Debussy’s Conversation with M. Croche (1901)

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

In the spring of 1901 Debussy became the music critic for La revue blanche, a leading Parisian literary and artistic journal. His articles appearing there are far from mere descriptions of the concerts that he had attended, instead highly imaginative and opinionated speculations upon contemporary music. In his article for July 1, 1901, translated here, he puts down his ideas in the form of a conversation with an imaginary visitor whom he calls “M. Croche” (croche is the French word for an eighth-note, although the word also suggests “crossed” or “hooked” in a variety of French idioms). M. Croche is an argumentative character whose ideas about music are filled with ambiguity. In his words we hear the arch side of Debussy’s own personality.

It was a lovely evening. I had decided to idle. I mean, of course, that I was dreaming. I do not want to imply that anything of great emotional value was happening or that I was laying the foundations of the future, I was just enjoying that occasional carefree mood which brings peace with all the world.

And of what was I dreaming? What were my limits? What was the goal of my work? Questions, I fear, prompted by a somewhat childish egotism and the craving to escape from an ideal with which one has lived too long! Questions, moreover, that are but a thin disguise for the foolish yearning to be regarded as superior to others. The struggle to surpass others has never been really great if dissociated from the noble idea of surpassing oneself—though this, involving as it does the sacrifice of one’s cherished personality, implies a very special kind of alchemy. Besides, superiority over others is difficult to maintain and gives in the end but a barren victory. The pursuit of universal approbation means the waste of a great deal of time in continual demonstration and sedulous self-advertisement. These things may win one the honor of inclusion in a collection of distinguished persons whose names are used as the sauce for insipid conversations on art. But I will not labor the point. I should not like to check ambition.

The evening was as lovely as ever, but, as must already be obvious, I was out of humor with myself—I had lost grip and found that I was drifting into the most irritating generalizations.

At this precise moment my doorbell rang and I made the acquaintance of Monsieur Croche. It is unnecessary to check the flow of this narrative with the obvious or trifling incidents of his first visit. Monsieur Croche was a spare, wizened man and his gestures were obviously suited to the conduct of metaphysical discussions; his features are best pictured by recalling those of Tom Lane, the jockey, and M. Thiers. He spoke almost in a whisper and never laughed, occasionally enforcing his remarks with a quiet smile, which, beginning at his nose, wrinkled his whole face, like a pebble flung into still waters, and lasted for an intolerably long time.

He aroused my curiosity at once by his peculiar views on music. He spoke of an orchestral score as if it were a picture. He seldom used technical words, but the dimmed and slightly worn elegance of his rather unusual vocabulary seemed to ring like old coins. I remember a parallel he drew between Beethoven’s orchestration—which he visualized as a black-and-white formula resulting in an exquisite gradation of greys—and that of Wagner, a sort of many-colored “make-up” spread almost uniformly, in which, he said, he could no longer distinguish the tone of a violin from that of a trombone.

Since his intolerable smile was especially evident when he talked of music, I suddenly decided to ask him what his profession might be. He replied in a voice that

1Adolphe Thiers (1797–1877) was a French statesman and historian.
checked any attempt at comment: “Dillettante Hater.” Then he went on monotonously and irritably:

“Have you noticed the hostility of a concert-room audience? Have you studied their almost drugged expression of boredom, indifference, and even stupidity? They never grasp the noble dramas woven into the symphonic conflict in which one is conscious of the possibility of reaching the summit of the structure of harmony and breathing there an atmosphere of perfect beauty. Such people always seem like guests who are more or less well-bred; they endure the tedium of their position with patience, and they remain only because they wish to be seen taking their leave at the end; otherwise, why come? You must admit that this is a good reason for an eternal hatred of music.

I argued that I had observed and had even shared in highly commendable displays of enthusiasm. To which he answered: “You are greatly in error; for, if you showed so much enthusiasm, it was with the secret hope that some day a similar honor would be paid to you. Surely you know that a genuine appreciation of beauty can only result in silence! Tell me, when you see the daily wonder of the sunset have you ever thought of applauding? Yet you will admit that it is a rather more unrehearsed effect than all your musical trifles. Moreover, face to face with the sunset you feel so mean a thing that you cannot become a part of it. But before a so-called work of art you are yourself, and you have a classical jargon which gives you an opportunity for eloquence.”

I dared not confess how nearly I agreed with him, since nothing withers conversation like agreement. I preferred to ask if he himself played any instrument. He raised his head sharply and replied:

“I dislike specialists. Specialization is for me the narrowing of my universe. It reminds me of those old horses who, in bygone days, worked the roundabouts and died to the well-known strains of the ‘Marche Lorraine!’ Nevertheless, I know all music, and it has only given me a special pride in being safe from every kind of surprise. Two bars suffice to give me the clue to a symphony, or to any other musical incident.

“Though we may be certain that some great men have a stubborn determination always to break fresh ground, it is not so with many others, who do nothing but repeat the thing in which they have once succeeded. Their skill leaves me cold. They have been hailed as Masters. Beware lest this be not a polite method of getting rid of them or of excusing the sameness of their performances. In short, I try to forget music because it obscures my perception of what I do not know or shall only know tomorrow. Why cling to something one knows too well?”

I mentioned the most famous of our contemporaries, and Monsieur Croche was more aggressive than ever: “I am much more interested in sincere and honestly felt impressions than in criticism, which often enough resembles brilliant variations on the theme: ‘Since you do not agree with me, you are mistaken’; or else: ‘You have talent, I have none; it is useless to go any further.’ In all compositions I endeavor to fathom the diverse impulses inspiring them and their inner life. Is not this much more interesting than the game of pulling them to pieces, like curious watches?

“People forget that, as children, they were forbidden to pull their jumping jacks to pieces—even when such behavior was treason against the mysteries—and they continue to want to poke their aesthetic noses where they have no business to be. Though they no longer rip open puppets, yet they explain, pull to pieces and in cold blood slay the mysteries; it is comparatively easy; moreover you can chat about it. Well, well! An obvious lack of understanding excuses some of them; but others act with greater ferocity and premeditation, for they must of necessity protect their cherished little talents. These last have a loyal following.

“I am only slightly concerned with works hallowed either by success or tradition: once and for all, [Giacomo] Meyerbeer, [Sigismond] Thalberg, and [Ernest] Reyer are men of genius; otherwise, they are of no importance.
“On Sundays, when God is kind, I hear no music: please accept my apologies. Finally, be so good as to note the word ‘impressions,’ which is applicable, since it leaves me free to preserve my emotion from all superfluous aestheticism.

“You are inclined to exaggerate events, which, in Bach’s day, would have appeared natural. You talk to me about Dukas’s [Piano] Sonata. He is probably one of your friends and even a musical critic. Good reasons for speaking well of him. Your praise, however, has been surpassed; for Pierre Lalo, in an article in Le temps, devoted exclusively to this sonata, made simultaneous sacrifice to Dukas of the sonatas written by Schumann and Chopin. As a matter of fact, Chopin’s nervous temperament was ill-adapted to the endurance needed for the construction of a sonata: he made elaborate ‘first drafts.’ Yet we may say that Chopin inaugurated a special method of treating this form, not to mention the charming artistry, which he devised in this connection. He was fertile in ideas, which he often invested without demanding that hundred percent on the transaction, which is the brightest halo of some of our Masters.

“Lalo, of course, evokes the noble shade of Beethoven in reference to the sonata of your friend Dukas. Personally, I should have been only mildly flattered! Beethoven’s sonatas are very badly written for the piano; they are, particularly those that came later, more accurately described as orchestral transcriptions. There seems often to be lacking a third hand, which I am sure Beethoven heard; at least, I hope so. It would have been safer to leave Schumann and Chopin alone—undoubtedly they wrote for the piano—and if that is not enough for Lalo, he ought at least to be grateful to them for having opened a way toward the perfection represented by a Dukas—and incidentally some others.”

Monsieur Croche uttered these last words with an imperturbable detachment: a challenge to be taken up or ignored. I was too much interested to take it up and left him to continue. There was a long silence, during which there came from him no sign of life save for the smoke ascending in blue spirals from his cigar, which he watched curiously as if he were contemplating strange distortions—perhaps bold systems. His silence became disconcerting and rather alarming. At length he resumed:

“Music is a sum total of scattered forces. You make an abstract ballad of them! I prefer the simple notes of an Egyptian shepherd’s pipe, for he collaborates with the landscape and hears harmonies unknown to your treatises. Musicians listen only to the music written by cunning hands, never to that which is in nature’s script. To see the sun rise is more profitable than to hear the Pastoral Symphony. What is the use of your almost incomprehensible art? Ought you not to suppress all the parasitical complexities, which make music as ingenious as the lock of a strong box? You paw the ground because you only know music and submit to strange and barbarous laws. You are hailed with high-sounding praises, but you are merely cunning! Something between a monkey and a lackey.”

I ventured to say that some had tried in poetry, others in painting—I added with some trepidation one or two musicians—to shake off the ancient dust of tradition, and it had only resulted in their being treated as symbolists or impressionists—convenient terms for pouring scorn on one’s fellows.

“It is only journalists and hucksters who treat them so,” Monsieur Croche continued without a falter, “and it is of no importance. A beautiful idea in embryo has in it something absurd for fools. There is a surer hope of beauty in such derided men than in those poor sheep who flock docilely to the slaughter houses that a discerning fate has prepared for them.

“To be unique, faultless! The enthusiasm of society spoils an artist for me, such is my fear that, as a result, he will become merely an expression of society.

“Discipline must be sought in freedom, and not within the formulas of an outworn philosophy only fit for the feeble minded. Give ear to no man’s counsel but listen to the wind which tells in passing the history of the world.”
As he spoke Monsieur Croche appeared to be lit up from within. I seemed to see into
him, and his words came to me like some strange music. I cannot adequately convey
his peculiar eloquence. Something like this, perhaps:
“Do you know anything more splendid than to discover by chance a genius who has
been unrecognized through the ages? But to have been such a genius oneself—can any
glory equal it?”

Day was breaking; Monsieur Croche was visibly fatigued and went away. I accompa-
nied him as far as the landing door; he no more thought of shaking my hand than I of
thanking him. For a considerable time, I listened to the sound of his steps dying away
flight by flight. I dared not hope that I should ever see him again.

Source: Claude Debussy, “L’entretien avec M. Croche” (“Conversation with M. Croche”), La revue
blanche 1 July 1901: 384–87, translated by B. N. Langdon Davies.