

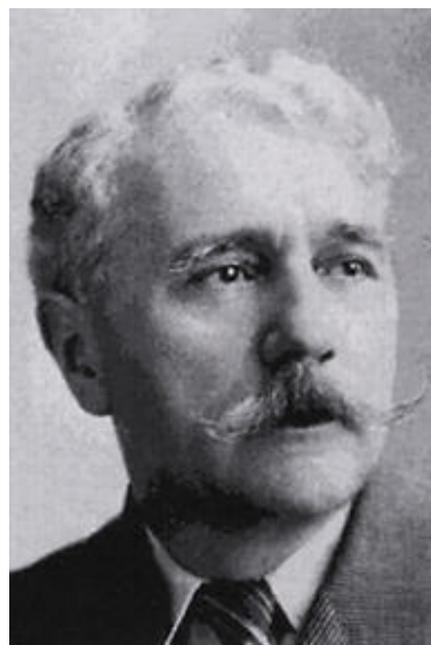
## JEAN ROGER-DUCASSE

David C F Wright DMus

Jean Roger-Ducasse has written some of the most fascinating, difficult and virtuosic piano music of any French composer. It would be wrong to compare it with Liszt, but on the grounds of difficulty there may be a comparison. Perhaps his music is neglected because of the Herculean demands it makes on pianists or because Ravel's piano music is deemed to be more worthy.

Jean Jules Amable Roger-Ducasse was born in Bordeaux on 18 April 1873 and studied at the Paris Conservatoire with Emile Pescard and Andre Gedalge ([see article on Rhené Baton](#)).

Roger-Ducasse was a friend of Gabriel Fauré although his music shows no influence of the older man. In fact, Roger-Ducasse succeeded Fauré as professor of composition following Fauré's death in November 1924. After the death of Paul Dukas in 1935 Roger-Ducasse took over his position as professor of orchestration.



Many famous musicians were pupils of Roger-Ducasse including Jehain Alain the finest French composer of organ music who lived from 1911 to 1940 and was killed in World War II, Claude Arrieu (1903-1990), who people still confuse the Chilean pianist Claudio Arrau. Claude Arrieu was a female composer. Another pupil was Francis George Scott (1880-1958), the Scottish composer of some lovely songs

The talk of organ music reminds us that Roger-Ducasse wrote only one organ piece, the Pastorale of 1909. It starts somewhat simplistically in F major and in 12/8 time, yet develops into a very difficult and wonderful piece. It has been deservedly called a masterpiece. And yet so many people do not know it and are missing a terrific experience.

His charming Petite Suite for orchestra dates from 1899 and there is a version for piano duet. The movements are Souvenance, Berceuse and Clairnonneire. The year 1906 saw the Variations on a serious theme for harp and orchestra. There is also a fine Barcarolle for solo harp. The Suite Française for orchestra is in four movements, an overture in D, a rhythmic bouree in E, a recitative and aria in D flat with an excursion into F, and a quick minuet in D and A with some passages with time signatures as 15/8 and 7/4. There is a luscious Symphonic Poem called Sarabande which calls for a chorus as well as the orchestra.

Adept at chamber music Roger-Ducasse wrote a 105 page Piano Quartet in B flat in 1912 a very attractive piece with a formidable piano part. There is an allegro, andante ma scherzando, a molto adagio set in C and an allegro. There are two splendid String Quartets, the first in F and dating from 1900 -1909 and the second is in D.

There is a sumptuous Romance for cello orchestra, or piano, of 1918, the same year as the premiere of Au Jardin de Marguerite for soprano, tenor, solo choir members, double choir and orchestras. The premiere was on his 45th birthday. The work was written between 1901 and 1905 and is based on an episode from Goethe's Faust. His most ambitious work is Cantegril which has 32 demanding solo roles. There is also Odysseus and the Sirens of 1937 dedicated to the choir teachers of Paris.

As to the piano music, the Two Arabesques were written in 1917. One, written for Hélène Léon, is in six sharps and full of double sharps which does not make it easy to read. It is a lively work full of

difficulties and sometimes written on three staves instead of the usual two. There are dangerous leaps in the left hand, fifths and fourths in the right hand (see example from page 4). Notwithstanding this, it is a fine piece.

There is a set of Six Préludes written for Madame Jean Cruppi. The first is in E minor and payable by a Grade 7 pianist. It is a strong melodic piece in which the memorable theme is in right hand octaves. The second prelude is marked prelude orientale and is in F sharp major. This calls for a cool hand, steel figures and an admirable sostenuto not to mention essentially clear fingerwork. The third is in C minor, a short slow piece with some massive solemn chords at the end.. Nine notes. The fourth is in A flat and is predominantly a tranquil piece superbly written but very far from easy. The fifth is marked Prelude ancien and is anachronistic as the title suggests. It is in B minor. The final prelude is on G minor a quick piece with florid arpeggios throughout. This one is dedicated to Mademoiselle L. Ruckert.

There are two interesting things to note. Much of his music is dedicated to females and, unlike Debussy, his music has melodic and thematic content.

Sonorités for piano of 1919 is another example. They are dedicated to Madame Alfred Périere and, if she was a pianist, to play this work she must have been a phenomenal pianist. The three Esquisses are grade 7 or 8.

Did Mademoiselle Denise Haas, the dedicatee of the Etude in Sixths of 1916, ever play this piece? The figure six not only appears in the title but the study is written in six flats. It is exceptionally difficult. The Four Studies of 1915 begins with a prelude and Fugue, dedicated to Hélène Isidor, make up studies 1 and 2. Study three was written for Cécile Lambinet and is a slow piece in E. The fourth study was written for Daniel Ericourt. It is full of atmosphere, florid runs and some central drama. Rythmes of 1917 was written for Blanche Selva and is another example of how the composer starts in a relaxed or pensive mood and builds up to a mighty climax. There is a charming Barcarolle of 1906.

I am also impressed by the Sonata for violin and piano Op 24. It will very well-written and the composer is precise with his instructions. Like Dukas, Roger-Ducasse was highly self critical and destroyed some of his works because they were inadequate.

He died at Le Teilan-Médoc in Aquitaine, south west France on 19 July 1954

There is no doubt that his music is worthy and should be taken up.

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