The Great Composers: No. XIX. Georges Bizet

Author(s): Joseph Bennett

Source: *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, Vol. 27, No. 524 (Oct. 1, 1886), pp. 582-585

Published by: Musical Times Publications Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3365206>

Accessed: 25-04-2016 21:28 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Musical Times Publications Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*

feeling for harmony, or the dwellers in some of the midland and northern counties of England. The comparatively sparse nature of the population of Ireland may have a good deal to say to this. At any rate, the great centres of choral singing, in Yorkshire and Wales, are coincident with districts where the density of the population renders co-operation an easy matter. At the same time, temperament and physical aptitude must count for a good deal, and in neither of these respects can the Irish of the present day maintain their right to the title of the "Land of Song." When we come to review the achievements of individual Irishmen in the domain of music we find that to the roll of British composers and artists, the sister isle contributes perhaps a larger share than her numbers would warrant us to expect. There is Balfe, in whom some critics see the great protagonist of native art. "Should English opera ever be established on a thoroughly national footing," writes Mr. Brown in his "Dictionary of Musicians," lately noticed in these columns, "it will be necessary to draw largely on the many works which Balfe has produced." Reactions must be expected in music as in other departments, and the success of Nessler's operas in Germany may be taken in evidence of this. But to the mind of most critics the revival of Balfe's operas, with their imperfect orchestration, common-place melody, and grotesque libretti, would be little short of a portent. Gifted he undoubtedly was, but he wrote for his time, not for all time, and the verdict which has shelved nine-tenths of his works is not likely to be reversed. Lover, except in the opinion of ultra-patriots, hardly deserves serious attention as a composer, and yet the rich humour of his words makes us willingly shut our eyes to the faultiness of his workmanship, his infantile accompaniments and conventional melody. His songs reflect with the greatest happiness the harum-scarum, happy-go-lucky, side of Irish character, and a good selection of them, with revised accompaniments, would be a welcome addition to the scanty *répertoire* of humorous music, wholly free from the odious buffoonery of the music hall. Of Moore I have already spoken, and of the reasons for denying him the title of a national poet, to which Lover has really a better claim. Coming down to our own times, it would be impertinent for me to do more than point to the great talents in their different spheres of Sir Arthur Sullivan and Dr. Stanford, as a proof of the achievements of which Irishmen are capable in the field of composition. But I may be allowed to remark how the careers of both these distinguished musicians illustrate the dependence of Irish genius on foreign surroundings. In the present state of affairs this could hardly be otherwise, for the Irish capital does not support a good orchestra, it is sadly in want of a good Concert hall, while the notorious cliquishness of Dublin musical society, owing to the lack of an *entente cordiale* between the chief musical authorities, has sadly hindered the progress of the art in that classic city. Few Irish names are to be found in the ranks of distinguished instrumentalists or executants, and we have already adverted to the lack of a first rate Irish chorus. On the other hand, Ireland is very well represented amongst the distinguished solo vocalists of the day. Without making any pretence at completeness, it will suffice to mention the names of Signor Foli, Messrs. Barton McGuckin, Crotty, Ludwig, and Mrs. Hutchinson. The promise given by Irish pupils who are carrying on their studies in London, again, is decidedly encouraging, for it is obvious to all who attend the Royal College Concerts that in the three departments of pianoforte

playing, composition, and singing the Hibernians are in the first flight.

So far as the past and present afford us means of judging of the future, it would seem as though the Irish were rather destined to achieve musical distinction by rare individual eminence than high average excellence. Berlioz has told us that the multitude of its musicians does not make a nation musical, and this is a true saying. But, at the same time, the value of co-operation in music cannot be denied, and the want of a good orchestra in Ireland is a standing reproach which her patriotic citizens should do their utmost to remove. It is a want, however, which is highly significant of the music of the country, which has always been stronger in its melody than its harmony, and it would not be difficult to establish an analogy for this in other fields where the Irish character finds scope for development. For example, cricket and football both need co-operation on the part of the players if they would succeed, and neither of these games have ever taken proper root among the people in Ireland. Individualism, in so far as it means the self-assertion of genius and emancipation from conventionality, is a principle of vital importance in music as elsewhere. But it can also stand for isolation, for sporadic and disorganised efforts. Both these sides of individualism, the good and the evil, are familiar to the observer of Irish art, and it is only by a due recognition of the opposing principle of collective effort that the evil can be counteracted and fruitful work achieved. Those ardent advocates of nationality who spend so much time on vain efforts to propagate the study of the Irish tongue, or to revive forgotten Celtic sports, would do far better if they were to devote their energies to the establishment of a really efficient Musical Academy in Dublin, and thus take practical steps towards confirming and justifying their often heard claims to be considered a musical people.

C. L. GRAVES.

THE GREAT COMPOSERS

By JOSEPH BENNETT.

No. XIX.—GEORGES BIZET.*

THERE is no reason why these sketches should be limited to the composers conventionally termed "great," nor, in the case of the author of "Carmen," can good reasons be shown against the use of the word. Bizet was cut off in the very dawn of his career. He achieved little, because the opportunity was denied him, but in that little he accomplished much; giving to music the most original and successful opera of the day, and by a single effort earning an undying name. This is his passport to the present series of biographical notices, and nobody can contest its validity.

Bizet came of a musical family, and breathed the atmosphere of art from his birth. His father gave singing lessons in Paris, and his mother's sister, Madame Delsarte, a *premier prix* of the Conservatoire, enjoyed repute as a pianist. Circumstances were favourable, therefore, for the child of music who entered the world on October 25, 1838. In baptism, the future composer was named Alexandre César Léopold—a tremendous appellation, which might have weighed him down through life, had not a sensible godfather, having, as we may suppose, sullenly acquiesced at the font, persisted ever after in calling him Georges. Georges he became to all his friends and acquaintances; Alexandre César Léopold being reserved for occasions on which the law demanded strict accuracy.

* For much of the material in this biographical sketch the writer is indebted to M. Edmond Galapert's *Georges Bizet, Souvenirs et Correspondance*, and especially to M. Charles Pigot's recently published work, *Georges Bizet et son Œuvre*.

Little Bizet was only four years old when his mother began teaching him at once the alphabet of letters and of music. He could distinguish the degrees of the scale as soon as his A B C, and, it would seem, took much more kindly to the first than the second. Moreover, when his father was engaged in giving lessons, little Georges would hover about the door of the room, picking up stray bits of knowledge, and assimilating them with remarkable digestive powers. He was, in fact, a musical child—a phenomenon happily not so rare as that any one of us is unable to imagine, in some degree, the ways and means with which he satisfied his inborn appetite. When Georges reached the age of eight his father took him in hand, and, we are told, experienced no small surprise on discovering how far the little boy had turned previous and, so to speak, unofficial opportunities to account. M. Pigot says:—

“One day when he made him sing a solfeggio, bristling with difficult intervals, he was struck with the accurate way in which the child attacked the different intonations, never making the least mistake. He raises his eyes, and saw that those of the young pupil were wandering far away from the copy open on the desk. The child, having no suspicion that his master had observed this, continued to sol-fa without reading a note. He had often heard this lesson through the door, and could repeat it exactly.”

Finding that he had a musical prize in Georges, Bizet *père* pushed on his studies with ardour, teaching him harmony and the pianoforte, till, in a year, it was felt that the lad should be entrusted to other hands. The father naturally desired to place his son at the Conservatoire, but this could only be done at the time by infringing the rules of that institution, Georges not having reached the required age. It was, nevertheless, determined to make an effort, trusting that the interest excited by so clever a child would prompt the authorities to wink at an evasion of the law. The elder Bizet, therefore, spoke to his friend, M. Alizard, of the Opéra, and the two, taking the child with them, went to M. Meifred, a member of the Conservatoire committee on studies. Victor Wilder told the story of this interview when writing an obituary notice of Bizet in the *Ménestrel*, and it runs as follows:—“‘Your child is very young,’ said Meifred, looking the little fellow all over with a disdainful grimace. ‘That’s true,’ answered the father, not the least disconcerted, ‘but if he is little by measurement, he is great by knowledge.’ ‘Really! and what can he do?’ ‘Place yourself at the piano, strike chords, and he will name them all without a mistake.’ The test was at once applied. Standing with his back to the instrument, the child unhesitatingly named all the chords which he heard, though some of them were purposely far-fetched; at the same time, with surprising ease, he rapidly called out the members of each chord as they lay under the fingers. Meifred could not restrain a burst of admiration. ‘My boy,’ he exclaimed, ‘you are on the high road to the Institute.’”

The result was that the doors of the Conservatoire opened to the gifted child out of due time, and he was allowed to attend Marmontel’s pianoforte class, although the number of students was complete. He was soon definitely admitted, and, six months later, took the first prize in *solfeggio*, thus attracting the attention of the venerable master, Zimmermann, under whom he passed for counterpoint and fugue. Having now fairly entered upon his student career, Bizet began the achievement of a series of distinguished successes. In 1851, at his first competition, he took second prize for piano, being then thirteen years old, and in the following year he divided the first prize with another. He thus rapidly mounted to

the highest place, his playing being spoken of by his master, Marmontel, in terms of special admiration. Bizet made equal progress on the organ, under Benoit, winning the second prize in 1854, and carrying off the first in 1855. His organ studies naturally brought him under the influence of Sebastian Bach, of whom he was a fervent and passionate disciple. For Beethoven, also, he cherished a profound admiration, but the older master was his special idol. He would often gather his friends around the pianoforte and play to them the Cantor’s fugues. At such times, it is said, “he had the air, with his sympathetic physiognomy and charming profile, of a young pontiff initiating the faithful into the mysterious rites of some new cult—the *culte* of Art, greatest and most beautiful of religions.”

Zimmermann dying in 1853 (Gounod took his class during illness), Bizet passed under the instruction of Halévy, who prompted the young man to compete at once for the *Grand Prix de Rome*. Georges, however, took a more modest view of his powers, and held back till 1856, when he made up his mind to enter into the struggle. The cantata imposed was called “David,” and upon this the concurrents laboured with a result which satisfied none of them. That is to say, the first prize was withheld altogether. The second fell to our young hero. M. Pigot asserts that he would have received the first but for his youth, and the opinion of the judges that another year under Halévy would do him most good. That year, however, was not to pass in study alone. Jacques Offenbach, then director of the Bouffes-Parisiens, put an operetta up to competition, and undertook to produce the successful work. Bizet at once resolved to avail himself of this unexpected opening to fame, if not to fortune, and on receiving the libretto of “Doctor Miracle” he set to work with ardour. In the result, he was bracketed, at the head of the competition, with a classmate, M. Lecocq, of whom the world has since heard. Both works were performed, turn and turn about, and both the young men felt the first round of ambition’s ladder under their feet. But here they parted company. Bizet went on to better things than farcical opera; Lecocq could not resist its vulgar attraction. The same year Bizet won the longed-for *Prix de Rome* with a setting of a cantata entitled “Clovis et Clotilde.” This work was solemnly performed at the Académie des Beaux Arts, according to usage, and, with applause ringing in his ears, our young laureate shortly set out for the Eternal City.

Bizet arrived in Rome on January 28, 1858, there to take up his residence for two years. He laboured hard, and first forwarded to Paris, in discharge of his obligation to compose a certain number of works, an Italian *opéra-bouffe*, “Don Procopeo.” This was officially pronounced at the Académie to be distinguished by an easy and brilliant touch, and a style youthful and bold. The score is now lost, as it was not the custom, five-and-twenty years ago, to catalogue and preserve the compositions sent from Rome by holders of the *Grand Prix*. In August, 1859, Bizet made a trip to Naples, taking with him a letter of recommendation which Carafa had written to Mercadante in case of such an opportunity. The story of that letter is amusing. Anxious to be perfectly free as a sight-seer, Bizet did not at once present himself to the aged chief of the Neapolitan Conservatoire, and, at last, the hour of departure came without his having found time to do so. He grieved over this, as abusing the kindness of Carafa; but the feeling did not survive when curiosity prompted him to open the envelope. He read this: “My old friend,—I strongly recommend to you the bearer of this letter,

M. Bizet, laureate of our Institute. He is a charming young man, a good fellow, worthy of all sympathy, but, between ourselves, he has not a rag of talent."

At the close of his second year in Rome Bizet sought and obtained permission to spend a third year there, instead of travelling in Germany, as required by the conditions of the *Grand Prix*. He was happy in his Italian life, and, as the old heroes of German music, whom he adored, were no less accessible in Rome than in Leipzig, the young man failed to see how he was likely to benefit by removal. This matter settled, Bizet began to prepare for the second of the compositions he was under obligation to send to Paris, and decided upon a Choral Symphony, the subject suggested by the "*Lusiade*" of Camoëns. Then arose the usual difficulty about a poet. He found one at last, but the result was not happy. "I have put my hand," he wrote to his old master, Marmontel, "upon a certain D—, a well-informed Frenchman, but deficient in taste. I am obliged to re-write part of his verses, which does not amuse me, especially as I see with terror that my poetry is infinitely better than his." Nevertheless, the work was done somehow, the music composed and "*Vasco de Gama*," a descriptive Symphony with choruses, duly forwarded to the Institute. It was performed in Paris some years later, and has been published since the master's death.

Bizet's third work under the conditions of the *Grand Prix* was an Orchestral Suite, consisting of a Scherzo and Andante *Marche Funèbre*. This was performed at the Institute when the prizes of 1861 were distributed. The Scherzo had a great success, and was afterwards incorporated into the Symphony "*Souvenirs de Rome*." As for the Funeral March, it appears to be still in MS., but its principal theme is reproduced in the third act of "*Les Pêcheurs de Perles*." His term in Rome having ended, the young man set out for Paris, little expecting the shock that awaited him. At Venice he received news that his mother was dangerously ill. Hurrying home with all possible speed, he found his beloved parent on her death bed, and in a few days all was over. *Après*, M. Pigot very justly writes: "After three years of separation, to see his mother in mortal agony, and then to lose her for ever! One comprehends without difficulty the grief of the poor boy, who, at the threshold of his career, when all appeared to smile upon him, and he believed himself completely happy, had his heart lacerated by the most cruel woe—a sorrow the most terrible and unforeseen. He learned then that happiness is not of this world, that the strong man must reckon with the cruel surprises of fate, and courageously, stoically, he addressed himself to the struggle." That Bizet was a good and loving son is evident from the beautiful letter he addressed to his parents just before the last New Year's Day which saw the family circle unbroken:—

"My letter starts so as to reach you on New Year's Day, my dear parents. Now let me send you all my wishes. I begin by desiring for both of you the perfect health of body without which health of mind is not possible. Next, I hope that money, the frightful metal beneath whose sway we all are, will not be wanting to you. As to this I have a little plan: When I possess a hundred thousand francs, papa shall give no more lessons. Nor will I. We will begin the life of *rentiers*—not a bad thing. A hundred thousand francs! It is nothing; only two successes at the Opéra Comique. Lastly, I desire to love you always with all my heart, and to be ever, as to-day, the most affectionate of sons."

After reading these words, it is easy to understand

that Bizet's first great grief must have torn rudely at his heart-strings.

Settled down in Paris, the young musician found himself face to face with the necessity of earning a living, and with very little prospect of the two successes at the Opéra Comique. He began by making arrangements and transcriptions for the pianoforte, no less than 150 of which were published by Heugel under the title "*Pianiste Chanteur*." He worked also at the little one-act piece in which it was usual for the returned *Prix de Rome* to show of what metal he was made. This was called "*La Guzla de l'Emir*," and its rehearsals were taking place at the Opéra Comique when an event happened which changed the whole situation.

The then Minister of Fine Arts, Count Walewski, being dissatisfied with the circumstances amid which the returned holders of the *Prix de Rome* found themselves, and desiring to afford them encouragement and opportunity, granted a subvention of 100,000 francs to the Lyrique, then presided over by M. Carvalho, on condition that a three-act opera by a *Grand Prix* was produced each year. Carvalho had met Bizet and had been charmed, not only by the young man's personal graces and addresses, but by his obviously superior talent. At once, therefore, he offered him the first work under the new arrangement, and handed over a libretto, entitled "*Les Pêcheurs de Perles*," the production of MM. Carré and Carmon. Wild with delight, Bizet went straight to the Opéra Comique and withdrew his "*Guzla de l'Emir*," wisely anxious not to run the risk of compromising himself in view of the more important venture. Besides, he wished to make his *début* with an example of higher art than a musical farce, and unquestionably he was right. "*Guzla de l'Emir*" afterwards made no further sign. Nobody knows what became of it, but the libretto was subsequently set to music by Théodore Dubois and represented at the Athénée. M. Pigot assumes that Bizet's work was burnt by himself. He says:—"Sometime before his death—perhaps with a prevision of the end—he made an *auto da fé* of all the manuscripts which appeared to him short of perfection; he destroyed with pitiless hand all that seemed unworthy to survive; doubtless with injustice to works of incontestable interest and great artistic flavour."

While engaged upon "*Les Pêcheurs*" Bizet's name came twice or thrice before the public. The Scherzo of his Suite was performed at the Cirque Napoléon, under Pasdeloup (January 11, 1863), who ventured to associate his young countryman with Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, and was mercilessly baited for his pains. The audience hissed; the subscribers protested; the press criticised. Who was Bizet that he should be forced upon such illustrious company, and his music be thrust in where only classic art should reign? The same Scherzo was better received at a Concert of the Société Nationale des Beaux Arts, through whom, also, his "*Vasco de Gama*" obtained a hearing, but concert-going Parisians were not, on the whole, favourable to the new man, the less because he was charged with a leaning to Wagnerism. M. Pigot makes a spirited defence of his hero against this accusation, claiming that he never ceased to be absolutely individual, that he belonged to the great race of Weber, Mendelssohn, and their fellows, and had nothing in common with the master of Bayreuth. It would serve little purpose to discuss the matter here, but readers may be interested in a letter written by Bizet to Galabert after attending a general rehearsal of "*Rienzi*." It was first published in the recipient's brochure, "*Georges Bizet: Souvenirs et Correspondance*":—

"They began at eight o'clock; they finished at two. Eighty instrumentalists in the orchestra; thirty on the stage. A hundred and thirty choristers; five hundred supernumeraries. Work badly constructed; only a single rôle—that of *Rienzi*, remarkably played by Monjaube. An uproar, of which nothing can give an idea. A mixture of Italian themes; style bad and *bizarre*; music of the decadence rather than of the future. Some numbers detestable; others admirable. On the whole, an astonishing work, wonderfully alive, an Olympian grandeur and inspiration. Will it be a success? I do not know. The house was full; no *claque*. Effects prodigious! Effects disastrous! Cries of enthusiasm: then dead silence for half-an-hour!"

The fact appears to be, and this letter indicates it, that Bizet was a discreet critic of Wagner, and declined to be prejudiced for or against him—an example which his countrymen, unhappily, do not follow.

"*Les Pêcheurs de Perles*" was produced at the Lyrique, September 29, 1863, the public listening, we are told, with more surprise than pleasure. The style was new to them, and audacious into the bargain. It was even original enough to be offensive; nevertheless, the composer's friends, more perceptive than the mass, or desirous of putting the best face on the matter, bestowed hearty applause and congratulations, without, however, undeceiving him as to want of success with the bulk of the audience. A writer in the *Figaro* put the situation wittily and neatly next day:—

"I do not know if France counts a composer the more. The matter is beyond my competence, but the Club des *Entraînés* possesses another member. It is necessary to explain, is it not, that which one means by the *Entraînés*. Under this generic name are classed the happy authors who, at the fall of the curtain, yield to the clamours of imprudent friends, and show themselves in company with the interpreters of their work. As their modesty causes them to hang back, *on les entraîne*." "*Les Pêcheurs*" gradually faded from the stage, the public continuing indifferent to its unfamiliar charms. It was played through October, alternately with "*Le Nozze de Figaro*," then appeared at wider intervals, and received its last representation on November 23. The fact is worth noting that, of all the critics who sat in judgment upon "*Les Pêcheurs*," Berlioz showed the clearest insight into the power of the composer. He said: "The score of this opera has won a real success; it contains a considerable number of beautiful and expressive pieces, full of fire and rich colouring. . . The work does the greatest honour to M. Bizet, who will have to be accepted as a composer, notwithstanding his rare talent as a pianist." But other writers accused Bizet of all and sundry high crimes and misdemeanours, including Wagnerism, from the charge of which he escaped only when he ceased to live.

With "*Les Pêcheurs de Perles*" off his hands, Bizet set about composing a grand opera in five acts, on the subject of "*Ivan le Terrible*," libretto by MM. Blau and Gallet. At this time our composer was infatuated with the later style of Verdi, yielding himself up completely to its fascinations. He became, so to speak, drunk with Verdi, and the music of "*Ivan le Terrible*" was naturally affected thereby. Some critics suppose that Bizet deliberately strove to engraft the Italian master's style upon that of the French school, and thus obtain an original cross-breed; but it is more reasonable to assume that the young, sensitive, and impulsive Frenchman had no set purpose whatever. We are the more confirmed in this opinion by the fact that when the Verdi fever

abated, Bizet, restored to his right mind, withdrew the score of his opera from the Lyrique, where it had been accepted, and some years later destroyed it.

The master next began upon a symphony, "*Souvenirs de Rome*," into which was incorporated the Scherzo of the orchestral Suite. Soon, however, the unfinished score had to be laid aside in favour of another opera, "*La Jolie Fille de Perth*," which his friend and constant admirer, Carvalho, commissioned him to write. He varied his work upon this by composing "*pot-boilers*," such as dance movements for the orchestra, and the six pieces published by Heugel, under the title "*Feuilles d'Album*." The necessity of keeping the wolf from the door knew no law; but Bizet hated so mean a task. Writing to his friend Galabert, he said:—

"Be assured that it is aggravating to interrupt my cherished work for two days to write solos for the cornet à pistons. One must live. But I have my revenge. . . The piston utters the yells of a low drinking shop, the ophicleide and the big drum agreeably mark the first beat with the bass trombone, the cello and the double-basses, while the second and third beats are marked by the horns, violas, second violins, the first two trombones, and the side drum. Yes, the side drum. If you could see the viola part! There are unhappy people who pass their lives performing such things. Horrible! . . . I work tremendously, and have just finished, at a gallop, six Melodies for Heugel. I think you will not be dissatisfied with them. I have chosen my words well. . . . I have not suppressed a strophe. It is not for musicians to mutilate poets. My opera, my symphony, all are in train. When shall I finish! Heavens, the time is long, but it amuses me. I have brought myself to adore work. I now go only once a week to Paris. There I limit myself to business and return at a gallop."

(To be continued.)

MUSICAL CELEBRITIES OF SIENA: AN HISTORICAL SKETCH.

THERE are, even in fair Italy, few places so peculiarly fitted to attract, nay, to inspire, the disciple of the muses as Siena. Its commanding and all but matchless position—rivalled, perhaps, only by that of Perugia; its noble cathedral, its famous Municipal Palace in the fan-shaped Piazza del Campo; the palaces of the grand old Sienese families, whose history is in itself a boundless store of drama and romance; the touching and still revered associations of St. Catherine; the priceless treasures of art and literature; the beautiful Tuscan dialect, spoken in uncontaminated purity by noble and peasant alike—all these combine to stamp Siena as a city pre-eminently *sui generis*, where, favoured by a high state of civilisation, the Muses early found a home, and have, in the course of centuries, spread their gentle and refining influence, and especially the love of music, through every class of society, through every institution.

The nursery-ground of music in Siena was, and has ever been, the Cathedral. Consecrated as early as 1179, it has for seven centuries, and throughout the ebb and flow of the political fortunes of the city, maintained a standard of excellence to which, in bright contrast to St. Peter's of Rome and other Italian cathedrals, it still, and deservedly, lays claim, as is attested by the beautiful vocal and instrumental performances in the month of August in honour of the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin, coinciding with the famous annual Mediæval Games in the Piazza del Campo.