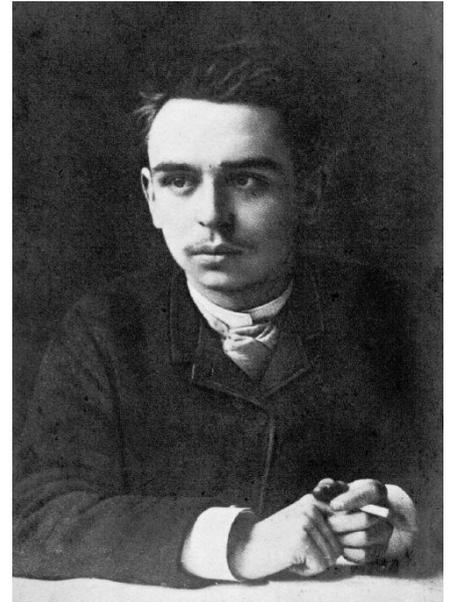


GUILLAUME LEKEU

David C F Wright DMus

Jean Joseph Nicolas Guillaume Lekeu was a Belgian composer of high quality music. That a fine composer dies young is a very unfortunate : this composer was very gifted and could have produced more works of the same quality had he lived. All of his works which I know, are exceptional, beautiful and sometimes profound but never tedious or painfully academic

Lekeu was born in Heusy, a village near Verviers, Belgium on 20 January 1870. He originally studied piano and music theory under Alphonse Voss, the director of the brass band at the local conservatory. In 1879, his parents moved to Poitiers, France and the young man continued to pursue his music studies independently and while at school, composing his first piece at the age of 15. From 1885 onwards, he regularly composed music, especially for the piano, and he studied harmony and violin from 1887 under Octave Grisard.



He was an excellent student able to retain all that he was taught. He had a remarkable memory and developed a logical approach to music. For example, he seldom wrote trifles although there are two waltzes and a mazurka.

In June 1888, his family moved to Paris where he began to study philosophy. He was introduced to the works of T  odor de Wyzewa and continued his studies under Gaston Vallin. In August 1889, he travelled to Bayreuth to see the operas of Richard Wagner which inspired him. On his return, he studied counterpoint and fugue privately with Cesar Franck who was kind to him but never a good teacher.. Franck encouraged him to continue composing. After Franck's death in the autumn of 1890, Wyzewa introduced Lekeu to Vincent d'Indy, who taught him orchestration and pressed him to compete for the Prix de Rome, awarded in Brussels. D'Indy was a very fine teacher and an underrated composer. In 1891, Lekeu won second prize in the competition for his cantata *Androm  de*.

In 1892, d'Indy introduced Lekeu to Octave Maus, then secretary of Brussels-based *Le Cercle des XX*. Eug  ne Ysa  e commissioned a work from him, the *Violin Sonata in G Major*, which was premiered in March 1893, and which is highly regarded. It s a very fine work and both parts are exceptionally well written. The same can be said of His *Cello Sonata*. The *Quartet no 1* is as good, if not better, than most other French chamber works.

Of outstanding beauty is Lekeu's rich *Adagio* for string orchestra. My copy is for solo violin, four violins, two violas, two cellos and double bass. I understand that there are other versions. String writing has never been as good as this, and only that of Bartok is as exemplary.

Lekeu contracted typhoid fever from a contaminated sorbet in October 1893. He died in his parents' home in Angers on 21 January 1894, the day after his 24th birthday. On 26 January 1894, he was buried in a small cemetery in Heusy.

His personal style was present in his earliest compositions. In 1887, he said "*Bien plus, ce sera bizarre, d  traqu  , horrible, tout ce qu'on voudra; mais, du moins, ce sera original*" ("Even more, it will be weird, mad, horrible, anything you like, but at least it will be original").

Lekeu's string quartets were inspired by Beethoven, and by exposure to Wagner's operas at Bayreuth which influenced his approaches to melody. He described this as "des mélodies de telle longueur qu'un seul exposé suffisait à parfaire... un morceau de musique" ("melodies of such length that a single presentation was sufficient to complete... a piece of music").

His primary influence has been said to be Franck. Many of his works are characterized by a certain melancholy; in his own words, "la joie [est] mille fois plus difficile à peindre que la souffrance" ("joy is a thousand times harder to paint than suffering").

Lekeu composed about 50 works, and left a number of unfinished compositions at the time of his death. Two of these, a Cello Sonata and his Piano Quartet, were completed by D'Indy. All have been recorded at least once, and several of them more than once, notably the Violin Sonata in G Major and the Piano Trio in C minor. The first time the Piano Sonata in G minor was completely performed live was by the pianist Paweł Albiński in Cracow on 20 August 2014.

His style was foolishly said to be prophetic of early-twentieth-century avant-garde French composers like Satie and Milhaud, was influenced by Franck, Wagner and (especially in the Trio) Beethoven, though these influences did not manifest themselves as mere imitation. He was a pioneer not a disciple. He was not avant garde or preempted that. His larger compositions are cyclic in structure; that is, themes in his works will often recur from movement to movement, something no doubt inherited from a long tradition of nineteenth-century European composers, as well as from many works of Franck and d'Indy. In general, Lekeu is regarded as a highly talented composer whose death cut short a promising musical career. He could have made greatness, although I think he already has.

Works include:

Opera

Barberine opera (unfinished)

Choral

Andromède, poème lyrique et symphonique for soloists, chorus, & orchestra, in 15 parts (1891)

Chant lyrique for chorus & orchestra (1891)

Songs

La fenêtre de la maison paternelle for mezzo-soprano & piano

Les pavots for tenor (or baritone) & piano

L'ombre plus dense for tenor & piano

Quelque antique et lente danse for soprano & piano

Chanson de Mai for tenor (or baritone) & piano

Andromède for soprano & piano quintet (piano & string quartet) (arr. of fragments of choral/orchestral piece)

Trois Poèmes for soprano (or baritone) & piano (texts by the composer) (Sur une tombe; Ronde; Nocturne)

Trois Poèmes for unaccompanied soprano (arr. of soprano)

Trois Poèmes for soprano & piano quintet (piano & string quartet) (arr. of soprano & piano piece)

Orchestra

Chant de triomphale délivrance (Etude symphonique) (1889)

Etude symphonique no. 2: Hamlet et Ophélie (1889)

Introduction symphonique aux Burgraves Overture after Victor Hugo's Les Burgraves (1890)

Adagio for string orchestra (1891)

Fantaisie sur deux airs populaires angevins (Fantasy on two Angers folk tunes) (1892-93)
Prelude from Act II of the opera *Barberine*
Concertante and Ensemble works
Adagio op. 3 for orchestra with solo violin (1885-88)
Epithalame for strings, 3 trombones, & organ
Larghetto for solo cello & ensemble
Introduction et Adagio for tuba & wind orchestra
Fantaisie Contrapuntistique sur un Cramignon Liégeois (Contrapuntal fantasy on a Liège cramignon) for chamber orchestra (1890)
Overture and Adagio for brass band (1892)

Chamber music

Choral (*À mon oncle Pierre Lekeu*) op. 3 for violin & piano (arr. of a fragment of the orchestral Adagio op. 3) (1885-88)
Menuet for string quartet (1885-88)
Thema con Variazioni for string trio (1885-88)
Adagio molto espressivo for 2 violins & piano (1885-88)
Minuetto for 2 violins (1885-88)
Andante più tosto adagio for violin & piano (1885-88)
Molto adagio sempre cantante doloroso (*Mon âme est triste jusqu'à la mort*) for string quartet (1887)
String quartet in G major in six movements (1887-88)
Cello sonata in F major in 4 movements (cello & piano) (completed by d'Indy) (1888)
Piano trio in C minor in 4 movements (piano, violin, cello) (1890-91)
Adagio for string trio (1891)
Violin sonata in G major in 3 movements (violin & piano) (1891-93)
Piano quartet in B minor for piano & strings (piano, violin, viola, cello) (movements 1 and 2 only; completed by d'Indy) (1892-93)
Méditation in G major for string quartet

Piano

Andantino semplice e molto espressivo for piano (1885-88)
Tempo di Mazurka for piano (1885-88)
Allegro marcato for piano (1885-88)
Berceuse et Valse for piano (1885-88)
Moderato quasi largo for piano (1885-88)
Adagio religioso col più grand' espressione for piano (1885-88)
Andante for piano (1885-88)
Piano Sonata in G minor (Prélude; Fugue; Fugue; Dans un mouvement plus lent; Finale) (1891)
Fantaisie sur deux airs populaires angevins for piano 4 hands (arr. of orchestral piece) (1892-93)
Morceau (Andante sostenuto) for piano 4 hands
3 Pièces (Chansonette sans paroles; Valse oubliée; Danse joyeuse) for piano
Morceaux égoïstes for piano in 4 movements (Andante; Lento doloroso; Andante; Andantino malinconico)
Berceuse for piano

Concertante and Ensemble works

Adagio op. 3 for orchestra with solo violin (1885-88)
Epithalame for strings, 3 trombones, & organ
Larghetto for solo cello & ensemble
Introduction et Adagio for tuba & wind orchestra

Fantaisie Contrapuntistique sur un Cramignon Liégeois (Contrapuntal fantasy on a Liège
cramignon) for chamber orchestra (1890)
Overture and Adagio for brass band (1892)

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