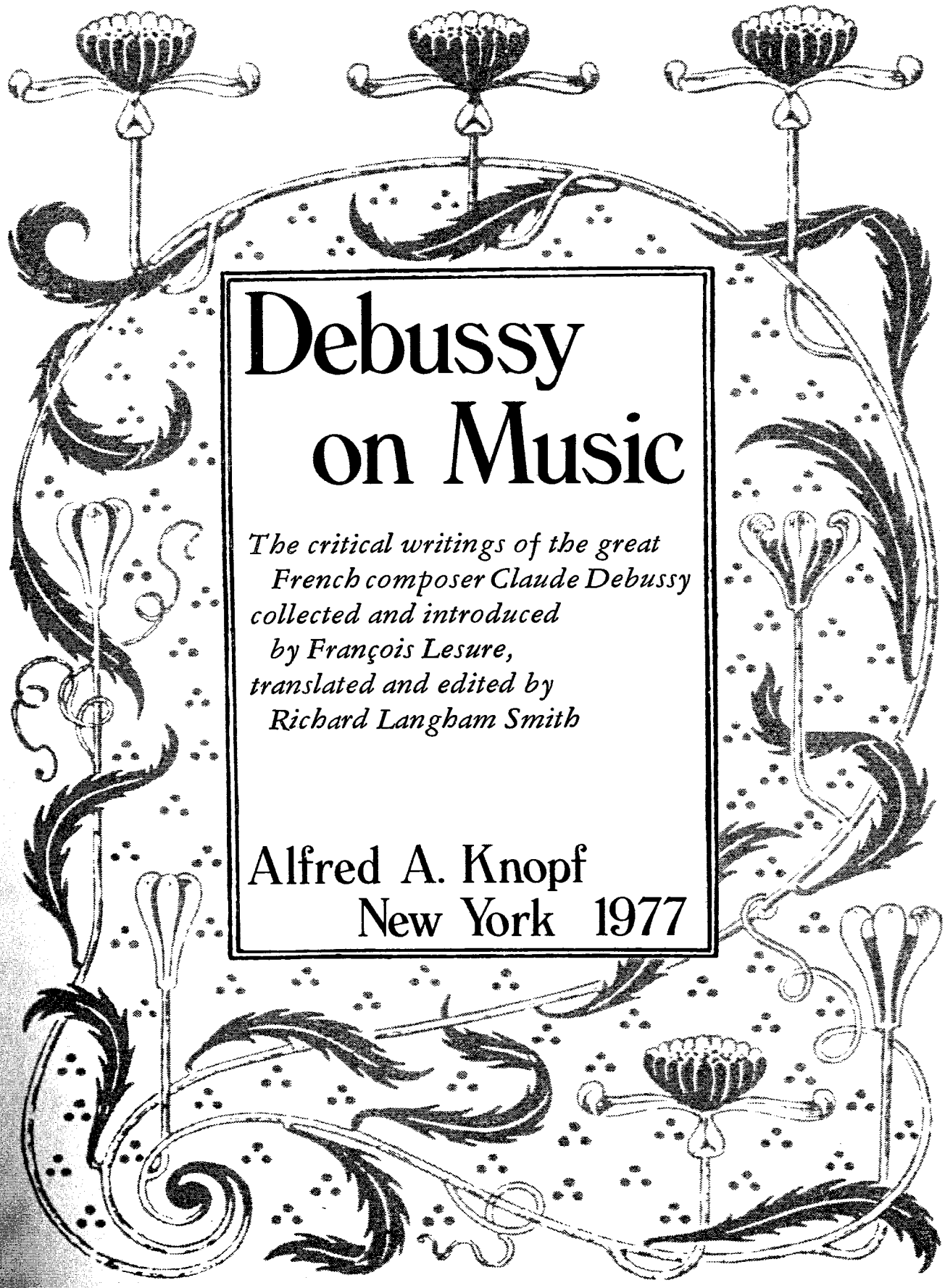

Debussy on Music

The critical writings of the great French composer Claude Debussy collected and introduced by François Lesure, translated and edited by Richard Langham Smith

Alfred A. Knopf
New York 1977

SIM
15 February 1913

Taste

IN these times, when we are so preoccupied with trying out various different ways of educating people, we are gradually losing our sense of the mysterious. The true meaning of the word "taste" is also bound to be lost.

In the last century, having "taste" was merely a convenient way of defending one's opinions. Today the word has come to mean much more than that: it is now used in many different ways. It generally signifies something that involves the kind of argument usually settled with knuckle-dusters; one makes one's point, but in a way somewhat lacking in elegance. The natural decline of a "taste" concerned with nuance and delicacy has given way to this "bad taste," in which colors and forms fight each other. . . . But then perhaps these reflections are rather too general, for here I am only supposed to be concerned with music—a difficult enough task in itself.

Geniuses can evidently do without taste: take the case of Beethoven, for example. But on the other hand there was Mozart, to whose genius was added a measure of the most delicate "good taste." And if we look at the works of J. S. Bach—a benevolent God to whom all musicians should offer a prayer before commencing work, to defend themselves from mediocrity—on each new page of his innumerable works we discover things we thought were born only yesterday—from delightful arabesques to an overflowing of religious feeling greater than anything we have since discovered. And in his works we will search in vain for anything the least lacking in "good taste."

Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* speaks of a music that everyone

has within them: "The man that hath no music in himself . . . let no such man be trusted." Those people who are only preoccupied with the formula that will yield them the best results, without ever having listened to the still small voice of music within themselves, would do well to think on these words. And so would those who most ingeniously juggle around with bars, as if they were no more than pathetic little squares of paper. That is the kind of music that smells of the writing desk, or of carpet slippers. (I mean that in the special sense used by mechanics who, when trying out a badly assembled machine, say, "That smells of oil.") We should distrust the *writing* of music: it is an occupation for moles, and it ends up by reducing the vibrant beauty of sound itself to a dreadful system where two and two make four. Music has known for a long time what the mathematicians call "the folly of numbers."

Above all, let us beware of systems that are designed as dilettante traps.

There used to be—indeed, despite the troubles that civilization has brought, there still are—some wonderful peoples who learn music as easily as one learns to breathe. Their school consists of the eternal rhythm of the sea, the wind in the leaves, and a thousand other tiny noises, which they listen to with great care, without ever having consulted any of those dubious treatises. Their traditions are preserved only in ancient songs, sometimes involving dance, to which each individual adds his own contribution century by century. Thus Javanese music obeys laws of counterpoint that make Palestrina seem like child's play. And if one listens to it without being prejudiced by one's European ears, one will find a percussive charm that forces one to admit that our own music is not much more than a barbarous kind of noise more fit for a traveling circus.

The Indochinese have a kind of embryonic opera, influenced by the Chinese, in which we can recognize the roots of the *Ring*. Only there are rather more gods and rather less scenery! A frenetic little clarinet is in charge of the emotional effects, a tam-tam invokes terror—and that is all there is to it. No special theater is required, and no hidden orchestra. All that is needed is an instinctive desire for the artistic, a desire that is satisfied in the most ingenious ways and without the slightest hints of "bad taste." And to say that none of those con-

cerned ever so much as dreamed of going to Munich to find their formulae—what could they have been thinking of?

Was it not the professionals who spoiled the civilized countries? And the accusation that the public likes only simple music (implying bad music)—is that not somewhat misguided?

The truth is that real music is never "difficult." That is merely an umbrella term that is used to hide the poverty of bad music. There is only one kind of music: music whose claim to existence is justified by what it actually is, whether it is just another piece in waltz time (for example, the music of the *café-concert*) or whether it takes the imposing form of the symphony. Why do we not admit that, of these two cases, it is very often the waltz that is in better taste? The symphony can often only be unraveled with great difficulty—a pompous web of mediocrity.

Let us not persist in exalting this commonplace invention, as stupid as it is famous: taste and color should be beyond mention. On the other hand, let us discuss, rediscover our own taste; it is not as if we have completely lost it, but we have stifled it beneath our northern eiderdowns. That would be a step forward in the fight against the barbarians, who have become much worse since they started parting their hair in the center. . . .

We should constantly be reminding ourselves that the beauty of a work of art is something that will always remain mysterious; that is to say one can never find out exactly "how it is done." At all costs let us preserve this element of magic peculiar to music. By its very nature music is more likely to contain something of the magical than any other art.

After the god Pan had put together the seven pipes of the syrinx, he was at first only able to imitate the long, melancholy note of the toad wailing in the moonlight. Later he was able to compete with the singing of the birds, and it was probably at this time that the birds increased their repertoire.

These are sacred enough origins, and music can be proud of them and preserve a part of their mystery. In the name of all the gods, let us not rid it of this heritage by trying to "explain" it. . . . Let it be enhanced by delicately preserving our "good taste," the guardian of all that is secret.