

Flavio Varani on the Paray Piano Works



The name Paul Paray has been part of my musical life since I was 10 years when I began my studies with the legendary pianist Magda Tagliaferro, first in Brazil, where I was born, and later at age 13 in Paris as the recipient of a French government scholarship. Madame Tagliaferro lived most of her life in France and frequently mentioned to me her great friendship with Paul Paray who had been the first conductor with whom she soloed, while still a teenager, with the Lamoureux Orchestra. Later, when Paray became conductor of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, he invited her to perform with him, as did Charles Munch and Leopold Stokowski, encouraging her to come to the U.S.A.

I remember in the early 1970s when Madame Tagliaferro performed Beethoven's 4th piano concerto with Paul Paray at the Champs Elysées Theater in Paris. After the performance I went back stage where Madame Tagliaferro introduced me to this very gracious man.

Magda devoted a full chapter to the maestro in her autobiography *“Almost All”*. In it she referred to him as *“a born conductor, with his eagle's eyes and the power of an animal trainer, yet with a gentleman's soul. Uncompromisingly firm, with musical integrity, his diabolical sense of rhythm, his “sapateado” (referring to his famed dancing manner of conducting) and so many other things, and to top it all, an angelical freshness; these were his attributes”*. Further on she wrote, *“I consider him one of the greatest conductors in the world”*.

He apparently enjoyed entertaining friends at the piano accompanying himself in old songs with their archaic accents and at the same time doing some Spanish dance steps, never with any degree of vulgarity, which provoked hearty laughter.

When I received a phone call from Fr. Perrone inviting me to consider recording Paul Paray's *Fantaisie* for piano and orchestra, I was astonished. *“Wasn't he a conductor ?”* I asked. The answer was that, unknown to present day musicians, Paray had once been a composer of many works that were published in the early part of the 20th century but which had been nearly forgotten or ignored until now when, through the Paray “Grotto productions” series, his entire output is being recorded and at the same time published by Editions Jobert. Given my own background and familiarity with Paul Paray, my curiosity prompted me to request the score.

As soon as I put the *Fantaisie* on the piano rack I realized that I was in familiar territory. All of my experiences growing up in France returned to me as I played the score enraptured. I found it surprising that this *Fantaisie*, composed at the same time as that of Debussy, was in reality much more successful as a performing piece than his. It has everything such a composition should have : a virtuosic solo part, orchestral writing replete with character and color, and expressive power elegantly expounded. It was a revelatory discovery.

After recording the *Fantaisie* I was then asked if I would also be interested in recording his entire solo piano output. Here was new ground to break : various types of piano pieces representing different styles, forms, and compositional techniques. It seemed obvious to me that Paul Paray, as a young composer, was searching for his own voice, utilizing this medium. Perusing the many descriptive titles, forms and variations, one is made aware of Paray's vast emotional resources. One detects a respect for Fauré but without any direct imitation. Paray's music is very French in character with occasional echoes from the middle ages. At times it reminds me one of the paintings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti or of the angelic rosy cheeks in late-renaissance paintings. He experiments with impressionism (*Sur la mer*), with the tongue-and-cheek humor of Chabrier (*Allegro*), but always retaining a certain purity of thought. To listen to these youthful works is a certain challenge to the listener because there are no exact precedents to them. My curiosity was soon converted to enthusiasm in discovering an ignored composer of such high quality.

The majority of the pieces were composed around 1913 and these are perhaps his best. They ceased around the time of the First World War. I have often wondered what turn his music might have taken if his conducting career had not ended his life as a composer. Penetrating into Paul Paray's musical world is to believe in the ennobling capacity of a life devoted to the art of music.

Flavio Varani

THE WORKS OF PAUL PARAY (1886-1979)
The Complete Piano Music (World Premiere Recordings)
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