

Claude Debussy, Musicien Français (1862-1918)

François Couperin was writing evocative, satirical, and sensual character pieces long before Bach's French Suites and other 'absolute music' in the French style. Like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Couperin's 27 Ordres explore the human condition through portraits ranging from irreverent caricature to tender confession, charming levity to tragic depth. Given Couperin's generative role in French music, it is no surprise that Debussy would turn to him for inspiration in his last major work for the piano, the *Douze Études* of 1915. These studies represent a final blooming of invention, transparency, and form- a return to innocence in the face of war. They also reveal a political agenda, as evidenced by Debussy's preface, claiming Rameau and Couperin as "...our admirable clavecinistes...". Yet, the Études are dedicated to Frédéric Chopin, a composer beloved by Debussy and adopted by France, but not a native son. It is difficult to believe that the matter of the dedication, whether to Couperin or Chopin, was essentially an arbitrary one left to his publisher, Jacques Durand; Debussy excoriated copyists for the slightest error and threw tantrums if a frontispiece was not designed and printed exactly per his request. The answer lies in the inherent duality of this work and its synthesis of style as represented by Couperin and Chopin, as well as a musical cryptogram. Both Couperin and Chopin bear the same initials (F.C.) and the pitches representing their names appear in structurally important moments of the Études, with Debussy's initials (A.C.D.) making frequent appearances in their midst.

Debussy found a model for this double homage in Couperin's *Apotheosis of Lully*, a large-scale piece of chamber music that finds Couperin presiding as musical diplomat in the afterlife. In his *Apotheosis*, Couperin creates a fanciful, imaginary landscape in which he introduces Jean-Baptiste Lully, the grand seigneur of French opera, to the Italian master violinist and composer, Arcangelo Corelli. The narration suggests that both of these great men had been reveling in their place at Parnassus for many years at the

time of this composition. There is a peculiar charm that emanates from the music and its whimsical melodrama, and Couperin even writes a dance in which Lully and Corelli accompany one another on their violins, each in his own native style. This playful scene is pretext to much deeper psychological terrain, and the narrative frame provides a safe distance from which the composer can express his musical ideology, free from censorship. Couperin holds contradiction in his music with true virtuosity, duality being an essential trait of the *Commedia dell'arte* which he knew and admired. The melding of French and Italian styles in this work is the most explicit evidence of Couperin's credo: the marriage of these two aesthetics would result in the perfection of music.

Debussy does not go so far as to include narration between his études, but his preface, and the music itself reveal similar intentions. The tempi, expressive indications, and titles of the *Études* are a mix of Italian and French, a striking departure from Debussy's usual habit of writing almost exclusively French performance directions. Each étude is preceded by "Pour les..." which is likely a sly allusion to their place of composition, a seaside town in France called Pourville. The studies seem to be based on the rudiments of music itself- intervals, basic patterns of five fingers, ornaments, arpeggios, and chords. However, it is worth noting that the names of musical intervals are the same as positions in fencing- Tierces, Quartes, Sixtes, Octaves etc. Then there is the question of Italian and French musical styles which come together in these pieces. To generalize, a steady flow of sixteenth notes played evenly would be recognized as Italian, while lilting, highly ornamented phrases would be French- expressive chains of dissonance and virtuosity in the former, crisp dotted rhythms and balletic grace in the latter. Most importantly for Debussy is the omission of any discernible Germanic influence, an attempt to construct a French tradition in which the Teutonic never existed.

As Derek Canon and Jane Clark write in their brilliant book, *The Mirror of Human Life: Reflections*

on Couperin's *Pièces de Clavecin*, Couperin was closely associated with the Duchess du Maine, a formidable intellect and political force who founded in 1703, the Order of the Honey Bee, "L'Ordre de la Mouche à Miel". This secret society, a precursor to Lodges of Adoption and inclusion of women in Freemasonry, was based at her country estate at Sceaux at which theater, music, dance, and poetry were all celebrated. The Order consisted of 39 members, a number divisible only by 3 and 13, and was symbolized by the Honey Bee who "is small but inflicts great injury". When Debussy writes to Durand regarding his forthcoming *Études*, he speaks in terms suggestive of this imagery, "I have concealed a rigorous technique under the flowers of harmony. You can't catch flies with vinegar!" Sounds of the bee are particularly present in the climax of the first etude, the study for chromatics whose beginning recalls Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumblebee", and the perpetual motion of the Etude for "eight fingers", a cheeky nod to the clavecinistes who avoided using the thumb whenever possible.

Numerology and mysticism inform Debussy's work at every turn, and yet the composer became so adept at concealing his technique that one has to delve deeply into his world to touch the materials with which he builds his art. At first glance, the *Études* do not appear to have the same structural discipline as some of Debussy's earlier works, yet the composer is simply speaking a new compositional language. By creating a harmonic axis on A-flat and A-natural, Debussy superimposes the twelve studies in all their variety on this essential conflict, introduced with comic effect with the first Etude and its 'wrong' note, A-flat. The French system of solfège names this pitch La-bémol, the first two syllables homonymous with 'l'abeille', French for 'bee'. Therefore, the A-flat is the perfect code for the secret order, here veiled in comedy. Couperin wrote 27 *Ordres* and Chopin 27 *Études* (27 being 3^3) so it is only fitting that the germinative pitches of this cycle be the 13th and 27th harmonics, particularly given their relationship to the number 3 and its esoteric significance. Debussy was then completing the

Order by composing 12 etudes which could be added to either set by Couperin or Chopin to make 39.

There was a practical motivation for the composition of these pieces that helps explain their dedication as well; war time prevented many musical editions from crossing French borders, and Debussy was employed to edit the piano music of Chopin, thus creating an autonomous French version. Through this process, he played through an oeuvre like visiting an old friend, finding renewed admiration for its beauty and invention. Debussy described *Pour Les Agréments*, the last to be composed and the most quintessentially French, as “..a barcarolle, on a somewhat Italian sea.” Chopin's love of Bellini and bel canto singing along with his unique integration of its vocal style in pianistic terms, casts him in the role of Corelli living in France, while Couperin represents the French tradition with an Italian accent. Debussy produces with this work his own Apotheosis- a meeting of great minds, truly *goûts réunis*.