

The Villa Medici at the time of Ingres

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Ingres had recently met with failure at the Paris Salon of 1834 with *The Martyrdom of Saint Symphorian*, by which he set great store. The work that he called his ‘*maître-tableau*’ (master painting) had been eclipsed by Paul Delaroche’s *Execution of Lady Jane Grey*. Feeling extremely bitter and resentful, he envisaged a retreat from public life. ‘Monsieur Ingres’ – an artist steeped in the academic tradition, and an embodiment of Classicism – was touchy, obstinate, and given to sulking... which is partly what makes him so interesting. While attaining the heights of pure aesthetic creation, he kept his feet firmly planted in a very limited daily existence. His painting is as detached from reality as he as a man was down to earth and approachable. Gounod reported in his memoirs:

He had the tenderness of a child and the indignation of an apostle; he had a naivety, a touching sensibility, and a freshness of emotion not met with among *poseurs*, with whom some people like to number him.

Ingres’s dejection increased when he was appointed director of the Académie de France in Rome. Instead of seeing the appointment as the favour it was, he felt that he was being sent there too soon, and for the wrong reason: to get rid of him. All of the events of 1834, a series of vexations, therefore amounted, he thought, to a conspiracy against him. Flatly declaring that he was retiring for good from public life, he left at the end of 1834 for six years of ‘voluntary exile’ (as he put it) in Rome.



HAVING A SECOND STRING TO ONE'S BOW:
INGRES AND HIS VIOLIN

From early in 1835, when he first arrived at the Villa Medici, Ingres was thus responsible for the institution inherited from the *grand siècle* which, as well as painters, sculptors and architects, now welcomed musicians and engravers. His personal tastes made him the right man for the job. For as well as his immoderate love for drawing, a medium that was also part of the daily practice of the pensionnaires representing the plastic arts, he also had a bent for music, which augured a community that was truly united around its director, removing the composers from their relative isolation. Ingres was not only a music lover; he also played an instrument: the famous violin (now in the Musée Ingres in Montauban) that inspired his nephew, the journalist Émile Bergerat, to coin the famous expression 'violon d'Ingres', meaning 'an avocation at which one excels'.

Indeed, Ingres was by all accounts an accomplished amateur violinist. In his youth, before he moved to Paris, he apparently played at the Grand Théâtre in Toulouse: 'I successfully performed in public a concerto by Viotti; then M. Lejeune, who at that time was a violinist in Toulouse and a friend of Rhode [*sic*; the violinist Pierre Rode] gave me lessons,' he wrote in a letter in 1855. And Amaury-Duval, in his recollections of his teacher (*L'Atelier d'Ingres: Souvenirs*, 1878), claims that Ingres told him that he played Beethoven quartets with Paganini in Rome during the time he spent there as a pensionnaire himself. Finally, *Ingres, sa vie, ses travaux, sa doctrine* by Comte Henri Delaborde, published in 1870, includes a very useful section of ten pages or so devoted to the painter's writings on the subject of music and musicians. To give just one example, Ingres wrote in 1818:

My loves are still Raphael, his century, the ancients, and above all the divine Greeks; in music, Gluck, Mozart, Haydn. My library consists of about twenty volumes, immortal masterpieces, and therewith life has many charms.

He mentions music, we notice, after the fine arts and before literature, for which, although he lists his favourite composers, he mentions no names. This is interesting in the light of the fact that Ingres saw himself as a ‘history painter’ – the highest goal of academic art – i. e. the exponent of a genre that is an alliance of two sister arts, hence an illustration of the Horacian dictum *Ut pictura poesis* (‘As is painting, so is poetry’), expressing the notion that painting and poetry are alike. How could a pupil of David and, *a priori*, an exponent of literary painting relegate *poesis* to third position, after the art of music?

By March 1835, not long after he had taken up his position as director of the Villa Medici, Ingres was missing music; he was unable to play himself because some of his personal belongings had not yet arrived:

However, there is one thing I miss: I am without music because my large crate has not arrived. Fortunately Providence is great; she has taken pity on me by extending the stay in Rome of a musician and composer named Thomas: an excellent young man, a pianist of the finest talent, and who has in his heart and in his head everything that Mozart, Beethoven, Weber, etc., have ever written. He expresses music like our admirable friend Benoît, and most of our evenings are delightful.

(Letter to Varcollier, Rome, 25 March 1835)

Ambroise Thomas and later Charles Gounod were Ingres’s great consolations during his six years of ‘exile’ in Rome (1835-1841). He was particularly close to Gounod. Another quotation from Gounod’s *Memoirs*: ‘His ruling passion was for Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, with which we would sometimes remain together until two o’clock in the morning, at which point Madame Ingres, ready to drop with weariness and fatigue, would be obliged to close the piano in order to separate us and send us to bed.’

A consolation for Ingres, therefore, and an exceptional opportunity for the musicians with whom he entertained special relationships to make their presence felt; but for all the other pensionnaires this ‘favouritism’ was a source of exasperation. After the directorship of the painter Horace

Vernet (1829-1834), who had given the pensionnaires many opportunities to shine in society, that of Ingres, who shut himself away in the Villa and conceived of no celebrations other than musical, must have seemed very austere to them. And indeed some of them did show discontent. The sculptor Jean-Marie Bonnassieux wrote in June 1840:

These past days we have had a musical celebration at the Villa; it was held under the vestibule, looking out over the gardens with the Villa Borghese; there was something to see as well as to hear, which will not have been a frequent occurrence under the directorship of M. Ingres. The drawing room is always deadly boring. Members of the fairer sex, who are the life of such events, appear to have been excluded; always music, nothing but music, and of the finest, but it is possible to grow tired of anything. I return to the vestibule. The piano was being played by Mme Trennerel. M. Gounod was assisting her. M. Ingres was holding his own against them on the violin, and M. Bouquet was also playing his part, while the bass player completed the instrumental harmony. In the intervals there was singing, but M. Ingres does not like singing. When we were tired of listening, we would go out for a stroll, then come back in to listen, then go out again, then come back in. From ten o'clock in the morning until sunset the vestibule resounded with serious music. That was our celebration.

Round about the same time, but in a very different tone, Gounod wrote:

Our Sunday evenings were usually spent in the director's large drawing room; the students were freely admitted to his apartments on that day. We always had music. M. Ingres favoured me with his special friendship. He was a great lover of music, being passionately fond of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and, above all, Gluck who, in the nobility and pathos of his style, seemed to him a Greek, a descendant of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. M. Ingres played the violin, not as a performer, much less a virtuoso, but during his youth he had played that instrument in the orchestra of his native town, Montauban, where he had taken part in the

performance of Gluck's operas. I had read and studied the works of Gluck. As for Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, I knew it by heart, and, although I was not a pianist, I managed to gratify M. Ingres by playing for him the score he so adored. I also knew from memory the symphonies of Beethoven, for which he had much admiration. We two would often spend a great part of the night thus entertaining ourselves in intimacy with the great masters, and in a short time I was completely in his good graces.

Bonnassieux's account is no doubt a little exaggerated. For Ingres received not only famous instrumentalists who were capable of delighting even the non-musically inclined – Fanny Mendelssohn, for instance – but also well-known singers such as Pauline Viardot. Indeed, contrary to the sculptor's claim, Ingres had no aversion to singing. But he *was* particular about what was sung. Under his roof he could bear to hear only '*musique vertueuse*' – 'virtuous music'. Ingres was as strictly exclusive regarding music as he was concerning the fine arts.



WHAT MUSIC WAS HEARD IN M. INGRES'S DRAWING ROOM?

What then was the 'virtuous music' mentioned by Amaury-Duval in his memoirs? It was 'that of Mozart, Beethoven and Gluck'. Mozart and Gluck appear in the lower section of *The Apotheosis of Homer* (1827; Paris, Musée du Louvre). The compositional scheme of this major work by Ingres is found much earlier, in about 1803, in *Apollo crowning Gluck and Mozart*, a preparatory sketch (now in the Louvre) for a painting that was never completed. Examining the handwritten notes on that drawing enables us to observe Ingres's close relationship with music. Mozart and Gluck appear surrounded by other composers: Palestrina, Bach, Handel, Haydn, Grétry, Cherubini, Méhul, Beethoven and Weber. Of the eleven composers chosen to constitute this musical pantheon, two are French, two are Italian, and seven are German. Ingres once declared: 'Music! What divine

art! Honest, because music has its manners too. Italian music only has bad ones; but German!

Ingres's musical references were focused on the German school as much as his pictorial sources were focused on Italy. Thus, having drawn portraits of Niccolò Paganini (1819) and Pierre Baillot (1829), both of whom he admired at the time, Ingres later condemned the former for excessive virtuosity, while retaining his admiration for Baillot, whom he described (30 October 1842) as 'le Poussin des violons' (referring to the painter Nicolas Poussin, noted for his sensitivity to the nuances of gesture, design, colour, and handling in his paintings). From that point of view Ingres's *Cherubini deified*, also known as *Luiqi Cherubini and the Muse of Lyric Poetry*, is an exception. This portrait of Cherubini, sketched in 1834 and completed in 1842, the year of the composer's death, is above all a defence and illustration of the last living reformer of the *tragédie lyrique* (an heir to Gluck) at a time when the Italomania and Romanticism of Berlioz (winner of the Grand Prix de Rome in 1830) were experiencing a triumphant success. Cherubini, a survivor from another era, the embodiment of a tradition that was contested by youth, and the stern director of the Paris Conservatoire, mirrored so to speak Ingres, his successes and his present failure, relegated as he was from 1834 to the ranks of representatives of another age.

There was, however, one composer – Mozart – whom Ingres venerated as much as he did Raphael. 'Heaven appeared to be jealous of the earth when it snatched away Raphael and Mozart so soon,' he declared, and: 'Long live Mozart, the god of music, as Raphael is the god of painting!' Then:

Let us always adore with the same fervour and passion Gluck, Haydn, Beethoven, and Mozart, our Raphael of music. [...] But never anything Italian! The devil take such commonness, such triviality, in which everything, even 'A curse on you!', is uttered in such dulcet tones.

Other than in Germany, there was no salvation, except in Paris. Ingres found Italian music, 'fit for fairground stands' (Ernest Hébert, 'La Villa

Médicis en 1840: Souvenirs d'un pensionnaire', published on 1 April 1901 in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*).



INGRES, PAINTER OF NUDES: UT PICTURA MUSICA?

Is it possible that, consciously or otherwise, music influenced Ingres's painting? Most of his works were portraits or nudes. But the nudes in question are not masculine figures engaged in action (i.e. they are not strictly speaking history paintings), but rather languid female bodies, freed from all considerations of a narrative nature, providing the viewer with visual pleasure: art for art's sake. In those works Ingres appears as a purely formal painter, whose paintings are of value not through their message (almost non-existent), but purely through the abstract play of point-counterpoint in the colours and arabesques. The narrative has evaporated, leaving only the plastic and chromatic harmonies. Whether representing bathers or odalisques, Ingres's nudes are no longer allied to literature as a sister art, so they no longer correspond to Horace's *ut pictura poesis*. But since they refer to nothing other than the actual *means* of painting – lines and colours and their interactions – they could very well represent a parallel with music, which in the nineteenth century clearly constitutes a new paragon and an alternative to poetry as painting's rival art: *ut pictura musica*. A self-referential art that Whistler, in works such as his *Symphony in White* nos. 1, 2 and 3 or his series of *Nocturnes* (adopting the musical terms best suited to the character of his paintings), was to be the first, sometime between 1865 and 1875, to claim openly.





Charles Gounod, photograph taken in about 1880.
Leduc Archives.

Charles Gounod vers 1880.
Archives Leduc.