Laughing And Dancing From The Trenches

By Catherine Kautsky

I recently began to prepare for a lecture-recital on the piano music written in France during World War I, wondering what lessons I might glean about the interweaving of music and politics. I began by reviewing my history, most notably by re-reading *All Quiet on the Western Front* and reminding myself how many died and how. I'd forgotten, or perhaps never processed, the extent of the catastrophe: some 10 to16 million dead, the French alone contributing 7,500,000 troops, of whom 75 percent were killed or wounded. But human brains aren't good at processing tragedy of such dimensions; I hoped that listening to the music would have a more visceral impact.

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And so I began my mission to trace how music, that statesmanly, international language, forged its way through the war—building community, understanding and healing on all sides, yes? When I told an elderly friend of my project, she asked radiantly if I also saw how music today might save us from terrorism. I wasn't yet ready to answer definitively.

Soon, though, I wasn't feeling optimistic. As I began to peruse the piano music of Ravel, Debussy, Satie and Stravinsky (not French, but living in France) that emerged from the war years, my perplexity grew.[1] Where were the funeral marches, the requiems, the songs of mourning or brotherhood? Where was the pianistic equivalent of the Beethoven 9th Symphony (1824), proclaiming "Alle menschen werden bruder," or the Britten War Requiem (1962) decrying the "shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells?" Where, more modestly but immediately, was the Janacek Sonata of 1905, whose two movements, "Presentiment" and "Death," seemed so aptly suited to the debacle soon to follow?

I persisted, astonished at the enthusiasm an imminent bloodbath could generate. *Le Figaro*, the Parisian newspaper, touted the "savage poetry"[2] of war, Paul Claudel, the writer and diplomat, extolled its "freedom…[and] adventure,"[3] and Marcel Duchamps, the artist, enthusiastically invoked the "great enema,"[4] that was forthcoming. I wondered whether composers might be more tuned in to suffering, less invested in the power of nationalistic words and slogans by dint of their access to a non-verbal language of emotions. Apparently not. Ravel looked to "this holy war… [as] the most grandiose and the most noble action since man came into existence."[5] Debussy spoke of attacking "a meticulous brutality that is unmistakably 'Made in Germany.'"[6] Satie, ever eager to rewrite tragedy as farce, strove for music "without sauerkraut"[7] and began collaborating with Cocteau, Picasso and Massine on the circus music of *Parade*. Stravinsky, according to Romain Rolland, regarded German intellectuals with "a contempt without limit,"[8] presumably including such luminaries as Thomas Mann, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud in his sweeping denouncement. I grew increasingly despairing.

A virulent nationalism was obviously raging among the French. It was traceable back 45 years to the ignominious defeat of the French in the Franco-Prussian War and, in addition, among musicians, to 200 years of Germanic

musical hegemony, culminating in the hubris of Wagner. Thus, rather than responding to the call of war with a desire to become global ambassadors for peace, French composers dug into their musical trenches. Loyalty was an unassailable virtue among soldiers, and art music apparently responded to this same military imperative, bringing itself into line with the bugles, bands and anthems that had always been part of a military presence. Debussy bitterly assailed the "Austro-boches miasma," asking warily in 1915, "Did no one suspect these people of plotting the destruction of our art as they had prepared the destruction of our countries?"[9] Musical borders were placed under tight patrol.

In fact, the battle lines had already been drawn years before, and Debussy had announced them fiercely, if comically, in *Golliwogg*'s *Cakewalk* (1906–08) when he parodied *Tristan*. He instructed the performer to play the tiny *Tristan* excerpt—and only that excerpt— "avec grande émotion," but therein lay the rub. For if overt grande émotion was the province of the Germans, and only the Germans, a vast territory had indeed been ceded. Where then were the French to set up camp?

With short pieces, dances and comedy it would appear. And there our story could stop, for these choices were unsurprising given the history of French piano music: Fauré and Chabrier (indeed Chopin) were worthy predecessors when it came to miniatures, and Debussy and Satie had added more humor to the mix early on in the century. Was it possible that nothing basic changed because of the war—-that music is so insulated it proceeds unperturbed as the world explodes around it?

I wish that story were wrong, for it is deeply unsatisfying to feel that one's art is so apart from the angst of the world, and, right or wrong, it seems more interesting to explore how a nation's art comes to tell a story in synch with its politics. Despite Debussy's sad disclaimer that "War is a state of mind contradictory to thought,"[10] and "the long drought created in my mind by the war,"[11] his small *Berceuse héroïque,* written in 1914 for inclusion in the Belgian relief project, *King Albert's Book*, was one of the few solo piano works that grappled notably with the times. It incorporated the sounds of bugles, a despondent march and the Belgian national anthem. In the end, though, even Debussy found it an ineffective composition, completely incommensurate with his own personal despair at "this terrible cataclysm"[12] and a feeble testament to his belief that "30 million Boches can't destroy French thought."[13] His wonderful Etudes, written only a year later, may have reminded listeners of early French clavecin embellishments and thus furthered national loyalty, but I think politically they are most notable for what they don't do: outside of the early *Pour le Piano,* they are the only significant non-referential piano music written by Debussy, a composer drawn like no other to diverse programmatic associations. Though they may obviously reflect the composer's anguish over the war in subliminal ways, they nevertheless form a striking commentary on the divorce of music and realpolitik, and testimony to the schism between Debussy's most pressing thoughts and his musical allusions to them. In fact, only *En Blanc et noir* (1915) stands apart as a significant and explicit response to the war by France's preeminent composer, but as a two-piano work, it was far grander than much solo music and is outside the purview of this article. Ravel, Satie and Stravinsky provide more relevant examples.

So on to Ravel, for of the three he was without doubt the most solemnly engaged, both by virtue of his nature and of his direct involvement in the war. He insisted on enlisting in the military despite an initial medical deferral, he spoke about the war with passion, and in 1919 he wrote a two-piano work, *La Valse*, (existing, though less frequently performed, in a solo version) that arguably goes farther than any other toward capturing Vienna's tailspin from grace. If we look first at the last important work he wrote for piano before the outbreak of hostilities, *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales* (1911), we see that Ravel was already concerning himself with Austro-French relations. Far from initiating hostilities, however, this piece, whose namesakes were Schubert's *Valses sentimentales, Op. 50* and *Valses nobles, Op. 77*, obviously posited a noble and sentimental compatriot, as opposed to an intransigent enemy-to-be. Perhaps Schubert was a distant enough saint, no threat by dint of chronological distance. Or, more likely, certain aspects of Schubert were particularly safe. For it was not the sturm und drang of the C Minor Sonata, D. 958 or the second movement of the A Major, D. 959 to which Ravel paid homage. Rather it was the miniature dances, the lovely music with little "grande émotion," which allowed a Frenchman to safely declare his *amitié* with those powerful foreigners. This was music that was small, elegant and refined; it brought Schubert to the French side, and the quote Ravel placed at the opening of his own noble waltzes, dedicating them to "*…le plaisir délicieux et toujours nouveau d'une occupation inutile"* ("….the delicious and always new pleasure of a useless occupation"), made that yet more clear. Beethoven and Wagner saw themselves as neither delicious nor useless; their defiant heroism made a Frenchman shudder. Far more admirable in France to appreciate the ineffable "sounds and perfumes that turn in the evening air" (Baudelaire/Debussy)[14] than to grapple with the gods.

And that defining Gallic virtue, that ability to reside in the sensual and fleeting, was made more emphatically clear once the war began. From 1914–1917 Ravel worked intermittently on *Tombeau de Couperin*, his quintessentially French dance suite doubling as a war opus. The piece not only pays homage to the great French

clavecinist composer, François Couperin, as its title suggests, but, more pertinently, each of the six pieces in the suite is dedicated to a fallen soldier Ravel had known. The subtext is moving, and Ravel himself designed the funerary urn which adorned the title page. And yet, without the urn and the dedications, would the music itself tell us of the suffering and loss embedded in those pages? I think not. The music is stunning—elegant, melancholy and startlingly beautiful—but equally stunning is the degree to which it divorces itself from death and destruction. Not a single piece is slow; there is no torment. Instead this Prélude, Fugue, Forlane, Rigaudon, Menuet and Toccata play by the rules of propriety and avoid unseemly emotional display. Their acid harmonies are restrained, processed, never savage, never desolate. They speak to an organized sense of French nationhood, honed and pedigreed, and they proudly represent their nation against perceived German barbarism like a sharpened bayonet. Their very lightness is their national signature; more weight would place them in the enemy camp.

Ravel here established adherence to tradition and the invocation of French icons as a potent nationalist tool. His post-war commentary on the enemy, *La Valse,* was less obedient to precedent, but even as its wild Viennese waltz shattered in completely unorthodox fashion, it retained its allegiance to dance and euphoric movement. Originally conceived in 1914 as a piece entitled *Wien,* by 1919 its nostalgia was irrevocably linked with regret, and its innocently seductive waltz had become manic and explosive. And yet, despite the fact that this is the portrait of a culture spun out of control, Ravel eschews any overt sign of grief. I was struck by a posted YouTube commentary, naïve, but nonetheless revealing: **"**This is French music, light and ecstatic, not German, which is heavy and bombastic."[15] Ergo, even in the face of a tragedy, whose weight might sink the heart of that heavy German, Ravel's music continues to levitate. Should you doubt me, watch the YouTube clip informatively entitled, "Bernstein Dancing to Ravel's La Valse!"[16]

As Ravel was ever graceful, his countryman, Erik Satie wrote also with clarity and brevity, but accompanied his piano music with texts that were less concerned with refinement than with eccentricity. The texts were secret, available only to initiates with access to the score (Satie expressly forbade their being read aloud), and obviously a non-francophone was instantly excluded. Satie's comedy was a barbed weapon indeed: the "shriveled up and stultified" population he pointedly addressed in his 1914 "serious and proper chorale" (*Sports et Divertissements)* was no doubt German, for who but that most venerable German master, J. S. Bach, was responsible for serious and proper chorales in the first place? Satie's "bitter preamble…austere and unfrivolous" was all "about Boredom," and when he dedicated it to "those who don't like me," one assumes the antipathy was mutual. Likewise in his *Sonatine Bureaucratique* (1917), a parody of Clementi's C Major Sonatina, Op. 36, #1, Satie took a Germanic form and debunked it with relish. Courtesy of the accompanying text, the highbrow sonata became a low-brow government bureaucrat's plea for advancement. "Appassionata," "Pathetique," "Tempest," "Hammerklavier" move over—the guy in the next cubicle hopes for a raise. This office worker "reflects upon his promotion… he hums an old Peruvian air which he collected from a deaf-mute in Lower Brittany… the cold Peruvian air goes to his head." It'd be hard to imagine a scenario better calculated to deflate both logic and pride. The music was collected from someone who could neither hear it nor convey it, it came from Peru but the deaf-mute was in France, and it took the form of a musical air which suddenly morphed into a frigid draft. All this in the midst of a world war.

Tombeau de Couperin-Ravel

What in the world was going on? Was Satie unaware, uninterested or fighting back with ridicule? Was music impervious, escapist or part of a cultural arsenal?

One need not choose among the options, but surely all three seem to exclude a predilection for brotherly love or emotional catharsis. Stravinsky, the last of our examples also dug satirical graves for the enemy. He no doubt deemed the Germans responsible for the stern supremacy of tonics and dominants, and his bombastic "Une Souvenir d'une Marche Boche" makes merciless use of V-I progressions and extravagant march formulations. The Boche militia here stepped proudly, and while they marched like fools, Stravinsky looked on in glee.

That glee resurfaced in the *Piano Rag Music* of 1919 written, as Stravinsky himself noted in his score, just before he "heard the cannons at the front [which] thunderingly announce[d] the signing of the peace at Versailles."[17] While one could argue that the carnival atmosphere of this music was due to the war's end, it seems just as likely that it formed a continuum with Stravinsky's miniature waltzes and polka written during the war. War created a frenzy, where, as the painter Max Beckmann ruefully noted, "all restraints on behavior fall away." The raucous *Rag Music* let loose

with dissonance and rhythmic abandon. Life was a wild and primitive dance to be enjoyed while it lasted.

From beginning to end, then, this solo piano music in France made clear what side it was on. It paraded its nationalism and bombarded the Germans with wicked parodies. It masqueraded as the ancien régime, a Peruvian deaf-mute and American black-face minstrels. It was by turns funny, lovely and nasty, but always, underneath, it was unmistakably French. Perhaps a lone piano was especially prone to adopt military stratagems, for its owner chose between a German Bechstein and a French Erard,[18]and its status as a large and imposing piece of furniture used to accompany patriotic songs, accentuated its prominence as a cultural symbol. Its language, purportedly so free to mirror spiritual truths unencumbered by the limitations of words, images and national boundaries, in fact was one very particular language, and that was the language of partisanship.

In the end, these pieces steer clear of death and carnage. There was no composer counterpart to the World War I poet, Wilfred Owen; piano music did not wish to tarry with "vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues."[19] This music was instead an admirable soldier, loyal, unquestioning and willing to laugh sardonically at the absurdity of what men had wrought. It was not a moral beacon, but an accurate reflection.

As I close, I'm reminded of the infinitely appealing (and real-life) psychiatrist, W. H. Rivers in Pat Barker's World War I trilogy, *Resurrection.* He worried, he wept, but in the end he did his job, and that job consisted of preparing fallen soldiers, no matter how damaged, for a return to the battlefront. French music did the same. It proudly bore the stamp, "Made in France," it entertained no doubts about the virtues of its origin, and it pressed ever forward to assure its own survival. As the French poet, Paul Valéry, said in 1920, "The illusion of a European culture has been lost, and knowledge has been proved impotent to save anything."[20] Music and knowledge shared similar fates.

NOTES

1. This list omits Gabriel Faure, born in 1845. Faure lived until 1924, composing piano music until close to the end of his life, but his generation was arguably less concerned to establish French music as independent of the German tradition, than the one that followed. Though one could certainly hypothesize that the dark unrest in his late nocturnes is related to the Great War, I've seen no evidence that he himself drew that connection. His views on the war were clearly moderated by his own horrifying experience serving in the Franco-Prussian war: unlike the younger composers, he had experienced the atrocities of war first-hand and was less drawn to public patriotic statements and vilification of the enemy than to participation in charity concerts undertaken to aid war victims.

2. Abel Bonnard in *Le Figaro*. Quoted in Alistair Horne, *Seven Ages of Paris*, (New York; Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 302.

3. Paul Claudel, quoted in Alistair Horne, *Seven Ages of Paris*, 303.

4. Marcel Duchamps. Quoted in Glenn Watkins, *Proof Through the Night: Music and the Great War* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA; University of California Press, 2003), 14.

5. Maurice Ravel in letter of Sept. 21, 1914 to Maurice Delage. Quoted in Gerald Larner, *Maurice Ravel*, (London; Phaidon Books, 1996), 146.

6. Claude Debussy in letter of Oct. 14, 1915 to Robert Godet. François Lesure and Roger Nichols, Eds, *Debussy Letters*, (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1987), 305.

7. Erik Satie as quoted in Guillaume Apollinaire, "L'esprit nouveau et les poets" in *Mercure de France*, December 1, 1918. Quoted in Glenn Watkins, *Soundings*, (New York; Schirmer Books, 1995), 70.

8. From the journal of Romain Rolland. Quoted in Glenn Watkins, *Proof Through the Night,* 133.

9. Claude Debussy in letter of Oct. 24, 1915 to Igor Stravinsky. François Lesure and Roger Nichols, Eds, *Debussy Letters*, (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1987), 308. Translation from Glenn Watkins, *Proof Through the Night,* 90.

10. Claude Debussy in letter of Oct. 24, 1915 to Igor Stravinsky. Quoted in Glenn Watkins, *Proof through the Night*, 91.

11. Claude Debussy in letter of June, 1915 to Jacques Durand. Quoted in Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy, His Life and Mind*, Vol. 2 (New York; The Macmillan Company, 1965), 210.

12. Claude Debussy in letter of Aug. 8, 1914 to Jacques Durand. Lesure and Nichols, Eds., *Debussy Letters,* 291.

13. Claude Debussy in letter of Aug. 5, 1915 to Jacques Durand. Lesure and Nichols, Eds., *Debussy Letters,* 298.

14. "Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir" is the title of Debussy's 4th Prelude. The title is a quote from Baudelaire's poem, "Harmonie du soir," which Debussy had also set as a song.

15. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPm2Z5X4xy8. See comment posted by paolohudson.

16. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TK6gGWMnTZI

17. Glenn Watkins, *Proof through the Night*, 153.

18. In a letter of Sept. 1914 to Nicolas Coronio, Debussy amusingly states, "I'm doing a little piano-playing again, notably on a Bechstein; my only excuse is that it's not paid for! It can go under the heading of 'War Contributions'…" From Lesure and Nichols, Eds. *Debussy Letters,* 293.

19. Wilfred Owen, Dulce et Decorum Est, Oct. 8, 1917-March 1918.

20. Paul Valéry, "The Crisis of the Mind," in *Paul Valéry: Collected Works,* vol. 10. Quoted in Leah Dickerman, *Dada* (Washington, National Gallery of Art, 2005), 4.

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