
This new book has a predecessor of sorts in French Piano Music: A Survey with Notes on its Performance, by Norman Demuth (London: Museum Press, 1969), in which French music for clavichord as well as the piano from Champion and Chambonnieres to Dutilleux and Boulez is covered in 170 small-sized pages. By narrowing his historical focus, Roy Howat covers the belle époque of French piano music in vastly greater depth and wider scope. The author is a concert pianist who has recorded all of Debussy’s piano works (Tall Poppies Records TP 094, TP 123, TP 164, and TP 165 [1997–2003]) and edited many of them with meticulous care and expert judgment for the Debussy Couleurs complètes. He is also an excellent writer whose prose vibrates with life on the page even while feasting the reader with an abundance of historical information and astute technical analysis. Those who know the increasingly rich literature on Debussy published in recent years will already know Howat’s Debussy in Proportion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), a valuable study of Debussy’s idiosyncratic approaches to form, in which the Golden Section is shown to be an important measurement.

The new book relates the varied art of its four composers to each other and within their historical background in France, especially to Couperin and Rameau and to Chopin, who was still alive in Paris when Chabrier and Fauré were born. Schumann was another major influence on all four composers, specifically in his songs and in the characteristics of his keyboard style. Among composers active in France in the 1870s, when the greater part of the story begins, Saint-Saëns and Franck stand out, the former as Fauré’s teacher and the latter as Debussy’s (for a brief instant), and Fauré in turn as Ravel’s teacher before 1905.

Chabrier (1841–1894), the oldest of the four, also died the youngest, but his impact was profound on French music generally,
and on Debussy and Ravel in particular. Chapters 7 ("Musique adorable; à la découverte d'Emmanuel Chabrier") and 13 ("Rhythmic Games in Chabrier") are dedicated to his work. In America, Chabrier is hardly known beyond España (1885), but in France he is more than ever a national treasure, acknowledged, with Fauré, as the most important French composer between Berlioz and Debussy. I was delighted by Howat's reference to Jean Francaix, citing in turn Ravel's biographer Roland-Manuel: "Let's stop rediscovering Chabrier every twenty years. Let's put him once and for all in his true place, right at the top." Chabrier's best piano music, carefully examined in the new book, is found in the Dix pièces pittoresques (1881), the Trois valses romantiques for two pianos (1883), and the Bourrée fantasque (1891), not to mention the brilliantly witty Souvenirs de Munich: Quadrilles sur les thèmes favoris de Tristan et Isolde for piano, four hands (1886). César Franck is reported to have said of the Dix pièces pittoresques: "This music is a bridge between our own time and that of Couperin and Rameau." More than that, pieces like " Sous-bois" and "Mauresque" discover a whole new world of piano sound that was effectively exploited by Debussy and Ravel thirty years later.

Much of the new book deals with harmony, which as an element of large-scale musical structure evolved more rapidly in France than elsewhere during the half-century before World War I. As Howat shows, there were significant antecedents and influences in Russian music (chaps. 8, "Debussy and the Orient," and 9, "The Exotic via Russia and Spain") and in Chopin and Liszt, whose influence on our four composers was arguably greater than Wagner's (chap. 6, "Chopin's Legacy"). Mussorgsky's songs and Boris Godounov and Balakirev's Islamey are justly cited as notable exemplars whose exotic colors worked their way westward even before the Franco-Russian alliance. Debussy and Ravel have long been cherished for their resplendently Hispanic music, though with Ravel the Spanish influence is more widespread in his orchestral and vocal music than in his works for the piano. The kinship with Asian music has been more difficult to document, but Howat makes a case for the effect of gamelan scales on Debussy's piano music that goes far beyond the usual obvious remarks of writers who point to works like Pagodes and the second movement of the String Quartet.

It is likely that the young Ravel influenced Debussy in the radically exploratory pianism of a work like Jeux d'eau (1901), dedicated to Fauré while Ravel was still a student at the Conservatoire. The three pieces of Debussy's Pour le piano, begun earlier, were completed that year. The only other major Debussy work for piano from the decade of the 1890s remained unpublished until 1977, when the so-called "Images oubliées" demonstrated how Debussy's pianistic language was evolving far beyond his earliest Chopin-inspired pieces. Having spent the 1890s principally occupied with composing his only String Quartet and developing a mature sense of the orchestra while simultaneously grappling with opera, Debussy after 1901 began writing what would turn out to be the majority of his works for the piano: Images in two series, Estampes, two books of Preludes, Children's Corner, and Danse etudes, as well as En blanc et noir, one of the most visionary works ever written for two pianos. Ravel, too, brought forth his Miroirs and Gaspard de la nuit during the first decade of the new century, with Valses nobles et sentimentales and Le tombeau de Couperin to follow before he served in World War I; thereafter his contribution to the piano was in chamber music and the two concertos.

The most meticulous parts of Howat's book deal with specific approaches to piano performance in the works of the four composers. There is an abundance of detailed information about what the composers themselves said about their own music and their own playing, and also about the instruments they played and those that they preferred. But close study of the scores is the most important part of any pianist's approach. As Howat writes in the introduction (p. xiv):

What's the secret of playing French music? I'm often asked. The only secret I can think of is that there is, or should be, no secret. The composers did all they could to make themselves clear on the page and, as much as any music, this repertoire demands straightforward and unaffected performance, letting its emo-
tional frankness and expressive structural logic speak for themselves. We just need to ensure that the evocative surfaces don’t mask that underlying strength and coherence. (Maybe that’s the secret.)

More than thirty years ago I asked Beveridge Webster about his edition for International Music of Chabrier’s Pièces pittoresques; he told me that it reproduced the original Enoch-Costallat printing and that he had done little more than add some fingerings. Webster’s second “corrected” edition (1974) of Claude Debussy: Piano Music (1888–1905) for Dover Publications is more serious; many of the most important engraving errors remain unchanged in their reprinting from earlier Fromonot editions, especially in Pour le piano and Suite bergamasque. (This volume, an excellent selection of Debussy’s earliest piano works through the first set of Images [1905], is currently out of print but still has wide circulation.) Fortunately much better editions are now available for Chabrier, Debussy, and some of Fauré and Ravel, with more in preparation. Howat’s book discusses many of these. His own outstanding work as editor of published editions of Chabrier and Debussy is well known. For the Debussy Oeuvres complètes there are already available individual works without the critical apparatus of the collected bound volumes, and these should always be used in preference to any other editions (see my review in Notes 64, no. 4 [June 2008]: 819–24). As for Chabrier, the best of his solo piano music (including his transcriptions of the Habanera and Joyeuse Marche), carefully re-edited and fully annotated by Howat from original editions, is easily available in a single volume (Emanuel Chabrier, Works for Piano [New York: Dover, 1975]).

The Art of French Piano Music is beautifully printed and well proofread, with only a few errors worthy of note: “Grenada” appears once instead of Granada (p. 140); the “Tenth Nocturne of 1908” referred to on page 303 is actually the Ninth; and the headings for the first two columns in the second row of the table on page 192 both appear in the second column.

What is particularly invigorating in this book is the amount of well-researched incidental detail in support of the central thrust of each part and each chapter. This is not surprising considering that the bibliography is twelve pages long. The author’s respect for and comprehensive knowledge of his wide-ranging subject, no less than his love for it, is plain on every page. Not just pianists, but every scholar who studies the music of Chabrier, Fauré, Debussy, and Ravel, will welcome this book.

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