

The Prix de Rome for music (1803-1968)

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Created on the joint initiative of Colbert and Lebrun in 1666, the Académie de France in Rome did not admit musicians until 1803, when the institution moved to the prestigious Villa Medici acquired by Napoleon. Winning the Prix de Rome, with a scholarship to spend a number of years at the Académie in Rome, represented for musicians of the Paris Conservatoire the culmination of their studies. The Prix de Rome competition for them was in two stages: in the first, candidates were required to compose a fugue and a chorus with orchestral accompaniment to a set text. Five or six musicians were selected to go on to the second and final round, in which they were expected to compose an operatic scene (*scène lyrique*) or 'cantata', on a subject taken from history, mythology, the Bible or a novel. The set libretto, lasting about twenty minutes, aimed to present the main dramatic situations a composer could encounter when writing an opera. Many fine composers, such as Halévy, Berlioz, Ambroise Thomas, Gounod, Bizet, Massenet, Debussy and Ravel, competed and altogether left hundreds of works, most of which are yet to be discovered.

The history of the Prix de Rome is in fact the history of French music, reduced to a sort of thread, running from 1803 to 1968. The annual public event organised by the Académie des Beaux-Arts, at which the winning cantata was performed, was attended by journalists and theatre directors and by the artistic and political élite of the moment, which

explains why the greatest singers were prepared to forego their fees to take part in the performances. It is worth noting that the instrumentalists who participated in those *scènes lyriques* when they were presented at the Institut were always placed high up in the dome of the Palais des Quatre Nations, which was acoustically far from ideal. Hence the overwhelming conclusion that all the cantatas were heard in deplorable conditions that made it impossible to judge them objectively.

1830 was undoubtedly a key date in the history of the Prix de Rome. Try as one may to play down the effect on mentalities of the July Revolution, it has to be admitted that there was at that time a radical change of attitude, even in the supposedly conservative context of the Prix de Rome competition. The first significant change occurred in 1831, when the cantata was no longer for solo voice and orchestra, but included two characters. And soon a third part was added. This experimentation shows the major issues that were at stake: faced with the modernity of the *grand opéra* as practised by Meyerbeer – as regards form – and the impulses of a new musical style – ‘Romanticism’ – the cantata had to keep up with current tastes, simply because its sole purpose was to test the candidates’ ability to compose for the contemporary stage. But the musical style also changed because the set librettos changed, with their authors readily turning for inspiration to novels or legends, at a time when the *mélodrame* was at the height of its popularity.

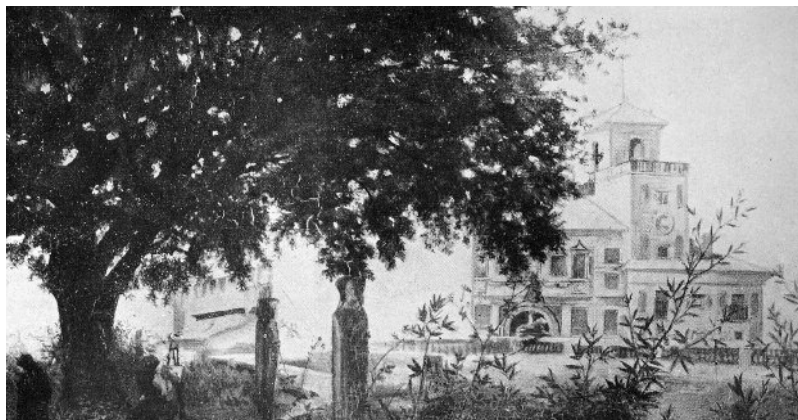
Following various criticisms levelled at the judging of the Prix de Rome, however, the administration of the Académie des Beaux-Arts decided in 1863 to reform quite radically the attribution of powers: the responsibility for organising the competition was taken out of the hands of the Académie and given jointly to the École des Beaux-Arts (for the fine arts) and the Conservatoire (for music). That decision came as the result of years of reflection, aimed at making originality the cornerstone in a State policy for the arts. It was a matter of bringing academicism more in line with modern tastes. The first of the main changes made in the competition concerned the members of the jury: henceforth there were nine examiners, chosen by lot by the Ministry (Ministère des Beaux-

Arts). The age limit for competitors was set at twenty-five; the full cost of organising the competition was to be borne by the State; only one prize could be awarded, and the length of the stay in Rome was reduced from five years to four.

In autumn 1871, however, the fall of the Empire led to a 'return to order' in academic activities. While the Third Republic alternated between republican and monarchical tendencies, the Prix de Rome competition returned to its original home: the Institut. As regards music, this reinstatement brought with it changes. Since accusations of intrigue and favouritism were still recurrent, the Ministry required members from outside the Académie des Beaux-Arts to take part in its deliberations, thereby encouraging transparency in the results. The Prix de Rome experienced its most glorious years at that time. Between 1880 and 1890, no fewer than four great-names-to-be of French music won the prize in turn: Alfred Bruneau, Gabriel Pierné, Claude Debussy and Gustave Charpentier.

At the turn of the century there came a crisis that was ultimately to bring about the demise of the competition. Controversy arose over Maurice Ravel's successive failures. After winning second prize for the second time in 1901, he received no prize at all in 1902 and 1903, and in 1905 was not even allowed to proceed to the second round. On that occasion, for the very first time, journalists initiated a seriously constructive process of reflection, rather than simply being disparaging. For it was clear that 'modernity' was incompatible with the Prix de Rome. At a time when the value of instrumental music was no longer doubted, the cantata seemed both outmoded and an unnecessary element in the training of composers: the mode of selection was felt by the art world to be obsolete. Between the Ministry, the Académie des Beaux-Arts, the Académie de France in Rome and educational institutions, a dispute that had been latent gradually gained strength. It reached its peak during the events of May '68. That year the competition was postponed. No competition was held in 1969, but it was not until 16 September 1970 that a ministerial decree officially called the competition into question and

abolished the Prix de Rome. Since then, the Villa Medici has continued to house artists, but they are now selected by application, rather than by competition as before.



La Villa Médicis vers 1870.
Musica, novembre 1906.

The Villa Medici around 1870.
Musica, November 1906.