

## CONVERSATION BETWEEN DEBUSSY AND ERNEST GUIRAUD

- DEBUSSY: [I have] no faith in the supremacy of the C major scale. [The tonal scale must be enriched by other scales. Nor am I misled by equal temperament. Rhythms are stifling. Rhythms cannot be contained within bars. It is nonsense to speak of "simple" and "compound" time. There should be an interminable flow of both. Relative keys are nonsense, too. Music is neither major nor minor. 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. It is inconstant. There must be a balance between musical demands and thematic evocation. Themes suggest their orchestral coloring.]
- GUIRAUD: [Debussy having played a series of chords on the piano] What's that?
- DEBUSSY: Incomplete chords, floating. One can travel where one wishes and leave by any door. Greater nuances.
- GUIRAUD: But when I play this [a "French sixth" chord on A<sup>b</sup>, evidently one of the chords Debussy had played] it has to resolve.
- DEBUSSY: I don't see that it should. Why?
- GUIRAUD: Well, do you find this lovely? [He plays a series of parallel triads.]
- DEBUSSY: Yes, yes, yes!
- GUIRAUD: I am not saying that what you do isn't beautiful, but it's theoretically absurd.
- DEBUSSY: [There is no theory. You merely have to listen. Pleasure is the law.]
- GUIRAUD: I would agree with you in regard to an exceptional person who has discovered a discipline for himself and who has an instinct which he is able to impose. But how would you teach music to others?
- DEBUSSY: Music cannot be learned.
- GUIRAUD: Come now, you are forgetting that you yourself were ten years at the Conservatoire.
- DEBUSSY: [He agrees and admits that there can after all be a doctrine.] Yes, this is silly. Except that I can't reconcile all this. True enough, I feel free because I have been through the mill, and I don't write in the fugal style because I know it.

This is an extract of a conversation that is supposed to have taken place in October, 1889 and was written down, presumably after the fact, by Maurice Emmanuel. Emmanuel and Debussy had both been Guiraud's students at the Paris Conservatoire. The Guiraud-Debussy conversations were collected and published in 1977. The translation above is taken from P. Weiss and R. Taruskin, *Music in the Western World* (1984), 417-18.