

La Mer A Deception?

A Reception History Analysis

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ABSTRACT Debussy composed *La Mer*, in the summer of 1905. It was performed for the first time the same year in Paris. The reception of the public and the critics was biased. The critique, written by Amédée Boutarel, in *Le Ménestrel*, France's longest running music journal (1833-1940), dismisses *La Mer* very openly. *La Mer* wasn't reproduced in Paris till 1908 and then was a success. The most intriguing part of this success was the review of Amédée Boutarel again in *Le Ménestrel*, this time still with some reservation but clearly more appreciative and treating the performance as it were a premiere. This paper presents possible reasons for the shift in Amédée Boutarel's perception and thus the standpoint of the magazine from a Bourdieuan point of view. According to Bourdieu not only the artists (writers, composers) and performers, but also the agents (publishers, critics, journals) contribute directly to the production of the field of art, which has its own dynamics. For that purpose the magazine's marketing & sales strategy is analysed by taking its content, visual design, and writers, specifically Boutarel, into account.

Keywords: Debussy, *La Mer*, field of cultural production, Bourdieu, reception history.

La Mer was composed in the summer of 1905 and was performed for the first time in October 15th, 1905 by the Orchestre Lamoureux under the direction of Camille Chevillard. A second performance was given by the same orchestra and conductor a week later. These performances were for Debussy far from satisfactory. The orchestra couldn't play this piece in three parts, called by the composer *trois esquisses symphoniques* (three symphonic sketches¹), properly due, according to Debussy and others, to his incompetency in contemporary music [Trezise, S:1994]. The reception of the public and the critics was biased. Pierre Lalo, who was the son of Eduard Lalo, rather open to novelties, an admirer of Debussy in general and writing in the daily newspaper *Le Temps*², reviews the piece not

¹ All translations are of my own unless noted otherwise

² Classified by Jann Pasler in "Pelléas and Power" as a "moderate, most respected, republican bourgeoisie and anti-wagnerian" journal

very negatively, yet in an ambiguous way, mentioning that this piece is not necessarily Debussy's best, but still very pleasant [*Le Temps*, October 24th 1905, p. 5]. :

Mr. Debussy is not at all concerned with composing well done "homeworks". The inaccuracies of development and logic existing in his earlier works, which we didn't take into account at all, become visible here since the sensation doesn't support and animate this music, it seems fragmented and arbitrary ... in order to make myself better understood, I exaggerate and I magnify arbitrarily these slight errors of Mr. Debussy's new piece, you'll enjoy an extreme pleasure while listening to it ...³

On the other hand the critique written by Amédée Boutarel, in the weekly music magazine *Le Ménestrel* in the issue of October 15th, 1905 dismisses *La Mer* very openly:

It [La Mer] has a prestigious instrumentation, but does it have the sincere expression of natural emotions? I wouldn't dare to approve ...The simplicity which can be admired in *L'Après-midi d'un faune* and *la Demoiselle élue* can't be found here. "Are you enthusiastic about Debussy's work?" a friend asked me, "I am thinking about ...in order to know!" Alas, there you are with this sort of work...⁴

La Mer wasn't reproduced in Paris till 1908. In January 12th, 1908 it was performed under the baton of Debussy as a preparation for the London premier in February which he was going to conduct as well, and it was surprisingly a success. The most intriguing part of this success was the review of Amédée Boutarel, again in *Le Ménestrel* (January 21st, 1908), this time still with some reservation but clearly more appreciative and treating the performance as it were a premiere, while if we might say, "forgetting" completely his review of October 22nd, 1905:

The three pieces which constitute these "symphonic sketches": "*De l'aube à midi sur la mer*, *Jeux des vagues*, *Dialogue du vent et de la mer*", portray one by one the shimmering shivers of the water under the changing light of the morning, the rocking and caressing rhythm of the waves, the wave which dissipates on the sand ... The discreet manner with which the artist has presented us his work does not allow us to make a critique of principles, one always has the right to try new ways... This first audition of *La Mer*, conducted by the master, though it is not without a focused conception resulting from hard work, is certainly not less beautiful nor interesting. The audience showered the composer with ovations...

As Bourdieu states in his book "The Field of Cultural Production" not only the artists (writers, composers) and performers, but also the agents, such as publishers, critics, galleries, magazines,

³ "... Et ce n'est point l'affaire de M. Debussy de composer de bons devoirs. Le défaut de développement et de logique qui existait dans ses ouvrages précédents, et auquel on ne prenait point garde, devient ici visible dès que la sensationne soutient et n'anime plus cette musique, elle apparaît fragmentée et arbitraire; ... me faire mieux entendre, j'exagère ici et je grossis à plaisir les défauts très légers de l'oeuvre nouvelle de M. Debussy vous goûterez encore en l'entendant un plaisir extrême..."

⁴ "... C'est d'une instrumentation prestigieuse, mais est-ce là l'expression sincère de sentiments naturels? Je n'oserais l'affirmer. La simplicité que l'on peut admirer dans *L'Après-midi d'un faune* et dans *la Demoiselle élue* ne se retrouve plus ici. «Êtes-vous enthousiaste de l'oeuvre de Debussy? » me disait un confrère : « Je réfléchis... pour savoir! » Hélas! on en est là avec des ouvrages de ce genre..."

contribute directly to the production of the work of art. They create upon the consumer a certain perception of the work of art, which aligns with their socio-economical and political standpoint.

This paper will present possible reasons for the shift in Amédée Boutarel's perception, taking into account the socio-political & economical standpoint of the magazine's *Le Ménestrel* and Boutarel's educational background and his socio-political standpoint.

1. AN EXAMINATION OF LE MÉNESTREL

Taking the above mentioned Bourdieuan view into account, basically any magazine can be assessed through an analysis of its content, writers, language, front cover and sales & promotion activities. All these elements provide indicative evidences about the target audience, the socio-political standpoint of the magazine and eventually the possible change in those within a time frame.

Outlook, content, language: *Le Ménestrel* was a weekly music magazine, published between the years 1833-1940 by Heugel. Initially it had a popular outlook and language rather than a musical, analytical one and was aimed at music lovers. As mentioned before *Le Ménestrel* was a both musically and politically conservative, anti-Wagnerian journal. It contained since its start-up in 1833 biographical articles about renowned and approved composers, reviews of operas. It started to review the Sunday concerts as of 1885 as well. The latters had more emphasis as of 1886. The two main critics of the Sunday Concerts were Henri Barbedette and Amédée Boutarel, both of them rather well educated music listeners than music experts. Though the content didn't change drastically, the outlook, the front covers, and thus the image of the journal gradually changed, as Example 1 shows:



Example 1a: 1833 cover



Example 1b: 1842 cover



Example 1c: 1850 cover



Example 1d: 1864 cover

“Hearts for Sale”, in March 1840 *Le Ménestrel* made a decision for “quality control” over the music to be distributed and the editor of the magazine discussed the issue as follows:

...For a long time, *Le Ménestrel* has promised noteworthy improvements in the music that it offers. . . . We believe to have finally resolved this problem [of publishing too many romances] by the new system of publication that we are adopting from this day forward, a system that will permit us consistently to offer our subscribers compositions of the first order, and at the same time, to open up a greater domain for our musical critiques. As of today, *Le Ménestrel* will appear each Sunday with four large pages of text. Every two weeks, it will publish one new romance by MM. Meyerbeer, Donizetti, Halévy, Adam, Ambroise Thomas, Clapisson, Grisar, Masini, Amédée de Beauplan, d’Adhémar, de Flotow, Mlle Puget, etc.”

Le Ménestrel changed its appearance, its sales strategy and accordingly its content in order to be perceived as a pure, serious music journal. According to Bourdieu’s theory of the “Field of Cultural Production” art is situated at the dominant pole (positive pole) of the class relation field. On the other hand it is related to the power field (economical, political) on the negative pole, which in turn is on the positive pole of the class relation field (Figure 3).

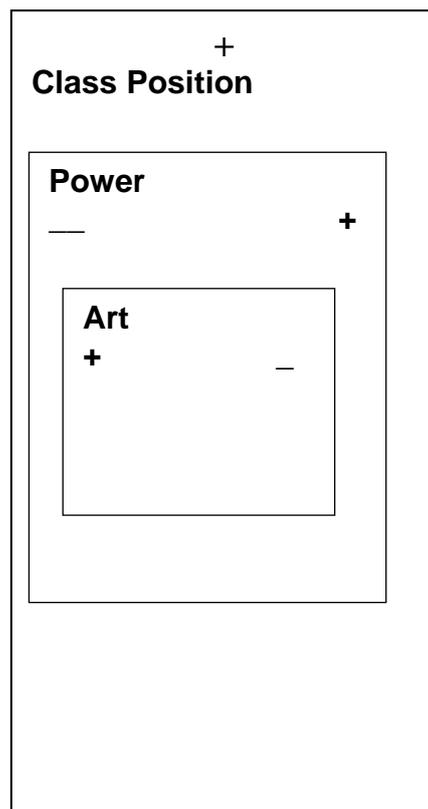


Figure 3: “Heteronomous Principle of Hierarchization

This “heteronomous principle of hierarchization” applied to the changes Heugel made in *Le Ménestrel*, enables the assumption that he attempted to corner a certain demographic segment of the bourgeoisie, namely the upper strata, who wanted to move to the dominant class. Nevertheless as Harrison states in her dissertation, *Le Ménestrel* still remained conservative in content throughout the

years and was against Debussy till after WWI [p. 244]. Even for the premiere of *Pelléas*, about which the positive and negative reviews were equally distributed, Pougin wrote in the May 4th, 1902 issue an extensively negative review. So was *La Mer*, premiered in 1905 in a Sunday concert by the Orchestre Lamoureux, rejected by Amédée Boutarel, as well.

2. WHO WAS AMÉDÉE BOUTAREL?

When we explore Amédée Boutarel's output we can see that he was rather a literary man and a very good translator from German to French, since he translated a great deal of German lieds, such as Schubert's, Brahms', Schumann's, and choral symphonic works such as Schumann's *Faustszenen* into French. The only book he wrote about music is called "L'oeuvre symphonique de Franz Liszt et l'esthétique modern" (The symphonic work of Franz Liszt and the modern aesthetic) published again by Heugel in 1886 and is 61 pages long. His first article appearing in *Le Ménestrel* was "La musique expressive étudiée dans l'oeuvre de Berlioz" (Study of expressive music in the work of Berlioz) in three successive parts. He didn't write his first review before 1886. Till then he wrote articles from time to time about well accepted composers. He started to have a periodic appearance, as of 1900. We can assume from these facts that it took him some time to grow up from a literary person to a musical person. He basically reviewed only Sunday concerts of L'Orchestre Lamoureux and L'Orchestre de Colonne. When we compare the language of his reviews with the ones of Arthur Pougin's, he seems to be still far being of a musically well educated person. In order to make a comparison in their styles and backgrounds, below a quotation from Pougin's one and half page review of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, appeared in *Le Ménestrel* on May 4th, 1902:

...Mr. Debussy is late, like many of his young colleagues. They think and say that they are in advance of their time and they are not aware that time goes by and they are the ones who are late. They are not aware that the public is there to listen a music which doesn't exist: that it is tired of this heavy and continuous declamation without either air or light, which doesn't possess not even a single plot of real chant; that it has enough unbearable chromaticism so that all sense of tonality and melody disappear; that it needs to hear some phrases ... which move in a logical and rational manner and don't go from modulation to modulation in order to end up in another modulation. ... Rhythm, chant, tonality three things unknown to Mr. Debussy. ... what a lovely sequence of perfect chords in direct movement, with fifths and octaves following each other. What a collection of dissonances, sevenths or ninths, moving up with energy, even with disjoint intervals. ... I do understand the darings, the infringement of the rules when they are justified for a reason. But does it really make sense to learn the grammar of one's art ... and hurt free of charge the language you've been thought to speak? No, I will never agree with the anarchists of music...⁵

⁵"... il est en retard, M. Debussy, comme beaucoup de ses jeunes confrères. Eux et lui se croient et se disent en avance sur leur temps, et ils ne s'aperçoivent pas que le temps marche et que maintenant ils sont en retard. Ils ne s'aperçoivent pas que le public est las à la fin d'entendre de la musique qui n'en est pas : qu'il est fatigué de cette déclamation lourde et continuelle, sans air ni lumière, dans laquelle il ne trouve pas une parcelle de chant véritable; qu'il a assez de ce chromatisme insupportable grâce auquel le sens de la tonalité disparaît comme le sens mélodique ; ... qui se déroulent d'une façon logique et rationnelle, et qui ne passent pas de modulation en modulation pour aboutir encore à une modulation Le rythme, le chant, la tonalité, voilà trois choses inconnues

For instance, as he cites the basic “deadly sins” of counterpoint –parallel fifths and octaves- and names them as the “language you have been thought to speak”, it is clear that he not only masters counterpoint and harmony, but also wants these rules to be respected. On the other hand he really takes the time to look into the score, and makes an effort to understand the music, even though it doesn’t seem to be very helpful. These are certainly facts that don’t apply to Boutarel’s reviews as it can be observed on p.3 in the reviews of *La Mer* or below in the review of D’Indy’s first symphony. Aside of the musical language when we look into Boutarel’s reviews of premieres, for instance d’Indy’s first symphony in 1904 (*Le Ménestrel* 1904/03/06) it can be also observed that he is not really enthusiastic about novelties.

... when such a wise, conscious master, skillful in the technical secrets as Mr. Vincent d’Indy comes into question, I think that I have to ignore my preferences in order to acquire completely the composer’s point of view. Nevertheless I would suggest ... that Mr. d’Indy ... and sometimes César Franck has a defect, even psychological abnormality. How come such sincere artists give up on the beauty of simplicity, on the noble and harmonious order which constitute the work of art of the greatest geniuses ...⁶

Though he describes d’Indy and Franck as geniuses of the French composers, he can’t approve the lack of “clarity” and “simplicity”: the two most important characteristics of the good old French school. For him the novelty lies in the melody and apparently he can’t see further than this. Taking these two standpoints into consideration we can assume that Boutarel is a romantic and conventional person, who doesn’t possess a very profound musical background.

When we compare Boutarel’s positioning in this review with the first review of *La Mer* in 1905, his dismissal can be comprehensible. He is looking for melody, clarity and simplicity and *La Mer* certainly doesn’t possess none of these classical French school elements.

Another question which arises, concerns his “freedom” of speech and of subject choices about which he was going to write. Was he commissioned to write these articles? How was the decision making system functioning especially regarding contemporary pieces to be reviewed? How far was Heugel influential, if at all? Who was saying the last word? As it can be seen from different covers of other contemporary journals (Figures 4 and 5), main collaborators are listed on the cover page.

à M. Debussy Quelles adorables suites d'accords parfaits marchant par mouvement direct, avec les quintes et les octaves qui s'ensuivent! Quelle collection de dissonances, septièmes ou neuvièmes, montant avec énergie, même par intervalles disjoints! Je comprends les audaces, je comprends la violation des règles lorsqu'elles sont motivées, justifiées par une raison quelconque, parle désuet la recherche d'un effet particulier. Mais, franchement, est-ce bien la peine d'apprendre la grammaire ... et de blesser gratuitement la langue qu'on vous a enseigné à parler? Non, décidément, je ne serai jamais d'accord avec ces anarchistes de la musique. Je crains bien que le public soit de mon avis. ...”

⁶ “...Quand il s'agit d'un maître aussi érudit, aussi consciencieux, aussi habile dans les secrets de la technique que M. Vincent d'Indy, je crois devoir faire abstraction de mes préférences pour me placer entièrement aupoint de vue de l'auteur. Je remarquerai toutefois, ... que M. d'Indy a, ... un défaut que j'ai signalé parfois chez César Franck et qui me surprend toujours énormément, parce qu'il constitue, à mon sens, une anomalie psychologique. Comment se fait-il que des artistes aussi incontestablement sincères ... renoncent quelquefois à la belle simplicité, à l'ordonnance noble et harmonieuse qui constitue l'oeuvre d'art chez les plus grands geniés...”



Figure 4: *La Renaissance Musicale* 1/1/1882 cover page

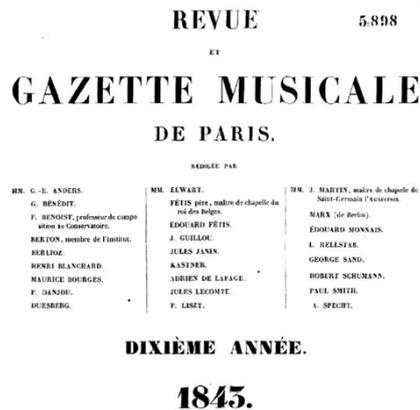


Figure 5: *La Revue Musicale*, 1843 cover page

Interestingly, when *Le Ménestrel* used to mention its collaborators on its cover, Boutarel’s name never appeared whereas Pougin’s always did. As quoted above on pages 8-9 Pougin had definitely a music theory background, which certainly distinguished him from Boutarel and allowed him to appear on the cover page. Again his review of *Pelléas*, which is certainly harsher than any of Boutarel’s Debussy reviews indicates that he doesn’t approve of contemporary music.

3. CONCLUSION

According to Brian Hart, Debussy’s compositional language changed fundamentally with *La Mer* in 1905.

I am not sure if this fundamental change affected Boutarel’s critique of the piece since he doesn’t mention it in either of his reviews. As he makes basically very subjective, simple comments by taking his personal emotional perceptions into account, without mentioning the musical reasons for these such as harmony, use of unusual chords, intervals or/and any contrapuntal “unorthodoxies”.

On the other hand Debussy wrote *La Mer* in the summer of his separation with his wife Lilly due to his love affair with Emma Bardac. According to Trezise after Lilly tried to commit suicide the affair became public and was certainly not well received. Nevertheless the creation of *La Mer* was also related to this event since it was composed during Debussy’s summer vacation with Emma Bardac. Even though Boutarel doesn’t make neither any allusions to this event nor there is anything in his language to suggest this sexual undertone, as a conservative magazine *Le Ménestrel* might have deprecated this situation through rejecting the piece that year.

When *La Mer* was performed in 1908 for the first time in three years, Debussy’s personal life was in shadows again. As to Debussy pieces around 1908, *Le Ménestrel* and Boutarel were certainly very fond of *Pelléas et Mélisande* (premiered in 1902) and *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* (premiered in 1894) as anybody else in the community. They were being performed regularly not only in major concerts but also in Sunday concerts (Colonne, Lamoureux, etc), which were reviewed regularly by *Le Ménestrel*. This increased exposure of debussyist music helped the public to digest this new musical technique and to enjoy it. As Harrison states in her dissertation as well, the influence of these concerts

on the public was also linked to the publishing market since it created a certain demand [p. 249]. As an agent in the field of cultural production, *Le Ménestrel* made, as we have seen, changes in its outlook and content to keep up the balance of heteronomous hierarchization. One of Heugel's editorial tactics to keep up the balance was to review Sunday concerts in general favorably and if not completely, and to have "national rising stars" praised. So it was time for *Le Ménestrel*, to praise Debussy as well, who attended his "climax" around 1908. Heugel used this tactic not only in the case of Debussy but in the case of other national and international contemporary composers such as Korsakov, Richard Strauss (*Le Ménestrel*, December 9th, 16th 1911) as well. Nevertheless he had these favorable reviews written by the "minor" critics of the magazine such as Boutarel and Jemain. These critics didn't have a musical background and weren't considered as "contributors" to the magazine, since they were not appearing on the first page. So Heugel was killing two birds with one stone: He still had novelties in his magazine, but not with an important emphasis, which would have been the case if Pougin had reviewed them. I think that it wouldn't be wrong to assume that Pougin with his solid music theory background could have forgotten *La Mer* if he listened to it once. On the other hand this seems to be the case with Boutarel, who was favorable about it after three years as if the piece was performed and reviewed by him for the first time, which in turn served Heugel's tactical purposes.

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