

A Personal Journey with Henriette Renié

by Odette de Montesquiou, edited by Jaymee Haefner

Editor's note: *The following is an excerpt from The Legend of Henriette Renié by Odette de Montesquiou, edited by Jaymee Haefner, translated by Robert Kilpatrick and published by AuthorHouse. © 2006 by Jaymee Haefner, editor. Used with permission.*

This chapter was written from Odette de Montesquiou's perspective.

In 1920, the French government gave Henriette Renié and Camille Chevillard the responsibility of making a French propaganda tour in the Rhineland after World War I. The orchestra was composed of Germans who were not very enthusiastic about performing a required concert. Impassive at the beginning, they were moved by the passion of the artist, and at the end of the concert they gave her an endless ovation.

About this time in 1920, I was overcome by a deep attraction to the harp and I insisted that I be allowed to take it up. My mother, an avid musician, had often heard her pupil Nicole Delorme speak of Henriette Renié. She decided one day to bring me to Nicolo Street, where Renié lived at that time. When she came into the room where we waited, I was impressed at once by her strong personality. Her voice and her gaze revealed a warm, vibrant being. After she questioned me, she began to understand my love for the harp. In spite of our great difference in age, this was the beginning of an immediate understanding which would continue to develop over the years.

Along with her remarkable teaching, I had the great joy of discovering her inspiration and her inner vitality. Her passionate love of God drove her to seek out the source of all beauty, but I only came to know this little by little.

During our first years of work together, she helped me discover the instrument and the art. She soon had me take part in her group courses, which I previously described. These were frightening courses, for nothing escaped her sharp ear.

During her private lessons, her teaching became even more intense. I learned how to discover all the richness of the instrument from which she drew a thousand varied timbres. Time ceased to exist when she focused on seeking out the ways for you to improve a phrase, avoid a buzz, or find the precise stroke to be given to a string so that the desired sound could be produced.

With the execution of a piece on stage, the study of her interpretation, and the search for perfection of style,

unforgettable moments were engendered; like a statue beneath the fingers of the sculptor, the piece changed shape and came alive with relief and movement. She would work a passage with demanding intensity until she arrived at the perfection she sought to communicate to you.

The preparation of my first recital was an opportunity to know Mlle Renié better still and to discover the spiritual asceticism through which she needed to pass before performing in public. She aimed at reaching perfection, but felt herself to be, like all great artists, at the mercy of the slightest mistake which would prevent her from reaching it. She thus knew the anguish of stage fright, but she was able to surmount it by a deep act of humility. At the time of performance, she considered herself to be an empty vessel, after wanting to possess intelligence, memory, and musical comprehension; she believed that her talent and her gifts belonged to God and that she had to give them back to Him, their creative source.

Renié enjoyed the success she obtained, the ovations and the compliments, but inside, she did not accept the credit for them.

At the time of a concert which she gave in Salle Gaveau on April 2, 1943, which I was unable to attend, she wrote me a letter discussing her state of mind before, during and after the concert. Here are some passages, which offer a glimpse of the source of her greatness:

The better I felt, the more I felt myself to be in full "bloom," the more I would suffer and choke up while thinking about the audition of April 2 . . . Naturally I wanted to have intelligence, memory, musical comprehension, mechanics, an uplifted soul and beauty of expression. I would have instinctively wished that all my work and all of my achievements were mine, with the divine gifts to do what I desired on April 2. Yet the presence of God is behind all of them. The gifts are talents that were made to bear fruit; both of them belong to God, and I have known this for a long time . . . and yet it should be believed that I had forgotten these. And (finally) I have given everything, this entire burden of intellectual, spiritual, and other wealth . . . In truth I did not even so much give them as "return" them to Him who alone possesses.



Renié at eleven



In 1923



In 1943



Théodore Dubois's class at the Paris Conservatoire



Renié at five



During World War I



Composing



Renié's hands

All photographs from the Henriette Renié and Françoise des Varennes Papers, Music Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

The Secret of True Talent

Another time, Renié wrote to me:¹

In my opinion, one "takes" the audience in three ways. The first is through dazzling virtuosity, like Mr. Diemer². . . not through the heart, but through breathtakingly sure virtuosity; for example, through confident musical quality with no emotion. The second is . . . through bad taste, seeking out the effect which makes the public swoon; one descends toward it and seeks only his success, without concern for the artistic beauty of the work. The third is passion, which entices the audience with an irresistible dynamism by giving oneself the generosity with which one delivers all that one possesses. Believe me, in my youth, I wandered aimlessly within certain passages that I played. Of course, these always remained musical, and I would recover courageously afterward (which did not prevent becoming furious) and in such a way as to stir up a crowd. Being well known at one time of my life, I wanted greater mastery of what I was doing. In 1903 a newspaper critique read, "Admirable interpretation without ostentation of Concertstück by Pierné." At the time, I was content, but I later understood the danger of this statement. Admittedly, it is necessary to prepare everything thoroughly and to be able to control what one does when one works. In public, however, it is necessary to do away with personality and to think of nothing but the piece which one wants to understand and to convey, with the desire to lift hearts toward the beauty of the music and to not flatter the audience.

She wrote another letter to me before a concert which I was to give. She found my program too easy and she feared that I was satisfied to seek only the safety in the execution, the musical quality and perfection.

One should not be satisfied with "perfection," with everything being in its proper place. I don't care about that. One must have generosity, passion, sensitivity, and spirit. One must be able to give oneself, to give part of oneself, or what one has received; to be lacking enough in those little ready-made ideas called "inspiration." Too bad if it makes people tremble and if it moves them. One only gives what one has.

1 Renié wrote these letters to Odette de Montesquiou.—Ed.

2 Mlle Renié is probably referring to Louis-Joseph Diemer, who was a well-respected pianist at the Paris Conservatoire in the nineteenth century. He was known for precision and purity in his virtuosic performances.—Ed.

The following quote shows that Renié's concept of style was nevertheless demanding, requiring the self-effacement of the artist before the work that is performed:


I would readily say that style is the work, in its simple truth. I agree that the artist reveals it in his heart and through his own interpretation. However, the more that he can refrain from this so that the listeners forget him in order to listen to the work in its own beauty as if it were very simple, the more he nears perfection. Feeling this, I wonder if I will be able to play this beautiful Quartet (in G minor by Mozart). Ah! What a beautiful voyage art is, my dear. It is a voyage of discovery where one always discovers unexplored shores.

About the author:

Odette de Montesquiou was one of the most faithful former disciples of Henriette Renié, as well as a member of Renié's harp sextet.

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A faculty member at the University of North Texas, Jaymee Haefner has completed her doctorate in harp at Indiana University. She is an active performer both in the U.S. and abroad. 

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For the Harp

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