

A TRIBUTE TO THÉODORE DUBOIS

Charles-Marie Widor

translated by Richard Stephenson

(Speech delivered at the Académie des Beaux-Arts in 1924.)

Gentlemen,

He was the son of small farmers, from a family whose watchwords were hard work and rectitude. His grandfather was the village schoolmaster, his father a basket maker. A charming trade, that: poets and musicians have sung it. Dubois should have hailed it in his turn. Did he do so? Perhaps...

Rosnay, a pretty village in Champagne, standing in the Vesle valley, thirteen kilometres from Reims. Our colleague always kept up the house where he was born, which he enjoyed beautifying. Each year, in summer, he faithfully spent long periods there, and there he kept the small harmonium that his parents had purchased for little Théodore from their savings. The loss of the peaceful cottage in the shock of invasion during the Great War was one of his greatest sorrows.

Until the age of twelve, he attended his grandfather's village school. In his free time he enjoyed playing the flageolet. It was, without doubt, the first stirrings of his vocation. But what irresistibly decided him was a service he attended in Reims cathedral. The singing of the choir and the swelling organ overwhelmed his boyish soul (he was just seven). 'I wish to be an altar boy,' he told his parents. 'And why?' they asked. 'So that I may sing in church.' Unfortunately, the church did not approve for these functions a candidate whose vocal talents, little more than a croak, were found wanting. A characteristic of this tall, vigorous, well-built man was that his voice was always

a little muted: he was not a born singer. In fact, this early misfortune only inflamed his love of music the more. So a master had to be found for him.

In Rosnay, there were no musicians. But in the neighbouring village of Gueux, the cooper, in addition to his barrels, was in charge of a bass fiddle and the parish organ. Little Théodore received nine lessons from this rural master. After the ninth lesson, the good cooper told his disciple that he could teach him nothing more. But was not listening to this good man hooping his barrels a further lesson? The rhythm of labour punctuated by the sound of his hammer was music that echoed so beautifully around the peaceful village! Barrels have music in their soul. George Sand, taken to a concert by her best friend – at this time this was Chopin – noticed above all, in that ordered storm in the *Pastoral Symphony*, a similarity between the rumbling of the thunder and the cavernous sound of the barrels which, as a child, she had heard being hooped in Nohant.

The schoolmaster, his grandfather, had a schoolmaster friend in Reims whose daughter, who played the piano, became the boy's second teacher. His real master was the third one. This was Louis Fanart, also from Reims. He was a wealthy dilettante, the owner of an extensive scholarly and musical library, an excellent musician well versed in harmony after studying with Lesueur, who taught Berlioz. Twice a week for three years, Théodore walked the thirteen kilometres there and back, from Rosnay to Reims and vice versa. To Louis Fanart he owed the principles of his technical education and knowledge of great music. But the more the scope of his instruction widened, the narrower seemed the horizon of Reims and the stronger his desire to go to Paris and enter the Conservatoire. But how does a poor peasant boy cross that sacrosanct threshold?

The mayor of Rosnay was the Vicomte Eugène de Breuil, a man of refined tastes and a friend of Parisian artists. He had observed the progress made by the young Dubois, who by this time was 17. He brought him to Paris and introduced him to Ravina, a fashionable pianist, and to Marmontel and Bazin, both of whom taught at the Conservatoire and accepted Théodore into their classes. Monsieur de Breuil provided him with lodgings in a house he owned in Paris, near the Rue Saint-Georges. Dubois lived at the very top of the building and took his meals in the lodge, with the often-drunk concierge and his ever evil-smelling

wife. These, you will agree, were years of fairly harsh trials. But what of it? He was living in Paris, he was a student at the Conservatoire, his teachers had noticed him, and he had no self doubts, feeling that he was a true musician. He was happy. Never would he forget the debt of gratitude he owed to his protector.



At that time he was extremely thin, poorly dressed, and wore a comical yellow cap his comrades would rag him for. But the young man worked no less hard, with an energy that won him the first prize for Harmony in 1854, then the first prize for Fugue, then the first prize for Organ, and finally the position of assistant organist at the Chapel of Saint-Louis-des-Invalides. It was at this time that he came to know César Franck.

Franck, the *maître de chapelle* at Sainte-Clotilde, needed an assistant organist. Dubois applied. The master subjected him to a sort of exam, decided that he was fit for the position, and had him appointed. The perfect public servant, our future colleague nevertheless found time to work. A student of Ambroise Thomas for composition, he set his sights on the Prix de Rome. A more fortunate competitor – Guiraud – won the place. The following year, he went once more into the breach. While he was *en loge*, isolated from the rest of the world, he contracted scarlet fever, forcing him to retire from the lists. But being an honest young man liked by one's comrades has its uses, and Dubois now received touching proof of this. His comrades themselves, not wishing to turn his misfortune to their advantage, loyally agreed to petition the Minister that their rival, once cured, should be allowed back into the *loge* for the remaining twenty days of his seclusion. This time, our colleague took the prize (1861).

There are two categories of 'Romans', by which I mean our scholarship students. In the first category are the incurious, who live in Rome as they would in Paris, and being bored with Rome dream only of seeing the Boulevard and Montmartre once more. In the second category are those who are curious to see and learn, who become enamoured of the works of Roman Antiquity and the Italian Renaissance, and who enrich their beings with wonderful memories. In this second category was Théodore Dubois. His time in Rome was precious

to him. He never lost his sense of awe, and often returned to the glorious banks of the Tiber thereafter.

At the Villa, his comrades were Paladilhe and Guiraud, musicians, Henner and Jules Lefebvre, painters, Falguière and Carpeaux, sculptors, and Moyaux and Coquart, architects. One day, he received a visit there from Liszt in person: 'Show me one or two of your works.'—'Master,' the awe-struck young scholar replied, 'dare I show you these two pieces for the piano?' In his room was one of those old square pianos of the time. Liszt spread the manuscript on the music stand and played. Imagine the intense joy of the composer. The piano was less happy. Under the majestically firm hand, eight or ten strings gave up the ghost. Liszt returned to the Villa fairly often, once in particular to congratulate Dubois on a Mass* he had recently composed, which the master had heard. One morning, while still in Rome, Dubois received a letter from Franck, his former patron. Franck informed him that a great organ had just been built at Sainte-Clotilde, that he, Franck, was to become the *titulaire*, and hence the position of *maître de chapelle* was vacant, which he would be happy to keep for his former assistant. Dubois accepted at once and returned in all haste. And one may say that his acceptance of this position largely determined his artistic career, and that it turned our colleague into more of a church musician and composer of sacred works. I would also add that his initial, highly religious, education and his personal faith, predisposed him towards this type of music.

In 1868, Dubois moved from Sainte-Clotilde to the church of La Madeleine, again as *maître de chapelle*. Saint-Saëns was the organist there. Right from these beginnings, relations between the two men were what they would remain until the end: very trusting, very affectionate. Dubois already had a great admiration for his future colleague, and for his Sunday improvisations in particular. We should observe here (and we will return to this in greater detail) that at this time he was not only in charge of the church choir, but already a famous composer in his own right, the author, among many others, of a choral and orchestral work, *Les Sept Paroles du Christ*, which enjoyed considerable success, and was performed successively at Sainte-Clotilde, La

* The Messe recorded on this present disc (ED.)

Madeleine, and the Padeloup concerts. The work enjoyed no lesser fortunes outside France, as testified by performances in the United States and Canada, where it generally forms part of the spiritual concerts in Holy Week.

In 1871, Ambroise Thomas, the Director of the Conservatoire, had his former pupil appointed Professor of Harmony, and subsequently, Professor of Composition following the death of Léo Delibes, *titulaire* of that class. In 1877, Saint-Saëns resigned as organist, and Dubois, leaving aside his duties as *maître de chapelle*, ascended to the great organ. It was a difficult succession, which he courageously accepted. The new organist proved himself not unworthy of his illustrious predecessor and was able to retain the same close circle of faithful followers. This was from 1877 to 1896, at which time he composed his many works for organ. In 1896, Ambroise Thomas died, and our colleague, who was then called on to succeed him, in turn resigned as organist. The humble peasant boy from Rosnay, now Director of the Conservatoire. The former humble schoolboy occupying the chair of Cherubini: the stuff of dreams!



A very old institution, our Conservatoire. It was founded by a decree issued by Louis XVI in 1784. At that time it was called the *École de Musique***. It was lodged on the Place des Menus-Plaisirs. A few years later, it changed its name to *École Gratuite de la Garde Nationale Parisienne*. This was the institution which furnished the vocalists and instrumentalists for Revolutionary festivities. After being renamed the *Institut National de Musique* in 1793, two years later it received the constitution which, with only minor changes, governs it to this day. The administrative constitutions they wrote in those days were solid. There were a few differences, however, one of which was that instead of a Director, an administrator flanked by six inspectors ruled over the destinies of the early Conservatoire. The administrator was one Sarrette, a simple dilettante, but a Captain in the army general staff. The inspectors were citizens Méhul, Gossec, Lesueur, Cherubini,

** Sic: Actually the *École royale de chant* (ED.)

Martini, and Monsigny, and were clearly better qualified. The first Director was Cherubini.

We have all known those buildings in the Rue Bergère, gloomily ugly and devoid of all comfort. Orchestral and choral exercises, examinations, and competitions, were barely accommodated in a hall seating around 100 people. At mid-height was a narrow circular gallery. At the back of this was a small box where Napoleon, the First Consul, attended the first prize-giving in 1800. A few days earlier, at the Battle of Marengo, a bandsman in the consular guard had seen the bassoon he was holding destroyed by shrapnel. Bonaparte gave an honorary bassoon to the soldier musician, winner of the first prize. Facing that box, on the stage, was an organ. This was the instrument Franck used in his teaching (and mine too, as I succeeded him when he died, in 1896) after he became the Conservatoire's Professor of Organ through the grateful intervention of Théodore Dubois.

That now destroyed auditorium (the Conservatoire moved from the Faubourg Poissonnière to Rue de Madrid in 1911) was witness to the whole of French music: Berlioz, Gounod, Saint-Saëns, Bizet, Massenet. In a word, all our masters, from Boieldieu to Debussy. But its size was no longer equal to the growing numbers of pupils. The present hall we owe to Cherubini, who designed it himself; and it is no less illustrious than its predecessor since it has become that of the Société des Concerts, with many masterpieces seeing their first performances here. It was here that Richard Wagner, and I quote his own testimony, received the true revelation of the *Ninth Symphony* [Beethoven's]. So much for the premises of the Conservatoire. What they long lacked, until around 1860, was a soul, a unified teaching rooted in the unity of a doctrine of harmony. It was through the treatise written by Reber, but annotated, revised, and virtually transformed by Théodore Dubois, that it at last received this indispensable doctrine...



The honour of codifying the principles of our art fell to Théodore Dubois. His teaching enabled him to supplement his first work with a second, the *Traité de Contrepoint et de Fugue*, which was the fruit of his personal observations as professor of composition when he succeeded Delibes. A great educator, a man of rules and discipline, he nevertheless had a

gentle fear of wounding his pupils by too-direct criticism. One pupil brought to class the latest product of his pen: 'It is very good, *Monsieur*, very good. But perhaps you do not know the piece by Massenet that I will now play for you?...' By the fourth bar, the pupil, who saw the resemblance, took up the manuscript and tore it in pieces: 'Oh, *Monsieur*,' dolefully exclaimed the good master, 'I do beg your pardon!'

Although he was a traditionalist, his class, which saw almost all of today's musicians pass through, included (like mine, in fact) a few revolutionaries. Certainly one of his pupils must have spoken of his teaching, just as one of mine spoke of mine. This clever, talented pupil of mine, who was rather fearsomely *harum-scarum*, but harmless, once found himself at a reception where a beautiful lady asked him: 'And what does Widor, your master, say of your extravagances?' – 'Widor,' replied the youth, 'pulled a sour face at first, but we trained him.' A droll way, I am sure, of paying tribute to my old friend Dubois and myself, and of observing that the first duty of a professor is to respect the temperament of his pupils, however given to excess.

This doctrinal unity we admire in the works of the theoretician can be found throughout the works of the composer. It is his personal hallmark, regardless of the genres he is working in: symphony, oratorio, theatre, secular music, or religious music. He has left us three symphonies, one of which, his masterfully constructed *Symphonie française*, seems to evoke every aspect of France, from the majesty of Reims cathedral and the great figure of our Joan of Arc, to the battalions of revolutionary *sans-culottes*, marching to battle singing the *Marseillaise*. Among his concert overtures, the most popular, colourful, and lively was inspired by the Scandinavian legend of *Frithiof*.

It was to the first of his oratorios, *Les Sept Paroles du Christ*, that he owes, as we have said, his burgeoning fame; and that fame grew and was strengthened by the success of *Paradis perdu*, which won the Prix de la Ville de Paris in 1878; several operas (*L'Enlèvement de Proserpine*, *Les Vivants et les Morts*, *Le Baptême de Clovis*, and *Notre-Dame de la Mer*); concertos for piano, for violin; quintets, a quartet, a trio; sonatas for a variety of instruments; unaccompanied choral pieces; volumes of songs; and a large quantity of piano pieces, including his charming *Poèmes virgiliens*.

For the theatre, he composed two one-act operas, *La Guzla de l'Émir* (1873) and *Le Pain bis* (1879), along with *La Farandole*, a ballet in three

acts, successfully performed at the Paris Opera (1883); *Aben Hamet*, a four-act drama performed at the Théâtre Italien (1884); and *Xavière*, an opera in three acts performed at the Opéra Comique (1895), based on a poem by Ferdinand Fabre.

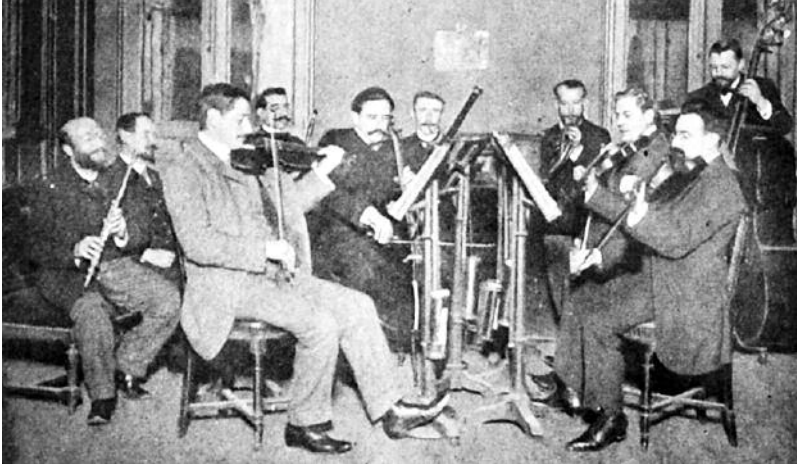
His true musical glory, and a lasting glory at that, is his religious music. Bach, the illustrious *cantor* of Leipzig, wrote a cantata for every Sunday. If you were to leaf through a catalogue of masses and motets by Théodore Dubois, you would certainly find enough to supply the ordinary for every Sunday for two years and more. And if we had to qualify the principal traits of this vast oeuvre, we would say that it stands out for the art of writing for voices and by the integrity of the resources used, deriving from a sincerely Christian soul, creating a naturally perfect accord between the music and, if I may be so bold, the very stones of the religious edifice where this music sings. Dubois always respects the pure tradition of sacred music, which should not reach for effect, and should be more than the yearning of one soul. I cannot hear his *Tu es Petrus* for three voices without being moved; the voices are so perfectly interwoven that they sound like an extensive polyphony and an immense kneeling in prayer.

Unity and harmony are the two words which always spring to mind when talking of Théodore Dubois. His life resembled his work: in the family a model of union; in his class, where his attentive awareness neglected not even the smallest of his duties; in his work as Director, a true vocation; and in this very place (in 1894 he was elected to the Académie des Beaux-Arts, taking the seat vacated by the death of Gounod), where his discretion was a useful strength: as a sworn enemy of empty chatter, he only ever spoke (such uncommon wisdom!) on subjects in which he was particularly well-versed and where only he could offer the testimony of a special competency. Remember the day when, near death, he came to read a very short, very dense paper. He was quite rightly expressing his surprise at an illogical difference in the competitive examinations, between pupils at the Beaux-Arts and the musicians, where the former group were entitled to choose between two subjects, whilst the latter had only one subject and no choice.

Our colleague enjoyed a long retirement without ever losing interest in anything concerning our art, and in particular his beloved Conservatoire, whose library was one of his chief concerns. He would have wished, and we often spoke of this together, that all our musical

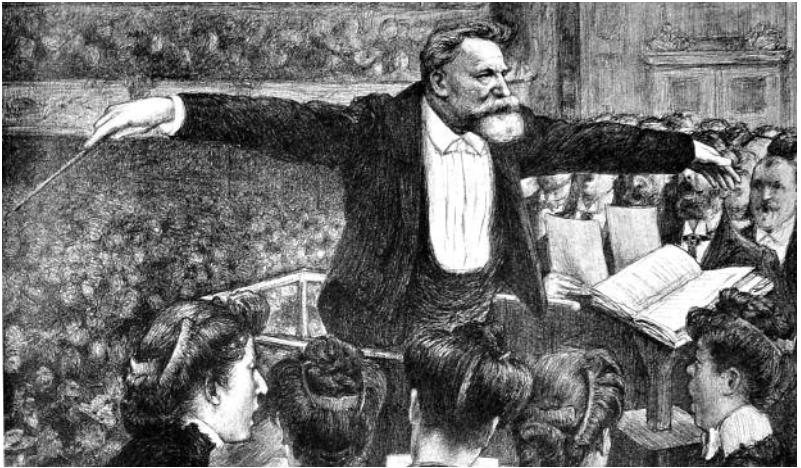
treasures, currently dispersed at the Mazarine, Sainte-Geneviève, Arsenal, and Nationale libraries and in the archives of the Opéra, should be brought together either at the Conservatoire or at some other specially assigned building. But would that not be imprudent? Would it be wise to collect together so many masterpieces in a single place? Is it not truly sad to be certain that, logically, there is no building that might not one day be destroyed by fire or war? Every morning, from my window, I contemplate the ordered magnificence of the Louvre, and every day, I tremble for it. We finally agreed that it would be preferable to leave the manuscripts of *Don Juan*, the *Appassionata*, and the autograph scores of Berlioz, Chopin, and all our masters here at the Conservatoire; at the Mazarine library, the incomparable folio collection dedicated to Leo X, published at Rome in 1516, containing 15 masses, all by French composers from before Palestrina (who owes more than is generally thought to them); at Sainte-Geneviève, the first editions of Goudimel and Costeley; at the Arsenal the manuscripts of our old *trouvères*; and at the Bibliothèque Nationale an inexhaustible corpus, still largely unexplored, which Henri Expert, under the auspices of our own Académie, is now cataloguing. Finally at the Opéra, perilously housed in the attics, are the archives of France's lyric theatre since 1712. What a loss it would be if some idiotic accident were to deprive the history of our art of these sources! Dubois and I were of the opinion that, if we were to leave these documents in their dispersed state, which would perhaps save them from total loss, it would nevertheless be desirable to gather methodically catalogued photographic reproductions of them in one place, where researchers could come to consult them. In this way, we would enjoy the benefits of concentration with none of the dangers. An institution of this type always has the necessary complement of a Society whose financial subscriptions, initiatives, and activities would support it. To give it a name, it could be called the *Société des Bibliophiles de la Musique Française*.

Théodore Dubois died in the generous conviction that, one day, our project, with support both from the public purse and private munificence, would see the prompt execution that he desired for our art and for France. Let us never forget our responsibility to the treasures our predecessors have left us.



La Société du Double Quintette for which Dubois composed his *Nonetto* and *Dixtuor*. (*Musica*, May 1906.)

La Société du double quintette pour qui Dubois composa son *Nonetto* et son *Dixtuor*. (*Musica*, mai 1906.)



Édouard Colonne, conducting. (*Musica*, June 1905.)

Édouard Colonne dirigeant. (*Musica*, juin 1905.)