

The New Criterion

Dispatch November 05, 2018 05:52 pm

The Critic's Notebook

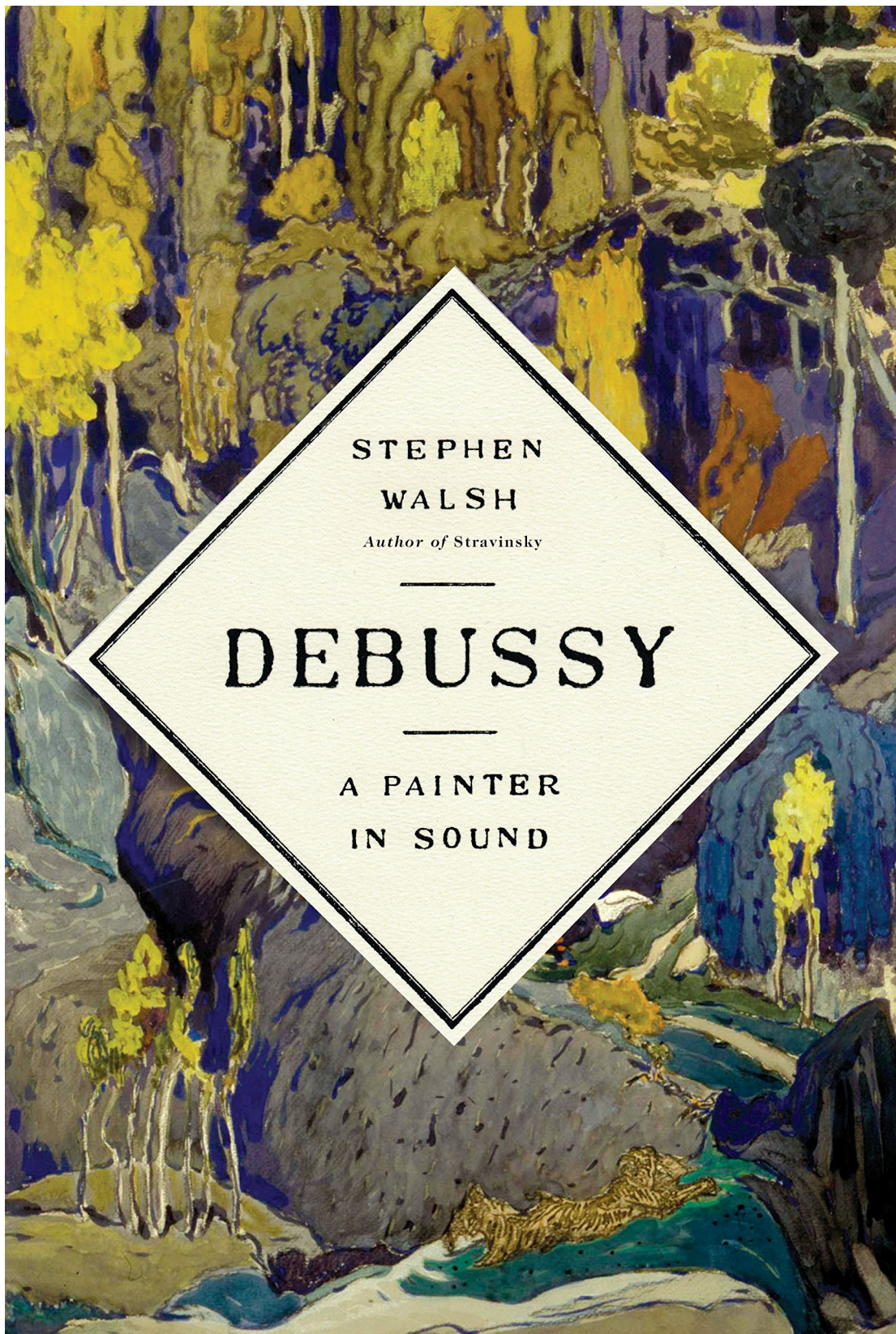
by The Editors

This week: Debussy's sound paintings, the king of cello concertos, Churchill's destiny & more from the world of culture.



Eric Aho, Viewfinder, 2018, Oil on linen, DC Moore Gallery.

Nonfiction:



Debussy: A Painter in Sound, by Stephen Walsh (Knopf): Debussy's best-known works conjure clear pictures in the mind: think "The Sunken Cathedral," "The Girl with the Flaxen Hair," "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun," or, of course, "Clair de Lune." But Debussy's painterly touch as a composer was

about more than colorful titles that evoke image and emotion; composers of program music did that before and have done so since. No, as he sat down at his desk in 1906, Debussy joked, quite prophetically, that “I’ve at last got a 75-centimetre table for writing things that [will] revolutionize the world.” And he was right: by composing with motifs, “frames,” and sweeping brushes of sound instead of the “narrative” structure prevalent in Wagner and much symphonic music of the nineteenth century, Debussy changed the way later composers approached the musical canvas. Many a music critic has attempted to answer the question of whether or not this influence on the music and art of his contemporaries makes Debussy himself an “impressionist,” the term commonly used to describe his musical and artistic milieu. But Stephen Walsh uses a different technique in this biography. He attempts to get into Debussy’s mind to trace his intellectual vision for this new form of music: “few composers ever had so precise an image of the music they wanted to write, and even fewer have been so ruthlessly meticulous in the search for the exact expression of that image” (a correction for those who think of Debussy’s “impressionistic” sound as simply “blurry”). Describing Debussy’s musical mindset in words is an ambitious project, but if anyone can pull it off, it’s Walsh: Tim Page called his two-volume biography of Stravinsky “one of the best books ever written about a musician.” *Debussy* is an impressive portrait by a master of biography. —HN

Art:

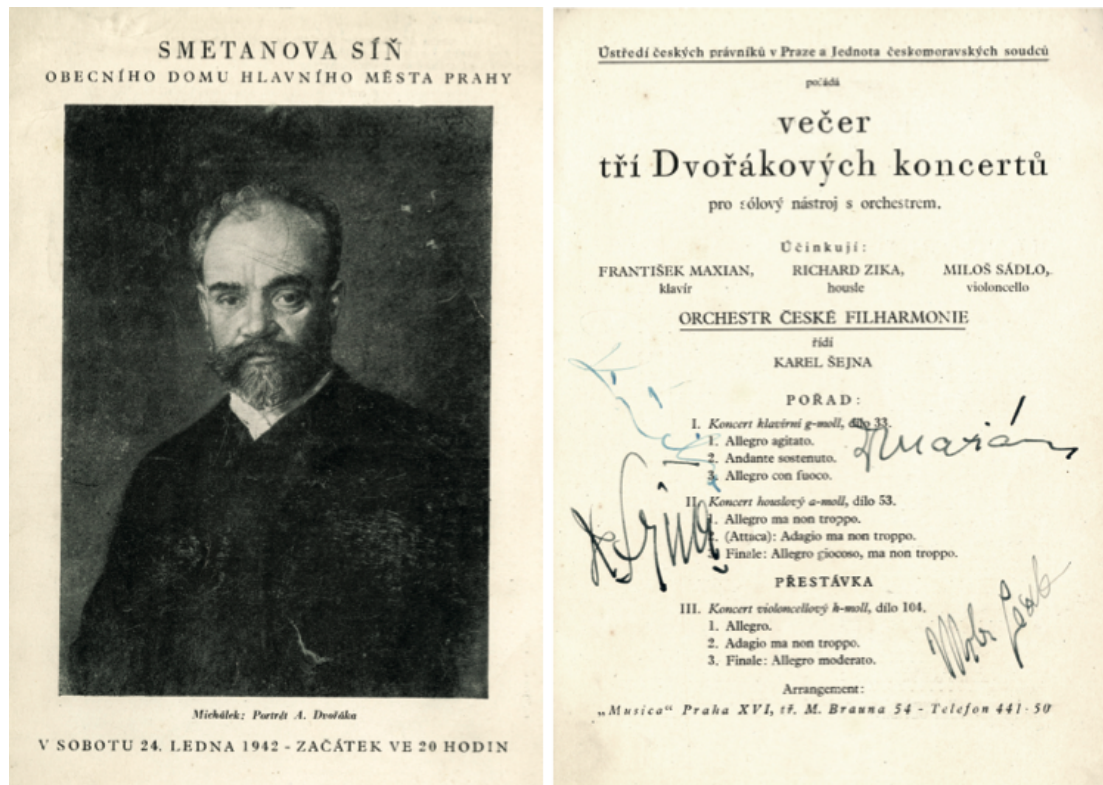


Sangram Majumdar, Giacometti's Shadow, 2018, Oil on canvas, Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects.

“Eric Aho: Guide,” at DC Moore Gallery (through November 10), and “Sangram Majumdar: Offspring” at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects (through November 10): This week is the last chance to see two exhibitions of strong contemporary painting in downtown Manhattan. At Chelsea’s DC Moore Gallery, Eric Aho’s large oils return a sense of exuberant, abstract Romanticism to scenes of hinterland wilderness. The theatrical works prove—through their bold brushwork and their often miraculously staged color—that such a project is yet to be exhausted of its artistic potential. At Steven Harvey Fine Arts Projects on the Lower East Side, Sangram Majumdar embarks upon a perhaps similar endeavor, but takes his images deeper into the realm of abstraction, wherein he

directly confronts many of the essential dialectical concerns of his medium: line and movement, ground and atmosphere, concealment and revelation. Originating from the starting impulse of seeing his young daughter learn to walk, the finished works contain only fragmented suggestions of figure-like forms, but yet they somehow retain a sense of light and experience that is deeply felt. —AS

Music:



The cover of Dvorak's famous Cello concerto in B minor, which premiered in 1896. Photo: Czech Center.

“Antonín Dvořák: Cello concerto in B minor,” at the Czech Center (performance November 8, exhibition on view through November 9): It seemed that the Czech composer Antonín Dvořák could do no wrong during his tenure as the Director of the National Conservatory in New York from 1892 through 1895. Dvořák set out to write authentically “American” music, continuing his interest in incorporating local traditions much as he had done earlier with Czech folk songs. The plan was a success: his symphony *From the New World* became a worldwide sensation almost overnight, and his *American String Quartet* was hailed as an important new arrival in chamber music. But Dvořák did admit to one mistake as a composer: he considered the cello an unsuitable solo instrument until 1895, when he finally gave in to his cellist friend Hanuš Wihan’s requests for a concerto for his instrument. Dvořák was so pleased with the resulting *Cello concerto in B minor* that he exclaimed, “Had I known that one could write a cello concerto like this, I would have written one long ago!” The manuscript of this “king of cello concertos,” now often regarded by cellists—who would know—as one of the best ever written, is on display in an exhibition about Dvořák’s time in New York, on view through November 9 at the Czech Center on Seventy-third Street in Manhattan. And don’t miss a performance of the concerto’s second movement at 7 p.m. on November 8. —HN

Other:



Andrew Roberts and David Petraeus. Photo: 92nd Street Y.

“Andrew Roberts interviewed by David Petraeus,” at the 92nd Street Y (November 6): Last week I said that Churchill was in the air, and it appears he still is. Tomorrow at 7 p.m., Andrew Roberts will speak with General David Petraeus at the 92nd Street Y about his new biography, *Churchill: Walking With Destiny*, on the day of its release. A book signing will follow the event. Also, be sure to mark your calendars for April 4, 2019, when Andrew will be honored with *The New Criterion*’s seventh annual Edmund Burke Award for Service to Culture and Society. Tickets can be reserved [here](#). —BR



The ruins of Rome in 2017. Photo: Naissance & Renaissance.

From the archive: “What ‘Dark Ages,’ ” by Michael Novak (February 2006). A review of *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success*, by Rodney Stark.

From the current issue: “Eternally ours,” by Nigel Spivey. On Rome, the world’s favorite ruin, occasioned by the publication of *The Rome We Have Lost*, by John Pemble.

From the editors: “Death in Venice, alive in New York,” by James Panero (*Spectator USA*). On two Tintoretto shows in New York, occasioned by the 500th anniversary of the painter’s birth.

Broadcast: Roger Kimball introduces the November issue of *The New Criterion*.

Each week the editors of *The New Criterion* offer recommendations on what to read, see, and hear in the world of culture in the weekly Critic’s Notebook. To get it first, subscribe to the free Critic’s Notebook email by [clicking here](#).