

BEYOND THE COMPOSER: THE MAN

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(*descendant of Fernand de La Tombelle*)

To speak of the music of Fernand de La Tombelle is the essential thing here, and that is the domain of specialists; but to speak of the man, his ideals, his acts, is that not to evoke the elements which nourished that music?

It was in 1854, in the second half of a nineteenth century fizzing with life and discoveries, that the composer was born to a jurist father and a musical mother: an intriguing combination. He had to live up to their exacting standards, and thereby acquired a rigour and a well-ordered brain that were to serve him in his later studies. Nevertheless, he could still take refuge in his dreams, for his mother took care to have him learn the piano at a very early age, followed by the organ when he was fifteen. Hence he could choose his path without difficulty or regret, and it was the path of art – all the arts, as long as they represented beauty. Architecture, painting and poetry were his earliest passions. Greece and Rome occupied the leading role in his classical studies, which formed his thinking and whose importance to him he always asserted.

At the age of nineteen, La Tombelle had to overcome the trauma of his father's murder; this took him several years, during which he worked indefatigably. His spirits were visibly revived at the age of twenty-four, when his first musical works were published. He married at twenty-six, becoming a father at twenty-seven and twenty-nine, and this marked the beginning of his new life. There were many friends, many concerts, many receptions, for the environment was eminently propitious: his mother had just purchased a town house on rue Newton in Paris, which played host to numerous musicians,

painters and poets, a band of friends who assembled to fête one of their number or the New Year. They sang and enjoyed themselves at every opportunity, and La Tombelle composed pieces for each such occasion, since he wished to make everyone around him happy. A document found long after his death, at the bottom of a drawer, tells us that he 'hope[d] to have succeeded' in that ambition.

For the moment he too was happy, adulated and appreciated by everyone, adored by his wife who had loved him long before he loved her and who had waited for him. His circle admired his youth, his energy, his openness to others, and the festivals he organised in the Périgord countryside not far from Sarlat, where everyone was invited to attend 'Cours d'amour' (courts of love). For, in this part of south-western France, the Middle Ages were venerated, and he was so much in his element there, at Castelnaud and Fayrac, where the Occitan language of the troubadours was still a living entity (La Tombelle spoke it himself), that it would have been a pity to deprive himself of such pleasures. Sometimes it was simple parties in the gardens, with the attraction of hot-air balloons, that brought the whole village together. A few years later, once such festivities had come to an end, the composer extended his activities to a wider circle, in order to ensure that those of his contemporaries who had not had his good fortune could attain, through beauty and the knowledge of music, that 'elevation of the soul' to which every human being is entitled.

But why was his wife soon to write a poem with the intriguing title of 'Souvenir' (Recollection)? Henriette de Marivault, a writer and poet, now published under a pseudonym (only the works she had written before her marriage had appeared under her married name). It would even seem that she no longer signed all her poems.

This subtle and elegant musician was also a sportsman: it was said that he was a force of nature and that, when he returned to his property in Fayrac to revisit his roots, he travelled by bicycle, covering 450 kilometres in three days... And he was eager to get there, because he had embarked on major improvements. He removed all the unnecessary vegetation that concealed the beautiful stone and the shutters; he restored the mullioned windows; and he converted a somewhat commonplace house, added at some uncertain date in the past, into a crenellated tower! The result was a masterpiece, creating or perhaps restoring a harmony that had doubtless disappeared over the course of time.

Here one could admire his skills as a decorator and his eye for balance, which were often praised in the early years of the twentieth century, when he transferred to Fayrac the furniture from the house in rue Newton, which had been sold on his mother's death. These events marked a total change in his existence: he now lived alone with his son, since his wife Henriette had taken back her independence a few years previously, in 1895, no longer able to tolerate the presence of her all-powerful mother-in-law.

After the bicycle came the motor car, which he used for the long trips he made to educate his children, who became his companions from an early age on frequent escapades of three or four days (not to mention the many detours they made on their regular route between Paris and the Dordogne). La Tombelle explained to them the history of the places they visited, their architectural styles and so on. Perhaps this was the first concrete sign of his need to teach and pass his knowledge on to others, which was later to take the form of the many lectures he gave here and there, but most especially in the beautiful medieval city of Sarlat, where he did not hesitate to organise concerts at the Lasallian Brothers' school. He would sometimes finish them, after a profitable collection for the school (frequently taken by his wife), with Périgord folkdances played on his hurdy-gurdy – at which point the listeners would rush onto the stage and dance joyfully.

When he arrived at his Fayrac estate, he would go out on the terrace and, facing the view that extended far into the distance, he would take out his telescope and look at the sky. He renewed acquaintance with the moon he loved so much, made learned calculations and drew illustrations intended for use in a film on the stars that Pathé was to produce; unfortunately, the war put an end to this project.

La Tombelle had a fluent literary style, and wrote poems throughout his life; he even amused himself by writing his everyday correspondence in alexandrines for pleasure. This was also his way of expressing his tastes and ideas, for his writings give an insight into his youthful nature, his *joie de vivre*, but also his deeply held faith, his rigorous standards, and his passion for the Middle Ages and ancient Greece, for his castle and his servants, whose proud bearing he loved. They also hint at his joys and sorrows.

As a countryman, he loved the natural world around him, his roses and his trees. Some died, some grew older, like him, and wept,

like human beings... but 'pines have a resin... that catches fire!', as he once wrote in a letter. Some readers may wonder why he indulged in all these activities. It was, of course, to nourish his music, the purpose of his life.



Invitation to a party at Baroness de La Tombelle's house.
(Private collection)

Invitation pour une soirée chez la baronne de La Tombelle.
(Collection particulière)