

Interview

This is Philippe Gaubert's Flute!

One afternoon when I was teaching the virtues of the Taffanel and Gaubert notebooks in Neuilly-sur-Seine, my student and friend, Aurelie-Poiret, enters the classroom with a traversiere Louis Lot flute under her arm and says to me, placing the instrument on the piano:

“This is Philippe Gaubert's flute.”

When I first discovered the instrument I was swept by a strong emotion and through time, Aurelie Poiret has allowed me entrance into Philippe Gaubert's world, guided by a mutual trust for which I thank her deeply.

The door opens for me through one of the only living witnesses to a large part of the life of Philippe Gaubert, Yvette Poire-Gaubert, Philippe Gaubert's daughter-in-law. Madame Poire-Gaubert who became part of the master's family at an early age thanks to a precocious love story, with the great Gaumont film producer, Alain Poire, went on to rub elbows with the great artists of that time, having contributed heavily to the great French artistic tradition.

Philippe Gaubert, the great flutist, teacher, composer among the great talents, also director at the Opera de Paris in the 1930's and conductor of the orchestra, was keeping company with Ravel, Debussy, Enesco, Dukas, Honeggar, or Valery, Giraudoux, Lifar, just to name a few...

Madame Poire-Gaubert, the only person with the rights to Philippe Gaubert's works today, allows me a rare interview, evoking the career, the personality, the family, the relationships, and even the daily life of Philippe Gaubert.

Interview with Yvette Poire-Gaubert and Nicolas Duchamp

ND: Hello, Yvette Poire-Gaubert and thank you for opening the door to your memories of, not only a great flutist, but also a great artist and great man, Philippe Gaubert. How did you come to be close to him?

YP: I knew Philippe Gaubert in 1932 when I was 14 and Alain Poire, my future-husband, was 16. Philippe Gaubert had remarried Madelaine, Alain's mother; Philippe Gaubert raised and loved him as if her were his own. We were considered a couple to be engaged at a later time, and I was received with open arms into his family. They called us the little Gauberts!

ND: You wrote a book not long ago dedicated to Philippe Gaubert. Can you tell us a little about it?

YP: I had wanted to write this book for 25 years and then, I gave myself one year to write it but 25 passed before it was done!... the time of a rich and tumultuous life. I had married Alain Poire who was producing about 6 films a year. At the time of Madeleine's death, I inherited numerous documents which, of course, were about his flute. There was a great sorting of his records at the house and, thanks to that and my memories, I was able to write my book.

ND: Philippe Gaubert's career is amazing.

YP: Yes! It's a real fairy tale. His professional life was a success thanks to a lot of hard work combined with his many talents and extraordinary gifts. His start is really worthy of a fiction story. First, we have to talk a bit about his father, Baptiste Gaubert, who must have had a strong personality himself: coming from a fairly poor peasant family from around Cahors, an uneducated man, he had an innate gift for music that he, himself, was unable to develop. At the age of 12, instead of bringing back the money he made from selling the products they had raised on the farm, he brought home a violin! His parents immediately broke it over his back.

Refusing to work the land, he opened a shoe-repair shop on Brives St., in Cahors, which would later become Philippe Gaubert St. As soon as they could walk, he offered his two sons a small violin and a flute. And a short time later, in a spirit of total recklessness, he exclaimed, "I do not want my sons to become cobblers, they'll be musicians and so we'll go to Paris." His second son, Lucien, made a living doing copies and transcripts.

The real miracle was Philippe Gaubert! Philippe Gaubert's father died when he was barely 13 years old, leaving them with nothing. It was at that time that Philippe Gaubert, totally self-taught, was hired to play the violin in a little movie theater in the Ternes district of Paris in order to bring home enough to feed his family. Philippe's mother told me that she would go to wait for her little boy every evening so that he wouldn't have to come home alone in the dark.

ND: How did he come to be a flutist?

YP: That is where the fairy tale takes on new meaning. One day, when Philippe Gaubert was playing the traversiere flute near a window, all along having had no instructor, Simon-Jules Taffanel, a Bordelais flutist and lutist, who had recently played in Paris and was the father of the great Taffanel, was listening and immediately recognized Philippe Gaubert's extraordinary potential.

He suggested to his mother that he give him lessons and that Philippe make a career as a musician. After his mother made him aware that he had to provide for them, he landed him a position as back up violinist at the Opera de Paris.

He then discovers a child with a great predisposition for the flute and a relentless taste for work. One day, he said to his son Paul, "I would like to have you listen to one of my exceptional students." And so, Paul Taffanel says to his father, "O.K., he's no longer your student, he's mine."

At that moment, Simon-Jules Taffanel had to remind Dorus who, upon hearing him play in Bordeaux, had asked his father to take him in his class in Paris.

ND: Who was Paul Taffanel at the end of the 19th century?

YP: Paul was an exceptional flutist renowned all over Europe. He was a professor at the Conservatory of Paris, Madrid St. He took Philippe Gaubert in his class at the Conservatory where he was awarded his first prize as flutist, in 1894, at the age of 15.

“Parrain” (everyone in the family called Philippe “Parrain”) always felt strong feelings and gratitude towards “his master.”

He loved to say that he owed him everything because he always looked out for his favorite student. When he was an accomplished artist, he named him first flute at the Opera. He was 16 years old at the time.

Taffanel highly recommended him saying that he played better than he did.

To earn a living, Philippe also played in churches. He was telling us that one day there was “cold meat,” as the artists say when speaking of a burial; when he was placing his flute in preparation to play with all his heart, the organist quietly said to him, “don’t work too hard.” Philippe couldn’t play a single note because he was laughing so hard. As they were leaving, someone remarked “It’s too bad that the organ completely drowned out the flute!”

ND: Let’s get back to his musical career...

YP: It was far-reaching and wide ranged. He was an inveterate worker, he composed every night. In 1905, he won the second prize of Rome, which was sometimes attributed to his teachers like Pierne or Faure, but journalists say anything. He took lessons in composing but I would be tempted to say that he was more self-taught as a composer, as with everything he took up.

It was in 1908 that he was named professor of the flute at the Conservatory of Paris where he had, among others, students like his favorite, Marcel Moyse.

ND: Was Philippe Gaubert directing during that time?

VP: Of course! It was in 1904 that he appeared on the scene as second director of the Societe des Concerts du Conservatoire at the death of Andre Messager, who had founded that brilliant phalanx known throughout Europe. Philippe told me that Taffanel had told him that it would be he, Philippe, who would direct the Orchestre du Conservatoire. He replied that he didn’t know how to direct even though he had taken a few courses and Taffanel said to him: “that doesn’t matter!” He gave him some advice, I don’t know what, while waving the baton in a joking manner and then he was off! The first time that Philippe Gaubert directed the orchestra, the musicians stood up and applauded. It was in 1913 that he collaborated with Paul Taffanel on the writing of 17 DAILY FLUTE EXERCISES.

ND: What became of him in 1914, when the war with the Germans started?

YP: Well, he took off boldly in the infantry. He was very patriotic. At the end of 1917, he had a serious lung infection, was discharged and got over it with barely any bed rest. He was a hardy, robust guy, nothing could stop him. He wanted to go back to the war because it hadn't ended, but a discharge is a discharge and the government wasn't budging an inch.

ND: Did he play the traversiere flute after the war?

YP: He performed his SONATE POUR FLUTE in 1918 and they talked about it in the press "the great qualities of this sensitive musician." He was named first conductor of the Societe des Conservatoires in 1919. He directed a great deal during that period and in 1922, he interpreted his MADRIGAL as well as two of J.S. Bach's pieces.

Unfortunately, due to lip problems, he stopped the flute at his peak. Too short a career to the dismay of the flute world, and for a long time still expressing their distress about it. They spoke repeatedly of their regrets, referring to his absolutely dazzling virtuosity and in such personal tones that you could never forget it. When he was caricaturised, he was always shown with a flute.

He always loved the traversiere flute and my husband Alain told me that before going to fulfill his heavy workload everyday, he sometimes played a little in the morning.

There is, however a trace of Philippe the flutist which was found in 1987 by way of facsimile that states that he participated in a concert, playing LES CHANSONS MADECASSES, accompanied by Ravel himself at the piano at the Ravel Festival, Aug. 24, 1930 at the Hotel du Palais, Biarritz.

ND: So, it was in 1930 that Philippe Gaubert was heard playing the flute for the last time in public?

YP: As far as I know, there is a final trace at a gala concert in 1930 to benefit the Philharmonic Society at which he played one of his sonatas for flute and piano. The famous critic and musician Louis Aubert wrote in the newspaper after the concert:

"This season brings ongoing and renewed evidence of a hundred different aspects of the phenomenal work of this musician...well, what we don't forget but are too rarely reminded of is: unparalleled talent whose flute sound is such that you would not be able to imagine the quality of the of the velvety texture before having caressed it. Do people know that it was Philippe Gaubert himself who developed the best of our flutists? But as talented as his disciples were, it's a new marvel each time the charmer returns to his first loves."

ND: The termination of his public appearances as flutist didn't leave him with too little to do...

YP: Never, quite the opposite. In 1930, he was appointed Director of music at the Opera de Paris; in fact, he already was director, but then it was officially confirmed. He then left his flute teaching position at the Conservatoire de Paris, which he regretted, but he directed a tremendous amount for Jacques Rouche at l'Opera, which kept him very busy, naturally.

ND : Who was Jacques Rouche?

YP: He was the administrator of the Opera de Paris in the 1930's. It's been said that I didn't like Rouche: that's not exactly true. What I don't like is the fact that the bold programming choices of the Opera de Paris were attributed to Rouche. He was foremost, the true patron, which is to his credit. He had made a huge fortune selling popular perfumes, that were inexpensive and of high quality. You can say that the whole Opera de Paris was his "toy." He paid very little, very poorly, but he paid for everything. The real music director of the Opera de Paris, the one who made the really bold programming choices was Philippe Gaubert.

ND: Was Philippe Gaubert decently remunerated for the prestigious position that he held?

YP: At the Opera, I don't know, it would have been easy to know by approaching the Opera de Paris but it happens that that great company did not save anything from that period, not even treasures displaying the greatest artists of the time. But, to give an idea of the remuneration for musicians of that period, Philippe Gaubert earned 2000f per year for directing the orchestra of the Conservatory 3 times per week, while my husband, starting at 20 years old at the Havas agency, earned 3000f per month. But Philippe didn't worry much about it because he was very fond of that company and loved music much more than money.

Sometimes the great originals, like Loie Fuller or even Rubenstein, wanted him to direct their shows. He had dared to charge them 50,000f and had shared that godsend with all his musicians.

ND: Few people today have a real knowledge of Philippe Gaubert's immense career and multitude of activities; was "his company," the Opera de Paris, one of the many stops on your canvassing trip to bring awareness of the musical memory of Philippe Gaubert to the public?

YP: No. I offered the Opera de Paris to do a window, at my expense, with the bust of Philippe Gaubert which the famous artist Landowsky (brother of the still unknown musician) had sculpted.

I wanted to give them a flute of Philippe's, his baton and other documents in honor of his memory; unfortunately, I didn't hear a word from them. They didn't have anything to do with it! I became aware that there is no museum of the Opera, it's a tall tale. There are three little things kept in a nice hall and the rest, they throw out. As a result, I gave that to the Philippe Gaubert School of Music in Cahors. The headmaster and the mayor themselves were present to remind the young musician apprentices who Paul Gaubert was.

ND: You were speaking of the bold programming at the Opera de Paris...

YP: Jacques Rouche relied on a traditional public, but it's necessary to salute his courage for having allowed Philippe Gaubert to put on works that were far from the standard proprieties. Philippe Gaubert renewed the opera public, rejuvenated it with the constant concern for playing French music of his time that wasn't played enough. All the French composers, Philippe Gaubert and other important ones, of that era, were put through a sort of purgatory before being played. He had to fight to make our music known to us. Philippe Gaubert carried that creativity, not only French however, everywhere but mainly in Europe. Fortunately, he was at the Opera de Paris to create works like Elektra by Strauss, or King Oedipus by Enesco; there was just as much Milhaud, Dukas, Debussy, Ravel, Honnegar, and I forget who else...The audience, a little disconcerted, might however end up with Bubuss.

ND: Bubuss?

YP: Yes, Bubuss! Well...Henry Busser. Bubuss took charge of the directing which was more accepted by the Opera audience.

ND: I thought it was understood, nevertheless, that the relationship between Gaubert and Rouche was a stormy one?

YP: No, not at all! Rouche knew Gaubert's nature and didn't hold the detailed letter of resignation he received from him every day against him. As soon as he would come back, "Parrain" thundered forth with, "I'm going to fling my resignation at Rouche," or even "I'm going to tell him that he's in charge of his cologne and he doesn't know anything about music!"

ND: He was never at a loss for words! What would you say about his personality?

YP: He always said what he thought and it never seemed to hurt him. He said to hell with ministers when he wanted to; he hated society women because in his time it was already fashionable to dislike French music and that made "Parrain" crazy mad! They only applauded German music, with Wagner or Beethoven, while my father-in-law did not spit on it, it was very annoying for him being the great defender of his own country. I remember one day when we were at the house of the ministre de Beaux-arts, he took aside his wife saying, "Like all society women, you don't know anything about it, you might appreciate your country's music." He said what he thought in all situations and he hated obligations of any type.

However, he had a very captivating personality, he had real class, breeding, and a fabulous refinement. He had married a woman who was part of "two hundred families" and never exploded, according to his friends. He expressed himself very well. Since he had left school at 13 years old to support his mother, he always had a geography, history, or philosophy book in his drawer...he had studied everything, he knew about everything, and wanted to know everything. Life around him was enchanting, he was tender, cheerful, whimsical, he also had mood swings...he had a great presence even if he got lost in his dreams and musical creations from time to time.

ND: He was a serious worker.

YP: A journalist once wrote that his renown would endure thanks "to the work he did

at night so that he could make music all day..." I think that only the spontaneity and speed with which he wrote can explain his expansive work despite his death at an early age.

From 9 in the morning he was at his lectern on Thursdays and Saturdays for rehearsals at the Orchestre du Conservatoire, the night before he would direct an opera late into the evening, he did his class at the Conservatoire, plus auditions, his reading as Director of music at the Opera, and then often the codirector's...he was a force of nature and that required a level of organization that you'd never believe you'd see in your wildest dreams...he was known as "compere" but he was viewed as a wise administrator.

ND: How was he viewed by the audience of the Opera?

YP: He had a lot of influence over his audience, which is the privilege of great directors. Because he was a handsome man and conducted himself with masterful authority, he aroused many devoted admirers among the female audience. He would lock himself in his dressing room to escape frenzied admirers from whom he received letters which went unopened but it was a joy to see all the life around him with his "screw balls" ready to win him over! At home, we tried to protect him from intruders, cadgers, or administrators but he was always there for his friends.

ND: Did you see him composing?

YP: That was one of the fascinating things of my life! Seated in front of these huge staves at his desk for many hours straight, he was very clean, meticulous, without making any erasures, his manuscripts are proof of it. Sometimes he'd go to the piano and play a few bars and then sit down again. In short, he composed calmly, his mind rested and lucid. He wrote so easily that he was always ready to offer a little bit of support to his students or his colleagues at the Conservatoire to those who asked for it.

ND: What were the circumstances surrounding his death?

YP: He ate far too much! At that time, we barely paid attention to the food that we ate, and too, he did not take any control over his health. At 60 years old, he says to my mother-in-law: "I feel like I'm 20." He felt like he was in good shape and attended the incredible triumph of his ballet LE CHEVALIER ET LA DEMOISELLE at the Opera. The day after the show, he composed all night just like always, and the piano stopped... At 7 in the morning, his wife opened the door with that knowing sense that women in love possess...he looked at his hands and he died. An aneurysmal rupture at the age of only 62. He had an exhausting job, you know, being the director of the orchestra requires considerable physical effort. "Life is so short," Philippe Gaubert loved to say. He only loved music and I think the angels welcomed him to heaven.

It is, however, so sad that the evening before his death Serg Lifar behaved like a real boor regarding the considerable success of their ballet. After the first ballet of Alexander the Great, Serge had asked "Parrain" to write the music for a new ballet for him. Too, he lived at the house under Philippe Gaubert's heels. Everyone was

nice to Serge Lifar, my mother-in-law was his darling, I was his fiancée, he acted like a real “boot licker: (to put it nicely) for months. He even rented a carriage for Philippe during the Occupation to take him to dinner Chez Drouant...in short, that was the insanity of love. The ballet was quite successful and at the many interviews that he gave, he completely failed to mention the name of the composer: Gaubert. He had invented the name “choreo-author” letting people think that he too was the author of the music. As far as I know, Philippe Gaubert had one of these articles telling of the success of the “Lifar Ballet” in his hands the night before his death and that kept him from sleeping all night...

Since it was well known that he was involved, Lifar was hated at the Opera and the musicians refused to play for the rehearsals of the ballet. It was also the only time that Philippe Gaubert’s wife intervened in her husband’s public life when she begged the musicians to play in spite of all of that because the work was sublime. They finally accepted that Serge Lifar would dance.

“It was fitting and proper that his final joy was given to him in the theater that he held most dear, by the enormous success of “Chevalier” which he had written, put on with creative enthusiasm, with the fire of youth and the vigor of maturity. Philippe Gaubert went out in a triumph.” Jacques Rouche.

ND: What were the repercussions of his death in the artistic world?

YP: That was astonishing. He was slated to live to be a hundred! In my book, you can read all the letters of condolence from Honnegar, Valery, Saint-Saens, Cortot, Thibaud, of course, Georges Hue, and I forget who else. The national press paid homage to him. You know, whatever the horror for all that this premature departure caused, we have to all tell ourselves that the progress in medicine might have rescued this man from death but left him diminished, paralyzed maybe, without the life force which characterized him.

ND: After his death, was his music still played?

YP: Yes, a great deal, all over France for several years. Today, the money that I am paid as author, which comes from all over the whole world, attests to the vitality of “Parrain’s” music in the music world, especially in Scandinavia and Japan. One of his last works was LE CONCERT IN F that was just edited, today, in fact, highlights an important soloist part for each musician in the orchestra. Philippe Gaubert had dedicated that work “in homage and thanks to my musicians.” Next September, the same great orchestra of Luxembourg will record LE CHEVALIER ET LA DEMOISELLE, directed by Marc Soustrot, including the “pas de deux” that Schwartz and Lifar danced. Philippe Gaubert was played everywhere all his life. He was invited to direct his works and those of some others in Germany, Belgium, Romania, Spain, and I forget where else, but he had a great career in foreign countries. The Germans, especially, were crazy about Philippe Gaubert, which he didn’t like. At the beginning of the Occupation, Hitler had given the order to be kind to key figures in the countries that they controlled. So, Philippe didn’t have problems with the Germans in 1940, but he did not want them to come into his dressing room, because, he said, “I don’t like kicks in the ass.” Upon his death, the Germans sent a letter to my mother-in-law informing her that they wouldn’t come to his national funeral because: “We know that Monsieur Gaubert hated us.” After his death, the Germans were always interested in Philippe Gaubert and they

went to his house regularly to see his piano and the place where Philippe lived daily, and in complete simplicity.

ND: How would you qualify the character of Philippe Gaubert's music?

YP: His music reflects his personality perfectly. There is a duality in his works: sometimes violent, strong, powerful, and also very majestic all while expressing feminine and romantic sensitivity, with a great softness.

ND: So there will be three concerts next October in Paris as a living testament to the great man, your father-in-law, Philippe Gaubert and also, along with the concerts, an exhibition. Can you tell us about it?

YP: Unique documents about Philippe Gaubert will be on display, showing that part of his life that I know from having been right next to him, thanks to my husband, Alain. Some letters, some original manuscripts that I still have, some photos with personalities who he kept company with, etc... but it's best to come to see and hear it! The concerts will be played by great talents such as yourself, Nicolas, and the American pianist Barbara McKenzie. I'm sure these concerts will not fail to resonate in the United States, to my great pleasure and to that of all music lovers!

ND: Me, I'll be there and so will Philippe Gaubert's flute. Thank you for your testimony and meetings on the 6th, 8th, and 10th of October at 8 pm for the concerts and exhibits at the Cite des Arts, 18 rue de l'Hotel de Ville, in Paris IV.