

A MAN OF HIS TIME

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translated by Mark Wiggins

When, in August 1912, Théodore Dubois completed his *Souvenirs de ma vie* (although intended for publication, this work did not appear until 2008), he concluded: 'From today, in order that my memory should let me down no further – I am somewhat fearful of this, even if this has not happened on many occasions for the foregoing – I shall be now writing down my notes from one day to the next. Rather than consisting of recollections this will be more of a diary.' Matching his words with suitable action, he wrote, from August 24, 1912 and until December 21, 1923 – shortly before his death – such a diary or journal to which he regularly confided the most important occurrences in his daily life. The process of rediscovery of this composer and of his music commenced in 2010, following a stirring read of these pages, which had been preserved by Dubois' family. And also following the many and pleasant surprises that it held in store...

Dubois was the archetypal 'official artist'. An 'Academician', one might say today. A gifted student (who had been born in 1837), he had a successful musical training at the Paris Conservatoire, receiving many accolades there, notably in piano and composition, including a *premier grand prix de Rome* (1861). On returning to France, he immediately embarked on the natural course of a regular and patient professional ascent. Professor of harmony at the Conservatoire from 1871, he became professor of composition there ten years later. He was named its director from 1896 until his retirement in 1905. Alongside these professional activities, he held different musical posts in churches, notably at the Madeleine as its organist (1877-1896). Honoured by the official circles, elected a member of the Institut de France in 1894, Dubois would

suffer after his death from this privileged position. Whilst remaining completely faithful to his ideas of clarity and of respect for tradition, he was sensitive to the advanced ideas of his time, as exemplified by his early membership of the Société Nationale de Musique. His vast and varied output, which embraces all genres, is eclectic in its inspiration, aligning itself just as much with Franck and Schumann as with Brahms and Saint-Saëns. Amongst the works which would permit a suitable idea of his style being given, the majority had unfortunately become forgotten – even untraceable – until recently. An international festival dedicated to the composer in 2012, some 15 record releases containing his music which have been released since then, and this present *Portrait*, are currently encouraging a reappraisal and revision of those stubborn prejudices from which Dubois still suffers. And likewise for the whole official *fin-de-siècle* School swept aside as a mere memory by the innovating symbolism of a Debussy or a Ravel.

In reality, the range of Dubois' works exemplifying his inventiveness and bearing witness to a real evolution in his writing is indeed a large one. For the present book-CD, we have selected works from across the composer's output (from his *Messe pontificale* begun in 1862 in Rome and initially performed under the title of *Messe solennelle*, up to the symphonies from the 1910s). We have also drawn on a very rich body of works, from the *Piano Sonata* through to orchestral pieces, from the *Piano Quartet* through to the motets written for the Madeleine.



Despite the eclecticism inherent in his career and in his oeuvre, the image that posterity has chosen to retain of Dubois is that of an artist who was zealous in defending the rules, competent only in illustrating them and formulating theories about them through treatises, one of which became a landmark publication and which still invokes memories of schooldays for some. The enduring image that inevitably clings to authors of theoretical treatises is one of the reasons for the disregard in which Dubois has been held since his death, especially given that he was so prolific in that activity. Another explanation for this disregard clearly lies in the widespread awareness of what constitute the most impersonal sections of the composer's output: his organ works and religious music. Published starting from the 1860s, these

occasional pieces (principally motets with soloists), which – although agreeable in themselves – were necessarily limited in their ambitions; they found their way all across France and established the composer's reputation as that of a man of religious worship much more so than that of the theatre or the concert hall. Indeed, many people today continue to recognise in Dubois only this compositional facet.

For this current book-CD, we have made a selection of six motets representing the different aspects of this genre, drawn from more than a hundred written by the composer, and composed throughout the greater part of his life. Thus, we have an *Ave verum* for solo voice and organ, a *Paris angelicus* for soloists, choir and several instruments (which places special emphasis on the configuration of violin, cello, harp, organ and double bass), and three motets for choir and organ with double bass (an *O Salutaris* and two *Ave Marias*; some of these can be sung *a cappella*). Lastly, there is a startling *O Salutaris* for mezzo-soprano, chorus and organ, which proves to be a parody of the slow movement from the Second Symphony of Beethoven – this long-standing technique which was aimed as a homage to past masters rather than as an ironic wink. On another occasion, Dubois makes use of the aria 'O Isis und Osiris' from Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* in a composition scored for male voices and organ. Some of these six motets characterize the then current neo-Palestrinian fashion, which imitated the austerity and the modal harmony of the Renaissance, whilst others illustrate the operatic style then-fashionable in the church (notably the *Ave verum* for solo voice and organ).

Continuing to make the selection here from the domain of sacred music – but with a work significantly more ambitious in its scope – the *Messe pontificale* was published in 1895. We know today that its origin was considerably earlier since it was a partial revision of the *Messe solennelle* written by the composer in the 1860s during his stay at the Villa Medici. The rules of the Académie de France in Rome required the first-year musician-*pensionnaires* to send an *envoi* to the Académie des Beaux-Arts, consisting of a worked-out piece of religious music, the choice being from a mass, a *Requiem*, a *Te Deum* or an oratorio. The report given by the members of the Institut de France, in 1863, unre-servedly praise the young composer's labours:

For his first-year work M. Dubois has sent to the Académie a Messe solennelle scored for large orchestra. In this work, skilfully handled by a knowledgeable and serious musician, we have noted a Kyrie, which is tasteful and pure in style; in the Gloria, there is a Qui tollis scored for solo tenor and choir, imbued with an attractive religious sentiment; we will highlight also that in the next section, there is a perfectly written fughetta for the voices. The Credo appears to us to be the principal section of the work; the Et incarnatus est and the Crucifixus are compositions embracing a noble and elevated sentiment. We wholeheartedly commend him for the development sections, the unity of style and the majestic character of this Credo. In addition, we will mention the Sanctus, the O Salutaris and an Agnus Dei whose melodic sentiment and expression are perfectly adapted to the subject's character [...] The labours of this pensionnaire demonstrate strong and serious studies and lead one to augur more than favourably for his future.

This mass was published in Paris by the firm of Heugel, which brought out the greater part of Dubois' output. The first Parisian performance took place in the church of Saint-Eustache on Saint Cecilia's Day in November 1895 (although Dubois refers to 1896 in the *Souvenirs de ma vie*). The composer relates:

Back then, the Association des Artistes Musiciens used to celebrate Saint Cecilia's Day with the performance of a High Mass with orchestra in the church of Saint-Eustache. I recalled a Messe pontificale composed in Rome in 1862, as an envoi, and which I had only heard performed on a single occasion, in the Madeleine in 1870, and then under poor conditions. I had the desire of hearing it again. I made a proposal to the committee, and it was accepted. However, I did not want it to be put on again without first freshening it up a bit. I set about entirely reworking and re-orchestrating it; the work was very well performed under the baton of Lamoureux.

On the title page of the piano reduction score there is an indication which refers to an arrangement of the work for string quintet, harp and two organs (one of which acts for the work's wind parts). Unfortunately, neither the large revised orchestration, nor the transcription for small ensemble, are currently available for hire. The Heugel archives, purchased by Leduc and more recently by Music Sales, are silent on this mass. Hence, the present recording makes use of a modern transcrip-

tion, one carried out by Alexandre and Benoît Dratwicki based on Dubois' piano reduction, and following the spirit of nineteenth-century adaptations. In addition to a choir and four soloists (soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor and baritone), the arrangement calls for flute, clarinet, bassoon, horn, harp, two violins, two violas, two cellos, double bass and organ. By a happy stroke of luck, soon after the present recording was made – and in the spirit of healthy rivalry brought on by the 2012 Dubois festival – the Bibliothèque Nationale de France began cataloguing in 2014 a large collection of words by Dubois which had been declared lost, but which recently had been rediscovered. Among them appears – in addition to *Le Paradis perdu* and the opera *Aben-Hamet* – the manuscript for the *Messe pontificale* in its 'large' version. So, only the final and magisterial revision remains to be recorded.

The *Messe pontificale* conforms to the traditional structure of the mass. The *Kyrie*, Schubertian in its inspiration, highlights the tenor solo for the contrasting part of the *Christe eleison*. The concise choral texture develops in a tranquil manner – not without indulging, however, in some elegant modulations. The opening of the *Gloria* is very Verdian in its appearance, providing the baritone solo with a heroic and vigorous subject. The rest of the movement makes full use of the different characteristics implicit in the written text, the *Propter magnam* keeping alive the spirit of the classical Viennese masses, introduced by a *Gratias* in the form of an appropriately angelic chorus of seraphim (the female choral parts divided into four). The sumptuous *Qui sedes*, entrusted to the soprano solo, above balancing arpeggios from the harp, calls upon all the elements found in operatic sensuality, although the repeat of the heroic *Qui tollis*, from the tenor soloist, curtails any sentimentalism. A strongly-marked *Quoniam* concludes the *Gloria* in exemplary fashion. The alluring opening of the expansive *Credo* is also entrusted to the baritone. For the following *Et incarnatus est*, above a string of triplets, the soprano presents all the *cantabile* attractiveness found in Italian opera, allied with a tonal wholeheartedness of tone. The choral restatement here undoubtedly provides one of the most poignant moments in this mass. The very short *Sanctus* is almost enchainé to an imaginative *O Salutaris* scored for four soloists (the final reply from the choir being optional according to an indication supplied by Dubois). Composed in the neo-Palestrinian style, this *O Salutaris* brings the mass towards a close in a mood of reflection,

far from the academic style with which this composer is so often associated. The final section, the *Agnus Dei*, involving soprano, tenor and choir, participates in this 'cleansing' of the notion of monumentality in favour of introspection. The touching *mélodie accompagnée* along with poetic commentaries from the clarinet are presented first separately, then in dialogue between the two soloists. A luminous choral passage leads to a long ethereal coda which seems to imply that divine pardon is within reach.



Compared to his religious music, Dubois' chamber music is impressive less for its quantity than for its variety. The composer distinguished himself in more or less all the 'classical' combinations of his time (string quartet, piano trio, piano quartet and quintet, violin, cello, piano sonatas, etc) and even introduced innovations which involved some of the more 'modern' instruments of the time (*Fantasetta* for flute, viola and harp; *Dixtuor* for string and wind quintets, etc). As a suitable representative from this area of Dubois' output, we have chosen for the present *Portrait* the Piano Quartet (written for violin, viola, cello and piano), published in 1907. Dubois composed it when still in full command of his musical faculties, at the time of his leaving the Conservatoire and going into retirement (1905). Around then, the composer became especially interested in the cyclic form of which his teacher, César Franck, was such a stout defender. The finale of the Piano Quartet accordingly presents a finely-stitched thematic recapitulation, clearly defined on the score itself by Dubois, with directions for the players concerning the source and transformational type applied to each of the melodies. Wholly Romantic in the sweep of its size and intensity, the first movement is marked by its initial exalted and passionate subject. However, it is above all the developments carried out to this (and several other) motifs which demonstrate the perfect mastery of harmony possessed by Dubois – who incidentally had been a professor in this subject and not just in composition or counterpoint. Whilst as a more than competent organist he had mastered the techniques of fugal writing, he was always more open to the ever-changing colours of harmony than to the dryness of contrapuntal work. The slow movement from this Quartet is one of the summits of Dubois'

chamber output, alongside the exquisite *Adagio* from his Piano Quintet. The wistful tonal colours provided by the viola are perfect there and, once again, the sinuous harmonies of the thematic progression embody a shimmering and bristling poetry. Spiritual, almost Haydnesque in its simplicity, the *Scherzo* acts as a pointed bow of respect to the classicism from another time. It recalls analogous movements in the *Suite concertante*, the piano trios and the string quartets and appears – for those who know Dubois well – rather as one of his distinctive signature features. Present at the work's première in 1907, the critic Amédée Boutarel wrote in *Le Ménestrel* of March 30:

At the final concert given at the Rue de Clichy music society, a quartet by M. Théodore Dubois, scored for piano, violin, viola and cello, has received the warmest of welcomes. Attractive singing phrases appear over a tessitura composed of ever-melodious subjects, an irreproachably clear form, shorn of any quiriness or vulgarity, various motifs presenting a well-judged character in order to create a piece from which monotony is absent, always fresh and attractive; these are the dominating qualities which to me seem to justify the repeated applause of the audience.



If Dubois was undoubtedly a more accomplished organist than he was a pianist (he himself admitted to having taken up the instrument too late to become a real virtuoso), he was able to rely throughout his career on the advice proffered to him by his wife, Jeanne Duvinage, a concert pianist popular with Parisian audiences. Indeed, Duvinage was the first performer of a number of her husband's works, including the *Concerto-capriccioso* dating from the 1870s. The Piano Sonata, published in 1908, clearly benefits from judicious technical remarks. Its writing is wide-ranging and resourceful, with a sound texture – at times Schumannesque, elsewhere otherworldly – and which from time to time is crossed by epic flashes. Some of the technical features, in particular, call for much more than an amateurism executed in good taste. The first movement, in the key of A minor, exhibits a varied range of thematic material, in which the second subject is harmonised wittily and with poetic charm. The slow movement consists of an enormous nocturne, in tripartite form, with the repeat of

the initial elegiac song paving the way for a calm and sustained variation section. The finale begins with a suspended cadence appearing to be restraining all its energy, which is then unleashed in one single burst. A very fine Wagnerian motif demonstrates that the Bayreuth master was not always denigrated by Dubois. In this Sonata, *Le Ménestrel* identified

one of the strongest and most personal scores to have been written by the composer of Xavière. I am highlighting this exquisite work for those who think that M. Th. Dubois is not part of the 'movement'... firstly, the opening section, with its two very distinctive subjects, the first spirited, the second poetic, enveloped in delightful harmonies; the whole submitted to all kinds of treatments and developed with an astonishing skill; then there is a fine Andante of a completely Beethovenian inspiration, which M. Risler executed with an admirable feeling; lastly, the finale, which is highly rhythmical, intense and yearning, all of which caused the salon to burst out in enthusiastic applause. I repeat with as much frankness as with pleasure: a most attractive work magnificently performed.

(*Le Ménestrel*, May 23, 1908.)

It appears that from that point on, Édouard Risler, the work's first performer, repeatedly performed the Sonata, in all sorts of performing situations. In his *Journal*, dated March 11, 1913, Dubois refers to this aspect:

A marvellous performance of my Piano Sonata from Risler, at the Salon des Musiciens Français. Risler is a superb musician and he has understood my thinking with a force, a charm, and with an absolutely remarkable sense of colour. He was accorded a huge – and well-merited – success by the audience.



The 19th century symphonic tradition, abounding in repeatedly-performed masterworks of Beethoven, served as a heavy burden for composers of the second Romantic period to carry. Dubois was one of these, and he only set about this demanding genre late in his career, in the same way that he came late to the string quartet. Nonetheless, when he began the composition of his *Symphonie française* in 1908, he had

behind him a solid orchestral experience already essayed in various concert overtures (the highly successful *Ouverture de Frithiof*, for example) as well as original operatic scores (*Aben-Hamet*, *Xavière*) or oratorios (*Le Paradis perdu*). In his *Souvenirs*, Dubois becomes very voluble when referring to the initial and subsequent performances of the *Symphonie française*:

In 1908, I came to the end of the Symphonie française which I had been working on. This symphony was performed in Brussels in November 1909, under the superlative direction of the great Ysaÿe. It was my choice that the work should be first performed abroad, dreading – with reason – the damage too often meted out by the audiences of the Concerts Colonne and Lamoureux to those composers who were not scared of facing up to them. My hunch proved to be correct. Not only was my work a great success in Brussels, but it subsequently gained the same reaction in Paris, The Hague, in many cities in Germany, in Nancy, in Boston. This very year (1912), when I have myself conducted at the Concerts Colonne – Gabriel Pierné being indisposed – it was a triumph! Just imagine it; the return of the foreigner! Have I not previously said that the public appeared to be handing out better reactions and feelings towards me? The same thinking applied with the press, so often harsh and malicious in days gone by, plainly unfair. Perhaps I am gathering in a little of the fruit of my own perseverance and of my artistic sincerity!

The *Symphonie française* opens in the same unsettled mood as that of the *Symphony in D minor* by César Franck (Dubois' teacher). Such a comparison is not unintentional: like his teacher, Dubois resumes the thematic material in a different key with the initial exposition scarcely concluded. The turbulent *Allegro* is based on several motifs, the first undulating and with steadily widening intervals, the second, calmer and entrusted to the solo clarinet. In general, the discourse is shared out in a very fragmented way among different orchestral desks, only being interrupted by a number of brass calls. The slow movement is astonishing in its simplicity. Constructed as a set of variations on a popular French tune, first played alone by the oboe, before being slowly expanded, it gradually calls into play an instrumentarium of unusual abundance, including a celesta, which he deploys with great skill and care. With the triumphant rhythmical beating of the brass, the finale covertly conjures up *La Marseillaise*, yet without the com-

poser overdoing this in a trite or vulgar manner. In his *Journal*, Dubois talks about performances of the work in Paris, Monte Carlo, New York, each occasion, it seemed to him, being a great success. The final references to this work are dated to January 31, 1919 ('My *Symphonie française* had lots of success at the Concerts Padeloup. Very well conducted and very well played, the effect it created was truly spectacular and welcoming! I'm pleased about that.') and to January 17, 1922 ('I had forgotten to mention that my *Symphonie française* had been performed in December at the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire. Admirable performance! A very warm reception indeed!'). The very title of the work brought him benefit during the course of the First World War, with some concert programmers making use of it for simple but effective patriotic purposes.

Completed in 1912, the Symphony No. 2 experienced a much more complicated life compared to its predecessor, and this despite neither its language nor its orchestration being radically different from the earlier work. Dubois relates:

First performance of the Symphony. The first movement is applauded strongly, quite possibly too much at the whim of some crazy individuals in the higher galleries, for then they began to cause a commotion – continuing until the end – whistling, singing, jeering even during the performance, in such a way as to prevent it being heard, and causing an obstruction. It was disgraceful! This crew of barbarians wants nothing beyond what comes out of its trendy 'boutique', that is the Schola Cantorum. People all over the place tell me this. My name appearing on a poster is enough to get their goat! An old man who is still composing! What a nerve! At any rate, I spent a grim afternoon, all the more so in that I knew my poor wife was in the hall! She acted very bravely, and tolerated the row remarkably well! In the first outbursts, I identified – from where I was sitting in the wings – the word 'Institut', from which I deduced that they were wanting to reproach Pierné for playing the music of a member of the Institut, holding me up in their court in this way in view of the forthcoming elections! Did Pierné appreciate this ruse? I might cheerfully believe it, for his attitude to it was rather half-hearted. He wasn't in possession of the required energy to bear up in the storm. If he had called a halt to the performance, turning towards the troublemakers (which is what Colonne and Lamoureux would have done in their day) and said: 'Messieurs, I will continue when you permit the audience to listen', matters

would have turned out differently. But no, he came over as embarrassed and placed, I have no idea why, an interminable gap between each part of the work!

(*Journal*, November 10, 1912.)

The next day, he added:

The press hasn't been too bad. I must say that all the critics energetically criticized that group of ruffians who were practising artistic sabotage so effectively and so shamefully! I have since learnt that what served as the pretext for these vandals was a similarity [with my work] to the first three notes of Massenet's Vision fugitive [from Hérodiade]. It is not untrue that there was a little involuntary 'recollection' there, but let the composer to whom this has never happened cast the first stone at me. More famous composers than me have had these 'recollections': was César Franck ever reproached for the complete similarity between the opening subject of his wonderful symphony with one of the subjects from Die Walküre? Was Ambroise Thomas reproached for having borrowed, note by note, the entirety of the opening stanzas of his Le Songe d'une nuit d'été from a well-known lied of Schubert? And Richard Strauss, whose majority of motifs from his Elektra seem to be copied, despite light adjustments, from those of an Italian opera, moreover unknown: Cassandra, by Gnechi? Who has never thought of turning it into a crime against one's teachers? But with me, it is different, 'I am that scabby, scurvy object, that pariah!'

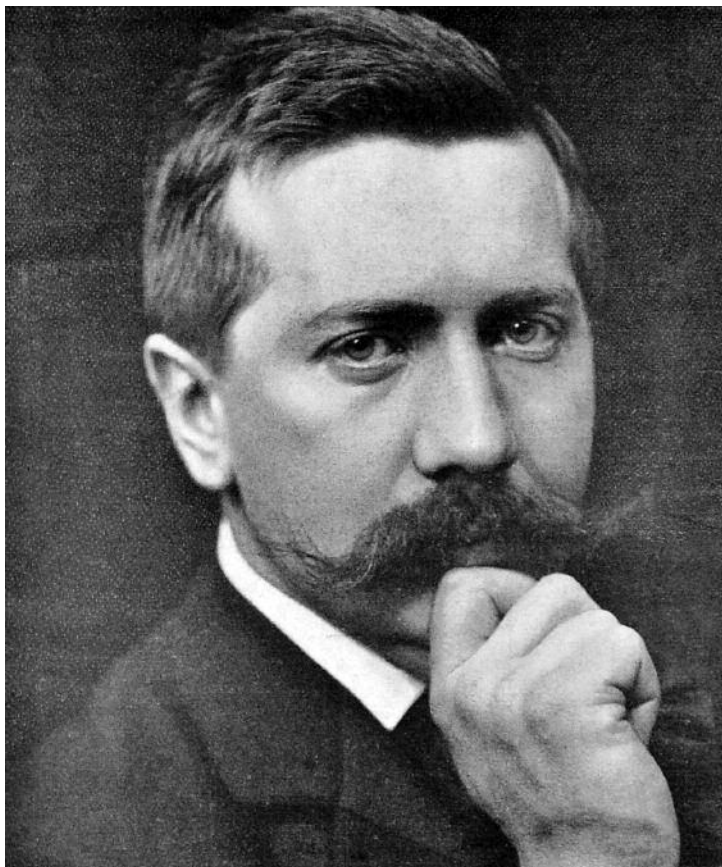
(*Journal*, November 11, 1912.)

Conscious of the fact that this unwitting borrowing might be highlighted by reviewers, Dubois hastened in his desire to wish its disappearance. Notwithstanding this, it appears that Heugel may have refused to reprint the score – and the orchestral parts – with corrections applied. A copy which has been meticulously struck through with corrections remains today the version which is made available for hire, bearing the traces of that repentance and permitting, if need be, the playing of the symphony in its first version. Out of respect for the alterations desired by Dubois, the present recording has nonetheless taken into account all the cuts indicated, including within a different movement than the one which makes use of the Massenet motif. A propos this, Dubois noted in his *Journal* that he was making 'light

changes so as to make the offending recollection disappear' and that he 'lightened a little the *Adagio*' (November 25, 1912). Not unreminiscent of *St John's Night on Bald mountain* by Mussorgsky, the first movement of Dubois' symphony efficiently manages a highly dissonant motif, which whirls chromatically around a pivot note. It is only the first subject sound 'halo', strictly speaking, which emerges from the depths of the orchestra. Both the bass clarinet and the double bassoon are regularly called upon here and this special sonority must be noted as one of the score's original features. The basis of this initial movement is provided not by two but four principal ideas, something which considerably enriches the variety of the development sections. Orchestral effects – and their results – also abound in the slow movement. Chromatic string textures summon up afresh the memory of César Franck, while the meticulously-crafted details of the second motif are conducive to a final superimposition of the two melodic ideas. The *Scherzo* offers an attractive recollection of Mendelssohn, and of the Italian sun – whose charms Dubois had so often extolled – which shines out here as much in the woodwind staccatos as in the expressive melody from the cellos. It is rather like hearing an unpublished movement from the 'Italian' Symphony by the German composer. There is an impulsive moment of humour with the final scale on the flute, which in no time at all brings this indefinable dance movement to a close. The finale, with the intensity of a Schumann, sets forth in a dignified manner, radiantly flowing through the most contrasting of landscapes. The brass here has a more active presence, recalling the flamboyant sonorities of the finale of the *Symphonie française*. The cyclic nature of the work is limited to a brief thematic recapitulation, but one where the slow movement repeat interrupts the flow of the piece in a surprising but efficacious way. The sombrely-hued first movement subject had reappeared before it, then followed by the violas' lyrical motif, this time played with boldness by the trumpet. What is revealed to the ear is virtually Chausson. The movement comes to an end in a 'con brio' manner; one more time the image of a stuffy and reserved Dubois is called into question. After a performance in Brussels, in 1913, the composer wrote:

L'Indépendance Belge *has been considering my evolution! I am a Franckian, a d'Indy, and 'I reach out' to young composers! From being a reactionary,*

here I am now very popular! It is amusing. In Paris, I have been whistled at as if I was banal and out of touch. Here, I am acclaimed as a progressive. I am just independent and have no desire to belong to any clique or clan.
(*Journal*, November 23, 1913.)



Édouard Risler, first performer of the Piano Sonata by Dubois.
(*Musica*, February 1906.)

Édouard Risler, créateur de la *Sonate pour piano* de Dubois.
(*Musica*, février 1906.)