

Fernande Decruck,
a featured composer
on the album



A recording PROJECT

*Saxophonist Dominic Childs
describes the experience of
recording an album of French
music for saxophone and piano,
inspired by female composers
and other formidable women*

When producer Tom Hammond told me about Chiaro, his classical music recording and production service in collaboration with sound engineer John Croft, I was immediately excited about the possibility of recording an album which had been forming in my mind for a number of years. When Simon Callaghan agreed to play piano on the recording, I began to believe that this could be a really special project to be involved with.

I sit here writing this article in a café in Belgium, 60 miles from Dinant, birthplace of Adolphe Sax, the inventor of our beautiful instrument. The four works on this album have a number of strong ties binding them together: origin, orchestration and women. All have been composed by French composers with three of the four originating from Paris, and they are among my absolute favourite works for the saxophone. Intriguingly, despite all of them being often programmed in saxophone and piano recitals, they were all written with both orchestral and piano accompaniments. Nothing, however, gives these pieces a stronger link than the women who were central to their creation: two female composers, one determined woman who commissioned the work, and one strong female character, Carmen. ➔

Scanned by CamScanner

Debussy's wonderfully colourful Rapsodie would not have existed without the dogged determination of Elise Hall

I spent three wonderful days in the company of Tom, John and Simon as we recorded the album in the Bradby Hall, with fantastic hospitality and facilities provided by Haileybury College, Hertfordshire. We were fortunate that the recording process went so smoothly in this beautiful space. John and Tom set up the microphones incredibly efficiently, a pristine layout of brightly coloured wires, microphones and stands, while Simon and I were charged with procuring the coffees! We continued mostly undisturbed with only one jog out on to the immaculately kept lawns to ask the groundsman if he would kindly mind mowing out of hearing range. At the end of the session, John later introduced me to the intricacies of coiling the wires, which is not as easy as it looks!

Setting the tone of the album, we began with Debussy's wonderfully colourful *Rapsodie*. This work would not have existed without the dogged determination of Elise Hall, who came from a prominent Boston family. For health reasons she had been told that she should learn a wind instrument, and so began learning the saxophone aged 47 in 1900. Alongside a number of amateur musician friends, Hall co-founded the Orchestral Group of Boston, employing the French oboist Georges Longy as conductor. In the space of a few years Hall went on to become chairwoman, as well as chief financial backer and president!

Throughout this period, she became wholly immersed as a saxophonist and studied intently with Georges Longy who had become a close friend. It was through his contacts she was able to commission a great number of French composers to write works for this relatively new instrument, names such as Jean Hure, Andre Caplet and of course Debussy to name but a few. These works were premiered in recitals in Boston by Hall herself. Her legacy is remarkable and she can be considered one of the first American classical saxophonists. The works she commissioned have now become part of the standard repertoire.

Fernande Decruck's *Sonate* for alto saxophone became one of my favourite pieces in the repertoire as soon as I started learning it many years ago. While many of her earlier works were harmonically

and rhythmically simple, by the time she wrote this wonderful *Sonata*, the complexity of her writing, both in the saxophone and piano parts, had significantly developed. The mix of impressionistic, neo-classical and romantic styles is not dissimilar to the complex blend of a fine French red wine. I am open to suggestions regarding the best wines to enjoy while listening to my album – recommendations on Twitter are welcome! Decruck was clearly inspired by the French impressionists, indicated by her indifference to functional harmony in the work, and one can hear the influences of Debussy and Ravel in particular.

Decruck originated from a small village near Toulouse in southern France. From this humble beginning, she became the first woman to write a piece for a member of the famed Band of the Garde républicaine: *Chant Lyrique* for the saxophonist François Combelle. I find this particularly intriguing, as for me it demonstrates her talent and quietly determined nature. It is a significant achievement given that she was writing in the early 1930s.

Despite composing a multitude of works, Paule Maurice is often overlooked

She spent the majority of her life living in New York and Paris. Her husband was a clarinettist and saxophonist who at one time was a member of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, a fact that can help us understand why Decruck wrote over 40 works for saxophone.

When arriving at Haileybury to record the next work on the album, I was greeted by a plethora of Tottenham Hotspur Football Club banners and posters. As it was half term, the club were holding their holiday course there, and as a keen supporter I found myself undecided about which direction to turn: left to record *Tableaux de Provence* or right to the playing fields to try and hone my skills on



Elise Hall, responsible for commissioning much early classical saxophone music

the pitch? I feel confident that I made the correct decision, as the chances of me being scouted and signed up are long gone!

Paule Maurice was another composer who hailed from Paris. Following a similar path to Fernande Decruck, although some 14 years her junior, Maurice studied and

went on to work at the Paris Conservatoire. Alongside her husband, fellow composer Pierre Lantier, she wrote an important piece of literature on harmony which became

commonly used both in France and further afield. Unfortunately, little is known about Maurice both as a person and a composer. Despite composing a multitude of works, she is often overlooked, for example in the 1995 *Norton/Grove Dictionary of Women Composers* where she is sadly not represented.

I am drawn into her music by the vivid images of Provence that she creates with such colour and sensitivity. Despite being a Parisian, it is clear to me that this music was written by someone who knew and understood Provence. Maurice even wrote in a letter to saxophonist John Mackenzie, 'My husband is a Southerner, and although I was born in

Paris, I'm Provençale at heart'. Spending every summer for 25 years in Provence, Maurice became well acquainted with everything she depicts so imaginatively in this work. From the 'large buzzing insect' portrayed in the final movement entitled 'Le Cabridan', to the roads surrounded by Roman tombs at the gates of Arles in the sombre 'Dis Alyscamps l'amo Souspire', which was written in two days upon learning of the death of a close member of the family, this work is a wonderfully illustrative piece of music which was highly enjoyable to record.

Now is a good time to mention the stunning piano playing on the album. As you will hear, Simon Callaghan's performance on the recording is moving, sensitive and simply flawless. From the entrancing opening of the *Rapsodie*, to the fiendishly virtuosic passages in 'Le Cabridan', Simon manages to capture the mood and character of every moment perfectly. It was a great honour to perform these works alongside him, and constantly entertaining!

Our exuberant final work has a significantly different link to women:

the well-known fiery and flamboyant character of Carmen. François Borne uses musical themes written by Georges Bizet, which he adapted in 1875 for his opera Carmen from the 1845 Novella by Prosper Mérimée. Set in Southern Spain, Carmen is a provocative gypsy girl who seduces and ultimately brings about the downfall of José, a soldier who falls deeply in love with her.

Contained within the opera, Bizet composed some of the most memorable, captivating melodies and musical themes ever written. Borne was just one of a number of composers and musicians who seized the opportunity to utilise this highly popular material to create what was originally a work for flute. The piece itself is wonderfully entertaining and virtuosic, incorporating a number of the most prominent themes from the opera. The 'fate' motif, foreshadowing Carmen's death, appears after a captivating introduction, followed by the prominent and seductive 'Habanera' which diversifies into different variations. Borne concludes the piece with the sparkling 'Gypsy Dance', the dynamic 'Toreador Song' and a most exhilarating finale.

It has been a privilege to record an album of my own devising, performing repertoire that has had a real impact on me over the years. What has elevated the project in every way was the team I was fortunate to work alongside. It all started when I was offered the opportunity to run the saxophone programme on the Ingenium Academy in 2015, where I met and worked alongside both Simon and Tom. I would have never have thought that within two years I would have recorded this album thanks to their incredible talent, expertise and support. I am extremely grateful to everyone who has made this album possible, including the financial support I have received from CASSGB.

On a final note, I'm running a competition to name the album. Alongside our many thoughts, we would love to hear your ideas! All you need to do is to tweet me your suggestions (@dom_childs) and the winner will receive a free signed copy of the CD which will include the winner's name! I look forward to hearing from you. ■

Dominic's album will be released later this year. For information on applying for funding from CASSGB, visit www.cassgb.org/funding-applications

www.tom-hammond.org.uk
www.simoncallaghan.com
<http://chiara.audio>
www.ingeniumacademy.com/programmes/saxophone-programme

Nothing gives these pieces a stronger link than the women who were central to their creation



Dominic Childs