

Towards the Future with SMR...

Written by Dr. Lee Patrick

Friday, 14 May 2010 10:28 - Last Updated Monday, 11 June 2012 14:47

There is a tendency when appraising the remarkable career of Sigurd Raschèr to dwell on his great artistic achievements of the 1930's and to overlook many other aspects of his life. When we carefully study his life and accomplishments, we quickly realize that he has single-handedly given us a legacy unequalled in the history of any other instrument. This legacy is ours, free for the taking; all we need do is open our eyes and ears and to become aware of what has been offered.



Let us consider the issue of the saxophones' emerging respectability. It is not necessary to describe to readers of this journal the low regard in which the saxophone was generally held

at the time Sigurd Raschèr started concertizing. While it is true that there were, before his time, a few saxophonists who played the instrument with proficiency, he appears to have been the only one who saw the direct link between artistic respectability and a musically-significant repertoire.

Furthermore, he was blessed with the ability to convincingly demonstrate the artistic possibilities of the instrument to a number of composers prominent in the 1930's. The fruits of these early collaborations form the backbone of the saxophone repertoire. Enough time has passed that we can consider these works objectively; it is safe to say that the Raschèr-inspired compositions of Martin, Glazounov, Ibert, and Hindemith have found a lasting place in the repertoire. These works, plus a few others - such as those by Daphl and Husa - are always among the first cited when one seeks to defend the validity of the saxophone repertoire.

Do we ever consider where we would be today if these works did not exist? The lack of these works would make it extremely difficult to justify the inclusion of the saxophone in today's higher-education music curriculum, those seeking careers as soloists would have little worthwhile music to perform, and everyone would be denied the experience of these compositions. In a manner of speaking, these works are gifts to us from their composers that would not have come into being were it not for the inspiration of Sigurd Raschèr's artistry; all that is expected in return is that we perform them with as much integrity as they were so frequently performed by the gentleman for whom they were composed.

As we can learn from reading review of Sigurd Raschèr's concerts in the thirties, and from accounts of those who heard them, the most commanding aspect of his performances at that time were his beautiful tone, accurate intonation, command of the altissimo, and technical facility.

Without meaning to sound disrespectful, we should expect this from anyone who presents him or herself as a soloist. But the lesson to be learned by all who strive to become artists is what happened next! Through the years Mr. Raschèr continued to grow as an artist and his performances became more and more insightful.

This can be easily documented by those who have listened carefully to his recordings. Compare his early recording of the concerto by Lars Erik Larsson with his much later recording of Erland von Koch's concerto - two works that have several outward similarities. In spite of the vast differences in recording technology between these two recordings, we can easily recognize the quantum leap in artistry. The earlier recording has about it a fiendish level of accuracy that most performers would be well satisfied to attain. The later recording is much more elastic and is filled with subtle nuances and insights lacking in the earlier endeavor.

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And so it has been throughout the many years he has been before the public. He never wastes time looking back; instead, he always looks ahead to tomorrow when it will be possible to take another step toward the ultimate artistic ideal.

Perhaps proof of this would be his final solo appearance (May 14, 1977); there are knowledgeable critics who believe that this was the most beautiful and deeply-moving performance of his career.

In this aspect of his life he has taught us a valuable lesson. Many of those who play an instrument spend their teens and twenties gaining technical mastery and learning its basic repertoire. The remainder of the career becomes a holding operation; after a while this becomes impractical and the instrument spends more and more time in its case. Sigurd Raschèr has demonstrated that it doesn't have to be this way; one is never too old to learn and to improve.

Obviously, a big part of the secret of playing for as many years as did Mr. Raschèr is maintaining a sound body and a clear mind. Those who know him well have had ample opportunity to experience for themselves his remarkable good health and stamina, and his common-sense approach to maintaining his physical well-being.

The mental side of this is more difficult to explain. Those who have studied with him for an length of time will attest to the amount of mental effort involved on the part of both teacher and student. To many, it seems as if an afternoon spent working through a major repertoire piece with him involves more thinking than is required these days to obtain a college degree. If this sounds like an outlandish exaggeration, ask someone who has had the experience.

It may well be that his ability to think clearly, freshly, and originally is the strongest aspect of his personality. Indeed, his ability to pass this skill on to others is probably the key to his phenomenal success as a teacher.

But there are certain unanswered questions and puzzles concerning his teaching and his influence on others. It is well documented that from the very beginning of his career he had

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an immediate influence on composers, conductors, and other musicians. He broke the ground in various phases of music making.

Today it is not unusual to see a televised performance of a concerto. How many of us realize that the first concerto performance to be televised was a performance of the Larsson concerto with Sigurd Raschèr as soloist (London, November 27, 1937), or that for years he was the only wind instrumentalist who made his living as a soloist? A number of flutists and trumpet players, but no other saxophonists, have since achieved this distinction.

The puzzle is that for so long his influence was so little felt by other saxophonists. Fully two generations separate him from most of his students.

From his own generation no other saxophonists come to mind who were directly influenced by him. Without a doubt, the human and political tragedy then enveloped Germany and the rest of Europe during the 1930's and most of the 1940's took a heavy toll from Mr. Raschèr's generation and this was a major contributing factor to the situation.

From the next generation only a very small number seem to have been greatly influenced, and, in spite of the great amount of concertizing Mr., Raschèr did in Europe during the 1950's and 1960's, all of these are Americans.

We must move to still another generation - to those people now in their twenties and thirties - to find the largest number of saxophonists who are attempting to follow Sigurd Raschèr's example. Why is this? Why did it take so long?

Perhaps the sheer enormity of his initial accomplishments has something to do with the number of years that separate him from most of his students. For a person to take seriously and to play concerts on the saxophone must have seemed total madness at a time when the role of the saxophone was limited almost exclusively to entertainment music. Added to that, the technical level of his playing was on such a high plane that emulation may have seemed impossible.

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The younger saxophonists of today see things from a different perspective. They have access to better instruction, there is plenty of good music readily available, that they can find no reason why they should not be expected to meet the same standards of excellence routinely expected from violinists, pianists, singers, etc. They see themselves as musicians who, for one reason or another, have chosen to play the saxophone and can find no reason why they should be discouraged from doing so.

In Sigurd Raschèr they recognize a unique opportunity to study much of the repertoire with the person most intimately acquainted with it. That is probably the initial reason many come to study with him, but it soon becomes much more. As a teacher, he is as uncompromising as in the other phases of his life. From his students he expects extremely high standards of artistic excellence. His students are fully aware of these expectations and soon realize that anything short of their best effort is unacceptable. Not everyone is equal to the task.

From this, however, one should not conclude that he is an unsympathetic teacher. Quite the opposite. He always gets to know his students as individuals and tailors his instruction to the particular characteristics of each student's personality. He has unique - and subtle - ways of encouraging student to develop their special talents while strengthening the more poorly-developed aspects of their playing or personality (the two are usually interrelated). The results are better music making and lasting friendships.

Just as time seem to have come for Sigurd Raschèr the teacher, it also appears to have arrived for another cause that he has championed for years - the saxophone chamber orchestra. These days more and more of these ensembles are being established in various parts of the world, and, just as he did for the solo repertoire in an earlier age, he is busy at the task of encouraging composers to compose for the medium.

Both of these phenomena are probably outgrowths of the series of summer workshops that he started long ago and still continues to offer at various locations in the United States. At these workshops many saxophonists have their first personal contact with him and get their first taste of large ensemble playing. Often they return to their home towns determined to establish ensembles there.

And so the chain continues unbroken. Mr Raschèr's boundless enthusiasm for the man from Dinant and his wonderful invention is now shared by countless others and there is no reason to believe it will not continue to be passed on as long as music continues to be heard.

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Those who have been fortunate enough to be a part of the first few generations of musician to play serious music on the saxophone have seen exciting times. To carry on the work of Sigurd Raschèr with the same joy, integrity, and devotion to the highest of artistic ideals as he has shown through the years is a responsibility and a pleasure that many others have willingly assumed.

It is fortunate the Mr. Raschèr has been granted a long life so that he can see and hear for himself how the art form he pioneered a half century ago has flourished; there is no way he could have foreseen the enthusiasm with which so many others now share his vision.

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