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Claude Achille Debussy
Bewitching in music, Bastard in Love

Born: Saint-Germain-en-Laye (near Paris), 22 August 1862
Died aged 55: Paris, 25 March 1918

There is a woman at each crossroad of Debussy's life.
Certainly women of all ages seemed fascinated by him,
and they attached themselves to him like ivy to a wall.
[Marcel Dietschy: A Portrait of Claude Debussy]

He was - it's all in his music - a very sensual man.
[Maggie Teyte, soloist in *Pelléas et Mélisande*, 1908]

Claude has still not recovered from the nibbles of your
dear little mouth.
[Debussy to Lilly Texier, 24 April 1899]

She knew what she wanted and had come prepared.
When, in reply to her knock, Claude opened the door,
he saw that she was nude under her fur coat.
[from Pierre La Mure's novel: *Clair de Lune*]

Let's not mince words. Where most of his many women were concerned Debussy was a bastard! After his death there was a roaring trade in grotesque wax effigies, demanded by screaming feminists, of this monster with the renowned bulging cranium and double-forehead. I made that up about the effigy, of course, though it's true that Debussy's double forehead was always his most distinguishing physical feature. Double forehead or not, Oliver Reed was certainly the right man to play Debussy in Ken Russell's BBC Omnibus Classic documentary of 1963, *The Debussy Film*, scripted by Melvyn Bragg. Russell selected Reed after seeing him on Juke Box Jury and being stunned by his physical resemblance to the composer. Debussy's heirs actually used their copyrights to ban the film because of the offence caused by one scene based on a play for which Debussy wrote incidental music, *The Martyrdom of St Sebastian* (see below). In Russell's film, a girl is shown in a t-shirt in the water, attached to a cross and being pelted with arrows.

No composer did more than Debussy to justify the feminists' adage that All Men Are Bastards. He drove two of his women, Gaby and Lilly, to desperate measures with revolvers. Although Gaby's hysterical pot shot at herself after finding a love letter in Debussy's pocket seems to have been aimed to miss, in Lilly's attempted suicide a bullet remained lodged in a vertebra under her left breast for the rest of her life.

And yet! Is not Debussy the finest composer in this volume? At any rate, he's easily my favourite. And not simply because like some readers, no doubt, I cherish happy memories of playing the *Golliwog's Cakewalk*, *The*

Girl with the Flaxen Hair, Clair de Lune, Jardins sous la pluie, and En Bateau several decades ago. But where Debussy's treatment of women was concerned, the opening salvo cannot be mollified one iota.

He was incapable of selfless love for anyone except his beloved only daughter Chouchou, borne in 1905 by the woman who became his umpteenth lover and second wife, Emma Bardac. Mary Garden, the Scottish-born lead soprano in the premiere of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, the opera that established Debussy's reputation as one of the world's greatest composers, had the full measure of Debussy the man:

I honestly don't know if Debussy ever loved anybody really. He loved his music – and perhaps himself. I think he was wrapped up in his genius ... He was a very, very strange man.

Because of his brutal treatment of women Debussy lost many of his close friends over the years, including the man he had loved, homoerotically rather than homosexually, as much as any woman, Pierre Louÿs. Louÿs, whose half brother some claimed to be his father, was a poet, portrait photographer, and writer of novels that "oozed sex from every page": *The Crimson Man, New Sensual Delights, Aphrodite ...* Louÿs also provided Debussy with three poems that he set to music in his *Chansons de Bilitis*.

That Debussy treated women badly didn't of course mean they gave him a wide berth. On the contrary, as Marcel Dietschy has emphasised, "women of all ages ... attached themselves to him like ivy to a wall." However odious their behaviour, geniuses of either sex have never lacked strings of lovers if they wanted them. But Roger Nichols has suggested that one additional secret of Debussy's appeal for women was his playfulness. One of the many women who were enchanted by it was the celebrated French novelist Colette in 1910 (she of *Chéri, The Cat and Gigi* fame). Then in her late thirties, Colette chronicled Debussy's exuberant tomfoolery after being bowled over by his first hearing of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*:

He sang scraps of this new music, accompanied himself with a glissando on the piano, imitated the timpani on a pane of glass, the glockenspiel on a crystal vase. He hummed like a swarm; he laughed with his whole astonishing visage - and we were delighted.

Little wonder that when Debussy was on such form "rumour had it that no pretty girl within 100 metres was safe from him." Nor did they wish to be! How could they resist a genius who compared beautiful music with beautiful women in such words as these?

The Ballade [by Fauré] is almost as lovely as Mme Hasselmans, the pianist. With a charming gesture she readjusted a shoulder-strap which slipped down at every lively passage. Somehow an association of ideas was established in my mind between the charm of the aforementioned gesture and the music of Fauré. It is a fact, however, that the play of the graceful, fleeting lines described by Fauré's music may be compared to

the gesture of a beautiful woman without either suffering from the comparison.'

"The kind of face women glance at twice"

Debussy's "Assyrian" looks were yet another of his magnetic attractions. With his "soft and silky" black beard and thick curly hair, his "vivacious black eyes under heavy, drooping lids," his "pale, matt complexion," plump cheeks, his wide-shouldered, "rather fleshy", body he exuded a languid, voluptuous aura, "partly feline, partly gypsy." "Byzantine priest," "an Indian Prince, "one of the magi" are other oriental labels included in Debussy cameos etched by various people at different times.

His outfits too were distinctly personal in his bohemian days: they included a huge sombrero-cum-cowboy hat, a beige overcoat with a wide black velvet collar, silk ties, button shoes, and a blue cane with delicate carvings on the knob.

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As Edward Lockspeiser has clearly shown, the only constant aspect of Debussy's personality was his ambivalence, his constant wavering between violent extremes. Various pen portraits of the composer show that he was

tender-hearted, infinitely sensitive, yet also brutal; he was shy and also outspoken; confident, even impetuous, yet devoured by doubts; independent but envious. Even his appearance belied his nature: he was noble, perhaps exotic, as it was thought, yet also a bohemian; he was wealthy and extravagant, as it seemed, but in reality almost a pauper. If there is a single key to the many conflicting aspects of Debussy's nature it is his ambivalence, the sudden and unaccountable veering from one extreme to another to which an artist of sensibility is perhaps inevitably condemned.

"The naked flesh of emotions"

Debussy was as unfettered in his music as in his personal life. His goal was to free music from all the shackles (form, tonality, rhythm) of the Classical school, which he saw as a form of Teutonic tyranny. (He once described Germans and their music as "so heavy, not clear" and Beethoven as "the old deaf man.")

"How much one must create and destroy whilst trying to touch the naked flesh of emotions," he wrote towards the end of his life. Here are two more of his bon mots that pinpoint his lifelong search for complete originality:

Music in its essence is not a thing that can be poured into a rigorous and traditional mould. It is made of colours and rhythmical beats. All the rest is fraud, invented by cold-blooded imbeciles riding on the backs of the masters.

[To his publisher Durand]

There is no school of Debussy. I have no disciples. I am I.

[To a Viennese journalist in 1910.]

His quest for such a kind of music took in all kinds of sources and inspirations: whole-tone scales, pentatonic scales (equivalent to the black notes only of the piano) and other scales deriving from Javanese gamelan music that bewitched him (as did the theatre of Annam) when he heard it at the Universal Exhibition in 1889. He also brought into his music twelve-tone chromatic scales, ancient church modes, medieval organum, and jazz progressions.

The painter in music

“I love pictures almost as much as music”
(Debussy to the composer Varèse in 1911)

Debussy’s inspiration came far more from Impressionist painting and Symbolist poetry than from the music of other composers, save possibly that of Moussorgsky who was his ideal of the “instinctive” composer. If there is any label for Debussy, then Impressionist is the only one. Debussy himself, however, was ambivalent about the tag. In 1908 he said that it was “just about the least appropriate” but in 1916 he told his friend Emile Vuillermoz (a music critic) that

You do me a great honour by calling me a pupil of
Claude Monet.

Debussy’s music gets as close as music can ever be to painting. It brings to mind the paintings not only of Monet, but even more so of his favourite painter Joseph Turner, England’s most original landscape artist. The affinity between Debussy’s *La mer* and Turner’s abstract portrayals of light, space, and the elemental forces of nature – say in his *Rain, Steam and Speed* - is obvious.

Even many of Debussy’s titles are in tune with the visual arts: *Arabesques*, *Nocturnes*, *Images*, *Estampes* (Engravings) ...

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How to account for such a complex, secretive man? Debussy’s teenage and adult love life was so packed with incident that we must skim over his childhood, which, according to Dietschy was fraught with “instability, lack of money, rebellion, hunger, fear, delusion, shame [and] defeat.”

Debussy’s volatile and domineering mother Victorine (née Manoury), was “passionately attached” to her eldest-born Claude, fussing, over-protective, and taking sole responsibility for his elementary education. (This wasn’t a good idea in view of his lifelong shaky spelling and syntax.) Her death in 1915 would affect Claude “more painfully than I can say.” His father Manuel Achille was largely ineffectual, Debussy once even referring to him, perhaps unfairly, as “a waster.” Manuel Achille was by turns a china shop owner (at the time of Debussy’s birth), a broker, a civil servant, a clerk in a printing works and twice a soldier – the second time getting off lightly with a year in prison and loss of civil rights for his role as a captain of the Communards in 1871. Manuel Achille’s later disappointments in seeing his son reject the careers planned for him - first of sailor and then of concert virtuoso – would be finally compensated in 1903 when, purely to please both his parents Debussy received the Chevalier of the Légion d’Honneur. (He himself had no time for gongs.)

It was from both his parents that Debussy would acquire tastes that were both expensive and unaffordable. He would never be a man to allow arrears of rent to stop him somehow laying his hands on fine silks, yellowed prints, satsuma vases, walking sticks carved from pale wood, ivories, green or Vermeer-blue silk neckties, batiste ... He became a hedonist to the core, like the poet Verlaine, and like Wagner.

The key player in Debussy's musical beginnings was his fond paternal Aunt Clémentine, a true demimondaine whose life story is another ready-made novella. She found Claude his first piano teacher in Cannes, where he and other members of the family stayed with her over a few summers from 1870. Claude was happiest here when either losing himself in Aunt Clémentine's cardboard theatre - or doing absolutely nothing. According to his sister Adèle (the eldest of his four younger siblings), Claude was uncommunicative, and closed in upon himself, liking neither his lessons nor his games ... He would spend whole days sitting in a chair, thinking, no one knew of what.

Already he was a dreamer. And as Dietschy has said, "to dispute the primacy of the dream over reality is to fail to understand Debussy."

Nevertheless, for all his dreaming, his second piano teacher, a certain Mme de Mauté who claimed, dubiously, to have been a pupil of Chopin, spotted Debussy's wayward talent and managed to get him into the Paris Conservatoire in October 1872. Debussy was by then "a fat boy of ten or so, short, thickset, wearing a black coat enlivened by a loose spotted tie and short, velvet trousers."

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"Mon plaisir"

Not surprisingly Debussy quickly became the despair of his professors Antoine Marmontel and Albert Lavignac who found him to be "a little backward in the rudiments". Ten years or so later he was hauled before the Conservatoire's irate registrar who asked him, "What rule do you follow?" "My pleasure," was the youth's supercilious reply, leaving the official dumbfounded. The one man who most encouraged Debussy's wayward genius was his easy-going composition teacher from 1880, Ernest Guiraud (who wrote the recitatives for Bizet's Carmen). By then Debussy had won no first prizes as a piano soloist, but had composed several songs set to the poems of Alfred de Musset.

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Green-eyed Mme Blanche Vasnier

Debussy's "succubus"

everything he writes is for her and owes its existence to her.

[Paul Vidal, July 1884, in a letter to Henriette Fuchs]

To help make ends meet during his studies, Debussy was fortunate in acquiring two part-time jobs in the autumn of 1880: one as the accompanist to a choral society named La Concordia and another, at around sixty francs a month, as accompanist to a singing teacher by the name of Mme Victorine

Moreau-Sainti. Predictably, Debussy often failed to turn up for the choral rehearsals when he had more interesting fish to fry. But neither hell nor high water would have kept him away from Mme Moreau-Sainti's studio with her potted palms and succession of pupils being put through their paces with technical exercises, Gounod's Ave Maria and Carmen's Habañera.

Here it was that at the age of eighteen, Debussy fell madly in love with one pupil, thirty-two year old Mme Blanche Adélaïde Vasnier. Without ever deliberately intending to, it seems, she utterly enslaved Debussy for the next seven or eight years of his life.

True, he had "proposed" that summer to Sonia von Meck, flighty sixteen year old daughter of Tchaikovsky's idolater and patron Mme Nadezhda von Meck. (Debussy worked as one of Mme von Meck's house musicians for the three summers 1880-1882, variously in Arcachon, Florence, Russia and Vienna.) But this had been a fit of adolescent fancy and he probably felt no lasting pain from Mme von Meck's curt refusal.

Mme Vasnier was the stuff of Debussy's dreams. Her eyes were his favourite colour, green. Her hair was red to brown, and she sang with a lovely light voice to professional standard. Daughter of a printer and man of letters, she was married to Eugène-Henry Vasnier, a reclusive, teetotal, workaholic legal expert (a "registrar of buildings"), eleven years her senior and extremely wealthy. She had thus always had every opportunity to pursue her expensive tastes and her passion for music to the full.

But it was with Debussy that she indulged, probably for the first time, her unsatisfied craving for passionate love. Hitherto she had merely titillated what Paul Vidal (one of Debussy's Conservatoire friends) called her "jealous vanity" by flirting with her many admirers.

It must have been while they were preparing for a concert they gave on 12 May 1882 in the Salle Flaxhand (Paris) that Love Walked In. Debussy was to accompany her in two of his own songs, *Les Roses* and *Fête Galante*, and the programme also included his *Nocturne and Scherzo* for violin and piano, in which he accompanied Maurice Thieberg.

Given Debussy's humble home in the rue Clapeyron, to have been so often made welcome by the Vasniers in their palatial apartment in the Rue Constantinople, and also at their country home in Ville d'Avray (half an hour from Paris) must have been paradise. The Paris apartment (Dietschy tells us) sported

Louis XV black-lacquered furniture, curtains of embossed red velvet, dazzling white cushions, pedestals adorned with dried flowers, paintings adroitly hung, heroic bronzes, and a selection of delicate bibelots.

The Vasniers' daughter Marguerite, who was thirteen in 1882, later recalled Debussy's almost daily visits to work in their Paris home:

... I can still see him in the little drawing room on the fifth floor. ... He used to come there nearly every evening, often in the afternoons too, leaving behind him the unfinished pages which were placed on a little

table as soon as he arrived. He used to compose at the piano. ..or at times walking about the room. He would improvise for a long time, and then walk up and down humming, with the everlasting cigarette in his mouth, or else rolling tobacco and paper in his fingers. When he had found what he wanted, he began to write. He made few corrections, but he spent a long time working things out in his head and at the piano before he wrote. He was rarely satisfied with his work ... He was very quick to take offence and extremely sensitive. The slightest thing put him in good humour or made him sullen or angry. ...

Debussy was pouring out reams of lovely music – even if at this stage often somewhat derivative of Massenet, for his idol. She was the first woman ever to sing his songs. It only took a brushing of fingers one day as he nervously handed over the manuscripts; only a few seconds' lingering eye contact for Mme Vasnier to lead her nervous adorer by the hand to her boudoir, undo the buttons of his shirt and ask him to unlace the back of her dress. ... And then the powder keg of passion exploded ... At least that's how I imagined the first time. Pierre La Mure's scenario is rather different. (La Mure wrote perceptive and well-researched, if often wonderfully OTT novels based on the lives of Mendelssohn and Debussy, and I have "borrowed" quite a few vivid details from his *Clair de Lune*.)

Altogether Debussy wrote twenty-three beautiful songs over nearly three years between 1881 and 1884. Here are two of the dedications:

to Mme Vasnier, the only muse who has ever inspired in me anything resembling a musical feeling (not to mention anything else).

to Mme Vasnier, these songs which have come to life through her alone, and which will lose their enchanting gracefulness if they nevermore pass her melodious fairy lips.

The eternally grateful author

Roger Nichols highlights one song in particular, a setting of Verlaine's poem *En sourdine*, a portrait of two lovers in each other's arms, completed on 16 September 1882. "From the very first bar," writes Nichols, "the song is clearly describing a mystery, almost a religious experience. ... the intention can hardly be misinterpreted."

Grand Prix de Rome

In the grip of such a grand passion, it is hardly surprising that Debussy abhorred the prize so many French musicians, painters, sculptors, architects, and engravers craved for when he won it on the second attempt in 1884. Instituted by the French Académie des Beaux Arts in 1803, the Grand Prix de Rome required the winner to pursue three years of study in Rome at the Villa Medici. Debussy recalled much later that when he was informed that he had won the prize with his cantata *L'Enfant Prodigue*, "my heart sank ... I had a sudden vision of boredom ... I felt I was no longer free."

Especially no longer free, of course, to continue his affair with his “succubus”. Thus did Paul Vidal damn Mme Vasnier in this letter to a friend in July 1884. (The literal definition of a succubus is “a female demon believed to have sexual intercourse with sleeping men.”)

So our friend Achille has won the prize despite himself! This sinister tale of adultery has been played out over a long period. Last year I had to persuade him to compete in the final round, against his wishes. Then during the winter he told me he wouldn't leave for Rome even if he won, that he was prevented from doing so. ...

His succubus is battenning on to all his little weaknesses. She's pretty and much pursued by admirers, ... everything he writes is for her and owes its existence to her. How can one expect him in the circumstances to exile himself for two years in Rome, which he already knows and abhors! ...

His moral sense is undeveloped, he's nothing but a sensualist. ... But, with all that, he has such talent and such a personality!

Debussy found Rome initially unbearable. Within about two months of his arrival in February 1885 he was lamenting thus to his friend Claudius Popelin-Ducarre, father of one of his friendly and sympathetic fellow students, the painter Gustave Popelin:

I must tell you that there has been no change in me during the last two months, if anything, my feelings have only been intensified during that time. ... I know this is not following the advice you gave me to try to reduce this passion, which I know is mad, to a lasting friendship, but it's because it is so mad that it prevents me from being reasonable. Thinking seriously about it not only makes it worse, but almost convinces me that I have not sacrificed enough to this love.

Debussy fled back to Paris twice, the first time as early as April 1885, the second in February or March 1886. He also spent part of the summer vacation (July 1885) with the Vasniers in Dieppe. By the time of his second flight, M. Vasnier, ever an assiduous and kindly mentor to Debussy over this entire period, must surely have rumbled the situation and wearied of his role as cuckold. He steered Debussy back in the direction of Rome, where he remained only until March 1887, flouting the Prize rules which specified a three-year stay.

Among Debussy's limited musical consolations during these two years in Rome were meeting Liszt - then a biretta-sporting half-priest in his mid-seventies - and steeping himself in the Renaissance polyphony of Palestrina and Lassus in one of Rome's churches, San Maria dell'Anima. Work wise, he abandoned two projects and wrote little of lasting interest. He did, however, steep himself in Shakespeare, Shelley, Verlaine, Baudelaire, and other writers.

Loulu: “Kissing in the villa ... nude under her fur coat”

There were also a few social diversions and consolations for Debussy in Rome, including a one-night stand or three. He was befriended by a certain

Count Primoli (“a distant cousin of Napoleon III’s daughter in law”) who entertained him in luxury at his villa in Fiumicino in August 1885. And Primoli later revealed to the Principal’s wife Mme Hébert (so she wrote in her diary for 9 February 1886) that Debussy and one, Loulou, had been seen “kissing in the Villa.” Loulou turns out to have been another married lady, Mme Hochon. She and her husband were guests of the Héberts at the time. Being a “worldly woman” the presence of her husband didn’t prevent Mme Hochon from offering the bereft Debussy “an evening of pleasure.” The story goes (details unconfirmed) that the brazen hussy took a fancy to him at a reception at the Villa and, having given her husband the slip, appeared at the door of Debussy’s room “wearing nothing but a wedding ring under a new fur coat!”

Given his good fortune, it may even possibly have been Mme Hochon rather than Mme Vasnier who inspired the song dated this very January 1886 that Debussy set to the poem Green (in the collection *Ariettes*) by Verlaine:

These final kisses ...
This heart that beats only for you

Back in Paris after his two-year ordeal in Rome, Debussy’s contact with the Vasniers petered out – the last sighting of him in his role of lover being (according to Holmes) when the painter Jacques-Emile Blanche saw him climbing a rope ladder up to Madame’s window in Dieppe in 1888. Debussy had maintained an entrée into the Vasnier household as Marguerite’s piano teacher – an experience that the young lady found decidedly negative.

“A Rubens model”

Just one more glimpse of Mme Vasnier (from Dietschy) when she is 42. She appears in one photograph as

buxom ... plump of face, her eyes dry, her arms
crossed, the provocative thrust of her breasts balanced
by the hips drawn back. ... Mme Vasnier had taken on
the amplitude of a Rubens model.

The only large project Debussy was working on when he left Rome was his concluding obligation for the Prix: a setting of *The Blessed Damozel*, a poem D G Rossetti had written for his consumptive mistress Elizabeth Siddall. The work was finally premiered in April 1893.

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1887 through 1892

“... almost abject poverty”

Debussy returned from Rome to his family in the rue de Berlin to find shortly afterwards that his father, now fifty-one, had lost his clerical job. Debussy was therefore forced to earn his living disagreeably, giving piano lessons and doing occasional hackwork for publishers. The trickle of money from the few compositions that were published in these next few years – including the *Ariettes* and *Deux Arabesques*, the *Petite Suite*, the *Cinq Poèmes de Baudelaire* and a cluster of piano pieces – was nowhere near enough to sustain his parents while he remained briefly with them.

Nor often even himself after he moved into his seedy fifth floor apartment at 42 rue de Londres, hard by the Gare St Lazare.

The four or so years after his return from Rome were ones of “almost abject poverty” relieved by occasional spending sprees when he received a publisher’s advance for a transcription, or other small commission. According to his plumber-poet friend and most intimate witness of these years, Vital Hocquet, Debussy lived through four Parisian winters without even an umbrella. La Mure’s imaginative scenario of a kindly concierge cooking him the occasional stew to supplement his diet of bread, potatoes and tea is all too believable.

However, having latched on for a while to a wealthy dilettante, one Etienne Dupin (who would later be murdered in Mexico), Debussy went in Dupin’s company - and at Dupin’s expense - to Bayreuth in the summers of 1888 and 1889. Over the two visits he saw two performances of *Parsifal*, two of *Die Meistersinger* and one of *Tristan und Isolde*. He returned from the first of these experiences “like a Muslim from Mecca,” though fortunately for Western civilisation the infatuation wore off. Nothing would have been worse than Wagner à la française, as some of Debussy’s contemporaries turned out to become.

Since his return from Rome he had begun mingling with the symbolist poets - Mallarmé, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Régnier and others - who met each Tuesday evening at Mallarmé’s house in the Rue de Rome, and whose work would so crucially inspire Debussy’s own. Mallarmé himself believed that poetry should be “transcendental” and should strive for the abstraction of music. Not surprisingly many of his poems are exceedingly obscure.

Still on the symbolist front, in 1892 Debussy read a play by the symbolist dramatist Maurice Maeterlinck, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, set in the imaginary kingdom of Allemonde. Although a flop in Paris as a play, its other-worldly atmosphere was exactly what Debussy had been seeking for an opera:

It had no action [writes La Mure], no suspense, no dramatic structure - nothing. The plot, if you could call it that, was the triangle, this hoariest, tritest of all plots. A young woman [Mélisande], lost, afraid, battered by life, married a kindly middle-aged man she did not love [Golaud]; later she met his younger brother [Pelléas] and fell desperately in love with him. It all ended badly, as such things usually did. The husband discovered the romance and in a fit of jealousy killed his brother, only to discover that his deed solved nothing. His wife did not love him any better than before, and she died, leaving him shattered with guilt and broken-hearted. As a play *Pelléas* was about everything a play should not be. In fact it was an unreal prose poem in which unreal people expressed real emotions. But music, not words, was the true language of emotions ... It was waiting for music to bring it to life.

Inspired by the play, Debussy immediately began working on music that would finally emerge before the world – a full ten years later - as his own opera of the same name. Pelléas sealed his reputation worldwide as the greatest French composer of the nineteenth century.

In 1891 Debussy met a genius far more wayward than himself – a truly divine head case who was to become one of his most loyal friends in dire trouble, Erik Satie (he of *Gymnopédies* fame). The two men met in a Montmartre restaurant on the rue Trudaine, L’Auberge du Clou, where Satie was house pianist. (See Chapter 13 on Satie.)

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“one navel looked astonishingly like another”

Now back to love! There is no reason to doubt La Mure’s intuition that between Debussy’s affairs with Mme Vasnier and Gaby Dupont he had any number of one night stands or short affairs with pickups as lonely as himself, only to discover that “one navel looked astonishingly like another” and that “kisses could be as tasteless as water.” Nor that he had a brief and passionate liaison with another “Madame V.,” a Belgian from Antwerp - “beautiful, rich, Jewish and married” - who was visiting relatives in Paris. The affair seems to have been more agonising on Mme V’s side, since she also loved her husband “with all her heart” – though no longer, it seems, with her body which craved intensely for young Claude.

“A rickety table, three straw-bottomed chairs, something resembling a bed and, on loan, a splendid Pleyel piano.”

Life with “Gaby-of-the-green-eyes”, 1892-98

a blonde with catlike eyes, a powerful chin and firm opinions.

[René Peter]

There were scandalous suggestions that Debussy and Gaby Dupont (1866-1945) first met “in some frivolous place” - a pickup joint, perhaps, rather than a brothel? Well, why not? All Parisian brasseries of the Toulouse-Lautrec type were pickup joints. Men and women must meet each other somewhere, and church socials were out of the question for a pagan like Debussy who declared that he “made mysterious Nature my religion.”

Born in Lisieux in the Auge region of Normandy, twenty-four-year-old Gaby, the daughter of a dressmaker, had “an excellent figure, light brown hair which she dyed [blonde], a firm chin, blue-green eyes and a brilliant complexion,” as well as full lips and a largish mouth. She arrived in Paris c.1887 to make her career as a courtesan in high society - and why not, when the only alternatives were dressmaking, millinery, or even soliciting and the like. You’ll have to take it from me that on the testimony of one of her protectors (quoted by Dietschy), Gaby was unusually good at her job of pleasing men. A photo portrait of her, very Art Nouveau, by the aforementioned Louÿs shows her reclining languidly, eyes closed, on cushions and fabrics on a chaise longue. Head on hands, she is wrapped in a full-length loose-fitting gown. No wonder that after arriving in Paris she soon attached herself to “a black-sheep aristocrat,” the middle-aged, corpulent Comte de Villeneuve.

Gaby must unquestionably have loved Debussy to reject a life of certain luxury as a protector's paramour to throw in her lot with him. Instead of being a kept woman languishing in bed all morning, she had to work her fingers to the bone as a milliner to help pay the rents; firstly for the couple's "dank attic" at 42 rue de Londres, with its borrowed Pleyel piano, bed, three chairs and a rickety table; and then, from autumn 1893, for their fifth floor apartment with three rooms, a kitchen and an inside loo at 10 rue Gustave Doré. After they parted Gaby admitted that their poverty was as much a cause of the split as Debussy's other women.

Even with an annuity of 6,000 francs settled on him in 1894 by George Hartmann (front-man for the publishing firm of Froment), as well as several well-paid engagements playing transcriptions of Wagner at society functions, Debussy was invariably penniless. And any hopes he and Gaby had nursed of money from Rodrigue et Chimène, the operatic project he had begun in 1890 and dedicated to her, were dashed after he abandoned it after the third act in 1892. (Debussy's life story is littered with such abandoned projects, over forty in all. He even scuttled the performance of one of his works, a *Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra*, on the day of its premiere.)

"... a relatively stable emotional life" (New Grove, 2001)

The world needs to be eternally grateful to Gaby for creating some comfort in which Debussy could work on so many masterpieces during his developing career – the *String Quartet*, *the Proses lyriques*, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, *Prélude à L'Après-midi d'un faune* (usually regarded as being the first and ground-breaking piece of "modern music"), the *Nocturnes* ... Gaby's background may have prevented her from being a full-blown muse. But even unworldly composers work better if all is done and dusted. If tiresome callers, plumbers, creditors, landlords and leaking roofs are all dealt with. And if light refreshments, meals (however so often frugal in this couple's case) and snifters are served at regular intervals. Especially as Debussy had by now established a habit of working through the night until dawn and sleeping in - perhaps because there was less racket from the train whistles and all the other puffing, hissing, clanking and clattering noises of the Gare St Lazare.

Debussy's young dramatist friend René Peter wrote vividly of the couple's lives in the mid nineties:

[Claude] was living under the sway of Gaby. She was a blonde with catlike eyes, a powerful chin and firm opinions. She looked after the domestic side - there was not much *Mélisande* in her - and that was quite a big undertaking, first of all because they were poor and secondly because Claude, being a large, spoilt child who refused to allow himself to be manhandled by life, indulged all his whims and was impervious to reason.

Was he suddenly struck with the desire for that brown Japanese engraving which he later gave me for my birthday? He emptied his purse without stopping to think where the next day's dinner would come from.

And while he was lost in thought in company with his genius, Gaby would be out raising money on knickknacks at some sordid pawnshop.

In view of his indebtedness to Gaby, Debussy's dedications to her were rather scant:

À Mademoiselle Gabrielle Dupont
[on the first page of the manuscript for the abandoned Rodrigue et Chimène]

to my dear and very good little Gaby, with the sincere affection of her devoted Claude Debussy
[Inscription on the short-hand score of the Prélude à L'Après-midi d'un faune]

To Gaby, princess of the mysterious kingdom of Allemonde. Her old devoted friend Claude Debussy,
June 1902.
[inscription on a score of Pelléas et Mélisande, given to Gaby three years after they broke up]

Proposals, romances and affairs during the Gaby years

Given Debussy's affairs, and even two breathtaking proposals of marriage to other women while he was living with Gaby, it is a wonder that the liaison lasted six years. His infatuation with the sculptress Camille Claudel, an "ethereal, beautiful woman" who shared his love of Degas, was harmless enough. As later was an undeclared crush on Mallarmé's daughter Geneviève, who bowled over many other men besides Debussy as she served punch at her father's Tuesday evening gatherings of the symbolists.

There were other such innocent infatuations with dream girls linked directly in Debussy's fantasies with his compositions: most notably, in February 1894, with a friend's daughter Yvonne Lerolle, aged 17 and of "of touching beauty." Debussy gave her a Japanese fan decorated with birds and flowers with the dedication

To Mademoiselle Yvonne Lerolle, in memory of
her little sister Mélisande.

Thérèse Roger (1866-1906)

Debussy's treatment of blonde, blue-eyed Thérèse Roger - "ravishing, young and all the rest" - in 1894 was of another order altogether, and brought him low in the eyes of many. The second child of a widowed singing teacher, Thérèse was already a renowned interpreter of Debussy's music. She had sung in the premiere of his Blessed Damozel in April 1893, and the last two of his Proses Lyriques in February 1894. She sang these works again the following month in a concert in Brussels that he rather grandiosely called The Debussy Festival.

In a state of dream-like euphoria, Debussy proposed to Thérèse after the February concert. Obviously being unaware that he was living with another woman, the hapless Thérèse, twenty-eight and maybe worried about being left on the shelf, accepted. From cloud-cuckoo land Debussy

wrote thus to his composer friend Ernest Chausson, who as the brother-in-law of Thérèse's father had paved the way for Debussy's proposal:

[8 March]

Now that a sunny road is open before me I'm afraid at not having deserved such happiness, and at the same time I'm fiercely determined to defend it with all the power at my disposal! Your advice about marriage has touched me deeply, I assure you, and it seems to me (novice that I am in the business) absolutely right. ..I really feel I've offered my life once and for all and that from now on it will be lived for just one person.

When Gaby got wind of all this (there was even a notice in the press) she went ballistic, as any woman would. Imagine the scenes in the rue Gustave Doré! On 17 March the marriage was called off. Poor Thérèse became a virtual recluse for another four years. Eventually, at thirty-six, she entered into an unhappy marriage with a divorced engraver and died four years later in 1906

Not surprisingly Debussy's treatment of Thérèse caused a two-year rift with Chausson, as well as permanent ruptures with other erstwhile admirers and supporters. The world is full of such stories of course. A former good cellist colleague of mine discovered purely by chance one day that her live-in partner – a garage mechanic - was going to get married to another woman in two days time. He wouldn't have told her even then if she hadn't challenged him when he came home from work!

After the Thérèse debacle, Debussy and Gaby seem to have rubbed along well enough between 1894 and 1897. There were just the usual flaming rows and passionate reconciliation's that were par for the course between a volatile woman and an abnormally self-centred man who shared few interests in common besides making love. A trip they made to the Hotel de Croisy, Orbec (Calvados) at Whitsun 1894 resulted in the lovely Jardins sous la pluie (Gardens in the rain). On 28 August 1894 Debussy wrote to Lerolle:

My life here is simple like a blade of grass, and I have no other joys than working.

The relatively happy couple would attend the literary Fridays at the Chat Noir café in Montmartre, its walls covered with Gauguins and paintings by the Impressionists. As well as meeting painters, poets journalists and other composers, they watched shadow plays in the top room. They also frequented the Reynolds bar where they saw clowns performing, and the cakewalk from America. Other diversions included the circus, billiard matches, puppet shows, and the Alcazar music hall on the Champs Elysées.

When the odd cheque came through the box marked "letters," Debussy squandered it in on expensive meals. He had been a gourmet since childhood, his favourite dishes including timbales of macaroni, rose-flavoured pralines, curried oysters, tiny salmon trout, tarts, port ...

More affairs, a suicide attempt, and another proposal

These reasonably good times were bound to crumble. Debussy became involved with a Mrs Alice Peter, who was effectively separated from her

husband and keen for a time to be seen as “the muse of the great man of the future.” Debussy dedicated the second of his *Chansons de Bilitis* to her, *La Chevelure*.

He then cheated on Gaby in an affair with “a young and wealthy society woman” still unidentified – though La Mure gives her name as Hélène without, as he often does, quoting his source in a footnote. Debussy himself told the story of the ensuing crisis, including Gaby’s suicide attempt, to Louÿs (who was then in Algeria acquiring an Arab lady named Zorah):

[9 February 1897]

Gaby with her steely eyes found a letter in my pocket which left no doubt as to the advanced stage of a love affair with all the romantic trappings to move the most hardened heart. Whereupon tears, drama, a real revolver and a report in the *Petit Journal*. Ah, my dear fellow, why weren’t you here to help me out of this nasty mess? It was all barbarous, useless and will change absolutely nothing. A moth’s kisses or a body’s caresses can’t be effaced with an India-rubber. Mind you, they might perhaps think of something like this and call it the Adulterer’s India Rubber. On top of it all, poor little Gaby lost her father - an occurrence which for the time being has straightened things out. I was, all the same, very upset ...

This was far more histrionics rather than a serious suicide attempt. Although emotionally shattered, Gaby was unharmed and a few days later was able to attend her father’s funeral in Lisieux. But Mme Chausson and Mme Ysaÿe (wife of the distinguished violinist who led the first performance of Debussy’s string quartet) both publicly took Gaby’s side, each giving her refuge for a time. Thereafter Debussy had only occasional contact with Chausson and Ysaÿe.

Around 1897 Debussy made his second proposal during the Gaby years, this time to Catherine Stevens, daughter of the Belgian painter Alfred Stevens. She declared that she would have married him, “despite everything that was being said about him at the time ... if I hadn’t met Henry.” Henry was Henry Vivier, a brilliant young doctor. Catherine did her best to spare Debussy’s feelings with such words as “once Pelléas is performed, we will talk about it again!” However tempting he might have been for a fling, Debussy was definitely not husband material for the likes of a woman like Catherine, then in her early thirties and looking for a good match. Debussy was, she wrote, too “eccentric,” a “man without a penny.”

He was inconsolable for several days. Then once again it was back to Gaby and Pelléas. Desperately short of money he himself contemplated suicide in a rather whining letter to Louÿs (1 April 1898), part of which reads:

I’ve got into this state of mind from continually fighting against silly and despicable impossibilities. You know me better than anyone and you alone can take it upon yourself to tell me that I am not altogether an old fool ...

Rags to riches

Soon after this it was crunch time for Gaby. According to La Mure, dire poverty had already driven her from Debussy for a few months from the early summer of 1897. At that point she took up with an unidentified protector whose money enabled her to rent a house and provide for her widowed mother in Orbec. But love drove Gaby back again to the draughty doors and squeaking shutters of the rue Gustave Doré.

Finally, however, fed up of being endlessly cheated on, and of living so often on bread and tea, she left Debussy for good, probably by September 1898, and collapsed into the welcoming arms of the aristocrat Comte Victor de Balbiani who lived on the Avenue Niel. There (writes La Mure) she was soon presiding over glittering receptions attended by diplomats, senators, cabinet ministers, even Aristide Briand, later to be ten times Premier of France. In due course Balbiani probably replaced her with someone younger.

Debussy later rebuffed Balbiani when approached by the count to write incidental music for his play *La Fille de Pasiphyé* (The daughter of Pasiphaë). Aside of male rivalry, the play's lurid plotline, in which the heroine Pasiphaë (wife of King Minos) sleeps with a white bull and produces a son with "the head of a bull and the equipment of a man" (the Minotaur), was hardly one to tease out music from such a fastidious man as Debussy.

In September 1898 Debussy moved to another apartment, on the fourth floor of 58 rue Cardinet. He soon found some money to paper the walls in his favourite green, and decorated the room with Chinese silks and ornamental cats.

"She really loved him until she died."

[The pianist Alfred Cortot, who knew Gaby well in her last years]

Gaby may have later been reported to be "a well-dressed tart," but neither she nor Debussy bore each other any ill will. On the contrary, he presented her with the earlier mentioned score of *Pelléas* in 1902, and some time much later she was seen attending a lecture on the composer's life and works.

Even when she was back in Rouen as an usherette, she held on to Debussy's scores as long as she was able. Later, she was reduced to satisfying her craving for tobacco by combing the pavements and gutters each night for cigarette ends "in an old coat and knitted woollen hat." She died on 12 May 1945 at Orbec.

*

Life with "LILY-LILO" (Lilly)

Rosalie Texier, Mme Claude Debussy (1873-1932)

She is unbelievable fair and pretty, like some character from an old legend ... Her favourite song is a roundelay about a grenadier with a red face who wears a hat on one side like an old campaigner – not very provoking aesthetically.

[Debussy to his friend Robert Godet, 5 January 1900]

“not much up top.”

**[Roger Nichols on Lilly, BBC 2: Masterworks 2, 19
January 2002]**

Debussy was first introduced to Lilly Texier in the spring of 1898 during the terminal stages of his relationship with Gaby. Daughter of a widowed telegraph inspector, with a “slender figure, pale complexion, small dark mouth and dark chestnut hair,” Gaby had come from the Yonne (in Burgundy) to Paris when she was twenty-five to work as a mannequin in a fashion house, the Soeurs Callot in the rue Taitbout. She first lived with “a nice fellow who dabbled in stocks” - the niceness however being infected with a streak of violence from which Lilly soon fled.

In a way that the French seem to manage better than anyone else, for a time Gaby befriended Lilly and even warned her of her suitor’s less loveable qualities, especially his roving eye. Paul Holmes sketches this ménage à trois:

For a while, all three could be seen in each other’s company at their favourite haunts, especially in the Brasserie Pousset with its Pre-Raphaelite decor. Debussy and his two women, with their friends Mendès, Messenger, various writers and journalists and the fantastic poet Paul-Jean Toulet, who wanted to co-operate on a libretto with Debussy, must have been a striking sight.

Lilly became very popular with many of Debussy’s friends – not only for her “simplicity, her firmness, her lively and slightly earthy wit, her elegance, and her lithe body” but also because she laid on a very yummy “thé complet” - biscuits, brioches, canapés, macaroons, cream puffs Her least appealing asset was a harsh voice that Debussy was often prone to mock.

A year on, the relationship between Debussy and Lilly had clearly moved well beyond the platonic:

[24 April 1899]

My dear little Lilli, Claude has still not recovered from the nibbles of your dear little mouth. And he can hardly leave off thinking of that evening when you gave him so much unexpected pleasure in the nicest way, and with the most complete abandon in the world.

Although in mid May Debussy was telling Louÿs that “my old liaison with Music prevents me from becoming a bridegroom,” by July he was describing Lilly as “marriageable.” He had even been economical with the truth – or wildly optimistic - in telling her in the previous month that

it is certain that Pelléas et Mélisande will be put on this winter and that my situation will improve very markedly.

All he had done at that stage was to play the score to Albert Carré, director of the Opéra-Comique. It would be another three years before it reached the stage.

“A time of spring”

With Gaby's warnings, and no doubt hearing other stories of Debussy's womanising, Lilly hesitated before plunging into marriage – even though in September Debussy threatened in eloquent style to kill himself. But she finally capitulated and they married on 19 October 1899. The witnesses were Satie and Louÿs. Every book on Debussy repeats the same story of the wedding day with minor variations. Debussy had to give a lesson for twenty francs (to a Mlle Worms de Romilly) so that he could pay for the ceremony and wedding breakfast. In the afternoon they went to the zoo at the Jardin des Plantes, and then dined at the popular Brasserie Pousset. Mme Claude Debussy then returned with her husband to his apartment at 58 rue Cardinet.

The couple enjoyed about three years of happiness. According to their matchmaker René Peter, “there followed perhaps the happiest period of his life – ‘a time of spring’, he used to call it – and a flowering of rare but marvellous works ...”

Debussy was able to work productively and undisturbed on *Pelléas*, as well as the *Estampes* (three piano preludes) and two of the *Nocturnes*. One caller at the rue Cardinet, Emille Vuillermoz, arrived and heard Debussy working on the opera but was firmly barred from entry:

The door opened. A beautiful but stern-looking woman appeared, holding in her hands various menacing items of household apparatus. I can still see the long-handled broom on which she was leaning, like a Valkyrie on her spear! I asked politely to see Debussy. Brünnhilde listened to me with an outraged expression. My audacity seemed to take her breath away. ... ‘My husband is not at home.’

During all this, Debussy was playing and singing louder than ever, practically drowning our conversation. I ventured an unbelieving glance at the half-open door of the study from which this torrent of music was emanating. ... ‘I tell you, my husband is not at home!’ And satisfied with the solidity of this statement, the daughter of Wotan closed the door in my face. ...

[Emile Vuillermoz: Claude Debussy]

Another caller Mme Gérard de Romilly, the now-married piano pupil he had taught just before his marriage ceremony, paints a cosy picture of wedded contentment:

There was an atmosphere of intimacy and calm in the two small rooms joined by a bay. One was Debussy's studio where, on the desk, manuscripts, inkwells and pencils were laid out in perfect order. There was also a divan, several Oriental carpets and, on the walls, pictures ... and drawings representing Lilo Debussy, then at the height of her beauty. ...

... The two cats, which Debussy cherished, occupied an important place in the family, and had all their whims respected. As silent as their master, they had the right to spend the day solemnly on the desk

and, if they so wished, to sow disorder among the pencils.

This, of course, was all too good to last! One slowly increasing source of disappointment was their inability to have children. Between 14 and 23 August 1900, after a three week holiday in the Yonne, Lilly had an abortion in the Maison Dubois. On 25th Debussy wrote to Louÿs:

Lilly. ..was operated on several days ago, but that's not all; it seems her body in general is in a poor state and (between ourselves) she has tubercular patches at the top of both lungs. We are having to take immediate steps to deal with these, namely sending her to the Pyrenees for three or four months! You can imagine what a torment it's all been, quite apart from my financial situation, desperate as usual! I don't know any more how to cope with so many contradictory events.

The convalescence in the Pyrenees probably never materialised – at any rate not for three or four months. By way of affordable recompense for Lilly, at the very end of the year Debussy dedicated the first two completed movements of his *Nocturnes* to her:

This manuscript belongs to my little Lilly-Lilo. All rights reserved. It is proof of the deep and passionate joy I have in being her husband. Claude Debussy. At the peep of January, 1901.

When these two *Nocturnes* were premiered the following December a discerning critic – there aren't many of those! – wrote that Debussy was “one of the most original and remarkable artistic personalities of the day” who was “intent on expressing the transient impressions of the dream he is in quest of, rather than the eternal passions of the world which he shuns.”

Pelléas

Lilly's proudest months with Debussy were probably those surrounding the premiere of *Pelléas et Mélisande* on Monday 30 April 1902 at the Opéra-Comique on Place Boiëldieu – a full ten years after he first began reading Maeterlinck's play. Although unable to appreciate the real quality of her husband's genius, she felt that it was as much her piece as his. She had, after all, looked after him during its orchestration and completion – a process that went on even after the premiere since Debussy had to write some orchestral interludes to be played between the scene changes. Lilly will obviously have been thrilled that the opera played to fourteen good houses, and that in the last performance of the season on 28 June there were three or four curtain calls after each act.

Henri Busser, who conducted the offstage chorus of sailors on the first night and later took over from André Messager as the main conductor, made some diary notes.

28 April: The great day finally arrives! Public dress rehearsal of *Pelléas*. ... Debussy takes refuge in Messager's office and nervously smokes one cigarette after another..

30 April [? 1 May]: The morning after the premiere I go to see Debussy ... [Lilly's] happy that *Pelléas* is being

produced. 'It's my work too', she says, 'because I gave Claude encouragement when he was despairing of ever seeing his work reach the stage!'

This year of Pelléas was perhaps the climactic year in Debussy's rise to fame. He had written what many consider to be the most perfect music drama ever written. Pelléas would be performed over the next few years in Berlin, Munich, Milan (La Scala) London ... and even the New York "Met." (The Met's director Gatti-Casazza later forced an advance on Debussy for a second opera which, needless to say, was never written.) By the end of the year of Debussy's death Pelléas would be staged also in Brussels, Frankfurt, Cologne, Prague, Berlin, Rome, Boston, London, Chicago Buenos Aires, Geneva, Birmingham and Manchester.

Debussy's arrival to fame also sparked a cult which he came to loath of "Debussyism" in which acolytes proclaimed him their leader and wrote stuff "full of parallel fifths, unresolved sevenths and full-tone arpeggios."

Smelling Salts and Pistols at Dawn

Debussy's musical successes never came without enormous struggle – he was after all a man who would in his own words, "sometimes require weeks to decide upon one harmonious accord in preference to another." In the case of Pelléas there had also been an unholy fracas with the dramatist Maeterlinck. Suffice it to say that a huge row over Maeterlinck's choice of the lead soprano – his own mistress Mlle Georgette Leblanc, with Debussy's initial agreement – against the choice of the theatre, Mary Garden, (whom Debussy also came to prefer) climaxed into a Feydeau farce. Maeterlinck confronted Debussy with a cane, challenged him to a duel (even putting a bullet through his cat while practising for same), Debussy dropped into a chair, Lilly fetched smelling salts ...

It all, of course, came to nothing.

After all his public success, – including his acceptance of the Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur – Debussy went to London for four days at the invitation of Messager. From the Hotel Cecil he sent this "soothing" letter to Lilly on 16 July (1902):

My very dear little wife,

Your letter did me immense good - if you knew how alone I feel in spite of everything; no longer hearing your imperious voice calling 'Mî- Mî leaves me as melancholy as a guitar. I loved your lack of courage very much. You see, it is very nice to be the strong little wife, but there are times when the strong little wife must have her weaknesses. That adds an extra charm to her graciousness. ... Would you believe that it is impossible to get a cup of good tea? That makes me think of my rue Cardinet and the dear little wife, who, among other gifts, possesses that of making tea! Ah! in England there are no such wives as that; here they are wives for horseguards with their complexions of raw ham and their movements like those of a young animal.

...

He came back to find Lilly, rarely in robust health, "in the grip of kidney stones". "Will she never get well?" Debussy asked in a letter to a

friend. But they spent that summer in the peace of the Burgundy countryside at Lilly's father's home in Bichain. Here he worked on, amongst other things, an opera based on Edgar Allan Poe's *The Devil in the Belfry* - another obsessive project that would come to nothing after years of agonising.

"His love for Lilly was oozing out of him like water from a cracked jug." (La Mure)

By 1903 life with Lilly was beginning to pall. He secretly admitted that her voice and shrill laughter grated on his nerves. At the age of 30 she was also ageing prematurely, developing jowls and her eyes becoming ever more "doe-like." She was unable to identify with his ever intensifying need to withdraw from the world in his search to express himself.

Their holiday photos at Bichain in 1903 (where he began working on his first set of *Images* and *La mer*) "have a glum aspect," writes Dietschy. Debussy is bored with her. And they were still childless, and still sometimes short of money. In his correspondence with others Lilly became "my poor wife," "my little wife" ...

Enter Emma Bardac

a woman of "commanding presence"

Things would no doubt have drifted on, in the way that men, more than women, always let them, had Debussy not met someone else. She had money and she made a beeline for him, as she had done for other distinguished artistic men.

In October 1903 a young pupil of Debussy, Raoul Bardac, introduced his teacher to his mother, forty-one-year-old Emma Bardac, the Jewish wife, since she was seventeen, of a wealthy banker Sigismond Bardac. Their marriage had been "open" for some time, he consorting with an actress and she with various artists including most notably, a decade earlier, Fauré, who had dedicated his song cycle *La Bonne Chanson* to her. Others who had fallen for her auburn hair and topaz-coloured eyes included Debussy's composer friends Charles Koechlin and Albert Samain.

Debussy had long admired Emma's voice, and after dining with the Bardacs, readily accepted a further invitations for music

"The conflagration of 1903-4"

"Elle l'a eu par la gueule." ("She's hooked him.")

[Lilly's comment on Emma]

Things moved quickly over the next few months, with Debussy and Bardac, according to one unconfirmed report, taking a romantic drive in her carriage along the Bois de Boulogne and Debussy, in French novella style, successfully proposing an affair.

In Dietschy's opinion, Debussy's *Deux Danses* of April 1904 for harp and strings (*Danse sacrée et danse profane*) convey his "unease and anticipation" of this time. This letter of 6 June from Debussy to Emma thanking her for some flowers is surely the language of lovers:

How kind of you and how good they smell! But above all, I am made profoundly happy by your thought. That entered my heart and remains there, and it is for such things as these that you are unforgettable and charming. ... Forgive me if I have kissed all these

flowers as though they formed a human mouth.
Perhaps it is crazy ...

In this same month Debussy also completed his second set of *Fêtes galantes* to poems by Verlaine, dedicating them to Emma - "To my little darling [À la petite mienne] to thank the month of June," Of this music Nichols writes:

The third and last song, *Colloque sentimental*, Debussy's farewell to the poet, sounds like a farewell to Lilly as the two ghostly lovers converse:

'How blue was the sky, and great our hope!
'Hope, crushed, has fled toward the black sky'

On 15 July 1904 Debussy packed Lilly off to her father's at Bichain and moved to Emma's house. On 16th he wrote to Lilly that:

for some time I've been worried that I'm going round
the same circles of ideas. Now that I seem to have
found a new direction, that's why I dare not let go of it,
whatever it costs me

Over the next weeks he hinted several times at how things were going to turn out.

"The works born of his passions"
Masques, *L'Île Joyeuse* ...

Later in July Debussy went with Emma to Jersey where he completed his *Masques*. They then moved on to Dieppe for most of August and part of September, where he completed the work that on every hearing sounds incandescent with his new passion: *L'Île Joyeuse*. Both this and the *Masques* were sparked off by the eighteenth-century painter Watteau's *The Embarkation for Cythera*, depicting masked lovers leaving for Aphrodite's island of love. There are obvious parallels with Debussy's own flight to Jersey with his beloved. In Dietschy's words, *L'Île Joyeuse* with its profusion of oriental arabesques

is in every regard the isle of Jersey, an isolated place
and a place of uninhibited joy – the composition proves
it overwhelmingly.

Both these works, Dietschy feels, embody Debussy's "uncontrollable feeling" for Emma Bardac.

*

Mayhem

For all this passionate elation, Debussy had to come down to earth. He had to ditch his wife. There was a "painful meeting" on 13 September when he told Lilly that he was moving out of the rue Cardinet and moving in with Emma, first to 19 Avenue Alphand. Lilly would threaten suicide at least four times.

Debussy wrote to Messenger on 19 September 1904 :

My life during the last few months has been strange
and bizarre, much more so than I could have wished. It
is not easy to give you particulars, it would be rather
embarrassing. ... I have had many a fall, and have hurt
myself so much that I have felt utterly exhausted for

hours afterwards ... I have been mourning the Claude Debussy who worked so joyfully on Pelléas ...

The crisis came on 14 October 1904, perhaps because Lilly couldn't face their imminent fifth wedding anniversary. In the very public space of the Place de la Concorde, she pointed a revolver at herself and fired. Mary Garden describes her visit to Lilly in a clinic on the rue Blomet:

... When Lilly had finished telling me the story, the surgeon came in to dress her wound ... and opened her night dress, and in my life I have never seen anything so beautiful as Lilly Debussy from the waist up. It was just like a glorious marble statue, too divine for words!

...

And lying underneath Lilly's left breast was a round dark hole where the bullet had gone in, without touching anything vital ... That little token of her love for Claude Debussy stayed with her till she died, and that was in 1932.

Curiously, in June of this very same year Debussy had told Mary Garden that he was "obsessed with love" of *her*! Clearly Mary was another Mélisande in his imaginary love life. Mary, however, although deeply respecting Debussy, didn't remotely fancy him.

Now that Debussy was a public figure, Lilly's suicide attempt received coverage in every newspaper including *Le Figaro* (4 November). Later even a play based on it appeared, *La Femme nue* by Henry Bataille.

It is not surprising to learn that Debussy never visited Lilly at the clinic, nor did he pay her bills. Ravel and Pierre Louÿs collected money amongst their circle to help her. Louÿs openly quarrelled with Debussy, while Fauré also refused to speak to him – no doubt also piqued by Debussy inheriting his mistress! Other erstwhile friends who had been fond of Lilly and who temporarily or permanently broke with Debussy included René Peter, Paul Dukas André Messenger, Pierre Lalo ... Inevitably some accused Debussy of pursuing Bardac for her money. Only Satie, Louis Laloy, his new publisher Jacques Durand, Ricardo Viñes (who premiered many of Debussy's piano works), Koechlin, and a few others stood by him.

In the run-up to his divorce, Debussy turned to the offensive in one of his Note Books (quoted here from Nichols) that also contained sketches for *La mer*:

Anger - even in front of her family - violence with the servants; quarrels about money ...; lies of every kind. ...; constant dissimulation - my friends, for example, never liked - was only after a slightly better situation - she made a mistake there and avenged herself by exercising a daily tyranny over my thoughts and dealings ...; ... If Mme D had been an honest person, it is probable that my friends would not have been so attentive to her -!! [exclamation marks added in blue]

Debussy never saw Lilly again, though even as late as March 1905 during divorce proceedings she was still resisting a break-up. The divorce – rightly punitive for Debussy – was finalised on 2 August. (Emma's divorce, more favourable than Debussy's, had come through on 4 May.)

Even allowing for the futility of laying blame in love, it is easy to see why so many of Debussy's friends deserted him. He had once loved Lilly and, (as Holmes reminds us) had even put her into a play on which he collaborated with René Peter, *Les Frères en Art*. There he said of her:

'You don't pretend to be a muse who frightens the sparrows away. You don't do your hair like the women in the frescoes. You have a lovely perfume and you are as sweet as a peach. ...'

Lilly's story closes by mentioning that in 1910 Debussy stopped paying her alimony, and that on 15 July 1916 he had to make a down payment of 30,000 francs to fund her alimony of 400 francs a month. In doing so he moaned to his lawyer that "an artist is much less interesting than a mannequin".

Lilly died in 1932

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By the Spring of 1905, life had become so unbearable for Debussy and Emma in Paris that they left for England via Jersey. Before leaving Debussy wrote to his new young friend the scholar and critic Louis Laloy:

[14 April 1905]

You should know how many people have deserted me. It is enough to make one sick of everyone called man. I shan't tell you everything I have gone through. It's ugly and tragic and ironically reminds me of a novel a concierge might read. Morally, I have suffered terribly. Have I some forgotten debt to pay to life? I don't know, but I've often had to smile so that no one should see that I was going to cry .

In Jersey, Debussy took up *La mer* once more and wrote thence to Durand:

The sea has been very good to me, she has shown me all her moods.

Debussy was glad of Durand, who in August 1905 signed with the composer an exclusive contract paying him a monthly income based on anticipated future royalties.

That same August the couple moved on to London where, he told Laloy, he spent several days

without much joy, except for the music of the grenadiers who used to pass every morning with their joyful bagpipes and the wild little fifes playing marches in which the Scotch song seemed to melt into the cakewalk.

Debussy noted one march down and was to use it four years later in his *Children's Corner Suite* for piano. Children were now very much on his mind, since to his joy Emma was now some seven months pregnant.

From London they moved on to Eastbourne where once more Debussy wrote to Laloy:

I've been here a month. It's a little English seaside place, silly as these places sometimes are. I shall have to go because there are too many draughts and too much music - but I don't know where ... I have written

a certain amount of music as I have not done for quite a time.

In spite of the distraction of seafront bands in Eastbourne playing military marches and arrangements of Sullivan and Edward German, he finished the orchestration of *La mer* (“three symphonic sketches”) while overlooking the sea from the windows of the Grand Hotel. *La mer* would be premiered later that year on 15 October in a fiasco of catcalls and hisses followed by a “cool” press response. (One problem was that the conductor Camille Chevillard was not up to the job.) However, the tide soon turned when Debussy himself conducted the work successfully in 1908, and it is now perhaps his best-loved orchestral work. Here is one eloquent tribute in a memoir by Nicholson Baker:

I was amazed by how true to liquid life it all was. ...
How did [Debussy] turn an orchestra, a prickly ball of
horsehair and old machinery, into something that
splashed and surged, lost its balance and regained it?

...
[from *Granta* magazine, issue 76]

*

Family Man: whisky and strong tea

With the birth on 30 October 1905 of Claude Emma Debussy – ever to be known as Chouchou - Debussy, although not yet married to Emma Bardac, was indeed a de facto family man living also with Emma’s twenty-three year old son Raoul, her daughter Dolly (for whom Fauré would later write his *Dolly Suite*), two servants and Kim the dog. Debussy also ensured that his ageing parents were living in decent accommodation.

With Emma’s funds, they had all moved shortly before Chouchou’s birth from the Avenue Alphand to 80 Avenue du Bois de Boulogne (now Avenue Foch): a pleasant detached house whose rear garden backed on to the familiar ceinture railway line that circled the city.

According to Dolly Bardac these were days of happiness, with Debussy sending from his study to her mother elsewhere in the house billets doux “full of love and tenderness.” For nearly two years there were no money problems, with Emma’s alimony keeping her in the style to which she was accustomed and Debussy in a position to indulge in all those luxuries that he had always in any case regarded as essentials. Dolly later numbered among her step-father’s treasured acquisitions a big wooden toad, a Chinese ornament called Arkel, various Chinese antiques, beautiful silver ... And from across the Channel books of English literature, original paintings by Turner, Whistler and D G Rossetti, drawings by Arthur Rackham, William Morris furniture ... not to mention supplies of whisky and strong tea.

From now on Debussy also became more conventional and meticulous in his dress, abandoning his broad-brimmed hat “nearly as big as a parasol” for a thoroughly bourgeois derby.

Debussy was besotted with his Chouchou, and made up for her a whole series of stories about a Monsieur Gros, a fat butterfly hunter who got into scrapes with lions, tigers and crocodiles. Later, from Vienna, he would send her post card instalments of “*Les Mémoires d’outre-Croche*”

signed “Le Papadechouchou.” In 1908 he dedicated his *Children’s Corner Suite* to her “with her father’s apologies for what is to follow.” Some of the pieces were inspired by toy animals in her nursery and some of the titles were suggested by Chouchou’s English governess, Miss Gibbs. Later, in 1913, Chouchou and her collections would also inspire *La boîte à joujoux* (The Toy Box) - “a little work to amuse children, nothing more.”

The singer Maggie Teyte (“the graceful Miss Teyte” as Debussy referred to her) left a telling picture of Debussy in 1906/7 in the Debussy-Bardac household in the Bois du Boulogne. (She sang *Mélisande* at the Opéra-Comique in 1908, taking over from Mary Garden.)

So it was, that at the age of eighteen, very small and light, I found myself on Debussy’s doorstep, with the score of ‘Pelléas’ under my arm.

... he sat at the piano without even moving. There seemed to be hours of silence. At last he turned round: ‘Vous êtes Mlle Teyte?’ ‘Oui Monsieur.’ Silence. ‘Vous êtes Mlle Maggie Teyte?’ ‘Oui Monsieur.’ Silence. ... Strange to relate he never shook hands with me. He said to me, ‘I will have *Mélisande* as I want her.’ I was only too ready to agree.

As a teacher he was pedantic ... He sat one day at the piano. He never played without getting into the mood. This took two or three minutes. I sat and waited. He raised his arms and was just ready to play when he saw a little bit of white cotton on the floor. He stopped and picked it up. He rolled it up and looked everywhere for a place to put it. Dead silence for another five minutes ...

... He was such a many-sided character. ... He was volcanic: a volcano that smouldered. I once saw him so white with anger, then red with the sheer effort of control. There was a core of anger and bitterness in him ... No one seemed to like him. Jean Perrier, who played *Pelléas* to my *Mélisande*, went white with anger if you mentioned the name of Debussy ...

1907

When poverty comes through the door love flies out of the window.

[Lancastrian adage]

Once again the good times for Debussy didn’t last. Sigismund Bardac soon began to renege on his alimony payments and had to be pursued through the courts. Worse still, in 1907 the couple’s hopes of a bonanza from the will of Emma’s Uncle, Osiris, were dashed when they discovered that owing to his displeasure with her conduct, he had left her a mere 5,000 francs a year.

A letter from Debussy to Laloy of 15 October 1907 is one of all-too-familiar moroseness:

An ordinary rain is falling on Paris, but I do not see its purpose very well ... peace does not dwell in my soul. Is it the fault of the landscape of this corner of Paris? Or is it that I am clearly not made to put up with domestic

life? So many questions, which I cannot find the strength to answer.

Tough! With Chouchou now a dearly beloved child of two, absconding was not even an option. Instead he sealed his relationship with Emma by marrying her on 20 January 1908. Debussy realised that from now on, much to his loathing, he would have to hit the road regularly as a conductor of his own works in order to bring in some money.

Loathsome long train journeys, hotel rooms, rehearsals, concerts, receptions ... Merde! Between now and his death Debussy would visit London, Vienna, Amsterdam, Budapest, Moscow, St Petersburg, Turin, Rome, The Hague, and Brussels. His very last trip would be to London in 1914 to earn a sou performing for Sir Edgar and Lady Speyer.

On the composing front, he would have to labour on commissions – including the bizarre five-act “mystery” by Gabriel d’Annunzio, *Le Martyr de Saint Sebastien* (inspired by the love bites of d’Annunzio’s mistress who was the star of the show!), and also the ballet *Jeux* for Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes. Inevitably these and other projects reduced the time he could spend writing for himself. But praise be that he could somehow continue to produce such masterpieces as the *Rondes de Printemps*, *Ibéria*, the two sets of *Images* (for orchestra), his ineffably beautiful two sets of *Préludes*, *Le Promenoir des deux amants*, the *Trois Ballades de François Villon*, the *Trois Poèmes de Mallarmé* ... And then would come his explosion of creativity in the summer of 1915 (see below), followed by the last creative spurts before his death.

Debussy’s increasingly morbid state must have made him hard to live with. In 1908 he began to identify himself with the character of Roderick, in Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*, who feels the walls of the house suffering ... A year later, still immersed in Poe’s gloomy mansion he wrote to Durand

I spend my existence in the House of Usher ... and leave with my nerves as taut as the strings of a violin.

His recurring gloominess wasn’t improved in 1909 by the appearance of the first symptoms, in the form of daily haemorrhages, of the cancer that would kill him in 1918.

It Had To Happen

Of course it did! Debussy had his last known affair with an unknown woman in March 1910. Approaching the male menopause he wrote to André Caplet on 23 March,

I am – and this happens to me often – at a dangerous turning point in my life.

“There was a final attachment,” writes Dietschy, “secret and very tender, but it led to no rupture.” Did Emma know? Did she by now care? Probably, just about.

The reluctant “travelling salesman”

Debussy’s first letters to Emma from abroad date from Vienna late November and early December 1910. Coming from a man compelled to abandon the comfort and tranquillity of his study and present his wares all too often to “idiots,” they are not those of a happy man:

You realise that I have undertaken this journey for us, because of our persistent poverty without which I shouldn't be so far away from you, so deprived of your caresses.

It was with much difficulty that I kept myself from weeping ... Everything annoys me. My nerves are on edge and I find that a composer of music is required to excel these days in those qualities of toughness possessed by a travelling salesman.

If only you could see my expression – something like the mask of Beethoven or that of Dante on his return from Hell.

Certainly the marriage was going through a rocky patch, perhaps not the first. Emma wrote to a lawyer about a possible separation, complaining among other things about her husband's mania for table-tapping. (Debussy's interest in Occultism is another chapter.)

Nevertheless she stuck with him and supported him crucially through the ordeal of the above-mentioned project with d'Annunzio in 1910 and 1911. When it was all over, Debussy recorded his gratitude to Emma in June:

For my own little one, in memory of three months of Martyrdom which she alone knew how to alleviate with the happy phrase: "What does a work like this matter to you!"

*

By now Debussy was heavily in debt, his obligations to Durand alone in 1911 amounting to 27,000 francs. (By 1914 the figure would rise to over 56,000 francs.) To make matters worse, Emma refused to let him to sail to Boston in the final months of 1911 to see a production of *Pelléas* conducted by Caplet. He also felt he had dried up musically; he was no longer reaching "the naked flesh of emotions."

The Debussys were unable to afford holidays in either 1912 or 1913. Of the latter year Nichols writes:

It is implicit in one or two remarks in his letters that Emma refused to countenance any diminution of the luxurious lifestyle she was accustomed to. At the same time she regularly refused to let him travel without her and no less regularly suffered illnesses of one sort and another: in this summer of 1913 a temperature and accompanying insomnia, which prevented Debussy travelling to London and earning a fairly easy 5,000 francs for accompanying Maggie Teyte in the *Ballades de François Villon*.

Debussy's trip to Russia in December 1913 did have some pleasant moments – including hearing *Sorochinsky Fair* by his favourite composer Moussorgsky - but basically the trip was a "a grim ordeal." He suffered continuously from insomnia, one of the symptoms of his cancer condition. The letter he wrote to Emma on his first night in Moscow is like many others:

I went to sleep broken-hearted. ...After an hour, not being able to sleep, I got up and walked about like a demented one, from one room to another. ...I drop into an armchair, fall off to sleep and am awakened by the cold. ...I lie down again and try to get to sleep by doing the silliest things such as counting to a thousand forwards and backwards. Then some-one comes in to ask what I want for breakfast.

Even more alarming is this letter of 6 December:

What's going to become of us? Your letters are more and more miserable! Like you, I feel nothing will calm you and that makes me very uneasy. ..Once again, I beg you, grant us both a little patience and goodwill.

Two days later the real rub, perhaps, in their marital problems surfaces: a rub that causes so many creative artists to change partners frequently or to end up living alone. Emma is jealous of his composing. He gives her insufficient attention:

Do you realise that you wrote: 'I don't know how I'll manage not to be jealous of your music'? Don't you think that's enough to upset one's equilibrium somewhat? ...

Concert-wise, this Russian trip to Moscow and St Petersburg was a huge success with both audience and critics. Even more to Debussy's liking will have been a homage signed by twenty Russian musicians assuring him that their expectations of his music had not been disappointed and that
we have lived with you days that will never fade from
our memory.

Debussy's melancholia continued in 1915 when between leaving Paris on 18 February for Rome (where audiences went "delirious" over his music) and returning home on the 24th, he sent Emma twelve letters and telegrams of despair: at having received no letters from her, at her having to face their creditors alone, at his being in a hotel room in which he felt that 'everything is crumbling round me' ... One letter reads:

In the course of a sleepless night I was convinced I was going to die and decided to give up conducting concerts throughout Europe. I hardly dare write this down but I confess my terrible fear of losing your love.

After Rome came a four-day trip to Amsterdam and The Hague for a fee of 1,500 francs. Again successful concerts were no consolation for personal distress:

The fog is murky; that's the only word for it. I'm again in a dismal state, but with my nerves on edge, and I'm off to rehearse.

The death on 23 March of his mother after his return only plunged him further into despair. "Does one know what happens at such moments?" he asked.

*

"Probably the three most productive months of his life for quality and quantity"

Ouff! the most intricate Japanese woodcut is child's play compared to some of those pages, but I am content. It is a good work.

[Debussy to Durand of the Piano Etudes]

Having helped Emma in her war efforts by organising a concert, Debussy and his family went in July 1915 to Mon Coin, Pourville, near Dieppe. Exactly what now sparked off such an explosion of creativity – probably the three most productive months of his entire life - is a mystery. First came a two-piano suite *En Blanc et Noire*, followed by *six Etudes*, a *sonata for piano and cello*, six more Etudes, then *the Sonata for flute viola and harp* ... All these works testified to Debussy's newfound enthusiasm for the French tradition in music – hence his signing himself Musicien Français in the scores. (This was, of course, wartime.)

In October he had to return to Paris. On hearing of the destruction of French villages, at the beginning of December he wrote his little heartfelt *Le Noël des enfants qui n'ont plus de maison* (Carol for homeless children) – one of the last spurts of his flickering genius. Only the *violin sonata* was still to be written. Before his debilitating colostomy for rectal cancer on 7 December he bade Emma to “continue to love me in our little Chouchou”.

From 1916 life became a long calvary. “He is so thin and pale” wrote Emma to Pasteur Valléry-Radot. The composer Widor was “profoundly moved by his thinness and weakness.” “If I must soon die, I hope at least that I have tried to do my duty,” Debussy wrote to Durand on 3 July 1916. His morale was not improved by taking up and abandoning once again his project on the *House of Usher*, of which he completed only a sketch for one scene.

In March 1917 he finished his *Violin Sonata*, begun the previous year, and took part in its premiere on 5 May. His last-ever concert engagement was to accompany Gaston Poulet in the *Violin Sonata* in September at St Jean de Luz (at the Atlantic end of the Pyrenees). Back in Paris he soon took to his bed for the rest of his life.

A cryptic note to Emma at New Year 1918 was his last ever to her. He had not put pen to paper for two months.

But if it is agreed that love is ... How will it not be

...

Pasteur Valléry-Radot saw him on 8 February:

I acted as though I knew nothing and she did likewise
... As if this war did not kill enough people, this illness
had to strike a man like him. What injustice, what
blindness of fate!

His last days were relieved by visits from Viñes, who played him the *Etudes*, then from Durand who embraced him and handed him ... a cigarette. One of the millions that he had rolled and savoured with such pleasure throughout his adult life and that surely helped to kill him.

He died on Monday 25 March 1918 at 10.00pm during blasts of the German's infamous monster long-range canon “Big Bertha”. Emma, André Caplet and Valléry-Radot were beside him. The funeral ceremony took place on 28 March amidst another shelling. Of the fifty or so mourners

present, only a handful arrived at the Père Lachaise cemetery where he was buried. Shortly afterwards, his body was re-interred at the Passy cemetery.
