

THE MAN AND HIS WORKS

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At school Théodore Gouvy was a brilliant pupil, with a particular interest in the classics. After passing his *baccalauréat* in 1836, he went to Paris to study law, but his heart was not in the subject. Furthermore – another reason for abandoning his studies – he had difficulty in obtaining the French nationality he needed in order to be able to sit the examinations. In the meantime he saved up to attend operas and concerts, and he read many scores. He took piano lessons with Édouard Billard (a student of the renowned Henri Herz), frequented the salons and met the musical personalities present in the capital. Before long he decided to take up music as a career. Until 1841 he took lessons in harmony and counterpoint with Antoine Elwart, a professor at the Paris Conservatoire, who had won the Grand Prix de Rome in 1834. At the same time he also studied piano with Pierre-Joseph Zimmermann, whose pupils included Charles-Valentin Alkan, César Franck and Clara Schumann.

Exasperated by the blatant virtuosity that was so popular in the capital, Gouvy decided to devote himself exclusively to composition. He met the German violinist Carl Eckert and with him took up the violin. Wishing to get to know Germany, which he regarded as the ‘home of instrumental music’, he stayed in 1842 in Mainz, Frankfurt and Leipzig. He heard Felix Mendelssohn and Clara Schumann play. In 1843 he settled in Berlin, where he met Franz Liszt and Giacomo Meyerbeer, and discovered the works of Bach, Gluck, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, Schumann and Spohr. In 1844 he returned to Paris, where, thanks to Elwart, some of his works were presented in concert. Gouvy then left for Italy, where he was amazed in Rome by the carelessness of the singers and orchestral players and the theatrical-

ity of the religious services. From there he went to Frascati, then on to Naples. Rossini received him in Bologna and the two composers became friends.

Gouvy's return to Paris was marked by a desire to present symphonic works. Concert societies had multiplied, despite a general loss of interest in 'serious' genres. Gouvy's propensity for 'absolute' music led the critics to describe his compositions as 'Germanic in inspiration' but with 'French clarity'. He continued to produce chamber music for various types of ensemble, which was performed in both France and Germany. Through his sustained efforts, his works were billed by several concert societies, but his rejection of the Wagnerian aesthetic, and opera in general, barred the way to a more ambitious career.

Gouvy wrote many songs to poems by Ronsard and other members of the Pléiade group of poets. Berlioz encouraged him to compose symphonies, but when his success in the genre proved only moderate, he decided to try his hand at opera. He was no supporter of opera – 'music of the future', he called it – but he was aware that it left no one indifferent. He set out therefore to find his own answers to the challenges of the operatic repertoire. He decided to work on an adaptation of Corneille's *Le Cid* and asked the German poet Moritz Hartmann, then living in political exile in Paris – Hartmann had already provided him with texts for his art songs – to write the *livret* (libretto). He began work on the score in 1862 and by March 1863 the opera was ready. The Opera House in Dresden was interested in producing it, and Gouvy resided in that city until 1864, while widely disseminating his music in Germany. Successive setbacks delayed the performance, and meanwhile he gradually reworked the manuscript. The première was finally announced for October 1865, but the tenor who was to have taken the title role died after singing the part of Tristan in Wagner's opera. The work was withdrawn and Gouvy gave up all hope of ever seeing it performed.

For Gouvy, with his Franco-German culture, the declaration of war in 1870 came as a terrible psychological blow; he was deeply hurt by what he saw as a fratricidal conflict. The annexation of Alsace-Moselle upset the activities of his family's metallurgical firm: the smithies were sold and new ones were set up in Dieulouard, in the French zone. But the family kept the house in Goffontaine and the villa in Hombourg-Haut. Théodore returned to his native region,

where he wrote chamber music, including the discreetly patriotic *Variations sur un thème français* op. 57. He did not return to Germany until 1876. Shortly he became a member of the recently created Société Nationale de Musique, the aim of which was to promote French instrumental music. His works were performed regularly at the concerts of the SNM, but he was aware of their retrograde nature at a time when the aesthetic of the new generation was firmly forward-looking. Feeling that his knowledge of the composer was insufficient, Gouvy studied J. S. Bach, a rediscovery that inspired him to turn to sacred music and large-scale choral works. Between May and October 1874, in Hombourg-Haut, he worked on his *Requiem*, then his *Stabat Mater*. At that time he became friends with Théodore Dubois, Elwart's successor at the Paris Conservatoire. The two men understood and appreciated each other as human beings, and as composers they shared a liking for clear structures and a relative imperviousness to fads and fashions.

Bolstered by his new Baroque influences, Gouvy began writing dramatic cantatas for voice and orchestra. In 1875 he composed *La Religieuse* and that same year the Académie des Beaux-Arts awarded him the Chartier Prize for the whole of his chamber output. *La Religieuse*, which adopts the typical structure of the concert aria (prelude – cantabile – *tempo di mezzo* – cabaletta or stretta), is so expanded that one might be excused for taking it for a single-act opera with just one character. The work may also be a nod to the cantatas written for the Prix de Rome competition, which Gouvy, not being allowed to enrol at the Conservatoire, was never able to attempt – although it is very likely that he would have been successful. As he often did, Gouvy provided a German translation of the text, thus reflecting his dual culture and his hopes of success in both countries. In March 1876 *La Religieuse* was premièred at the Société Nationale de Musique and the *Requiem* was presented at the Concerts Lamoureux; in each case the composer made a substantial contribution towards financing the event. Both were an immediate success. In August, he began work on *Asléga* for soloists, chorus and orchestra – ‘scènes dramatiques’ of vast dimensions, based on a Scandinavian legend. In 1877 his sacred cantata *Golgotha* was performed at the home of Édouard Lalo. 1878 saw the composition of the cantata *Le Printemps* and the overture *Le Giaour*, the latter inspired by Byron's poem and the painting by Delacroix.

Gouvy gave more and more concerts in Germany and the critics were unanimous in recognising his talent. Meanwhile the number of concerts devoted to his music in France began to dwindle.

His last years were devoted to cantatas and ‘scènes dramatiques’, mostly inspired by tales from Antiquity: *Cédipe à Colone*, *Iphigénie*, *Électre*, *Polyxène*, *Egill*. But absolute music was not neglected: he produced the masterful *Sixth Symphony* and his *Sinfonietta* – the latter inaptly named, since it is in fact a symphony, complete with all the traditional developments of the genre. It is also, if not a testament, at least the most successful testimony of his technical mastery and his constantly renewed creativity. The Mendelssohn-like colours of the slow introduction give way to the Schumann-like energy of the first *Allegro*, then the theme and variations of the slow movement seem to lead to lead from Haydn, the master of Classicism, to Brahms, the disciple of Romanticism. Shortly after that Gouvy completed his last religious work, the *Messe brève*. While his chamber music was still appreciated in Paris, his great works of lyric inspiration were performed only in Germany, often at the composer’s own expense. Gouvy suffered from the judgement that his music was ‘French in character, but German in its sound accomplishment’. Despite favourable reviews, he felt as he neared the end of his life that he had not had the career he had hoped for. He nevertheless received some recognition: he was a correspondent of the Institut de France, and in 1894 he succeeded Anton Rubinstein as a member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts. In 1895 he even became a member of the Berlin Academy of Arts. Possibly spurred into action by such tokens of esteem, he began to compose a new opera, *Fortunato*, based on *Matteo Falcone*, a short story by Prosper Mérimée. He chose this time (contrary to *Le Cid* thirty years previously) to treat the libretto in a condensed manner, tightening the musical framework around the plot. Again he did not have the opportunity to hear his score. On 16 March 1898, after hearing Bach’s cantata, *Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit*, at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig, he suffered a stroke, following which he remained at home in Lorraine. He died at 10.30 a.m. on 21 April 1898 and was buried in the cemetery at Hombourg-Haut.



With a catalogue of over 160 works, Gouvy tried his hand at almost every genre except concerto – although he did compose a charming *Fantaisie pastorale* for violin and orchestra. Despite some dazzling arpeggio-work, the latter is not so much a demonstration of bravura as a bright evocation of rusticity. Particularly remarkable is the use of the high register for the solo instrument, which thus appears to hover with bucolic innocence over a discreet but subtly colourful orchestra. The introduction of the winds would be enough on its own to demonstrate Gouvy's skilful orchestration. Less rhapsodic than one might at first imagine, the work is based on several closely combined motifs, the interlacing of which only becomes apparent after several hearings.

Piano works represent an important section in the composer's catalogue. The *Vingt Sérénades*, written between 1855 and 1875, are a set of genre pieces, in the manner of the 'songs without words' of Chopin, Liszt, Schubert or Mendelssohn. We find here some treasures of the Romantic aesthetic, inherited from the 1840s. But while Mendelssohn was brief, Gouvy prefers to pour out his feelings in voluptuous modulations that constantly steer clear of vulgarity, while obviously seeking immediate effect. In delaying as long as possible the conclusions of his melodic phrases, the composer demonstrates his handling of lengthy time-spans (*Sérénades* 2, 5 and 11, for example), a propensity that we find in another Germanic composer with whom Gouvy was acquainted: Franz Schubert. Does this explain why Gouvy composed so many quintets with two cellos, for which the only model appears to be that of Schubert? Gouvy sought to develop his pianistic ideas above all through works for piano four-hands: three Sonatas of symphonic dimensions and several sets of variations. He also composed pieces for two pianos, including a monumental Sonata in D minor op. 66, clearly showing the influence of Beethoven.

Gouvy composed relatively few pieces for the piano with another instrument: the *Duettos* op. 34 and op. 50 and the Sonata op. 61 (violin), the *Sérénade vénitienne* (viola), *Décameron* op. 28 (cello), *Introduction et Polonaise* (flute) and the Sonata op. 67 (clarinet). The five Trios for violin, cello and piano were written between 1844 and 1860, when he was acquiring the discourse and form of the Classical style. While the first three show great freshness, the last one, despite its qualities, suffers a little from a lack of boldness. Trio no. 4 seems to

be the balance point in this set between the frenzied outpourings of Trio no. 3 and the moody Classicism of no. 5. A beautiful Mendelssohn-like *Andante* precedes a witty finale that appears to be a tribute to Haydn. Showing some rusticity, the *Scherzo* is again an accelerated minuet rather than a true *presto* in the manner of the last Romantic generation. The first movement is bathed in an ‘early Beethoven’ style that seems to be an incitement to spontaneity and simplicity – two key words that could be taken as Gouvy’s credo.



Between 1848 and 1888 Gouvy composed eleven String Quartets – a lot for a French composer of that time. Initially he was reluctant to take up the genre, which was seen as elitist, abstract, and even Germanic. This explains why only five of them were published during his lifetime. While some of the unpublished ones are particularly interesting (especially no. 6 in G major), two works literally tower above the rest: no. 5 in C minor (published by Breitkopf & Härtel in Leipzig) and his op. 56 no. 2 in A minor (published by Richault in Paris). Each of them contains at least one movement that makes no secret of its modern, Germanic inspiration. The second movement of Quartet no. 5 and the first movement of op. 56 no. 2 opt for a hypnotic swaying that is the hallmark of the German intermezzo, as exemplified by Brahms in particular. And we are reminded of the same composer in an amazing episode in the Quartet in C minor. Otherwise, the two works explore every possible facet of the genre. Note the Spanish motif, very evocative of the salons, that brilliantly concludes the Quartet in A minor. Whereas many other composers would have been well satisfied with a superficial development, Gouvy develops his idea with great art, until a swirling ‘*più presto*’ skilfully sweeps the work and its musicians to a well-deserved triumph.

The quintet was very rare in France and it is in Gouvy’s quintets – six String Quintets (with two cellos, following the Schubertian model) and a Piano Quintet, op. 24 (1861) – that we find some of his most personal contributions. Gouvy also composed sextets (including three Serenades for flute and string quintet or orchestra), a *Septuor* (Septet) and two *Ottettos* for wind instruments, a *Nonetto* for winds and double bass, and a very popular *Petite Suite gauloise*, op. 90, for winds.

His symphonic works take up a significant part of his catalogue, with four *Ouvertures*, eight *Symphonies* (including the *Symphonie brève* and the *Sinfonietta*), the *Fantaisie* op. 69, the *Petites Variations sur un Thème original*, the *Variations sur un Thème scandinave* and the *Paraphrases symphoniques* op. 89. The orchestral forces are inherited from the Classical model and are often used as such: pairs of woodwinds (plus a contrabassoon in the *Fantaisie* op. 69), 4 horns, 3 trombones (absent from *Symphonies* 3, 4 and 5), trumpets (absent from the *Symphonie brève*), timpani and strings. The forms are also Classical, although some movements use the thematic recall. The presence of the variation, in the development or even the whole movement, is worth mention for its sometimes almost Brahmsian singularity. Gouvy was no doubt the greatest symphonic composer of his generation, anticipating the French revival.



Vocal music represents a whole continent in his *œuvre*. Written in the 1860s, most of his French art songs (*mélodies*) for voice and piano were inspired by the *Pléiade* poets, especially Ronsard. His dual culture also prompted him to compose songs to German texts by Moritz Hartmann. And he wrote several pieces for mixed and male-voice choirs *a cappella*. One of them, *La Gloire du Seigneur*, to a text by Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, was later orchestrated, thus paving the way for his future cantatas. As we have already mentioned, it was possibly because he was unable to compete for the *Prix de Rome* that Gouvy composed cantatas and secular ‘*scènes dramatiques*’ for solo voices, chorus and orchestra – this was the set format (apart from the chorus) for that musical sesame disputed by the students of the Paris Conservatoire. In that genre Gouvy composed *La Religieuse*, *Asléga* and *Egill* (subtitled ‘*scènes lyriques sur des légendes scandinaves*’) and *Le Printemps* op. 73. Inspiration drawn from ancient mythology marks his ‘*oratorios*’ (in reality ‘*cantatas*’ and ‘*scènes dramatiques*’) (*Ceïpe*, *Iphigénie*, *Électre* and *Polyxène*). Although no works were staged after the failure of his two operas, *Le Cid* and *Fortunato*, the terminology is confusing – on the manuscript of *Asléga*, the subtitle ‘*opéra*’ has been crossed out – as are the expressive means employed in these works. The orchestra and chorus play a key role, but the *airs* and ensemble pieces do not

completely renounce their theatrical inspiration, although they have no recourse to virtuosity and bravura. The colours are distinctive, but they do not dominate the writing, which proceeds from counterpoint and the fugue without being truly fugal.

Alongside his vocal output, which is now gradually being rediscovered, Gouvy's religious music is dominated by the monumental *Requiem* op. 70 (often compared to that of Verdi), his *Stabat Mater* op. 65, the cantata *Le Calvaire*, and his *Messe brève* op. 72. These scores show the eclecticism of that time: the sections waver between archaism (sometimes with a Gregorian slant), Cecilianism, salon and theatre music. The whole is nevertheless unified by the composer's rigorous style and a natural inspiration that steers clear of both worldly theatricality and ecclesiastic aridity.



Gouvy often had great difficulty in having his works performed. He was a man of private means and comfortably well off, and throughout most of his career he made a large financial contribution to the concerts in which his scores were première. Criticism was on the whole positive. The *Gazette de Cologne* of 26 February 1853 noted, for example:

Théodore Gouvy, a young composer whom we already admired a few years ago when he had a symphony performed in Leipzig, gave a concert some time ago consisting entirely of his own works. A new symphony showed how rich is his talent, how noble his musical intentions, and just how much instrumental music in France can expect of him.

Appreciated by Berlioz, Lalo and Saint-Saëns, Gouvy embodied in the 1850s the 'serious' trend in instrumental music. *Le Ménestrel* of 21 December 1862 mentioned Gouvy, along with Alkan, Benoist, Boëly, Kreutzer, Onslow and Reber, as a composer of chamber music who was underestimated by the public. After the first performance by Charles Lamoureux of his *Requiem*, the *Revue et Gazette musicale* of 2 April 1876 noted 'the elevation of his ideas, his careful attention to detail, his conscientious and honest implementation of the musical elements, without ever seeking vulgar or conspicuous effect'. Henriette

Gouvy, his sister-in-law, who travelled to Paris for the occasion, even heard some well-informed audience members comparing his work to the Verdi *Requiem*. Later, *Le Ménestrel* of 23 June 1878 described the performance of the ‘Symphony in C major, by M. Th. Gouvy, [which] is a masterpiece’. In 1885 Johannes Brahms wrote of Gouvy’s *mélodies* to poems by Ronsard:

I was astonished to find in them things truly graceful and bright, which I would never have expected of a man so tired.

There are many examples of positive assessments of Gouvy. Nevertheless his early works were considered too abstract and Germanic; those of his maturity were seen quite simply as old-fashioned. Furthermore his dual culture did not facilitate the performance of his works: France found him too German, and Germany found him too French. In November 1880 he wrote: ‘The Krauts claim me as theirs, but they treat me like a foreigner.’ The same could also be said of the French.

Gouvy’s view of his contemporaries is enlightening. Of Bizet’s *Carmen* he wrote:

The enormous success of Carmen in Germany has opened the eyes of the French. The work is a marvel of skill, originality and local colour, yet with discreet orchestration.

He felt there was ‘something feminine’ about the talent of Massenet, whom he appreciated little as a man of the theatre. After 1883 he recognised Wagner as the ‘boldest genius of invention who has ever lived’, but he regarded him as ‘living proof that, ultimately, fulsome praise is unbearable to human nature’. In a letter written in November 1886 he praised Brahms highly as a man who ‘in pursuing his ideal, 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*’. Gouvy’s comments on his illustrious German and French colleagues also reflect on himself, of course: he always pursued a high musical ideal without taking into account the expectations of the public, but he suffered from not receiving the full recognition he would have liked, and which he deserved. He also gradually de-

veloped a complex because he had never been able to study at the Conservatoire: ‘The older I get, the more I lose confidence. I have no diplomas.’ Yet he composed until the very end, as is evidenced by the sketches of an ‘opera’, *Didon*, dated April 1898. (He also mentions in his letter to Dubois of 3 January 1898 that he was working on that composition.) A whole lifetime relentlessly devoted to composing, despite the many obstacles, is worthy of interest and respect – especially when the resulting music is so sincere.



Manuscript of a *mélodie* by Gouvy, *Le Lac*.
(Conseil Général de la Moselle – Division des Archives, de la Mémoire
et du Patrimoine.)

Manuscrit d'une *mélodie* intitulée *Le Lac* de Gouvy.
(Conseil Général de la Moselle – Division des Archives, de la Mémoire
et du Patrimoine.)