

**PAUL BAZELAIRE – THE
TRANSITION TO THE MODERN
FRENCH CELLO AGE**

written by David Johnstone

BAZELAIRE, Paul

Born: 1886, 4th March (Sedan, France)

Died: 1958

Paul Bazelaire was one of those amazing talents in which everything almost seemed too easy. He was a real prodigy, but early success did not go to his head. Not only an exceptional cellist, but many writings – original works and transcriptions – were produced in his hand with fine craftsmanship. This small article reveals a little more light on the man who helped shape France's renaissance in the cello world during the first half of the twentieth century.

Paul Bazelaire was born in 1886, son of a distinguished writer who won many prizes for literature and poetry in France and Belgium. On his mother's side, both his mother and grandmother were both good musicians, and taught him his first lessons in theory and piano. He began studying the cello at the age of seven thanks to H. Clarival, the excellent Director of the Philharmonic Company of Sedan, his city of birth. When he was ten years old Bazelaire began his studies at the Paris Conservatoire. He was an excellent pianist for a child, as well as something of a cello prodigy, and at first he was not able to decide on which instrument to concentrate. Finally, for the lasting good fortune of all cellists, he entered the class of the important cello professor, Delsart.

Meanwhile, he made his debut at the age of eleven in his hometown, Sedan, in December of 1897. That same year he took first prize in cello at the Academy. By the following year it is known that he had already composed some 50 different pieces of music! Obviously, the academic and performing sides went 'hand in hand', a little later, at 17, whilst a student of Xavier Leroux, he won first prize in harmony, and two years later won first prize in composition and counterpoint.

After leaving formal studies he immediately began a concert soloist career, and was to travel extensively in Poland, Russia, Germany, Austria, Italy, Tunisia, England, and Belgium. He had great success at the Academies of Pétrograd and Moscow, and with the Philharmonic societies of Warsaw, Lodz, Cracow, Prsemysil, Vienna, Berlin and Hamburg. He also performed as soloist with the London Covent Garden Orchestra, and others of Manchester, Rome and Pisa.

Conductor Sir Henry Wood remembered him from as far back as 1899 (then still only 13):

"He had come to us from a tour in France and Germany and had twice played in Berlin at the command of the emperor. He must have created an impression because the court sculptor Degas executed a bust of him, which still adorns the Tiergarten"

In the 1920's and 1930's he had become a recognized master of the cello. One critic wrote: *"Bazelaire plays with both flexibility and brilliance. He is a master of the bow, performing with intelligence, always giving a fine interpretation. He will have bright success!"* Continuing with his concert career, he also became a well-known teacher. He was appointed professor with the National Academy of Paris in 1918.

From the age of 32 years, when he became professor at the National Academy, he attracted and trained many student cellists. He was the author of several significant works on the relationship between technique and interpretation, and these were very important publications in the French language. One should remember that an ample majority of books and methods referring to the cello were usually published in German or in English at the time. These French publications of Bazelaire included:

Quelques Notes sur differents points importants de la Technique Générale du Violoncelle (Paris, 1920)

L'enseignement du Violoncelle en France (Paris, 1944)

Pédagogie du Violoncelle (Paris, 1952)

Included among his disciples are:

Firstly, one has to mention Pierre Fournier, world famous soloist who was justifiably referred to as the 'Aristocrat of the cello'.

Pierre Baker,

Bernard Michelin

Reine Flachot

Guy Fallot

Roger Albin

Genevieve Trip Hammer

... and many other eminent performers, whose style is reflected by their spiritual father.

Bazelaire did not approve of considerable left-hand extension activity, such as Casals and Alexanian were developing and proposing at the beginning of the twentieth-century, for he considered it somewhat dangerous for all except the largest hands. It also seems that he rarely used the cello in classes, preferring to demonstrate and explain from the piano. He encouraged his students to attend concerts, and his own performances were virtually obligatory!

He created a unique ensemble of fifty cellists, which became famous all over France, and even around the world. This was a kind of parallel activity to the London Violoncello School, founded by Herbert Walenn. This Parisian group participated in the "Farewell Concert" for Pablo Casals on 1st October, 1956 at the Sorbonne, where Casals directed an orchestra of some 100 cellists. Bazelaire and his students contributed much to this wonderful event.

Bazelaire was for many years a good friend of Pablo Casals, and Casals entrusted to him the presidency of the international Pablo Casals contest in the 1950's. Other invited judges included A. Fritz, Gaspar Cassado, Pierre Baker, Milos Sadlo and several other great cellists. As an anecdote, one of the entrants was a young Mstislav Rostropovich.



Paul Bazelaire, extraordinary French cellist

Paul Bazelaire was given many Awards, including:

- Officer of the Legion of Honour
- Officer of the cultural merit Monegasque by Prince Rainier III of Monaco
- Member of the Company of the Authors and Type-setters
- President of the Union of Violoncellists of France
- Professor with the American Academy of Fountainebleau
- Co-author of the Larousse Dictionary of Music

He died in 1958, I believe in his home town.

Bazelaire is perhaps more remembered today as an excellent arranger, rather than as principally a cellist. Amongst the tens, or even hundreds of arrangements he lovingly carried out, two particularly stand out for the regularity of inclusions in concerts up to the present day in the twenty-first century. Both were an integral part of the repertoire of Pierre Fournier, but they have also been played regularly by artists such as Lynn Harrell.

The first is the Vivaldi 'Concerto' in E Minor. Bazelaire basically 'orchestrated' for string orchestra one of the cello sonatas, and even those who are interested in 'historically-oriented' performances would have to admit that this arrangement is so tasteful and discreet that few would guess it was not as such an 'original' concerto work.

The second is the Couperin 'Pieces en Concert'. Bazelaire here collected a number of pieces from the harpsichord 'Les Goûts-réunis' collection of 1724, and of which the original idea was to reunite the French and Italian compositional styles of the day. Two options exist from the Bazelaire reworking - cello with piano; or cello with string orchestra - although it has to be said that the orchestral version undoubtedly works best due to the fact that the original harpsichord decoration is less effective in the piano accompaniment. Of the five pieces, two - the Prelude and Plainte - are in French style, whilst the other three conform to the Italian style. The skill of writing makes them a most likeable addition to cello repertoire, and an interesting change from the standard baroque and classical concertos for the instrument. When Bazelaire made this work available in the 1920's much of Couperin's music had barely been heard since the 1750's! However, there are so many pieces of an easier level than those mentioned above; one has simply to look at the French editorial lists and glance at the cello educational music for youngsters, to find that this the case.

He also made noteworthy arrangements of music by Robert Schumann.

However, it should be remembered that Bazelaire also continued to compose original works as an adult, even though by this time much of his output was geared towards competition or conservatoire pieces. Amongst the original works of note are a cello sonata, a trio, and a quartet. Some of his original cello studies are not at all easy either.

In any case, here is a résumé of his original work for cello:

Works for Cello solo:

Prelude in C Minor (1948) - with the optional accompaniment of piano
'Danse des vieux Menué', Op.4 (1898)
Suite for Solo Cello, on a viola da gamba theme of Telemann

Works for Cello and Piano:

Fantasia Militaire, Op.3 (1898)
Two Pieces, Op.109 (1927) - Grave and Sicilienne
Burlesque, Op.110 (1928)
Cache-Cache, Op.111 (1928) - dedicated to Pierre Fournier
Aria, Op.112 (1929)
Deux Images Lointaines, Op.113 (1930) - Yamilé and Baile indolente
Suite Française, Op.114 (1934)
Berceuse Chinoise, Op.115 (1936)
Rhapsody in Russian style, Op.117 (1938)
Suite Italienne (1938) - homage to Vivaldi, Boccherini and Scarlatti
Funérailles (1944)
Prelude, Sicilienne et Final, Op.124 (1949) - a competition set piece
Variations sur une chanson naïve, Op.125 (1949) - dedicated to Bernard Michelin
Concertino No.1, Op.126 (1957)
Concertino No.2, Op.127 - in the form of variations
Prélude in C Minor - the piece mentioned in solo cello, with optional piano

Cello and Orchestra:

Aria, Op.112 (1929) - for the 'Conciertos Padeloup' in 1930
Berceuse Chinoise, Op.115 (1936) - orchestration of cello-piano piece
Cache-Cache, Op.111 (1928) - orchestration of cello-piano piece
Rhapsody in Russian style, Op.117 (1938) - orchestration of cello-piano piece for
premiere in the 'Conciertos Colonne' of 1938
Impression de Russie (1902) - started in Warsaw, largely written in Moscow, and
finished in Berlin, all in 1902

In summing up, Paul Bazelaire was a central and crucial figure for France, for he gave new life to the modern French school of the violoncello, filling a void left from the era of Franchomme. For all the importance of the cellist Franchomme around the middle of the nineteenth century (see a separate article on him in *johnstone-music*), the centre of violoncello influence was quite clearly shifting from France and Belgium, to a newer excellence in Germany (and to a lesser extent in Russia). However, in large part, due to the presence of Paul Bazelaire France once again became an important consideration in world cello playing and cello matters.

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