



BRILLIANT
CLASSICS



ALPHONSE
HASSELMANS

Music for Harp

FLORALEDA SACCHI

The Art of the Harp: Alphonse Hasselmans

Alphonse Hasselmans was not only one of the leading figures in the history of the harp, but also an influential figure in the unique cultural flourishing of *fin de siècle* Paris. Born on 5 March 1845 in Liège, Belgium, he was the eldest son of Coralie Eugénie Vallée and Joseph Hasselmans, a violinist and conductor who, after having directed orchestras in Rouen and Nantes, was appointed resident conductor of the Liège orchestra in 1844.

Hasselmans begun studying the harp under the guidance of Xavier Désargus, but at the age of nine he moved to Strasbourg, where his father was appointed director of the Théâtre Municipal orchestra (Wagner praised his skills) and, in 1855, director of the Strasbourg Conservatoire. Hasselmans completed his harp studies in Strasbourg with Gottlieb Krüger, and we know from his biographies that he also studied with Félix Godefroid, the acclaimed Belgian harpist and composer. Both Krüger and Godefroid were students of Elias Parish Alvars, the first great soloist of the double-action pedal harp, patented in 1810 by Sébastien Erard. Berlioz described Alvars as the ‘Liszt of the harp’.

In 1865, aged 20, Alphonse was appointed solo harpist of the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels, a position he held until 1870. In 1871 he became a soloist of Benjamin Bilsé’s orchestra (which later became the Berliner Philharmoniker), and in 1872 he joined the private orchestra of Baron Paul von Derwies.

In 1874, aged 29, Alphonse moved to Paris, hired by the new orchestra of the Théâtre de la Gaîté, which he left in 1878 for the Opéra Comique. An article featured in *Putnam’s Magazine* portrays him as follows: ‘Mr Hasselmans was then young, with light brown hair and a beard, remarkably good-looking. In spite of his unusual height [ca. 185 cm], he handled his instrument with perfect ease and grace.’ Many students were witness to his towering figure, and several newspapers reported on his powerful sound and velvet touch.

Life in Paris marked a fundamental change in Alphonse's life both privately and professionally. In 1875 he married Anna de Boudagoff, the daughter of a wealthy Russian-Armenian family, with whom he had two children, Marguerite (1876) and Louis (1878). Both had intensely musical lives; Marguerite, described as 'a modern young woman who wore make-up and dared to smoke in public', later became the mistress of Fauré, and she was also a close friend of Albéniz, who dedicated to her the third volume of *Iberia*, as well as of Paul Dukas, with whom she corresponded regularly for 40 years. Louis, a child prodigy who played the cello, performed often with his father and was a member of the celebrated Quatuor Capet before taking up conducting. The Hasselmans family settled in the Avenue du Bois-de-Boulogne, the most exclusive street in Paris and a symbol of the belle époque.

Travelling from Paris, Alphonse performed as a soloist in France, Belgium and Germany, often in duo with cellist Adrien-François Servais, flautist Paul Taffanel and many prominent singers. There are dozens of his concerts reported in the press, both public and in private salons (that of the musical patron Polignac, for example).

It was also in Paris that Hasselmans established his undisputed dominance in teaching. With prestigious names already counted among his students (such as the Queen of Belgium), on 1 May 1884 he was appointed professor at the Paris Conservatoire, inheriting from former teacher Prumier a class of only two students and leaving behind the busiest class of the entire conservatoire when he died suddenly on 19 May 1912. Several newspapers of the time often praised the class for its excellence, adding that if one wanted to listen to good music and true talent, one only had to attend the harp Premier Prix. In recognition of his immense contribution to the field of harp playing, Hasselmans was awarded French honorary citizenship in 1903 and the Legion d'honneur in 1905.

Rewarding talent was the key to his teaching, and Hasselmans chose his students with care; if he recognised a talent then he tried to convince him/her to study the harp, and anyone without the economic means received lessons for free... Hasselmans even

took to stealing students from other classes! No one was forgiven for being unprepared, and students were managed with strict discipline and subjected to the professor's terrible irony in front of the class. But though his pupils recall him as cold and terrifying (he was, conversely, witty, cultured and cosmopolitan in his letters – an elegant man who had music written for him by Pierné, Widor, Roger-Ducasse, Busser, Dubois, Saint-Saëns and Sibelius, among others), they also remember him with great affection for the total equality of treatment they received as well as for the opportunities he gave them: should Fauré need a harpist, then Hasselmans would nominate one of his students, who were recommended to the best orchestras and played in the orchestra of harps that Hasselmans founded.

Moreover, students found every year a new piece composed by Pierné, Bizet or Fauré as part of the conservatoire's harp exam, and the professor's harp class also included unexpected names such as Pauline Viardot (a leading 19th-century mezzo-soprano) and the composer Nadia Boulanger. His teaching prepared all the greatest harpists of the 20th century (Salzedo, Renié, Grandjany, Tournier, Laskine, Jamet, Sassoli) and, of the following generation, musicians such as Zabaleta. Many harpists today can trace their pedagogical lineage back to Hasselmans (myself included).

The harp, a favourite instrument of the Art Nouveau, shines out in Hasselmans' compositions: they are never too long, never excessive, but highly refined in colour, with evocative and iridescent effects that one can find in paintings, jewellery and glasses of the epoch. In his short essay entitled *La harpe et sa technique* he outlines his compositional style:

The harp, in its lower register, has a rich, full sound. Its bass notes have power and roundness too often ignored: most artists rarely use them and do not exploit their potential. The middle register is the best for singing: its tone is perfect for sustaining sounds. The high register is exclusively brilliant and it is useful for fast passages.

German Romanticism often influences Hasselmans' music (as is evident from his transcriptions), and there is a discernible echo of Mendelssohn in such romances as *Chanson de Mai* Op.40. Goethe and Schubert can both be detected in *Gretchen am Spinnrade (Fileuse)* Op.27, and while Schumann inspires various *Preludes* and *Etudes*, there is also the influence of Chopin in *Nocturne* Op.43 and *Mazurka* Op.31. Spain and the Near East, much in vogue at that time, emerge in *Gitana* Op.21, *Guitare* Op.50 and *Sérénade* Op.5 or more rhythmic pieces like *Patrouille* Op.18 and *Menuet* Op.34. Works like *La Source* Op.44, *Au Monastère* Op.29 and *Follets* Op.48, meanwhile, are completely devoted to evocation as well as what was called 'école de la fluidité'.

Hasselmans composed almost exclusively for solo harp (there do exist a few chamber arias and duets with cello), and while some of his pieces are still popular (*La Source* doubles as a mobile-phone ringtone and features in the music of the video game *Zelda*), many others have been almost entirely forgotten – although they were highly successful in their day thanks to the widespread distribution of Durand editions. This CD assembles for the first time a large number of Hasselmans' concert pieces, some of which have (amazingly) never been recorded before.

© Floraleda Sacchi

Floraleda Sacchi

Born in Como, Italy, Floraleda Sacchi studied harp with Lisetta Rossi, Alice Giles, Alice Chalifoux and Judy Loman. She has won 16 prizes in Italian and international competitions, and has performed in major halls and festivals in Europe, Asia, the Middle East and North America – among them Carnegie Hall, Palace of Nations, Gewandhaus Leipzig, Binyanei Hauma (Jerusalem), Kyoto Prefectural Hall (ALTI), Gasteig (Munich) and CBC Glenn Gould Studio. Her performances have been broadcast by major radio and television companies the world over.

Sacchi has recorded CDs for prestigious labels such as Decca, Philips, Universal, Deutsche Grammophon and Tactus. In 2011 she started a CD collection for Amadeus Arte entitled 'Portraits' Collection', dedicated to various composers with whom she has worked or simply admires.

In addition to her wide-ranging repertoire, Sacchi also plays historical and traditional harps as well as the midi harp. Her first book *Elias Parish Alvars: Life, Music, Documents* was published by Odilia Publishing Ltd when she was just 21, and she is the author of several articles as well as music editions and arrangements for Ut Orpheus Edizioni. She also composes for the theatre.

Sacchi's passions include travelling, reading, studying, drawing, photography and cooking. Since 2006 she has been Artistic Director of the LakeComo Festival.

www.floraledasacchi.com

Recording: 4–6 March 2013, Vibe Productions, Como, Italy
Recorded and mixed by Filadelfo Castro at Vibe Productions
Producer: Floraleda Sacchi
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Hasselmans

Music for Harp

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Floralda Sacchi

ALPHONSE HASSELMANS 1845-1912

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|----|--|------|
| 1 | Gondoliera (Barcarolle No.2) Op.39 | 4'20 |
| 2 | La Source (Concert Study) Op.44 | 4'25 |
| 3 | Patrouille (March) Op.18 | 5'36 |
| 4 | Nocturne Op.43 | 4'03 |
| 5 | Sérénade Op.5 | 4'43 |
| 6 | Chanson de Mai (Romance without Words) Op.40 | 3'10 |
| 7 | Mazurka Op.31 | 3'29 |
| 8 | Follets (Caprice-étude) Op.48 | 2'49 |
| 9 | Gnomes (Caprice caractéristique) Op.49 | 3'14 |
| 10 | Petite Valse Op.25 | 3'25 |
| 11 | Romance Op.6 | 5'41 |
| 12 | Gretchen am Spinnrade (Marguerite au Rouet ou Fileuse) Op.27 | 5'10 |
| 13 | Menuet Op.34 | 3'39 |
| 14 | Guitare (Pièce caractéristique) Op.50 | 4'15 |
| 15 | Au Monastère (Sketch) Op.29 | 3'45 |
| 16 | Gitana (Caprice) Op.21 | 6'23 |

FLORALEDA SACCHI *harp*

Instrument: Lyon & Healy (1969), 'Ginevra' Style 30, No.06406

Total time: 68'45

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