

Preface

In terms of greatness, there is no doubt about Claude Debussy's – his greatness, that is, as a composer. But was he a great man? His life manifested none of the epic, star-status qualities, and little of the altruism, of such a figure as Franz Liszt – a man who defines a concept of greatness, not only as a composer and performer but as a compassionate human being. Liszt's antithesis is Richard Wagner, a composer of colossal power and influence, but an odious man. Between these two poles – between the gleaming Liszt and the glowering Wagner – lies the shadowy Claude Debussy: a feline, sensual and enigmatic figure of dubious background and equally dubious morals, who quietly but single-mindedly changed the course of music history. Like the Impressionist painters just before him, with whom he is famously identified, his vision, and his execution of that vision, was such that nothing could ever be the same again. His compositions demanded a new way of listening, just as the Impressionists' paintings demanded a new way of seeing. The music of the twentieth century, in all its wide-ranging originality and complexity, was born from him. Perhaps that is enough greatness for one human being.

I have long been fascinated by Debussy. In my childhood I had singled out his portrait from a row of composers' heads above the walnut upright piano in my teacher's studio. I was impressed by the domed brow and beard and the arrestingly sensual eyes, which I found both frightening and kind. The large head and the pointed black beard made the shape of a triangle, which in my child's mind I associated with the strange sound and the alien shape of the name written underneath – Achille-Claude Debussy. Then in my teens came the haunting piano piece *La Fille aux cheveux de lin*, with its sensuous sonorities and frissons of archaic romance. How could such music come from one who was considered, I soon learnt, rude and unpleasant? I needed to trace such rumours, which I refused to take at face value, to their source.

I became more intrigued by the personality the more I got to know the music. I liked him, and I knew this feeling came in some vital way from what I heard and played. But how? What kind of man could

produce music so startlingly original, so shockingly sensuous, so unerringly expressive of sensual experience? The extraordinary power of *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* was intimately connected in my teenage imagination with the erotic splendour of the green-eyed Gaby, Debussy's long-suffering girlfriend of the 1890s, described in all the biographies. But I gradually came to realize that this power rested upon an intellectual rigour, a precision of detail and structural cohesion that had nothing to do with self-indulgence. And finally I discovered that the polarized demands of the intellect and the senses were central to Debussy's existence as an artist and as a man. His personal life was spent finding deeply uneasy compromises between the two; as an artist he allowed no compromise at all, forging instead a sublime unity.

I am especially indebted to Roger Nichols for setting me on the right path in my quest with his compilation of contemporary accounts *Debussy Remembered*. It was in this book that I first truly found the man whom I sensed through the music. Lockspeiser's painstaking *Debussy: His Life and Mind* is without equal, and has to be a mainstay for any biography, but it never quite revealed to me the living personality that came across so powerfully in the contemporary memoirs – and of course in the letters. Debussy's letters are fine literary creations in their own right, although today English readers are largely prevented from appreciating them as no translation is currently in print. But readers of French at last have the complete correspondence, in a magnificent new work of scholarship recently published by Gallimard (though too late for me to draw on the large number of previously unpublished letters, including relevant letters from the correspondents themselves). Here, in one compendiously large volume, is a final confirmation, if one were needed, of the centrality in Debussy's life-story of the written word – his own. He appears to have written as he would have spoken: quietly, fluently and idiomatically, with a natural sense of style and pace and a habitual irony. For so private a man, so famously reticent and self-protective, his letters are remarkably revealing. Apart from his journalism, rather too self-conscious and mannered to be reliably the true voice of Debussy, his letters are all we have, in biographical terms, of the authentic man. It is for this reason that I have quoted extensively from them in the following chapters.

I embarked on this biography having spent most of my adult life performing Debussy's piano music. I wanted to see whether I had

anything to offer from my intimate knowledge of the music that might lead to an intimate knowledge of the man. 'Art is a reflection of life or it is nothing,' the literary critic F. R. Leavis wrote. For me, as a performer, Debussy's music reveals similar insights to those inherent in great literature, the ability to probe with clairvoyant understanding the experience of being alive. As a biographer I hope I have been able to convey something of what it must have been like for a composer of true greatness to be at the same time the all-too-human Claude Debussy.

It remains for me to record my special thanks to the Guildhall School of Music & Drama for providing me with the time and the funds to bring this enterprise to fruition. Over a number of years I have had the unfailing support and encouragement of the Guildhall's Head of Research, George Odam, to whom I am deeply grateful.

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