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# Debussy

*His life and mind*

Volume I 1862-1902

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# DEBUSSY: HIS LIFE AND MIND

VOLUME I

1862-1902

EDWARD LOCKSPEISER

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Claude Debussy in 1894. Photo, mutilated by Debussy,  
taken by Pierre Louÿs

Tel qu'en Lui-même enfin l'éternité le change,  
Le Poète suscite avec un glaive nu  
Son siècle épouvanté de n'avoir pas connu  
Que la Mort triomphait dans cette voix étrange!  
*Mallarmé*

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Debussy belongs to the history of the ideas of his time as well as to the history of music specifically, and no study can ignore contemporary developments in literature and painting. On the connexions

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## DEBUSSY: HIS LIFE AND MIND

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London, 1962

E. L.

## Introduction

Nearly all the literature on Debussy has so far been based on Léon Vallas's *Claude Debussy et son temps* which first appeared in 1932. This was a biographical and aesthetic study, revised in 1958, which had several admirable qualities in its day and still has. Vallas was alone in having established a vast documentation relating to the dates and origins of Debussy's known works, contemporary criticisms, and the main landmarks in his career. With this knowledge he set Debussy's achievements against the French musical scene as he saw it at that time. Vallas seldom looked beyond the surface, however, and he was concerned primarily to establish Debussy as a national composer, the saviour from foreign and particularly German domination. We can no longer accept this view. The national attributes of Debussy's work, which are plain enough, were over-emphasized by an earlier generation partly from a desire to revolt against the unalterable fact of a German musical hegemony, but also because a closer study of Debussy's mind would have demanded the investigation of certain aesthetic and moral problems which had not hitherto come into the province of writers on music and which have even embarrassed literary critics. Though he was a devoted scholar there were many aspects of Debussy's life and work by which Vallas was shocked. Accordingly, he prudishly closed his readers' eyes to what he judged were the less acceptable features of his personality. It was perhaps only natural that this poker-faced attitude should have aroused curiosity, and it must be said that although Vallas's reserve was well intentioned, his refusal to come to terms with any of the inner motives in Debussy's character has done considerable harm. Certain later studies have as a result been appallingly tasteless, an ironic fate to befall the work of a composer who reintroduced taste as an aesthetic value.

Vallas was also indifferent to contemporary movements in literature and painting. I do not believe that one can approach the art of Debussy as an isolated musical phenomenon. It belongs as much to the history of literature and the visual arts as, specifically, to the

history of music, and it plays a part, too, in contemporary psychological thought. In my view it is the hinterland of Debussy's world that is most likely to illuminate his mind. As with other figures of this period, Verlaine, Gauguin, and Wilde, we cannot be concerned, in any view of their contribution, with moral judgements for the reason that these were artists who claimed moral values of their own. Inevitably, hostility was aroused by actions in the personal lives of such figures, providing a curious contrast to the esteem in which they were so widely held. It is admittedly difficult to establish the interpenetration of an artist's life and work, and there are many writers, particularly on music, who believe that it can serve no purpose. This is partly because the biographer of a musician must deal with a form of creation that is nebulous and unyielding by comparison with the revelatory prose or poetry at the core of biographies of literary figures. Yet I think the effort should be made. If the style is the man so is the achievement.

Research over many years has convinced me that the art of Debussy is not merely a reflection of one aspect or another of his period. It is the period. Music was at that time regarded as the quintessential, privileged art, and I see no other composer who so closely realized the musical ideals to which the writers and painters of his time openly aspired. I would concede that this was not only the strength of Debussy but his weakness. Inspiration drawn from so many sources can easily lead to disintegration. Whatever the reason, a disintegrating element did take root as a result of Debussy's explorations, and it is my belief that we can only come to terms with later developments in music to the extent that the moral and aesthetic crisis faced by Debussy is seen for what it was.

This first volume extends from Debussy's childhood and early formative years, revealing important facts not hitherto disclosed, to *Pelléas et Mélisande*, marking the triumph of opera as a form of poetry. Concepts of the dream preoccupied Debussy during this period, as they preoccupied Freud in his contemporary early works, and the roots may be seen here of a new sensibility that has persisted to our day. The subsequent volume, covering the period from *La Mer* to Debussy's death at the end of the first World War, will branch out to the world of Proust and the early works of Stravinsky in the hope of illuminating further problems which every musical person must have at heart.

E.L.

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PART I

*Youth*

1862-1887



# I

## *The Debussy Family*

'En vérité, on n'y peut rien, on a l'âme que vous ont léguée  
un tas de gens parfaitement inconnus. . . .'

*Letter to André Caplet*

Until recently we knew singularly little, beyond the names and occupations contained in a few public records, of Debussy's ancestors; and we were even less well informed on the essential facts of his early family life, his early education, and the general emotional and artistic factors by which he was affected during the first ten years of his life. The reason for this unfortunate state of our knowledge was curious. The available records had only been superficially investigated by Debussy's first biographers, chief among them Léon Vallas. But in regard to his immediate family it was maintained that Debussy deliberately obscured or withheld during his lifetime the vital biographical data we need for any kind of assessment of his childhood years, and that more than this, there were certain secrets of the Debussy family which he was anxious should never be disclosed. It turns out that this mystery was entirely the creation of the composer's biographers, possibly motivated by a desire to idealize their subject. In his correspondence Debussy frequently refers to his family, his mother particularly, to whom he was greatly devoted, also to his father and the younger of his two brothers, and there is never a suggestion that he was anxious to conceal their activities, still less that he was in any way ashamed of them. As for his remoter ancestry, this, not surprisingly, was unknown to him, though he was certainly moved from time to time by the mysteries of heredity. 'The soul we possess,' he comments in a letter to André Caplet of



1911, 'has been inherited from a vast number of completely unknown people and compels us to act in one way or another without, as a rule, leaving us much choice.'

The genealogical facts of Debussy's family can be briefly stated. Our authority here is Marcel Dietschy, whose painstaking researches into public records have yielded the first reliable view of Debussy's ancestors. On both sides of his family Debussy was of Burgundian stock. Early paternal ancestors were Bridot de Bussy, a farm-labourer, born c. 1615; Edme de Bussy, a vine-grower, born at Benoissey, 1639; and later Valentin de Bussi, born 1682, registered as a farm-labourer from Courcelles-sous-Brignon in the Côte d'Or, and who married Marie Carré at Seigny in 1724. The name can probably be traced to the neighbouring town of Bussy-le-Grand, near Dijon, seat of the Counts de Bussy. One of these noblemen was Bussy-Rabutin, or Roger de Rabutin, the cousin of Madame de Sévigné, a libertine well known in French literature as the author of the scandalous *Histoire Amoureuse des Gaules*. Though he lived at Bussy-le-Grand during the second half of the seventeenth century we have no evidence that an ancestor of Debussy was related to him. Nor have we any knowledge of a possible connexion with one N. de Bussy, the mid-sixteenth century composer of chansons published by the famous Attaignant.

Valentin de Bussi's son, Pierre, was a farrier and his son, also named Pierre, was originally a farmer. According to Monsieur Dietschy this ancestor, Debussy's great-grandfather, was in Paris or near by at the time of the Revolution. The first to leave the soil, he became a locksmith at the end of the eighteenth century at the revolutionary centre of Bellevue and later lived in Paris and Montrouge. From then on we see the paternal line of small French tradesmen with large families, bearing their full share of misfortune. Pierre de Bussy had four children: Suzanne who married a carpenter; Pierre-Louis who became a locksmith and who died mysteriously during the Commune;<sup>1</sup> Achille-Claude, a locksmith too who died at Montrouge at the age of twenty-five; and Claude-Alexandre de Bussy, grandfather of the composer, born much later when his father was forty-four. He was a carpenter who for a time was also

<sup>1</sup> Monsieur Dietschy quotes a graphic description of him in the census returns (1823), *Archives de la Seine, Paris*, indicating a figure of striking facial characteristics: 'Black hair and eyebrows, grey eyes, low forehead, long nose, large mouth, protruding chin, oval face, thick lips'.