

GUSTAVE SAMAZEUILH

David C F Wright, DMus

Born in Bordeaux on 2 June 1877, the composer, musicologist, and critic, Gustave Marie Victor Samazeuilh grew up in a family in which art, and particularly music, occupied a central place. His father, a banker by profession, was a passionate music lover who had developed friendships with many of the most prominent figures of French music in the nineteenth century, among them Franck, Chabrier, Fauré, Duparc, D'Indy, Chausson, and Dukas. He was also personally acquainted with Wagner, and, in 1896, he took his son (who was then studying law) to Bayreuth to attend performances of the Ring cycle. From this privileged and highly cultivated environment, Samazeuilh developed an unusually broad and open mind, as his critical writings constantly attest.



A student of Ernest Chausson until that composer's death in 1899, Samazeuilh entered the Schola Cantorum in 1900 and studied with Vincent D'Indy and Paul Dukas. Although he always remained faithful to the discipline of craftsmanship he acquired under D'Indy's tutelage, Samazeuilh's style is strongly influenced by Debussy and eschews the academic dryness which often characterises the work of D'Indy's disciples. He also had a profound admiration for Richard Strauss, with whom he maintained a lifelong friendship, and whose music he promoted in France.

His String Quartet in D appeared in 1900.

Gustave Samazeuilh's output is characterised more by quality than quantity. In addition to piano music, he wrote some chamber music works, notably a very beautiful *Fantasia elegiaque* for violin and piano written for Jacques Thibaud and Alfred Cortot, a string trio and a string quintet, a few orchestral works and several songs. He is also known as the author of over one hundred piano transcriptions of works from the French symphonic repertoire.

Passionate defender of French music, he wrote studies on Chausson and on Dukas, on Racine and music, translated into French the libretto of *Tristan und Isolde* and of *Capriccio* and is the author of a preface to the correspondence of Richard Strauss and Romain Rolland. As a collaborator for many musical publications, he wrote countless articles that draw a vast panorama of French music over the first half of the twentieth century. He also published a collection of short critical studies of various composers and performers in which he shows a remarkable ability to appreciate aesthetics very different from his own.

There are at least twelve transcriptions of orchestral and chamber works by other composers for piano.

Samazeuilh wrote the six movement *Suite in G* for piano in 1902, when he was still a student at the Schola. The work is dedicated to the pianist Edouard Risler, who gave the first performance at the Société Nationale the same night he premiered Paul Dukas' *Variations, Interlude and Fugue* on a theme of Rameau. It was published after revisions in 1911. The influence of Chausson's *Quelques danses* op 26 is clearly felt, particularly in the *Sarabande* and the *Forlane*. The cyclical structure, which returns at the end of the *Forlane* with the theme of all preceding movements, testifies to the

heritage of Franck in D'Indy's teaching. Nonetheless, the freshness of inspiration in this youthful work allows glimpses of originality to shine through.

The Three Little Inventions for piano were written around the same time (1903). The first one, a two-part invention in G major is a rather curious pastiche of Bach and Debussy. It leads without interruption into a very sober three-part invention in the relative minor key. The last piece, in four parts and in F major, is undoubtedly the most successful one. The fervent atmosphere and the intense chromaticism are reminiscent of Franck. Note the transposed quotation of a full phrase from the Suite's Française. The year also saw the completion of his Serenade for guitar and his Sonata in B minor for violin and piano

The Naiades au noir (Nymphs in the Evening) (1910) is a nocturne whose shimmering and colourful harmonies led Samazeuilh to later realise an orchestral version of the piece. The composer tells us that, a year after the premiere of the Naiades, he vacationed with Maurice Ravel in St-Jean-de-Luz. One day, Samazeuilh heard Ravel, who was then working on Daphnis et Chloë, improvise a theme remarkably similar to that of his little piano piece. Since Ravel evidently did not know the Naiades au soir, both musicians were highly amused by the coincidence. When Daphnis et Chloe was published, Ravel sent Samazeuilh a copy with the following dedication: "To the author of the principal theme of this work." Naiades au soir was orchestrated in 1924

Le Chant de la Mer (The Song of the Sea) (1918) is Samazeuilh's largest-scale work for piano and is set in three movements. It merits a substantive discussion in Alfred Cortot's study of French piano music. Samazeuilh himself introduces it thus: "The first part, Prelude, depicts a majestic ocean, peaceful and almost enigmatic. The second part, Clair de lune au large (Moonlight on the High Sea) presents, apart from themes of nocturnal serenity, a theme of human emotion which takes as its full expressive significance in the course of the highly developed last movement, as it combined with the evocative ideas suggested by the title: Tempête et lever du jour sur les flots (Storm and sunrise over the waves)." The three movements are dedicated to Francis Planté, Marguerite Long and Alfred Cortot respectively. Marguerite Long gave the first performance. The middle movement is particularly moving and is probably Samazeuilh's highest achievement for the piano. The triptych as a whole recalls Gaspard de la Nuit, in part because of the virtuosic character of the last movement. As in Ravel, the poetic climate is always the foremost consideration and shows that this student of Vincent D'Indy can hardly be accused of dryness. When he was a child, Ernest Chausson had said to Samazeuilh: "My boy, I think you are gifted, but don't forget what I am about to tell you: music must be made from the heart." Perhaps that exhortation had something to do with it.

In the 1920s he produced some interesting works such as the Spanish Song for clarinet and piano, the Suite for string trio (both of 1925) and the Symphonic Poem: Nuit.

Shortly after the death of Dukas, Samazeuilh wrote a book about him. His other major literary work was his book French Composers of Our Time dating from 1947, the year of his Cantabile and Capriccio for string quartet.

The Esquisses (Sketches) in 1945 and the Evocation of 1947 are on a smaller scale and may suggest how critical and musicological work gradually took precedence over composition during the course of Samazeuilh's career. The short Esquisses are each dedicated to a renowned French pianist (Tatiana de Sanzévitch, Jeanne-Marie Dacré, Jean Doyen. and Marcel Ciampi). The movements 3 and 4 are a Sérénade for the left hand and a Souvenir (Remembrance) for the right hand alone, which is actually an improvisation on the opening Dédicace (Dedication).

Another work, Evocation is dedicated to the violinist Georges Enesco. True to his transcribing skill, Samazeuilh realized three versions of Evocation namely for piano, violin and piano, and cello and piano.

No one is likely to describe him as a great composer but he must not be forgotten.

He died in Paris on 4 August 1967. He was 90 years old.

I have just become a father for the first time and, for some unknown reason, I am playing Samazeuilh's music.

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