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Barbara L. Kelly, *French Music, Culture, and National Identity, 1870-1939*. Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2008. xix + 260 pp. Illustrations, chronology, and index. \$90.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-58046-272-3.

Review by Philip Nord, Princeton University.

The connection between politics and the fine arts is a complicated one, and the present volume, a collection of a dozen essays dealing with the musical history of France in the era of the Third Republic, is a case in point. The assembled authors are themselves far from agreed on a common line. A number of the contributors make a strong claim for the salience of politics in patterning musical agendas. Others are inclined to argue otherwise, pointing to regional or religious concerns as carrying the greater weight. The result is a volume that tantalizes and stimulates but that does not always hold together, however compelling many of the individual essays.

The political story comes in three parts. The first has to do with a revolution in the media. Widening literacy rates in the late nineteenth century fed the growth of a mass press. Newspapers, much like department stores, deepened their market by selling at cut-rate prices and by retailing not so much fashion as sensation. Edward Berenson's essay on the African explorer Savorgnan de Brazza examines how popular journalism in France made its own fortunes by sensationalizing de Brazza's exploits. De Brazza was cast as a secular saint, an above-party figure to rally a nation still reeling from the military defeat of 1870-71 and the subsequent civil war. Nor were just reading habits transformed by the media revolution but listening habits as well, the subject of Annegret Fauser's contribution on the Paris Exposition of 1889. Fair-goers were able to listen to music piped in from the Paris Opera, the Eden Theater, and the Opéra Comique. Edison himself made an appearance at the fair to promote an invention he had been perfecting over a period of years, the phonograph. New techniques of sound reproduction opened the possibility of exposing wider swaths of the public to the best of the musical canon. But did that new audience actually get tapped and with what consequences for music listening and the wider world of politics? Fauser is thought-provoking on these questions, but in the end her essay is more suggestive than analytical.

Part two of the political story touches on the musical canon itself and how it was formed. On this point, the collection advances an interpretive line that comes through with crystal clarity. The subject is treated in a trio of essays: Barbara Kelly's on Claude Debussy (Kelly is also the overall editor of this volume), Marion Schmid's on anti-Wagnerism, and Katharine Ellis's on the Rameau festival hosted by the city of Dijon in 1876. The story these essays have to tell runs something as follows. Richard Wagner had his acolytes in France—the Belgian-born composer César Franck who taught at the Conservatory and the aesthetes gathered around the *Revue wagnérienne* which first began publishing in 1885. France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian war, however, had fired up artists who wanted to create a music that was not subservient to German models but that was first and foremost French. This impulse was present from the 1870s but gathered momentum in the aftermath of the Dreyfus Affair, reaching a fever pitch during the Great War when the outright banning of Wagner's music came up for debate.

The problem, of course, was to figure out what a “French” music in fact amounted to. On the rhetorical level, the task was not so complicated. Wagner stood for murk and overblown heroics; the French tradition, by contrast, touted clarity, precision, simplicity, elegance. There was plenty of argument as to who the bearers of the French tradition were, but on the whole the tendency was to look beyond the nineteenth century—beyond Meyerbeer and Rossini—toward a pre-Romantic, Baroque past and, from this angle, the greatest master of them all turned out to be Jean-Philippe Rameau, the so-called “father of harmony.” Rameau’s hometown, Dijon, feted the composer with a gala event in 1876. Camille Saint-Saëns began in 1893 to publish Rameau’s collected works, a project that generated seventeen volumes and still remained incomplete twenty years later.

But for all the heated debate, “Frenchness” in practice proved to be an open-ended phenomenon. There were certain strictures to be sure. Debussy—and for that matter Maurice Ravel—did not much care for the symphonic form which they judged too formulaic for the play and color of the true French manner. The throbbing rhythms of Stravinsky’s *Sacre du Printemps*, which premiered in 1913, were also judged out of bounds. But after that, there was a lot of leeway for individual creation. Debussy and Ravel were great borrowers, and they didn’t always borrow from French sources: Debussy drew on non-western traditions when it suited him; Ravel made no secret of how much he had been influenced by American jazz.

Still, the Frenchness discourse was constraining and grew even more so during the Great War and in its immediate aftermath. Composers felt the pressure to define themselves as practitioners of a classical French style. This meant, as always, eschewing German examples, though now the Germans to avoid were not so much Wagnerians as serialists like Arnold Schoenberg. The postwar group known as Les Six—eclectic and avant-garde though they may have been (even to the point of a sneaking interest in Schoenberg himself)—made sure to wrap themselves in a neoclassical mantle that insisted on the wit and sparkle, French traits both, of their compositions. The same was true of Stravinsky who, now settled in France, repositioned himself as an apostle, no longer of a pounding primitivism, but of a return to classical form, however updated by modern musical means.

This is not to say that a triumphal neoclassicism swept all before it, an observation that provides the point of departure for part three of the collection’s political story. There were French composers who still felt the pull of German traditions, Vincent d’Indy for one who was a student of Franck’s (more on d’Indy below). Brian Hart contributes an essay that insists on the undiminished status of the symphonic form in *fin-de-siècle* France, Debussy and Ravel notwithstanding. Arts officials valued the form as a symbol of musical prestige, whatever its German associations, and decided to subsidize symphonic composition, albeit with mixed results. And then there were Alfred Bruneau and Émile Zola. They collaborated on an opera, *Messidor*, which premiered at the Paris Opera in 1897. James Ross analyzes the piece, the story of a modern-day peasant community that almost comes apart when a factory moves to the neighborhood. Hometown solidarity is in the end preserved and in the process basic French values—liberty, equality and fraternity—reaffirmed. But, as Ross shows, the opera used Wagnerian means to achieve its French revolutionary ends. Each of the six principal characters is identified by a *Leitmotif*, and the crowd scenes are handled with a choral care that pays due homage to the composer of *Die Meistersinger*. Nonetheless, *Messidor* ended up both a critical and a box-office failure, proof (if proof is needed) that good politics do not always make for good music and that Wagnerian musical technique even when lacquered over with French national values was not at all easy to sell to turn-of-the-century French audiences.

Such then is the Kelly volume’s overall narrative line: an ever more powerful nationalist mood, fashioned in part by new media like the penny press, pushed the French musical scene toward a self-conscious classicism, muting (without ever eliminating) Germanic strains. It is a line, however, to which not all the contributors subscribe.

Three essays deal with regional musical culture in France: Ellis's, already mentioned, on Dijon, Detmar Klein's on Alsace, and Didier Francfort's on Lorraine. Ellis demonstrates that Parisian critics glossed the Dijon festival as a patriotic exercise but that the *dijonnais* themselves were more inclined to understand the event in boosterish terms. They did not much care for Rameau's music which struck them as outdated. Still, Rameau was a native son, and making a fuss over him, it was hoped, would raise the city's profile. In Klein's essay as well, it is the local that triumphs. In Alsace, since 1871 a Reich territory, the locals mobilized to resist German cultural hegemony, doing so in the name of French revolutionary ideals. This did not mean, however, that they were French patriots pure and simple. What Alsatians were after, Klein argues, was a fusion of cultures, the making of a "proto-national Alsatian identity" that would encompass both French and German elements. Alsatians conceived of themselves as heirs to the principles of 1789 but also as speakers of *Elsässerditsch* who ate sauerkraut and wore, if they were women, the butterfly-shaped headgear known as the Schlupfkapp (p. 230). Francfort's piece on Lorraine is set on the other side of the border in French Nancy. Nancy-based officials and artists made an effort to promote a musical culture that was true French, but on closer inspection it turns out that local tastes and practices were not so different from those prevailing across the border in the German-annexed portion of Lorraine. In Francfort's account, in contrast to Klein's, it is not a proto-national identity that gets the upper hand but what he calls an emergent "common European culture," yet the general point still remains: the French national story gets trumped by regional concerns, whether autonomist or cross-border in character (pp. 246-47).

Nor is it just to the regional that the French national story loses out but to the religious as well. Three essays, once again, take up the religious theme: Steven Huebner's on Vincent d'Indy, Debora Silverman's on Paul Gauguin, and Deborah Mawer's on André Jolivet.

D'Indy is, at first encounter, something of a puzzle. He was a nationalist anti-Dreyfusard and a devotee of tradition. The Schola Cantorum which he helped to found in 1894 was, indeed, conceived as a bulwark of musical traditionalism. The curriculum, as d'Indy designed it, took medieval Gregorian chant as its starting point and went from there. And yet, as already noted, d'Indy was a student of César Franck, himself an admirer of Wagner. D'Indy was committed to the symphonic form, and he revered Beethoven, publishing in 1911 an admiring biography of the German-born composer. There is an apparent tension here between d'Indy's French nationalism and his sympathy for "German" forms and composers. Huebner manages to resolve the contradiction by insisting on the Catholic dimension of d'Indy's world view. D'Indy believed in the existence of a unitary Western musical tradition. Its essence was religious, the best works expressing a commitment to service in God's will, and d'Indy identified Beethoven—above all the late Beethoven of the *Missa Solemnis*—as one of the standard-bearers of this sacred heritage. But German music had since then strayed down overgrown Wagnerian byways, and it fell to composers like Franck to set things to rights once more. And it was via Franck who, though Belgian in origin, worked for decades in Paris that the banner of the sacred tradition had passed into French hands.

Silverman's Gauguin and Mawer's Jolivet are no less religion-minded than Huebner's d'Indy, though they do seem to have been a good deal less *engagés*. The political determinants of Gauguin's art get no treatment at all. Jolivet, it seems, had fleeting left-wing sympathies which led him to join a pro-Popular Front musical organization in the mid-thirties. But then again, what Silverman and Mawer care about is not how politics condition art but how artists explore the technical means to express spiritual conviction, an idiosyncratic Christianity in Gauguin's case, a pantheist mysticism in Jolivet's. Both painter and composer wanted to connect the viewer or the listener to transcendental worlds beyond the material here-and-now. To this end, Gauguin turned away from the naturalist styles of nineteenth-century painting, experimenting with color and form, not to communicate an impression, but to evoke inner mental states. Gauguin's anti-materialism indeed manifested itself in the very techniques he made use of. He employed white matte grounds, layered over with thin oil paints easy to absorb into the canvas, the combination creating a smooth chalky surface, a flattening effect that looked less like a

painted canvas than a church fresco. Jolivet's *modus operandi* was in critical respects analogous. Les Six drew on modern, popular forms to create a music that resonated with the present-day, but Jolivet dismissed such practices as frivolous. His aspirations were other-worldly. He was just as willing to borrow as Les Six, but he turned to Eastern sources—to Polynesian dance and chant, to Javanese gamelan—for inspiration. Unfamiliar rhythms and harmonies, novel instrumentation, all served the same end: to dislocate Western listeners and, through dislocation, to lift them out of themselves onto a higher, mystical plane.

In certain respects, then, this is a volume at odds with itself. Nation-building through media and music is the central theme, but it is a theme undercut by region and religion. Some of the undercutting, I would venture, is more apparent than real, above all on the matter of religion. Remember that d'Indy was not just a fervent Catholic but an anti-Dreyfusard too. Gauguin, before heading out to a more solitary life in Tahiti, spent time in the mid-1880s at Pont-Aven in Brittany working alongside Émile Bernard and Maurice Denis, Catholic rigorists both of whom were also men of the nationalist Right. And Jolivet, left-wing though he may have been as an individual, belonged to a group of composers, La Jeune France, whose dominant personalities, Jean-Yves Daniel-Lesur and Olivier Messiaen, were themselves not so left-wing. Daniel-Lesur and Messiaen, like d'Indy, Bernard, and Denis before them, combined Catholic belief with a politics of the Right, a politics which in Daniel-Lesur's case drew him during the Second World War into the orbit of Maréchal Philippe Pétain's Vichy regime. Right-wing politics and the aspiration to a music of spirit were not always compatible commitments, but they went hand in hand in this period with an unsettling frequency. From this perspective, the religious theme does not so much lead out of the political story as complement it.

But the interpretive tensions that exist in this collection, whether resolvable or not, do not in the end detract from its overall accomplishment. Music history and history *tout court* have more often than not pursued parallel paths, the one uninformed by the other. There are, of course, notable exceptions to the rule, Jane Fulcher for one who has worked long and hard to promote dialogue between the two disciplines.[1] The present volume will carry this conversation a valuable step further, and for this it deserves the gratitude of historians and musicologists alike.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Barbara L. Kelly, "Introduction: The Roles of Music and Culture in National Identity Formation."

Edward Berenson, "Unifying the French nation: Savorgnan de Brazza and the Third Republic."

Annegret Fauser, "New Media, Source-Bonding, and Alienation: Listening at the 1889 Exposition Universelle."

Barbara L. Kelly, "Debussy and the Making of a *musicien français*: *Pelléas*, the Press, and World War I."

Marion Schmid, "*A bas Wagner!*: The French Press Campaign against Wagner during World War I."

Steven Huebner, "D'Indy's Beethoven."

James Ross, "*Messidor*: Republican Patriotism and the French Revolutionary Tradition in Third Republic Opera."

Brian Hart, "The Symphony and National Identity in Early Twentieth-Century France."

Debora Silverman, "Transcending the Word?: Religion and Music in Gauguin's Quest for Abstraction."

Deborah Mawer, "Jolivet's Search for a New French Voice: Spiritual 'Otherness' in *Mana* (1935)."

Katharine Ellis, "Rameau in Late Nineteenth-Century Dijon: Memorial, Festival, Fiasco."

Detmar Klein, "Becoming Alsatian: Anti-German and Pro-French Cultural Propaganda in Alsace, 1898-1914."

Didier Francfort, "National Identity and the Double Border in Lorraine, 1870-1914."

#### NOTES

[1] Jane Fulcher, *French Cultural Politics and Music: From the Dreyfus Affair to the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Fulcher, *The Composer as Intellectual: Music and Ideology in France, 1914-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

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