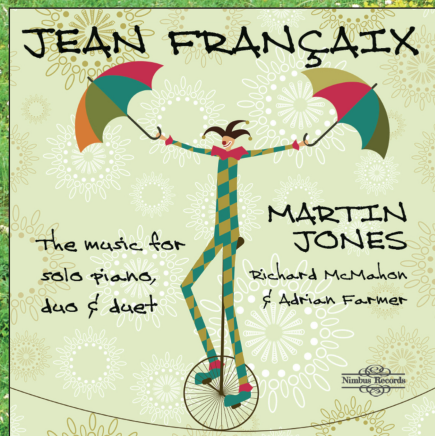


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JEAN
ROGER-DUCASSE

The complete piano music

Jean Roger-Ducasse (1873-1954)

The Piano Music

Martin Jones

with Adrian Farmer (duet)

Cover photograph : Jean Roger-Ducasse, March.1936 © Roger-Viollet

Recorded by Nimbus Records

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(Photo by Albert Harlingue/Roger-Viollet)

Gabriel Faure and Jean Roger-Ducasse at the piano, behind them from left to right, Louis Aubert, A.Z. Mathot, Maurice Ravel, Andre Caplet, Charles Koechlin, Emile Vuillermoz and Jean Hure.

We know that Roger-Ducasse played the piano in public, although he probably did not consider himself as primarily a performing musician. He was clearly an ambitious pianist, and one with an apparently very large hand. There is no doubting that Roger-Ducasse's piano music is among the most difficult in the repertoire. Martin Jones identifies the main challenge of these pieces as the constant extension required of each hand. A greater than average span is required that can strike a tenth (and frequently more) with ease, plus the ability to simultaneously play rapid chords and passing notes with the 2nd, 3rd and 4th fingers. Such wide-spread chords are a part of the search for new sonorities, which only sound as intended if they can be 'struck' rather than 'spread'. There are many occasions where a chord of up to 7 notes is written, often with a compass greater than a 12th, where two (or even three) of the notes are to be played by the thumb alone. Perhaps even more difficult, and occurring in virtually every bar, are long bass notes which must to be held even while both hands are fully occupied higher up the keyboard. To do this the performer must cultivate a very accurate use of the piano mechanism's 'middle' pedal, and the ability to play the bass note a split second ahead of the beat.

Roger-Ducasse's original works for piano are complete on Discs 1 & 2. Disc 3 presents three piano transcriptions (he made quite a number, including works by other composers), the original of the *Petite Suite* (a popular orchestration came later), and a curious set of Duet Etudes, which were presumably written as Conservatoire test pieces. The Etudes are progressive, starting out as pupil on top (primo) and master on the bottom (secondo), and step-by-step they develop into an equal partnership. Along the way Roger-Ducasse throws in every dirty trick in the duetists library, including hands-above-hands playing the same notes a split second apart, arms crossing under-and-over at speed, and big fortissimo chords for all four hands in a very slow tempo.

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	DISC 1	68.36
1	Barcarolle (1906)	6.40
	Six Préludes (1907)	10.55
2	I <i>Très nonchalant</i>	1.12
3	II <i>Très calme</i>	1.20
4	III <i>D'un rythme très précis</i>	1.10
5	IV <i>Très libre</i>	1.25
6	V <i>D'un rythme capricieux et tender</i>	2.47
7	VI <i>Très souple</i>	3.01
8	Prelude (1913) <i>Avec beaucoup de fantaisie</i>	1.10
9	Etude en Sol dièse mineur (1914) <i>Modéré</i>	6.46
	Quatre Etudes (1915)	14.39
10	I Prélude <i>Allegro</i>	4.55
11	II Fugue <i>Assez vite</i>	3.36
12	III <i>Lent</i>	2.09
13	IV <i>Lentement</i>	3.59
14	Variations sur un Choral (1915)	15.22
	Choral <i>Lentement</i>	
	1ere Variation <i>Même Mouvement</i>	
	2e Variation (Variation en Ut mineur de Beethoven) <i>Décidé</i>	
	3e Variation <i>Vite et léger</i>	

	4e Variation <i>Très lent</i>	
	5e Variation <i>Vite</i>	
	6e Variation <i>Très accusé</i>	
	7e Variation <i>Très lent et très expressif</i>	
	8e Variation <i>Presque lent et très souple</i>	
	9e Variation <i>Vite</i>	
	10e Variation <i>Très lent et très soutenu</i>	
15	Etude en Sixtes (1916)	8.08
	<i>Presque vite et avec une excessive fantaisie de rythme</i>	
16	Rythmes (1917)	4.46
	DISC 2	65.10
1	Etude en La bémol majeur (1916) <i>Presque lent</i>	9.32
2	Arabesques . . . (1917)	7.02
	Esquisses pour Piano (1917)	7.08
3	I <i>Lent</i>	1.32
4	II <i>Sans lenteur et gaîment</i>	1.02
5	III <i>Sans lenteur</i>	1.40
6	IV <i>Lent et grave</i>	2.54
7	Arabesques . . . No.2 (1919)	4.25
8	Sonorités (1919)	5.58

Jean Roger-Ducasse writes music that is the antithesis of all this. Not only does he avoid any visual or poetic references, his scores are frequently complex, densely written, and highly dissonant. Even now, almost a century later, it may take several hearings to achieve an understanding of all that is presented. The impetus for this style of writing for the piano was Gabriel Fauré.

Roger-Ducasse's veneration for his master would be lifelong, developing into a true friendship despite the age difference. We can also imagine the joy Fauré had in discovering a much younger man who shared his dedication to formal structure, harmonic logic and rigorous self-discipline. Comparing the keyboard style of the two composers after 1914 it is clear that Roger-Ducasse was intimately familiar with the new works of Fauré's final years. The simultaneous arrival of Fauré's distilled style, and the appearance of Roger-Ducasse's piano pieces seems more than coincidental. It is as if Fauré had struck a resonance in Roger-Ducasse, freeing him, at the relatively late age of 37, to begin writing keyboard works in a style that he could wholly embrace. Faced with the twin keyboard innovations of Debussy and Ravel, one can well understand Roger-Ducasse's inhibitions.

In terms of harmony and sonority Roger-Ducasse is striking out on new paths, but the formal construction of his piano works is traditional and straightforward as befits these single movement pieces. The A-B-A-coda pattern dominates, often with verbatim repeats of the opening material roughly two-thirds of the way through the piece. He also has a preference for the 'black-note' keys: of the 27 movements that constitute his solo piano music, twelve are in flat or sharp keys, with A-flat (g-sharp) and G-flat (F-sharp) accounting for 10 of them. If nothing else favouring these particular keys is an indication of Roger-Ducasse's own comfort at the keyboard: they are more difficult to read, but they fit the hand more naturally.

It is perhaps part of the reason for his neglect that in an age when French composers were developing piano miniatures into tone-poems, Roger-Ducasse was content with the inherited models. By his death in 1918 Debussy had demonstrated that a piano piece up to 10 minutes duration could contain a wealth of specific visual, psychological and dramatic experience. His 24 Preludes (1910-13) are all explorations of worlds conjured up by the evocative titles - *La cathédrale engloutie*, *La fille aux cheveux de lin* – attached to every piece. And in the first decade of the 20th century, Ravel, the supreme master of sound painting had transformed the innocent Nocturne into the magical world of ‘Noctuelles’ (*Miroirs*, 1905) or the gruesome one of ‘Le Gibet’ (*Gaspard de la Nuit*, 1908)

Such extra-musical associations are not to be found in the music of Roger-Ducasse. His earliest surviving piano pieces ‘Barcarolle’ (1906) Six Préludes (1907) certainly betray the over-powering influence of Debussy in harmony and sonority. However, his stance remained resolutely one of music for its own sake, ‘pure’ music, and difficult rather than popular music at that.

Works organised as sound-pictures allow (perhaps compel) composers to follow a linear path, to tell a story. Their progress through beginning, middle and end are not bound by established structures requiring the repetition and development of musical ideas announced at the outset. Their exploration of colour, of emotion, and sensual impression, is motivated and organised by new techniques replacing two-hundred years of musical tradition. Ironically the actual harmonic language promoted by Debussy and Ravel becomes simpler, more open and attractive, less dissonant and challenging. Part of the composer’s ambition is to create a deep impression on first hearing.

9	Barcarolle No.2 (1920)	8.56
10	Barcarolle No.3 (1921)	7.40
11	Impromptu (1921)	5.03
12	Chant de l’aube (1921)	4.25
13	Romance (1923)	5.01

DISC 3 51.51

Petite Suite pour piano à quatre mains (1899) 5.08

1	I Souvenance	1.45
2	II Berceuse	1.20
3	III Claironnerie	2.03

4 **Prélude d’un Ballet** (1910) *Réduction pour piano par l’Auteur* 3.01

‘Le Parc abandonné d’un château où vivaient les seigneurs et les dames d’autrefois . . . Automne . . . Le Poète, rêvant de jadis, s’avance . . .’
 [The Park, a castle once inhabited by the lords and the ladies of yesteryear, abandoned . . . Autumn . . . The Poet, dreaming of the past, advances . . .] *Mr D. Calvocoressi*

5 **Interlude ‘Au jardin de Marguerite’** (1913) 11.06

Réduction pour piano par l’Auteur
 La nuit sur le jardin . . . Réveil de l’ame du jardin . . . Bruissements silencieux des soirs . . .
 . . . une cloche lointaine, Presque irréal, semble élargir le silence . . . Faust, alangu, repose, écoute . . . [Night in the garden . . . Awakening of the soul of the garden . . . rustles in the quiet evening . . . a distant bell, almost unreal, seems to expand the silence . . . Faust, languid, rests, listens . . .]

Etudes à quatre mains, pour un Commença

	Livre I (1916)	7.08
6	I <i>Presque lent</i>	1.17
7	II <i>Sans lenteur</i>	1.33
8	III <i>Presque vite</i>	1.00
9	IV <i>Lent</i>	1.26
10	V <i>Presque vite et très rythmé</i>	1.52
	Livre II (1916)	10.51
11	VI <i>Sans lenteur</i>	4.36
12	VII <i>Lent et triste</i>	3.20
13	VIII <i>Assez vite et très rythmé</i>	2.55
	Livre III (1917)	6.02
14	I <i>Adagio classique. Lent</i>	4.13
15	II <i>Scherzando. Assez vite</i>	1.49
16	J. S. Bach, Passacaglia BWV582	8.34
	<i>Transcription pour Piano par Roger-Ducasse (1918)</i>	

Jean Roger-Ducasse

Jean Jules Aimable Roger Ducasse, later known as Jean Roger-Ducasse, was born in Bordeaux on 18 April 1873. He was born into a wealthy family and as a result received a good education. He studied both Latin and Greek as well as French literature, and

cultural hub of Europe. The music of Ravel and Debussy along with the arrival of Stravinsky's ballets *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring* at Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in Paris set the tone for change. By the 1920s jazz had been introduced from America and Poulenc, Honegger, Milhaud and the rest of *Les Six* amongst others had already reacted to the Modernist music of the previous two decades. The rest of Europe and America was experiencing similar developments in the music of Strauss, Bartók, Janáček, Scriabin, Varèse and Ives. By the late 1920s Arnold Schoenberg had finalised his twelve-tone serial technique and music would never quite be the same again.

In the context of the radical musical surroundings at the time it is perhaps less surprising that Roger-Ducasse did not establish himself more firmly as a composer of note. Yet his music speaks as clearly and communicatively today as when it was written and it is now high-time to revisit the works of this unjustly forgotten talent.

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The Piano Music

Even the titles of Ducasse's piano music are sufficient to fix his line of descent from Chopin. A Barcarolle, Nocturne, Etude, Prelude, or Impromptu are, at best, imprecise architectural forms. Nonetheless Chopin endowed them with such enduring gravitas and character that succeeding generations have continued to write pieces in the same mould.

In the case of Roger-Ducasse it is Chopin expanded through the harmonic developments of his master Fauré, whose own piano music is dominated by the Nocturne (13), Barcarolle (13), Prelude (9), and Impromptu (6).

Taillan-Médoc, Gironde on 19 July 1954.

Exactly why the work of such an active and influential figure as Roger-Ducasse has fallen into obscurity is something of a mystery. The majority of his major works were performed in his lifetime, often on more than one occasion, and the reception of his works were generally positive. An article that appeared in *The Musical Times* in 1921 by Alfred J Swan titled *A Modern Classicist: Roger-Ducasse* was overwhelmingly positive and was particularly impressed by the composer's ability to combine classical and impressionistic techniques stating: 'Of all modern classicists, perhaps none is more successful than Roger-Ducasse. All the best qualities of the French imagination are combined in him--an abundantly rich imagination, clear and deep thought, graceful and precise workmanship, and an unerring taste.'

There are, however, several possible reasons for the absence of the work of Roger-Ducasse in the repertoire. He was, firstly, a favourite pupil of Fauré and the close involvement and lasting influence of his mentor never quite left him, both in his music and in the public's perception of him. Roger-Ducasse was in many ways in the shadow of Fauré. He was also said to have been an uncompromising individual and fiercely critical, both of himself and others, and to have destroyed any works that fell short of his exacting standards. In his isolated final years he wrote many letters to friends, which are bitter and hurtful not least the letters to Marguerite Long. The uncompromising trait of his personality is most clear in his music, which is difficult for both the performer and listener. Roger-Ducasse's intensely chromatic musical language is achieved through complex contrapuntal techniques which render the piano music in particular a gargantuan task.

Perhaps the biggest reason for his marginalisation, however, was out of his control: the explosion of Modernism at the turn of the century at which point Paris became the

showed his musical talents at an early age. Shortly after applying for a place to study at the Paris Conservatoire in 1889 his father died which had a profound effect on the young man and he would not make the move to Paris for another three years.

Roger-Ducasse gained a place as a student at the Paris Conservatoire in 1892 studying harmony with Emile Pessard, fugue and counterpoint with André Gédalge and, in 1895, he was admitted to the composition class of Gabriel Fauré. Ducasse's composition classmates included Maurice Ravel, Florent Schmitt, Charles Koechlin, Nadia Boulanger and Georges Enesco.

His earliest published works were songs with piano accompaniment. His schooling clearly shows in his choice of texts from the French literary canon with settings ranging from the fifteenth-century François Villon to the symbolist Georges Rodenbach. Another early work is the *Petite Suite* for piano four hands, which was published in 1899. His taste for vocal and piano music would be a sign of things to come.

Roger-Ducasse was to develop a close relationship with Fauré who, in 1900, gave Roger-Ducasse the task of making a piano reduction of the score of his Requiem. In the same year his teacher encouraged him to enter the Grand Prix de Rome but his entry was unsuccessful. In 1902 after another unsuccessful attempt, he won the second Grand Prix de Rome with his cantata *Alcyone*, with Ravel gaining fourth prize -- an achievement that Ravel would not better.

Following the success of *Alcyone* Roger-Ducasse composed his first major work the symphonic poem with mixed chorus *Au jardin de Marguerite* (1901-1905). *Au jardin de Marguerite* is a sizeable composition (a complete performance lasts one hour fifteen minutes) inspired by the Faust legend. The work was premiered nearly a decade later in Paris on 18 April 1913 at the Société Nationale de Musique conducted by Rhené-Baton.

The following years were productive for Roger-Ducasse composing several works in both large and small scale forms. He began writing for the piano producing a Barcarolle (1906) and Six Preludes (1907), wrote his first and only work for organ a *Pastorale* (1909), and he completed his String Quartet no.1 (1900-1909). He also wrote the orchestral works *Variations plaisantes sur un thème grave* with harp solo (1906) and the *Suite Française* (1907), and composed numerous choral works the most notable of which being the *Sarabande* a symphonic poem for orchestra and mixed chorus (1910).

Roger-Ducasse's activities were not purely devoted to composition. In 1909 along with Ravel, Vuillermoz and Koechlin he founded the the Société Musicale Indépendante and a year later became inspector general for the teaching of singing in Paris schools. The two activities are in many ways a contradiction in terms: the progressive Société Musicale Indépendante being a breakaway group from the conservative Société Nationale de Musique and his role as inspector of singing in Paris schools looked to conserve French musical traditions. Nevertheless these activities show Roger-Ducasse's active involvement in musical life in Paris.

It is not clear whether Roger-Ducasse gave performances of his own works at the piano but he was certainly a fairly active pianist during this time. He had developed a close friendship with the famed pianist Marguerite Long in the 1910s, who premiered his Six Preludes in 1912 at the Société Nationale de Musique, and Roger-Ducasse became her partner of choice in performance of piano duo repertoire. Roger-Ducasse also developed a close friendship with Claude Debussy and would later gave the first performance of Debussy's *En blanc et noir* with the composer in 1916.

Roger-Ducasse's next major work is the 'mimodrame lyrique' *Orphée* composed 1912-1913. Based on the Orpheus myth, the text (adapted by Roger-Ducasse) is delivered by the chorus while the onstage action is mimed. The ambitious work received its first

performance in concert in St Petersburg in 1914 and, due to the outbreak of World War I, didn't receive a full stage production until 1926 at the Paris Opéra.

Following *Orphée* Roger-Ducasse continued to compose in earnest primarily for orchestra and for solo piano. The orchestral works include *Nocturne de Printemps* (1915-1918), *Marche Française* (1916-1920), *Epithalame* (1922) and *Poème symphonique sur le nom de Gabriel Fauré* (1922). The piano works include the *Quatre Etudes* (1915), *Variations sur un Choral* (1915), *Esquisses pour Piano* (1917) and two Barcarolles (1920, 1921). He also composed a Piano Quartet (1899-1912) *Allegro appassionato* for violin and piano (1917), a *Romance* for cello and piano (1918) and a few choral pieces.

By the mid 1920s Roger-Ducasse's output slowed considerably and his three act comic opera *Cantegril* (1927-1930), which was premiered in Paris at the Opéra-Comique on 9 February 1931, marks the end of a steady stream of compositional activity from the composer; Roger-Ducasse's commitments at the Paris Conservatoire seem to be the reason for this. Sources conflict as to exactly when Roger-Ducasse took up a teaching post at the Conservatoire (some state as early as 1920 succeeding Fauré) but it is unanimously agreed that he gained a formal post in 1935 succeeding Paul Dukas as Professor of Composition. He is reported to have taken his role at the Conservatoire very seriously and Roger-Ducasse the composer quickly and comfortably became Roger-Ducasse the teacher. He held his position until just after the outbreak of World War II when he retired to Bordeaux.

In his final years he became isolated and cut off all ties to his musical connections with Paris, and was disillusioned and unhappy. He completed only two major compositions in his retirement: *Le petit faune* for orchestra composed between 1950 and 1954 and the String Quartet no.2 which had begun composing in in 1912 and completed in 1953. His String Quartet no.2 was first performed on 14 May 1953 a year before his death in

The Complete Piano Music of
Jean Roger-Ducasse (1873-1954)
MARTIN JONES

DISC 1 (68.36)

- 1 Barcarolle (1906)
2-7 Six Préludes (1907)
8 Prelude (1913)
9 Etude en Sol dièse mineur (1914)
10-13 Quatre Etudes (1915)
14 Variations sur un Choral (1915)
15 Etude en Sixtes (1916)
16 Rythmes (1917)

DISC 2 (65.10)

- 1 Etude en La bémol majeur (1916)
2 Arabesques . . . (1917)
3-6 Esquisses pour Piano (1917)
7 Arabesques . . . No.2 (1919)
8 Sonorités (1919)
9 Barcarolle No.2 (1920)

- 10 Barcarolle No.3 (1921)
11 Impromptu (1921)
12 Chant de l'aube (1921)
13 Romance (1923)

DISC 3 (51.51)

- 1-3 Petite Suite à quatre mains * (1899)
4 Prélude d'un Ballet (1910)
5 Interlude 'Au jardin de Marguerite' (1913)
Etudes à quatre mains *
6-10 Livre I (1916)
11-13 Livre II (1916)
14-15 Livre III (1917)
16 J. S. Bach, Passacaglia BWV582
Transcription par Roger-Ducasse (1918)

* with Adrian Farmer (duet)

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