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Evenings Lit by the Burning Coals: From Baudelaire to Debussy

Denis Herlin

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The Coalman

The Coalman

Side Magazine gives shape to the seven characters that will be staged at the next Bergen Assembly in Autumn 2022.

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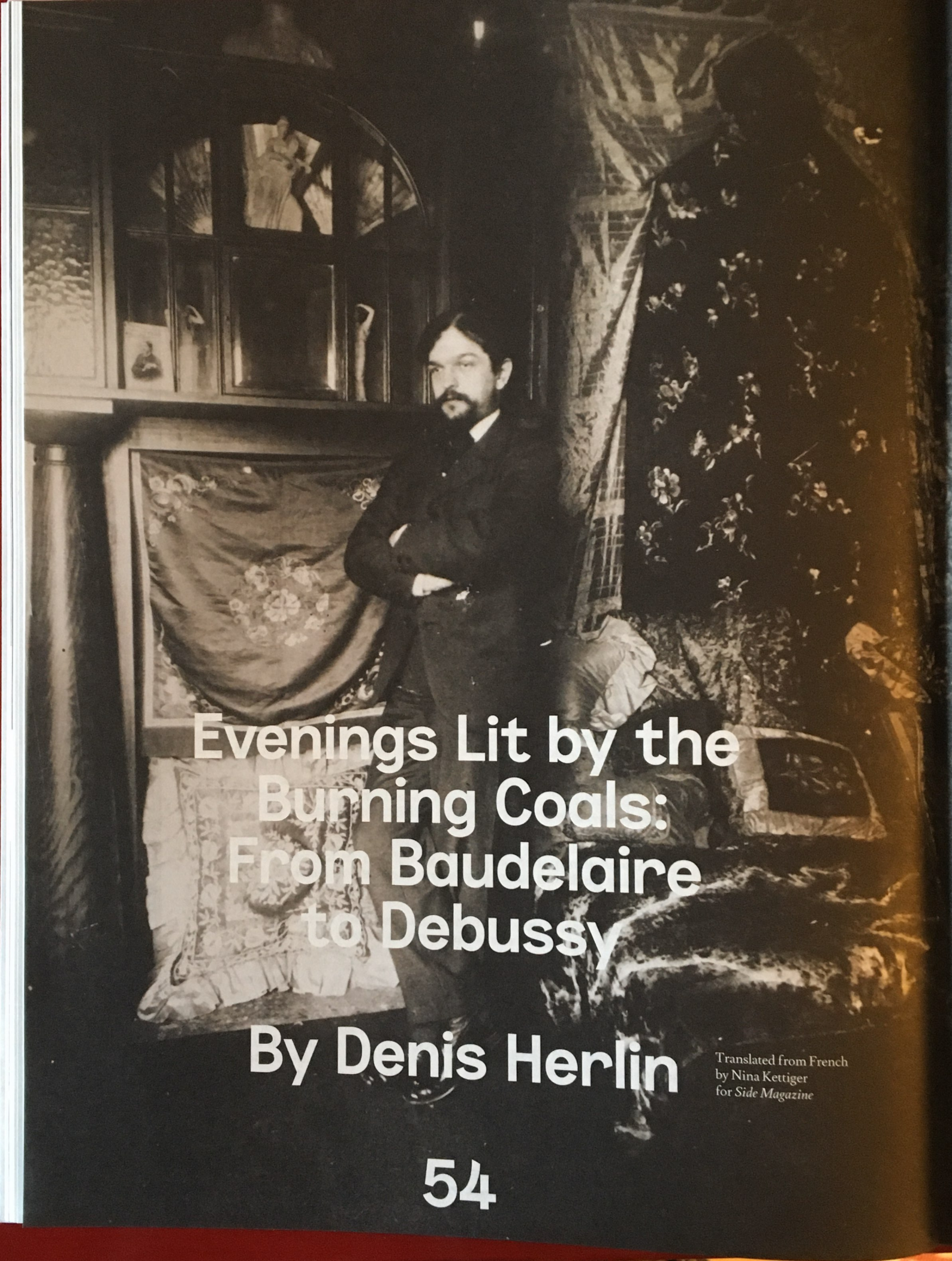
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**Evenings Lit by the
Burning Coals:
From Baudelaire
to Debussy**

By Denis Herlin

Translated from French
by Nina Kettiger
for *Side Magazine*

When Claude Debussy composed his final piano work in March 1917, *Les soirs illuminés par l'ardeur du charbon* (Evenings Lit by the Burning Coals), he was going through a sense of profound despair (fig. 1, left). Having suffered with intestinal cancer for a number of years, on December 7, 1915, he had undergone surgery that failed to stop the disease, despite treatment with radium, which was considered a "mineral with surprising, even mysterious effects."¹ Having been bedridden for the first few months of 1916, he tried to finalise his opera *La chute de la maison Usher* (The Fall of the House of Usher), based on a text by Edgar Allan Poe, but without any success. Working on the *Sonate pour violon et piano* at the same time, he eventually completed this in the winter of 1917, yet remained perpetually tormented by its last movement.

At the end of January 1917, Paris suffered a cold snap (reaching as low as -15°C by February 4) causing the beginning of a coal shortage (fig. 2, and fig. 5, p. 61). Domestic gas and electricity restrictions had been in place since the previous December in an effort to support the war industries during World War I. As a result of the German occupation of France's northern departments, the country lost more than a third of its coal reserves. The question of supply became so crucial that the government considered taking a census of stocks in both the public and private administrations, as well as in private homes, in order to ration them, a measure that ended up being carried out in September 1917. As his

wife, Emma, observed about the resultant living conditions, "Here, often without coal, the house is unbearable."² Desperate and broke, Debussy turned to his friends to help him find the precious combustible. Gabriel Astruc, the manager and founder of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, remembers Debussy "begging to get him some anthracite or charcoal, in exchange for a signature in a musician's copy of *Pelléas*."³ The composer never shied away from bartering with those who were sympathetic to his art: bags of coal in exchange for autographs. Unfortunately, this particular traded copy of the score of *Pelléas et Mélisande* (voice and piano) was never found.



Figure 2. Poster advertising Le Phare coal oven, 1926.

Figure 1. Claude Debussy standing at Pierre Louÿs' place, 1894.

At the end of January 1917, the composer approached his publisher and friend Jacques Durand for help in “getting him some wood or coal.”⁴ It is most likely through him that he came into contact with a certain Mr Croquin,⁵ a merchant of “coal, coke, anthracite,” residing at 25 rue de la Chapelle, in the 18th *arrondissement* of Paris.⁶ On February 1, 1917, Debussy was grateful to the latter for “having replied so promptly—and so well,” adding (see p. 63): “My little girl [Chouchou] was overjoyed when she read your letter—these days little girls prefer bags of coal to dolls!—It could not get any more cheerful than that.” Debussy goes on to say: “Besides, you make it easy for me to be indebted to you, and I will certainly not fail to do so, believe

me, with my sincere sympathy.”⁷ This statement indicates that Debussy was particularly keen to thank him for this service. Whether the piano piece he wrote for him, *Les soirs illuminés par l’ardeur du charbon* (fig. 4, pp. 58–59), is a response to a specific request from the dealer or whether the idea was initiated by the musician is, unfortunately, impossible to determine.

As evidence of the effort Debussy put into this quest, he wrote to Gabriel Fauré in early February, emphasising that “this life of domestic hardships is becoming more and more distressing.”⁸ It seems that the first delivery was used up quickly, since he wrote again to Croquin on February 12 to apologise for not having paid him yet and for not having given him “in a more personal manner, a token of my gratitude,” truly hoping that he would be able to “renew my first delivery.”⁹ A month later, Debussy wrote him yet another letter asking for the precious mineral: “The thermometer is dropping ... I have no more coal ... You had given me the hope of more or less regular deliveries, but I did not want to trouble you with my coal grievances. And yet ... necessity forces me to ask you to deliver everything you can as soon as possible.” He then adds in a postscript: “Will it be possible for you to collect next Thursday, the light tribute of my gratitude to your kindness?”¹⁰ The “light tribute” to which Debussy alludes is none other than the two self-scripted pages of his last piano work, which he titled—not without humour—*Les soirs illuminés par l’ardeur du charbon*, a piece that

XXXIV

LE BALCON

Mère des souvenirs, maîtresse des maîtresses,
— O toi, tous mes plaisirs, ô toi, tous mes devoirs !
Tu te rappelleras la beauté des caresses,
La douceur du foyer et le charme des soirs,
Mère des souvenirs, maîtresse des maîtresses !

Les soirs illuminés par l’ardeur du charbon,
Et les soirs au balcon, voilés de vapeurs roses ;
Que ton sein m’était doux ! que ton cœur m’était bon !
Nous avons dit souvent d’impérissables choses
Les soirs illuminés par l’ardeur du charbon.

4.

remained unknown and unpublished until 2001.¹¹ It is not known whether Croquin enjoyed this piece, but in any case, the manuscript remained in his possession, and was then passed down to his heir.

The reference to Baudelaire's poem is immediately emphasised in the manuscript given to Croquin, as Debussy notes at the beginning of the piece: "*Les soirs illuminés par l'ardeur du charbon*" / (Ch. Baudelaire = Le Balcon)." This verse opens and closes the second stanza (verses 6 and 10) of "Le Balcon" (The Balcony, fig. 3, left):

*Les soirs illuminés par l'ardeur du charbon,
Et les soirs au balcon, voilés de vapeurs roses.
Que ton sein m'était doux! que ton cœur m'était bon!
Nous avons dit souvent d'impérissables choses
Les soirs illuminés par l'ardeur du charbon.*¹²

Evenings illumined by the glow of coals afire
Or on the balcony, veiled in a rosy mist.

How soft your breast, how kind your heart to my desire!
We said imperishable things the while we kissed,
Evenings illumined by the glow of coals afire.¹³

Debussy knew this poem very well from the "Spleen and Ideal" section of *Les Fleurs du mal* (Flowers of Evil), having already set it to music in January 1888. The melody *Le Balcon*

was published in 1890 with four others from the same poem collection, in a magnificent self-published edition of 150 copies, fifty of which were printed on *papier de hollande*,¹⁴ and titled

*Cinq poèmes de Charles Baudelaire.*¹⁵ Further proving his particular fondness for this verse, he quoted it in December 1899 in a letter to Georges Hartmann, his main publisher before Jacques Durand, asking him for money: "Forgive me for insisting as such on the post scriptum of my most recent letter, but I am indeed really troubled, and you would be very kind if you would help me? I have a lot of medicine to buy for Lilly¹⁶ and you know how expensive 'evenings illumined by the glow of coals afire' are!"¹⁷

However, this was not the only verse from "Le Balcon" that he enjoyed quoting. At the end of November 1910, having just arrived in Vienna to give concerts, he confided in a letter to his wife, Emma: "All alone in this train so deplorably 'Orient-Express,' which connects all these sad little stations similar to angrily scattered pebbles ... how sad it

all is! And how true it seems that 'the warm peace of our hearth' is much more than just a mere literary expression!"¹⁸ Debussy is alluding here to the fourth line of "Le Balcon":

*Tu te rappelleras la beauté des caresses,
La douceur du foyer et le charme des soirs,
Mère des souvenirs, maîtresse des maîtresses.*¹⁹

You shall recall our blandishments and ecstasies,
The warm peace of our hearth, the evening's placid beauty.
Mistress of mistresses, mother of memories!²⁰

"Les feux illuminés par l'ardeur du charbon"
(de Beethoven et Schubert)

Lent et rêveur (♩ = 55)

The musical score is written on ten staves. The first staff contains the title and tempo marking. The second staff is the vocal line, starting with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The third staff is the piano accompaniment, starting with a bass clef. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, slurs, and dynamic markings. Performance instructions are written in French: "à l'aveugle" (at the end of the first system), "à l'aveugle" (above the second system), "à l'aveugle" (above the third system), "à l'aveugle" (above the fourth system), "à l'aveugle" (above the fifth system), "à l'aveugle" (above the sixth system), "à l'aveugle" (above the seventh system), "à l'aveugle" (above the eighth system), "à l'aveugle" (above the ninth system), and "à l'aveugle" (above the tenth system). The tempo marking "Lent et rêveur (♩ = 55)" is written above the second staff. The score is written in ink on aged, yellowed paper.

Propriété de son à la fin.

The image shows two systems of handwritten musical notation on a page of aged paper. The first system consists of two staves. The upper staff contains a melodic line with various notes, rests, and dynamic markings such as *mf* and *f*. There are also some handwritten annotations in parentheses. The lower staff contains a bass line with notes and rests. The second system also consists of two staves, with the upper staff having notes and rests, and the lower staff having notes and rests. The handwriting is in dark ink, and the paper shows signs of age and wear.

adagio

Figure 4. *Les soirs illuminés par l'ardeur du charbon* (Evenings Lit by the Burning Coals), Claude Debussy's music score, 1917.

Finally, in January 1916, as he lay bedridden and ill, he writes to his friend Robert Godet that he is gathering “glad moments,” a quote from the twenty-first line of the same poem:

*Je sais l'art d'évoquer les minutes heureuses
Et revis mon passé blotti dans tes genoux.*²¹

The resurrection of glad moments is an art I know: I live anew, my head pressed to your knees.²²

Thus, this evocative poetry of remembrance remains with him throughout his life and reveals his abiding attachment to the work of Baudelaire. In February 1889, when Debussy was working on completing the *Cinq poèmes de Charles Baudelaire*, he responded to a questionnaire asking about “your favourite poets” with the answer: “Baudelaire.”²³ This fascination was to last, even if at times he abandoned Baudelaire’s verses for other poets of the late Middle Ages or of seventeenth-century France. In his office in the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne, he placed a photo of the “terrible Baudelaire” on a “small piece of Anglo-Viennese furniture,” with a look that was “more severe” than that of “the modest Mussorgsky.”²⁴ In October 1907, he was quick to subscribe to an edition of Baudelaire’s posthumous works published by the *Mercure de France*, which contained previously unpublished pages. Perhaps there is a connection between this new edition and the homage he paid to Baudelaire again in 1910, when he called his fourth of the piano *Préludes* (first book) *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir*

(Sounds and Scents Turn in the Evening Air). This time Debussy did not quote a verse from “Le Balcon”, but from “Harmonie du soir”

(Evening Harmony), the third to be exact, a poem that he also set to music in

January 1889 in the *Cinq poèmes de Charles Baudelaire*. He chooses to evoke his admiration for the poet, not by accompanying his verses with music, but by creating “something inspired by them.”²⁵ The composition of the piano piece, *Les soirs illuminés par l'ardeur du charbon*, is situated precisely within that same perspective.

In February 1917, as Debussy still struggled with the scarce supply of coal, he wrote to Durand: “Dear friend, I have to lie down ... yesterday while fetching coal I got a cold on my kidneys and I am suffering like Saint Sebastian.” In recalling *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien*, an orchestral work composed in 1911, Debussy alludes to a specific passage, that of *danse extatique de Sébastien sur des charbons ardents* (“ecstatic dance of Sebastian on hot coals”) accompanied by a *chorus seraphicus*.

In the autumn of 1910, during his aforementioned tour of Vienna and

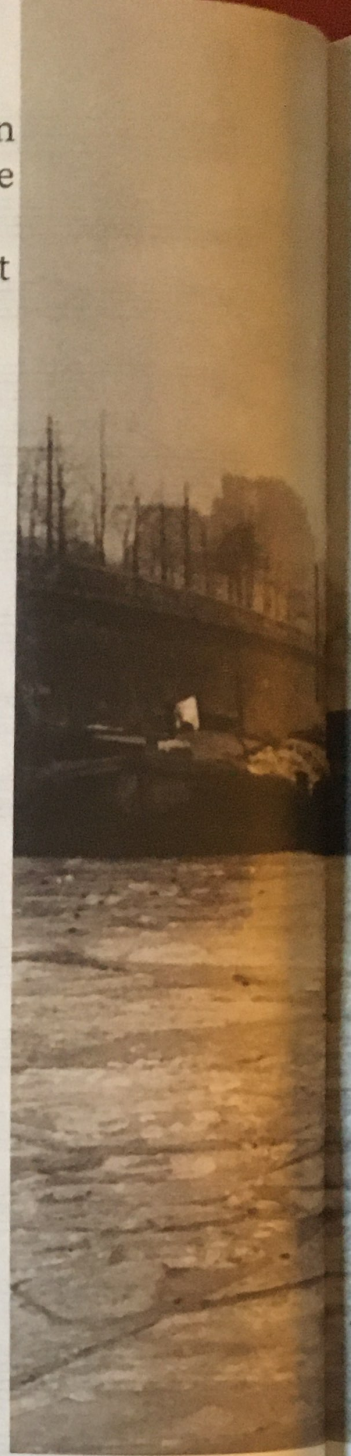
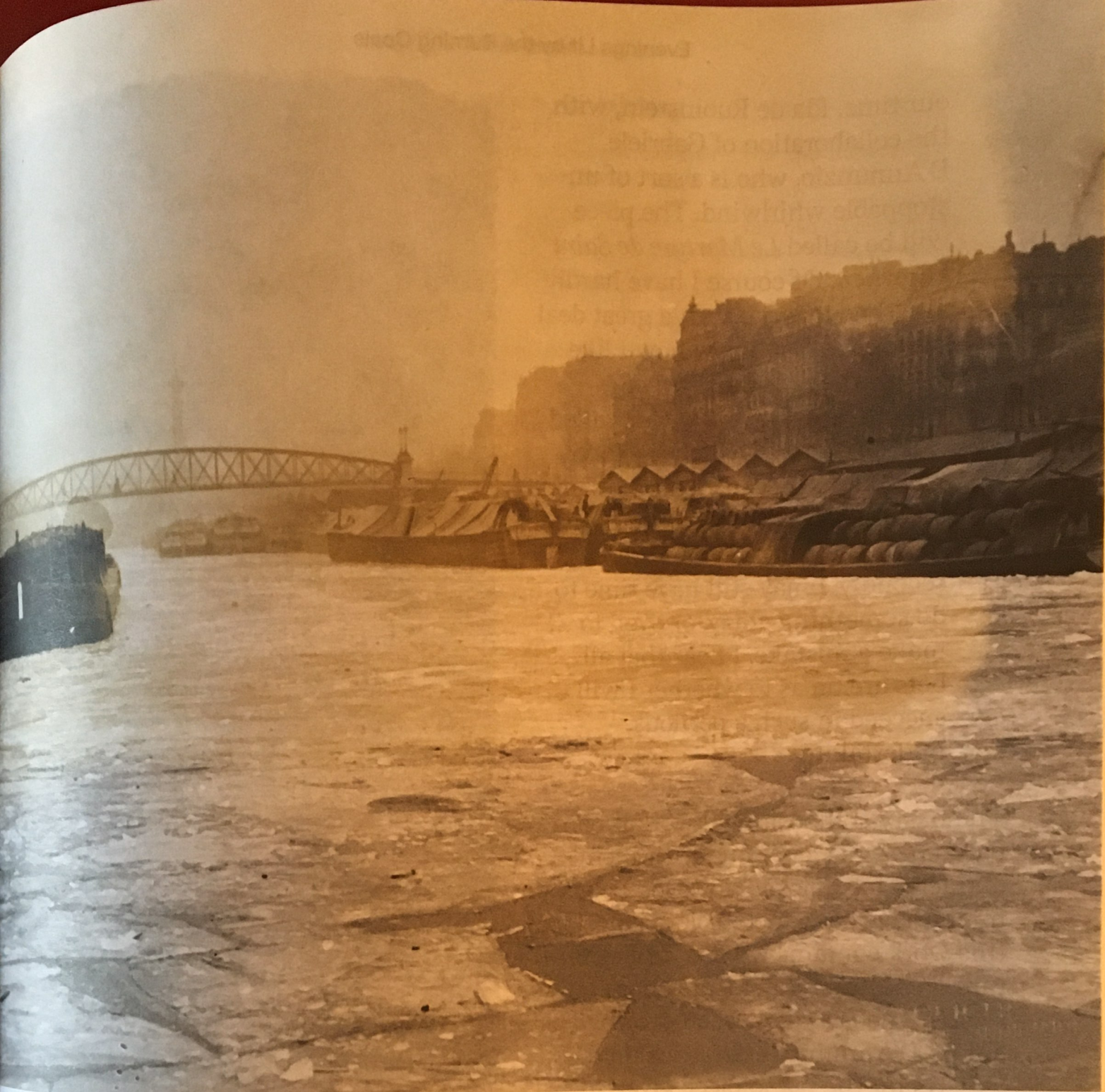


Figure 5. Le canal Saint-Martin (The Saint-Martin Canal)



artin Canal) from a series of photographs titled *Paris, La Seine prise dans les glaces* (Paris, the Seine river in Ice), 1917.

Budapest, Debussy received a letter from the famous Italian writer Gabriele D'Annunzio, asking him if he would compose music for his mystery play *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien*, in which the dancer Ida Rubinstein would take an androgynous role to play Saint Sebastian. Despite some reservations and the very short deadline—*Le Martyre* was to be performed at the Théâtre du Châtelet in May 1911—

Debussy eventually accepted on account of the very advantageous financial conditions, as well as the mystical subject that interested him, as he explained to André Caplet in February 1911:

For now I have set aside the strange stories of Mr. E. A. Poe for the fluttering legs [of] some of the most notorious dancers of

our time: Ida de Rubinstein, with the collaboration of Gabriele D'Annunzio, who is a sort of unstoppable whirlwind. The piece will be called *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien*. Of course I have hardly any time to write such a great deal of music.—You know how I like it!—In the profit margin of a mine, there is a coal that is called “all-purpose” ... which is exactly what I am. I accepted all the same, because first of all, it's worth getting something out of it; and secondly, I may still have time to do something crazy, or even to ... make a mistake. I hear that all bets are on as to whether I will succeed in such a perilous undertaking.²⁷

The hasty compositional work is compared here to a poor quality mineral extracted too quickly. However, Debussy might have been too quick to judge, for this work contains wonderful sheets of rare orchestral refinement, whose only misfortune is to have been drowned out by D'Annunzio's theatrical text.

As for the piano piece given to Mr. Croquin, *Les soirs illuminés par l'ardeur du charbon*, it is presented in a similar manner to the piano manuscripts Debussy gave to his publisher Jacques Durand. The manuscript even has the particularity of being notated on three staves, a system that gives it an almost orchestral dimension adopted by Debussy as early as the second book of *Images* (1907) and then in the second book of *Préludes* (1913). The beginning of the piece itself is rather

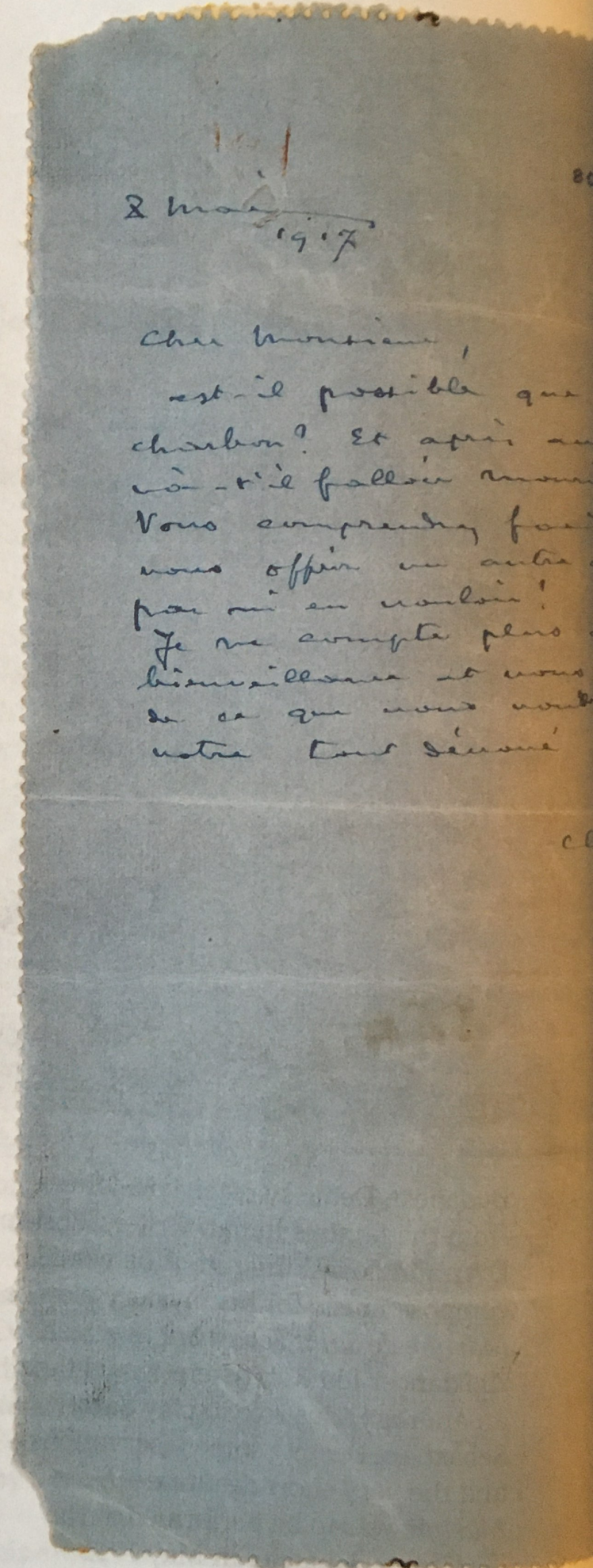


Figure 6. Letter written by Debussy to his coal merchant Mr. Croquin, May 8, 1917.

BOIS DE BOULOGNE

*avez plus de
buffet de froid
faire?
que je ne puis
graphie? - Vous finirez
sur votre amicale
avis a l'avance
faire pour*

de Debussy,

Four letters written by
Debussy to his coal
merchant Mr. Croquin between
February 1 and May 8, 1917:

February 1, 1917

Dear Sir,
I thank you for having
replied so promptly-and so
well ...
Besides, you make it easy
for me to be indebted to
you, and I will certainly
not fail to do so, believe
me, with my sincere
sympathy.

Claude Debussy

My little girl was overjoyed
when she read your letter-
these days little girls
prefer bags of coal to
dolls!- It could not get any
more cheerful than that!

February 12, 1917

Dear Sir,
Forgive me if I insist on
having an answer to the
letter I wrote you a few
days ago! In case you didn't
receive it, here is-more or
less-what it contained:
// My failure to consult the
delivery sheet, which
prevented me from sending
you a money order.
// My plea for you to wait
until I can offer you in a
more personal manner, a
token of my gratitude
// The hope that you might
not forget me and if you
could renew your first
delivery?
With my gratitude and
sincere sympathy.

Claude Debussy

Friday March 16, 1917

The thermometer is dropping
...
I have no more coal ...
You had given me the hope of
more or less regular
deliveries, but I did not
want to trouble you with my
coal grievances.
And yet ... necessity forces
me to ask you to deliver
everything you can as soon
as possible.

Claude Debussy

Will it be possible for you
to collect next Thursday,
the light tribute of my
gratitude to your kindness?

May 8, 1917

Dear Sir,
Is it possible that you have
no coal left?
And after having suffered
from the cold will we have
to die of hunger?
You will easily understand
that I cannot offer you
another manuscript?-You
would end up resenting me!
I can only count on your
friendly benevolence and
thank you in advance for
what you might consider
doing for your very devoted
friend.

Claude Debussy

Denis Herlin is Director of Research at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS). He has published books on French music from the seventeenth, eighteenth, and twentieth centuries. His current research examines the life and work of Claude Debussy. In 2005, he worked with François Lesure to edit the first complete edition of Debussy's letters, *Claude Debussy: Correspondance 1872–1918*, which was published by Éditions Gallimard. From 2009 to 2011, Herlin was President of the Société Française de musicologie. He is also the International Chair in Musicology at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, a position he has held since 2017.

singular, since it starts with a transposed reminiscence of the first bars of the prelude *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir*, already mentioned. Thus, within a few bars, we witness the emergence of a network of multiple intertwining quotations: the memory of the *Cinq poèmes de Charles Baudelaire* of 1889, an

early work to which Debussy was deeply attached, as well as the sketched emergence of the first bars of the piano prelude of the first book; many interwoven strata, like furrows in a mine. Furthermore, “Le Balcon” is, as the editor of Baudelaire’s works Claude Pichois points out, “one of the most beautiful poems of remembrance in French literature,”²⁸ a dimension that does not escape Debussy. Over the course of thirty-one bars, he creates rapid atmospheric sequences, almost giving the impression of an improvisation imbued with great nostalgia, a sort of photograph of Debussy frozen in time, “slow and dreamy.”²⁹ A few months later, after this final piece, he bitterly noted: “What have I done since then—I almost don’t dare think about it! But I am still ill and the catalogue of my works has not increased much! But I’m a year older ... That doesn’t exactly brighten my future? I must find a way out of this; to shake off this kind of soot that seems to be clogging my brain, otherwise I’ll just wander off into the other world.”³⁰

- 1 Claude Debussy to Jacques Durand, January 13, 1916, in *Claude Debussy Correspondance 1872–1918*, eds. François Lesure and Denis Herlin (Paris, 2005), p. 1967.
- 2 Emma Debussy to Marie Toulet, [mid-January 1918], Lesure and Herlin 2005 (see note 1), p. 2173.
- 3 Gabriel Astruc, *Le Pavillon des fantômes* (Paris, 1928), p. 319.
- 4 Debussy to Jacques Durand, [end of January] 1917, Lesure and Herlin 2005 (see note 1), p. 2075.
- 5 The name of this merchant listed in *Claude Debussy Correspondance 1872–1918* as “M. Tronquin” is incorrect.
- 6 *Annuaire du commerce Didot-Bottin* (Paris, 1914), p. 378.
- 7 Debussy to M. Tronquin [sic for Croquin], February 1, 1917, Lesure and Herlin 2005 (see note 1), p. 2076.
- 8 Debussy to Gabriel Fauré, February 9, 1917, *ibid.*, p. 2076.
- 9 Debussy to M. Tronquin [sic for Croquin], February 12, 1917, *ibid.*, p. 2077.
- 10 Debussy to M. Tronquin [sic for Croquin], March 16, 1917, *ibid.*, p. 2086.
- 11 Passed at public auction on November 30, 2001 (Hôtel Drouot, no. 2), this work was first published by Durand in 2003 (ed. Denis Herlin).
- 12 Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris, 1975), vol. 1, p. 37.
- 13 Jacques LeClercq, *Flowers of Evil* (Mt Vernon, NY, 1958). Author’s selected translation most fitting for the general understanding of this paper.
- 14 Translator’s note: *Le papier de Hollande* is a strong luxury paper. Mostly used for certain limited editions, it is made of chemical wood paste and a little cloth paste. It takes its name from its original place of production, the Netherlands, where it was once produced from rags, hemp, cotton, and unrefined linen.
- 15 No. 1, *Le Balcon*, no. 2, *Harmonie du soir*, no. 3, *Le Jet d’eau*, no. 4, *Recueillement*, no. 5, *La Mort des amants*.
- 16 His first wife.
- 17 Debussy to Georges Hartmann, December 18, 1899, Lesure and Herlin 2005 (see note 1), p. 524–25.
- 18 Debussy to Emma Debussy, November 29, 1910, *ibid.*, p. 1337.
- 19 Baudelaire 1975 (see note 12), p. 36.
- 20 LeClercq, 1958 (see note 13). Author’s selected translation most fitting for the general understanding of this paper.
- 21 Baudelaire 1975 (see note 12), p. 36.
- 22 LeClercq 1958 (see note 13). Author’s selected translation most fitting for the general understanding of this paper.
- 23 Questionnaire, February 16, 1889, Lesure and Herlin 2005 (see note 1), p. 68.
- 24 Debussy to André Caplet, April 5, 1917, in “Transcrire et orchestrer: l’amitié de Claude Debussy et d’André Caplet,” *André Caplet, compositeur et chef d’orchestre*, eds. Denis Herlin and Cécile Quesney (Paris, 2020), p. 110.
- 25 Debussy to Paterne Berrichon, March 10, 1901, Lesure and Herlin 2005 (see note 1), p. 588. This comment of Debussy concerns Rimbaud’s poetry, but fits perfectly with what he must have thought of Baudelaire. (Note in English in the original paper.)
- 26 Debussy to Jacques Durand, [February] 1917, *ibid.*, p. 2079.
- 27 Claude Debussy to André Caplet, February 14, 1911, *ibid.*, p. 1392.
- 28 Baudelaire 1975 (see note 12), p. 898.
- 29 Tempo marking at the beginning of *Les soirs illuminés par l’ardeur du charbon*.
- 30 Debussy to Jacques Durand, September 12, 1917, Lesure and Herlin 2005 (see note 1), p. 2148–49.