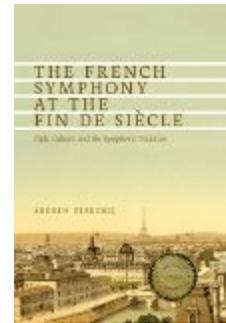


Andrew Deruchie. *The French Symphony at the Fin de Siècle: Style, Culture, and the Symphonic Tradition.* Eastman Studies in Music Series. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2013. viii + 294 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58046-382-9.

Reviewed by Nick Poulakis (University of Athens)

Published on H-SAE (February, 2014)

Commissioned by Michael B. Munnik



Music, Culture, and the History of the Modern French Symphony

More than twenty years after the first volume, which was a revised edition of *The Poetic Debussy: A Collection of His Song Texts and Selected Letters* (1982) by Margaret G. Cobb, Eastman Studies in Music Series of the University of Rochester Press publish their hundredth book entitled *The French Symphony at the Fin de Siècle: Style, Culture, and the Symphonic Tradition* by Andrew Deruchie. This is a broad musicological series, covering musical life and history throughout and beyond the classical Western music canon. Deruchie's monograph, however, revisits one of the canon's centerpiece moments: the works of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century symphonists in France. *The French Symphony at the Fin de Siècle*—entirely based on Deruchie's 2008 PhD thesis at Montreal's McGill University—consists of seven distinct chapters, each dealing with a particular symphonic landmark. Deruchie, currently a lecturer in musicology at the University of Otago (New Zealand), applies a cultural-historical methodology to approach his material. Opposed to former, purely positivistic and quantitative considerations of the material in question, the author suggests a combination of analytical and interpretive methods that highlights both the musical and sociocultural characteristics of the modern French symphonic style.

Following the acknowledgments and a readily comprehensible introduction, the first chapter of the book examines Camille Saint-Saëns's Third Symphony, also known as *Organ Symphony*. Deruchie opens his discussion by illustrating the historical, institutional, political,

and cultural context of this monumental work. He continues with a demonstration and an intense analysis of the themes, motives, and patterns that appear all through the four movements of the symphony, focusing primarily on the renewed developmental process that Saint-Saëns adopted: the cyclic (rotating) thematic transfiguration. After that, Deruchie moves on with a close review of the symphony's inspirational orchestration and finishes with an overall assessment of this composition by comparing it with matching pieces of music by the same composer and others.

In the next chapter, Deruchie inspects César Franck's Symphony in D Minor, the only established work to be a consequence of his earlier symphonic poems. The author interrogates the piece's popularity—its reception and criticism, particularly in respect to the historical and political milieu—and analyzes the divergent ideas of “light” and “darkness” that emerge from the music's narrative. Finally, he brings up the notion of the mystic mood that floats over this composition and has been observed by various scholars.

The third chapter is dedicated to Édouard Lalo's Symphony in G Minor. The key item that Deruchie notes is the symphony's borrowings from the previous abortive attempt of *Fiesque* (1866-68), an opera that had to wait for about 140 years to be performed on stage and, in the meantime, had become Lalo's music wellspring for other works. The author crystallizes the process of the

transferral of the composition's material from one musical genre to another. He also dissects the composer's role in bringing French music to fruition during the turn of the century, primarily through the deformation of the archetypal heroic design that resides in Ludwig van Beethoven's symphonies.

Symphony in B-flat Major composed by Ernest Chausson is presented in chapter 4. This piece has often been denigrated for its reminiscence of César Franck's *Symphony in D Minor*, as Chausson utilizes many of Franck's creative music formulas or, to use Deruchie's phrase, "an extensively *franckiste* compositional toolbox" (p. 122). The author cites earlier musicological criticisms that discuss these perceptions and converge to the view that the specific attribute of Chausson's production had diminished his prestige, in comparison with Saint-Saëns, Vincent d'Indy, and Franck himself. Deruchie describes Franck's handling of instruments, modes, motives, and harmonic texture, in addition to the structural rotation that is a typical sign of the form of this composition. Furthermore, he investigates Chausson's links with the art movement of symbolism, concerning not only the symphony's apparent style but also its subliminal basis and perspectives.

Both the fifth and sixth parts of the treatise pertain to d'Indy, another French composer of great importance who characterizes the period under debate. The author dilates on two of d'Indy's momentous works: *Symphonie sur un chant montagnard français* (*Symphony on a French Mountain Air*) and Second Symphony. Deruchie's comments allude to certain aspects of deep historical and socio-musicological analysis of the above symphonies, such as their ideological conception; their morphological, rhythmical, and orchestrational outline; their uses of folk and bucolic tunes; and their idiosyncratic treatment of the "perpetual duality" issue—that is, the need for osmosis between "tradition" and "modernity." To strengthen his arguments, Deruchie devotes a sizeable portion of

the penultimate chapter to the evaluation of d'Indy's aesthetic, didactic, and intellectual tendencies, as comparatively juxtaposed to and interweaved with those of relevant composers, such as Claude Debussy and Richard Wagner.

In chapter 7, Deruchie concludes his examination with Paul Dukas's Symphony in C. The author addresses the composer's skepticism toward the controversy surrounding "program music" and "pure music" as well as the way in which this ambiguity was conceived during the classical, romantic, and post-romantic eras of Western music. Besides that, Deruchie tries to find diachronic parallels by connecting Dukas's Symphony in C with Beethoven's heroic-style symphonies, without failing to notice the crisis of the French music of his day. This is a topic that is profoundly addressed through the whole book, and, according to Deruchie, it centers on the search for differentiation of musical forms connected with the liberal-bourgeois ideals of subjectivity.

In brief, Deruchie's *The French Symphony at the Fin de Siècle* is a well-written, thought-provoking, and fascinating book, in that the author skillfully enlaces the musicological with the sociopolitical aspects of the specific orchestral genre. Drawing on various musical examples and analyses, as well as other academic citations and historical resources, Deruchie manages to look beyond a conventional scholarly approach to classical music. In contrast, he presents an interpretive account of his study between the nonrepresentational art of music and the leading cultural and ideological values that relate to the French (or, broadly, the European) bourgeois identity of early twentieth century. The only weakness of the book is, perhaps, the lack of an ending chapter, which would serve as a functional concluding section to give an all-inclusive appraisal of the area being considered. In any case, the book is still a worthwhile source of elucidatory insights systematically examined and perceptively communicated.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-sae>

Citation: Nick Poulakis. Review of Deruchie, Andrew, *The French Symphony at the Fin de Siècle: Style, Culture, and the Symphonic Tradition*. H-SAE, H-Net Reviews. February, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=40514>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.