

Barbara L. Kelly: *Tradition and Style in the Works of Darius Milhaud 1912-1939* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003) ISBN 0 - 7546 3033 1

Review by Caroline Rae

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One of the most prolific composers of his age, Darius Milhaud committed what remains for some the inexcusable crime of having simply composed too much. His music has long suffered from unquestioned preconceptions, selective propaganda, clichéd over-simplistic historical pigeon-holing, and accusations of unevenness. As a result, much of his work has been neglected, Milhaud's reputation resting on a tiny proportion of a vast output which spanned more than sixty years and more than 400 opus numbers. While some surveys of twentieth century music ignore his work entirely, he is more typically accounted for as the supreme perpetrator of Cocteau-esque clownerie in 1920s Paris; a composer of jazz-inspired ballets, unusual pieces about flowers and agricultural machinery who generally "spiced things up with his chums" in *Les Six* by his entertaining and jolly Brazilian borrowings. That he established himself as an independent figure, certainly by the 1930s if not before, is often ignored, his music being largely defined in terms of his association with *Les Six*. The deeper complexities of Milhaud's musical persona – the reasons underlying his admiration for Schoenberg, his views on contemporary music, his relationship to and ideas about French musical tradition, nationhood and identity – have tended to be overlooked.

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Thirty years since Milhaud's death, a welcome reassessment of his contribution not only to French music but to twentieth century music as a whole, is now underway. Following Jeremy Drake's study of the dramatic vocal works, *The Operas of Darius Milhaud* (New York and London: Garland, 1989), Deborah Mawer's 1991 doctoral thesis provided the basis for her innovative and authoritative analytical study in *Darius Milhaud: Modality and Structure in Music of the 1920s* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997). A collection of essays and documents edited by Myriam Chimènes and Catherine Massip entitled *Portraits de Darius Milhaud* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 1998) embarks on the process of exploring some of the myths associated with Milhaud's activities as a composer and includes a selection of the composer's hitherto unpublished letters, as well as much valuable photographic material. In

addition, new primary source material has been provided in the form of interviews with, and recollections by, the composer's widow and cousin Madeleine Milhaud (Roger Nichols *Conversations with Mme Milhaud*, London: Faber & Faber, 1996 and Mildred Clary, Pascal Fardet, eds. *Mon XXème siècle*, Paris: France musiques – Bleu nuit, 2002). Barbara Kelly's recent volume is not only a welcome addition to new Milhaud scholarship but an impressively detailed study which directly sets out to challenge the conventional preconceptions associated with the composer, including his involvement with *Les Six*.

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Kelly's study focuses on the first half of Milhaud's life and work, the period 1912-1939 which, she explains, is crucial in the development of the composer's mature style. She concludes appositely with the year which marks both the outbreak of World War II and a natural break in the composer's life and work; Milhaud left France for the USA in 1940. She points out that it was also during this period that Milhaud published his most important writings. Kelly draws extensively on primary source material, not only the published writings but many of Milhaud's unpublished writings and letters, as well as the contemporary Parisian press. She also acknowledges the invaluable support of Mme Milhaud with whom she has been in contact for many years. Avoiding the dangers of mere survey and accounting, no doubt, for the logistical problems involved in any attempt to discuss even a portion of Milhaud's music, Kelly's study is sensibly selective and focuses on particular groups of works to examine technique and stylistic development. (It should be noted, however, that she manages to provide valuable context for a great many works up to 1939, and some beyond). According to the preface, Kelly aims to '*trace Milhaud's development as a composer alongside the compelling issues of the time*' (p. xiii) and reveal the breadth of his activities '*as a composer, writer and musician in post-World War I France*' (p. xiv). The point of departure for her reassessment of Milhaud's contribution is an open letter by Roland-Manuel, published in a newsletter of the Friends of the Aix-en-Provence festival in 1962 which raises the issue of the composer's identity, the breadth of his output, his relationship to the past and to French musical tradition. Milhaud was not simply a Frenchman but, as Roland-Manuel observed, '*a Frenchman from Provence and Jewish by religion*'. In drawing attention to the diversity of Milhaud's cultural origins (Provence is recognised in France still today for its distinct traditions, history and dialect), Roland-Manuel emphasised the breadth and complexity of the composer's inherited cultures each of which brought their own influences to bear and each of which influenced his musical output. Roland-Manuel's letter quotes Milhaud's own statement that '*each race, each country carries with it a whole past which weighs on an artist*'. In

opening her study with this letter, Kelly pin-points the issues of identity and, by implication, nationhood and inherited past tradition as being of central importance in understanding Milhaud's contribution and the context in which his contribution took place. These issues define the main objectives of her book.

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The first of her seven chapters includes a fine assessment of contemporary sources and writings. Milhaud's relationship with *Les Six*, and emergent independence from the constraints of group identity, is examined from a new and revealing standpoint. Taking the facts of the group's activities for granted, Kelly presents a virtuosic exploration of the complex political environment in which these activities took place. In so doing she attacks many layers of retrospective misinformation, not least that propagated by the members of the group themselves, as well as by the critics Vuillermoz and Landormy which are revealed to have inflated the scope of Cocteau's '*role and influence*' (p. 8). While Cocteau is unveiled as an opportunist with a predilection for self-promotion, it is also shown how the group members (not least Poulenc) were efficient propagandists able to manipulate the press to their own ends *il n'y a rien de nouveau sous le soleil!*, as the French proverb goes, and thereby set a new musical agenda. Nevertheless, due attention is given to the short-lived journal *Le Coq*, established by Cocteau and members of the group in 1920. The 'Vuillermoz problem' (his critical hostility towards Milhaud) is attacked head-on; Kelly investigates the many tensions between he and Milhaud, as well as the far-reaching implications of Vuillermoz' failure to recognise the importance members of *Les Six* attached to Schoenberg and Stravinsky. Kelly goes a long way to set the record straight. She reassesses the circumstances of Henri Collet's infamous article of 16 January 1920, published in *Comoedia*, in which the names of Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, Arthur Honegger, George Auric, Germaine Tailleferre and Louis Durey were first united and dubbed 'les Six francais' and explains the group's admiration for both Schoenberg and Stravinsky. Thus, Milhaud's dedication of his Fifth String Quartet of 1920 to Schoenberg (regrettably not mentioned by Kelly) and involvement in the Paris première of *Pierrot lunaire* of 1922, organized by Jean Wiéner, begin to have a proper context. (Kelly points out that, like Milhaud, Jean Wiéner was also Jewish, p. 11). This more balanced historical perspective suggests that '*the spirit of sincerity and generosity*' more usually associated with the later group of French composers, *La jeune France*, was also characteristic of *Les Six*, the very group from whom (perhaps somewhat ironically in the light of Kelly's revelations) *La jeune France* sought to distance themselves after 1936. The spectre of Berlioz also looms large (a figure associated with another fascinating sub-plot among the

complex issues of nationhood and identity in French music of the Third Republic). Milhaud's admiration for the giant of nineteenth century French music (discussed in Kelly's second chapter) is not only an indicator of his views on the continuity of a specifically French musical tradition (Wagner is listed revealingly among Milhaud's '*negative*' influences in Kelly's construction of the composer's personal musical canon, p. 35), but simultaneously a nationalist clarion-call, the same clarion-call sounded in Ives Baudrier's manifesto of *La jeune France*. It is interesting to note that the post-World War II group of Parisian composers known as *Le groupe Zodiaque*, led by Maurice Ohana (another Jewish composer), also feared Teutonic domination in the guise, not only of Wagner (and what Ohana called '*the frightful Richard Strauss*' (Richard Langham Smith: 'Ohana on Ohana: an English Interview', *Contemporary Music Review*, viii, I (1993) p. 127) but of post-Webern total serialism, a movement which Ohana equated with the oppressions of Nazi tyranny (Caroline Rae, *The Music of Maurice Ohana*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000). There is a wealth of factual information in Kelly's first chapter which should be scrutinised carefully by all scholars of French music.

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Chapter Two continues to provide valuable new context. Through an investigation of Milhaud's prolific writings, published and unpublished, Kelly examines the composer's ideas on tradition and identity. While the Jewish question is taken further from the outset (providing a tidy continuity with the final sections of the first chapter), Kelly is careful to point out that Milhaud emphasised his '*French nationality over his religious affiliation for the benefit of both his supporters and detractors*' (p. 27). Notwithstanding Kelly's careful navigation through these complex and sensitive issues, perhaps a little more space could have been devoted to 'L'affaire Dreyfus' as part of the contextual background; there is but a brief reference (p. 31). Nevertheless she explores Milhaud's relationship to inherited and reinvented tradition thoroughly, while explaining the significance of his Provençal and Italian roots as part of a distinctive culture. In examining Milhaud's reassessment of nineteenth century French romanticism and the issues associated with the rejection of Berlioz by the pre-World War I generation, in particular Vincent D'Indy, she shows how '*questions of identity, canonicity [sic] and the nature of French musical style were still matters of vital concern in 1920s France*' (p. 44).

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A new context for Kelly's reassessment of Milhaud's music having been established, the following chapters focus on musical discussion. The operas discussed in Chapter Three form the first part of an investigation of Milhaud's writing for music theatre, the collaborations

with Paul Claudel providing the basis for exploring Milhaud's experimentations with language, vocal texture and rhythm. Well supported with musical examples and structural synopses, Kelly shows how Milhaud's approach to percussive writing for the voice, in particular, was well in advance of its time. While explaining the ways in which Milhaud responded to Claudel's ideas concerning the relationship of music and drama, attention is also drawn to areas of aesthetic tension between the two friends and associates, as well as to their more well-known common enthusiasms. Focusing on the chamber operas, Chapter Four draws comparisons not only with Stravinsky and Poulenc, as one might expect, but also with Gounod, Chabrier and most intriguingly with Berg, the latter in relation to the use of traditional form (p. 75). As in previous chapters, Kelly assesses contemporary reception of Milhaud's work against a background of the activities of *Les Six*, while providing valuable context to the composer's choice of subject matter and attraction for condensed dramatic form. The chapter also discusses the hitherto unknown sketches for the 'opéras-minute' which Kelly dramatically reveals were discovered by accident in the Library of Congress (p. 88). New light is thus thrown on Milhaud's compositional method.

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Chapter Five delves further into Milhaud's vocal music which Kelly points out has received little attention compared with Poulenc (p. 104). She investigates Milhaud's various experimentations with text and language (notably English, Hebrew, Yiddish and French) and includes a detailed examination of both versions of the song cycle *Alissa* (1913 and 1931) which reveals much about the composer's developing approach to texture and line, as well as his treatment of text. Literature is shown to have played an important role in Milhaud's search for a distinctive style and, through considering the composer's explorations of the rhythmic potential of language, the instrumental qualities of the voice, Kelly reveals many aspects of his textural innovation in the chapter as a whole. Polytonality provided the focus for Chapter Six which discusses selective works, including the well-known *Saudades do Brazil*, against a background of contemporary debate in the Parisian press. In the final chapter, Kelly picks up the threads relating to inherited and reinvented tradition, explored in earlier sections of the book, to consider Milhaud's reworking of older material and relationship with the past. In considering some of his arrangements and transcriptions, as well as broader notions concerning the whole 'Back to Bach' issue (or more appropriately 'Back to Couperin, Lully et al'), she raises the interesting question about what constitutes composition, not only in relation to various Baroque borrowings but in respect of Milhaud's assimilation of Brazilianism and jazz. The discussion is juxtaposed against T.S. Eliot's idea of 'new wholes',

expounded in 'The Metaphysical Poets' (*Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed F. Kermode, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), created 'by dislocating the past and fusing it with disassociated material' (p. 169).

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Kelly concludes her study with a final assessment of Milhaud's overall achievements up to 1939. With the journey of the immediately preceding chapters fresh in one's mind, this post-script underlines how far Milhaud had also travelled, musically, stylistically and aesthetically since his compositional beginnings in 1912. Given the wealth of carefully presented evidence in the body of her study, Kelly's apposite conclusions confirm that Milhaud's work should indeed be considered in a broader modernist context. She has shown how he not only engaged with contemporary concerns but opened new technical and stylistic musical paths while shaping 'received senses of tradition to reflect a changing national and international context' (p. 195). The volume is supported with a useful index and impressive bibliography which will be a valuable source for many, and the copious, erudite footnotes provide much interesting, additional reading. As a review is intended to carp, some readers might find the sub-sectioning of chapters excessive at times, although on the whole this aids digestion of concentrated material. While the original French is fastidiously given for all quotations in English translation, there are times when the otherwise pertinent enhancement of the English text with French idioms or expressions may be off-putting for readers who are not quite as 'chez eux' in the French language as the writer. To be fair, many of these expressions are translated and explained (e.g. 'métèque' p. 11, 'Gribouilles', p. 13) but quite a number are not (e.g. 'le théoricien du groupe' and 'vient de mettre Paris en révolution' p. 5, 'le mauvais goût' p. 11, 'unité variée' p. 19 and 'dépouillement' p. 75). Although not the responsibility of the author, one might as well note Ashgate's attractive revised page format and good paper quality. Kelly's study represents an impressive reassessment of Milhaud's contribution to French music and should be deemed essential reading for all scholars of the period.