

# Guy ROPARTZ

## PIANO MUSIC

UN PRÉLUDE DOMINICAL ET SIX PIÈCES À DANSER  
POUR CHAQUE JOUR DE LA SEMAINE  
DANS L'OMBRE DE MONTAGNE  
LA CHANSON DE MARGUERITE  
CHORAL VARIÉ  
FIRST LOVE

Stephanie McCallum

# GUY ROPARTZ, FRENCH MASTER WITH BRETON ROOTS

by Peter McCallum

Composer, poet, conductor, novelist and administrator of remarkable energy, Joseph Guy Marie Ropartz (1864–1955) was born – in Guingamp, Côtes-du-Nord, more or less equidistant between Brest and St Malo – into a family of intellectual and artistic breadth and strong civic commitment to the culture and history of his native Brittany. These virtues shaped his music over a long, industrious and productive career, and each of them can be found in part in music included in this recording, which consists of two large-scale suites and a number of shorter pieces. Literary and narrative affinities pervade the two suites, particularly *Dans l'ombre de la montagne*, which also evokes folk-styles in some of its movements. His father, Sigismond Ropartz, was a lawyer, poet and enthusiastic chronicler of Breton history. After Sigismond's death in 1879, Joseph studied in a Jesuit college at Vannes, where he learnt the bugle, French horn, double-bass and percussion and consolidated a profound Catholic faith. In deference to his mother's wishes, he pursued training in law at Rennes, where he met Breton writer Louis Tiercelin and other artists interested in the Breton cultural revival. Ropartz joined the Breton Regionalist Union, a cultural organisation founded in 1898 and dedicated to preserving Breton culture and regional independence. He used the words of several Breton writers in musical settings, including Anatole Le Braz and Charles le Goffic. Although admitted to the bar in 1885, he does not seem to have ever practised law as a profession. Instead, he entered the Paris Conservatoire in the same year, where he studied harmony with Dubois and composition with Massenet. Inspired by hearing Vincent d'Indy's opera *Le Chant de la Cloche*, he then approached d'Indy's teacher César Franck, first as an organ student, only subsequently summoning the courage to explain that he wished to be a composer. After Ropartz had produced some of his music, Franck told him: 'You know little more than nothing, but I very much want to make you work.'<sup>1</sup> And work he did. Laurence Davies regards him as one of the most influential and effective of the disciples of César Franck and his music continued to attest to Franck's influence throughout his long life.<sup>2</sup> His harmonic style shows a mixture of Wagnerian chromaticism and disciplined voice-leading combined with some of the newer chordal discoveries

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in R. J. Stove, *César Franck: His Life and Times*, The Scarecrow Press, Lanham, Toronto, Plymouth, 2012, p. 272.

<sup>2</sup> Laurence Davies, *César Franck and his Circle*, Barrie & Jenkins, London, 1970, pp. 310 *et seq.*

and techniques of Impressionism; his formal approach, by contrast, resembles the mixture of classic form and the cyclic motivic unification used by Franck in his Violin Sonata and Symphony. During this period, Ropartz's artistic output was broad-ranging: he wrote novels, stage-works and published several volumes of poetry, the titles of which link his literary and musical endeavours: *Intermezzo* (1880), *Adagiettos* (1888) and *Modes mineurs* (1889).

In 1894, two years after his marriage to Cécile-Marie-Fanny Chauvy, Ropartz took up the position as Director of the Conservatoire at Nancy in eastern France, and remained there for 25 years, enduring the First World War in close proximity to the horrors of the Western Front. He developed the Conservatoire with remarkable energy, combining emphasis on the disciplined principles of counterpoint and plainchant laid down by Franck, with the study of contemporary French composers, whom he championed as both teacher and conductor, through the founding of an orchestral concert series by the Conservatoire orchestra, which he had established. As well as composing, Ropartz continued to produce poetry, and was also a prolific writer about music, championing the works of Dukas, d'Indy and Franck. In 1906 he was made a Chevalier of the Légion d'honneur for his efforts. His opera, *Le Pays*, based on a Breton legend with a libretto by fellow Breton Charles Le Goffic, was premiered in Nancy in 1912 and performed again in Paris the following year. His years at Nancy also saw the composition of his Third and Fourth Symphonies. Although he managed to avoid some of the politics of Parisian musical life, he maintained close contacts with many of the leading composers of his time, including Duparc, to whom he dedicated his First Symphony, and Chausson, whose *Poème* was first performed under his baton in Nancy. Two of his most important musical relationships were with the composer Albéric Magnard, a fellow student of Dubois and Massenet, and the violinist Eugène Ysaÿe. Magnard included a setting of Ropartz's poem, 'Au Poète', in his Songs, Op. 3, prefacing the score with a quotation from Wagner's *Parsifal*. Ropartz conducted the third act of Magnard's opera *Guerçœur* in a concert performance in Nancy in 1908. Both Magnard and the score of his opera met a tragic end in 1914 when the composer shot at advancing German troops from his family estate, the Manoir des Fontaines, in Baron, Oise, in northern France, whereupon he was killed and his house burnt down, along with several manuscripts. Ropartz reconstructed the orchestration from memory using a piano score.

In 1919 he was given the politically difficult task of leading the Conservatoire in Strasbourg. Various claimed by German and French rulers throughout its history, and fiercely defended by those who advocated an autonomous Alsace, Strasbourg returned to French rule in 1919 after the Treaty of Versailles, having previously been under German administration since the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Ropartz succeeded the German composer Hans Pfitzner as Director of the Conservatoire and, with his

customary energy, he revitalised music in the war-weary town, integrating it into post-war French musical life. Aware that the region itself required time to recover, and alert to the dangers of it being swamped by musicians from Paris, Ropartz was strategic in his appointments, bringing in Belgians to help strengthen the local scene. In 1929 he retired, moving back to his home in Lanloup in his beloved Brittany, but his compositional industry continued for another quarter-century. In 1943 his pupil, the conductor Charles Münch, staged a Guy Ropartz Festival in his honour at the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire de Paris and in 1951 he was again recognised by the Légion d'honneur, this time as Commander. Like Fauré, his eyesight deteriorated and he was blind from 1952 until his death in 1955, aged 91.

In addition to his opera, his output includes five symphonies and six string quartets, two cello sonatas, three violin sonatas and a large variety of other chamber music, over 40 songs, choral pieces and some distinctive repertoire for the piano.

*Dans l'ombre de la montagne* can be seen as belonging to a genre of suite cultivated by several late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century French composers in which a narrative programme across all movements is implied by the titles, by motives which recur like an *idée fixe* and by other elusive hints. Examples of this type of work can be found in the music of two of Ropartz's close friends, Vincent d'Indy's *Poème des Montagnes*, Op. 15 (1881), and *Promenades*, Op. 7 (1893), by Albéric Magnard. In each of these suites the implied programme is a love story, explicitly so in d'Indy's work which speaks of 'La Bien-aimée', culminating climactically in a section marked 'À deux – Amour'. As I have mentioned, it was hearing d'Indy's music that inspired Ropartz to seek out Franck as a teacher, and Stephanie McCallum, who has recorded both d'Indy's *Poème des Montagnes*<sup>3</sup> and Magnard's *Promenades*<sup>4</sup> and now Ropartz's *Dans l'ombre de la montagne* as well (this is its first recording), has suggested that the musical parallels between the works indicate that Ropartz's title is a direct reference to d'Indy's work. More broadly, the cyclical style of suite exemplified in these works can also be found in the final book (Book V) of *Chants* (1872) by Charles-Valentin Alkan<sup>5</sup> and in Ravel's *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (1911).

With a cogent instinct for musical organisation, Ropartz sets out in the Prélude [1] all the main musical ideas of the suite. The solemn majestic theme (Ex. 1) heard at the opening could well be taken as a representation of the mountain itself, and it is followed immediately by a short motive heard in the left hand of the piano built on thirds which becomes the *idée fixe* of the work (Ex. 2). Its concision and insistent quality as it returns throughout the work is subtle and elusive and one could not be certain

<sup>3</sup> On ABC Classics 461 798-2 (2001).

<sup>4</sup> On Tall Poppies TP081 (1996).

<sup>5</sup> Recorded by Stephanie McCallum on Toccatà Classics TOCC 0158.

whether it was intended to refer to subject-matter that was amorous or erotic, philosophical or spiritual, or perhaps all of the above. After another phrase of the ‘mountain’ theme, a short motive emblematic of resolve and built around a rising fifth appears (Ex. 3), followed by a melody marked *doux* (Ex. 4) which returns in the Postlude [7]. The tempo increases slightly (*Un peu moins lent*) for the next theme (Ex. 5), which becomes the basis for the central section of the fifth movement (‘Ronde’ [5]) and returns to the opening speed for a quick return of the *idée fixe* (Ex. 2) and of Ex. 3, before a sombre theme (Ex. 6) which features prominently in the reflective sixth movement, ‘Quand la lumière s’en est allée’ [6]. Exx. 2 and 3 return to close this elusive introduction. All these themes are introduced in a continuous line of thought, in a state of thoughtful reflection tinged with a mood that is slightly portentous, perhaps ominous.

Ex. 1

Musical notation for Ex. 1, showing a piano introduction in 3/4 time. The piece is marked *Lent*. The notation includes a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a bass clef. The music consists of chords and single notes, with dynamics *mf* and *ff* indicated. A large slur encompasses the entire passage.

Ex. 2

Musical notation for Ex. 2, showing a bass line with a slur. The piece is marked *expressif*. The notation includes a bass clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#).

Ex. 3

Musical notation for Ex. 3, showing a treble line with a slur. The piece is marked *f*. The notation includes a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#).

Ex. 4

Musical notation for Ex. 4, showing a treble line with a slur. The piece is marked *doux*. The notation includes a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#).

Ex. 5

Musical notation for Ex. 5, showing a treble line with a slur. The piece is marked *mf*. The notation includes a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The tempo markings *Un peu moins lent* and *Un peu retenu* are indicated.

## Ex. 6



After these compressed and gnomonic utterances, ‘Sur la Route’ [2] exudes the good cheer and energy of a country hike, though not without interweaving the *idée fixe* (Ex. 2) and the rising fifth motive (Ex. 3) into its main idea, so jaunty and carefree, is in fact a filling-out of the thirds of the *idée fixe*.

‘Paysage’ [3] presents music of sultry, summery languor with the evocation of delicate sounds and scents, and flurries of birds as hedges are disturbed. Twice in crossing the landscape, a glimpse seems to be had of the distant mountain as the solemn theme of the opening of the suite returns. Ex. 3 and the *idée fixe* are explored and returned to in a mood of deep rumination, with the latter left lingering in the mind as the piece closes.

‘Vieille Église’ [4] changes from a sense of teeming life and sunlit abundance to a funereal procession in which the *Dies Irae* plainchant is heard amid the doleful tolling of bells. After a processional opening and an expressive new motive, the *idée fixe* returns. Is this the death of the ‘bien aimée’ or was the *idée fixe* always related to the intimation of mortality?

Whatever the case, ‘Ronde’ [5] sweeps aside the tragic tone with animated cheer and a folk-like melody heard first in the left hand against dancing triplets. Although this melody has not been traced to a genuine Breton melody, it may well have been inspired by, or derived from, the vigorous folk-tradition that Ropartz loved and never hesitated to draw from when appropriate. The *idée fixe* returns, accompanied by a change of metre to a five-beat signature of 15/8. The central section is more expressive, and develops the fifth theme (*Un peu moins lent*) of the Prélude. Notwithstanding the intrusion of these more solemn thoughts, this is the most affirmative and rhythmically direct movement of the suite.

The title of the sixth piece, ‘Quand la lumière s’en est allée’ (‘When the light has gone’) [6] suggests rest at the end of both the day and life’s journey, and returns in highly expressive manner to Ex. 6 of the Prélude which it intertwines with other material, notably the *idée fixe*. It covers the widest emotional range of the suite, moving from music suggesting a hushed twilight to an impassioned climax, ending with a deeply expressive echo of the *idée fixe*.

The Postlude [7] follows without a break and returns to the sweet geniality of Ex. 4 from the Prélude. The last lines of the suite bring back a final glimpse of the mountain in all its solemnity (Ex. 1) and this thoughtful and intricate work ends with the theme of resolution (Ex. 3).

*Un Prélude Dominical et Six Pièces à danser pour chaque jour de la semaine* was written as an orchestral work for the Paris Opera Ballet under Serge Lifar shortly after Ropartz retired from Strasbourg in 1929. A protégé of Diaghilev, Lifar made his debut with the Ballets Russes in Paris in 1923, and after Diaghilev's death he was invited to work with the then moribund Paris Opera Ballet in 1929. Lifar set about reforming and strengthening the institution, and his success with Ropartz's work and others in that year led to his being appointed director, in which position he created many new French ballets. As a ballet, *Un Prélude Dominical et Six Pièces à danser pour chaque jour de la semaine* eschews the psychological complexity of *Dans l'ombre de la montagne* in favour of genial and good-humoured characterisation of each day of the week and its presumed activities. By this stage, Ropartz's harmonic style had evolved from the Wagnerian chromaticism found in *Dans l'ombre de la montagne* to incorporate impressionistic harmonies more integrally and with a fine sense of colour. His arrangement of the work for piano, published in 1930, retains much of that colour in keyboard form, creating a work of exuberance, refined sentiment and virtuosity. Unsurprisingly from the deeply devout Ropartz, the 'Prélude Dominical' ('Sunday Prelude') [8] evokes bells and a sincere aura of sanctity. 'Lundi' ('Monday') [9] implies an unhurried, somewhat capricious start to the working week. After the opening flourish a theme is heard which is to return at the end of the week on Saturday, suggesting that the protagonist is already looking forward to the weekend. 'Mardi' ('Tuesday') [10] begins with a peremptory drum roll and there is a mock-military character to the music suggesting a parade or children's game of soldiers, possibly in reference to Mars, the god of war, from whose name Mardi is derived. 'Mercredi' ('Wednesday') [11] leads off with a motive of furtive nervousness in an atmosphere of busyness and punctilious activity, which alternates with a more gracious idea, and the two alternate flirtatiously. 'Jeudi' ('Thursday') [12], by contrast, is reflective, and it and 'Vendredi' ('Friday') [13] join together to provide the most expressive music in the suite. 'Samedi' ('Saturday') [14] ends the week in a carefree and exultant spirit.

*Choral varié* (1904) [15] dates from an earlier period and style. Although originally written for piano, a version also exists for organ arranged by Louis Thirion.<sup>6</sup> Having studied the organ under Franck, Ropartz was a competent player and wrote several works for organ and for harmonium, although he never himself held a formal position as organist anywhere. Even in its original version for piano, the piece imitates idiomatic organ-writing and, in its textures and motivic exploration, the piece has affinity with

<sup>6</sup> Thirion (1879–1966) was a student and then colleague of Ropartz's at Nancy and took over the direction of the Conservatoire when Ropartz moved to Strasbourg. His output includes two symphonies and a number of chamber works, not least a string quartet, piano trio and a sonata each for piano and violin. History was hard on Thirion: at considerable cost to his health, he spent the entire First World War mobilised (during which time his house was burned down and almost all his manuscripts lost), and when his wife died in 1920, leaving him with two small children to raise, he decided to abandon composition.

the organ *Chorales* of César Franck. In Nancy he helped organise the installation of an organ in the new concert hall, constructed by the major French organ-builder Cavaillé-Coll.<sup>7</sup> The structure of *Choral varié* is a simple set of four variations on a chorale of four irregular phrases, each ending with a fermata (the third subdivided into two). Ropartz writes out the exact duration of the fermata in each case, giving the phrases an irregular length with changed metres, and the trajectory rises to its climax on the final chord. The first variation creates a murmuring intricate texture between two upper voices in a quasi-imitation of one another. The second is marked *Tempo di Marcia, nobile*, and in the third variation, the theme is in the bass, while the upper parts trace a spidery counterpoint. The last variation places the melody back in the treble with the texture animated by an active inner part.

*La Chanson de Marguerite*, Op. 5 [16], and *First Love*, Op. 6 [17],<sup>8</sup> are indicative of the music that Ropartz was writing before he came under the influence of Franck. Written in 1886, they may even have been among the very works that he showed Franck that year which inspired the caustic remark quoted above. Whether the 'Marguerite' of Op. 5 is Faust's first love is not clear: the dedicatee, Paul Thielemann, is a fellow Breton. Both waltzes follow the ternary ABA form and style of the popular French song of the Belle Époque, which was to have lasting influence even if Ropartz himself abandoned it, under Franck's guidance, for weightier fare. The term 'bluette' (spark), used as a subtitle for *First Love*, has several metaphorical meanings for things that are brief but burn fiercely. Most apt in this instance is that in the Larousse *Dictionnaires de Français: Amour éphémère* – ephemeral love.

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<sup>7</sup> Cynthia Bellinger Sajnovsky, *The Organ and Harmonium Works of Joseph Guy Marie Ropartz*, PhD diss., Washington University, Saint Louis, Missouri, 1981, p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> Ropartz used opus numbers only at the beginning of his career, twice starting a series but abandoning the practice with his Op. 29 in 1886.



Described by Anthony Clarke in *The Bulletin* as ‘one of Australia’s foremost pianists’, **Stephanie McCallum** has enjoyed an international career of over thirty years, appearing on over forty CDs (including nineteen solo discs) and also in live solo and concerto performances. Playing a repertoire from the eighteenth to the 21st century, she is especially noted for her performances of virtuosic music of the nineteenth century, particularly the music of Liszt and Alkan, and also for her advocacy of demanding contemporary solo and ensemble scores.

Stephanie McCallum is Associate Professor in piano at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music of the University of Sydney, where she herself studied with Alexander Sverjensky and with the noted Liszt player Gordon Watson. After advanced studies in England with the Alkan expert Ronald Smith, she made her Wigmore Hall debut in 1982 when she gave what is believed to be the first performance of Alkan’s *Chants*, Op. 70. She is also credited with the first complete performance of Alkan’s *Trois Grandes Études*, Op. 76, in London. Her live performances of the Concerto, the Symphony, and other works from Alkan’s *Douze études dans les tons mineurs*, Op. 39, have been described by critics as ‘titanic’, ‘awe-inspiring’, ‘stupendous’, ‘virtuosic pianism of the highest calibre’ and ‘one of the glories of Australian pianism’.

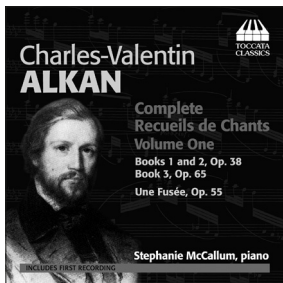
Stephanie McCallum has appeared extensively as a soloist in the United Kingdom, France and Australia, and has toured Europe with The Alpha Centauri Ensemble. She has made many appearances as soloist in the Sydney Festival, and performed in the Brighton, Cheltenham, Huddersfield and Sydney Spring festivals. A noted exponent of contemporary music, Stephanie was a founding member of the contemporary ensembles AustralYSIS and Sydney Alpha Ensemble and has been joint artistic director of the latter since its inception. She has performed with such groups as the Australian Chamber Orchestra, Elision and The Australia Ensemble. She appears in ensemble on many CDs as well as soloist on two discs by the Sydney Alpha Ensemble: *Strange Attractions*, and *Clocks*, featuring music by Elena Kats-Chernin. In 2000 she gave the world premiere of Kats-Chernin’s *Displaced Dances* with the Queensland Symphony Orchestra, a piano concerto written especially for her.



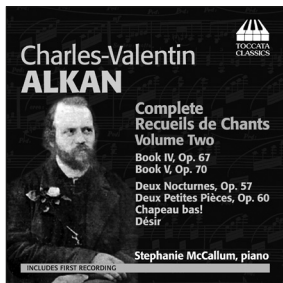
Her solo recordings include a two-disc set of the complete piano sonatas of Weber; *Illegal Harmonies: The 20th-Century Piano*; *Perfume*, a best-selling disc of rare French piano music; two CDs of music by Liszt, *The Liszt Album* and *From the Years of Pilgrimage*; and an album of piano works by Erik Satie, *Gymnopédies*. With the release in 2006 of a two-CD set of Alkan's *Douze études dans les tons mineurs*, she was the first pianist ever to have recorded both of Alkan's sets of studies in the major and the minor keys, Opp. 35 and 39. More recent discs include *A Romantic Christmas*, a CD of Schumann's piano music, *Scenes from Childhood*, including the *Fantasia* in C major Op. 17, and a Beethoven premiere recording – *Für Elise: Bagatelles for piano by Ludwig van Beethoven*. This disc contains a *Bagatelle* in F minor, probably the last piano piece that Beethoven wrote, and never previously published, performed or recorded.

Her recording of Alkan's complete *Recueils de chants* (Tocatta Classics TOCC 0157 and 0158) was received with universal praise: *CD Review* on BBC Radio 3 felt that the music was 'really exquisitely played by Stephanie McCallum, who really "gets" the style [...] if you really want to get to know what this Alkan guy is all about, then Stephanie McCallum can really show you very well indeed.' MusicWeb International agreed: 'McCallum is a practised exponent of Alkan's music and she has spent a number of years performing and recording it. She is alive to his affectionate *Allegretto* and is always extremely effective – I would say at her most supremely stylish – in the third movement *Chants* (or *Choeur* or *Canon*). She deftly evokes the dog bark in that of Book I, and so too the delicate bell peals in the succeeding piece. The flowing agitation of the tensile fifth pieces of the sets is also finely conveyed.'

For a complete list of recordings please visit Stephanie's website at [www.stephaniemccallum.com](http://www.stephaniemccallum.com).



TOCC 0157



TOCC 0158



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