

JOSEPH-GUY ROPARTZ

A Brief Introduction

by

Dr David C F Wright

(1979)

Joseph Marie Guy Ropartz was born in Guingamp, Cotes du Nord on 15 June 1864.

He is one of the many neglected and forgotten French composers.

There are probably two main reasons for this. Firstly, his music is somewhat severe in keeping with his strong Roman Catholicism and, secondly, it shows too much influence of Cesar Franck whose music and musical form left, and still leaves, much to be desired.

He was born of an old Breton family. As a child he showed a real interest in music playing the bugle, horn and double bass in local orchestras. He wrote his first musical composition in 1882 but he also wrote poems and short stories. Artistic creativity was always in him. But music was not considered to be a career and so he studied law and received his degree in 1885 but he decided on a musical career. Having studied at Rennes, Vannes and Angers he went to the Paris Conservatoire. He had a love and a gift for literature but preferred music. He was a very clever intellectual.



He was a pupil of Francoise Clement Theodore Dubois and Massenet at the Paris Conservatory.

Dubois was born in Rosnay in 1837. He studied under Ambroise Thomas and was one of the successors of Saint Saens as the organist at The Madeleine a post which he held from 1877 to 1906. He was professor of harmony at the Paris Conservatory from 1871 and director from 1896 to 1905. He resigned in protest because Ravel was prevented from entering for the Prix de Rome for the fourth time. He composed operas, ballets, oratorios, cantatas, two piano concertos and a violin concerto. He died in Paris in 1924.

Jules Massenet is, of course, better known. He wrote twenty three operas of which Manon (1884) and Werther (1892) are the best known. He also wrote orchestral music and often used the word scenes in his titles. He also wrote a curious Piano Concerto in E flat which I have performed. He lived from 1842 to 1912 and was also a pupil of Thomas.

Ropartz moved on to private lessons with Franck during 1887 to 1890 who greatly influenced him.

Franck was Belgian, born in 1822. He studied with Reicha, became the organist of the church of Saint-Clotilde. He developed the art of improvisation and Liszt admired him. But improvisation can be a problem since one of its features can include repetition and too much of it. His early works were influenced by Gretry and are among his better pieces. But many of his other works suffer, in my view and in the view of many many others, of being too repetitive as are the works of Schubert. In Franck's only symphony the main themes are done to death (overcooked and badly burnt as Beecham said)

which is the sign of a bad composer, one who does not know what else to do but keep repeating the same material over and over again. However, most people like the symphony. It is my professional view that his religious works are worthy of revival such as Ruth, The Tower of Babel, The Beatitudes, Redemption, Rebecca and the masses.

Ropartz and Franck became great friends largely due to their dedication to Catholicism although Ropartz concentrated his music on Breton legends or the legends of Celtic France as in *Les Landes*, *Scenes Bretonnes*, *A Marie Endorme* and *Soir sur les chaumes*. His *La Chasse du Prince Arthur* is based on a poem by Brizeux entitled, *Les Bretons*.

His earliest works show a lack of a personal language. His song cycle *Quatre Poemes d'apres l'intermezzo de Heine* owes much to Schumann's *Frauenlieben und leben* a masterful work. Ropartz was very sensitive to criticism. His *Symphony no. 1 (sur un choral Breton)* was ravaged as being too cramped, dark and moody in the sense of temperamental. Yet Albert Magnard and Paul Dukas both admired it and I share their enthusiasm.

The weakness in this symphony is because of its evident influence of Franck. It dates from 1894 -5 and was premiered on 29 December 1895. It was dedicated to Duparc who, in turn dedicated his *La Vie anterieure* to Ropartz. The work begins with the Breton chorale and the movement is in sonata form which makes it a genuine symphony. The composer said that he was also influenced by the Breton landscape. Debussy was one who ravaged the piece and reproached Ropartz for not writing in the style of Debussy and yet the idea of Debussy's engulfed cathedral is here in that the religious music seems to belong to a cathedral. The scherzo of this symphony is woven into the slow movement. Dukas said that this symphony was of great importance and of the highest musical quality.

The *Symphony no. 2* was completed in 1900 and the premiere was to be conducted by the composer but he was worried about his daughter Monique who was ill and so Vincent d'Indy was appointed to conduct the first performance at the *Societe Nationale* on 26 April 1901 but pulled out and it was left to Pierre de Breville to undertake it at less than a days notice. Sadly, it did not fare well.

Ropartz was badly affected by its failure and the work was forgotten which is a pity because it is a very rewarding piece although I only know it in its version for two pianos. It has a religious feel and is classical in design. There seems to be some influence to Beethoven and the Choral symphony. The finale has a theme in Dorian mode and evokes Breton music. Later in life, Ropartz said that he was surprised that the symphony did not catch on.

He was director of the Nancy Conservatoire from 1894 to 1919 and then was conductor of the *Strasbourg Orchestra* from 1919 to 1929. In Nancy in 1902 he gave the first performance in France of Bach's *St John Passion*. He invited the finest soloists of the day such as Ysaye and Cortot. He also had concerts concentrating on certain themes such as the German symphony, the *Symphonic Poem of the Romantic Overture*.

His *Symphony no. 3* and his *Symphony no. 4* of 1911 date from his period in Nancy. The *Symphony no. 4* was premiered at the *Paris Lamoureux Concerts* on 15 October 1911 under the direction of Camille Chevillard. The audience were enthusiastic. It received great acclaim in America whose first performance was in Boston with the *Boston Symphony Orchestra* under Andre Caplet. Had Caplet not returned to France during the First World War he may have performed it many more times in America and enhanced its success.

In design it is like the *Symphony no. 1* with two sonata-allegro movements framing a slow movement which incorporates a scherzo. Gaston Carraud wrote that the work has a beauty and is rigorous and is powerful because of the composer's powerful thinking..

While at Nancy his opera *La Pays* was produced on 1 February 1912 and at the Opera Comique in Paris on 16 April 1913. He wrote much incidental music including a stage version of Loti's *Pecher d' Islands* in 1891, *Le Mystere de Saint Nicholas* (1905) and *Oedipe a Colonne* (1914). After his retirement his ballet *L'Indiscreet* was produced at the Paris Opera in 1936.

He also composed organ music and a fine Requiem and the year before his retirement he composed a Rhapsody for cello and orchestra but the concerto form did not appeal to him..

In 1929 he retired to his family home in Lanloup. His wife died on New Year's Day 1939 and then there was the second world war, Ropartz having lived through the first world war and the occupation of France. At this time Ropartz wrote many religious works and it is clear that they were in opposition to the war. *Le Preier du combattant* (The Prayer of the Combatant) is the most obvious example. He also wrote a work based on George VI's Christmas message of 1940 which he called *Sur le seuil de annee* (On the threshold of the Year). That year also saw his *Ave Verum* and the following year a *Salve Regina* and a setting of Psalm 129. The only comfort in the war years was his strong Catholic faith. He also wrote a *Petite Symphonie* being lead back into the symphonic genre and to the *Symphony no. 5* premiered on 14 November at a UNESCO concert conducted by Charles Munch. This symphony is a war symphony but majors on the joy of deliverance and freedom.

His music is always melodious and often modal which sometimes gives it a mystic flavour.

Among his other compositions are three violin sonatas, two cello sonatas, a sonatina for flute and piano, a String Trio, a Piano Trio and six string quartets although the first one in G minor does not bear a number. The String Quartet no. 5 in D is subtitled *Quasi una Fantasia*. He also wrote *Prelude, Marine* and *Chansons* for flute, string trio and harp which was recorded many years ago.

As an old man he could often be seen in his black hat and coat and his long white beard walking locally. He had a kind word for everybody.

He was such an admired and loved figure that he was known as *The Spokesman* for the Bretons.

He died in Lanloup in his native Brittany on 22 November 1955 at the age of 91.

Copyright David C F Wright 1979. This article, in part or the whole, must not be used in any way, copied, stored in a retrieval system, downloaded without the prior written consent of the author.