

Claude Debussy, Monsieur Croche: The Dilettante Hater [Monsieur Croche, Antidilettante] (1921)

Claude Debussy's *Monsieur Croche Antidilettante* was published by Dorbon and the *Nouvelle Revue Française* in 1921, three years after the composer's death. However, this edition cannot be considered an entirely posthumous publication. In fact, Debussy worked on its development during the 1910s, and sent his publisher, Dorbon, a manuscript containing selected and updated articles in late 1913. In February 1914, he refused to sign off on the final page proofs, judging them to be "formless". In a letter to Dorbon dated 28 May, he clarified his thoughts, explaining that the collection "required a considerable amount of revision in order for the little book to hold together, so that it would consist of something more than a collation of uneven articles placed side by side" (Debussy, *Correspondance 1872-1918*, edited by François Lesure and Denis Herlin, Paris, Gallimard, 2005, p. 1814). Clearly Debussy hesitated as to the form that the book should take. The outbreak of World War One, and Debussy's own illness, prevented him to complete the publication of his texts. Under pressure from Dorbon and the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, Debussy's wife, Emma, entrusted Louis Laloy with the task of completing the editorial work based on an unmarked set of proofs. Laloy revised the outline of the volume, and made several corrections, most notably by adding transitional sentences and abridging certain passages. At present, it is impossible to know what form Debussy would have given the book.

As published in 1921, the volume consists of twenty-five chapters, comprising articles from *La Revue blanche* (1901) and *Gil Blas* (1903) with two exceptions: the twenty-fourth article, on Gounod, was taken from *Musica* (1906); and the ninth, devoted to Massenet, contains part of a text extracted from an article in *Matin* (1912). The fact that none of the thirteen articles written for the *S.I.M.* (1912-1914) were selected for inclusion is most revealing; Debussy likely did not regard them as highly as his articles in *La Revue blanche* and *Gil Blas*. Chapters 1-3, 6-7, and 9 mix several excerpts from various articles, while the remaining chapters each draw from one single source. In general, the chosen structure from Chapter 13 (the midpoint) onwards is chronological, with only chapters 17 (on Siegfried Wagner), 21 (on Vincent d'Indy) and 25 (Open letter to the chevalier Gluck) interrupting the chronological trajectory.

This is the form in which Debussy's texts were disseminated, exclusively by Gallimard, since 1926. The following year, the work was translated into English by Bernard N. Langdon Davies, and published in London by N. Douglas. In 1971, François Lesure gathered the entirety of Debussy's writings and interviews, published by Gallimard, and revised in 1987. Even though this collection is titled, [*Monsieur Croche and other writings*](#), it no longer contains the 1921 text, but simply

presents Debussy's articles in chronological order, just as they were published in *La Revue blanche*, *Gil Blas*, and the *S.I.M.*, mixed with other more occasional writings in *Musica*, *Le Mercure de France*, *Le Matin*, and *Le Figaro*. Richard Langham Smith produced a translation on the basis of the 1971 edition, published by Knopf in 1977.

In giving his work the title of *Monsieur Croche antidilettante*, Debussy was acknowledging that the creation of this character, whose role was originally meant to be quite limited, had contributed importantly to the acclaim of his writings. Had Debussy not borrowed the conceit from Paul Valéry's *Soirée avec monsieur Teste*, would his writings have enjoyed such widespread fame? Even as these articles (like his correspondence) abound with ideas and personal reflections which diverge considerably from the writings of his contemporaries, they contain redundancies, as well as ellipses which are left underdeveloped, given how Debussy's thought lent itself toward aphorism. Notwithstanding, Debussy was conscious of the quality of certain of his writings—the uniqueness of his style, his sense for a good turn of phrase. At the same time, he ultimately faced a real challenge in transforming his texts into a coherent book.

Denis HERLIN

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Trans. Peter Asimov

Further reading

François Lesure, « Introduction » in Claude, Debussy, *Monsieur Croche et autres écrits*, éd. François Lesure, Paris, Gallimard, 1987, collection L'Imaginaire, n° 187 (première édition Paris : Gallimard, 1971, collection Blanche).

Denis Herlin, « Les mésaventures de Monsieur Croche », in Michel Duchesneau, Valéry Dufour et Marie-Hélène Benoit-Otis (dir. sc.) *Écrits de compositeurs, une autorité en question*, Paris, Vrin, 2013, p. 231-258.

André Schaeffner, « M. Croche » in *Variations sur la musique*, Paris, Fayard, 1998, p. 357-373.

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