

## A LIFE SPENT BETWEEN FRANCE AND GERMANY

*Sylvain Teutsch*

Gouvy is a name still familiar to many people in the Lorraine region of France, and one that was associated until not so long ago with the metallurgical industry and with metalworking. Indeed, the Gouvy family firm existed for two and a half centuries in a Sarre-Lorraine whose turbulent history meant that for many years it was buffeted between two cultures, German and French. However, one member of the family – Théodore Gouvy – was a talented composer, who led a distinguished career in France and Germany, but then, like many other musicians of the French Romantic period, was forgotten after the Second World War.

Like his brother, Alexandre (b. 1817), Théodore Gouvy was Prussian by birth. He was born into a French-speaking family on 3 July 1819 in the village of Goffontaine (later Schafbrücke and now part of Saarbrücken), just four years after the Sarre came under the jurisdiction of Prussia, following the defeat of Napoleon. The two elder Gouvy brothers, Henri and Charles, had been born French, but Théodore and Alexandre were unable to obtain French citizenship until 1851 and 1861, respectively. Théodore Gouvy nevertheless received a French education: *collège* in Sarreguemines, then *lycée* in Metz. His widowed mother enrolled him after that to study law in Paris. But he was not interested in law, nor did he feel any inclination to carry on the family tradition of metalworking. He wanted to become a composer. Since his Prussian nationality made him ineligible for entry to the Paris Conservatoire, he continued to take piano lessons, trained

privately with well-known teachers, and soon he began to spend long periods in Germany and Italy, where he met the great musicians of his time and expanded his knowledge and experience. He was bilingual and asserted his dual culture from an early age. It was to influence his artistic orientations. Indeed, his style is characterised by a perfect, and tasteful, synthesis of French and German elements that lends his work strength and makes him a truly European composer.

Rejecting the sovereignty of opera and virtuosity, Gouvy devoted himself almost exclusively to 'la musique sérieuse', as he called it. His ideal, of which he was to become a strong advocate, was 'absolute music' (as opposed to 'programme music'). His works, admired by his fellow composers, were performed all over Europe and beyond by the greatest musicians of his time. He received major distinctions, and his abundant correspondence (unfortunately now dispersed) shows that he was regularly in contact with most of the major composers of the second half of the nineteenth century and enjoyed close friendships with many of them. Through his letters and other writings, he was an important witness of his time.

Théodore Gouvy was one of the first members of the Société Nationale de Musique, and was soon appointed to its committee. The directors of the Académie des Beaux-Arts were authorised by the Ministry to subscribe for the publication of his symphonies. And the same Académie later awarded him the Chartier Prize. At the same time he received the Légion d'Honneur, was appointed to the committee of the Société des Compositeurs and became a member of its board of examiners for quartets and symphonies. His career was crowned by appointments as corresponding member of the Institut de France (replacing Anton Rubinstein), then as a member of the Berlin Royal Academy of Arts.

Deeply affected by his mother's death in 1868, Théodore Gouvy then joined his brother, Alexandre (by then director of the family firm), in the latter's beautiful home in Hombourg-Haut, a charming village in eastern Moselle. His comfortable apartment in the house made a pleasant change from the often poorly heated hotel rooms he was used to in Paris. The pond, the shady park around the house, and the nearby forest in which he liked to walk, all provided him with new sources of inspiration. The family atmosphere there was also beneficial to him. He found a ready ear in his sister-in-law,

Henriette, who took a keen interest in his work. He would discuss his projects with her, as he had done with his mother, and she being an excellent pianist, they would play his scores or piano reductions together on one or two pianos, thereby enabling him to test and improve his compositions. Henriette Gouvy (*née* Böcking) played a very important part in Théodore Gouvy's life and works. She was a woman of great musical culture, capable of giving shrewd advice on his work. Gouvy was to spend much of the last thirty years of his life in the house in Hombourg-Haut, where he composed many of his most important works. The 'Villa Gouvy', as it is known, now belongs to the commune of Hombourg-Haut; it houses the Institut Théodore Gouvy. In 1871 Théodore's nephew, Léopold Gouvy (d. 1968), was born in the villa. Writing under the name of Opol Ygouw, he is another composer to be rediscovered.

Théodore Gouvy died in Leipzig on 21 April 1898. His funeral took place six days later in Hombourg-Haut and he was buried in the family vault, near the collegiate church of Saint-Étienne, where for the past twenty years his works have been revived. His works, providing a link between France and Germany, enable us to gain a better understanding of the evolution of musical tastes in Europe, and especially between those two countries, at a very difficult time in their relations. Gouvy's case continues to interest musicians and musicologists worldwide. For some he is a perfect example of a composer whose career was determined by political and historical events. For others he undoubtedly represents one of the most important musicological discoveries of the last twenty years.

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Cello

Cello

Cello

Cello

Cello

Cello

Cello

Cello

Cello

Cello

Segue pag. 54

Basso - Alto - Tenore

Quintet with two cellos, sketch by Gouvy. (Conseil Général de la Moselle – Division des Archives, de la Mémoire et du Patrimoine.)

Esquisse d'un quintette avec deux violoncelles de Gouvy. (Conseil Général de la Moselle – Division des Archives, de la Mémoire et du Patrimoine.)