

APPENDIX B

CONVERSATIONS WITH ERNEST GUIRAUD

The following record of the conversations between Debussy and Ernest Guiraud was made by Maurice Emmanuel under curious circumstances. Whilst still a student at the Conservatoire, Emmanuel was attracted to the medieval modes and planned to introduce them in his compositions. This met with the stern disapproval of his master Léo Delibes, with the result that Emmanuel sought the support of the more broad-minded Guiraud with whom he was able to pursue his studies unofficially. Debussy had maintained a friendly relationship with his former master Guiraud, and in 1889 and 1890, after his visits to Bayreuth, often discussed aesthetic problems with him. These discussions were inspiring to Emmanuel to the extent that he jotted down some of the main points. Though they are set out in a haphazard fashion they light up a corner of the mind of Debussy at a time when Wagner was still a revolutionary and when the young Debussy was beginning to discover his way.

GUIRAUD: You say that the cor anglais solo in the third act of *Tristan* is a classical aria, an 'exercice'? It doesn't in any way suggest Beethoven.

DEBUSSY: Because you don't hear the harmony beneath it. But let us look further. Berlioz is much further removed from Bach and Mozart than Wagner. He is less tonal than Wagner, though Wagner is more accomplished in transitions from major to minor.

GUIRAUD: How harsh; it's constantly chromatic. You can't call that classical.

DEBUSSY: Classical signifies major and minor.

In the classical style chords are resolved. The classical style implies near modulations (a closed circle).

Romantic: a label that to my mind has no significance. The language of Schumann, Berlioz, and Liszt is the classical language. I hear in them all the same kind of music.

GUIRAUD: But this insipid, continuous music. No scenes, no cuts. You can't say it is anything like Mozart!

DEBUSSY: I shouldn't say it is the opposite of Mozart. It's a later development. No square-cut phrases, nevertheless Wagner develops in the classical manner. Wagner merely abandoned the

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perpetual perfect cadence and the hateful six-four chord. Supposing Mozart had had the idea of writing an act in one continuous movement, do you think he would have been able to achieve it? His was the convention of separate arias and four-bar phrases. Wagner develops in the classical manner. In the place of the architectural themes of a symphony, occurring at specified points, he has themes representing things and people, but he develops these themes in a symphonic manner. He derives from Bach and Beethoven, as we see in *Tristan* and *Meistersinger*—not to speak of his orchestra which is a development and enlargement of the classical orchestra.

GUIRAUD: But what about his treatment of the voices?

DEBUSSY: Yes, there we find a difference, but not a musical difference. Is it new? It may seem to resemble the spoken language; and it doesn't follow the four-bar phrase. There are no recitatives in the Italian manner and no lyrical arias. The words are subordinated to the orchestral accompaniment, but not sufficiently. It is music that sings too continuously. Singing should be reserved for certain points.

GUIRAUD: What kind of poet would you yourself have in mind?

DEBUSSY: One who only hints at what is to be said (*celui des choses dites à demi*). The ideal would be two associated dreams. No place, nor time. No big scene. No compulsion on the musician, who must complete and give body to the work of the poet. Music in opera is far too predominant. Too much singing and the musical settings are too cumbersome. The blossoming of the voice into true singing should occur only when required. A painting executed in grey is the ideal. No developments merely for the sake of developments. A prolonged development does not fit, cannot fit, the words. My idea is of a short libretto with mobile scenes. I have no use at all for the three unities. A variety of scenes in regard to place and character. No discussion or arguments between the characters whom I see at the mercy of life or destiny.

THE DIVISION OF THE OCTAVE

(Debussy seated at the piano)



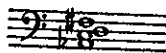
DEBUSSY: 24 semitones=36 tones in the octave with 18 different degrees. No faith in the supremacy of the C major scale. The tonal scale must be enriched by other scales.

I am not misled by equal temperament. Rhythms are stifling. Rhythms cannot be contained within bars. It is nonsense to speak of 'simple' and 'composed' time. There should be an interminable flow of them both without seeking to bury the rhythmic patterns. 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. In *Tristan* the themes heard in the orchestra are themes of the action. They do no violence to the action. There must be a balance between musical demands and thematic evocation. Themes suggest their orchestral colouring.

GUIRAUD (*Debussy having played a series of intervals on the piano*): What's that?

DEBUSSY: Incomplete chords, floating. *Il faut noyer le ton*. One can travel where one wishes and leave by any door. Greater nuances.

GUIRAUD: But when I play this it has to resolve.



DEBUSSY: I don't see that it should. Why?

GUIRAUD: Well, do you find this lovely?



DEBUSSY: Yes, yes, yes!

GUIRAUD: But how would you get out of this?



I am not saying that what you do isn't beautiful, but it's theoretically absurd.

DEBUSSY: There is no theory. You have merely 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 learnt.

GUIRAUD: Come now, you are forgetting that you yourself were ten years at the Conservatoire.

DEBUSSY (*He agrees to this and admits that there can nevertheless 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. (*He is astonishingly direct in discussion and never seeks to avoid a point with a joke.*)