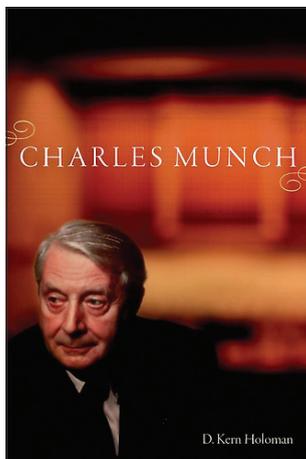


## BOOKS

**CHARLES MUNCH**

D Kern Holoman  
Oxford University Press  
h/b £22.50



EDITOR'S  
CHOICE

More than four decades after his death in 1968 at the age of 77, the absence of a biography of the pioneering conductor Charles Munch, a figure who surely stands alongside peers such as Toscanini and Bernstein, has been long overdue. Happily, it has been worth the wait for University of California music professor D Kern Holoman's portrait of a man who did much to champion French music, who was a staunch advocate of new music, who transformed the Boston Symphony Orchestra into one of America's greatest (and one of its most commercially successful) bands, and whose energised and illuminating performances on the podium were often at odds with a personality 'muffled by timidity and simple disinclination to say much'.

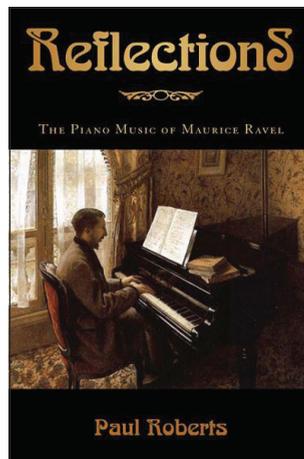
Munch's achievements as a conductor seem all the more astonishing given that he first picked up a baton relatively late in life, after more than 20 years as a violinist and concertmaster. Remarkable, too, that such a private and diffident man should have placed himself in so public and exposed an arena that led to his becoming a leading figure in the cultural life of America. Himself a conductor, Holoman writes with enormous sensitivity about a man whose personal life bordered on the reclusive, who made few public pronouncements, and who gave fewer interviews. He is especially articulate in connecting Munch's elusive and enigmatic personal life to a noticeably more extroverted approach to music making, his description of the 'fundamental mission' of the conductor as ensuring 'feelings must be made to reach an extreme of intensity' in performance.

Holoman's admirably elegant interrogation of the dichotomy of Munch's on- and off-stage personality is sympathetically handled and proves to be both insightful and informative. It makes a strong and persuasive argument for a reassessment of Munch and for his place among the great conducting talents of the last century, one who never sought to cultivate his own 'sound', but was always and only at the service of music.

A companion website includes more than 120 audio clips, links to videos, and a detailed discography.



MICHAEL QUINN

**REFLECTIONS**  
THE PIANO MUSIC OF  
MAURICE RAVEL

Paul Roberts  
Amadeus Press  
h/b £22.95



Pianists and piano lovers who are grateful for Paul Roberts' splendid *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy* (Amadeus Press) will not be surprised that his new book from the same publisher reflects similar qualities of friendly discernment, accessibility, and good sense. Roberts, himself a noted pianist and teacher, is not afraid of challenging a tempo indication in *Le tombeau de Couperin*, opining: 'For me Ravel's metronome marking ... is too fast. It needs to dance, yet remain flexible enough for the dotted rhythm not to sound mechanical. It should not clip along, but rather lilt.'

*Reflections: The Piano Music of Maurice Ravel* itself lilt in well-judged views of performance tradition, based on practical experience. Favouring a memoir by Henriette Faure, a somewhat forgotten Ravel pupil, to one by the more celebrated Vlado Perlemuter, Roberts highlights intriguing points, as when Ravel tells Faure that to 'correct the heaviness of her thumbs' when performing his *Ondine*, she should practise Liszt's *Feux-follets*. The same pianist noted that when they discussed performers who disregarded his instructions, Ravel sniffed characteristically: 'Well, obviously they prefer their own imaginations to my reality.' Only rarely do Roberts' judgments seem clouded by his obvious adoration of both Debussy and Ravel, as when he sentimentally posits that the former's death in 1918 was a contributing factor to Ravel's failure to write any solo piano works after that year. A highly independent individualist, Ravel continued to be inspired compositionally by the long-dead Liszt, although his nightmarish service in the first world war, combined with his beloved mother's death, also cited by Roberts, are more plausible reasons for abandoning this intimately solitary idiom in which he created so exquisitely.

In biographical matters, Roberts can occasionally be debatable, as when he asserts that 'Ravel's was a repressed existence, emotionally and most probably sexually, which he counteracted and corrected through his music (and the huge consumption of his beloved caporal bleu cigarettes).' Sublimation by smoking may be an acceptable Freudian diagnosis, but a nicotine habit and sex life need not be mutually exclusive, especially for the composer of the overtly erotic *Boléro*.



BENJAMIN IVRY