

ALBERT ROUSSEL

by

Dr. David C.F. Wright

Albert Charles Paul Marie Roussel was born at Tourcoing in northern France, otherwise known as French Flanders, on 5 April 1869, the only child of wealthy French industrialists who specialised mostly in textiles. The child was named after his father who died of consumption shortly after his birth. The young widow, Louise, whose maiden name was also Roussel, never recovered from this loss and she died in 1877. Although she lavished her son with love and attention and he was devoted to her, her broken heart could not be repaired. The boy was brought up by his grandfather, Charles Roussel-Defontaine, who was mayor of Tourcoing. Later, young Albert's aunt married Felix Requillard and Albert was brought up by him, his grandfather having died in 1880 when Albert was eleven.



Every year his uncle took young Albert with his family to spend the summer months at Heyst on the Flemish coast. He developed a love for Belgium and claimed Flemish ancestry. Years later, in 1935 he composed his *Flemish Rhapsody*, Op. 56, in homage to the people who won the battle of Eperons d'Or. Roussel also said that "the admirable legend of Eulenspiegel makes 'our' Flemish hearts beat."

He studied Flemish songs and was impressed by the workers' chorales he heard at the Songs of the People Contest at the Brussels exhibition which led to his composing *Le Temeraire*, Op. 59, a grand opera evoking the revolt and birth of the Flemish people. It was unfinished at his death.

In 1884 he entered the Collège Stanislas in Paris training to become Naval officer and specialising in the study of mathematics. He always loved the sea since his early visits to the seaside resort in Belgium.

His first music instruction was from an eccentric organist at the Church of Saint Ambroise, but Roussel had no desire to take up music at this time.

In 1887 he joined the training ship, *Borda*, and on that and other ships made several journeys to French Indo-China. On his return to France he received a commission on the *Melpomene* and later joined the *Victorieuse* off Cherbourg.

While serving on these ships he began to compose. So promising were his first attempts that a fellow musical officer, Calve, the brother of a famous opera singer, suggested that Roussel show them to Edouard Colonne and the director of the Conservatory of Roubaix. The verdict was favourable and so Roussel resigned his commission from the Navy and went to Paris to study with Eugène Gigout.

Gigout was born in Nancy on 23 March 1844. In turn he had studied with Saint-Saëns, whom he replaced at the Madeleine. Gigout is remembered mainly for his fine output of organ music. He died in Paris on 9 December 1925.

In 1896 Roussel met Vincent D'Indy, who came from a wealthy and distinguished background. Roussel was one of his first pupils at the newly founded Schola Cantorum.

D'Indy was a competent composer. He was born in Paris on 27 May 1857. His family wanted him to study law but in 1872 he sent his Piano Quintet to César Franck and the rest is history, as they say. His Symphony no. 1 in A minor was unpublished but the Symphony no. 2 in B flat, Op. 37 had some success. It is his Symphony on a French Mountaineer's Song for piano and orchestra, Op. 25 that is his best known work. There is also a *Sinfonia Brevis*, Op. 70. There are three string quartets, nos. 1 in D, Op. 35, 2 in E, Op. 45 and 3 in D flat, Op. 96. There is a Piano Trio, Op. 98 and an earlier Clarinet Trio in B flat, Op. 28. His friend the composer Duparc had introduced him to Wagner and he became a great admirer of Wagner. D'Indy wrote five operas: *Le Chant de la Cloche*, *Fervaal*, *L'Etranger*, *La Légende de Saint Christopher* and *Le Rêve de Cynias*. As well as Roussel his pupils included Satie, Auric and Turina. He died in Paris on 1 December 1931.

Roussel's first success were *Two Madrigals* for four voices which won the prize from the Société des Compositeurs in 1898.

During 1904–6 he composed his first large-scale orchestral work, *La Poème de la Forêt*, which is his Symphony no. 1 in D minor, Op. 7. The four movements are entitled *Forêt d'hiver*, *Renouvres*, *Soir d'été* and

Faunes et Dryades. The opening movement has a marvellous portrayal of a winter blizzard.

In 1908 he married Blanche Preisach and went on an extended tour to Cochinchina and India which travels inspired his *Evocations* Op. 15 and *Padmavati*, an opera ballet in two acts, Op. 28, completed in 1918.

During World War One Roussel served with the Red Cross having been turned down for combat duty owing to ill-health. He was a transport driver both at Verdun and the battle of the Somme which greatly distressed him. Curiously he never wrote a war or protest work and even more curious is that his music is nearly always cheerful and vital. Nor did he write a work about the sea, his first love. The war had interrupted his work on his ballet *The Spider's Banquet*, Op. 17, which he had begun in 1912.

In January 1918 he was discharged and retired to Perroc-Guierre in Brittany where he completed *Padmavati*. This was followed by his *Symphony no. 2 in B flat*, Op. 23, which dates from 1919–21.

The symphony is dedicated to the French composer Rhené-Bâton (1879–1940). It is scored for a large orchestra: three flutes doubling piccolo, two oboes, cor anglais, two clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons and double bassoon, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, three percussion players, two harps, celesta and strings.

The opening movement begins slowly (crotchet = 72) and in 9/4 time with a bass clarinet over three bassoons with harp B flat octaves. Low horns enter and the cor anglais takes up the melodic fragment at bar 6 accompanied by divided violas. The oboes join in as do the low brass and timpani. A short passage in 12/4 is less slow and employs some mellow string playing. The opening tempo returns with flutes and oboes in unison in what is a somewhat strange but lovely sound. The metre constantly changes: 9, 6, 9, 6, 9, 12, 9, 12, 9, 12, 9 and 6. The *moins lent* passage highlights the warm string music. The movement accelerates at figure 3 to *moderément animé*, crotchet = 108, and in 4/4 time. The cellos take up a strident theme joined by an angry brass outburst but the movement remains relatively calm. The opening idea in the strings, in 9/4, returns at figure 5, and, now, in 3/4 *assez animé sans presser* there is a high violin part. The music quickens, crotchet = 132, with the oboe having a compelling role and the music shifts away from the D'Indy influence to pure Roussel. The tonality is now C. I adore the fluttering brilliant flute work and the crescendo at figure 11. When have power and beauty been so equally matched? There is more dazzling woodwind work and impressive horn writing, a super theme, in a scintillating climax. The tuba briefly recapitulates the lugubrious opening and is soon joined by the trombones. The violins, now in 12/4, take up the cause supported by busy woodwind. The music slows and drops to crotchet = 88 and 6/4 time and the oboe with clarinets and bassoons sing a nasal melody and three solo violins take it up. There is a little *accelerando* to crotchet = 132 and the music goes into F sharp minor with true Rousselian sound and glorious writing for two harps. The music simply sparkles and returns to the tonality of B flat as the horn theme make a welcome return. This is passed to the lower woodwind. The music slows again after figure 27 and to 3/4 time. The movement ends in a curious ambivalence of B flat and what could be F sharp minor.

The central movement could be dismissed as a scherzo and trio. It begins in G and is marked *modere*, dotted crotchet = 88. It is rustic, bucolic with a soaring repetitive violin line. The trumpet is also dance like. The harp work is a delight and the music has that captivating Rousselian joy. There is also that other great Rousselian feature, the onward drive. But the music does slow down to a passage in D flat mainly affecting the lower strings in a rich tapestry of sound. It is profound, personal and almost tragic. The oboe's contribution is very important. We pass in to F sharp minor and a soaring climax ensues before the fun music returns but still in three sharps. But we do return to G with that Rousselian joy, a climax and the peace of the countryside has the final word.

The finale is not altogether satisfactory. It never gets going. It begins slowly in A flat and has a broad theme low on the violins. The speed picks up a little but then it subsides. There is an angular theme and a brief climax. A lot of work in this movement is for the oboes and at one place the first oboe has to get top E flats, that is three E flats above middle C. The music goes into the tonality of C with a new and curious theme. The music is very nasal and dark and the metre changes briefly to 3/4 and there is yet another oboe theme. It presses on rhythmically and back to B flat but there is a long slow passage for clarinet solo and the music sinks into silent ambiguity.

In 1920 he purchased a delightful villa at Saint-Marguerite-sur-la-Mer near Varengeville and spent most of the rest of his life there quietly with his wife. His health was always a worry.

The Piano Concerto, Op. 36 dates from 1927. It has been subject to unfair criticism being described as



melodic nullity and that, at sixteen minutes, it is too short to be a concerto!

Surprisingly his favourite composers were Bach and Chopin, whose music he often played first thing in the morning. Another leisure pursuit was tackling mathematical problems. The rest of the morning would involve composition and his afternoons usually meant long walks by the sea. He was an extraordinarily pleasant and kind man, very cultured but sometimes a little aloof.

In 1930 Paris honoured him by holding a Musical Festival in Paris mainly devoted to his music.

His setting of Psalm 80 was given in London at The Queen's Hall on 28 July 1931 and the previous year he travelled to Boston for the premiere of his Symphony no. 3 in G minor, Op. 42, commissioned by Serge Koussevitzky for the Boston Symphony Orchestra, which I have no hesitation in saying is an unqualified masterpiece and the greatest French symphony written to date.

It is deservedly popular and needs no analysis from me.

The Symphony no. 4 in A, Op. 53 dates from 1934. It is scored for three flutes one doubling piccolo, two oboes, cor anglais, two clarinets,

bass clarinet, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings and is in four movements.

One critic wrote of this splendid piece, "Happy the man who can produce works like this that will last as long as men appreciate beauty."

It was very well received as was its predecessor.

The symphony is dedicated to Albert Wolff. He was born in Paris in 1884 and studied at the Conservatory and was Choirmaster of the Opera-Comique in Paris from 1908. He gave the premiere of Poulenc's *Le mamelles de Tiresias*. He introduced much French music in New York shortly after World War One. He made his debut at Covent Garden in 1937, the year of Roussel's death, with Debussy's *Pelléas and Mélisande*. He also wrote an opera *L'Oiseau Bleu* performed in New York in 1919. He was a fine interpreter of Roussel. He died in Paris in 1970.

The first movement has a slow introduction, crotchet = 48, and is slightly eerie and has a religious or spiritual feel about it. The woodwind are given solos before the *Allegro con brio* begins crotchet = 169 with a stunning angular theme. The metre has changed from 4/4 to 3/4. The music is bold, brave and has an exciting swagger and onward drive. The pace slackens a little, crotchet = 120, to accommodate the second theme. The music modulates to C and quickens. Throughout the orchestration is truly superb. The brass heralds the return of the *con brio allegro* (a tremendous moment) and the woodwind and harp sparkle. The music is both busy and exhilarating. We return to A major with some peaceful but interesting music, and then slows down for another haunting oboe melody accompanied by warm strings. The coda, in the quickest tempo of the movement, heads towards an abrupt but splendid end.

The slow movement is a joy. All slow movements should be like this. It begins *Lento Molto*, crotchet = 48, but it is so well written that it does not sound slow. Anyhow, it does not drag. The string melody is effortless and is later supported by the horns. A tam tam strikes at figure 24 introducing the sometimes exotic sound Roussel makes. The oboe sings a plaintive but compelling song. The solo trumpet meanders through soaring strings and the full orchestra sparkles complete with vigorous timpani writing. The music is thrilling. The strings have another outpouring of melodic invention. A flute solo in its low register with high cello writing is yet another delight. Trumpets and timpani thrive and the music accelerates to *Andante*, crotchet = 69, before reverting to the opening material commenced by the clarinet and then the flute over muted trumpets and, finally, the oboe and bassoon. I admire Roussel's equality in the use of the orchestra. A solo trumpet imitates a previous oboe theme which appears somewhat sad and string music appears before a calm and definite end.

The third movement is marked *allegro scherzando*, crotchet = 138 and is in F and 6/8 time. It is mainly delicate, deft but great fun. The humour simply buzzes and watch out for the bass clarinet clowning just before figure 43. The success of the movement also has much to do with the fact that the tempo does not

change. It keeps going and in marvellous good spirits.

The finale is an *allegro molto* and in A. The oboe gets things going over two clarinets, harp and strings in a very diverting and entertaining way. When the melody is strengthened with the whole orchestra the resultant character one of exuberant power. The music moves in to the tonality of C. This is really joyous and cheerful music full of captivating liveliness. The writing for the full orchestra is exemplary and absolutely faultless. The general opinion is that of all French composers Berlioz is the master of orchestration. The music relaxes slightly with a solo bassoon over three muted trumpets both unusual and very clever. The music then rushes to a splendid and abrupt end.

The recording I have is of a live performance by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under Erich Leinsdorf. It is stunning. This is the orchestra that has only had one truly great conductor who turned it into one of the world's finest orchestras. His name was Fritz Reiner.

It is this originality, durability of his music and technical skill which make Roussel undoubtedly a great composer.

In the 1930s he composed two sumptuous ballet scores, *Bacchus and Ariane* (1930) and *Aeneas* (1936). There are also some choice chamber works of the very highest quality, namely the luscious *Serenade for flute, string trio and harp* (1925), the delightful *Trio for flute viola and cello* (1929), the *String Quartet*, which Michael Kennedy dates at 1832!, and the enchanting *String Trio of 1937*.

Roussel was warned by his doctor to rest after a serious angina attack in the summer of 1936. He eventually went to Royan in the south west of France but on 13 August, 1937 he suffered a heart attack and was confined to his bed. His *Trio for clarinet, oboe and bassoon* will never be completed. On 23 August shortly before four o'clock in the afternoon he died.

His first love was the sea. He was an orphan, a sailor, husband, ambulance driver, professor, composer and one of that rare breed, a really nice guy! He is buried near his country house at Varengeville. His grave rightly overlooks the sea.

Like Rimsky-Korsakov, Albert Roussel started life as a sailor and turned to music only after reaching adulthood. (He finished his studies at the age of 38!) Despite this late start, all of Roussel's work is characterized by solid craftsmanship that was influenced by Debussy's impressionism in his early works and by neo-classicism in his later works.

Roussel was probably the dominant French composer of the inter-war era. He produced several enduring masterpieces, and his reputation is growing, rather than fading. All of which makes him one of music's most intriguing "what-ifs". What if he had devoted himself to music sooner? How great could he have been?

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