

Debussy's Piano
Alive and well and living in Brive-la-Gaillarde
by
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Before leaving Eastbourne, I always stop by for a chat with Lawrence Stevens at his shop in Crown Street. During our conversation in the spring of 2009, Lawrence mentioned he had heard that a piano belonging to Claude Debussy had been purchased in Eastbourne and was now in a museum 'somewhere in France'. Spurred on by this interesting tit-bit, I started making inquiries which revealed two versions to the story. One has a piano purchased in Jersey in 1904; the other in Eastbourne in 1905. In any event, Debussy's 'English' piano is one of the main attractions at the Musée Labenche d'art et d'histoire at Brive-la-Gaillarde in central France.



Debussy was born in 1862 at St Germain-en-Laye, near Paris. He was one of the leading French composers, and at the heart of the changes that European music was undergoing at the turn of the century. Rudolph Réti, the Serbian musical analyst, maintained that Debussy 'established a new concept of tonality in European music'. However, like Georges Bizet, Debussy was not only a composer but also a brilliant pianist who could have forged a career as a concert performer. His private life was tempestuous. After several love affairs, he married Rosalie ('Lilly') Texier, a mannequin, in October 1899. Although Lilly was affectionate and popular with his friends, he became irritated by her lack of musical appreciation, and in June 1904 made up his mind to leave her for the mother of one of his pupils – Emma Bardac, an amateur singer and wife of a Parisian banker. They later had a daughter, Claude-Emma Debussy, 'Choucho', who was born on 30 October 1905; Claude Debussy and Emma Bardac finally married in Paris on 20 January 1908.

In the summer of 1904, Debussy and Emma Bardac fled Paris and the scandal surrounding his desertion of Lilly. They travelled together to Jersey and arrived unannounced and incognito at the Grand Hotel de Jersey towards the end of July, where they stayed for some two weeks. The 'Centre de Documentation Claude Debussy' in Paris states: "In Jersey he is thought to have bought a Blüthner baby grand piano." The source for this claim must be a lecture given in London in December 1972 by Debussy's stepdaughter, Hélène ('Dolly') Bardac. Mme Bardac asserted that he had bought a 1904 Blüthner grand equipped with the unique aliquot system on the island, and that this had remained in his salon until the day he died. The aliquot system involves the placing of an additional string above each note of the top three octaves. These aliquot strings are not struck by the hammers but vibrate in sympathy, thus adding to the richness of the tone.



However, in a well-researched article published in 2004, Diane Enget, a professional translator and literary researcher, casts doubt on Jersey as the place of purchase. She explains that Dolly Bardac was 12 years old at the time of the trip to Jersey in 1904, and that she did not accompany her mother and Debussy. (On the other hand, it should be pointed out that Debussy's letter of 27 August from the Grand Hotel Eastbourne to the conductor, Édouard Colonne, makes it clear that Dolly had accompanied her mother and Debussy

to Eastbourne during their visit in 1905.)

Correspondence with the Claude Debussy Museum at St Germain-en-Laye led to Mme Claire Moser-Gautrand, the chief curator of the Musée Labenche d'art et d'histoire at Brive-la-Gaillarde. She confirmed that the composer had stayed in Eastbourne from 24 July to 30 August 1905 and hired a Blüthner grand piano (number 65614) that had been made in Leipzig during the first quarter of 1904. The dealer was S Hermitage and Sons, who had a shop at 56 - 58 Terminus Road.



Diane Enget maintains that Dolly Bardac had been mistaken about the provenance of the piano, pointing out that the serial number of the Blüthner at Brive indicates that it was produced in the first quarter of 1904. She sought the advice of Bill Kibby, one of Britain's leading piano specialists, who stated: "The problem is that it is almost impossible to say that a piano made in 1904 even left the factory in 1904, unless their archives have proved it." The difficulty is compounded by the fact that the firm's archives were destroyed during the bombing of Leipzig in 1943. He adds:

"Some pianos didn't even come out of the factories for a year or three. Then they didn't sell immediately, so dating a piano even to a year is unreliable." Diane Enget maintains that the time schedule between its manufacture in the first quarter of 1904 and a subsequent sale in Jersey in June of the same year is unrealistic; and if Debussy had bought the piano from a Jersey firm, they would have inlaid their own name. S Hermitage and Sons, whose name is on the lid of the piano at Brive, did not have a branch in Jersey but at Clapham, St Leonard's, Hastings and, most importantly, at Eastbourne.

In any event, Debussy liked his rented Blüthner so much that he bought it and had it shipped back to Paris at the end of his stay. In later life, he had three pianos at his house: two were uprights - a Pleyel, which was a gift from the manufacturer, and a Bechstein. The third, his favourite, was the Blüthner grand which bears the name of the Eastbourne dealer. He would always keep the lid open and show visitors the extra aliquot strings, but shut the Blüthner before playing. It was kept in his salon until his death in 1918, and when his wife died in 1934 it was inherited by her son, Raoul Bardac. During the Second World War, the latter took refuge in the department of Corrèze in central France. When Raoul died in 1950, his wife kept the piano, but on her death it was left to the family doctor. In 1989, it was put up for sale at an antique shop near Brive-le-Gaillarde and bought by the town's museum.

Debussy was a passionate pianist and felt the need to play and refine his compositions while in Eastbourne. The management of the Grand Hotel would surely have made a piano available, but he probably did not seek publicity. The local newspapers seemed to have been unaware of his presence for their *Fashionable Visitors* sections make no reference to his stay. Even though the scandal of the previous year had abated – his abandoned wife had attempted a very public suicide in the middle of the Place de la Concorde – Debussy would have wanted to remain incognito. His mistress, Emma, was by now pregnant and many of his friends had distanced themselves following the scandal; furthermore, an announcement of his divorce from Lilly was pending.



Eastbourne's main dealer was Hermitage and Sons at 56 - 58 Terminus Road, and this is where Debussy saw the fine aliquot Blüthner that he arranged to hire for the duration of his stay. It would have been Emma who made the arrangements for – anglophile though he was – Debussy spoke no English. However, there is no point in standing in front of 56 - 58 Terminus Road and imagining Debussy going through the front door of one of the present charity shops because the road was renumbered in 1947. Originally the high numbers were at the railway station end, with number 1 at the junction with Seaside Road, where T J Hughes stands today. In 1905, S Hermitage and Sons was at what is now 116 Terminus Road, the current premises of 'Superdrug'. From local directories, it seems that during or immediately after the Second World War Hermitage sold out to Lindridge, who continued to sell pianos but later branched into radios and televisions. The picture of

the shop, looking much as it had done in 1905, comes from the 1923/24 Blue Book, where it is called 'Hermitage Hall'; in the 1910 directory the name is 'Beethoven Hall'. The shop with its huge window that has been a feature of the street scene for so many

years was originally a grander and wider affair looking like a miniature Crystal Palace. It is described on the plans of 1883 as 'The Winter Garden', and its use is given as 'garden and sale rooms'. The building was designed for Richard Willard by Charles Hollebon Junior, an architect whose practice was at Newark House, 25 Langney Road.

It has been fascinating to track down Debussy's piano and I will certainly go to see it when I next visit that part of France. In August 2012, it may even be possible hear the Blüthner in Paris for there are hopes it may be played during recitals to mark the 150th anniversary of the composer's birth. I am grateful to Mme Claire Moser-Gautrand, Chief Curator of the Musée Labenche d'art et d'histoire at Brive-la-Gaillarde, for the photographs and to Mme Alexandra Laederich, Curator of the Centre de documentation Claude Debussy in Paris, for preparing books and documents in advance of my visit.

Notes and Sources

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