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Rapsodie pour Orchestre et Saxophone, by Claude Debussy

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Rapsodie pour Orchestre et Saxophone, by Claude Debussy, Jonathon Blum

The *Rapsodie pour Orchestre et Saxophone* composed by Claude Debussy is a very intriguing work that for all its musical merit remains pushed aside by many musicologists and ignored by the mainstream orchestral repertoire. Composed by Debussy in Paris in 1904 and published by Durand, this work lasts a duration of about ten minutes and features an orchestra with solo saxophone.[1] The piece was commissioned in 1903 by a wealthy Boston aristocrat/amateur saxophonist Mrs. Richard J. Hall, often referred to as Elise Hall. The *Rapsodie* was composed at the same time that Debussy was working on *La Mer* and when he was in a period of great distress in his own life. The score did not actually reach Mrs. Hall until 1905, and even then it was only the saxophone part and a piano part. The actual orchestration of the piece was completed by Roger-Ducasse about a year after the composer's death even though Debussy did not orchestrate the piece himself, the music is arranged with an authenticity very close to what Debussy's manner of writing probably was like.[2]

At the time that Debussy was composing the *Rapsodie*, he was also involved in other matters, some of which were more personal. Besides working on *La Mer*, Debussy was involved in criticism. He praised Rameau and the so-called French national tradition, which he believed had been "diverted from its proper path" by influences from Germany.[3] Also during this time Debussy met a woman named Emma Bardac who was an amateur singer and married to a banker. Debussy at this time had been married to a

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[1] Jean-Marie Londeix, *A Comprehensive Guide to the Saxophone Repertoire* (Cherry Hill: Roncorp Publications, 2003), 442.
[2] David Vassall Cox, *Debussy Orchestral Music* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), 57.
[3] Lesure, Francois/Howat, Roy, *Debussy (Achille-) Claude.* New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicans, 2nd edition. Vol. 7, 98.

model named Lilly Texier since 1899. Debussy went to live with Emma in 1904, which drove Lilly to attempt suicide.[4]

It was Hall's involvement with the Boston Orchestral Club that greatly influenced her desire to pursue a commission from Debussy. Having picked up the saxophone at age 47 after she became partially deaf, she began taking saxophone lessons from Georges Longy, the principal oboist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in order to help halt any more deterioration of her hearing. In 1897 Elise Hall's husband died, and Hall was the primary benefactor in his will, thus making her very wealthy. Much of her musical activities were associated with the Boston Orchestral Club and by 1904 she had assumed the role of president. With the help of Longy, Hall was able to make a list of composers to commission new works for saxophone, Debussy being one of her choices. It is because of this woman that the *Rapsodie* came into existence. Had it not been for the early commissions made by Hall, the *Rapsodie* and other important saxophone repertoire would not exist.[5]

As stated earlier, the *Rapsodie* reveals the same kind of musical thinking that Claude Debussy had when composing *La Mer*. Debussy might have continued this direction of composition had he not died at a young age. Much of the melodic material is derived from the composer's thorough study of plainchant and the calls made by the street vendors as part of an urban folk music as seen in figure 1:

Figure 1.

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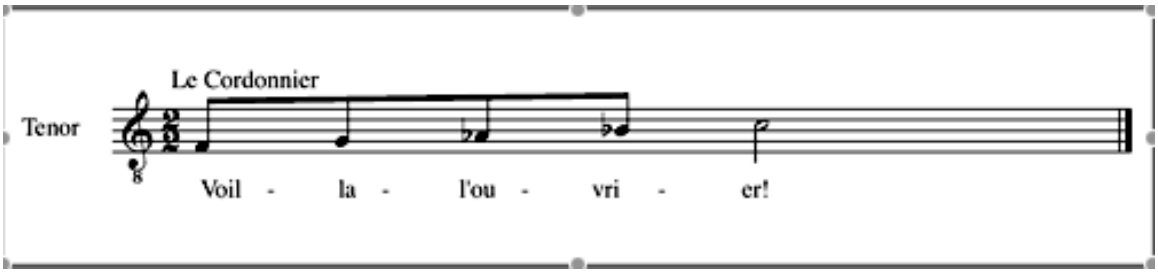
[4] Ibid., 98.

[5] Robert Jan Seligson. *The Rapsodie for Orchestra and Saxophone by Claude Debussy: A Comparison of Two Performance Editions* (Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Services, 1988), 1-5.



This kind of music was used by composers such as Rameau and Couperin. Debussy "assimilated the raw sound material of these calls and integrated them into a new, original way of writing".[6] One can compare the melodic cells found in the Rapsodi*e* to the calls made by Georges Kastner in his volume *Les voix de Paris*. Debussy takes the "raw" original folk material and adapts them perfectly into a work of art.[7] The piece itself is listed as Opus 98, between *Lindaraja* and *Estampes*, as categorized at the Bibliotheque Nationale. The *Rapsodie* itself is divided into two main sections, similar to the Hungarian Rhapsodies *lassan* and *friska* by Liszt. This form is very much in the French overture style of Jean-Baptiste Lully with the slow to fast arrangement of the melody.[8] The *Rapsodie* was premiered in Paris at the Societe Nationale in Paris on May 11th 1919. Andre Caplet directed the premiere. The saxophonist is not known for sure but probably was either Louis Mayeur or Francois Combelle.[9]

In performance, it is important to remember that Debussy was not impressed by sheer virtuosity. Musical works for Debussy were significant because of their mystery, not because of the level of technique required by the performer. When performing this work, a deep level of understanding must be developed regarding the overall accentuation in a manner that moves the listener emotionally. The phrasing is subtle and learning this

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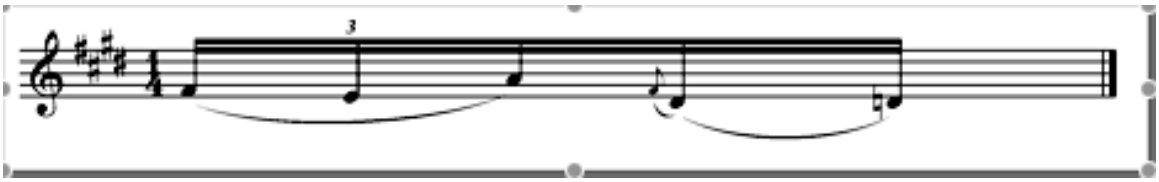
[6] James C. Umble, *Jean-Marie Londeix: Master of the Modern Saxophone* (Cherry Hill: Roncorp Publications, 2003), 213-14.
[7] Ibid., 214.
[8] Ibid., 216.
[9] Ibid., 217.

piece can be a long, slow, and difficult process. The performer needs to pay close attention to phrasing in order to develop the mastery that makes this work convincing and a sense of simplicity emerges which clarifies the work.[10] The piece is broken into two parts. The tempo at the start is marked *tres modere*. After the opening introduction by the orchestra, the saxophone enters alone, softly singing in a melancholy voice and can only be described as "Debussy-esque"[11] The fourth measure contains an important cell that is heard throughout the entire work, it is made up of two repeated beats containing the interval of a third as shown in figure 2:

Figure 2.



This figure is played often in different voices and is augmented, elongated, transformed, and varied both in tonality and rhythm before the piece ends.[12] The opening phrase played by the saxophone is anacrusic. It is important that the performer not overemphasize the F# instead of the C (C being the principal note of the following phrases). The nature of the introduction is improvised and *ad libitum* is even marked. It is also important to recognize the masculine and feminine endings, the masculine endings being C in measures fifteen and sixteen and C flat in measure 20. The feminine endings

[10]James C. Umble, *Jean-Marie Londeix: Master of the Modern Saxophone* (Cherry Hill: Roncorp Publications, 2003), , 216-217.
[11] Ibid., 217-218.
[12] Ibid., 218.

being C to C flat in measures seventeen, eighteen, and nineteen. Breaths should be taken both in the middle of the sixth measure after 1 and at the end of the eighth measure. The sequence concludes ten measures after 1 and should have a ritenuto there to gracefully end the phrase.[13]

Moving on, make a clear and precise attack on the down beat of the next 2 measure and play the dotted-eighths and sixteenth note figures expressively in order to maintain a feeling of joyful simplicity and movement. It is important to take into consideration that the following two measures are rhythmically different (even though they are similar). The first measure which is the sixth measure before 2 is interrogative and emphasizes the importance of the first thesis note B and the penultimate A which, being lengthened slightly gives the measure a feminine character. The repetition of this phrase in the next measure is given a crescendo and has one strong beat on the first B. The phrase unit is concluded with a masculine ending, having a downbeat on a high A. Be sure to clearly pronounce each and every note (even the ones that are at very soft dynamics) and strive to make each rhythmic figure clear and expressive as well. Only when each and every element of the piece is carefully assimilated will the true spirit of the music come to life.[14]

The saxophone returns at measure sixteen after 2, with an a tempo written above the 2/4 time signature. Yet, it is actually one full measure later that the actual a tempo is established and the melody that was first introduced an octave higher eight before 2 is now played again here. The saxophone embellishes a melismatic figure on the second degree while the accompaniment concludes a C major chord. The saxophone then revisits

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[13] James C. Umble, *Jean-Marie Londeix: Master of the Modern Saxophone* (Cherry Hill: Roncorp Publications, 2003), 218-219.
[14] Ibid., 219.

the motive from the introduction that provides evidence of both binary and ternary rhythms with appoggiaturas that become enlarged progressively. The first part ends with a restatement of the beginning with few differences between the two parts and concludes with a short dialogue with the accompaniment.[15]

The second part is marked Allegretto scherzando and begins eleven measures before 4. This section is heavy in the accompaniment and the saxophone's entrances are sparse and episodic. At 4, the saxophone plays a four-note formula derived from a lengthy phrase heard at the introduction. The accompaniment then takes over again until the saxophone enters again at 6.[16]

At 6, get a big breath in order to play the first ten full measures all in one breathe. The initial grace note should be calm and on the tender side and avoid giving it too heavy of an accent. This phrase ends on a minor third (B*b*-D*b*) ten measures after 6, and has a feminine character by using a diminuendo on the D*b*. Take another quick but sufficient breathe and begin the next lengthy phrase group using a gentile sonority. Give a slight but deliberate rallentando for both the tenth and 22nd measures after 6 to help emphasize the feminine character. At 7 the saxophone plays another short plaintive melodic phrase on the chromatic figure first initiated by the saxophone at 4. This is developed over forty measures using successive melismatic (both varied and modulating) repetitions. [17]

The final phrases in this piece occur nine measures before 12. The saxophone plays an anxious melodic motive that is cut off by the accompaniment. Thirteen measures

[15] James C. Umble, *Jean-Marie Londeix: Master of the Modern Saxophone* (Cherry Hill: Roncorp Publications, 2003), 219-220.
[16] Ibid., 220.
[17] Ibid., 220.

before the end the saxophone states the final melody, in all its plaintive beauty, before sweeping away the last four measures like a solitary leaf in a sudden gust of wind.[18]

Throughout the piece, the performer should strive for clarity, making every inflection of each motive, melodic phrase and rhythmic formula crystal clear. For the feminine endings be sure to decrescendo unaccented notes and for masculine endings reinforce the final note. The dynamics are never aggressive. Vibrato should not be overdone, but refined and controlled (conservative use of vibrato). The tone is never overpowering, however make sure that the tone does not become weak or thin (especially when playing in the middle register or at a soft dynamic, which is often for both). Lastly, even though this piece is very ad-lib at times, always keep a steady pulse and take extra care to play in time with the accompaniment.[19]

Looking back, it is hard to believe that there was such a furor over the merit of this piece. As said before, the Rapsodie was composed at a time when the composer was experiencing many changes in his own life. Composed around the same time as *La Mer*, much of the melodic material that comes from the Rapsodie is derived from the composer's thorough study of plainchant and the calls made by the street vendors as part of an urban folk music. Having "assimilated the raw sound material of these calls and integrating them into a new, original way of writing" Debussy created a way of taking "raw" unpolished urban folk music and turning it into a complex artwork. The Rapsodie stands as a paradigm for early 20th century composition, its stirring simplicity and tranquil splendor have proven to be perhaps some of the most beautiful things in impressionist music.

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[18] James C. Umble, *Jean-Marie Londeix: Master of the Modern Saxophone* (Cherry Hill: Roncorp Publications, 2003), 221.
[19] Ibid., 221.

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