

Rose of the Occult, Cross of the Revealed: Esoteric Evidence in the Work of Claude Debussy

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Abstract

The inclination to esotericism and to the so-called "occult" philosophies has been the subject of interest, and even research, among philosophers and politicians. Conversely, very few lines are dedicated to this biographical aspect of the great musicians and even less to the artistic pages that they have realized in the light of mystical inspiration. The objective of this paper is to highlight the influence of some esoteric currents on the work and personality of Claude Debussy, especially Rosicrucianism, drawing a brief biographical profile of the composer based on the testimonies from his contemporaries, and conceptualizing the notions of "esotericism" and "mystery." Rather than absolutely establishing any affiliation, or Debussy's belonging, to any of these esoteric movements, this paper aims to cast a new light on the weight exercised by the set of concepts common to these traditions on his musical production and his worldview, pointing out the main works whose inspiration somehow draws from the corpus of esotericism and highlighting its relations with the Symbolist movement and the famous figures of the cultural milieu of Paris of the *Belle Époque* – a historical period between the end of the 19th century and the First World War in which French cultural life, and that of Paris more particularly, was deeply characterized by artistic effervescence and by great technical and scientific advances, elements that radiated even beyond French borders.

La Rose de l'Inconnu, la Croix du Dévoilé : Évidence ésotérique dans l'œuvre de Claude Debussy

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Résumé

L'attirance envers l'ésotérisme, les philosophies dites « occultes », a fait l'objet de l'intérêt, voire de recherches, de la part de philosophes et d'hommes politiques. Inversement, très peu d'écrits sont consacrés à cet aspect biographique de certains grands musiciens, et encore moins aux compositions qu'ils ont écrites sous inspiration mystique.

L'objectif de cet article est donc de mettre en évidence l'influence de certains courants ésotériques – le Rosicrucianisme en particulier – sur l'œuvre et la personnalité de Claude Debussy. Tout en conceptualisant les notions d' « ésotérisme » et de « mystère », nous avons esquissé un bref profil biographique du compositeur, construit à partir de témoignages de ses contemporains.

Plutôt que d'établir résolument l'affiliation, l'appartenance de Debussy à l'un de ces mouvements ésotériques, ce document vise à jeter un nouvel éclairage sur le poids exercé par l'ensemble des concepts, communs à ces traditions, sur sa production musicale et sa vision du monde, en soulignant les principales œuvres dont l'inspiration s'inspire en quelque sorte du

corpus de l'ésotérisme, et en mettant en évidence ses relations avec le mouvement symboliste et les célèbres personnages du milieu culturel du Paris de la Belle Époque : entre la fin du XIXe siècle et la Première Guerre mondiale, la vie culturelle française, plus particulièrement celle de Paris, a en effet été profondément caractérisée par l'effervescence artistique et par de grandes avancées techniques et scientifiques, ces concepts ayant rayonné même au-delà des frontières de la France.

Rosa de lo Oculto, Cruz de lo Revelado: Evidencia Esotérica en la Obra de Claude Debussy

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Resumen

La inclinación al esoterismo y a las filosofías llamadas "ocultas" han sido objeto de interés, e incluso de investigación, entre filósofos y políticos. Por el contrario, muy pocas líneas están dedicadas a este aspecto biográfico de los grandes músicos y menos aún a las páginas artísticas que han realizado a la luz de la inspiración mística. El objetivo de este artículo es resaltar la influencia de algunas corrientes esotéricas en la obra y personalidad de Claude Debussy, especialmente el Rosacruzianismo, trazando un breve perfil biográfico del compositor basado en los testimonios de sus contemporáneos, y conceptualizando las nociones de "esoterismo" y "misterio". Más que establecer absolutamente alguna afiliación, o pertenencia de Debussy, a alguno de estos movimientos esotéricos, este artículo pretende arrojar una nueva luz sobre el peso que ejerce el conjunto de conceptos comunes a estas tradiciones sobre su producción musical y su visión del mundo, señalando la principales obras cuya inspiración de alguna manera se inspira en el corpus del esoterismo y destacando sus relaciones con el movimiento Simbolista y las figuras célebres del medio cultural de París de la Belle Époque - un período histórico entre finales del siglo XIX y la Primera Guerra Mundial en cuya vida cultural francesa, y más en particular la de París, se caracterizó profundamente por la efervescencia artística y por los grandes avances técnicos y científicos, elementos que irradian incluso más allá de las fronteras Francesas.

A Rosa do Oculto, A Cruz do Revelado: Evidências Esotéricas na Obra de Claude Debussy

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Resumo

A inclinação ao esoterismo e às chamadas filosofias "ocultas" tem sido objeto de interesse, e mesmo de pesquisa, em torno de filósofos e políticos. Inversamente, pouquíssimas linhas são dedicadas a esse aspecto biográfico dos grandes músicos e ainda menos às páginas artísticas que eles produziram à luz da inspiração mística. O objetivo deste artigo é salientar a influência de algumas correntes esotéricas na obra e na personalidade de Claude Debussy, especialmente o Rosacruzianismo, traçando um breve perfil biográfico do compositor, com base nos testemunhos de seus contemporâneos, e conceituando as noções de "esoterismo" e "mistério". Em vez de estabelecer absolutamente uma afiliação ou pertencimento de Debussy a qualquer um desses movimentos esotéricos, este artigo visa lançar uma nova luz sobre o peso exercido pelo conjunto

de conceitos comuns a essas tradições em sua produção musical e sua visão de mundo, apontando as principais obras cuja inspiração de alguma forma se baseia no corpus do esoterismo e salientando as relações delas com o movimento Simbolista e as famosas figuras do meio cultural de Paris da Belle Époque - um período histórico entre o final do século XIX e a Primeira Guerra Mundial em que a vida cultural francesa, e a de Paris mais particularmente, foi profundamente caracterizada pela efervescência artística e por grandes avanços técnicos e científicos, elementos que se irradiavam além das fronteiras francesas.

Die Rose des Verhüllten, das Kreuz des Offenbarten: esoterische Hinweise im Werk von Claude Debussy

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Zusammenfassung

Sowohl Philosophen als auch Politiker interessierten sich für Esoterik und für sogenannte „okkulte“ Philosophien und erforschten sie sogar. Umgekehrt sind nur wenige Sätze in den Biographien der großen Musiker vorhanden. Auch hinsichtlich ihrer Werke, die aus mystischen Impulsen entstanden sind, ist wenig bekannt. Diese Abhandlung versucht, den Einfluss mancher esoterischen Strömungen, insbesondere des Rosenkreuzertums, auf die Arbeit und die Persönlichkeit von Claude Debussy zu beleuchten. Hierzu wird ein kurzes biografisches Profil aufgrund der Zeugnisse seiner Zeitgenossen sowie anhand Theorien über die Begriffe „Esoterik“ und „Mysterien“ erstellt. Anstatt eine Mitgliedschaft oder Zugehörigkeit Debussy's an irgendeiner esoterischen Bewegung nachzuforschen, möchte diese Abhandlung eher den Einfluss einer Reihe von Begriffen, die diesen Traditionen zu eigen sind, auf seine musikalischen Kompositionen und auf seine Weltanschauung neu richten. Hierzu werden seine Hauptwerke, die irgendwie beeinflusst wurden durch die Grundlagen der Esoterik sowie durch seine Beziehung zu der Symbolismus Strömung und zu bekannten Persönlichkeiten des Pariser kulturellen Milieus der Belle Époque, unter der Lupe genommen. Die Belle Époque entstand in Frankreich am Ende des 19. Jh. und dauerte bis zum ersten Weltkrieg. Damals war das kulturelle Leben in Frankreich, aber besonders in Paris, durch die dort aufsprudelnden Künste und durch große technische und wissenschaftliche Errungenschaften, die bis über den Grenzen hinausstrahlten, gekennzeichnet.

Introduction

Esotericism and the so-called "occult" philosophies have been the object of interest and research by many philosophers, scientists, and even politicians. Many studies dealing with the mystical life of Francis Bacon, Comenius, Paracelsus, or Benjamin Franklin, for example, and the unfolding of their philosophical convictions in their works have been developed by researchers like Frances Yates and Arthur Versluis, to name just two. Albert Einstein, in turn, synthesized this openness to the transcendental experience – something considered fundamental to him – in the following quote:

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to

wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.... To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms – this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness.¹

On the other hand, we find only a few lines dedicated to the mystical aspect of their thinking in the biographies of great musicians, and still less to the artistic pages that they conceived in the light of mystical inspiration.

As far as Claude Debussy is concerned, most of the academic works that are dedicated to him touch on only the musical aspects of his works. In other words, the aesthetic revolution that he promoted in the patterns of sound relationships that governed Western music until then happened alongside his own personal aesthetic evolution. The changes were an expressive consequence of the interaction between his musical ideals and sources of literary or visual inspiration. It is precisely from this interaction that some abuses concerning the misuse of the word "impressionist" also derive. Indeed, the popularization of some of his most emblematic works – such as *Clair de Lune* – along with the somewhat pernicious tendency of historical musicology to label composers according to generic and often superficial features of their works, ended up roughly plastering creative universes as plural and distinct as those of Debussy and Ravel within the same label – that of “Impressionists.” This is the result of an awkward effort to put them on the same track as the homonymous aesthetic avant-garde in painting, which at that time of the century, enjoyed great popularity. However, Debussy himself was decidedly hostile to that label. In a letter to his editor Jacques Durand, he states: “I try to do ‘something else’ and create – somehow – realities; something that imbeciles call ‘impressionism,’ a term absolutely misused mainly by art critics, who do not hesitate to put it in Turner, the best mystery creator that exists in art!”²

Paul Roberts (1996) also puts us on guard against this labeling when he argues that an “impressionist” interpretation, referring to Debussy as “a sound painter,” is unreasonable when disregarding the fact that the composer had little need to emulate painters, although he respected their techniques.³

In any case, as certain authors and musicologists have highlighted since the 1930s, this “revolution” unleashed by Debussy – who expanded the frontiers of music by going beyond traditional archetypes, provoking the listener and inviting the most refined sensibilities to experience extrasensory phenomena promoted by his sound palette – has a background that precedes him.

In order to understand the real extent of the shock caused by the “quiet revolutionary,” according to Victor Lederer, it is essential to become familiar with his philosophical convictions to scrutinize his historical environment and to recognize the influence that may have produced the effluvia of that period. In other words, it is necessary to immerse oneself in the Parisian *Belle Époque* and come close to notorious figures, such as the poet Victor-Émile Michelet, novelist Joséphin Péladan, mystic Papus, or singer and occultist Emma Calvé, if we want to go beyond the limits imposed on Debussy's creation by strict musicology – or even “to raise the veil of

mystery” (to return to a hermetic expression) that so many critics and musicologists have acknowledged exists around Debussy's musical thought and production.

Aware of the eminently abstract nature of some of the elements that conceptualize esotericism, we now begin to shape the notions of "esotericism" and “mystery” in the most canonical terms possible in order to identify their traits in the personality and work of the great French musician.

The Notions of Esotericism and Mystery

Luc Benoist (1967) defines esotericism as follows:

In a general perspective, we find among certain Greek philosophers the notion of esotericism applied to an oral teaching, transmitted to some elected disciples. Although it is difficult to know its nature in these conditions, we can deduce from these same conditions that this teaching surpassed the level of a philosophy and a rational exposure to reach a deeper truth, destined to make the disciple's whole being penetrate wisdom – and at the same time – his soul and his spirit.⁴

In turn, Antoine Faivre (1994) proposed a systematic model that academically defines esotericism as a way of thinking. Its core is described as having four fundamental characteristics: a theory of correspondences (interconnection of all things in the universe), the belief in a living and conscious nature, the belief in the operative and magical power of the symbolic imagination, and the transformation of matter from inner evolution (alchemy). These elements are associated with two fundamental dynamics: an effort to establish common denominators between different masters and spiritual traditions of different times – the basis of a belief in *Prisca Theologia*, a primordial truth common to all humanity and practiced since its creation – and the transmission of teaching through a master who confers the initiation of mysteries to the disciple; a sociological element of esotericism.⁵

However, it is Hans-Dieter Leuenberger (2010) who synthesizes the essence of esotericism, as he manages to discern its distinctive character: “In its profound sense, esotericism cannot be taught or learned, but only lived and, above all, felt.”⁶

Esotericism is a practical-philosophical approach that instead of opposing religious experience, establishes a complementary, direct, and unmediated relationship with more subtle aspects of the nature of life, which can give rise to an experience susceptible to condition, among other aspects, the creative activity of the individual. English composer Cyril Scott, in his work *Music and Its Secret Influence Throughout the Ages*, originally published in 1933, gives a very particular conceptualization applied to artistic creation:

Materialism offers no convincing explanation for that mysterious charm, that elusive something which renders a number of works of art immortal. Nor can materialism or even orthodox religion convincingly account for genius. It is only esotericism which affords a satisfying explanation.⁷

Vladimir Jankélévitch (1949), in his book that deals precisely with the "mystery" in Debussy, states:

There is mystery and there is secret. The indefinable thing that Debussy expresses is not something secret, but something mysterious. . . . Mystery is the prerogative of music, . . . but no musician went further than Claude-Achille [Debussy] in suggesting and transcribing mysterious things. His music, in fact, gradually evolved from secret to mystery. It initially finds food in occultist and Rosicrucian Paris of the [18]80s, in this Paris of Chat Noir and Sar Péladan where mysticism is sometimes transformed into mystification.⁸

It is in this landscape that we must insert ourselves in order to extract the evidence of Debussy's connections with the world of esotericism.

The Days of *L'Art Indépendant* and Its Relationship with Rosicrucianism

At the turn of the twentieth century, a notable artistic movement broke out in Paris – Symbolism – which was nourished by esotericism and spirituality in an effort to establish a concrete link between artistic expressions and the essential truths veiled by the so-called “occult” sciences. Parisian bookstores became true bastions of this new aesthetic. Artists sharing these same ideals came together. One of these bookstores, *L'Art Indépendant*, owned by Edmond Bailly, had among its regular visitors Edgar Degas, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, Odilon Redon, Augustin Chaboseau, Papus, Stanislas de Guaita, Joséphin Péladan, Erik Satie, Stéphane Mallarmé, Pierre Louÿs, and Victor-Émile Michelet. Debussy at the time was becoming one of the greatest names in music, and he was not refractory to this movement. Expressing a great interest in the occult and Kabbalah, as witnessed by his correspondence with the poet Maurice Bouchor, he made friends with many of these personalities, especially with the famous occultist Emma Calvé. The relevance of this influence is duly noted by Roy Howat (1983), author of a study on Debussy and the golden number or golden ratio, in which he draws attention to the French composer's interest in the occult. For this author, this is a key aspect in Debussy, as it was for several Symbolist authors, who believed that technological advances would make science reconcile with art and religion.

According to Howat, Debussy's occult involvements were first documented by Léon Guichard, who tracked down Debussy's association with Joséphin Péladan's neo-Rosicrucian movement in the early 1890s, which suggests that Debussy was occupied with esotericism even during his stay in Rome from 1885-1887, as is evidenced by his letters to Émile Baron (Francis Ambrière, 1934) requesting supplies of such titles as *Rose+Croix* by Albert Jounet.⁹

The scope of the meetings at the Edmond Bailly's *L'Art Indépendant* bookshop was not negligible. In addition to being a highly educated esotericist, Edmond Bailly was an editor. He published *Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire* and *La demoiselle élue* by Debussy. In the late 1880s, when Debussy returned to Paris after his stay in Italy, the consequence of obtaining the Prix de Rome, Bailly's bookstore and publishing house was “a rallying-point for both esoteric and Symbolist devotees” (Howat, *Debussy in Proportion*, 167). Victor-Émile Michelet (1937) tells us: “Being able to express himself freely there, Debussy let himself be thoroughly impregnated with Hermetic philosophy (involving reputedly ancient Egyptian theories of magic and alchemy).”¹⁰

The association between Debussy and Joséphin Péladan also dates from that time when Péladan revived the Rosicrucian movement and installed the headquarters of the Kabbalistic Rosicrucian Order (later “Rosicrucian Order of the Temple and the Grail”) on the first floor of the *Café Auberge du Clou*, frequented by Debussy and Satie (Alessandro Nardin, 2016). The proximity between the two composers allows us to place at that time the connection of both to the Rosicrucian fraternity. Satie, in addition, formalized his collaboration with Péladan in multiple *happenings* led by the novelist, of which undoubtedly the most famous were the *Salons de la Rose-Croix*, for which Satie composed music. However, the musical work of the two composers is uneven from this point on; whereas Satie, whose technical capacities were more modest, disperses into eccentricities and condenses his production into musical miniatures of a predominantly anecdotal taste, Debussy, whose genius unquestionably bears fruit in a more disciplined and ambitious way, devotes himself to larger scale compositions and seeks other types of extra-musical associations. However, Nardin still maintains that “the world that revolved around Péladan, composed of artists and intellectuals, constituted the cultural context in which Debussy moved with great familiarity.”¹¹

Howat reports that one of Péladan's novels, *Le Panthée*, whose main character is a composer who constantly works on his "Golden Symphony," is inspired by his relationship with Debussy and Satie. In this novel, the central character flees the city to live an idyllic life with his beloved on the island of Jersey and concludes his "Golden Symphony" there. Twelve years later, Debussy himself went to Jersey with Emma Bardac to work on his own "Golden Symphony," *La Mer* (Howat 1983, 170-71).

On the occasion of the publication of Debussy's biography written by Leon Vallas, Jean Chantavoine (1933) made the following comments that testify to the influence of Rosicrucianism on his work:

The work and, insofar as it reveals itself, the person of Debussy offer, in fact, two elements to this analysis.... On the one hand, the most acute sensitivity, the most original imagination, the most singular expression – in the true sense of the term – that the music of its time knew and, perhaps to be, even the music of all times. On the other hand, ... the incessant and feverish quest for food, or better, stimulants for this imagination and this sensitivity, apparently so spontaneous. We feel, we intuit, we see Debussy lurking in all the literary or plastic formulas proposed in daily life by the conventions of a cénacle ... and likely to be tried in music.... In his work we hear the echo and distinguish the reflection of all the transient modes that have followed in France since his entry into artistic life until his last years.... There we would see *La Revue Blanche* spawn with the Rose-Cross.¹²

Regarding Rosicrucianism, there is an episode that, despite having been aborted, marks the keen interest that Debussy expressed in it: his collaboration with the playwright Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, another “habitué” of *L'Art Indépendant* and author of the drama *Axël*, of Rosicrucian outlines (published by Bailly), from which Debussy would sketch an opera. In *Axël*, a piece derived from the work *Dogma and High Magic Ritual* by Éliphas Lévi, there are many

references to the esoteric symbol of the Pantacle and the golden number. According to Robert Orledge (1997), Debussy revered this particular work by Lévi.

Projection of Esoteric Elements in His Work

Most likely, Debussy's fascination with esotericism and with his efforts to translate it into his music come from the time before the Prix de Rome and are due to Charles de Sivry, a kabbalist and occultist he had met in Mme. Mauté de Fleurville's house, the piano teacher who had prepared him for admission to the Paris Conservatory. What is particularly notable is his inescapable inclination towards the inspirational stimuli found in the mysteries of the ancient East, Egypt, and Greece. The examples are numerous and quite evident, especially in the context of the setting or ambiance of his works, of which some examples follow: the *Khamma* ballet, whose action takes place in ancient Egypt; *Canope*, which alludes to Canopus, an Egyptian mythological god, and to the canopic vase, a type of funerary jar used in Pharaonic Egypt; and *Danseuses de Delphes*, which is an allusion to the temple of Delphi, where the famous maxim "Know Thyself" was recorded. In addition, another piece to consider is *L'Isle Joyeuse*, which was inspired by the painting by Jean-Antoine Watteau, *Pilgrimage to the island of Citera* – a utopian place of pleasure and ecstasy.

At the same time, fantastic beings without a necessary affiliation with esotericism, but always belonging to the scope of mystical culture, are recurrent elements throughout his production:

- 1) *Ondina* [Preludes book 2]: an aquatic nymph of extraordinary beauty, with feminine human features but no soul, mentioned first in the alchemical work of the physician and Rosicrucian Paracelsus;
- 2) *Mermaids* [Nocturnes for orchestra]: fabulous creatures with the head and torso of a woman who, due to the sweetness of their song, attract navigators to the reefs;
- 3) *Puck* ("La danse de Puck" [Preludes book 1]): a British folklore fairy creature sometimes described as a nature sprite and whose most notable appearance occurs in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Shakespeare;
- 4) *Syrinx* [piece for solo flute]: a nymph from Greek mythology;
- 5) *Fairies* ("Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses" [Preludes book 2]): legendary beings of great beauty and capable of casting spells;
- 6) *Pan* ("La flûte de Pan" [3 Chansons de Bilitis, on texts by the symbolist poet Pierre Louÿs] and "Pour invoquer Pan, le dieu du vent d'été" [Six Épigraphes Antiques]): divinity of nature, protector of shepherds and flocks and in close relationship with the aforementioned Syrinx;
- 7) *Faun* ("Prélude à l'après-midi d'un Faune" [symphonic work] and "Le Faune" [Fêtes Galantes book 2, on texts by the Symbolist poet Paul Verlaine]): a country creature from Roman mythology.

Regarding the Golden Ratio, one of the most absolute symbols of Perfection in Western culture (including in the esoteric sense of the term), we will find it in the formal and dynamic architecture of many of Debussy's compositions, especially in the ecstatic *L'Isle Joyeuse* and the famous *Clair de Lune*, but also in *La Mer* and *Reflets dans l'eau* – these works being perfectly constructed according to the Golden Ratio. In this regard, a letter sent by Debussy to Jacques Durand, his editor, when preparing the *Estampes* edition, leaves us with an intriguing statement, since it is clear that the desire to conform to the Golden Ratio was much more than a banal aesthetic concern:

You will see, on page 8 of *Jardins sous la pluie*, that a bar is missing, my mistake, by the way, as it is not in the manuscript. However, it is necessary with regard to the number; the divine number, as Plato and Mlle. Pougy would say, each for different reasons.¹³

The Symbolist poetry of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Verlaine in turn occupies a capital position in Debussy's creation. The vocal works he composed on texts by these authors are ubiquitous in his catalog – from the works of his youth to those of the last years – and not only reflect the aesthetic evolution of his musical language, but also show his constant predilection for Symbolist texts throughout his life. For him and for Symbolist poets, the esoteric nature of art was a central, almost dogmatic belief. Let us remember that *The Flowers of Evil*, Baudelaire's masterpiece, is characterized by the deliberate probing of the duality of existence, and that five poems of this work were set to music by Debussy in the days of the *L'Art Indépendant*. Baudelaire, moreover, nourished himself with the ideas of the Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg, which were apparent in his work. Additionally, Debussy attended several *mardis soir* at Mallarmé's house, which were aimed at a scrupulously refined public, where he enjoyed the presentation of some of his productions inclined to mysticism. It is, therefore, not surprising that one of Debussy's greatest productions, *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un Faune*, is inspired by Mallarmé's eponymous poem.

The English soprano Maggie Teyte, a friend of the composer, reports that in 1907 “he still was involved in esoteric activities, including esoteric Egyptology” (Howat 1983, 170). Furthermore, Scott states that Debussy would have unconsciously reproduced the Atlantean templar chants in his work, especially in the second of his orchestral *Nocturnes: Fêtes*, through Javanese music and under the influence of the “Higher Ones” (Scott 2013, 146). Although lacking an objective foundation, this statement does no less than stir our curiosity.

As a part of what was a possible personal credo regarding the reform of the arts, Debussy once said: “I conceived a religion of a mysterious nature for me.”¹⁴ Those words reported by Tobias Churton (2016) could very well summarize his faith. His illustrious contemporaries portrayed him as someone quite disappointed in the human race, his tolerance for the “humanities” disappearing as he aged. In another letter, addressed to Ernest Chausson, Debussy even defended the idea of establishing an “Esoteric Musical Society” with the aim of creating music less accessible to the masses who, according to his perception, were unable to understand true art.¹⁵ Furthermore, Yates (1972) repeatedly emphasizes the interest of the Rosicrucian fraternity in renewing and reforming the arts, considered as the image of the Cosmos, and Howat does not fail to point out Debussy's affinity with this creed, which echoes in his famous phrase: “Music is a

mysterious mathematics whose elements participate in the Infinite.”¹⁶ This phrase asserts a correlation between Debussy's artistic thought and the Rosicrucian conception of art, as reported by Yates. In this conception, the reform of the arts would aim at the recovery of a primordial harmony – a “reintegration” to a *status quo ante*, which Paolo Repetto identifies in Debussy's artistic process in his essay *Il sogno di Pan*. In this refusal to conform himself to the artistic-academic establishment, “[Debussy] starts to write like crazy, or rather, like someone who is convinced that he is going to die tomorrow and needs to rebuild some of the *beauty* against which war tenaciously invests.”¹⁷

In practical terms, the reaction to academicism, moreover, and the pertinacity in the renewal of art – an attribution into which Debussy bluntly launched, not often sparing the representatives of “old French music” from his usual irony – are the main common ideological traits linking Debussy to the Symbolists and putting them in resonance with the esoteric creed of art. According to the French art critic Gabriel Mourey (1991): “Debussy was a human being who lived an intense interior life.”¹⁸

In this sense, the composer Raymond Bonheur recalls that in Debussy:

There was no trace of that vulgarity common to artists, nor that “friendly camaraderie” which often hides clandestine intentions.... At the same time, he showed a great indifference to the opinion of the masses and, above all, a refined pride which was nothing more than the certainty of being alive somehow on a higher plane.¹⁹

Conclusion

The Rosicrucian Order, AMORC, officially recognizes both Debussy and Satie as having been formal members of the Rosicrucian fraternity. However, it is less important to establish Debussy's affiliation to any of the aforementioned movements than it is to recognize the weight exercised by the set of concepts common to these traditions on his musical production and his worldview. According to Nardin:

Outer activism and inner involvement are not commensurable quantities. Quite the contrary: true initiatory participation is totally independent of ostentation, and the silence, which Debussy always masterfully surrounded himself with, is its most conscious expression of it.²⁰

On the one hand, it appears that Debussy did not intentionally create esoteric works through the formal elements of his compositions, such as the plot and the setting. On the other hand, it is evident that his artistic and human ideals and his musical thinking were impregnated with at least a subtle and esoteric philosophy. If this philosophy did not come to manifest itself fully in his personal life, it was only because of his impulsively independent character and due to the vicissitudes of his material existence. His ideals, however, as well as his artistic creation, never bowed to material needs and never made concessions to the average popular taste nor to the simple and mediocre.

Debussy said:

Those around me insist on not understanding that I have never been able to live in the reality of things and people, whence this inexpressible need to escape from myself in adventures which seem inexplicable because there appears a man whom we do not know. It may be the best in me! Besides, an artist is by definition someone used to dreams and who lives among ghosts.²¹

These words, reported by Hélène Cao (2001), express in a confessional tone the nuances of his interior landscape of which fauns, mermaids, fairies, saints, magical creatures, and Egyptian deities bear an undying testimony.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Albert Einstein, *Living Philosophies* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1931), 6.
- ² "J'essaie de faire « autre chose » et de créer – en quelque sorte – des réalités – ce que les imbéciles appellent « impressionnisme », terme aussi mal employé que possible, surtout par les critiques d'art, qui n'hésitent pas à en affubler Turner, le plus beau créateur de mystère qui soit en art." Claude Debussy, *Correspondance (1872-1918)* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 1080-1.
- ³ Paul Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1996), 43-4.
- ⁴ "En una perspectiva general, se encuentra en algunos filósofos griegos la noción de esoterismo aplicada a una enseñanza oral, transmitida a algunos discípulos elegidos. Aunque sea difícil en estas condiciones conocer su naturaleza, es posible deducir, a partir de estas mismas condiciones que esta enseñanza superaba el nivel de una filosofía y de una exposición racional para alcanzar una verdad más profunda, destinada a penetrar de sabiduría el ser entero del discípulo, su alma y su espíritu al mismo tiempo." Luc Benoist, "El esoterismo" (Buenos Aires: Editorial Nova, 1967).
- ⁵ Kocku von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge*, trans. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (London: Equinox, 2005), 3-4.
- ⁶ "Em seu sentido profundo, o esoterismo não pode ser ensinado ou aprendido, mas apenas vivido e, sobretudo, sentido." Hans-Dieter Leuenberger, *História do Esoterismo Mundial: da Atlântida aos dias atuais* (São Paulo: Pensamento, 2010), 2.
- ⁷ Cyril Scott, *Music and Its Secret Influence Throughout the Ages* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2013), 28.
- ⁸ "Il y a le mystère et il y a le secret. L'inexprimable que Debussy exprime n'est point chose secrète, mais chose mystérieuse.... Le mystère est la chose de la musique ... mais aucun musicien n'a été plus loin que Claude-Achille dans la suggestion et transcription des choses mystérieuses. Sa musique, à vrai dire, n'a évolué que peu à peu du secret au mystère. Elle trouve d'abord un aliment dans le Paris occultiste et rose-croix des années [18]80, dans ce Paris du Chat Noir et du Sar Péladan où le mysticisme prend parfois le visage de la mystification." Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Debussy et le mystère* (Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1949), 3-15.
- ⁹ Roy Howat, *Debussy in Proportion: A Musical Analysis* (Cambridge: University Press, 1983), 167.
- ¹⁰ "Capable de s'y exprimer librement, Debussy s'est laissé imprégner de philosophie hermétique (impliquant des théories égyptiennes réputées antiques de la magie et de l'alchimie)." Victor-Émile Michelet, *Les compagnons de la hiérophanie : souvenirs du mouvement hermétiste à la fin du XIXe siècle* (Paris: Dorbon Aîné, 1937), 75.

¹¹ “Il mondo che ruotò attorno a Péladan, fatto di artisti e intellettuali, costituì il contesto culturale in cui Debussy si mosse con maggior familiarità.” Alessandro Nardin, *Debussy l'esoterista. Sulle tracce del mistero* (Milan: Jouvence, 2016), 41.

¹² “L'œuvre et, pour autant qu'elle y transparait, la personne même de Debussy offrent, en effet, à cette analyse deux caractères.... D'une part, la sensibilité la plus aiguë, l'imagination la plus originale, l'expression la plus singulière – au vrai sens du terme – qu'ait connues la musique de son temps et, peut-être, la musique de tous les temps. D'autre part ... la quête incessante et fiévreuse d'aliments, que dis-je, d'excitants pour cette imagination et cette sensibilité, en apparence si spontanées. On sent, on devine, on voit Debussy à l'affût de toutes les formules littéraires ou plastiques proposées au jour le jour par les conventions d'un cénacle ... et susceptibles d'être essayées en musique.... Dans son œuvre nous entendons l'écho, nous distinguons le reflet de toutes les modes transitoires qui se sont succédé en France depuis son entrée dans la vie artistique jusqu'à ses dernières années.... On y verrait La Revue Blanche frayer avec la Rose-Croix.” Jean Chantavoine, “Debussy et son temps,” *Le Ménestrel* (ed. 5046, 1933), 9.

¹³ Howat, *Debussy in Proportion*, 6-7.

¹⁴ Tobias Churton, *Occult Paris: The Lost Magic of the Belle Epoque* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2016), 284.

¹⁵ François Lesure (compilation et édition), *Claude Debussy : lettres 1884-1918*, (Paris: Hermann, 1980), 51.

¹⁶ Howat, *Debussy in Proportion*, 171.

¹⁷ “[Debussy] recomincia a scrivere come un pazzo, o meglio, come chi è convinto di dover morire l'indomani e deve ricostruire un po' della bellezza contro la quale la guerra si accanisce.” Paolo Repetto, *Il sogno di Pan – Saggio su Debussy* (Genova: Il Melangolo, 2000), 142-5.

¹⁸ Gabriel Mourey, “Souvenirs sur Debussy,” in *Cahiers Debussy n° 15* (Paris: 1991), 56.

¹⁹ Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 10.

²⁰ “L'attivismo esteriore e il coinvolgimento interiore non sono grandezze commensurabili, anzi: la vera partecipazione iniziatica prescinde totalmente dalla ostentazione, ed il silenzio, di cui Debussy seppe sempre magistralmente circondarsi, ne è la più consapevole espressione.” Nardin, *Debussy l'esoterista*, 43.

²¹ “On s'obstine, autour de moi, à ne pas comprendre que je n'ai jamais pu vivre dans la réalité des choses et des gens, d'où ce besoin indicible d'échapper à moi-même dans des aventures qui paraissent inexplicables parce que s'y montre un homme que l'on ne connaît pas. C'est peut-être ce qu'il y a de mieux en moi ! D'ailleurs, un artiste est par définition un homme habitué au rêve et qui vit parmi des fantômes.” Hélène Cao, *Debussy* (Paris : J.P. Gisserot, 2001), 93.