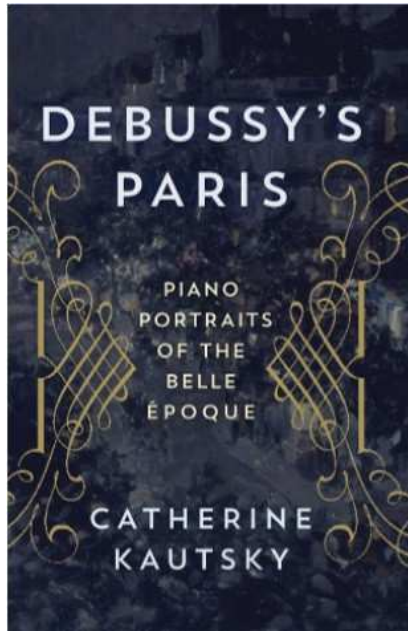


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Review by Ann DuHamel

Debussy's Paris: Piano Portraits of the Belle Époque, by Catherine Kautsky



The first time I heard Professor Catherine Kautsky speak at a conference, I was utterly entranced: she gave a captivating, lively, and energetic session that I still remember years later. Her enthusiasm for French music was palpable, and she provided an exciting and thought-provoking framework for the works discussed. Since then, whenever presented with an opportunity to attend one of her appearances, I've jumped at the chance. Likewise, I jumped at the chance to read her book *Debussy's Paris: Piano Portraits of the Belle Époque*. The book is as delightful as her speaking engagements and has lived up to all of my hopes and more.

Debussy's Paris offers social and historical background for the time and place in which Debussy wrote his music. By examining this framework, "... [we] enter into his world with infinitely more subtlety and comprehension [by placing] ourselves in his universe" (p. xxix). Kautsky provides layers of context for Debussy's world and music: philosophical, aesthetic and artistic, cultural and historical, even sociological and gender roles. The rich and densely woven text

requires close reading for the nuanced, lively detail that transports the reader to the Parisian Belle Époque, the period lasting from 1871 to 1914.

The book begins with a condensed biography of Debussy. Topics covered in the thirteen main chapters span a wide and dizzying array of subjects. Beginning with the significance of the *Commedia dell'arte* and Pierrot, the reader learns of the allure of masks, circuses, dance, the cakewalk, and minstrel shows during the Parisian Belle Époque. We read of Debussy's fascination with the Orient, including Africa, Spain, and Greece, as well as Southeast Asia. We are thrilled by the fantastical and imaginative worlds of children's make-believe and fairy tales, dreams and enchantment, the magical sway of water and the creatures found therein. And, perhaps surprisingly, we discover Edgar Allan Poe as an inspiration, in addition to the growing influence of French identity and nationalism.

Though "[much] of this book strays from musical analysis and meanders through historical and social phenomena" (p. xxix), musical examples of Debussy's piano works appear throughout, including references to some lesserknown works. Kautsky quotes extensively from Debussy's own writings and letters, providing a fascinating glimpse into his personal history. *Debussy's Paris* is replete with evocative art works. Replicas of famous and not-so-famous paintings illustrate points and complement the text, though they are all in black and white, and might be too small to see all of the intricate details. The supplemental material on the marvelous corresponding website (<https://www.debussysparis.com/>) is a veritable treasure trove of wonders, with poetry, artistic images, additional text, and links to recordings by Kautsky and others.

Kautsky acknowledges from the outset that she is a performer. Nevertheless, Debussy's Paris reminds me of a wonderfully rich, interdisciplinary graduate level musicology class—the gorgeously written, colorful prose that is vividly presented immerses the reader in the Parisian Belle Époque and the culture that inspired Debussy. After reading this book I have a deeper and more holistic understanding of Debussy's world—his influences, contemporaries, and artistic and musical philosophies. (Rowman & Littlefield, 254 pages, \$38)

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