

THE 'JOURNAL'

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translated by Sandy Spencer

Dubois left us two works in manuscript form which give both an account of his life as an artist and his views on French music from 1850 to 1920: The *Souvenirs de ma vie* (Life Memoirs, covering the period 1837-1912); and a day-to-day diary (the *Journal*) running from 1912 to 1923 whose last entry was made a few months before the composer's death.

The *Souvenirs* – written before the war – are somewhat guarded in tone. In the writer's view, the era they deal with was far from over and its artists and ideas still contemporaneous. Dubois, dutiful academic that he was, had no wish to upset a world of which he was considered an ambassador if not, in fact, an official member. But, in the immediate pre-war period, a page of history had already been turned, a page the ensuing conflict would, quite literally, rip up. The fact that the *Souvenirs* remained unpublished is evidence that by 1914 the work was already considered, in both form and content, to be of another age. Dubois apparently made no attempt to publish them at the war's end in 1918.

The *Journal* reads differently. The author's voice as engaging as ever may seem a little dull by comparison with the brazenness of say a Berlioz or Debussy but it is an honest voice, the voice of an artist who no longer needs to consider the professional feelings of others or his own advancement. The tone, as deliberate as ever, is more assertive than that of the *Souvenirs*. The author makes no attempt to hide his bewilderment at the music of 'the future'.

Dubois' *Journal* was not published until 2013. Besides rounding out the chronology of the *Souvenirs*, the diary details the artistic development of a 'romantic' composer at sea in the cross-currents of a modern-

ity that distressed him no end. The *Journal* also differs from the *Souvenirs* in its frank appraisal of a younger generation – Ravel, Stravinsky and Milhaud come in for particularly harsh treatment – and its consideration of the development of a musical language he labels ‘ultra-futurist’ (May 30, 1913). Dubois makes no bones about it, writing on April 25, 1914: ‘I love music but not *this!*’ Two years earlier, he commented:

It is astonishing how our young composers have no sense of charm. It’s as if they were afraid of it somehow! Their primary goal seems to be to shock us with a combination of ‘new’ sonorities and harmonies! As if that was all there was to music! I feel sorry for them!

(December 16, 1912.)

While Dubois criticizes Maurice Emmanuel for ‘a modernity that is limited to eking out the most basic and useless harmonies’ (May 17, 1913), it is Stravinsky who most irritates him for his blatant disregard of the art-form itself:

I am going [...] to hear Stravinsky’s The Rite of Spring. There is absolutely nothing musical in the work. It’s just noises, not notes. Nothing else. The composer is certainly talented and has a passionate following! But the music is awful: so hard on the ear, enough to make you want to scream at times, peppered with wrong notes, violent clashes. And all this done deliberately with consummate skill. Painters have their Cubism. Now we musicians have ours!

(April 25, 1914.)

Ravel, like Stravinsky, was given no quarter:

After applauding Schumann’s First Symphony and my Fantasy, the audience went wild for a suite by Ravel, Daphnis and Chloé which has to be the most bizarre piece ever heard, the most disjointed, the longest, the least musical imaginable. It is all one could wish for: very adeptly put together, all except the music. Such noise, uneven rhythms, appalling combinations of notes; such a jumbled mess that at times I felt as if I was in an insane asylum. And in spite of all that, the audience went mad for it. We are obviously in an age of decadence. [...] No one cares any more about craft, development and balance in a work of art. I strive to achieve all that, most likely never will, and will die unrepentant. I still wonder if all this will some day die away or if we are witnessing

the dawn of a new art-form! I am too old now to be around for the outcome...! There is apparently no hope that, out of the blue, some composer will one day give us a work that is simple, melodic, expressive and profoundly moving, a work that will send all these tricksters packing. I wish to God it might be so!
(February 26, 1923.)

In the event, what burst on the scene just after the war was the Group of Six who, according to Dubois, ‘inveigled their way in by trickery, money and the sheer stupidity of the public’ (August 30, 1923), and most especially the polytonality so favoured by Milhaud.

I gather that Colome at one of his concerts recently featured a nonsensical work by a young aesthete: Darius Milhaud. I’m told the music was polytonic (sic)! Whatever next. It should have been roundly booed but that would only have played into their hands. Better to ignore them. To think that a man so widely derided could be on the path to glory!
(November 20, 1920.)

On the other hand, Dubois classed some of his contemporaries – albeit more experimental than himself – as post-Romantic, a label he found acceptable and a way for him to demonstrate his own open-mindedness. Alfred Bruneau was one of these but Jules Massenet, by public acclaim, principal among them:

General rehearsal: Massenet’s Panurge. Delightful music; open-handed, open-hearted. No weirdness, no tonal scales, no false notes, squeaking trumpets and random rhythms, etc., etc., which we are deluged with right now or, I should say, poisoned by. If the music I heard today had been the first I ever heard, I would surely not have chosen to be a musician. That’s for sure!
(April 23, 1913.)

Against this new aesthetic, an aesthetic whose multiple influences and orchestrations he did not fully comprehend, Dubois fielded his champions, Saint-Saëns still the leading-light: ‘Saint-Saëns is seventy eight! Still so fresh, so on fire! He played [...] a quintet of his on piano. Such a miracle of charm, grace, composition and transparency! Would that the younger generation could learn from such lessons! But they are nowhere to be seen!’ (November 6, 1913.) Ten years on and near death,

Dubois took the time to make a list of everyone he had known and those he revered:

I consider the most significant works by composers of our age and the age that went before. It's quite interesting! Some of them have fallen by the wayside, especially those who were mere flashes in the pan. I won't list every name. I can only say that Saint-Saëns is certainly at the top of it; Franck may have been over-rated; Chabrier has slipped a couple of notches; though gifted, Debussy's work with its intolerable monotony, its lack of ideas, of melody, of rhythm will not outlive him; Gounod and Massenet do not deserve the ill-opinion young upstarts have of them – their work is inspired and will survive; the current generation of avant-garde composers is madly intent on destroying all tonality, rhythm, melody, structure, everything that music used to mean! I have only mentioned a few names but enough to make my point.

(September 6, 1922.)

It would be wrong to think that Dubois found all modern music abhorrent and gave no credit to the young composers he knew, either by acquaintance or through the juries he was often a member of. He wrote that Lili Boulanger possessed 'a remarkable intelligence and considerable talent' (July 4, 1913) and acknowledged she had a 'real gift' (December 4, 1920), a gift cut short by her premature death. Even more far-sightedly (at least in France where German post-Romanticism was still largely misunderstood), Dubois was one of the first to identify innate genius in the work of Brahms at a time when the German composer was still regarded with suspicion and scorn.

My wife and I have been playing Brahms' symphonies scored for four hands. I really don't understand why French audiences are so cold towards him. His work has a solidity, a quite remarkable structural power. His close and sumptuous harmonies, their resolution, the intricacy and manner with which they are developed evidence his reverence for Beethoven and Schumann. [...] We are in the presence of a master who inspires our admiration and our respect. That anyway is the feeling I get from his work and I really do not understand the public's coldness towards him, their outright disdain even.

(June 23, 1913.)



'WE ARE PLUNGED INTO DARKNESS!'
(AUGUST 7, 1914)

The whole of Europe has been shaken to the core these last few days. Austria has declared war on Serbia and we await the possible consequences. The situation is very grave. The Triple Alliance on one side, the Triple Entente on the other! The merest spark could ignite Europe and set it ablaze! What will come of it?

(July 30, 1914.)

It is hard to imagine now when the First World War was raging in Europe how soon Parisians were denied their usual distractions, for the time-being at least. Artists were particularly affected, finding themselves suddenly irrelevant in a world stripped to bare essentials. By August 1914, Dubois was already commenting: 'My music is sadly neglected. I have neither the heart nor courage to set myself to it. It is hard to keep one's mind off the terrible state of affairs that have engulfed us!' (August 21, 1914.) Several weeks later, he added: 'A composer? Of what? On what possible subject? What's the point!' (September 19, 1914.) The rare occasions on which the artist, now more than seventy-five-years old, felt himself to be of any use were the charitable concerts intended to boost the morale of soldiers on leave. The old improviser could at least put his talents to use and soothe the troubled minds and fire up the patriotism of his fellow-citizens:

I played the organ at the Madeleine Church in Mont-de-Marsan on Sunday the 18th last. The service [...] was a benefit for the Red Cross. It was most moving, particularly the moment when the wounded soldiers taking part left the church. I felt my organ-playing to be quite rusty but think I came out of it quite well in spite. In honour of the occasion, I managed to slip into my rather ill-prepared improvisations passages from the Marseillaise and the Russian anthem. The congregation seemed quite taken with it.

(October 21, 1914.)

Inspired by such patriotic feelings, Dubois' 'war' diary soon bristles with fierce hatred for all-things-German. He has no qualms about writing on August 5, 1914: 'Behind every Prussian lurks a barbarian.' Though Dubois was usually rather mild and subdued by nature, most likely as

a result of his incurable shyness (brought on in turn by a slight stutter which he refers to in the *Souvenirs*), the atrocities committed in the war engendered in him a disgust for Germans and Germany which quickly became all-consuming. Its origins can doubtless be traced to the carnage committed in the area of Reims, located as it was on a part of the Front that after Verdun proved to be the bloodiest of all. Originally from a little village outside Reims, Rosnay, where he had a country house he inherited from his parents, Dubois was daily reminded by accounts in the papers of the tragedy that beset the region. In September 1914, he anguishes: 'There are reports that the Germans are *bombing Reims Cathedral!* This act of vandalism is the last straw! They deserve our utmost contempt!' (September 21, 1914.) The next day, he writes: 'Our beloved cathedral is in ruins! There is no accounting for this act of savagery, no words to express it. My eyes fill with tears when I think of it. This beautiful church held such memories for me! These vandals! And they call themselves civilized!' (September 22, 1914.) The word 'Boche' gradually replaces 'German' in Dubois' writings and ends in an almost daily castigation of the people themselves: 'The Germans fight this war like barbarians. [...] What boors! Overarching pride and hypocrisy, old traits re-surfacing in spite of the *Kultur* they are so proud of and boast about so archly and arrogantly!' (October 31, 1914.) At first confined to the Front, artillery barrages – the true nature of which Dubois, reliant on distorted accounts in the Parisian press, had no idea – eventually reached Paris. German air-attacks and frequent Zeppelin raids followed by the deployment of the infamous long-range mortar Big Bertha were perils the capital's citizens were daily subjected to. Now, Dubois found himself personally affected by the horrors of war that would mark him for life. That may explain the consuming hunger for revenge that plagued this old and somewhat reclusive man.

The Boche are conducting this war with their accustomed brutality and ferocity. Anything that will deal a blow to the enemy is permissible! That's their creed! As for us, we still play by humanity's rules. They must take us for idiots! They sign treaties without any intention of abiding by them. And we never learn. If it were up to me, I would visit the most terrible reprisals on them! But what would all our devout socialist and sheepish internationalists have to say! A bunch of ideologues, dreamers and utopians. They make me sick!
(June 19, 1917.)

The change of heart towards Germans Dubois underwent is a textbook illustration of how well the French government's wartime propaganda effort succeeded. An avid reader of more than a few national papers, Dubois' take on the conduct of the war was wholly shaped by them without any realization on his part that he was being misled.



'RED-LETTER DAY: SIGNING OF THE ARMISTICE!'
(NOVEMBER 11, 1918)

The war is over! I am beside myself! France is free once more, so is Europe, and, for that matter, so is the world! Germany's master-plan was to put all of us under its yoke! So much for the Kaiser! There is an inherent justice that shapes our ends! Humanity can breathe again! The nightmare is over! But now we face the consequences, a multitude of problems. I pray we will be up to them. The French people will show themselves as worthy in peacetime as they were in war. They must!

(November 11, 1918.)

With peace came the reopening of all theatres and many of the concert societies, heralding a resumption of the old musical traditions Dubois pined for. He was to be disappointed. Once peace had been signed, a grateful French public went on a spree:

We are inundated with concerts, mostly piano concerts! A veritable down-pour! And none of it in any way interesting. The orchestral concerts have nothing new to offer. The same names, the same little cliques, the same little games and the same cold-shoulders as before the war. Humanity will never be done with its burden of despair, meanness and misery!

(March 12, 1919.)

Dubois became increasingly embittered and disillusioned as he himself admits in his *Journal*. Even though he still composed music, he found he no longer figured in the artistic world he wished so much to be a part of. 'Would that I could find some pleasure and enjoyment in life, forget even!' (December 17, 1919.) But such oblivion would not end with the war. A page of social and artistic history had been turned

and, in its customarily careless way, history had cast multiple works and composers much honoured in France before the war into outer darkness. It is worth noting that Saint-Saëns died in 1921, Fauré in 1924, the same years as Dubois.

Concerts continue to proliferate and artists' manners show no sign of improving. They are as malicious as ever. They form cliques and clubs to which all outsiders (by which I mean all those who have remained true to the classical tradition), are strictly denied entry, however talented they may be. It is appalling but that's the way it is! The war has changed nothing!

(May 12, 1919.)



'THE MODERNISTS'
(FEBRUARY 9, 1921)

While the opening pages of the *Journal* and, more generally, those that cover the period up to 1918 are filled with damning judgements of Modernism by a Théodore Dubois still very much in swim, the years 1919-1923 betray the hopelessness of a man time has passed by (even though he was still composing and would continue to do so):

Music as an art is suffering a catastrophic crisis. The most discordant notes are randomly flung together without respect for rhythm, tonality or structure on the pretext of breathing new life into the art and liberating it from the old traditions. The result is cacophony, the most disagreeable and disordered-sounding mess. Most of those guilty of it have no idea what they are doing!

(December 26, 1920.)

It goes without saying that not too much later music by composers such as Ravel and Stravinsky would be considered 'classics'. Not only were the harmonic principles and phraseology of Dubois' art left in tatters, the very concepts of 'tonal music' and 'structural rhythm' were swept aside.

Music is still stuck in its little rut. Those who were considered at one time to be leaders in the field have been trumped by the Modernists. We might as well

be living in the Tower of Babel. The silly audiences have thrown themselves at the feet of Wagner. Only Wagner will do! Meantime, we poor French composers, trying to stay calm, timidly offer up carefully wrought compositions which are rarely played and are greeted by audiences with trepidation and bewilderment. Then there are the ballets – Russian, Swedish and so on – with their really awful music, not to mention all the little concerts given by foreigners from all over the place. ‘Look! We’re making music!’... It’s just a mess... a hodgepodge... a total waste! Luckily, I don’t listen to any of it and so stay sane. (February 9, 1921.)

One thing is sure. From this point on, Dubois, conscious of the fact that he has been forever cast into artistic darkness, harbours no illusions about how posterity will treat him...



**‘I AM A LIVING WITNESS TO MY OWN DEATH.
HOW VERY SAD!’
(SEPTEMBER 10, 1922)**

The final pages of the *Journal* read like an agonizing literary demise of a man stricken with physical and moral woes.

I lead a very miserable life! I am beset with loneliness! All around me is in ruins. First, my poor Rosnay which I loved so dearly and which I may never see again! Then my bladder and hernia problems which make life so painful and hard to bear! And lastly, the cruellest cut of all, I have lost my dearest companion, she who loved me so much. My life is a desert! And that doesn’t include the abandonment of so many of my dreams, laid to waste by the selfishness that dominates our time! And yet, somehow, I must carry on! (January 17, 1923.)

The kindness of his family offered some brief moments of respite but what most troubled him was his work which he no longer had the means to get played or promote.

I know this younger generation [...] considers me worthless. Their contempt is quite literally killing me. And yet, I remain my own best critic and con-

tinue to put my best compositions to the test. I believe (and I say so without a trace of conceit) that they do not deserve such rough handling. I have suffered through the humiliations and there have been more than enough, but I live in hope that the time will come when I will be given my due. Amen!

(September 6, 1922.)

Now that I am cast into darkness and snobs and avant-garde music rule, my works are rarely featured on programmes. I am forced to go on my knees to concert managers as if I were still a twenty-five-year-old. I am fading from the musical scene. I am a living witness to my own death. How very sad! This indifference affects me so deeply that in my current state I cannot do the things I used to, keep up with the people I should. Virtuosi, singers and orchestra-leaders fawn over these troublesome youngsters, are obsessed with them. They so desperately want to succeed that they set all critical judgement aside! And old men like me who keep hanging on are left twisting in the wind. In my particular instance, I believe that is unjust. As I have noted in these daily entries, I have been treated harshly in the past and am in need of some timely redress! Thank goodness I can still be philosophical about it!

(September 10, 1922.)

Dubois' philosophical vein turned to self-blame in his final weeks. He owned up to his tendency to write more than he ought to have without making appropriate demands on himself. He also recognized that his humble origins ill-prepared him for an art-form that by its very nature was elitist:

If I had been better educated, I would certainly have done better. In my opinion anyway. And since I seem to be in a confessional, I should and want to acknowledge that gifted with a facility for producing work as I am, I have produced too much. There is an unevenness in my work, yes. But any discerning artist should be able – I say this without conceit – to find more than a few pieces that have often and unjustly been overlooked! Time will tell.

(June 27, 1923.)

In conclusion he writes:

I may be mistaken but I believe that some time in the future my work will be revisited by musicians and critics still to come who will decide in my favour!

I will not be around to relish the moment but no matter. I can still take pleasure in the thought of it! [...] There are enough good things in all I have written to set the record straight!

(December 18, 1922.)

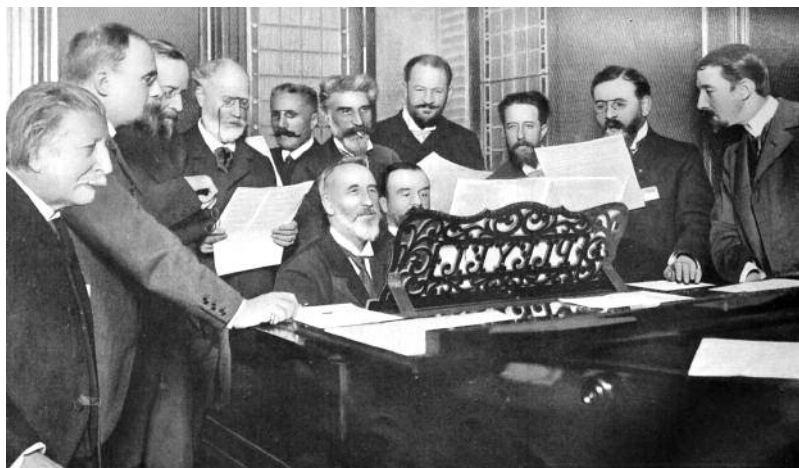
The *Journal* ends somewhat uncomfortably with an entry recording the announcement of a new performance of the Symphony No. 2. Dubois recalls the success of the work's première in Belgium and relives the pain of the scandal its performance caused in Paris. An account of the very same scandal was recorded in the opening pages of his diary in 1912.

As this *Portrait* goes to print, many of Dubois' works have been recorded or soon will be. Poetic justice for an honest and engaging artist less than a century after his death.



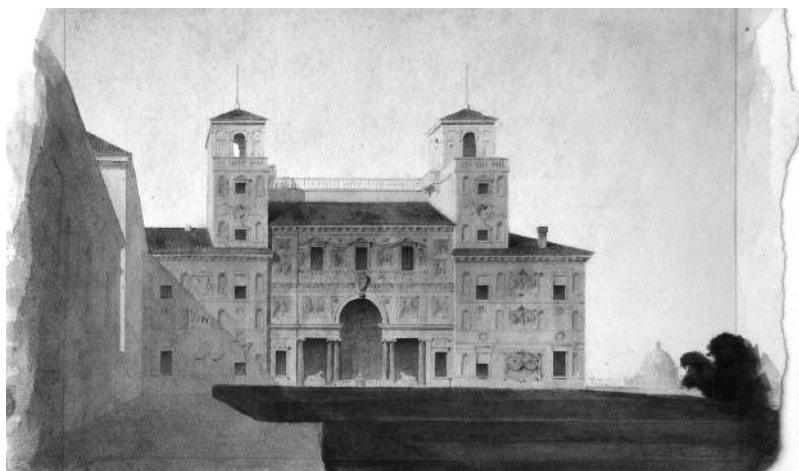
13. César Franck, with whom Dubois was in contact at Sainte-Clotilde. .
(*Musica*, May 1911.)

César Franck, que Dubois côtoya à Sainte-Clotilde.
(*Musica*, mai 1911.)



Théodore Dubois (at the piano), a jury member of the *Musica* Tournoi.
(*Musica*, January 1904.)

Théodore Dubois, au piano, membre du jury du tournoi de *Musica*.
(*Musica*, janvier 1904.)



The Villa Medici, around 1835, where Dubois – winner of the Prix de Rome – was to stay in 1861. (Collection of the French Academy in Rome.)

La Villa Médicis, vers 1835, où séjourna Dubois vainqueur du prix de Rome en 1861. (Collection Académie de France à Rome.)