

***RAPSODIE FOR SAXOPHONE AND ORCHESTRA: a double challenge for Debussy.***

In 1901 Claude Debussy received a commission from Mrs. Elise Hall, a wealthy American, amateur saxophonist. She was also the founder and president of the Boston Orchestral Club. Debussy's first challenge: He wasn't aware of the full possibilities of the saxophone. In fact, he was not very fond of the instrument; but he was deeply in debt at the time and agreed to compose a piece for saxophone and orchestra.

The second challenge for Debussy: in most cases, a composer writes solo pieces for a known virtuoso, assuming that their technique is impeccable. This was far from reality! Mrs. Hall was, in fact, a mediocre instrumentalist with limited technical abilities and a questionable musical sense. Less than enthusiastic, Debussy dragged his feet: the Saxophone Lady could wait .....

As time passed, Mrs. Hall became increasingly impatient to get her score, often showing up at the composer's door. In August 1903, 2 years after her first contact with Debussy, he completed a short Rapsodie, but the score was not orchestrated. It fell into oblivion again! Debussy immersed himself into composing *La Mer*, a work closer to his heart. The task of orchestrating the saxophone piece fell to his good friend Roger Ducasse after Debussy's death. It is to be noted that Ducasse didn't really orchestrate it, but merely followed the precise indications of his friend. Debussy never heard the Rapsodie ( it was published after his death) and Elise Hall never played it. At its completion, she had become completely deaf.

The title, *Rapsodie for Orchestra and Alto Saxophone*, gives us a helpful clue to approaching its interpretation. Although the saxophone has a prominent part, this is in no way a "concerto style" work; rather, it is an orchestral composition with saxophone obligato. It is short (11 to 12 minutes) and contains large sequences for orchestra alone. The saxophone part is technically not very challenging, so much so that some soloists like to borrow the clarinets and other instruments parts to enrich its musical texture.

My personal approach: In general, I am always reluctant to arrange or rearrange a piece by a skilled composer. Undoubtedly Debussy is one of those. He was obsessed with structure to the point of adding or retrieving measures to fit a pattern. There are interesting studies about the Rapsodie for saxophone and the golden ratio. Indeed the piece flows naturally as written. The question, beside being faithful to the text, is what angle should be highlighted? As I established before, this is not a flashy, showpiece composition and was never intended to be so.

After sharing ideas with Javier, we decided that the emphasis should be placed on the poetry of the music. A rhapsody should sound like an improvisation, played with fluidity. Another obsession of the Master was water. We had to keep this in mind. One of the great assets of Javier's playing is his sonority, his ability to explore a vast expanse of colors that infuses a wide range of emotions into his interpretations. We never forgot that Debussy is an impressionist, relying on emotionally charged sonorities to render justice to the piece. The dialogue between the orchestra and the saxophone is perfectly timed. It required a genius like Debussy to compose such a fascinating piece that would so skillfully make us forget that Mrs. Hall, to whom the piece is dedicated, was without doubt full of good intentions, but a very limited musician.