



Taffanel: Genius of the Flute

By Edward Blakeman

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The French flute player and conductor Paul Taffanel (1844-1908) was an extraordinary virtuoso and a major figure in fin-de-siècle Parisian musical life. Based on a treasure trove of private documents of Taffanel's previously unpublished letters and papers, *Taffanel: Genius of the Flute* recounts the rich story of his multi-faceted career as a player, conductor, composer, teacher, and leader of musical organizations.

As a player, Taffanel had a rare vision of the flute as a serious, expressive instrument and his name sits at the center of the extraordinary lineage of flutists. At a crucial moment in the flute's history -- after it had been completely remodeled by Theobald Boehm -- Taffanel had far-ranging influence, creating the modern French school of playing which has since been widely adopted throughout the world, and re-establishing the instrument in the mainstream of music. Taffanel was also an inspiring teacher at the Paris Conservatoire, to whom many modern flutists can trace their roots.

Taffanel also pioneered a renaissance in playing and composing chamber music for wind instruments. He founded the Société de musique de chambre pour instruments à vent (Society of Chamber Music for Wind Instruments) in 1879, reviving the wind ensemble music of Mozart and Beethoven, and stimulating the composition of many new works, among them Gounod's *Petite symphonie*. The ensemble broke the dominance of piano and strings in recital and chamber music and fostered many of the canonic works in that repertoire.

Although foremost a flutist and teacher, Taffanel was also an important opera and orchestra conductor, virtually without rival in Paris. From 1890, he served as chief conductor at the Paris Opera and the Société des concerts du Conservatoire (Paris Conservatory Orchestra) - the first time a flutist, rather than a string player, had been appointed to such key positions. At the Opéra he was charged with all new productions and gave notable French premieres of various Wagner operas and Verdi's *Otello*. At the Société des concerts he championed contemporary French composers, particularly his great friend Saint-Saëns, and gave the world premiere of Verdi's *Sacred Pieces*.

Beyond his work as a performer, teacher and conductor, Taffanel was a fluent composer for the flute and wind quintet, a formidable administrator of several

musical organizations, and was a major personality in Parisian musical life. Blakeman expertly places Taffanel's story in the rich political and cultural backdrop of the time, evoking Conservatoire intrigues, the Société des concerts, and Taffanel's relationships with various musicians and major composers. Blakeman details the circumstances surrounding landmark commissions, performances, and repertoire, and weaves the details from Taffanel's correspondence with first-person interviews and flute lore. What emerges is a portrait of an all-round musician who was also a modest and genial man.

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Editorial Review

Review

"*Taffanel* will appeal to the aficionado as well as the proletariat, a highly readable documentation that balances the composer's achievements against the cultural institutions of the Belle Epoque."--Mark Tanner, *Musical Opinion*

"Edward Blakeman expertly rises to this challenge as he lucidly tells the story of this fascinating, important, and kindly man who influenced flute playing indelibly over the later decades of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth. This makes for a good read, but the book will also prove invaluable as a reference tool, not least because of the copious appendices.... Not only are these fascinating in themselves, but they are not found elsewhere in print--important, if minor, components in the rich mosaic of Parisian musical life across the *fin de siècle*."--Richard Langham Smith, *Music and Letters*

"Finally a new book that adds something to our knowledge of French music from the first half of the 20th Century."--Mia Dreese, *FLUIT*

"As one would expect, the major part of the book focuses on Taffanel as a performer, conductor and teacher. It is all so fascinating that it is impossible to do justice to it by quoting out of context, but I suggest that you buy a copy. Not only will it entertain and inform, but all the notes and lists in the appendices will prove invaluable in writing programme notes, etc."--Brenda Dykes, *Pan*

"Taffanel was the foremost flutist of his time and ushered flute-playing into the modern age. Edward Blakeman's superbly-researched and elegantly-written book considers Taffanel in the context of French music at the time of Saint-Saëns, Fauré, and Massenet and explores his influence as conductor, composer, and teacher. Strongly recommended not only to flutists but to devotees of French culture as well."--John Solum, concert flutist, author of *The Early Flute*

"Edward Blakeman's long-awaited biography of Paul Taffanel will be much appreciated by scholars and performers. It is an eloquent account of his multifaceted career as flutist, teacher, and conductor and of the cultural institutions of Belle Epoque Paris."--Nancy Toff, author of *Monarch of the Flute: The Life of Georges Barrère* and *The Flute Book*

"Blakeman's scholarly technique is impeccable, mingling a superb command of the archives with quite a number of personal connections and first-person interviews, and a rock-solid knowledge of flute players and

lore. His no-nonsense approach is refreshing: It's a fine piece of work."--D. Kern Holoman, Barbara K. Jackson Professor of Music, University of California, Davis and author of *The Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, 1828-1967*

"Splendid... [A] fine biography."-*Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society*

About the Author

Edward Blakeman is Editor of Live Music at BBC Radio 3 in London, in charge of broadcasting opera, orchestral concerts, and the annual summer season of the BBC Proms. As a flute player and writer on music, he has long been fascinated by all things French and this book is the result of many happy times of work and play in Paris.

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