

THE FRENCH MENDELSSOHN

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The music of M. Gouvy is that of a man who shows dignity in his bearing, melancholy in his general disposition.
(*Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, 26 December 1847.)

Were it not for the vagaries of history, including the redrawing of the border shortly before he came into the world in a village in Moselle in 1819, Théodore Gouvy would have been born French, instead of Prussian. He was a wealthy artist, who divided his time between Paris, Leipzig and the Gouvy family home in Hombourg-Haut, where he would go to seek inspiration. He received recognition in both countries, becoming a corresponding member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris and a member of the Berlin Royal Academy, but he nevertheless suffered the consequences of being a 'foreigner' in France, excluded, until his naturalisation in 1851, from the official networks. Although his *œuvre* is largely dominated by chamber music, he also produced many orchestral compositions (nine symphonies, for example), religious pieces (a *Requiem*, a *Stabat Mater* and a *Messe brève*) and several dramatic works (including six cantatas and two operas).

'M. Gouvy seems to be aiming for Romantic music,' wrote the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris* in 1847 (26 December). Gouvy's musical style is comparable to that of prominent French composers of his time, but also to that of German composers of his century. He retained the colourful textures that Mendelssohn obtained from the orchestra, Schubert's interest in the suspension of time (notably in his splendid funeral marches) and the impassioned vehemence that characterises the discourse of Schumann. He discovered the poetic melancholy of the German *intermezzo* at the same time as Brahms, and

repeatedly developed that genre. But his formal models, his general approach to music and his attitude towards the past came from Ambroise Thomas and Camille Saint-Saëns – and also from Gounod. He acknowledged J. S. Bach and admired Mozart. As a pianist himself, he provided his instrument with some fine works: a piano quintet, five trios, sonatas for piano four hands, not to mention some very skilful and always pleasant music for two pianos. On the other hand, he regarded the concerto genre as superficial and demonstrative, and composed no such works, for any instrument. Nor did he leave any programme music, and his overtures, *Jeanne d'Arc* and *Le Giaour* (after the poem by Byron), exalt moral values, rather than attempting to use music as a means of relating historical or legendary deeds. If we had to choose the very finest works in Gouvy's output, they would undoubtedly be his nine symphonies, his *Requiem* and his large-scale dramatic cantatas, including *Iphigénie en Tauride*, *Polyxène*, *Cédipe à Colone*, *Électre* and others, some of which were originally intended for the stage.



Rediscovering Gouvy today means honouring the tenacity of an artist who aimed to promote 'true beauty' in music, which meant adopting an academic style that was untouched by changing fashions and had no recourse to external processes (as in programme music). He showed total dedication to music and great modesty. He worked hard on bringing to fruition works that were not likely to be published (his five Quintets with two cellos, for example) and, for his own satisfaction, retouched symphonic and operatic compositions that in all probability he would never hear performed. After a century of Wagner-worship, rediscovering Gouvy also means reminding ourselves that in the 1880s Wagnerism was not the *only* 'German' style that overran Europe: Brahms was not the only spokesman for the spirit of Mendelssohn and Schumann. Gouvy was also their representative, driven by a conviction and an artistic integrity that are reflected in every one of his works.



Gouvy's grave, Hombourg-Haut, Moselle.
(Institut Gouvy Collection.)

Tombe de Gouvy à Hombourg-Haut en Moselle.
(Collection Institut Gouvy.)