BARTOK ORCHESTRAL MUSIC, by John McCabe
DEBUSSY ORCHESTRAL MUSIC, by David Cox
BBC Publications, 1974 (£0.55 each)

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Reading books whose aim is to provide an overview of some aspect of a composer's work for the layman is an occupation that can easily induce an ambivalent response. In the first place, one is loath to criticise writers whose knowledge of the music in question is extensive and often penetrating. On the other hand, one is constantly left with an uncomfortable feeling which derives from the fact that no amount of writing — whether it seeks to expose the technical aspect of the music, or parallel the aesthetic response — can replace the immediacy and power of the musical experience itself. This problem is, of course, central to any music book whose scope is not purely technical or biographical, and the dangers and pitfalls it involves are legion. The justification for running the gamut of these pitfalls in the case of the music guide can only be that the

author is a professional musician who has been able to examine and reflect on the music under discussion at comparative leisure. As a result his insights presumably provide incisive criticism against which the layman may consider and possibly re-evaluate his own response. In books such as these, therefore, writing which is technical or which 'describes' the emotional impact of the music only seems legitimate insomuch as it conforms to this purpose.

Given these criteria, John McCabe's book on Bartók's orchestral music is largely successful. Although there is a great deal of technical discussion, and although there are times when this discussion seems to take over the line of thought, it is in fact never far removed from illustrating a critical judgement or describing an aspect of the composer's development. McCabe's description of Bartók's development is given further depth — particularly in the earlier, less technical part of the guide — by specific references not only to the way in which the composer assimilated elements of Bach and the styles of the later Romantics, but also to the way in which his work often paralleled or drew on the stylistic features of his contemporaries. Ultimately the guide succeeds because its aims are clearly thought out, concisely stated and generally followed through, and because McCabe has thoroughly penetrated Bartók's style. It will undoubtedly provide a useful supplement for anyone wishing to listen to Bartók's orchestral music in any depth.

In the sense that its largely classical and linear style is reasonably accessible to traditional forms of analysis, and its emotional impact generally unambiguous, Bartók's music is relatively easy to write about. Debussy's music, on the other hand, more than that of most other composers, seems to induce writers into the pitfalls mentioned above. Because the music is not easily accessible to traditional methods of analysis, technical discussion on many occasions appears superficial and unrelated to aesthetic experience. Conversely, and perhaps because of this initial inadequacy, writers often indulge in a prose style which not only seeks to outdo the composer (often to the point of meaninglessness) in the creation of vague and illusive atmospheres, but which also seems to have remarkably little to do with the music *as music*.

Unfortunately, these are temptations to which David Cox, in his guide on Debussy's orchestral music, tends to succumb. Although he keeps telling us that "Debussy's musical constructions have a logic and character of their own, completely justifiable in musical terms" (p.33 — see also p.35), there is little attempt to reveal what those terms are. Musical description (and that is all it is) is still couched in terms of tonality. And although most of the characteristics and hallmarks of Debussy's music, together with the influences on his style, are faithfully mentioned, they tend to be submerged in a considerable amount of background information and asides which add little to appreciation. Are the de Gaulle quotation on the characteristics of Frenchmen on page 25 or the attempt at anthropological discourse (rather ethnocentric) on page 46 really necessary?

It may, perhaps, seem unduly harsh to criticise the writer of what is, after all, a guide, for not attempting to distil Debussy's style in terms of categories of analysis which are drawn from the music itself and which are therefore likely to closely parallel the aesthetic response. The guide is useful in bringing under one cover information which would otherwise have to be sought in a number of different places. But given the degree of musical literacy assumed by the author, it does not appear that a more incisive exposé of Debussy's style would have been totally impossible. Although it deals only with thematic transformations, Deryck Cooke's article on Delius' Violin Concerto (*The Musical Times*, July 1962) — and Delius' style is nothing if not as 'illusive' and 'vague' as Debussy's — still serves as a model in this respect.