

The Influence of the French School of Flute Playing

It is more than 150 years since Theobald Boehm created the Boehm system flute- a flute of metal and one which was infinitely better in tune than any other previously: a flute which boasted lighter, more agile mechanism than had hitherto been known. It is as a result of this achievement, in my view, that the embryo of the French School was formed.

There was, at the time, a prevailing style of playing and teaching at the Paris Conservatoire, promoted by the then leading teacher, Altes. One of his more famous pupils was the flautist/composer Tulou, famous for those heavy sentimental, virtuoso salon pieces. Altes was to be joined and challenged by the flautist Louis Dorus in 1860 and it was Dorus, who had been playing the new Boehm flute (nicknamed the Gas Pipe by the wooden flute fraternity) since its conception and who now rigidly insisted that all his pupils play it. This must have caused quite a stir, but it was soon recognised that those Tulou and Boehm virtuoso works were infinitely more playable on this instrument and players began to develop the fluid techniques and variety of tone colour and dynamics which were a hallmark of successful flautists from the Paris Conservatoire of the period and are still emulated today by all of us who love the versatility and expressive qualities of the metal flute.

The most famous pupil of Dorus was Taffanel, the man who is considered the “Father of the French School” He won his Premiere Prix at the age of 16 and at 18 joined the Opera Comique. At twenty he became Principal flute of the Opera de Paris and later played for the Societe des Concerts. ” Taffanel soon gained a reputation as a great virtuoso and musician. According to an edition of L’Edition Artiste in 1895, he would be “ forever hallowed as the unrivalled Paganini of the flute” He was most of all famous for his beautiful tone quality which was referred to as powerful and brassy in the low register, refined, sensitive and flexible. Gaubert described Taffanel’s tone as full and homogenous throughout the entire range of the instrument, a quality that seemed to be fundamental to the French School. Once Taffanel had established himself as a great flautist, he then showed himself to be also a musician of integrity, and with the advantage of the new Boehm system flute, he pioneered the revision of major classical and baroque works which had been neglected by his predecessors who favoured the florid virtuoso works such as Demerssman and Toulou, and contemporary works. There are sadly no recordings of Taffanel and few recordings of this early period, but you may be interested to hear Hennebains- a pupil of Altes and apparently quite a virtuoso who played with charm and finesse. He succeeded Taffanel as solo flute of the Opera in 1891.

RECORD 1 Hennebains 1912. Nocturne in F#, Valse

Taffanel rapidly took the professional path, which was traditional for successful players from the conservatoire, and I would like, at this point, to describe the teaching strategy prevailing during this period.

All teaching of the flute was in a class situation. A Professor would sustain a class of up to 12 students and it was likely that two students would be accepted each year. Students attended very young and often graduated with their Premiere Prix at 16 or before. Gaubert gained his first prize at 15. It was an elitist school coaching the favoured few for a minute professional arena. Women did not feature in the arena until comparatively recently. I suppose that applies throughout the world. It was common for the successful pupil to join the Opera Comique and then the Opera de Paris and/or the Societe des Concerts. Players often retired from performing by the age of fifty and continued their careers as either conductors, composers or professors at the Conservatoire, sometimes like Taffanel and Gaubert, all three. Until Moyse, there was indeed a tradition of virtuoso flautists composing much virtuoso music. One only has to think of Devienne, Tulou, Demerssman and Boehm. Dorus and those after him, composed less and Moyse wrote no original works apart from some exercises.

So Taffanel went along the then traditional route and by 1893 was Professor at the Conservatoire. From this focal point in the history of the French School, it began to branch out internationally. Taffanel had travelled widely in Europe as a soloist, no doubt demonstrating the merits of the Boehm system flute and the French style and some of his students were to travel even further afield, having an even wider impact. Others, like Philippe Gaubert, were to demonstrate the style not only with their playing, but also through composition.

Gaubert was said to be Taffanel's favourite pupil. He gained his first prize at fifteen and was for a time a highly acclaimed performer and teacher. His reviews were always glowing and the few recordings we have show him to have all the qualities we would expect from the best of the French School. He was a versatile musician and at the age of 25, turned his hand to conducting, very successfully, unlike Taffanel, and was appointed Assistant Conductor to the Societe de Concerts. From there he went from strength to strength, and eventually became Chief Conductor of the Societe and Conductor at the Opera. In 1932 he was appointed Professor of Flute at the Conservatoire and eventually Professor of Conducting. Largely because of his versatility and perhaps because he need to overtly market himself as a flute player, there are not so many recordings of Gaubert, or written material about his teaching or playing, but there is no doubt from the small number of recordings available that he was an exquisite flautist. And of all the legacies we have of this era, his flute compositions, which comprise of two hours of flute and piano works as well as a small amount of chamber music, are in my view the most clear demonstration of the impressionistic sense of harmony and phrasing, and variety of tone colour and articulation instilled into the players of that time. Runs, which are simply brush

strokes of sound and modulations, which owe much to the influence of Debussy, Faure and Ravel, are characteristic of his writing.

But to return to Gaubert the Flautist, here is Gaubert playing on a recording made in 1919.

GAUBERT DOPPLER-ASCANIO-CHOPIN

Another of Taffanel's pupils was George Barrere.

BARRERE (1876-1944) was one of the most brilliant pupils of Taffanel. He won his first prize at 19 and joined the orchestra of the Societe Nationale where he gave the first performance of Debussy's L'Apres Midi. For five years he was the solo flute with the Paris Opera and for seven the Colonne Orchestra, in 1905, he moved to the United States after an invitation from Walter Damrosch to join the New York Symphony Orchestra. Barrere was the first flautist to play a platinum flute, inspiring Varese's composition Density 21.5(-the chemical density of platinum), which he premiered in 1936. As a teacher he had an enormous influence in USA and some of his more eminent pupils are players and teachers such as Samuel Baron, William Kincade and Julius Baker.

Although Rene Le Roy did not study directly with Taffanel, he received the Taffanel tradition through Hennebains and Gaubert. His career, unlike most of his peers, was entirely developed around chamber music and solo playing. His expertise in chamber music led him to become the Professor of Wind Chamber Music at the Conservatoire in 1964. He won his first prize in 1918, at the age of 20. You will notice that as we have moved towards and into the 20th century the trend is to graduate later and some of the traditional paths for a career are changing. Perhaps this is due to the growth in the number of flautists studying at the Conservatoire. For example, comparing the number of first prizes gained between 1900 and 1950 looks like this. In 1901 there was only one. 1900-1910, 2-3 each year. 1910-1940 between 2 and 5 each year. Between 1940 and 1950 between 2 and 8 each year.

LAURENT was another interesting and successful exponent of the French School.

MARCEL MOYSE had the good fortune to study with Taffanel, Hennebains and Gaubert.

Influence of opera and the voice
Opera variations, studies

Taffanels pupils

GAUBERT

MOYSE

BARRERE

Gaubert pupils

LE ROY

MOYSE

LAURENT

Moyse pupils

USA Michael Parloff, now Met Pol Opera, NY studied with Moyse in Marlborough, took over Marlborough Festival and taught Mardi McSullec, now teaching in Melbourne University Music. Dept. Went to y

Perhaps Dorus was the grandfather? and Altes, who as early as 1880 wrote his “Method for the Boehm System Flute” was the great grandfather. Certainly his insight led the way.