

LINDA CUMMINS, *DEBUSSY AND THE FRAGMENT* (New York: Chiasma Press, 2006), ISBN 90-420-2065-2, 192 pp, €40

In her recent book *Debussy and the Fragment*, Linda Cummins attempts to situate the composer's compositional style as a descendent of a long line of artistic deviations from Aristotle's mimetic philosophy of 'beginning–middle–end' forms. With examples ranging from Rabelais and Montaigne to Cervantes and Sterne, the author explains how literature has experienced increasingly frequent digressions from the Aristotelian ideals to favour forms which frequently undermine themselves and their respective authors. Cummins notes that Michel de Montaigne referred to his *Essais* as 'a work made of parts, mere decoration, a grotesque' (29) when referring to the atemporal nature of the collection. Similarly, Rabelais's *Gargantua* and Cervantes's *Don Quixote* consist of fragments which the flawed narrator pieces together as the novels progress. This history of such episodic literature provides a well developed backdrop for the comparisons to Debussy's musical decisions which follow.

In the second chapter Cummins paraphrases Italo Calvino<sup>1</sup> by stating that beginnings and endings act as frames which 'isolate the work—separating it from what came before and what comes after; simultaneously, through the very act of separation, they acknowledge those surroundings' (63). By creating fragments out of these frames, however, the author/composer is able to evoke certain affect from the reader/listener. Beginning pieces *in medias res* was not unique to Debussy. Both Cummins and Charles Rosen note that Chopin's Prelude in A Minor, Op. 28 No. 2 does so, as does Brahms's B-flat-minor Intermezzo, Op. 118 No. 1. These off-tonic beginnings could lead to an interesting discussion about retrospective realization of expectations, but Cummins only touches upon this, without much discussion of temporality or the phenomenological implications. In Debussy's settings of Verlaine's poems 'Green' and 'Spleen' the composer treats the opening lines in a manner analogous to the meandering sentiments of the narrator. This study of the text settings of two of the composer's early songs offers one of the most rewarding elements of this book: an incisive look at Debussy's possible motivations in the formal composition of his songs.

Cummins also discusses Debussy's propensity for leaving out certain pieces of relevant musical information at length, as a number of authors have done. In Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* which Debussy read fondly in the same year that his first book of Preludes was published, the reader is given very little information at the start,

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<sup>1</sup> Italo Calvino, trans. William Weaver, *Under the Jaguar Sun* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1988), 86. Cited in Cummins, 63.

and only receives important structural elements at the conclusion of the story.<sup>2</sup> Cummins argues that these analogous elements can be found in certain progressions, such as beginning on a subdominant chord rather than the expected tonic chord. While this feature is quite prevalent in the composer's music, the idea of a non-tonic opening as a descendent of a literary fragment is, in fact, quite weak. As the author notes, a great number of compositions begin with segments seemingly distant from the ultimate tonal centre of the piece (such as the Brahms and Chopin pieces mentioned above), so the suggestion of a conscious effort by Debussy to refer to literary fragments would be an overstatement.

In the chapter entitled 'Arcadias and Arabesques' the author shifts her focus to the influence of mythology and classicism in Debussy's compositional fragments, and, more specifically, their role in *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune*. The author discusses the high rate of Greek and Roman forgeries in the latter half of the nineteenth century, as well as Debussy's knowledge of and acquaintanceship with such hoaxers. This is paralleled in Pierre Louÿs's poem 'Le Tombeau de naïades', in which a character follows footprints in a snowy landscape which prove to be false. When Debussy set the music to this poem, he apparently had knowledge of such allusions, and Cummins proposes that these missteps and false sightings are conveyed musically.

When discussing the text setting of *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune*, the author states, 'both Mallarmé's poem and Debussy's tone poem are examples of arabesque structures, digressive narratives, deformed and interrupted, but based, nevertheless, on recognizable conventions' (98). She illustrates how Debussy creates 'the impression of recollection' (101) and how the varying digressions and transitions between tonal collections in the piece allude to Mallarmé's narrative digressions. While the study of the text setting from a fragmentary perspective is an interesting prospect, Cummins relies too heavily on Matthew Brown's formal analysis when discussing the piece.<sup>3</sup>

In the fourth chapter the author discusses the nature of the sketch, which she considers the 'the mirror image of ruin' (117). Cummins discusses how a number of Debussy's compositions (such as *D'un cahier d'esquisses*) are quite literally fragments as they are stitched together from multiple independent compositions. While this digression into literal fragments is quite interesting and beneficial from an historical

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<sup>2</sup> This aspect of literary suspense was applied quite effectively by Edward Cone in his 'Three Ways of Reading a Detective Story or a Brahms Intermezzo', in Robert P. Morgan (ed.), *Music: A View from Delft* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 77–94.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Brown, 'Tonality and Form in Debussy's *Prelude à l'Après-midi d'un faune*', *Music Theory Spectrum*, 15 (1993), 127–43.

perspective, it offers little to Cummins's overall thesis. This is succeeded by a discussion of Debussy's tendency to quote himself (as in the *Pelleas et Melisande* quotations in the opening of *Nuages*), as well as his affinity for interrupting himself in musical phrases. The latter contains an interesting connection between Schumann's *Papillons* and Debussy's *Iberia*, but is at best a tangential digression in the book.

While a number of the texts discussed might seem almost deconstructive in nature, Cummins rarely delves into such lofty literary criticism, despite previous attempts to link the composer's music to poststructuralist philosophy (most notably by theorist Craig Ayrey).<sup>4</sup> Cummins's discussion of *versos de cabo roto* (in which the reader is left to infer the final syllable) in the work of Cervantes could be linked to both reader-response theory and Debussy's tendency to imply tonalities without explicitly stating them, but this is not done. The author does, however, discuss this compositional tendency of Debussy's when discussing 'Canope' from the second book of Preludes.

While *Debussy and the Fragment* provides a much needed resource for an often overlooked aspect of the composer's influences, it falls short when drawing parallels with the music. Many of the analyses are too heavily influenced by the work of other theorists, and at times the music almost seems to be an afterthought to the overall lineage of the 'fragment' in the creative arts. This is demonstrated by the fact that the first chapter, which is meant to provide a literary background for the reader and makes no mention of Debussy, is more than one third of the book, while an analytical discussion of the composer's Preludes is relegated to an all-too-brief 'postlude'. The book's conjectural starting point for a study of Debussy's music might seem reminiscent of Roy Howat's *Debussy in Proportion*,<sup>5</sup> but the similarities end there. The equal prominence which Howat gives to both supporting evidence and rigorous analytical discussions is simply not present in *Debussy and the Fragment*. This disparity, however, might be overlooked in favour of Cummins's ability to inform the reader of a literary inheritance rarely discussed in Debussy scholarship with such clarity and precision. While this work may not contribute extensively to Debussy scholarship, it is a decisive step forward to the interdisciplinary studies which the composer's music seems to provoke so often.

Daniel Shanahan

Trinity College, Dublin

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Craig Ayrey, 'Debussy's Significant Connections: Metaphor and Metonymy in Analytical Method', in Anthony Pople (ed.), *Theory, Analysis and Meaning in Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 127–51.

<sup>5</sup> Roy Howat, *Debussy in Proportion: A Musical Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).