

**The Department of Music at Haverford College presents**

**A Senior Recital by  
Haig Minassian, HC '12**



**Friday March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2012**

**Haverford College  
Roberts Hall, Marshall Auditorium**

## Program

Haig Minassian, alto saxophone  
Dr. Debra Lew Harder, piano

Sonata for Alto Saxophone and Piano (c.1720).....Henri Eccles  
I. Largo  
II. Courante  
III. Adagio  
IV. Presto

Sonata for Alto Saxophone and Piano (1965).....Wolfgang Jacobi  
I. Allegro ma non troppo  
II. Sarabande  
III. Allegro

Rapsodie Pour Alto Saxophone et Orchestra (1903).....Claude Debussy

*There will also be a short encore piece, dedicated to Minerva Pinto.*

## Biography

Haig Minassian is an Armenian-American classical saxophonist, and a senior Music major at Haverford College. Born in Bryn Mawr and raised in both Ardmore and Newtown Square, Haig is very proud of his local roots. He attended Friends School Haverford through second grade, then transferred to Marple Newtown School District where he promptly began teaching himself the saxophone. He was the Drum Major and Woodwind Captain in his high school marching band, and also played in orchestra, jazz band and saxophone quartet.

At Haverford College, Haig has mainly focused on improving as a soloist. Throughout his career, and under the tutelage of Charles Salinger for the past two years, he has studied the classical saxophone repertoire extensively, including canonical works by Paul Creston, Bernard Heiden, Paul Hindemith, Wolfgang Jacobi, Claude Debussy, Eugene Bozza, Henri Eccles, Frances Guilhaud, Charles Booker, David Maslanka, Alfred Reed, Pierre-Max Dubois, and Alexander Glazunov. He will be performing Movement I ("Energetic") of the Creston Concerto for Alto Saxophone with the Bi-College Orchestra on April 13th. He is also an active member of Swarthmore College's Wind Ensemble and the Bi-Co Student Recital Series.

Haig will matriculate at Jefferson Medical College this fall, where he will realize his lifelong dream of becoming a physician. He is interested in Pediatrics, Orthopedic Surgery, and Sports Medicine. As a physician, he aspires to serve the Philadelphia community with a creative mind and a compassionate heart. He also aspires to raise a loving family close to his very own.

## Henri Eccles, *Sonata for Alto Saxophone and Piano*

Henri Eccles (1670 - 1742) was an English composer from the heart of the Baroque era. He played in the court of King Louis XIV; however, conceiving himself neglected in England, he went to Paris where he was admitted as a member of the French King's band. In 1720, he published two books of sonatas for violin and continuo, each book containing twelve sonatas. The eleventh sonata in book one received the most public acclaim at the time and has since been arranged for other instruments in the string family, specifically viola, cello and bass.

Along came saxophone virtuoso and innovator Sigurd M. Rascher. Rascher had a profound influence on the saxophone's legacy as a classical instrument. Chief among his numerous and essential contributions was his discovery of altissimo fingerings, which allow saxophonists to play up to two octaves above the narrow two-and-a-half octave range in which the instrument is designed to play. He also expanded the saxophone's concert repertoire by transcribing classical pieces that predated the saxophone's invention and arranging them for saxophone. To this end, he arranged the piece for alto saxophone and piano in 1958 and renamed it *Sonata for Alto Saxophone*

*and Piano*. Rascher saw the saxophone as an ideal vessel through which Eccles' lyrical, eclectic, expressive, colorful piece could be channeled.

The first movement (Largo) begins with an expressive vertical leap and develops this gesture through repetition and variation of intervallic distances. As a consequence, the piece is rife with pleading and sadness, but not without a twist of sultriness and confidence afforded by the saxophone's colorful, idiomatic sound. The second movement (Courante) also features extreme vertical leaps which flirt with the absolute limits of the saxophone's written range, all the while demanding precise articulations and dynamic contrasts at a brisk tempo. The third movement (Adagio) recapitulates the sombre mood of the first movement at a slower tempo and with longer, broader phrases, culminating in a dominant harmony which gets resolved by the harmony that begins the fourth movement. The fourth movement (Presto) is a sprightly minuet which brings the sonata to a spirited and somewhat frantic end. The saxophonist must showcase all manner of virtuosic leaps and relentless sixteenth-note articulations, all in preparation for the final three, sumptuous quarter notes which stand at the pinnacle of the saxophone's written range. In spite of its relatively short length and conservative harmonic movement, the Eccles Sonata is a work of deep expression and beauty. It is lush and serenade-like, but it is always to be played with a polish and sensitivity that is characteristic of the Baroque style.

### **Wolfgang Jacobi, *Sonata for Alto Saxophone and Piano***

Wolfgang Jacobi (1894 - 1972) was a composer, teacher, and painter who lived a life full of discrimination and hardship. He was a prisoner of war during World War I. After the War, he studied in Berlin with Friedrich Koch from 1919 to 1922. In 1933, the Nazi government "disqualified" Jacobi from composing because of his half-Jewish heritage. He and his family took refuge in Italy for one year, then moved to Munich where he could resume his career in composition.

As a composer, Jacobi was influenced by the music of Debussy, Hindemith, Reger and Bartók. He dabbled in many genres, composing chamber music, orchestral works, concertos, choral music, songs and lieder. Despite not being a household name in the classical world, Jacobi could certainly hold his own, and in *Sonata* he created a canonical masterpiece that has earned the respect of saxophonists worldwide. By dedicating it to Sigurd Rascher, he hoped to help audiences worldwide appreciate the saxophone's magical differences in color across registers, and its ability to affect various kinds of drama through dynamic contrast and syncopation. He felt that Rascher's effortless grasp of the saxophone's extreme registers, as well as his unprecedented grasp of the altissimo register, would allow his piece to come alive exactly as he imagined it.

The first movement (Allegro ma non troppo) opens with the saxophone stating the main theme, unaccompanied. This theme consists of persistent, machine-like sixteenth notes and a careful mixture of staccato and legato tonguing, and interesting vertical leaps which are difficult to execute due to their angularity and range. Rhythms in this



the piece. That said, the work also appears to have satisfied one of the composer's own well-known musical desires: to create a piece of pure musical arabesque. Indeed, here the saxophone serves as an ornament to the orchestra. The work was meticulously crafted, using symmetrical forms and unconventional tonal relationships, all within an elaborate mathematical matrix, comprised of summation series, Golden Sections, and precise proportions. Debussy was methodical in his treatment of both orchestra and saxophone, utilizing the tonal capacities of each with great precision. Far from being unfamiliar with the saxophone, Debussy highlighted the peculiar tone colors of specific pitches at structurally important events within the work. It is also worthwhile to note that *Rapsodie* has direct compositional relationships to *Prelude to "The Afternoon of a Faun,"* Debussy's orchestral work featuring flute which he had just finished ten years prior. He also includes loud and glorious brass features that one would immediately associate with Richard Wagner; the irony here is that Debussy had made a conscious decision to disown his Wagnerian influence just a few years before composing *Prelude to "The Afternoon of a Faun."*

*Rapsodie* has a much more outward, forthright character than the rest of his work; consequently, many critics say that this is the work in which Debussy sounds the least like himself. Indeed, he departs from his habitual quest for formal innovation and follows the distinct outline of sonata form. In the exposition, while the solo saxophone introduces a sinuous and melancholy theme, the full orchestra, buoyed by Arabian rhythms and without the saxophone, introduces two spirited and confident themes. In the development, these competing forces first join together in blissful harmony, which then suddenly culminates in a tempestuous climax where the saxophone appears at times to be swallowed up by forces surrounding it. The result is a recapitulation of the orchestral themes only, joyously played first by the orchestra and then adopted ever so briefly and plaintively by the saxophone at the coda. Best known for creating subtle musical narratives, even Debussy may have surprised himself as much as his listeners at having created such an astonishingly forthright piece of music.

*Rapsodie pour Orchestre and Saxophone* is now understood to be one of the greatest works of the saxophone repertoire. No one yet knows what kind of scene or picture Debussy was trying to depict in this piece, but as the saying goes, the ears tell the mind what the eyes could not possibly believe. The very fact that a composer as great as Debussy created this masterpiece is the sole reason why the classical saxophone genre has survived to this day. Yet, as stated before, the saxophone is to be used as an ornament to the orchestra, and nothing more; saxophonists must surely abandon attempts at converting it into a virtuosic showpiece. It is best described as an orchestral tableau in which the singular character and beauty of the saxophone's timbre is chiefly displayed. I suppose that, when and if the saxophonist sits within the orchestra during performances of this beautiful *Rapsodie*, the original intentions of Debussy will have been finally realized in full.

movement are not unusually complex, but the constantly syncopated dialogues between saxophone and piano make rhythmic mastery an absolute necessity, and ensemble precision difficult to achieve. The second movement (Sarabande) is a triple-meter dance which is, at times, mysterious and ethereal and at other times infernal and fiendish. Rhythm may be an issue for both players as Jacobi subdivides the quarter-note pulse into four different types of sixteenth-note groupings in the main theme: quadruple, quintuple, sextuple, and septuple. The rhythms themselves are complex, and what is more, they must be played so precisely and confidently that they sound free and effortless, operatic and expressive. Dynamic contrast is yet another challenging facet of this movement as the saxophone is asked to play anywhere from pianissimo to fortissimo in the instrument's most extreme registers - an unenviable task for the performer, but a colorful soundscape for the listener to enjoy. The third movement (Allegro) is a scherzo that sounds rather erratic and off-kilter, but is actually constructed with consummate exactitude and attention to detail. One way to conceptualize this movement is to think of it as an experiment in gesture and timbral effects. The piece begins with the saxophone making an unorthodox attack on a pick-up instead of a downbeat; however, this gesture is far from random. Pick-ups and attacks on upbeats become one of the movement's main motifs, and it is reimagined in the form of long-short-short-long rhythms, rest-short-short-long rhythms in the cantabile sections, and grace notes tied to long held notes in the middle-section's refrain. The piece ends in an exciting, rapid descent that plummets into a held note that crescendos and gets cut off with a sforzando.

*Sonata* is an energetic and dramatic composition that - in spite of its departure from conventional tonality and other musical traditions that are inculcated in the ears of western audiences - is accessible and inspiring to musicians and non-musicians alike. It is the clear product of an ambitious, visionary mind who saw enormous potential in the saxophone as a classical instrument, and who made that potential a reality.

### **Claude Debussy, *Rapsodie pour Alto Saxophone et Orchestra***

Claude Debussy (1862 - 1918) was a French composer, and one of the most important musicians of his time. His harmonic innovations had a profound influence on generations of composers. The history of Debussy's *Rapsodie pour Orchestre et Saxophone* has been severely misrepresented, and its construction wholly misunderstood. Dismissed as an indifferent, incomplete, and ultimately inconsequential attempt at a saxophone concerto, *Rapsodie* has long deserved further consideration. A thorough reevaluation of the historical facts and musical substance reveals an astonishingly imaginative and overwhelmingly complex work, scored in the hand of Debussy himself - not posthumously in 1919 by Roger-Ducasse, a widely recycled and uncorroborated anecdote surrounding this piece.

Debussy's letters and the composition itself indicate that he composed *Rapsodie* in accordance with the wishes of Elise Hall, the saxophonist for whom he commissioned

## Acknowledgements

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## References

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