata. Beethoven was never to be Debussy's favourite composer, and we may surmise that he found his mother quite difficult enough at home without being reminded of her in class as well.

One of the sharpest and most engaging portraits of Debussy in his early years at the Conservatoire comes from Gabriel Pierné, his junior by almost exactly a year and destined for a solid career in Paris as composer and conductor: he was to conduct the first performance of

Debussy's *Ibéria* in 1910 and the first concert performance of *Jeux* in 1914:

I got to know Debussy around 1873 in Lavignac's *solfège* class at the Conservatoire. He was a fat boy of ten or so, short, thickset, wearing a black coat enlivened by a loose, spotted tie and short, velvet trousers . . . His clumsiness and awkwardness were extraordinary, in addition to which he was shy and even unsociable.

In Marmontel's piano class he used to astound us with his bizarre playing. Whether it was through natural *maladroitness* or through shyness I don't know, but he literally used to charge at the piano and force all his effects. He seemed to be in a rage with the instrument, rushing up and down it with impulsive gestures and breathing noisily during the difficult bits. These faults gradually receded and occasionally he would achieve effects of an astonishing softness. With all its faults and virtues, his playing remained something highly individual.

The *solfège* teacher Pierné refers to was Albert Lavignac. He had been a pupil of Ambroise Thomas at the Conservatoire and, when Thomas was appointed Director in 1871, he immediately asked his twenty-five-year-old ex-pupil to plan a new course in sight-reading and musical dictation. Lavignac's exercises were not for the faint-hearted, involving as they did use of all seven traditional clefs and transposition at sight and at speed.

Lavignac was already a Wagner lover (in 1897 he was to publish his *Voyage artistique à Bayreuth*) and was happy to pass on his enthusiasm to his pupils. One winter's evening, Debussy and his teacher became so absorbed in reading the *Tannhäuser* Overture that they were locked in and had to find their way out of the Conservatoire in the dark. A brief extract from the first chapter of Lavignac's book *L'éducation musicale* of 1902 suggests that his teaching enshrined the same blend of orthodoxy and liberalism found in the Conservatoire's original aims. 'Like all languages', he wrote, 'music possesses various dialects, patois or jargons, it even has its slang. As to the ways of writing it down, these can be rational and etymological, phonetic, or whimsical (*fantaisistes*).