

All roads start from Rome...

Patrice d'Ollone

Although he produced some fine instrumental music and art songs, Max d'Ollone was above all a composer of works for the stage, the author of ten operas, five of which were performed at the Opéra or the Opéra-Comique in Paris. In that, he appears to have been predestined. From his earliest childhood he was influenced not only by the operas he saw at the theatre in Besançon, where he discovered with delight the scores of Richard Wagner, but also by his encounters with Jules Massenet and Camille Saint-Saëns, who very early on recognised his 'aptitude for music' (as he modestly put it) and constantly showed him friendship and encouragement. The period he spent in Rome (1897-1901) enabled him to broaden his scope and affirm his commitment to the theatre with the composition of his first opera, *Jean*.

Max d'Ollone's father, who was himself very musical, came from Lorraine; his mother came from Franche-Comté. Max spent his childhood and adolescence between the family home in Saint-Dié and Besançon, where he was born in 1875, and where he first discovered his love for opera:

The theatre in Besançon, which billed mainly operatic works, was constantly in my thoughts. I would read with keen interest the cast-lists on the posters and, knowing the repertoire from having read the scores, would imagine the voices and attributes of those whose names I saw. A couple of times each winter I would be taken to that longed-for sanctum. And thus I saw *Robert le Diable*, *Les Huguenots*, *L'Africaine*, *Guillaume Tell*, *Mireille*, *Lakmé* (a very recent work), and *Mignon* and *Carmen* with the

singer [Célestine Galli-Marié] who had first performed those roles at the Opéra-Comique. Finally, *Le Roi d'Ys*, which was staged there a year after the Paris première.

That is also how he came to discover Wagner. 'I have the score of *Die Walküre*!!!' he wrote excitedly, at the age of twelve, to one of his brothers. However, although some of his early works, such as the cantatas written for the Prix de Rome and his symphonic poem *Les Villes maudites*, do occasionally call to mind Wagner, Max d'Ollone was never to forget his first encounter, at the age of ten, with Charles Gounod, and the old master's warnings: 'Poisoned already!' he had exclaimed. But as Max d'Ollone told Saint-Saëns at the beginning of the First World War, 'I am not at all blinded by my passion and by the moments of true ecstasy I feel when I hear many of the pieces written by Wagner. In art, as in all things, cliques and systems are repulsive to my independence. Like you, I find pastiches of Wagner most repugnant.'

As the composer and musicologist Gerard Condé observed after a radio broadcast of the opera *Le Retour*, 'Max d'Ollone was to remain a Wagnerian all his life, but you will not find any direct influence of Wagner in his music, whereas that of Massenet, for instance – the finest he had to offer – is quite noticeable'. At the tender age of six, Max d'Ollone had shown Massenet his skills at improvisation and transposition for the piano. He was disappointed by his first two years of study at the Conservatoire: 'I lost valuable time there, forgetting what I had previously learned by intuition and the company I kept with musicians of all times and places.' In 1894 he entered Massenet's composition class; the latter, he said, 'freed me to some extent from that artificiality, even though the Prix de Rome competition required special preparation that was bound to involve the use of clichés'. He admired Massenet both as a composer and as an 'artist in every sense of the word':

We would leave his class with our imaginations fired, our senses sharpened, and with greater discernment. [...] One of the features of Massenet's

teaching was that he knew how to bring humanity and poetry to every little detail of the musician's craft. There was in him, as in most teachers of that time, a deep love of music and a need to admire – that faculty for enthusiasm, which is a sure sign of goodness and generosity. The joy he showed at the revelation of a superior gift was something infinitely noble and beautiful. Those who did not get to know him in that respect will never have suspected that sometimes, before our very eyes, he could become once more the brilliant, enthusiastic, pure adolescent he once had been.

As for Massenet, he considered that Max d'Ollone naturally belonged to 'the cream', and ever afterwards he gave him his constant support and friendship. In 1899, for instance, he wrote to Edmond Rostand: 'I am very touched to be coming to speak to you about Max d'Ollone, a composer who is already much admired. I was *rapporteur* for the Institut this year and I was much taken by his dispatches [from Rome]. At the Institut we awarded him the Prix Rossini for his *very fine* work, *La Vision de Dante*.' The works Max d'Ollone sent from the Villa Medici during his first year there were, first of all, 'a String Quartet, for which the author deserves nothing but praise' (especially for the *Scherzo*, described as 'a perfect success', and the *Adagio*, 'deeply expressive and sincere'). According to the Institut's report the Six Songs with orchestral accompaniment that completed the dispatch showed 'sincere emotion, a most endearing charm and [instrumentation] that is always refined and sometimes very innovative'. His *poème lyrique*, *La Vision de Dante*, for soloists, chorus and orchestra, was performed at the Concerts du Conservatoire on 5 November 1899, with Paul Taffanel conducting. In the prologue the colouring calls to mind César Franck, while the first dissonant chords are reminiscent of Gounod's *Mors et Vita*, which Max d'Ollone always regarded as a masterpiece. The critic Pierre Lalo described the score as 'elegant and outstanding', while Paul Dukas reported that the work was seen as 'an unqualified success by an enthusiastic, academic audience', continuing: 'Although sometimes the ideas do not as yet show a very distinct personality, Max d'Ollone knows how to present them well by

using the instrumentation to bring them out perfectly. There are many delightfully charming passages in the work. But the composer also knows how to deploy great vigour when required; the choruses in the first part of the work are possibly among its finest pieces. The one for the Damned, for instance, in the second scene, shows fine energy and is excellent in its sonority.'

Saint-Saëns, who was in the audience, appears to have been very keen on the work: Max d'Ollone wrote to him after the performance, 'It would be shameful and most wrong of me not to work relentlessly after the wonderful things you have said.' Massenet influenced Max d'Ollone, but so did Saint-Saëns. As the composer Tony Aubin (who conducted a radio recording of the opera *La Samaritaine* in 1953) observed, 'Max d'Ollone admires Massenet and Saint-Saëns in equal measure and he handles the qualities of both to perfection; which means that his music is graceful but will never stoop to the adoption of weak solutions.' Referring to the perfectly controlled naturalness that characterises Max d'Ollone's compositions, he concluded: 'He loves naturalness and makes free use of it, but never lets it impose its law on him.' When he was only ten years old, Max d'Ollone was presented to Saint-Saëns, and they played the latter's *Suite algérienne* together on two pianos.

Although he looked a bit sarcastic and was reputed for his arrogant assurance, Saint-Saëns was basically a good, sensitive man. I subsequently had many opportunities to see this, in his behaviour towards others and towards myself. As soon as I was back from Rome, he, who had constantly given me the most precious support, asked me to compose in his stead, since he was ill, the ballet music (*Bacchus et Silène*) that was to accompany the revival in 1901, in the amphitheatre at Béziers, of the admirable *Prométhée* written by his friend Fauré.

Max d'Ollone reused in the ballet the first and last 'symphonic sketches' from his *Souvenirs d'Italie* (his second dispatch from Rome), inspired by a Sicilian theme he had heard near the temple of Segesta in Sicily. Saint-

Saëns wrote to the rich patron of the arts who had commissioned him to compose the work for the amphitheatre; after apologising for not having been able to honour the commission himself, he went on:

I appealed to the dedication and talent of Max d'Ollone, one of our most brilliant winners of the Prix de Rome, who kindly agreed to leave what he was doing and come to my aid to save the situation. [...] He has written an exquisite score; it is permeated by a youthful freshness that I no longer possess and already shows consummate skill. I have no doubt that justice will be done not only to his merit, but also to the dedication he has shown, which is beyond praise.

The older musician's encouragement during his stay at the Villa Medici must have had a positive influence on the development of Max d'Ollone's conception of music.



In 1895 the young musician had written to his friend Henri Rabaud (winner of the Prix de Rome in 1894): 'I shall never compose anything but musical sketches.' He felt hesitant – indeed, was almost intimidated – at that time by the imperatives of the symphony, and especially of its musical developments. His major second-year dispatch from Rome was his *Souvenirs d'Italie*, which he described as 'symphonic sketches', '*esquisses symphoniques*'. 'The whole of this composition,' we read in the Institut's report, 'confirms the opinion we already had of this young musician, who is in full command of the resources afforded by his art, is most delicate and most distinguished by nature, and on whose future we feel we are justified in pinning our most legitimate hopes.' The work is in five parts: *Chant populaire sicilien – Sorrente – Annonciation – Midi – Finale*. The Académie was full of praise for the work, but there were some slight reservations:

A little vague but very poetic in feeling, extremely attractive, calm and charming, the only faults being that it is too short and the *Andante*, though very pretty, very ingenious, paralyses the momentum and effect.

Was his method to blame, or his conception of the work? In the letter quoted earlier, he explained to Henri Rabaud:

This is how I compose: usually, when I think of a subject, a work, I have no precise idea in mind of the music for some time, only vague colours and snippets of sound! But I do have an idea of the style the thing will be in; then one day a musical idea enters my head that suits the colour, feeling, style I have in mind, and very quickly I become excited, I get worked up, I feel exhilarated, and the rather vague visions of the previous days gain in depth and intensity. Then I compose the music for the piece quickly, generally in a day, because it's unlikely that I'll be able to find exactly the same impression another day. So I hurry, as a painter would hurry to make the most of a particular light effect that he won't find again. But what would a painter do in that case? He would quickly cover the whole of his canvas, brushing in the essentials and sacrificing the details; he'd try to get everything to tone in with the effect that strikes him at that particular moment.

But almost immediately afterwards Max d'Ollone sent Henri Rabaud another letter:

I'd like to write a symphony. I find there is more to composing than effortlessly writing pleasant music; rather than concentrating on one aspect, an impression, a colour, the composer should try to make music that is more human, expressing feelings that are more general, broader, deeper, and – in the colours, the picturesqueness even – try to do things that are more salient, rather than elusive. I'm growing up; it's part of my revolution.

And he lost no time in putting that into practice. His final dispatch from Rome was regarded by the Académie des Beaux-Arts as 'unorthodox':

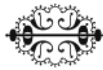
the *pensionnaires* of the Villa Medici were expected, as the Académie reminded them, to keep strictly to the programme specified in the regulations, and not to indulge in their own fancy. ‘However,’ the report went on, ‘it is not easy to criticise M. d’Ollone, whose dispatch represents a significant effort and is of unquestionable value. Intended as part of a larger work, *Les Villes maudites*, is quite uncommon in its vigour and vividness.’

This three-movement work, première in Paris on 22 November 1903 with Gabriel Pierné conducting, was Max d’Ollone’s first and only ‘symphony’. The orchestra it requires is almost as rich in its forces as those employed by Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss for their symphonies, composed around the same time; in the second movement a chorus (without words) puts in a brief appearance. As *Le Ménestrel* pointed out, it is ‘a small part of a *drame lyrique* entitled *La Terre promise*; the distinguished composer who wrote it will have the opportunity of presenting it again as part of the complete work, when the audience’s impression will no doubt be more clearly favourable.’ Later Max d’Ollone explained:

At the Villa Medici, in a calm none the less disturbed by echoes of the Dreyfus affair in Paris, I had the idea of writing a series of dramatic works illustrating, at different times and in different places, the revolt of the instinct and of human feeling against civil and religious authority. Thus, belatedly, I came under the influence of the Romantic and Revolutionary artists of last century, especially Wagner. Unfortunately I was far from equal to the task, which required genius, to say the least! Only one work for the planned cycle was completed: *Jean*, set during the French Revolution.

Max d’Ollone composed that work between 1900 and 1904, ‘in a state of ecstasy and remorse’. His libretto for his first opera, *Jean*, is quite unusual. Jean is about to take holy orders but his friend Vincent tries to dissuade him, urging him instead to try to be closer to the people. ‘Today, it is too much for them, they are rising up and demanding justice! The law is on their side. Draw aside the curtain and the fantasies that have come between you and reality since you were a child. How could you know pity,

when your god looks upon his work and feels no remorse? Let the human race be wiped out if servitude is to go on debasing souls for ever!' One night ('a night of anxiety that decided my destiny') Jean has a revelation: he hears a voice calling him to participate in a religion that represents joy and freedom and is at the service of those who are unfortunate in life. 'Soon the time will come when men at last will be brothers and will sing together of work and love.' At dawn, he leaves the monastery and his kin: 'I no longer belong to the Church, for henceforth, with all my heart and soul, I shall champion the cause of humanity. In order to follow my conscience, I must fight against everything you hold dear.' Later his father dies on the scaffold, his mother goes mad, and Jean – going further, even, than his friend Vincent, who marries, has children and leads a quiet life – travels the world over serving just and noble of causes. Only the prologue, *Dans la cathédrale*, was performed at the Concerts Colonne in 1905. According to *Le Ménestrel*, this symphonic piece with choruses denoted 'a musician who has a perfect command of technique'. Jean d'Udine, in *Le Courrier Musical*, hailed the work as 'well sounding, neither revolutionary nor reactionary, and which the new school received rather badly – why, I know not'. He appreciated 'its religious flavour' – 'very Catholic' – with 'the charm of a delicate, tender meditation, mixed with plastic visions of temptation and hell, characterised by a flurry of ill thoughts, as in the scherzos of Père Franck'. Max d'Ollone gave up his great project to write a *drame lyrique* entitled *La Terre promise* but retained his strong commitment to opera, writing nine more after *Jean*. Five of them were performed during the Interbellum at the Opéra-Comique, and also at the Paris Opéra.



Les Uns et les Autres, to a text by Paul Verlaine (1922), was greeted warmly by Henri Malherbe (*Cinquante ans de musique française*) when it was performed at the Opéra-Comique. He appreciated the 'smooth, captivating charm' of its 'subdued orchestration', the skill of its 'delicate, tender rhythms', and the 'fine technique' shown in its 'light instrumentation, which

murmurs like the silvery waters of a spring and gives off a subtle scent like that of trees'. As for *Georges Dandin* (1930), an *opéra-comique* set to a libretto by Maurice Belvianes based on the play by Molière, the critics gave the work a mixed reception. Neither *Les Uns et les Autres* nor *Georges Dandin* appears to have been among Max d'Ollone's favourite operas. But the three that were first performed at the Opéra (Palais Garnier) – *Le Retour* in 1919, *L'Arlequin* in 1924, and *La Samaritaine* in 1937 – were clearly among those he felt to be his best.

Max d'Ollone was also the author of the libretto for *Le Retour*. On an island, Blanche awaits the return of Jean, who represents her ideal love. But when Jean arrives, having spent years in the city, he feels unworthy of the pure love of Blanche, whom he has loved since he was a child, and he decides to leave. Blanche lets him go, and he dies in a storm at sea. With the real Jean dead, Blanche can go on loving her ideal. 'In his handling of the orchestra,' observed Reynaldo Hahn, 'and especially in his concern for melodiousness, in both the voices and the instruments, M. d'Ollone has remained true to his artistic ideal; this outstanding young composer cannot be congratulated enough.' The articles in *Le Figaro* and *Le Temps* were particularly complimentary. Pierre Lalo, after defending himself against indulgence towards the composer, wrote: 'The libretto outstrips the majority of opera librettos by far. Consisting solely of intimate feelings and emotions, it lends itself ideally to a musical setting. In its faithful union with the poetry, the music uses only the soberest of means: its value and personality are determined above all by the text that inspired it.' The columnist for *Le Figaro* evoked 'the admirable sincerity, the intense, penetrating emotion that emanate from the first act. The whole of the ending, with the rumbling of the storm and the ecstatic lyricism of the peroration, is of the utmost beauty.'

The island, the sea, voyage and return – themes that appealed to Max d'Ollone – reappear in the libretto written by Jean Sarment for *L'Arlequin*. The whole piece is bathed in sunshine and brightness; the sea sparkles with Mediterranean light (contrasting with the Nordic mists of *Le Retour*). This idyllic setting makes the story all the more bitter. To celebrate the

seventeenth birthday of his daughter Christine, the king of the blissful isle invites Harlequin, the most popular character of the Italian Commedia dell'arte. Like all the other inhabitants of the island, the princess knows nothing of the outside world and she dreams of discovering other places. Certain that he will enable her to escape from the monotony of such an arcadian life, she declares her love to Harlequin, who carries her off to his native Capri. But gradually Christine becomes disillusioned and in the end she returns, dying, to the island of her birth. In despair, her father, the king, names Harlequin as his successor and withdraws to a monastery.

By and large the work appealed to the critics; the composer André Messager praised

a remarkable score, music whose quality, and at the same time success, I am delighted to note; a work in which Max d'Ollone asserts his personality and his technique even more effectively, and by far, than in any of his other works. The themes unfold effortlessly, supported by constantly felicitous harmonisation, which, while remaining faithful to the purest tradition, ventures boldly into the spheres of modern conquests. The instrumentation shows clarity, ease and variety, but also perfect forcefulness and firmness when required.

Performed at the Paris Opéra in 1937, *La Samaritaine* is set to a play written by Edmond Rostand in 1897 for the celebrated actress Sarah Bernhardt. It is a Biblical drama in three scenes taken from the Gospel story of the woman of Samaria (John 4). The gentle, moving libretto carries a message of universal love and this, Max d'Ollone's last opera, likewise serene and delicate, echoes his first opera, *Jean*, in its quest for the Absolute. 'God is a Spirit,' Jesus tells the woman of Samaria at Jacob's well. 'All words of love must speak at last of me [...] Be kind. Understand. Admit. Smile. Be of good heart. That which you wish others to do to you, do unto others: That is the Law, that is all the prophecies!' Judging by the comments of composers such as Georges Auric, Henri Sauguet, Raynaldo Hahn and Darius Milhaud, the work was very well received. 'For those who are famil-

iar with the art of Max d'Ollone,' wrote Auric, 'it is easy to understand what tempted him to set *La Samaritaine*. Those three acts present a theme that could not be more perfectly in tune with his feelings and emotions. We are delighted to be able to acknowledge his success. From the very first bars, his language is most spontaneous [...] and very touching in its humanity.' Henri Sauguet: 'It is a work that expresses simple, noble emotion; its broad melodies are gentle and compelling; it met with great success. The work achieves serenity and grandeur with an ease that is refreshing and noble; it is softly coloured, without being picturesque, and is constantly pleasant to listen to.' Reynaldo Hahn remarked that 'Max d'Ollone [had] never given in to fashion' and that 'clarity and a pleasing style' had always been his aim. 'He has almost always allowed his heart to express itself freely, while controlling his pen. His knowledge, style of writing and superior taste are there to prevent him from ever falling into banality or staleness in his music.' Darius Milhaud regretted that despite the acclaim he received at the end, Max d'Ollone was too modest to come on stage to take a bow:

The composer conducted the score himself with his usual delicate fervour, for indeed this work is fervent above all. The vocal writing is always very clear and is never drowned by the orchestra; the orchestration is simple and direct. One senses in Max d'Ollone such absolute sincerity that one can but feel grateful to him for permitting us so constantly to enjoy such a natural world of sound.

The only reservation came from Max d'Ollone himself. In a letter to Jacques Rouché, director of the Paris Opéra, he had requested décors inspired by Italian art; but his request was not observed. Was it merely a coincidence then that shortly afterwards he orchestrated Liszt's *Sposalizio* (from his second *Année de pèlerinage: Italie*), a work most remarkable in its simple, pure lyricism, and inspired by Raphael's *The Marriage of the Virgin*?



De la musique considérée comme langue ('On music considered as a language'); *De l'intelligence qu'en ont les profanes* ('On the understanding of music by non-musicians'); *Du souci de l'originalité: personnalité de l'auteur, impersonnalité de la langue* ('On the concern for originality: personality of the author, impersonality of the language'); *La musique et son effet moral* ('Music and its moral effect')... these are just some of the titles from Max d'Ollone's literary work, *Le Langage musical* (1952), and they alone provide a résumé of his ideas on music and composition. He always advocated a 'musical language' that was understandable to non-musicians. He distinguished between composers who 'enrich the language' and those who feel they have to be innovative at all costs, 'for fear of assimilating processes used by others'. 'Max d'Ollone does not trifle with feelings,' observed Debussy in his account of the opera *L'Étrangère*, which was presented in a concert version in January 1914. 'Let us hope he will be able to hear it in the context he dreamed of. The music is sufficiently expressive to cope with its sometimes very psychological content.' Wasn't Max d'Ollone expressing the same idea, when he wrote, 'Music is the most appropriate and the most intense expression of human sensitivity'? His Classicism was always expressive and nourished by Romanticism: the themes evoked in his operas – as, indeed, in his art songs, for which he often wrote the poems – reveal the subtleties of his personality, torn between conflicting desires, to leave or to stay, and between spleen and fervour, depression and elation. The storyline of his three-movement symphonic poem *Le Ménétrier* – it is dedicated to George Enescu, who played the solo violin part at the première in 1910 – could almost be a self-portrait. It expresses quite clearly his idea of the musician and his relationship with the public:

Le Ménétrier tells the tale of a village fiddler, François, who enthralled all who hear him with the ancient melodies that have been passed on from generation to generation and are full of the history and culture of his homeland, and which thus remain present in the minds of those who hear them. The rhythm of his music gives deeper meaning to all the various celebrations and events in the village, both secular and religious. But one day a

band of Gypsies passes through the village. François is troubled and fascinated by their strange songs. Unable to resist, he joins them. He learns their melodies and is excited by their unusual rhythms and the feelings hitherto unknown to him that they express; they stimulate, intoxicate and finally exhaust him. He becomes a prey to a terrible sadness. Despite the charm they hold for him, the Gypsies remain enigmatic to him. He leaves them and returns to the security of his village, where he is welcomed joyfully by the population. But his music, imbued with the Gypsy influence, no longer sounds the same as it did before, and his listeners, no longer captivated by his playing, abandon him. He realises his music will no longer have the beneficial effect it once had on them, and they will never understand him again. Yet an invincible force keeps him in the village. He gives up being a musician and becomes a labourer. He begins to feel at peace once more and to enjoy the poetry of simple things and ancient customs. But when night falls he takes up his fiddle and goes out onto the lonely moors, where, passionately, he plays the Gypsy music that continues irremediably to haunt him.



Photograph of Max d'Ollone, around 1930.
Private collection.

Photographie de Max d'Ollone vers 1930.
Collection particulière.