

SOUVENIRS DE MA VIE

*Théodore Dubois**translated by Mark Wiggins*

Théodore Dubois commenced writing his Souvenirs de ma vie in 1909; they were submitted for publication but this did not occur at this point, owing particularly to the upheaval consequent upon the 1914 war. Here are given a number of individual passages which appear in their chronological order of writing; those interested in reading more are recommended to seek out the complete text, in the original French, as prepared by Symétrie and the Palazzetto Bru Zane in 2008.

ENTRY TO THE REHEARSALS OF THE SOCIÉTÉ DES
CONCERTS DU CONSERVATOIRE

I, like all my friends at the time, only got the chance to hear an orchestra playing the symphonic works of great classical masters thanks to him [Ambroise Thomas], and I am deeply grateful to his memory for that. In those days, we had nothing in the way of the type of symphonic concerts as were later founded by [Jules-Étienne] Padeloup, [Édouard] Colonne and [Charles] Lamoureux. The concerts of the Conservatoire were the only ones taking place at that time, and they were only affordable for the rare season ticket holders amongst us. Ambroise Thomas had the idea of asking the Société committee to permit access to the general rehearsals for students attending the composition classes, in order that they might form and develop their musical tastes and to complete their education by hearing those masterpieces which constituted the repertory of that illustrious Société. This favour was granted. From then on, I never missed a single Saturday rehearsal. I became acquainted in this way, score in hand, with the

admirable creations of those who were required to serve us as models; thus, I entered into the secrets of the form, of the developments, of the orchestral combinations, of the sonorities, of the expressive power of such an ensemble. A whole world of ideas awakened in me and my love for music intensified in a wonderful way.

COMPOSITIONS OF CÉSAR FRANCK

The daily visits from César Franck instilled in me a love and an admiration for that great musician. I was very fortunate in being able to observe the development of, and of accompanying, the first performance of his *Messe*, his motets, his lovely *offertoires* – including *Dextera Domini*, *Quae est ista* and the *Offertoire pour le carême* – all works of the first rank through their noble spirit, their masterly compositional design, and their vigorous and personal harmonies. What a contrast there was with the pieces that one used to hear in the majority of the churches in Paris! This was the start of a reaction against the ordinariness and the bad taste which still, after so many years (alas!) have not been completely eradicated from the church choir repertory! Later on, after my return from Rome, I witnessed the coming into existence of the collection of Franck's superb *Pièces d'orgue* and, for the first one, I used to assist the composer by pulling out the stops for him when he was trying his music out at the organ. These memories are dear to me because they remind me of the fine artist who was César Franck, the affectionate sympathy which he held for me, and also the strong impact that these works – in a style which was so new for me – had on my mind. It will come as no surprise to anybody when I say that the worshippers at Sainte-Clotilde proved to be a little resistant to the creations of their *maître de chapelle*, being more in favour of the banalities offered up by the workaday repertory. Has it not always been the way, and don't people see that the passage of time ends by putting everything in its place and that today the world of César Franck is justly admired! The outward appearance of the artist was little consistent with his talent, with his genius. Were it not for his lively look (full of intelligence) and the gleam in his eye, he could have instead been taken for some respectable provincial bourgeois. But as soon as he opened his mouth, he became transformed, demanding one's attention through his belief, by the power of his words, by his elevated insights

into art, into literature; he became persuasive, almost an irresistible attraction; one felt that one was in the presence of a powerful force, of a willpower! Moreover, there were few young artists who came into contact with him who weren't influenced by him to some degree.

TANNHÄUSER AT THE PARIS OPÉRA

Towards the end of that year, 1861, *Tannhäuser* by Richard Wagner was performed at the Paris Opéra. I wanted to hear this work which was stirring up an unholy row in Paris and whipping up the most impassioned and most varied of discussions there. Jules Lefebvre was wanting to come with me; both of us being short of money, we scraped together enough for two places in the gods for the third performance. It was just as well we took the decision to hurry, because it turned out to be the last one. It wasn't even possible to get to the end of the performance, the racket being so extraordinary. At one point, I recall, the artists, labouring under the most strident barrage of whistling, courageously remained on stage for a whole 20 minutes, despite being unable to continue! I was outraged, not previously having experienced such an outburst; I later found out that it was mostly the work of a cabal, since the music didn't strike me as being so revolutionary that it should arouse – or even be worthy – of such passions! Afterwards, what a turnaround then for Richard Wagner! The same people who whistled so fiercely in 1861 – and moreover without knowing why – today clap wildly with a similar recklessness and with the same incompetence. The merit of an artistic work ends up by imposing itself and, in order to avoid being seen as out of touch, one applauds, without understanding better, and there you have it! And this is the form of approval that composers are after! Seldom do they secure this in their lifetimes, but when the furore has died down, when time has run its course, justice emerges and a posthumous glory will cast its golden halo upon a name formerly scorned and unacknowledged. Let me simply mention here the names of Berlioz and César Franck in France! I would not claim that at this time I was entirely appreciating the new art and the modern aesthetic offered up by Wagner; this art and this aesthetic were completely at variance with so much of what I was accustomed to liking, and to practise, that I was confused by the whole thing. However, I felt that there was a great force there, a great strength whose

influence would certainly be significant for the theatre but, in parallel with this, I had a feeling – I could not say why – that French composers, whilst at the same time striving to get closer to the dramatic truth, needed to retain their own personalities and not try to imitate, by stepping in the footsteps of this great pioneer who was in the process of revolutionizing the musical world. I must say that I have not changed my opinion in this regard.

AMBROISE THOMAS

I often went to see my teacher Ambroise Thomas who constantly manifested a real sympathy towards me. These visits generally took place in the morning. He used to live in a flat on the Rue Saint Georges. He would let me in himself, typically in his shirt sleeves, forever smoking a cigar which he would always allow to go out and which he would continuously relight from a candle permanently alight in his fireplace. His flat was cluttered with ornaments and knickknacks, for he was an enthusiastic collector and a regular at the auction rooms. After a few minutes we would start and he would take an interest in what I was up to. I would talk to him about the problems that I was struggling to resolve at the time: he understood them, and would promise to give me as much help as he could. After that I would leave him to his own work. One day he provided me with a great token of his confidence, and I was proud and grateful for this. It concerned adapting *Mignon* for the Italian stage. For that purpose, the dialogues in recitative form needed to be transformed into Italian. Being busy with other matters, but this thing being urgent, he asked me to compose the recitatives, which I then did the best that I could. He then lightly adjusted them in places and the score was published in this new version. Of course, we kept this between ourselves, and if I am recording this recollection – unknown by anybody else – it is out of love for the truth and not to brag about what was really only a small piece of work on my part.

LISZT AT THE ORGAN OF SAINTE-CLOTILDE

Another very vivid memory occurs to me here, one which has left a lasting trace. It relates to two great artists: César Franck and Franz Liszt. The former had just finished composing his six wonderful *Pièces*

d'orgue, whilst the latter had promised him to come and hear them from the organ gallery at Sainte-Clotilde. They needed to be seen work together and, as I have already said, I was helping the composer out with his registrations at the time. After many rehearsals, once everything had been sorted out, Liszt arrived to the organ gallery on the appointed day, and listened attentively to the beautiful pieces, which appeared to make a big impression on him. He warmly congratulated Franck – towards whom he seemed to feel much admiration – and then he left. I had just been assisting in something unique: the meeting of two distinguished artists, with me there as the sole witness! Neither of them had sought to make any publicity out of this!

THE CONCERTS PASDELOUP

I have said before that the only symphony concerts that used to take place were those which Pásdeloup had founded a few years earlier. He organized them at the Cirque d'Hiver and at the Cirque d'Été on the Champs-Élysées (later demolished), depending on the season. He deserves to be acknowledged for the initiative which he had taken. It has borne such fruits! Indeed, from this time dates a sort of renaissance of the music for the masses in France. Up till then, a very limited elite used to go to the concerts of the Conservatoire (which had been founded in 1827 by Habeneck); and that was it! For the general public there was nothing other than theatre music. Young composers themselves, having no job prospects, would put all their efforts into the theatre; this is why, in contrast to in Germany, so few orchestral works used to appear in and from France. Bizet and Massenet were the first, I think, who led the way: the former with *Roma* (overture) and the latter with a *Suite d'orchestre*. Saint-Saëns had also composed some symphonic works which were played at the Société Sainte-Cécile and directed by Seghers.

THE SOCIÉTÉ NATIONALE DE MUSIQUE

At around the same time the 'Société Nationale de Musique' was founded at the instigation of Romain Bussine, the professor of singing. His aim was that all the young French composers – whatever their musical leanings were, but provided that they were possessed of some talent –

should have works of theirs performed. I was one of the founder members, and one only needs to mention the names of some of the committee members who took part in the early years to demonstrate the eclecticism of the operation: Saint-Saëns, Taffanel, Bussine, Lalo, Gouvy, César Franck, Guilmant, d'Indy, myself, Lascoux, Duparc. Later on, a split occurred, with the result that Lalo and I have since tendered our resignations. Since then, the Société Nationale de Musique has remained entirely in the hands of the Schola Cantorum, directed by M. d'Indy. That is to say, that it is far from being eclectic, and that sectarianism and partisanship reign supreme. The heart of the programmes lay above all in chamber music and singing; sometimes there were orchestral concerts, after which the pieces which had been judged the most favourably would have the distinction of being performed at the Concerts Colonne. This was thus the way in which my own *Suite villageoise* and the *Ouverture de Frithiof* were played at those latter concerts.



Exam hall at the Conservatoire, where Dubois spent many hours in his capacity as its director. (*Musica*, December 1910.)

Salle des examens du Conservatoire, où Dubois passa de nombreuses heures en qualité de directeur de l'institution. (*Musica*, décembre 1910.)

2^e SYMPHONIE

THÉODORE DUBOIS.

I

Allegro. (84 = ♩)

FLÛTES. 1 2

HAUTOIS. 1 2

CLARINETTES en SI^b. 1 2

CLARINETTE BASSE en SI^b

BASSONS. 1 2

SARRUSOPHONE.

CORS en FA. 1 2 3 4

TROMPETTES en UT. 1 2 3

TROMBONES. 1 2

3^e TROMBONE et TUBA.

TIMBALES LA, DO[♯], RÉ.

Allegro. (84 = ♩)

VIOLONS. 1 2

ALTOS.

VIOLONCELLES.

CONTREBASSES.

Title page from Dubois' Symphony No. 2.
(Éditions Heugel.)

Page de titre de la *Symphonie n° 2* de Dubois.
(Éditions Heugel.)