

CONSTELLATIONS IN SOUND

Jean-Emmanuel Filet

ORCHESTRAL MUSIC

Even if it represents only a small part of his output, the orchestral music of Fernand de La Tombelle is in the image of the man and his compositions, multiform and multifaceted. Leafing through his catalogue, one finds both short fashionable dances (*Bourrées et Montagnardes, Orientale* op.22, *Menuet Gay* etc.) and highly elaborate ballet scores (*La Roche aux fées, Divertissement de ballet*); incidental music for the theatre (*Le Circuit des étoiles, La Magdaléenne, Sainte-Cécile*); symphonic movements or even a symphony for wind band or brass band; hybrid pieces, close to monodrama, that combine chorus, orchestra, spoken declamation and sometimes even luminous projections (*Le Réveil du Poète, Apothéose fleurie de la cité, Chanson de geste, Sonnerie des champs*); and also a number of orchestral suites (*Impressions matinales, Livre d'images, Tableaux musicaux*).

The orchestral suite was a genre widely popularised since the 1860s by Jules Massenet, who was one of La Tombelle's sources of inspiration. It was often made up of a series of relatively short and not necessarily interrelated movements, and offered late nineteenth-century composers a compromise between two distinct genres: on the one hand, the symphony, a large-scale work traditionally consisting of several (usually four) movements; on the other, the symphonic poem, a frequently autonomous entity possessing an extra-musical argument that underpins and influences its form. As a fairly free form, the suite can also sometimes be an arrangement of extracts from music originating in other genres, such as opera, ballet, incidental music for the stage, or more recently film music. These excerpts are adapted to fit the format of orchestral concerts.

La Tombelle's first orchestral suite, *Impressions matinales* (Morning impressions), partly conforms to this last principle, in that it employs transcriptions of existing music. Before it was published by Richault in 1892, the work underwent several modifications. In its initial version, some of the movements were arrangements of organ pieces ('Écho' and 'Carillon' come from the composer's op.23, *Pièces d'orgue divisées en six livraisons*, Richault, 1888) or harmonium ('Aubade'). Finally, judging his organ carillon unsuitable for the orchestra, La Tombelle composed a new one with a much lighter scoring. It may also be noted that the suite originally included a 'Marche nuptiale' (or 'Cortège nuptial' in other concert programmes). Again, this was probably a transcription of an organ piece that won a prize from the Société des Organistes et Maîtres de Chapelle in May 1884. This movement, not included in the final version, had already been performed in 1887, as was the 'Kermesse' finale.

Although it was thus compiled in several stages, *Impressions matinales*, in its 1892 form, displays a solid skill in orchestration. The style is quite similar to that of Saint-Saëns and Massenet in its clarity and effectiveness. The melodic and harmonic elements recall another composer known to La Tombelle: Edvard Grieg. At much the same time, the Norwegian was preparing the suites from his incidental music for *Peer Gynt*, originally composed in 1874. The two men met during Grieg's stay in Paris in 1889-90 but were already corresponding as early as 1885. His influence may undoubtedly be detected in La Tombelle's stage music and some of his short pieces for piano.

Hence an obvious parallel may be drawn between *Morgenstemning* (Morning mood), the first movement of Grieg's suite, and 'Aurora' in *Impressions matinales*, a moderately paced movement in which the orchestra gradually awakens from its nocturnal torpor in a long crescendo turning towards the sun. It is also worth noting that, in addition to the title 'Impressions', the distanced effects in 'Écho' and the bell imitation on the horns in 'Carillon' are reminiscent of a contemporary orchestral suite by another young composer: Gustave Charpentier and his *Impressions d'Italie*, premiered at the Théâtre du Châtelet on 13 March 1892. And, hearing the pizzicato accompaniment of 'Aubade', how can one not think of certain 'ancient dances' composed at the same time, admittedly in a slower tempo, such as the 'Pavane des fées' from Messager's *Isoline* or Fauré's famous *Pavane*? Finally, the 'Kermesse', a

joyful and direct piece, which does not break with the character traditionally assigned to the last movement of a work dominated by a cheerful atmosphere. The morning is already well advanced. The sun has come out, the shepherd has sent the tones of his pipe (cor anglais) echoing back to the village, where the Angelus has already rung. Then some outdoor music, a simple *aubade*, is prepared before a colourful, motley crowd hastens from all sides to launch the fair of the title.

La Tombelle's second suite for orchestra, *Livre d'images* (Picture book), treats a recurring theme in his works, childish innocence and fairytales, which one may also associate with his interest in the sky and the stars. Although mentioned in the press as early as 1890 (*La Musique populaire*, 14 June 1890), the suite seems rather to have been composed around 1895. Originally written for piano, these *Images* had a larger number of movements than the orchestral version (the additional ones are 'Enfant sage', 'Vilain garnement', 'Étoiles filantes', 'Le Sentier perdu' and 'Le Lac enchanté'). But here let us allow the composer to speak, since he left us his poetic vision of the work in a set of programme notes:

They are no more than simple illustrations that one leafs through, sometimes focusing on a few details of the picturesque decoration without paying much attention to the text that presents it. [...] Yet this Picture Book is music. Is it not also watercolour? And, behind one or other of those manifestations, could it also be literature? To decide which it is depends on whether the ear, the eye or the mind finds it a pleasant experience – unless perhaps, abandoning themselves to spontaneous impression alone, these three elements of perception, combined, allow themselves to be pervaded by the charm under the unanalysed shimmering of the orchestral colour.

☛ Conte bleu [Blue tale]: *Where does this story take place? Is it a tale of the supernatural, of love or of childhood? Are these fairies, gnomes or korrigans that we imagine marching here, or assembling in groups beneath the rustling leaves? The music tells us, though not in words. [...] But here are the fairies waving their garlands through the trees and hanging their veils on the bark of the trunks. The Blue Tale resumes its legend at the point where it broke off, and the will-o'-the-wisps vanish [...] Question, conclusion, or moral? It's a blue tale...*

☛ Il était une fois [Once upon a time]... *there was a king and a queen? Or a shepherdess and a prince? Certainly not a werewolf and an ogress! It*

must be an old story told by a grandmother in front of a crib with a child falling asleep. [...]

👉 Perdu dans la forêt [Lost in the forest]: one might imagine that Hop-o'-My-Thumb and his companions were lost here, if the anxiety the piece displays were more childish. And some passages that seem to be a prayer contain more human anguish than would be appropriate for youngsters, who at this stage would be thinking only of their pangs of hunger. The lost ones' chase continues. Is this a clearing, a precipice or a pond? We go, we come back, we go round in circles. Then we use our reason! This way maybe? Yes, there's a path! Heart throbbing, we venture upon it, and soon here we are at the edge of the forest... and a well-deserved rest after such tension!

👉 Cavalcade: This is no heroic march. It advances, but not in any kind of processional order. There are tumblers, carnival kings, mid-Lenten queens, floats with colourful gold trimmings, cardboard decorations, zinc armour, knightly helmets with drooping plumes. [...] And the cavalcade passes by, leaving behind a joyful cloud of dust!

And now we have finished watching, reading or listening. The last page has slipped through our fingers. [...] The album that now lies abandoned will have amused the children, distracted the parents, kept the old people busy... It is only a Picture Book. It is not in its destiny ever to possess a luxurious binding. But that is of no importance if, one day, for an hour, it has felt a beloved hand nonchalantly turning its pages, rather than those of the many heavy tomes spread out over the rest of the desk!

(Concert programme of the Union Symphonique de Périgueux, 23 April 1923, La Tombelle archives)

A work of primary importance in the composer's output of concertante music, the *Fantaisie* for piano and orchestra op.26, composed in 1887, won the First Prize of the Société des Compositeurs de Musique in the same year. Though dedicated to the pianist Louis Diémer, it was in fact premiered by René Hirsch on 4 April 1889, during one of the Society's concerts at the Salle Pleyel, and then revived in May 1890 by the Société Nationale de Musique. The reviews were generally positive, despite some criticism of the piece's orchestration (it is scored for triple woodwind) and its overall duration. The critic and composer Charles Malherbe did not hide his enthusiasm:

The success was complete and thoroughly deserved. Monsieur Fernand de La Tombelle is an artist, a true artist, on account not only of the happy gifts he has received from nature, but also of the learning he has acquired at the price of arduous study. He has ideas; he knows how to set them off to best advantage by means of interesting developments and sterling instrumentation. Some listeners found the work long; but what does that matter, if the interest is maintained to the end? What must be said is that the piano is handled here by a musician with a perfect grasp of its resources, and who has been able to blend it with genuine skill into the great voice of the orchestra.

(Unidentified newspaper, La Tombelle archives)

Nevertheless, conscious of the criticisms levelled at his *Fantaisie*, the composer then returned to his work in the years up to 1896 to produce two further, more concise versions, one for chamber forces (piano and string quintet) and the other, recorded in this Portrait collection, for an orchestra of more reasonable dimensions, with double woodwind.

From an aesthetic point of view, the fantasia navigates between two influences. While its form and tonal trajectory emulate a classicism à la Saint-Saëns, its extensive use of melodic chromaticism and especially of the principle of cyclic form gives it a strong kinship with the school of César Franck. For everything in the work contributes to reinforcing its overall unity. The first movement, of the introduction-sonata allegro type, contains two thematic groups. The first of these, in the tonic key of F minor, features two contrasting themes marked by chromaticisms, one vehement and in dotted rhythms, the other more melodic. This opening theme recurs as a secondary theme in the second and third movements of the work, with a different character each time. The second theme, identifiable by its initial interval of a tritone, later serves as a transitional element (bridge, coda) in the slow movement and the finale. The second thematic group, which consists of a gentle, diatonic melodic phrase in the relative major, A flat, is reprised at the very end of the third movement in a moment of great intensity. But La Tombelle's intertwining of the themes does not stop here. Thus the principal melody of the second movement, gentle and cantabile there, is transformed during the boisterous finale into a broad, powerful chorale stated in massive, solemn chords on the piano. This interest in cyclic structures is also reflected in the composer's

sacred programme music for organ (*Deux Poèmes symphoniques pour orgue* op.33, *Jeanne d'Arc*), his oratorios (*Crux*, *Les Sept Paroles du Christ*) and his chamber music.



CHAMBER MUSIC

Composed for the most part between 1886 and 1916, La Tombelle's chamber music received the highest prize of the Institut in this category, the Prix Chartier, in 1896. The first major work in the corpus is the Piano Quartet in E minor op.24. Once again, this work went through a number of stages. First sketched around 1886, it was awarded an honourable mention in the competition of the Société des Compositeurs de Musique in the same year and then, in a revised version, honoured with the First Prize of the same institution's 1893 competition. The final score, published by Richault in 1895 and dedicated to the Angers musician Jules Bordier, comprises the traditional four movements: *Allegro agitato* in sonata form, *Adagio* in varied chorale form, scherzo (*Molto allegro*), and *Finale* in sonata-rondo form. It once more respects the principle of large-scale cyclic form: the last movement, between its successive refrains, presents thematic elements from the opening movement and the chorale heard in the slow movement. The supreme refinement comes when, following the same process, the coda of the first movement is built on fragments of its three main themes.

La Tombelle's other large-scale chamber works, in addition to the Trio in D minor op.35, premiered in 1894, and the String Quartet in E major op.36 of 1895, are the Violin Sonata op.40, composed in 1898, and the Cello Sonata he wrote in 1901-02. This was played by several virtuosos during his lifetime, including André Hekking, Gaston Courras (to whom it is dedicated, and who gave the first performance of the complete work, with the composer at the piano, at the Salle Érard in Paris on 17 March 1902) and Charles Van Isterdaël, professor at the Royal Conservatory of The Hague and dedicatee of numerous French sonatas, among them those of Charles Tournemire, Emmanuel Rhené-Baton and Charles Koechlin. Built on a three-movement scheme, La Tombelle's sonata is extremely personal, combining Romanticism and Classicism, modality (in the shape of some archaisms in the finale)

and modernity (through the use of remote modulations, to keys a third, a tone or even a semitone apart). Play on rhythmic figures is important here in both the first movement, with its infinite variations on the cello's initial anapaestic motif, and the third, where the music shifts between duple and triple time, between 6/8 and 3/4. The calm central movement acts as the point of equilibrium between the diverse musical influences. While the piano's *gruppettos* allude to a Classical tradition, certain harmonic progressions and the appearance of a canon at the octave between the two instruments at the end of the movement are more reminiscent of César Franck.

La Tombelle also left a substantial number of smaller solo pieces with piano accompaniment, berceuses and variations, mostly for flute, violin or cello, of which the *Andante espressivo* is a representative example. This music, sincere, direct and unpretentious, seems characteristic of the repertory heard in the *fin de siècle* salons.

With the *Fantaisie ballade* for harp the composer's interest in folklore appears. Like a number of his colleagues, La Tombelle not only collected or harmonised the folksongs of his region, but also incorporated them in his music, and examples of this may be found in all the genres he tackled. In this fantasia for harp, a brilliant piece full of contrasts, he invents his own folklike melodic theme.

For the sake of completeness, one should also mention La Tombelle's significant contribution to the piano repertory, which ranges from small-scale and didactic pieces to extended virtuoso fantasias, again distinguished by the use of folk themes, such as the *Rapsodie périgourdine* of 1901 (a version of which also exists for piano and orchestra) and the *Ritmos españoles* of 1909.

In the second decade of the twentieth century, and especially during the Great War, La Tombelle, rather like such different personalities as Saint-Saëns, Debussy and Ravel, affirmed in his chamber music a return to a certain classicism 'à la française', as opposed to an intensified Romanticism that now seemed too imbued with German influences. This is the impression given by such works as the *Suite courte* for flute and harp, the *Suite brève en quatre parties* for two violins and piano, or the *Suite* for three cellos. He left us some useful information on the genesis and form of the last-named of these, composed around 1914 and published in 1921:

Three cellos without any other orchestral or piano accompaniment is a rare type of scoring, though not unique. A few examples are known, but they generally have a first cello that leads the ensemble, while the other two provide a harmonic foundation. [...]

Why did I try my hand at one? Because I had three cellist friends, a father and two sons, all students of each other. The father was remarkable; one of the sons, of superior quality; the other son, an absolute ace! They said to me: 'Write us a trio in a large-scale form.'

I replied: 'If you like; but luckily summer is coming! I'll go and write it for you in the cellar!'

Well, no! No! I was wrong. And I soon came back to the surface to ask the sun for ideas. For we find it hard to imagine how well these three instruments, low-pitched by nature, can support each other, so much so that one feels no need for a higher timbre, which would be not only pointless, but indeed out of place.

But it is worth pointing out that, to achieve this result, the composition is not treated as if it were for one first cello with a second and then a third and last.

Here we have three equal cellos, one, plus another, plus another, which take turns to move through the polyphonic texture from low register to high, and, by means of effects on the open strings available in the chosen key, sometimes give the impression one is hearing four, five or even six cellos playing simultaneously.

The suite consists of five pieces.

The first is in sonata form. The last one is a fugue, emancipated from all textbook models. The other three movements, a light serenade, an anguished adagio, a rhythmic scherzo, are shorter and less severe in form. Let us say they are three sweet pips within a tough outer skin: in short, the definition of a fruit! Let everyone choose according to his or her taste!

(Concert programme of the Union Symphonique de Périgueux, 23 April 1923, La Tombelle archives)



MÉLODIES

This is the genre that held La Tombelle's attention throughout his compositional career, for his corpus of some 150 songs was written between 1878 and around 1926. They are pieces for one or sometimes two voices accompanied by varied instrumental forces – piano, harmonium, small chamber ensemble or even orchestra. Among his favourite authors, particularly in the 1880s, were the great Romantics such as Victor Hugo (*À la mère de l'enfant mort*, *Dans l'alcôve sombre*) and Alphonse de Lamartine (*Le Livre de la vie*), but also poets close to the Parnassian movement, among them Georges Boutelleau (*Le Secret des vagues*) from the Cognac region. In addition to the poets of the Renaissance, La Tombelle subsequently became interested in many regional writers of his time – Paul Harel (Normandy), Léon Chadourne (Corrèze), Paul Rabot and Gabriel Ducos (Gironde), Arthur Cambos and Philadelphé de Gerde (Languedoc) et al. But this did not prevent him, as a discerning man of letters himself, from sometimes writing his own poems with a view to musical setting. Such is the case with the cycle *Les Pages d'amour, six mélodies* composed in 1903 for Mme Blanche Seguy-Huguet, wife of the baritone and singing teacher Paul Seguy, both of whom were great champions of La Tombelle's music and performed it at the concerts they organised. The primary characteristic of his songs, which often alternate between strophic and free (*durchkomponiert*) form, is their respect for clear declamation and the use of a varied musical accompaniment that is invariably at the service of the meaning of each poem. As the composer wrote, it is necessary to find a balance between the importance of the text and that of the music without one ever detracting from the other:

One does not apply music to words like paint to a door! The music is intended to underline the poetry; but it cannot confine itself to that role; nor should it gain its freedom and become abstract music.

(Fernand de La Tombelle, 'Parole et musique', *Revue pratique de liturgie et de musique sacrée*, 1921)



CHORAL MUSIC

In terms of quantity, choral music is the largest single category in La Tombelle's catalogue of works. This substantial corpus includes, in the secular domain, small pieces and large choral scenes (often written for male-voice choirs called 'Orphéons', as was the cycle *La Légende de la Glèbe*) and, on the sacred side, short motets or hymns and extended cantatas or oratorios (*Crux, Les Sept Paroles du Christ, L'Abbaye* etc.). As he says many times in his writings, this was the genre dearest to his heart. La Tombelle was regarded as an authority on choral music during his lifetime. In the 1880s he won several prizes for his choral pieces; subsequently, he continued right up to the end of his life to participate as an adjudicator in countless choral competitions organised all over France and abroad too. These events were intended for both amateurs and experienced musicians.

Composed around 1910 on verse by the poet and politician Henri Darsay (1857-1914), the choral scene *Au fil de l'eau* is characteristic of La Tombelle's work in this domain. It makes use of contrasts and different vocal techniques, always placed at the service of the text and its character. The same is true of the short arrangement of the folksong *Le Furet*, which reminds us of his interest in folklore.

While he composed a large number of works for organ, La Tombelle also remained a leading figure in sacred vocal music in France at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He had two major sources of inspiration. First of all, the influence of Renaissance polyphony, championed by the Schola Cantorum in particular. An example of this is the *Madrigal spirituel* of 1902, which respects the five-part texture of the old masters. It is, moreover, a polytextual work: four voices sing a tight contrapuntal setting of a Marian text by Gabriel Ducos (1869-1934), while in the middle an *Ave Maria* is heard as a cantus firmus in the tenor part. More restrained and intimate, though still redolent of the neo-Palestrinian aesthetic, is the *Pie Jesu* composed in memory of Charles Bordes (1863-1909). The second influence on La Tombelle, found mainly in his cantatas and oratorios, is the sacred music of his mentors, such representatives of French Romanticism as Théodore Dubois, Camille Saint-Saëns and Charles Gounod. The cantata *La Voix de l'orgue* was written for the inauguration of the organ of the Sacré-Cœur church in Toulouse

on 17 February 1924, and presents a fine dialogue between the king of instruments and the choir.

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