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AN ENGLISHWOMAN'S MEMORIES OF DEBUSSY.

BY LOUISA SHIRLEY LIEBICH.

Many years ago, when much engaged giving lecture-recitals with my husband in the West of England and elsewhere, I came across an article in a Belgian magazine on Debussy by the eminent French critic, Lionel de la Laurencie.

In the midst of all our musical activities, and the enjoyment of those of other musicians, I had had day-dreams of a new composer. I could imagine some rare music which would be 'a little new of the ever old,' and that would be more subtle, more delicately-shaded, less 'literary' and imitative than any we already knew; a music that would transmute what is 'invisible' in nature, that would be less conventional than either classic or romantic music, and consequently simpler in its weaving of sounds as sound, and not as fixed notes of a pre-determined arbitrary scale.

M. de la Laurencie's interesting article made me rub my eyes; my composer existed, my waking dream had come true. From that moment we both took every advantage of learning more of Debussy, and of buying all his compositions as they were successively issued by his publishers.

In 1906, having previously published a few articles on Debussy, I bethought myself of writing a small book about him for Mrs. R. Newmarch's series; but in order to accomplish my purpose in any way adequately, I felt I must try and make the composer's acquaintance and get his support. Then it was that I was told by people who were not his friends that he was unapproachable, a hermit, a misanthrope—in short, that I hadn't the ghost of a chance of ever getting to know him. So after a visit to Paris, where I copied at the Bibliothèque Nationale all his critiques in the *Revue Blanche*, and others from *Gil Blas*,* we returned to London, and a little later my book was published. Under the circumstances it could but be a 'First aid to Debussy,' and as such it served its purpose. A year after, M. Louis Laloy's book on Debussy came out, and as a sequel to an interesting correspondence with this distinguished critic and intimate friend of Debussy, we found ourselves once again in Paris, and were cordially welcomed the following day at M. Laloy's house. That evening he wrote to M. Debussy telling him we were in Paris, giving us at the same time the composer's telephone number, and advising us to telephone to him. The next day over the telephone Debussy invited us to come and see him. On account of the description we had been given of him as 'farouche' and unsociable, I felt nervous at the thought of seeing the lion, so to speak, in his den. But when there entered into his bright study a charming, genial, smiling man, saying pleasantly as he shook hands, 'J'ai eu beaucoup de remords à cause de vous, Madame,' I felt perfectly reassured and at my ease. His 'remorse' was occasioned, as he explained, for not having written to acknowledge my book. That year, and other years, we were always welcomed by him and his wife. We heard much interesting talk at their table and in the little study overlooking the railway and the Bois. But that first conversation remains more impressed on my memory than later ones, partly because I took notes of it at the time.

I have a special love for 'Tristan and Iseult,' not Wagner's Teutonic version, but Bédier's French 'Tristan,' which has been exquisitely translated by Mr. H. Belloe, so I was eager to know when Debussy's

opera on Bédier's text would be finished. In answer to this question he made a big circle with outstretched arms: 'It will take very long to write; it is an immense task; every year I realise more and more the difficulty of doing exactly what one wants to do.' I said something about genius doing what it must, and he corrected me: 'Genius must find its own equilibrium; it must stabilitate and fructify; all that takes a great deal of time; it cannot happen all of a moment; if it did, composition would be too easy'; and he repeated several times, 'It needs a great deal of time.' He agreed that a genius is born—not made, but 'the germ must be present,' he said, 'and then there must be years and years during which it establishes itself and develops.' Apropos of certain singers and his songs, he said: 'People imagine they can do anything they like with modern music—old music is a religion to them, a fetish; people respect and revere every bar of it, but with modern music they think they can take any liberties.' We talked of Weber, whom he loved, of Mozart, of *petites chapelles*, of musical critics, cultured and uncultured, London, &c. I learnt afterwards how characteristic of him it was to ask my husband, whenever the performances of any artist were mentioned: Is he (or she) *sincere*? I think sincerity was a religion with him.

My husband was anxious to play some of the 'Images' and other pianoforte pieces to their composer, so a day and an hour was arranged of what proved to be the first of many delightful hours of converse on the interpretation and idioms of his compositions. On one occasion, after tea, Debussy played his first *Prélude*, 'Les Danseuses de Delphes,' to us. It was as yet unpublished. I have never heard more beautiful pianoforte-playing. I have been told he did not always play to advantage in a concert hall. He said that afternoon that many of the *Préludes*, especially 'Les Danseuses' and 'Des pas dans la neige,' should only be played *entre quatre-yeux*. But in the intimacy of his own room it was like hearing a poet reciting some of his own delicate lyrics. He had a soft, deep touch which evoked full, rich, many-shaded sonorities. He told us this *Prélude* embodied his impressions of the big caryatide of 'Les Danseuses de Delphes' at the top of the grand staircase of the Louvre to the left of the 'Winged Victory.' He also played some of the 'Children's Corner,' and on another evening some pieces of Erik Satie and his own 'Cathedrale Engloutie.' We now treasure an advance copy of the first book of *Préludes* which Debussy sent to my husband to interpret in England with the inscription *en toute sympathie*, 23 iv. 10.

I especially recall his excessive neatness. His room, his writing-table, his bookshelves were always in perfect apple-pie order. Neither had he any profusion of books or pictures or objects of vertu. His handwriting is minute, and yet not in the least cramped; the letters are beautifully formed, and it is especially clear; his writing of music has the same exquisite trimness. This orderliness can be traced in his creative work, where every note is in its rightful place, with no superabundance of detail, no unnecessary effect.

Of late years signs of pain and suffering were noticeable in his appearance and manner. We have letters from him in 1909 telling of long, weary rehearsals at Covent Garden of 'Pelléas,' from whence he would return to the Kensington Palace Hotel worn out with fatigue.

His death is a world-wide loss, for, as Madame Debussy wrote me a few weeks ago, 'while leaving unforgettable remembrances, he has passed away with so many wondrous things that he yet had to reveal.'

* M. Debussy gave me the right of translation of those critiques. I published some in the *New Age* in 1909. A complete translation of them will appear shortly, including those of 1912-14 from the 'S.T.M.'