Two Théodores: letters from Gouvy to Dubois

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The composers Théodore Gouvy (1819-1898) and Théodore Dubois (1837-1924) followed relatively different paths in life. Gouvy, born a year after Charles Gounod, spent most of his career on the fringe of the great French musical institutions, having been unable for reasons of nationality to enter the Paris Conservatoire. Dubois, two years older than Camille Saint-Saëns and a year older than Georges Bizet, led a brilliant academic career: Grand Prix de Rome (1861), professor at the Paris Conservatoire (1871), director of the same (1896-1905) and member of the Institut de France (1894). Nevertheless, the close relationship that grew up between the two musicians, as evidenced by the six letters reproduced below, comes as no surprise. Dubois wrote in an appendix to his diary (*Journal*) in the 1920s:

> *Who today remembers Gouvy? Yet he was a distinguished musician, a skilful symphonist, an author of oratorios and numerous chamber works. Unfortunately, his personality appeared only through the Classical masters, notably Mendelssohn. Hence, no doubt, the current indifference to his works, which are nevertheless not lacking in merit. [...] Gouvy did not like programme music, and he snubbed me somewhat for having given the* Ouverture de Frithiof *a descriptive title. He was uncompromising, but he was an excellent man, with a highly cultivated mind. The ultra-modern music of today would have made him very unhappy. He died in time!*

Dubois and Gouvy's friendship is explained by compatibility of character, like-mindedness; they shared a similar attitude towards the

musical ideas of their time. The Third Republic favoured works that ostensibly broke with tradition, but both men decided to explore a modernity that was in continuity with European Romanticism. Théodore Gouvy's correspondence (partly transcribed in Martin Kaltenecker's doctoral thesis, Sorbonne 1986) shows a veneration for Beethoven and Rossini. In the course of the Third Republic, his view of his contemporaries also shows a clear preference for those who did not heed the siren voices of extreme Romanticism:

> *[On Brahms:] I have no hesitation in saying that his Fourth Symphony is the finest of all the works by Brahms known to me. In pursuing his ideal, he takes the paths he chooses, without reflecting on whether or not everyone is able to understand and follow him; he is never concerned (like the rest of us) about* pleasing; *his muse often appears veiled in mist; he presents enigmas that cannot immediately be solved; he does everything differently from what we expected; he spurns easy effects.*
> (January 1885.)

> *[On Richard Strauss:] This young man is already a fine composer, and he also has the makings of an excellent conductor.*
> (9 January 1887.)

> *[Tchaikovsky] is a quiet, friendly man, with hair already turned white. His Suite took me aback somewhat, the finale is quite barbarian, but will be well liked in Paris.*
> (November 1887.)

> *[Vincent d'Indy] is a wild genius, but he should settle down.*
> (May 1889.)

> *Berlioz fixes his gaze upon the floor, Beethoven fixes his gaze on high!*
> (December 1890.)

Although Gouvy was at first highly critical of Wagner, he revised his early impressions after the composer's death:

> *Imagine a musician placing his hands on the organ and for a quarter of an hour playing nothing but series of sustained chords, while just occasionally*

moving a finger. Suppose now that the musician in question is an ignorant harmonist, who does not hesitate to let fingers stray to chords where they have no business to be: there you have, just about, the formless, idea-less chaos that was served up under the title of Tristan and Isolde. *Then came the introduction to* Lohengrin *with its teapot-on-the-fire effects, and finally the betrothal march from the same opera, which was even a great success.*
(Letter to Ferdinand Hiller, published in 1860 in the *Journal du Bas-Rhin*.)

Wagner died leaving behind fanatical supporters and hot-headed adversaries. The truth lies somewhere in between. A genius of invention, the boldest who has ever lived, he set himself a high ideal and followed with an iron will his plotted course of action. Time will tell whether in taking his system to the extreme he did not overstep the limits of true Art. As a man, he will not be greatly missed, his enemies have been less detrimental to him than his own character. He is living proof that, ultimately, fulsome praise is unbearable to human nature.
(After 1883.)

The six letters that follow (now in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris) show that Théodore Gouvy's attitude towards Dubois was, if not paternal, at least that of a kindly mentor. We find him encouraging and advising the younger composer, criticising certain propensities for naturalism, and offering to introduce him to his German contacts in order to improve the circulation of his works. Théodore Dubois fostered the relationship, and he did his utmost in Paris to obtain recognition for Gouvy. He conducted some of Gouvy's works and, from 1894, when he was appointed to the Institut de France, he pressed for the academic world to make some gesture in favour of this eminent but neglected composer, and much to Gouvy's surprise (see letter of 17 December 1894), he was appointed correspondent of the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris, replacing Anton Rubinstein. A few weeks after Gouvy's death, it was again Théodore Dubois – who by then had reached the height of institutional recognition – who asked the newspaper *Le Ménestrel* to publish in its issue of 1 May 1893 a rectification of the composer's obituary:

Dear Friend,

The obituaries published since Théodore Gouvy's death in various newspapers, including even Le Ménestrel, *contain many inaccuracies; concerning as worthy an artist as Gouvy, it would be good and right to set the record straight and correct the mistakes that have unintentionally crept into those short texts.* Le Ménestrel *is noted for its very receptive disposition, which I trust you will extend to the following lines that I have received from a friend of Gouvy: 'At the very beginning of his studies, Théodore Gouvy was a pupil of Elwart; he then trained at no school but his own and that of the old masters such as Bach, Mozart, Handel, Beethoven, etc., whom he studied with passionate interest. He stayed for only a very short time in Berlin in 1843, before going to Italy, but he did not complete his artistic education there.*

'As an admirer of Mendelssohn, he, like so many others at the time, was influenced by that composer, which is noticeable moreover only in his early symphonic works, but he never knew him personally.

'Performances of his works at the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire and the Concerts Lamoureux made Gouvy's name well-known and appreciated in France.

'If, in the past fifteen years, his musical sympathies brought him closer to Germany, it was because of the very warm reception there of his great vocal works, works of high value, "scènes dramatiques" for soloists, chorus and orchestra, for the most part unknown in France, and bearing the titles Iphigénie en Tauride, Œdipe à Colone, Électre, Polyxène, *etc. These works met with increasing success in Germany, then Switzerland, Holland and the Americas. Gouvy found in Germany strong and wonderful means for the performance of his works, the likes of which in France were not offered to him: that is why he used to go there, but at heart he was very French, and it was not without some bitterness and disappointment that he would speak sometimes of the lack of artistic understanding that he appeared to find amongst his fellow countrymen.*

'The cantata Le Golgotha *ought to be removed from his works, since that cantata has never been published. Théodore Gouvy was appointed correspondent of the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris, replacing Rubinstein, and at the same time a member of the Berlin Academy of Fine Arts.*

'The opinion that "he was cold and hard-hearted" is completely untrue. Those who knew him privately know, on the contrary, how kind, sensitive and considerate he was and how deep were his feelings. He did not like the world

very much and did not readily confide in other people; furthermore he was excessively modest: all these features have led some to misunderstand his true feelings, but his was the most upright, the most noble, the most simple, the most worthy character that ever was seen, and with a heart that was most generous, sensitive and deeply affectionate.'

There, dear Heugel, you have the truth restored. I shall be personally very obliged to you if you can bring it to the attention of your readers.

My very best regards.

Yours truly,

Théodore Dubois.

(*Le Ménestrel*, 5 June 1898.)

Hombourg-Haut, Lorraine, 4th July 1891

It is permissible, when one has recently reached the grand old age of 72 – it is befitting, even – to remember the few friends we may still have and wonder how they are getting on: for at this age each new birthday arrives and rings in our ears like the warning bell announcing that the train is about to depart! Your last letter confirmed what I had read in the newspapers: that you are working on a new opera [Xavière]. *And since your collaborator [the librettist, Louis Gallet] is a man of influence, I hope your work will soon be on stage, and that it will be a good, well-deserved and immediate success to make up for your long wait and for the disappointments, of which you, like all composers, have had your share.*

I respect your talent too much to imagine for a moment that your opera will be in the neo-French or neo-German style. All those who, in Germany at least, have followed in the steps of Wagner, as in his later works, have had a fiasco. I know I keep harping on the subject, but without melody, without form, without vocal artistry, there is no opera. Do away with all that, and you do away with art itself and everything that gives it its value, charm and greatness.

There is still talk about reforms! There are no reforms in the arts as there are in industry, where the new always kills off the old and does away with it forever! We still admire the paintings of Raphael, we are filled with admiration when we hear a Mass by Bach. Our engineers, on the other hand, smile pityingly when they see the Marly machine, which was regarded as a masterpiece at the time of Louis XIV.

So I shall go on saying that Wagner reformed nothing at all. If a new Boieldieu, a new Hérold were to come on the scene today, they would be praised to the skies. Does not the arrival of Mascagni show that? And does not the stupendous success [of Cavalleria rusticana*] go to show that the public is happy and relieved to find in a young man those qualities I mentioned earlier? But even that opera – you must know it – shows, by a single exception, that one cannot get away with having no form. See Alfio's aria in E minor, nevertheless so original, so daring, and so bold in its modulations: that aria had no effect on stage and it leaves the listener, though he may not realise it, in a state of uncertainty and uneasiness. Why? Because the author stays in the key of E minor for only six bars, before going rambling for another forty or fifty bars through keys that are very remote from the main key. 'Ah! La foorme, la fooorme!' as Brid'oison says [in Beaumarchais's* Le Marriage of Figaro*].*

I was pleased to hear of the success of Bach's Mass at the Conservatoire. That a musician such as you were impressed, I can well understand, but what the devil did the elegant audience of the Conservatoire see in a work of such immense skill, with not a single flon-flon to tickle their eardrums, not a single ritenuto followed by a pedal-point on the penultimate note? Mystery!

The Société des Grandes Auditions Musicales de France (a fine title!) appears to have been less fortunate. But why perform in an auditorium the size of the Albert Hall when one does not have the choruses that they have in London, and why come with 100 voices, when at least four times that number are required? It is curious that choral music only really thrives in countries that practise the reformed religion. I will not attempt to explain this phenomenon, it is just something that I notice.

Dear Dubois, my sister-in-law sends you and Madame Dubois
her kindest regards.
Yours, as ever,
Théodore Gouvy.

Leipzig, Hotel Hauffe, 24th March 1892
My dear Dubois,

Your letter gave me real pleasure, and I thank you for all the kind things you say, although I put many of them down to your natural kindliness. You have read my Électre *with the eye of a friend, without wishing to see its weak-*

nesses or imperfections, deeming that it is up to the author to discover those for himself, for which I cannot blame you.

As you read, with great care, a work that I have called dramatic, *you may have wondered why I did not intend it for the stage. I believe, and from the artistic viewpoint I think you may agree with me, that, given the ideas that are prevalent today, the art of music itself is moving further and further away from the theatre. Subjugated and corrupted by Wagner's example, the neo-French and neo-German school has taken away everything that has always constituted the merit and the value of opera, in short, its* raison d'être. *On the grounds of* verisimilitude, *we are presented with operas for orchestra with declamation* obbligato! *And what about the chorus, that other strong feature of any great work, in all this? And the ensembles, the finales and the melodious arrangement of the voices? There is none of all that; art is becoming material, while awaiting a reaction that will set it back on the right track.*

You at least, my dear Dubois, have remained true to good, healthy traditions, and you work on the worthy assumption that without form and without melody there is no music. The work you gave at the Théâtre-Italien, which I reread from time to time, makes me augur well for the one you intend for the Opéra-Comique. What a pity to have to wait so long and how I admire your stoic patience! Centralisation in Paris may have its advantages in politics, but it is absolutely disastrous for art. Here [in Germany] there must be twenty or thirty cities where an opera can be mounted in better conditions, and as far as success is concerned, it is absolutely immaterial whether a work is first performed in Berlin, Weimar or Darmstadt. If it is a success, word gets round immediately through the newspapers and it is performed everywhere. Why does nothing of the sort exist in France? But no, it is already a black mark for a work to be given in the provinces, and our high and mighty Opéra is ruled by the queer idea that it would be a dishonour to mount a work that has been a success in Rouen! French composers are real martyrs and I know of no condition worse than theirs. If we questioned all of them, one by one, how many would contradict me?

Therefore I can only hope with all my heart that you will not run out of perseverance. I see with pleasure, in the meantime, that you and your works are greatly in demand at every concert hall in Paris, and Le Ménestrel, *which I sometimes read, shows me your name in almost every paragraph. Bravo!*

I admit that I was very pleased on the 15th of this month to hear my Stabat *at one of the great concert halls in Cologne – the* Stabat *that you kindly conducted twice in Paris, at the homes of Lalo and Madame Viardot. But in Cologne*

we had 200 voices and 100 musicians in the orchestra, and what an orchestra, what voices!

Goodbye, my dear Dubois. Remember me, please, to Madame Dubois.

Yours most truly,

Théodore Gouvy.

Leipzig, Hotel Hauffe, 17th December 1894

My dear Dubois,

Your telegram, received on Saturday evening, so took me by surprise that I felt I had to send you a telegram in return to make sure I was not being fooled by some joker! Your kind and affectionate letter, received yesterday evening, reassures me in that respect, but I am nonetheless still amazed. However, as I read your letter that feeling became mixed with a sincere and tender emotion when I saw what a generous and devoted friend I have in you. Yes, as soon as I saw the telegram signed Dubois, I thought to myself: He is the one who did it! And for two days now I have been repeating all day long: But is it not a dream? But what have I done to deserve, on the one hand, such an honour, and on the other, such kindness? It never occurred to me that the Académie des Beaux-Arts could ever so much as think of yours truly. You may remember the Chartier Prize (many years ago), which I forgot *to pick up? And this is how the Institut retaliates: the whole corporation of France's finest artists, thanks to your initiative, call me to such a high and coveted distinction!*

Ah, my dear Dubois, how sweet and comforting it is to receive, in one's later years, such crowns, when they are offered by the hand of friendship! And when they come, unexpectedly seeking out the artist in the midst of his solitary labours, like the Roman who was called from his plough. You see I do not mind comparing myself to Cincinnatus!

My friend [Émile] Michel, from whom I have also received a letter, relates in detail how things went, and says that [Ambroise] Thomas very kindly played a part in having me elected. Did he not say it was a sort of reparation *that was due to me? Alas, who more than you in Paris deserve such amends to be made, you who for so many years have been waiting for the sun to shine for you at last? But the day is not far away, I hope, when your new opera will be staged, and acclaimed by Paris audiences, and believe me, no one will be happier that day than the writer of these lines, who thanks you most warmly.*

And now I must write to Michel, Thomas, my sister-in-law, and so on, and so on.

Please pay my respects to Madame Dubois and remember me to your son.

Yours most sincerely,

Théodore Gouvy.

I look forward to reading your obituary of Gounod; I know that it will be written con amore *and with all the admiration you felt for that great artist, which I share.*

Hombourg-Haut, Lorraine, 3rd May 1895

My dear Dubois,

I have been meaning to write to you for a long, long time, for I have not yet thanked you for so kindly sending me your obituary of Gounod, which I have read with great pleasure. You spoke as a man worthy of understanding and succeeding him, while very wisely avoiding mention of his [scandal-prone] private life.

Your future biographer will not have to be so prudently reticent, thank goodness, for your life is out in the open, but he will be able to say of you, and more rightly so, what you wrote to me yourself some time ago: 'You have been done an injustice.'

This is what I repeat to myself every day when I think of the endless delays you are made to suffer and your constantly thwarted hope of being able to appear before the public with a great work. 'It's dirty work, being a composer!' you said in one of your letters. I understand your uttering such a cry of despair, but my dear Dubois, it is not the work that is dirty – on the contrary, it is the cleanest, I mean the finest, I know of. What is despicable, disgusting, is this excessive centralisation, which may be excellent in politics, but which is tantamount to cutting the throat of Art and of artists. So in France there are two opera houses for 200, maybe 2,000 composers, which is insane! But you, gentlemen of the Conservatoire, frankly, are you not a little bit party to this abnormal situation? Do you not push the students in the composition classes towards the theatre? In music, is there nothing to do, other than write operas? And, I say, did our great Classical composers make their reputation on the stage? In the conservatories in Germany, young people are fed only on the finest works of the great masters, then they go off to second- or even third-tier cities, where they conduct those concerts which are now the true artistic expression

of a country in which theatre has never played any more than a secondary role.

But I think I am tilting at windmills, and I beg you to excuse my quixotic ways: we cannot reform the practices of a nation.

You know, since the famous telegram you sent me in December, I have still not got over my amazement! A thousand times I have wondered: what, for goodness sake, made the Académie des Beaux-Arts decide to award me this honour? Certainly not my successes *in Paris, for I have had none. So it must have been my Classical works. But you are the* only person *to whom I sent them! So it was Dubois alone who convinced Thomas, Thomas who convinced the music section, and the music section that convinced all the others!*

Nonetheless, I am still amazed at this appointment which, moreover, has made quite an impression abroad.

Please pay my respects to Madame Dubois.

Yours truly,

Théodore Gouvy.

Homburg-Haut, 12th December 1895
My dear Dubois,

Please accept my sincere and heartfelt thanks for so kindly sending me your Xavière *and your* Messe pontificale.

If I have not thanked you earlier, it is because I wished to be thoroughly familiar with these two works, both of them remarkable, but for different reasons, before writing to you. Your Xavière *is a charming* paysannerie, *in which everything expresses a naivety and a rustic simplicity that possibly do not exist naturally to such a degree, but which go down very well in the theatre when, as here, they are poeticised by true and moving expression and the very fine, new and striking harmonies, of which you know the secret. All this, further enhanced by an intelligent mise-en-scène, talented actors, etc., is bound to be a delightful spectacle, capable of fascinating the public and having a long run of performances.*

But I would like, if I may, to express one regret. Did your librettist provide a text that would enable the composer to show his talents to the full? I leave you to answer that question. Monsieur Gallet wrote for you a play that is in keeping with current ideas: he wanted to be modern. *In such plays music has to be* like speech, *avoiding the repetition of a word, making the aria, the*

duo, the ensemble piece as rare as possible for the sake of so-called verisimilitude. *But the question is: do we go to the theatre looking for verisimilitude, or what is known as such? Be that as it may, you, my dear Dubois, have done as your poet has done, boldly letting your hair down and getting rid of what is considered* old-fashioned. *You have accomplished a real feat in making musically attractive an opera in which the musician rarely has an opportunity, as on pages 130-131, 114, 155, in the ballet, etc., to demonstrate his melodic* invention *and his* savoir-faire. *Finally, something that will not jeopardise the success of your work is the honesty, the moral purity that emanate from it, which will give audiences a rest from the insanities and obscenities with which drama and literature are infested nowadays.*

From what I have just said, and no offence to sweet Xavière, there is perhaps no need for me to add that, from a purely musical viewpoint, my preference goes to the Messe pontificale. *Thank God, the doctrines of Bayreuth have not yet invaded the Church. In your mass I recognise myself, and I recognise you perfectly. What do you expect, dear fellow, I am all for what is* old-fashioned! *I am all for expansive forms, a broad development of ideas, choral polyphony – everything, in short, that is the very essence of the art, constituting its value and its dignity. And I find all these things in your fine mass, which is most certainly the finest of the modern era. It charmed me from beginning to end and it is a great honour to you; what a beautiful thing, amongst others, is the* Credo!

Goodbye, my dear friend; I have run out of paper. Thank you once again. My sister-in-law and I send our warm regards to you and to Madame Dubois.

Yours sincerely,

Théodore Gouvy.

Frankfurt am Main, 3rd January 1898, Hotel d'Angleterre

My dear Dubois,

When New Year comes around, we like to remember ourselves to our friends, and so I take up my pen to wish you and your dear wife continued joy and satisfaction in an artistic career so well begun and so faithfully pursued.

Now permit me to go back quite a long way in time and tell you that I received your note in July at the spa in Wildbad, where I cured nothing at all, but at least heard some very good music played by an orchestra from Nuremberg, which began its concerts each day with chorales played with a great many strings and brass instruments, as the sun's first rays gilded the tall pines of the Black Forest;

it was moving. Back in Lorraine, I set to work on Didon *(nothing for the stage), which will surely be my last great work, should I have time to finish it.*

In August, I read with great pleasure of your success in Blankenberge, and more recently I learned of the triumphs of your Violin Concerto, for which my sister-in-law was also full of praise in her letters.

All this is comforting and encouraging for you. An artist needs success, as a flower needs water and let me hope that if you have given up the theatre it will not be for ever; it is just a lovers' tiff and we 'always return to our first love', as the song says. The future is now up to you, since the demise of a man I have no need to name.

I am now in Frankfurt, to hear next Sunday my Polyxène, *a concert work of the same kind and on the same scale as the other ones you know. The Society of St Cecilia [*Cäcilienverein*], which gives me this treat, has a very large choir (70 sopranos) and, with the works of Bach and Handel as its regular fare, polyphonic combinations are but play for it.*

Ah, I have just had a wonderful idea: do you not have about a week's holiday for the new year? So why not come and hear my Polyxène? *On the 8th there is a night train direct from Paris; you would be in Frankfurt at 9 in the morning, and then you could rest until the concert, which is at 7 p.m., or even 6, if I am not mistaken.*

My plan has a dual purpose. I would like you to meet the two Kapellmeister *here: Mr Grüters, musical director of the* Cäcilienverein, *and Mr Koegel, who conducts the symphony concerts. Making their acquaintance could have incalculable consequences for you, and the introduction would be perfectly natural, since those gentlemen would know you had not come specially from Paris to see them, but to hear the work of a friend.*

Come, dear Madame Dubois, plead my cause, and accompany your dear husband to hear for once how they make music in this country. We can no longer shut ourselves within the four walls of a city, even if that city is Paris. The international movement has made a strong start, it will not stop now. Dubois must *at last get to know Germany!*

My sister-in-law hopes to come with her son, if her health permits.

So goodbye, my dear Dubois. I hope to see you soon.

All my good wishes to you and to Madame.

Your old friend,

Théodore Gouvy.

Théodore Gouvy *circa* 1860.
(Institut Gouvy Collection.)

Théodore Gouvy vers 1860.
(Collection Institut Gouvy.)