

# Editorial

## 2012: ANNIVERSARIES OF CLAUDE DEBUSSY AND JULES MASSENET

CLAUDE DEBUSSY AND JULES MASSENET: two artistic temperaments poles apart. The first was as fiercely independent as the second was preoccupied with his popularity. Although these characteristics have perhaps been overstated in the literature (Debussy enjoyed his increased income after *Pelléas et Mélisande* and Massenet was not without a well-developed artistic conscience) they nonetheless retain a kernel of truth. Massenet died in 1912 during Debussy's fiftieth year, so consequently 2012 marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of one and the 150<sup>th</sup> of the birth of the other. Comparisons seem inevitable. The anniversaries spawned an impressive array of conferences: for Massenet, events in Saint-Étienne (his hometown), Lucca, and Paris; for Debussy, scholarly gatherings in Montreal, Brussels, Paris, and London. Having been involved in conferences for both composers, I can attest to the copiousness of the material that emerged for Debussy, a real *embarrass du choix* for organizers, as well as difficulties of a different order for Massenet, namely, the more substantial efforts required to fill out programs of scholarly presentations. In a certain sense, this was hardly surprising, inasmuch Debussy towers as a giant in the canon and a major player in narratives of Western music history. Consequently, he appeals professionally to both musicologists and music theorists. Indeed, contributions by theorists to the Debussy conferences were plentiful, whereas to the Massenet events they were practically non-existent. The comparison gives food for thought about the role of music theory as a discipline (practiced as a separate enterprise mainly in the Anglo-Saxon academic world) in reinforcing what one might call an academic canon, and even, obliquely, in encouraging reductive views of Debussy as fiercely independent and Massenet as a populist. With the recent consecration of (contemporary) popular music studies in the academy, and even in the discipline of music theory, one expects that the new attitudes will be reflected back in time to repertoires previously unfashionable.

While more scholarly attention would seem justifiably to gravitate to Debussy than to Massenet by virtue of his 'game-changing' initiatives and influence, what remains striking is the *size* of the disparity in scholarly interest generated by both. It is out of all proportion not only to their reputations at the turn of the century but also to their place in the repertorial canon today, where *Manon*, *Werther*, and *Thaïs* are regularly performed at opera houses around the world and other Massenet operas appear frequently as well. In their own day Massenet was the better known figure among the general public and was recognized by colleagues and officialdom alike with an influential teaching post at the Conservatoire and a seat at the *Institut*. Communities of interest in the academic marketplace perpetuate themselves, dividing the terrain into ever smaller parcels or sustaining repeated re-readings fuelled by new methodologies. One would not want to affirm categorically that

a brilliant insight into a Debussy passage carries more academic capital than one of similar brilliance into music by Massenet – scholarly discourse cannot be easily quantified – but there remains a nagging suspicion that this may at least partly be the case.

Debussy's prestige stems in some measure from the privileging of change as an aesthetic quality, and the juxtaposition of these two composers invites reflections on rapidly changing notions of progress at the end of the nineteenth century, especially as related to aesthetic autonomy and shifting syntactical parameters. The decade of the 1880s in Paris was different in this respect than the 1890s. In the light of a critical tradition holding that the works of a composer such as Massenet constituted a corpus that Debussy had somehow to transcend, it is sometimes forgotten that Massenet himself occupied the front ranks of what was considered musically progressive around the time of the premiere of *Manon* in 1884. A little-cited interview he gave to Henri de Weindel of the newspaper *Paris* on 13 November 1893 gives a good idea of how he framed the issues. The interviewer set the scene by describing a nervously gesticulating man, with his head «cocked over his right shoulder in an attitude of coquettish weariness». On the whole «from his mien, his movements, and his high and musical voice their radiated a very feminine charm», an androgyny that surfaces time and time again in period descriptions of the composer. Massenet went on to hold forth on the necessity for an operatic canon. He told the story of his tailor who went to the opera only once a year, and always to hear the same work, Ferdinand Hérold's *La Pré aux Clercs*. For those parts of the opera-loving public who could only afford to go to the opera occasionally, the existence of a canon, said Massenet, provided an assurance that their money would be well spent. In modern parlance the French today might say *un bon rapport qualité/prix*: one could scarcely outdo this argument for its bourgeois common-sense. But Massenet also recognized that a substantial segment of the public wanted to hear new and innovative works as well, and that the money the canon generated was important in sustaining riskier productions of untried operas, an argument with on-going resonance in our own day as well. He also made a case for the authority of public taste in judging the unfamiliar and uncharted. «So you are willing to embrace originality?» the interviewer prodded. Massenet answered in the affirmative, and certainly his own operas give witness to a willingness to try new things, whether it be the extended melodrama in *Manon*, the prose poetry and symphonic ballet of *Thaïs*, or the all-male cast of *Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame*. Experimentation was good, provided that a writer or composer was thoroughly immersed in masterpieces of the past, in short, that he followed the 'great road'. There was, Massenet observed, a marked difference between the original and the merely bizarre. Academic training provided the rod to measure the distinction.

Debussy, for his part, was much more distrustful of the 'great road' than Massenet. «Rhythms cannot be contained within bars [...] Minor thirds and major thirds should be combined, modulation thus becoming more flexible. The mode is that which one happens to choose at the moment» he famously told his teacher Ernest Guiraud in conversations recorded by the scholar, critic, and composer Maurice Emmanuel. Thus did Debussy privately reveal his aesthetic inclinations a few years before Massenet's interview. Originality took on a different hue than with Massenet because Debussy questioned the very premises of the 'great road' itself. Adopting what became the quintessential modernist position, he argued that tradition itself was no longer a suitable vehicle for genuine originality and self-expression, but rather an obstacle. And for the listener, Debussy's critique promised

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direct access to sensual pleasure in music and unmediated contact with nature. His posture celebrated the spontaneity of natural genius, not without a certain unintended irony in view of the fact that he attended the Conservatoire for over a decade and was one of its most gifted students.

All that was associated with the 'academy', such as Debussy construed it, came in for a scathing rejection. On the sesquicentennial of his birth, however, the irony resonates in a different way, for now it is Debussy, as I have suggested, who enjoys a premier place in academic studies of music, while Massenet, for all his prominence at the Conservatoire, occupies a negligible one.

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