

---

## Reviews

---

Richard Langham Smith and Caroline Potter (eds),  
*French Music since Berlioz*  
Aldershot, Hants.: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006  
ISBN 0 7546 0282 6. 388pp., ill., mus. exx., bibl.

Reviewed by Patricia Shaw

*French Music since Berlioz* is a collection of a dozen essays by eleven different authors (including the editors themselves) that takes as its structural model the landmark publication *Cinquante ans de musique française (1874–1925)* (Paris, 1926), edited by L. Rohozinski. The editors state their belief that *Cinquante ans* 'is surely the first proof that French music is best covered by an *éventail de producteurs*' (p. xix), and argue the superiority of a mosaic of varied insights focussed on specific topics over the unified overview presented in single-author books such as Martin Cooper's well known *French Music from the Death of Berlioz to the Death of Fauré* (1951).

In *French Music since Berlioz*, an introductory chapter by Déirdre Donnellon (pp. 1–18) outlines the issues and debates that frame the subsequent essays. She presents French musical preoccupations since 1869 as a series of dichotomies: between Wagnérisme and anti-Wagnérisme, between Debussysme and the reaction against it from Satie, Les Six and La jeune France, and between post-World War II serialism and eclecticism. There is an over-arching preoccupation with the issue of nationalism, periodically reinforced by war. Another strong theme in French music is orientalism / exoticism, influenced by France's colonial connections in Africa and Asia as well as by France's relationship with Russian culture.

The material in the remaining eleven chapters is organised partly chronologically and partly according to genres or general topics; there are chapters on instrumental music, church music, and 'spectacle' (primarily opera), as well as on more sociological topics such as the role of salons and the impact of World War II, and on issues of compositional style and technique. It is an interesting structure that caters for both specialist and general-interest readers, and invites browsing rather than requiring cover-to-cover reading. Some types of music, unfortunately, slip through the gaps in this kind of book; ballet, for example, is barely mentioned, despite its historical importance and the impact of the Ballet Russe and the Ballet Suèdois on French music in the early twentieth century.

While the book's structure is modelled on that of Rohozinki's *Cinquante ans*, the editors note (p. xix) that writing about music has changed since its publication to become much more scholarly and evidence-based, and has also begun to engage with socio-political issues such as transculturation and gender politics. Langham Smith, in explaining his own approach to an understanding of twentieth-century operatic spectacle, states quite rightly that 'a list of operas done, with a few comments on their relative merit, is neither the story nor the history' (p. 117). In any case, establishing the 'merit' of a musical work is especially problematic, since there is no direct relationship between a work's popularity or importance and its musical 'value,' either at the time of its composition or subsequently (p. 117). However, the extent to which individual authors practise what is usually termed 'new musicology' varies greatly.

Arguably, the most prominent element of French musical culture is opera, and this is examined in chapters by Thomas Cooper on the last three decades of the nineteenth century (pp. 19–52) and Langham Smith on the entire twentieth century (pp. 117–60). Cooper also includes a few references to ballet. Both authors consider operatic culture as well as the music itself, introducing their essays with an outline of the performance context and issues.

Cooper emphasises exoticism, reflecting his own research interests, but also delves into issues such as nationalism, expressed at various times as anti-Wagner, anti-Semitic and anti-Italian sentiment. While the majority of works discussed are significant to the repertoire, it's unclear why space (pp. 26–30) is devoted to works by composers such as Guiraud, Joncières, Mermet and Masse, whose works the author himself notes had little or no impact even at the time. Cooper engages—albeit briefly—with recent scholarship in his discussion of Bizet's *Carmen*; he comments somewhat dismissively that Susan McClary's feminist analysis of the opera<sup>1</sup> has 'raised the hackles of those who prefer to focus specifically on the music, or who see the opera as purely a psychologically realistic study of human nature' (p. 29).

Langham Smith's chapter contains insightful discussion of both general issues and specific works such as Debussy's *Pelléas* and Ravel's two short operas. There is even some attention to activities outside the capital, in Monte Carlo and Béziers (p. 139, cf p. 119). However, the centralisation of elite professional musical activity in Paris is everywhere implicit in this chapter, as elsewhere in the book. The chapter concludes with selective lists of opera productions that reveal the shifting patterns of taste in opera. The first lists revivals of French baroque opera between 1890 and 1952, while the others comprise productions at the Opéra-Comique (1899–1971) and the Opéra (1900–1950). It is not clear why these lists do not cover more recent years.

The extent of the centralisation of French musical culture is also apparent in James Ross's 'Music in the French Salon' (pp. 91–116), which might as well have been titled 'Music in the Parisian Salon.' Ross discusses the salons of the most important patrons from Pauline Viardot and Augusta Holmès to the Princesse de Polignac and the Godebskis. Sadly little mention is made here or elsewhere in the volume of the compositional activities of Viardot and Holmès. Ross's account stops with World War II, when the state began to replace private patronage. The story is taken up, to some extent, in Caroline Potter's very interesting 'French Music and the Second World War' (pp. 281–302), but no other chapter continues the story of the role of post-War state involvement in French musical culture, apart from a brief mention of IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et de Co-ordination Acoustique-Musicale; see further below).

---

<sup>1</sup> Susan McClary, *Georges Bizet: Carmen*, Cambridge Opera Handbooks (Cambridge: CUP, 1999) 20–21.

Roy Howat's essay engages its subjects—Chabrier, Fauré, Debussy and Ravel—and the reader through the over-arching theme of 'modernisation' (pp. 197–222). The dense technical detail is readable, as the 'story' moves smoothly between musical language and its artistic, historical and socio-political contexts (see especially pp. 199, 204, 210). The style of writing is elegant and even amusing; Howat comments that *Daphnis* opens with the 'typically Ravelian footprint ... [of] an oboe virtually in the oxygen-mask range' (p. 216).

Robert Orledge has contributed an interesting chapter on Satie and Les Six (pp. 323–48), which unravels the very complex network of shifting personal and artistic alliances. Deborah Mawer, writing on the 1930s (pp. 249–80), first lays out the markers—dates, names, work titles—then covers this exciting and intense era by looking at the music of composers such as Roussel, Ibert, and the upcoming generation of Messiaen, as well as the role of radio, cinema, jazz and the popular chanson, nationalism, and interest in music of the past.

Despite the excellent chapters already mentioned, *French Music since Berlioz* disappoints in two ways. First, there are some essays that do not engage with the editors' ideal musicological approach. Second, and more importantly, the coverage of French music since the end of World War II is disproportionately small and generally poor.

Peter O'Hagan's 'Pierre Boulez and the Foundation of IRCAM' (pp. 303–30) is the chapter that relies least on modern musicological methods. Given its title, I was expecting a story of French musical culture in a radically changed post-war Europe: the emergence of the outrageously outspoken young Boulez, the early days of *musique concrète* in the RDF studios, the competition with state electronic studios in Germany, the influence of Darmstadt, the national/political agenda behind the foundation of IRCAM, the role of the President, and even the symbolic building of IRCAM underground beside the Centre Pompidou on the Place Igor Stravinsky.

Instead, O'Hagan merely gives a chronological survey of Boulez's compositional output—albeit using primary sources, including manuscripts—comprising mostly discussion of technique. At best, this chapter is misnamed, since the only mention of IRCAM is a half-page aside on its founding (p. 326). However, this chapter disappoints even as a survey of a composer's output, since it fails even to investigate some of the most fascinating aspects of its subject. O'Hagan initially mentions that Boulez's compositional career has been largely eclipsed by his fame as a conductor (p. 303), but does not explore the relationship between composition and conducting (Boulez's roles at the BBCSO and Ensemble Intercontemporain would seem to be particularly relevant). The relationship between Boulez's polemics and his musical language and style is ignored. The author mentions that individual works were premiered incomplete (and were sometimes never completed), substantially revised (sometimes over and/or after many years), or withdrawn immediately after their premiere. However, O'Hagan seems to have no interest in the pattern revealed of a composer whose output is largely 'works in progress,' and what this might reveal about his creative personality. Because so much of the story is omitted, the reader who did not already know a lot about Boulez would be mystified as to how he came to occupy such an exalted position in French contemporary musical life by the mid-1970s that he was asked by the President to set up IRCAM. Rather surprisingly, O'Hagan appears not to have consulted *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) by Georgina Born, who could perhaps have written a rather more interesting chapter with the same title.

Nigel Simeone's chapter on church and organ music (pp. 161–96) is also frustrating, as it ignores some of the most interesting aspects of this type of music-making. The essay is dominated by listing and description of choral and vocal music. Organ music is covered in the first thirteen pages through a list of notable *titulaires* at major Parisian churches and discussion of repertoire, although neither section continues to the present day. The distinctive French tradition of organ improvisation is discussed in less than a page (pp. 163–64), despite the existence of living practitioners, composed works based on improvisations, a few recordings of past greats such as Charles Tournemire, and didactic works such as Marcel Dupré's *Traité d'improvisation* (1926), which is described as 'particularly important' (p. 168) but not actually discussed. Also disappointing is the lack of context; factors that affect church and organ music include the systems of training and employment of musicians, the relationship between church and state (the effects of their legal separation in 1905 are not considered at all), the radical new approaches to music in the Catholic church following the Second Vatican Council (only briefly discussed, despite having happened over forty years ago), and the religious beliefs of individual church organist-composers (cf the agnostic Fauré and the devout Messiaen).

Timothy Jones, writing on nineteenth-century chamber and orchestral music (pp. 53–89), tells the story of the gradual emergence of these genres from the shadow of operatic and vocal music. However, he strikes an odd balance at times, with rather too much early nineteenth-century background—for example, the pages devoted to Anton Reicha's *Traité de haute composition musicale* (1924)—and much more emphasis on chamber music than on orchestral music. The author seems to have neglected the latter because few French composers wrote symphonies before the 1880s. However, the sophistication of French composers' orchestral writing in smaller genres such as the tone poem is revealed by Jones's own discussion (p. 79) of Carolyn Abbate's interpretation of Dukas's *L'apprenti sorcier* as much more than a simple musical rendition of Goethe's poem.<sup>2</sup>

Potter's 'French Musical Style and the Post-War Generation' (pp. 331–54) takes some interesting approaches, with topic headings relating to musical language ('Pivot Notes,' "'Spectral" Music'), genres ('Gregorian Chant,' 'Vocal Music: End of *mélodie*?') and extra-musical associations ('Mythical and Religious Influences,' 'East-West Dialogue'). These topic headings are, however, often misleading, as they are frequently followed by unrelated material. This chapter is informative, but also confusing, fragmentary, and therefore ultimately unsatisfying.

The more important problem with *French Music since Berlioz* is the lack of material on the post-WWII era, a deficiency that is flagged in the introductory chapter, which spends only half a page (out of eighteen pages) on the period since 1952. The book covers approximately 130 years, of which the years since 1945 comprise more than forty-five per cent. However, less than a fifth of the book is spent on the post-War era: a few pages on opera and church music, and two of the book's weaker chapters, those on Boulez and on post-War musical style. This volume is ultimately not significantly more informative about the most recent years of French musical activity than the chapters on France in *Modern Times: From World War I to the Present*, edited by Robert P. Morgan (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993).

---

<sup>2</sup> Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 1991) 30–60.

One cannot disagree with Martin Cooper's observation in *French Music from the Death of Berlioz* that '[a] generation must elapse before it is possible to see any work of art in a true historical perspective,' a comment that is quoted by Deborah Mawer (p. 252).<sup>3</sup> The most recent music included in Cooper's 1951 book was, indeed that of the previous generation: music written in the mid-1920s. However, the inability to view contemporary music in a true historical perspective did not deter other notable earlier writers on French music from viewing and evaluating it from a contemporary point of view. Rohozinski's *Cinquante ans* included music right up to the time of publication, as did Georges Jean-Aubry's *La musique française d'aujourd'hui / French Music of To-Day* (several editions in French and English from 1915 onwards), Rollo Myers' *Modern French Music: Its Evolution and Cultural Background from 1900 to the Present Day* (Oxford, 1971), and the monumental eleven-volume *Encyclopédie de la musique et dictionnaire du Conservatoire* edited by Albert Lavignac, *et al.* (Paris, 1913–31). A book published in 2006 has, I think, an obligation to devote considerable space to evaluating the two post-War generations and surveying the most recent activities and trends.

As well as aiming for an English-language audience, the editors also chose only British scholars to write the various chapters of *French Music since Berlioz* (p. xx), although the editors' view of Britain does not extend much beyond England (Langham Smith addresses only his compatriots in his casual reference to 'our "Land ohne Musik"' [p. 119; my emphasis]). No explanation or justification is given for the absence of authors from other English-speaking countries, or of scholars whose work could have been translated from other languages. It is also noticeable that only three of the eleven authors are women; does this reflect the real gender balance in French musical scholarship in Britain? The editors' 'idea was to draw upon the insights of scholars we knew and trusted, and who we believed to have perspectives on the repertoire which together would break new ground' (p. xix). However, the deficiencies of some chapters lead one to wonder whether the authors were always the best possible.

Also slightly disappointing is the physical presentation of the volume. The layout is often clumsy, with examples and illustrations unnecessarily distant from their discussion in the text (for example, Plate 2.1, Example 2.5), the editing sometimes clumsy (for example, pp. 119, 123 and 335–38), and the paper a little too transparent. Musical examples are always discussed in the text, often very well, but the illustrations are sometimes gratuitous (for example, Plate 3.1, Plate 12.1), and the reproductions not always of adequate quality (Plate 8.1, which looks as though it has been scanned from a fax).

*French Music since Berlioz* has some excellent chapters which engage well with the musical text and/or the socio-historical context, depending on their topic. Readers looking for modern re-evaluation of music and musical culture during the Third Republic in France will find much material of great interest and insight. However, overall the volume is uneven in quality, and seriously lacking in information, analysis and critique of French music of the last sixty years.

---

<sup>3</sup> Cooper, *French Music*, 201. Cooper expands this observation by noting the strong influence of Parisian musical 'fashion.'