

PERSONAL THOUGHTS

Théodore Gouvy

The following lines, taken from various letters, notes, cards, etc., show the evolution of Gouvy's ideas and judgments, from the time of his youth in Paris to the last moments of his life, spent in Lorraine. Anecdotal or profound, elliptical or detailed, these sincere thoughts summarise the composer's musical opinions. (Quotations taken from: Martin Kaltenecker, Théodore Gouvy, doctoral thesis, Université de Paris-IV: Paris-Sorbonne, 1986.)

¶ 'Before my twentieth year, I knew nothing other than the music of [Henri] Herz, the very music that Schumann called "herzlose Musik" [heartless music].'

¶ 'My goal, my ambition, is not to become a teacher or a pianist by profession. I look upon music from higher than that.'

¶ '[Germany] is the homeland of instrumental music, because it has famous symphonists, such as Spohr and Mendelssohn, who train students to follow their school.'

¶ '[The performance of my overture was] appalling, but the audience noticed nothing, for all it bothers about is the *quadrilles*, *galops* and *romances* that are lavished upon it in abundance.'

¶ 'Friends, like the salons, are bound to have a favourable opinion; we must therefore take it for what it is worth.'

¶ 'I see now that, in choosing a career as a musician, I have not taken the wrong turn.'

¶ '[Jules] Pasdeloup is amazed to see [in Leipzig] chorus singers who do not look bored on stage.'

¶ 'The impression of Mendelssohn's music varied according to the capacities of the listeners. The opinion of the masses boils down to something like: 'It is all well and good, but it is boring.' Since the festival was held [...] at the Cirque, many gawkers came along, following the crowd, thinking they were going to see some horses, then fled when they realised that Stockhausen and M^{lle} Bockholz [the soprano Anna Bockholz-Falconi] were not going to do the splits.'

¶ 'How long it takes for every man to be put in his place and for Truth to be distinguished from error.'

¶ 'I was quite struck by the idea you [Ferdinand Hiller] put forward, namely that the centre of gravity of our Art is shifting and is no longer in the theatre. I thought I was alone in this opinion, since I have never been able to make anyone else around here believe it, yet one only has to set foot once in our damned opera houses to be convinced that there is little room for Art in those establishments.'

¶ 'The excursions I sometimes make to Germany, especially to be with you [Ferdinand Hiller], are like oases in my life in Paris, which is surrounded by so much turmoil and indifference.'

¶ 'Since I wrote my opera, I have so far met with nothing but trouble.'

¶ 'Since we parted in Paris, I have lived here alone, but I have not been idle. I have set to music 33 poems by Ronsard. France has only one lyric poet to offer composers, but nobody knows him, because he has been dead and buried for 300 years. I may say therefore that I *discovered* Ronsard almost in the same way as Alexander Dumas discovered the Mediterranean.'

¶ 'You [Ferdinand Hiller] have defined the purpose of instrumental music very well: "To raise us above vulgar things", and that is why fools are opposed to it.'

¶ ‘The older I get, the more I lose confidence. I have no diplomas.’

¶ ‘You [Henriette Gouvy] know that I am a poor diplomat and that the feverish intrigues and demands of musicians here are for me but an amusing spectacle. [...] It is also a delight to trample on all that.’

¶ ‘I do not trust myself. I am no longer *à la page*.’

¶ ‘When I hear the variations by Mendelssohn, then those of Brahms and Schumann, I go into my shell and think I am after all only a dilettante.’

¶ ‘Without bragging, I am modest by temperament and by conviction, and I have read Bach and Mozart too often not to retain those good principles.’

¶ ‘I am suffering from absolute sterility; beside me young talents are springing up and everyone is more and more interested in them.’

¶ ‘Now there is a whole trend towards descriptive music, led by Massenet and Saint-Saëns, and the public is delighted.’

¶ ‘I confess that I would be happy if I could come to Cologne one day with a choral work, all the more so since it is unlikely that I shall ever hear one performed in its entirety in Paris.’

¶ ‘More and more I feel that I do not belong here [in Paris]; I find everything petty, boring, culturally retarded.’

¶ ‘[I decided to] take up the pilgrim’s staff once more and seek abroad what I cannot find in my own country.’

¶ ‘In winter I cannot work. The bad weather affects me. Long live spring!’

¶ ‘I realised my age with terror and, glancing back into the past, saw so much effort for so little result.’

¶ ‘This shows what good judges of music Parisians are: their finest composers, Gounod, Bizet, Massenet, find success first of all only in Germany.’

¶ ‘Wagner died leaving behind fanatical supporters and hot-headed adversaries. The truth lies somewhere in between. The boldest genius of invention who has ever lived, he set himself a high ideal and followed his charted course of action with an iron will. 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.’

¶ ‘I go abroad, where no one needs me, instead of finding in my homeland the satisfactions as an artist that are nevertheless every composer’s right.’

¶ ‘It is because of the craze for opera and operetta that France never had a first-rate composer. What a secondary art, one that requires for its performance décors, machinery, ballets and a thousand parasitic things useless to music, which degrade and overshadow it! In the concert, music reigns supreme; only there can it unfold in all its grandeur and develop the fine polyphonic forms that are the glory of the great masters and the last word in art. I know not a single opera that includes pieces comparable to those we find in the great works of Handel and Mendelssohn, and we would surprise many people in Paris by telling them that Bach is greater than Meyerbeer.’

¶ ‘Why do I live here [in Leipzig]: 1. Because my room is heated; 2. Because there is something for me to hear, whereas [in Paris] there is nothing; 3. Because I have relations with real artists, and [in Paris] there is no one; 4. Because I can still find publishers.’

¶ ‘Nobody cares what I have done; in Paris people think only of themselves and of the present.’

¶ ‘The propensity to solitude against which I have always struggled becomes stronger than ever here [in Leipzig]. Working in art is so absorbing that we find what generally interests people empty, tedious and worthless.’

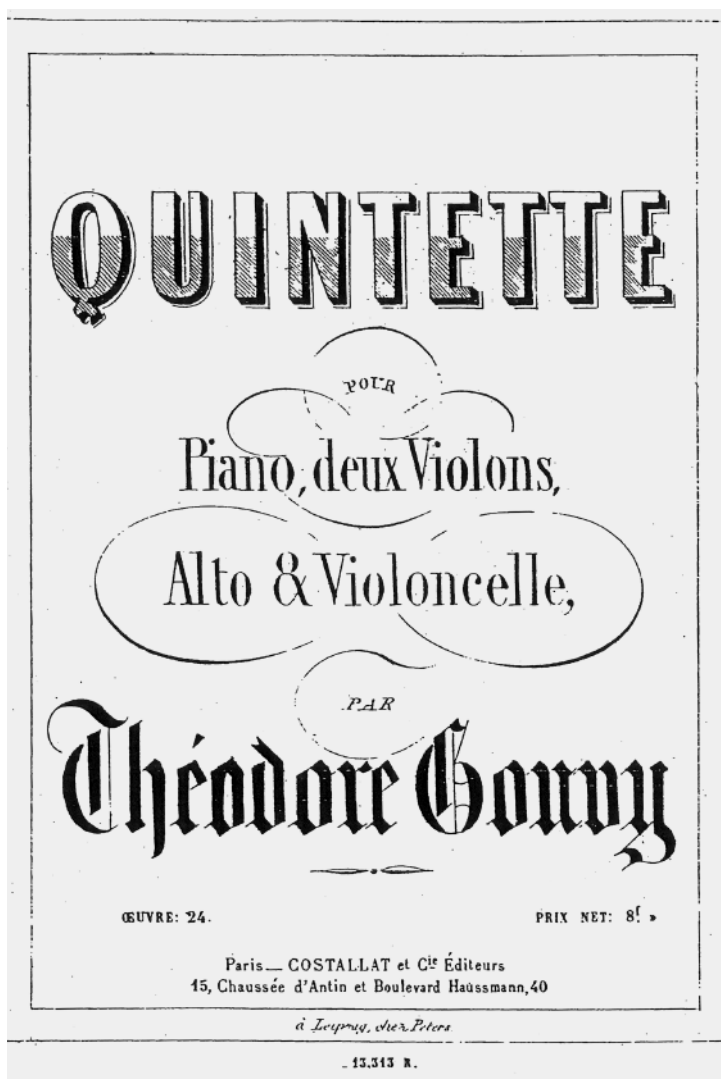
¶ ‘All those who, in Germany at least, have followed in the footsteps of Wagner, as in his later works, have had a fiasco. I know I keep harping on the subject, but without melody, without form, without vocal artistry, there is no opera. Do away with all that, and you do away with art itself and everything 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.’

¶ ‘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 *obligato*! 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 art of instrumental music loses its *raison d’être* if it does not remain true to the principle laid down by two centuries of masterpieces, namely: the development of a musical idea, the construction of a whole edifice on a four-bar phrase. This is the art of composers such as Haydn, Bach and Beethoven, an art that is indeed a little more difficult than that of illustrating a legend, an anecdote, or some poem or other, a childish art that thrusts an indispensable programme into the

listener's hand to make sure he does not lose the thread of the story. Today it is the materialist school of the likes of Berlioz and Liszt that bewitches and corrupts the young musicians of France and Germany. It is a fashion and it will last as long as fashions last. Let it pass.'

¶ '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.'



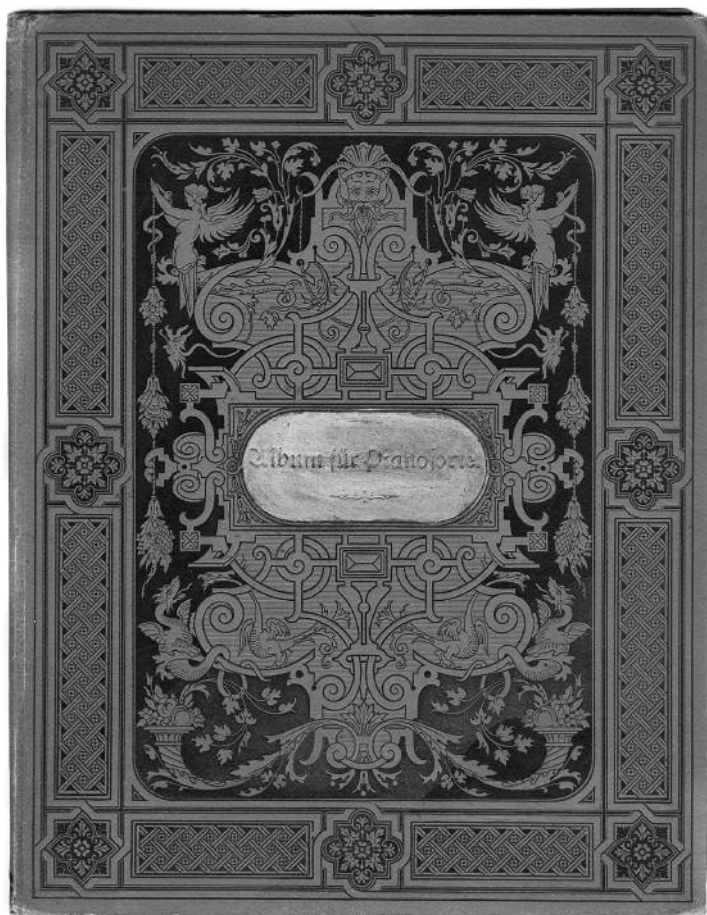
Cover of the first edition of Gouvy's Piano Quintet.
(Private collection.)

Première édition du *Quintette pour piano et cordes* de Gouvy.
(Collection particulière.)



Portrait of Théodore Gouvy, Karlsruhe, 1861.
(Institut Gouvy Collection.)

Portrait de Théodore Gouvy exécuté en 1861 à Karlsruhe.
(Collection Institut Gouvy.)



Book of piano music that Gouvy played at Hombourg-Haut.
(Conseil Général de la Moselle – Division des Archives, de la Mémoire
et du Patrimoine.)

Recueil de musique de piano jouée par Gouvy à Hombourg-Haut.
(Conseil Général de la Moselle – Division des Archives, de la Mémoire
et du Patrimoine.)