
H-France Review Vol. 11 (June 2011), No. 131

Paul-André Bempéchat, *Jean Cras, Polymath of Music and Letters*. Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2010. 598 pp. \$99.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 075460683X.

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The history of music is strewn with stories of "unjustly neglected composers" whose names and works were celebrated during their lifetimes but which faded into obscurity after their deaths. Breton composer Jean Cras (1879-1932), the subject of a recent biography by Paul-André Bempéchat, is one of the more fascinating members of this large and august group: he was famous both as a composer *and* a French naval officer. In the annals of naval history, Cras' name has come down through posterity. But Cras the composer, who was hailed by critics as being the most gifted and innovative of the younger generation of composers and who, for a time, was "at the zenith of French cultural life" (p. 104), is now forgotten. In a mostly admirable new study, the author seeks to restore the composer's erstwhile "Ravelian stature" (p. xx1). Jean Cras and his music could not have a more ardent champion than Paul-André Bempéchat, who wrote his dissertation on Cras and who is the author of numerous articles on Jean Cras and Breton music. With this book, Mr. Bempéchat confirms his reputation as the reigning expert on the composer. He makes clear on every page his thorough knowledge of and reverence for Cras and his music.

The current study is divided into two large sections, the first on Cras' life and the second on his works. In a preface (p. xxii), the author explains that Monique Cras, the composer's daughter, allowed him unfettered access to five volumes of her father's letters, as well as his diaries and other documents. Through liberal quotations from these primary sources, Bempéchat gives the reader access to the composer's most intimate thoughts on as well as the development of his philosophical, religious, and creative processes. In 2006, Bempéchat discovered 10,000 more letters by Cras, unknown to the Cras family, stored in a trunk. However, this remarkable treasure trove of documents is not incorporated into the current study. The author asserts that the book is meant to serve only as an introduction to the composer and his music, and that "a more complete, nuanced" examination of Cras' inner world must be left to "future generations" of scholars (p. xxii). While the personal portrait of Jean Cras drawn by Bempéchat is richly detailed and insightful, his disclaimer might also well serve as an explanation for—and preemptive defense against—the study's flaws, which shall be addressed later.

It takes the author some time to begin the biography proper. He precedes the narrative of Cras' life with an engrossing traversal of the subjects as far-ranging as French military history, the history of Brittany and Breton music, and French colonial exploits. The first biographical chapter ("Dualities, Pluralities, Synthesis") begins with an overview of the composer's native Brest, where economic, political, and cultural life was dominated by the French Navy. Cras' father was a naval medical officer and his mother, an accomplished amateur musician. Jean Cras showed an early talent for music, but made the pragmatic choice of a career in the Navy, which he entered at age 17. The tours of duty that took him all over the world made him a keen observer of diverse cultures. His worldwide voyages to dozens of French colonies and protectorates impassioned him to make a study of "exotic" musical idioms, scale systems, melodies, and instruments. His keen scientific and mathematical skills led Cras to invent a wireless communication system (p. 42) as well as a directional ruler-compass that would eventually become

standard equipment in the French armed forces (p. 89). Cras' service during the First World War included command of a torpedo boat and his acts of bravery resulted in steady promotions through the ranks. By the year of his untimely death in 1932, Cras had risen to the rank of Major General. Yet, throughout his thirty-six-year naval career, Cras, "smitten by the muses both musical and maritime" (p. 67), yearned to devote more time to composition. During solitary periods at sea and through the most horrific periods of wartime he found refuge in his fervent Catholic faith, score study, and musical and philosophical writings. Descriptions of his struggles to achieve "spiritual unity of mind, body, and soul in tandem" during periods of "homesickness and alienation" make for some of the most moving pages of the book (p. 70). Particularly fascinating is Cras' creation of an "imaginary despot" who goads him to work on the orchestration of his opera (pp. 94-95).

Throughout his life, Cras "found himself juggling not only two disparate careers . . . but also their governing moral and metaphysical precepts" (p. 67). While Cras' naval career and his manifold scientific accomplishments are given a fairly straightforward accounting, the story of Cras' musical career proper is less satisfactorily presented. It is delivered in small pieces, which are scattered, somewhat confusingly, throughout the book. The aspect of Cras' musical life examined most fully is his relationship with composer Henri Duparc (pp. 71-73). At the height of his renown, Duparc, who, like Cras, was highly self-disciplined and fervently Catholic, became the younger man's teacher and mentor. He encouraged and exhorted his pupil to find time to write music, despite the duties of naval life and the rigors and stresses of life at sea. For the next thirty years, Cras and Duparc corresponded regularly, developing an important friendship that enriched the lives of both men. The music produced by Cras represents an amalgamation of classical forms, Breton modal melodies, and orientalist and "exotic" elements culled from musics heard during his many years of worldwide travel. In addition to producing a sizable number of works for voice and piano and chamber ensembles, Cras also managed, despite the duress of Navy life, to complete an opera, *Polyphème* (on a libretto by Albert Samain), which, in 1921, won a prestigious music contest sponsored by the City of Paris. *Polyphème* was performed for the first time in 1922 and, over the next three years, ran for an additional sixteen performances to considerable critical acclaim. The subsequent interest in Cras's music resulted in numerous performances of his songs, concertos and chamber music by France's greatest vocal and instrumental artists and by the prestigious Colonne, Lamoureux, and Padeloup orchestras. These performances almost always resulted in positive, often glowing, reviews.

Regrettably, no information is provided on the crucial professional networking and behind-the-scenes advocacy that would have been necessary to set the steadily rising trajectory of Jean Cras' admirable career into motion. Winning a major competition alone (in any artistic domain) does not necessarily assure a successful professional ascent. The reader is thus left to wonder how the introverted, reclusive Cras managed to negotiate the labyrinthian Paris music scene, with all its partisanship and conflicting artistic politics. Influential organizations and institutions such as the Société nationale de musique and the Schola Cantorum and their constituent leading members are mentioned only in passing, and there are scant details of how Cras, on extended assignment in Paris between 1922 and 1924 (p. 105), interacted with other musicians in that city, both before and after the premiere of *Polyphème*. Although Bempéchat asserts that the opera's success "catapulted [Cras] to the summit of European musical life" (p. 302), he provides no clues as to the composer's personal relationship to that musical life. Examination of networks of professional relationships are the very stuff of musical biography and, in a foundational study such as this one, which strives, among other things, to "project a more complete image of Jean Cras" (p. xxii), the absence of more hard information on Cras as a composer among colleagues and his relationship to the musical communities that championed his works is puzzling indeed.

In place of a straightforward chronicling of the development of Cras' musical career, Bempéchat devotes a chapter (subtitled "Faith, Art, Character,") to Cras' spiritual development and the effect of his religious convictions on his compositions. One of the most challenging tasks for a biographer of a creative artist is identifying the motivations and intentions behind the creative act. In Cras' case, there is no ambiguity.

Early and often, Bempéchat identifies Cras' "unshakeable faith in God" (p. 133) as the prime mover behind the creative impulse. According to Cras, "(a)rt is the most exalted, most tangible form of human expression of God. The artist is not art: the artist is an instrument who suffers, who slaves away at a task which is imposed upon and dictated to him" (p. 132). Cras strives to live in a manner consistent with his faith-based philosophical constructs. In doing so, he eschews association with composers and other creative artists whose worldliness and "decadence" he perceives to have spilled into their creative lives. Thus, of Debussy, he writes: "When an artist does not delve into the recesses of his soul, the source of his inspiration burns out at a certain point, and there is nothing more painful than this decadence, which, at life's end, discloses on the 'physical' nature of the art" (p. 162). Of "Debussy's best compositions," Cras writes: "I would not . . . say: 'What a beautiful soul this man must have; as long as I do not feel my soul uplifted toward God, Debussy will remain for me a marvellous alchemist of rare perfumes, but not an artist'" (p. 163). Bempéchat asserts that "Cras' artistic preference relied exclusively on the degree of affinity he felt toward a work of art and, by extension, toward the character of its creator" (p. 162). It is often difficult to ascertain on what criteria these affinities were based, and Bempéchat does not always elucidate. For example, in recounting Cras' visit to the home another sailor-artist, "exotic" writer Pierre Loti (to whose orientalist works Cras' compositions were frequently compared), Bempéchat asserts, "Doubtless, Loti's dandyism, his escapism and his epicurean promiscuity preclude the possibility of any further common attributes with Jean Cras, the God-fearing church-goer and introverted family man. In fact, the parallels drawn between him and Loti after the première of [Cras'] *Journal de bord* had horrified Cras" (pp. 120-121). And, yet, fifteen pages later, Bempéchat reports that Cras venerates symbolist poet Paul Verlaine, "whose poems he qualified as 'succulent', whose every published word he had read, and whose cause he trumpeted before a crowd of philistine shipmates" (p. 135). The reader is thus left to wonder if, in select cases (like Verlaine's), where the creative work is of superior quality, Cras is able to forgive (or ignore) that artist's carnal appetites (homosexuality, alcoholism, drug addiction)—predilections that, traditionally, have revolted many a "God-fearing church-goer and introverted family man" (p. 120).

Bempéchat begins part two ("The Works: Struggle and Evolution") with a preface that surveys the timeline and the larger aesthetic and musical issues around Cras' compositions. In a brief passage on musical orientalism, the author posits Cras' extensive and "authentic" use of "exotic" materials, like Celtic drones in perfect fifths and the pentatonic scale, against "the robustly kitsch and ultimately condescending representations" of non-European cultures by composers like Debussy and Ravel (p. 203). Ralph Locke's landmark studies on musical orientalism do not figure in the notes or the bibliography.[1] An examination of these important works might have yielded a more nuanced discussion by the author of a complex issue central to Cras' composition.

On the other hand, Bempéchat's survey and analyses of Jean Cras' compositions that follow are thorough and engaging, highly detailed but never dense. The author divides Cras' compositions into five periods: the youthful (mostly unpublished) works of the late nineteenth century; the Franck-inspired works of 1899-1910, when Cras experiments with cyclical devices and dense chromatic harmony; 1909-1922, during which time Cras' opera *Polyphème* undergoes its long and fruitful gestation; 1922-1929, a period dominated by the composition of chamber music and orchestral works that often incorporate Breton and orientalist elements; and the "late period" (1930-1932), when Cras was preoccupied with the composition of his Piano Concerto. This is the best part of the book. The analyses of some fifty works from each of Cras' creative periods, in every genre and in many styles, are models of intelligent, cogent writing. Bempéchat, who is the founder of Lyrica, a society devoted to the scholarly study of word-music relations, is at his most illuminating when parsing Cras's text-settings in his opera and songs. The inclusion of many complete song texts and their translations and the generous number of musical examples, beautifully rendered, facilitate the analytical explorations. The analysis of the 1921 song *Image* is particularly memorable. These pleasurable journeys through Cras' compositions suscite the desire to hear the music performed.

Would that Bempéchat had been so engaging in the brief passages following each analysis that give each composition's backstory and provide a short discussion of the critical reception. Here, Bempéchat becomes inexplicably and unhelpfully terse, too frequently opting to present amusing anecdotes instead of pertinent and vital historical information. To cite one example: in a section on "the Legacy" of *Polyphème* (pp. 301-302), the lead bass-baritone, Vanni-Marcoux is only briefly mentioned. He is given equally short shrift after the long and penetrating discussions of the song cycles *Fontaines* (pp. 365-378) and *Cinq Robaïyats de Omar Khayyam* (pp. 378-390), both of which were given their first performances by the singer. Here is what Bempéchat doesn't tell you: Vanni-Marcoux was the most celebrated French bass-baritone of his era, internationally acclaimed for his dramatic portrayals of over 240 operatic roles, the quality of his musicianship, and his impeccable diction. In addition to being an opera star, he was an ardent champion of the art-song repertoire. It would seem to be worth noting, therefore, that, after creating the role of Polyphème, Vanni-Marcoux (whose participation in the premiere surely added to the production's prestige) became a champion of Cras' music, including the composer's songs on the programs of his annual Paris recitals two years in a row (1924 and 1925). Both concerts, highly publicized, sold-out affairs, garnered stellar reviews, which no doubt helped immeasurably to sustain Jean Cras' visibility in Paris cultural life and keep his name on the musical map. Scholars and other readers might find this information more helpful and interesting than inclusion, in the section on *Polyphème's* "legacy," of an anecdote, wholly unrelated to Cras, about pre-production problems in Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (p. 301).

As might be expected in such a long book, there are some other errors and omissions as well. Cras' mother Pauline is mistakenly referred to by Cras' wife's name, Isaure (p. 59); the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1878 is said to have taken place in 1881 (p. 71); Monique Cras' death "[on] the anniversary of the birth date of her father's beloved Beethoven" is identified as December 16 in one spot (p. xxii) and as December 17 in another (p. 58). In a discussion of Cras' artistic neutrality vis-à-vis the burgeoning Breton nationalist musical movement, Bempéchat makes (untranslated) reference to "Les Huit" (pp. 167-168) without ever making clear that "the eight" in question were the founding members of the Association des compositeurs bretons, mentioned much earlier and only in a footnote (p. 114). In a section on the "unfair, unfounded, and unjustified" parallels drawn by critics between Samain's libretto for *Polyphème* and Maeterlinck's libretto for Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (pp. 298-301), Bempéchat misses an opportunity to counterbalance his arguments about Maeterlinck's "emotionally pallid verbiage" (p. 301) with a discussion of another important French opera on a Maeterlinck text: *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* (1907), by Cras' friend Paul Dukas. Dukas, like Cras, was a neo-classical composer who revered Beethoven and Franck and frequently employed cyclic compositional procedures, and who succeeded, in his opera, in finding an artistic middle ground between the "unexpressed" qualities of symbolist text and the emotionally-charged, poignant "[giving of] voice to human hearts" (p. 301) that Bempéchat lauds in Cras's music. While Bempéchat generally does due diligence in providing English translations of French words and phrases, a fair number (e.g., *bricoleur* [p. 105], *épater le bourgeois* [p. 190]) and a chapter title ("*Feuille de route*," [p. 195]) are left untranslated. And the unfortunate decision not to number the measures of the individual movements in the autobiographical Piano Quintet (1922), analysed on pp. 354-365, creates some confusion for those trying to follow the analysis, especially of the second movement.

The most disappointing aspects of the book have to do with Bempéchat's puzzling approach to the critical reception of Cras' works and his often unhelpful method of citing press reviews. Bempéchat frequently cites two sources for reviews: a biographical article by Monique Cras and Dom Angelico Surchamp and Annick Le Boterff's unpublished catalogue of Jean Cras' works.[2] It may very well be that, in 1993, when Mr. Bempéchat was doing research for his dissertation, these sources and the Bibliothèque nationale's catalogue of press reviews for music, the *Fonds Montpensier*, were the only sources of critical reception available to him. But it is not clear why, in augmenting, deepening, and sharpening his previous research for the purposes of writing a book, Bempéchat limited his research into critical reception to the above-mentioned sources. From time to time Bempéchat grouses about the lack

of intelligent criticism of Cras' works, but noticeably absent from the text and the bibliography are articles from the influential periodicals *Le Ménestrel* and *La Revue musicale*, two of the most important sources of intelligent musical criticism in early twentieth-century France. Moreover, as a twenty-first-century scholar, Bempéchat had easy online access to almost every press source quoted and cited, especially through the Bibliothèque nationale's own database, Gallica. Therefore, when, for example, the author writes that the premiere of Cras' *Légende* for cello and orchestra "received spectacular reviews" (p. 489) there can be no justification for citing (in note 130) "Le Boterff, p. 189" as the solitary source of the reviews (as also occurs on pp. 364, n. 7; 366, n. 12; 390, n. 33; 430, n. 68; 484, n. 124) when fuller citations can be easily provided. A reader hoping to track down the original source of Paul Le Flem's laudatory review of Cras' *Journal de bord* is referred only to "Cras and Surchamp, *Zodiaque*" (p. 447, n. 94). The *Zodiaque* article is also listed as the source for the "enthusiastic" writings of the most oft-cited critic, André Himonet (quoted on pp. 103 and 113 and at length on p. 123). It requires considerable hunting on the part of the reader to locate the name and source of Himonet's original article in the bibliography (p. 535, under "Reviews of the Jean Cras Commemorations and Festivals"). Sometimes Bempéchat provides no footnote at all, as is the case when he reports that *Le Figaro's* music critic, Robert Brussel "pondered the fate of [Cras'] music, fearing it would be remembered in name only" (p. 182).

These weaknesses aside, *Jean Cras, Polymath of Music and Letters* is an important new work, essential reading for anyone interested in French twentieth-century music and the music of Brittany. Paul-André Bempéchat has presented Jean Cras in a compelling manner and the present study will surely incite new interest in the reclusive composer's beautiful compositions. The question of why Cras' music fell into oblivion after World War II, discussed in the final section of the biography ("Opus posthumous," pp. 181-191) remains open for consideration by future scholars. Bempéchat asserts that the fact that Cras' music was considered "tonally anachronistic at a time when *l'avant-garde* controlled much of European artistic life" (p. 190) and that a "quasi-idolatrous, pan-Germanocentric orientation to musical composition and theory, predicated on the twelve-tone idiom" (p. 191) dominated post World War II musical circles. Neither contention seems wholly convincing. In the case of the first assertion, the popularity--post-1945 and enduring to the present day--of many tonal and tonally-oriented composers, including Poulenc, Rachmaninoff, Vaughan Williams, and Samuel Barber, seems to contradict the first argument. As regards the second, while Pierre Boulez might indeed have been the darling of the of the post World War II European avant-garde, it is Olivier Messiaen--another humble, philosophically inclined and deeply devout Catholic--who is generally considered today to be the most influential French composer of the second half of the twentieth century. Perhaps the simplest explanation--one that, regrettably, still applies in 2011--can be found in a 1930 review by *Le Ménestrel's* critic Jean Lobrot of the successful and well-received first performance of Cras' *Légende* for cello and orchestra:

"This program, well conceived for real music-lovers and well executed by the Padeloup Orchestra under the skillful direction of M. Piero Coppola, only attracted a small audience. Perhaps the good weather was the cause; but I rather believe, as my neighbor expressed it so well, that it was because neither Wagner nor the Ninth nor the C-minor nor the "Pastoral" [symphonies of Beethoven] were on the playbill. And this public, who always wants to be served the same [musical] dishes, is singularly disconcerting and discouraging!"[3]

NOTES

[1] Ralph Locke, "Cutthroats and Casbah Dancers, Muezzins and Timeless Sands: Musical Images of the Middle East," *Nineteenth-Century Music* 22(1998-1999):20-53 and Ralph Locke, *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[2] Monique Cras and Dom Angelico Surchamp, "Jean Cras," *Zodiaque* 30/23(January 1980): 3-50 and Annick Le Boterff, *Catalogue des oeuvres de Jean Cras*, unpublished manuscript. Copy in possession of the author.

[3] Jean Lobrot, "Les Grands Concerts: Concerts-Pasdeloup," *Le Ménestrel* 92/14(4 April 1930): 156.

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ISSN 1553-9172