

Marguerite Long and Debussy: An Analysis of the Developing Process of a “Tradition” in Performance

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Seen as a guardian of Debussy’s “tradition,” by virtue of the coaching she received from the composer in his last years, French pianist Marguerite Long (1874-1966) published in 1960 a memoir-like small book, *Au piano avec Claude Debussy*. Some researchers regard the book as problematic in terms of its legitimacy as a testimony of the relationship between two musicians. For the purpose of clarifying the substance and the background of what she called “tradition,” this paper attempts to follow the prehistory of the book, which has not been fully explored, through a comparative analysis of Long’s various documents on Debussy, preserved in the Fonds Marguerite Long, Médiathèque Musicale Mahler in Paris.

Comparing her book, *Au piano avec Claude Debussy*, with other material in which she refers to this composer, such as magazine articles, manuscripts or typescripts for lectures and public speeches, and interviews on TV and radio programs, it becomes clear that many parts of her different writings and talks are essentially repetitions, a sort of “copy-and-paste” of a few, well-elaborated texts. Apparently, it was by her continuous, sometimes meticulous editing of those documents that she was able to talk about the same particular anecdotes and descriptions of the composer for more than 40 years. On the other hand, the meaning and “lessons” drawn from her story shifted as the years went by, from the simply technical and informative to more sententious doctrines such as notions about performers’ attitude toward composer’s intentions as well as about the importance of tradition itself.

In conclusion, Long’s discourse on Debussy reflects her sense of mission which shifted over her extended career, from that of a champion of contemporary music to that of a narrator of an oral history of a “great” composer in her immediate past, a history which ultimately became a “tradition” in the narrative on the modern French music.