Claude Debussy (1862-1918): Première Rhapsodie for Clarinet & Piano (1910)

This short piece (c.7’) was composed soon after Fauré, who had been Director of the Paris Conservatoire since l’affaire Ravel (see below), nominated Debussy to its Conseil Supérieur. Over the previous few years Debussy’s music had finally achieved the success which had previously eluded him with triumphant performances of Pelléas et Mélisande, La mer and Prélude à l’après-midi d’une faune.

The Première Rhapsodie is one of two mandatory pieces Debussy was asked to write for the conservatory’s clarinet competition. The Rhapsodie was given to candidates to study before the competition, Debussy also wrote a shorter second piece which was for sight-reading. The Rhapsodie is designed to expose any technical inadequacies in the performer: for example, one rapid passage exercises all 7 keys played by the little fingers. Despite these technical demands the piece is a thing of great beauty and has become a standard part of the clarinet repertoire. Debussy’s colleagues liked it too: ‘The clarinet competition went extremely well and, to judge by the expressions on the faces of my colleagues, the rhapsody was a success.’ After the public première by its dedicatee Prosper Mimart, Debussy declared it one of the most pleasing pieces he had ever written, and subsequently re-arranged it for clarinet and orchestra.

Like his much earlier String Quartet No 1, the Rhapsodie is entitled the first, but each is from a series of just one: he had planned a second rhapsody (for saxophone), but it never happened.