

## LA TOMBELLE'S ARTISTIC AND MUSICAL CIRCLE

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When he decided to devote himself wholly to music, La Tombelle came into contact with artistic personalities who were crucial to his career, since he remained very close to Alexandre Guilmant and Théodore Dubois after attending their classes. From 1878, when he began a brilliant career as a pianist and organist, the young musician participated for some twenty years in the Trocadéro Organ Concerts with Guilmant, who wrote to him in 1895:

*I am writing to thank you very cordially for the most precious and artistic aid you have given me for my concerts this year. Your kindness further enhances your fine talent and it is always a genuine pleasure to make music with you.*

Dubois swiftly asked La Tombelle to be his assistant at La Madeleine, and right up to his death continued to cast a benevolent eye over the works his former student regularly sent him. In 1917, the old composer gave his views on a piece that La Tombelle had submitted to him, after congratulating him in terms that attest to their shared attachment to a clearly affirmed tradition:

*By a curious coincidence, I too wrote this summer, among other things, a Prelude and Fugue to keep my hand in, in order to celebrate my eightieth birthday loud and clear! The old teacher and his distinguished former pupil had the same idea of work at the same time. For it is a fine thing to steep oneself in this fertile source once more, taking as a model the father of modern music, J. S. Bach, so old yet still so young, so varied, so rich.*

In addition to his studies with Guilmant and Dubois, La Tombelle benefited from the guidance of Saint-Saëns, which had a far-reaching impact on him. As one of that master's rare disciples, La Tombelle continued to attach great importance to his judgments, for he was still soliciting his opinion in 1894:

*I don't want to look as if I'm running away from your remarks; on the contrary! So I am writing to ask you on which day and at what time you can devote a brief quarter of an hour to giving me a severe critique of my trio. You know, of course, that the more you tell me, the happier I'll be and the more I will enjoy it!*

The dedication on a portrait photograph bears witness to the privileged relationship that the two men maintained over the years: 'To F. de La Tombelle, to thank him for not disdaining my advice in days gone by. His most affectionate C. Saint-Saëns. 1912.'

From the very beginning, La Tombelle also sought the advice of composers close to his circle, such as Edvard Grieg. After a mutual friend put them in touch, the Norwegian shared his impressions of a set of *mélodies* in 1885:

*Madame Fanny d'Avout, who has sent me some of your compositions, wrote to me that it would be of interest to you to hear my opinion. I hope you will not find it indiscreet of me to address you through these lines and acknowledge the pleasure you have given me with your attractive talent.*

*It seems to me your talent manifests itself most appealingly in your songs, one of which I might have guessed was composed by Gounod, so excellent is it in its harmonies, its melody and its form. That song bespeaks a talent that will undoubtedly have a future, for I am told you are still very young.*

La Tombelle also met Liszt in 1886, on his last visit to Paris, probably thanks to his mother's ties to the Hungarian composer. Many scores with handwritten dedications, kept in the family archives, also testify to La Tombelle's relations with Ernest Reyer, Ambroise Thomas and especially Gounod, who several times sent him his 'affectionate regards'. He probably saw them at the concerts he and his mother organised in the family salon on rue Newton in Paris. Not only did all the French composers already mentioned perform there, but also young

musicians with a brilliant future in front of them, such as Leoncavallo, initially known in Paris for his talents as an accompanist. In February 1885, the future composer of *Pagliacci* performed fantasias on *Lohengrin* and *Aida* in rue Newton with the quartet of the mandolinist Giovanni Pietrapertosa, of which he was the pianist.

La Tombelle also organised soirées to promote early repertory. In 1887, he marked the centenary of Gluck's death by conducting excerpts from *Iphigénie en Tauride* and *Orphée et Eurydice* before a prestigious audience that his friend the painter Horace de Callias immortalised in a painting exhibited the same year at the Salon, under the rather vague title *Répétition des chœurs de Gluck chez la baronne de La Tombelle* (Rehearsal of choruses by Gluck in the salon of the Baronne de La Tombelle). In reality, like many contemporary group portraits of artists, it shows the interpersonal links between the models in symbolic fashion. The picture, preserved in Périgueux (Saint-Front Cathedral), represents La Tombelle conducting a choral ensemble with soloists, including his wife (Eurydice) and two faithful members of his intimate and artistic circle: Caroline Brun (Iphigenia and Cupid) and Juliette Conneau (Orpheus), the former wife of Napoleon III's doctor, who had taken part in the premiere of Gounod's *Gallia* in 1871. La Tombelle seems *a fortiori* to be the principal subject of the painting, since, in addition to his central position in the overall structure, it also shows his mother welcoming a close friend of the family, the librettist Jules Barbier, on the threshold of the drawing room, near which Dubois and Guilmant sit side by side leafing through a score together.

La Tombelle and Callias forged a deep friendship in collaborating on a substantial output of 'fantaisies lumineuses', combining the visual arts with speech and music: poetry was declaimed over projections of tableaux designed by the painter, to the accompaniment of music by the composer. These highly unusual dramatic works, performed in the salon in rue Newton or in small Parisian theatres, are unfortunately difficult to assess nowadays, since the scores – and to an even greater extent the paintings – are generally lost, or most often available only in the form of an instrumental reduction. However, consultation of the press or the composer's archives reveals the titles or a description of a number of these works, a cross between theatre and oratorio. For example, *Le Divorce fantastique ou l'Hermite bienfaisant*, a 'magical projection in two acts and forty-five tableaux' by Ernest Depré, was performed,

probably in rue Newton, on 13 April 1889, a month before the premiere of Massenet's *Esclarmonde* which uses a similar device in its first act.

From 1891 onwards, Massenet became a regular guest at the soirées organised by La Tombelle and his wife, even setting to music poems by the latter, who published her literary works under the pseudonym Camille Bruno. La Tombelle himself took an active role in evenings devoted to the master, whose judgment of his works he also sought out. In 1893, Massenet gave him his views on one of his *mélodies*:

*I have received your kind letter and your score. One line will not suffice to tell you what I think of this work – you are a real musician; you write, you set words, you express yourself like a master – you know that, because you do it.*

*If we were chatting, with the score open on the piano desk, you would be convinced by my words – and you need not wait until that day comes to believe with certainty that I like musicians who write with that purity, that elegance and that unerring sentiment.*



#### LA TOMBELLE IN THE INSTITUTIONS OF HIS TIME

In addition to his musical activities in high society, La Tombelle was an assiduous contributor to the early concerts of the Société Nationale de Musique, at which some of his works were premiered. On 19 April 1884, *Fileuse. Légende du val d'amour*, a *mélodie* with orchestra, was given there. The conductor was probably André Messager, who wrote to him:

*Monsieur Colonne is unable to appear and will not conduct the concert on 19 April. It is I who have been appointed by the Committee to perform the duties of conductor on that day. You may therefore reconsider your decision and direct your work yourself if that is more agreeable to you. I assure you, however, that if your intentions remain unchanged, I will spare no effort to present your Fileuse to the best of my abilities, and I add that it deserves to be treated with the greatest care.*

La Tombelle also became involved in the activities of the Société des Compositeurs de Musique, which he joined on 1 March 1886, becoming a member of the committee in 1887. He was probably encouraged

to do so by Saint-Saëns, elected president the same year after leaving the Société Nationale de Musique, whose open-minded attitude to foreign repertory he disapproved of. It was in this context that La Tombelle took part in a 'lecture-concert' devoted to folksong at the Salle Pleyel, on 8 March 1888, accompanying on the piano 'Greek and Breton popular songs' by Louis Bourgault-Ducoudray, some of which he had already premiered in 1886. It is probable that he also took part in the first performance of Léon Boëllmann's Piano Trio, which won a prize in the Society's competitions in 1890, since the grateful composer wrote to him: 'I write very tardily to thank you a thousand times for your letter and above all for the personal and extremely precious role you played in the performance of my trio.'

This first stage in his compositional itinerary, marked principally by instrumental works in a classical style (but which did not exclude a form of attraction to Wagner and to folk music), was probably what encouraged Vincent d'Indy to seek out La Tombelle. In 1895, the two men, along with Guilmant and Charles Bordes, laid the foundations of the Schola Cantorum. La Tombelle, alternating with Pierre de Bréville, took on the position of Inspector General, and taught harmony for a decade or so. Among his students were Déodat de Séverac (with whom, it is said, he later indulged in improvisation contests), Blanche Selva and René de Castéra. His advice to the last-named included such words as these:

*Study a great deal of Handel at the piano too. It is not always amusing: it turns on a few chords, always the same ones, but that is what you need to have in your head and in your fingers at the current stage in your harmony studies! It is, so to speak, the equivalent of the study of anatomy in the visual arts. So study musical anatomy (if I may put it that way)! It will save you time!*

La Tombelle committed himself fully to the activities of the Schola by appearing in the guise of performer or lecturer at its famous concerts. He also wrote regular columns in *La Tribune de Saint-Gervais*, where he aired his views on the development of sacred music. While encouraging composers to study Gregorian chant and the Renaissance masters, La Tombelle adopted iconoclastic positions by stating, like Saint-Saëns, that Gounod's *Mors et Vita* is 'admirable and will certainly endure long after his theatrical works have ended their glorious career

under the fatal and disintegrating effect of time!' (*L'Oratorio et la cantate*). Similarly, he did not fix a strict boundary between genres, asserting that 'the two biblical acts of *Samson et Dalila* and the admirable treadmill scene will remain one of the finest musical depictions of sacred history' and, on the subject of Massenet's *Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame*, that it 'would not be possible to express more delightfully the calm attraction of the cloister or the manifestation of naive faith culminating in sacrifice'. His open-mindedness was further shown in the choice of subject for sacred works, which in the end he wanted simply to be 'colourful, decorative, mystical as much as human', and in his refusal to choose between the musical orientations he had set out, merely refusing sterile imitation of works of the past.

The output of this period at the Schola Cantorum, like his deeply held Catholic faith, might have guaranteed an unshakeable rapport between D'Indy and La Tombelle, who dedicated his String Quartet to his colleague in 1896. However, their relationship remains difficult to define, or at least seems to have grown looser in the course of time, if one considers how little D'Indy subsequently mentioned his collaborator's name in his writings on the Schola. For, in fact, in human terms La Tombelle's character was very different from that of D'Indy. Probably rejecting any form of anti-Semitism, he expressed his unreserved sympathy to Alfred Bruneau when the latter suffered virulent attacks, essentially motivated by his engagement in the Dreyfus Affair alongside Zola, at the time of the premiere of *L'Ouragan* in 1901. Moreover, from the time of the creation of the Schola, La Tombelle distanced himself from the Wagnerian aesthetic. In so doing, he followed a similar path to that of Saint-Saëns, who, for his part, was no great admirer of D'Indy. Finally, La Tombelle's eclectic positions concerning sacred music and his unwavering support for Saint-Saëns and Massenet are probably not unrelated to his distance from D'Indy. Thus, in his obituary of Massenet, he asserted that he was moved more by *Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame* than by *Parsifal*, just as he sought to glorify the virtues of French music by collaborating, alongside Saint-Saëns and Dukas among others, on the series that published the works of the French harpsichord school of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (*Les Clavecinistes français des XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles*), for which he edited two pieces by Marin Marais. This work probably prompted him to compose a suite for three cellos around 1914, in a

spirit similar to that of Debussy, who embarked the following year on his series of sonatas inspired by the style of eighteenth-century French music.



#### AFTER THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Little by little, La Tombelle probably experienced a form of isolation, since he could not understand the evolution of artistic trends in his own country. In a letter addressed to Charles Koechlin just before the Great War, he confided that he was ‘as independent on the modern side as on the classical, subservient to no school or party’, before adding:

*A constant concern for form and technique, which are unanimously acknowledged by even the most avant-garde colleagues! As for ideas, invention, good gracious, I'm sixty years old! And without boasting of my age, I don't conceal it, either in my music or in my person. This means that there is a certain music that my ear does not hear, and that my pen does not know how to write. That said, within the limits of my understanding, I am perfectly eclectic and perfectly at home in my present era. But the era to come unsettles and frightens me. These opinions, my dear sir, are perhaps the best definition of my music, for my music is like me!*

For La Tombelle was concerned about the artistic developments of the day, which he compared to the political upheavals of the inter-war period. He wrote to his friend, the composer Ermend-Bonnal:

*The ‘publishers’ have gone mad! And so have the art dealers. Hypnotised by fashion, they allow themselves to be invaded by cubism (unless... because it costs its creators more dearly than it does them!!!). Oh, I know plenty of details and combinations! But all that will pass! The main thing today is not to be the last passenger to embark on this sinking ship. The rats have already left it! That's why I tell you: believe me, stand your ground, which is the right one!*

Finally, he admitted to Ermend-Bonnal his inability to understand the French music of his time:

*I regard Boieldieu as more of a musician than Darius Milhaud, or that lunatic Honegger, and I won't be persuaded of the contrary, for I think Au clair de la lune more original than they are, who have forgotten everything more than being original! [...] We are really floating amid too much incoherence – in every respect. Moving away from a certain category of music, one turns to the decorative arts, where one loses one's balance for good! Trying to set things aright with literature, one no longer knows if French has not become Turkish. The theatre is lamentable. So one gives up, and it's very depressing. Weak minds say: it will pass. No: it is Russia, with its anarchy, that is advancing towards us, and polytonic [sic] music is showing it the way!*

When he died in August 1928, La Tombelle was therefore a marginal figure in relation to inter-war trends and a society he no longer seemed to understand. Amédée Gastoué wrote, not without justification, that La Tombelle 'never wished to yield to the harmonic experiments of the new composers, finding them [...] useless and disliking them'. Both he and his œuvre quickly sank into oblivion, from which they have fortunately emerged in recent years.



Astronomical drawing by La Tombelle.  
(Private collection)

Dessin d'astronomie par La Tombelle.  
(Collection particulière)





La Tombelle at the organ.  
(Private collection)

La Tombelle à l'orgue.  
(Collection particulière)