

## *Introduction to an introduction*

It was during the summer of 1995, after having read Jean Cras' correspondence for the first time, that I began studying the very broad, extra-musical parameters of his complex life. This demanded an understanding of the environment into which he was born. That Fourth of July weekend, on the Boston–Provincetown ferry, I began this exhaustive foray by reading Marie-Thérèse Cloître's *Histoire de Brest*. As we disembarked, a be-wigged middle-aged woman whose contrived English accent perplexed me, barked: 'Didn't you notice that families with children ride this ferry? How *dare* you bring pornographic literature on board?' Eyebrows raised, I realized that very instant the kind of work that awaited me, and how much introduction and explanation would be required for this book to make sense.

\*

During his lifetime, Jean Cras was obliged to confront the innate cynicism and condescension of Parisian artistic circles. Several years ago, an unscrupulous film producer approached me for information – documented or undocumented – that might thwart the image of the humble, pious family man and transform him into a libidinous Lothario. Few then, and few now, can imagine, much less believe, that one person could be as distinctly successful in more than one career. In Jean Cras' case, three were simultaneously operative: music, the military sciences, and the physical sciences. France's Navy continues to laud one of its heroes and his great achievements, even musical. It is the musical community that, until now, has faltered and failed to acquiesce to the Ravelian stature he once enjoyed. This book is committed to its restoration.

Jean Cras entered my life after my doctoral qualifying examinations in late November 1993, during a much-needed holiday in Paris. He was introduced to me by the President of Skarbo Records, Jean-Pierre Ferey, to whom I had proposed recording eclectic combinations of works by Schubert, Schumann and Brahms. He informed me that his firm's mandate was to revive the 'lost generation' of French composers, eclipsed by the venerated triumvirate of Fauré, Debussy and Ravel, and subsequently, all but consumed by the tidal wave of dodecaphonism. His current mandate was to record works by the post-romantic, 'quasi-impressionist' Jean Cras (*Jean Qui?*, asked I), and he pointed me towards Cras' piano works. This idea, it seemed, would 'kill two birds with one stone': provide the material for a new, original compact disc, and the subject of my doctoral dissertation. Very little research had been done on Cras, and the masters-level theses from the French universities remained unpublished. Examining their bibliographies yielded the most important source to date, Monique Cras' monograph about her father,

released in 1980 to mark the centenary of his birth in the interdisciplinary journal *Zodiaque*, published by the Benedictine Abbey at La-Pierre-Qui-Vire (Yonne). This became the foundation of my own research.

During the summer of 1994, I learned that Mlle Cras was still alive and contacted her to see if she would allow direct access to the letters she had quoted in her article. Delighted that finally, serious doctoral-level work would be conducted on her father's legacy, she entrusted me with five volumes of transcribed letters she had selected – many excerpted – for the scholarly community. Her eyesight failing, Mlle Cras had begun this extensive process of triage, editing and stenography – on a manual typewriter which even then would have undoubtedly qualified as a museum piece – as she entered into her ninth decade. These five volumes – the fifth being the correspondence from Cras' mentor Henri Duparc to his pupil, whom he had called *le fils de mon âme* ('my spiritual son') – remain unpublished. Such archives are a researcher's dream-come-true. Yet, problems emerged aplenty. Monique's typing was oftentimes faulty and the (second-generation) typeface very faint. Ellipses abounded, thereby upsetting Cras' prose, confusing time lines, the flow of information and data. References to obscure Breton and French cultural and political figures, then vital actors in the theatre of the Third Republic, were frequent. This correspondence has since been typeset and is available through his grand-daughters. Fate would have it that Monique Cras would not see this book: she passed away peacefully 16 December 2007 aged 97, paradoxically the anniversary of the birth date of her father's beloved Beethoven.

This book differs distinctly from my dissertation in that it projects a more complete image of Jean Cras. A chapter on France's political and military history during his lifetime has been added, as have extensive passages from the correspondence and ancillary sources, intended to humanize the man and the richness of his life and the complexities of his era. The chapter devoted to Cras' unpublished works does not figure in this book, as it would be unfair to comment on works still inaccessible to the public. This situation is now changing, as the family has begun to authorize their publication. In time, these will include several dozen songs from the composer's youth and adolescence, many prodigious, each a part of the vital chain that affirms his evolution as one of the premier composers of *mélodies*.

Co-ordinating two simultaneous careers proved to be, indeed, the greatest obstacle towards cohesion. Many solutions were offered, and one highly pragmatic colleague conveniently suggested ignoring Cras' naval career entirely. When I grasped the intrinsically autobiographical nature of his output, I dismissed this option, for synthesis and cohesion were the very goals of Cras' personal, philosophical and professional quests. A number of my colleagues have praised what they believe to have been thorough research. Yet, the work of future generations of musical scholars, scholars of military history, and scholars of the combined histories of Brittany and France alike will supplant the portrait I have painted by a more complete, nuanced one. Gradually, they will fill the lacunae both germane and inevitable to an endeavour such as this one. Jean Cras and his family, many of them pillars of their respective professional communities and social circles,

provide material for dozens of books and hundreds of essays. The over 10,000 letters discovered in 2006, in an abandoned navy trunk relegated to the back of a remote closet in the family's Paris flat, will become their source material.

\*

Jean Cras' life is an ecumenical lesson in humility, and for this reason alone, this book is dedicated to the memory of the Unknown Soldier. Unable to decide to whom it should be dedicated, and having 'lived' with Admiral Cras and his family for over a decade, I was led to ponder at length to whom he would have wished me to dedicate this study. Jean Cras' humanity, pacifism, spirituality and idealism are embodied in this dedication.