

## LODEWYK MORTELMANS

WHILE reading Mr. Vaughan Williams's fine essay on Gustav Holst in this Quarterly, the name of the Flemish composer Lodewyk Mortelmans came to my mind, as so many remarks on the English master can be applied to the Flemish one. Mortelmans, too, is a "modern" composer in the high sense Mr. Williams gives to that word, but neither he nor Gustav Holst are "fashionable," as they write "major ninths," and use muted strings and trumpets only when compelled to do so by their inspiration, and, not being fashionable, they get their works printed with difficulty, and are nearly unknown in the wide musical world.

As I consider it a very valuable privilege to be able to introduce a worthy countryman to foreigners apt to appreciate him, I shall not continue this essay without having first thanked the Editor for giving me this opportunity.

Lodewyk (Flemish for Lewis) Mortelmans, now about fifty-three years of age, is a native of Antwerp, born in the middle-class. He got his musical education at the School of Music under Peter Benoit, which has since become the Royal Flemish Conservatoire of Music. At the present time he is a highly-esteemed professor of counterpoint and fugue. Mortelmans is one of the few "Grands Prix de Rome" that have fulfilled the promise of their youth. He is an excellent pianist and as such an ideal interpreter of Beethoven, Schumann and Chopin. He is, moreover, a man of high culture, very widely read in Flemish and French; and great English authors such as Shakespeare, Byron, Tennyson, Thackeray, Dickens, Carlyle, Stevenson, Hardy, Kipling, Wells and Conrad are familiar to him through translations. As conductor of an orchestra he is unequalled in Belgium, but best and foremost of all, he stands as a composer. This I shall now try to prove.

His conscientiousness in everything he does makes of Mortelmans a rather slow worker, however quick a thinker he may be. Yet his "bagage musical" is far from unimportant, as a bird's-eye view of it will show. He began his career as a song-composer, and these songs were the first-fruits of a fame which is already high, and which, I trust, will still rise in times to come. In Belgium, at any rate, these romantic melodies made him popular with the composers of his own generation. They called him "the prince of song," and this praise

he merits even more abundantly for his later melodies. When, in 1899, some of his friends, with the practical help of the Belgian Government and the City of Antwerp, organised a *Festival Mortelmans* conducted by the young master, the song-composer *par excellence* turned out to be a symphonist likewise of indisputable masterly skill. He was then, indeed, the author of several short and one long symphonic poem and of a *Homerio Symphony* of perfect classical form. Since that time he worked at an opera *De Kinderen der Zee* (Children of the Sea) down to 1915. That beautiful work was produced for the first time last year at the Flemish Opera at Antwerp.

In 1899 he composed the first of his "Gezelle-songs," now famous in Belgium and Holland, beautiful interpretations of delightful little poems by Guido Gezelle (1830-1899), a Roman Catholic priest, the greatest lyrical poet of Flemish and Dutch literature.

On this or that occasion, or simply spontaneously, Mortelmans had composed a few "album-leaves" for the piano; during the war he felt himself, as a composer, more and more attracted by this instrument. He wrote *In Memoriam* for his late wife (d. 1917), a *Varied Minuet*, a *Bridal March* and *Uplifting of the Heart*. In 1919 and 1920 teaching made too heavy demands on his time, and left him little leisure for his inspiring walks in the country; nevertheless he wrote a *Grande Valse*, an *Elegy*, and about half a dozen "album-leaves."

And now that I have given a rough sketch of his life and a list of his principal works, I come to the more difficult part of my task—to give the features of Mortelmans's art. It will be more arduous for me and, maybe, at times more tedious for the reader, since, with the exception of the songs written before 1914 and the score of the *Homerio Symphony*, not a single work has been published. Familiar as I may be with most of them, I shall have to keep close to the examples I want to give, as my readers cannot test my contentions by the actual works.

Mortelmans's compositions are so many mirrors of his outer and inner life. He was an excellent husband and is a good father; he is a man of severe morals and a noble and sincere friend; during the German occupation and since, he has proved himself a passionate patriot; in short, he is "a man of one piece," as the Flemings say, and thus he is a composer "of one piece," a perfectly honest musician, composing only under inspiration, according to the rules of the craft and with unerring taste.

Poesy, rustic and lyrical, and distinction are the most striking features of Mortelmans's music. He is a child of nature. If an *Idyll of Sentiment* (a symphonic poem) is the outburst of a romantic young lover, the *Myth of Spring* and *Idyll of Spring* (also for orchestra) seem to have been written in a pleasant sunny meadow, while his





LODEWIJK MORTELMANS  
(in 1893)

great symphonic poem *Helios* and the *Homeric Symphony*, notwithstanding myth and legend, sound like glorious lyrical hymns to Nature and her Creator. I mean that he is no "programme-musician," any more in his larger orchestral compositions than in his shorter ones; he turns in a wonderful way sentiments and impressions of men and things into music, but never tries to do so with men and things themselves. That may not be so "modern" as Strauss or Marinetti (how old this last name seems to me!), but it has the advantage of being musical.

But our "child of nature" is, as I have said already, a very civilised man of general culture (a rarity among artists), possessing an infallible taste. This he shows by the choice of his texts, better than by anything else, or rather by the way in which he uses those texts. For with Schumann or Schubert, Brahms or Grieg or Duparc, the music does not better reflect the expression of the words, nor is the blending of melody and harmony more perfect and satisfactory from all points of view than with Mortelmans. The melody, even if it is very easy and in a popular vein, like that of *Kindje, wat ben je toch zacht* (Baby, how sweet thou art)—a favourite with the singing public—is never banal nor vulgar, and the harmonization is never slovenly.

*Andantino tranquillo.* *dolce con amore.*

Kind - je, wat ben je toch zacht,

*p dolce e con tenerezza.*

*Ped.* \* *con Ped.*

kep - je van tintel fijn goud . . .

Mortelmans never composes but under inspiration, and does so according to the rules of the craft. But he is so skilful and clever a craftsman that he moves about at will in the entanglements of the severest counterpoint or the most complicated fugue. So he does not need the help of licentious harmonies and developments to look "interesting" or produce "effect" or to hide a lack of true inspiration; nor are the poesy and sentiment choked in the iron grip of the rules; everything follows logically and naturally upon the foregoing without ever being weak or insipid. To prove such a bold contention, it would be necessary to give a whole movement of a symphony, which, of course, is impossible. It must not be supposed that Mortelmans avoids on principle all unprepared or unresolved discords and musical licenses. Yet, with him, such elements of the music are never out of the picture. One of his latest works, *Stemmingsbeeld* ("rendering of the mood"), might be termed a very "modern" (fashionable sense!) thing if it were not so well-equilibrated.

As to "licenses," Mortelmans has some forbidden progressions of "fifths"; they are to be admitted as, for instance, M. Bruneau's in "*Le Rêve*," because they are beautiful; they occur in the song "*Klokkenzang*" (Song of the Bells):—

*Maestoso.*

Ped. \* Ped. \* Ped. \* Ped. \*

These fifths are not a curiosity or an extravagance, but as much an expression of beauty as the rest.

To put it plastically: if we are not on *terra firma* with Mortelmans, we have at least the impression of gently soaring; whereas with some of the moderns we have the uncomfortable feeling of hopping on one leg or of hanging in mid-air.

Down to his last works we may distinguish three periods in the songs of Mortelmans. The first is romantic and already shows that seductive lyricism which reigns in all his works. *Meisje met Uw*

*Rozenmondje* (Maiden with the rose-bud mouth), after Heine, is a fine example of it. This is the first sentence:—

*Andantino espressivo. p*

Mai - sje met Uw ro - san - mon - dje

met Uw oog . . . jes zoet enklaar

and this is the beginning of the last -- the actual proposal of the young lover:—

*appass.*

Aan mjn lip - pen wil - de ik druk - ken U - we

And although the latter may seem a little wild and exuberant, it is not uncontrolled; the "Stimmung" is as poetic as of a Schubert song and less melancholic than one of Schumann. This and the other melodies of that period are the songs of a healthy Flemish musician who is very much in love with the sweetest of Flemish girls.

To this period also belongs a French song on a poem of Baudelaire, *L'Ennemi*. It is known only to some intimate friends and they value it highly.

The second period has principally a rustic character, while the sentiment has deepened and become purer. Love has been satisfied and nature seems to claim her old rights to him. The unsurpassed music to the little poems of Guido Gezelle belong to this time. In the prelude of *'t Is de Mandel* ('Tis the Mandle) you hear the rippling of the water along the green slopes, and, in the middle, its more restful flowing.\*

*Moderato, quasi allegretto.*

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system shows the piano accompaniment with a treble and bass clef. The right hand features a melody with triplets and slurs, while the left hand provides a steady accompaniment. The tempo is marked *Moderato, quasi allegretto*, and the dynamics are *mf giocoso*. A *con Pedale* instruction is placed below the first system. The second system continues the piano accompaniment with a dynamic marking of *mp espress.* The third system introduces the vocal line in the upper staff, marked *Amabilia. a tempo.* The lyrics *'t is de Man - del* are written below the vocal staff. The piano accompaniment continues below, with a *poco rit.* marking and a final *a tempo.* instruction.



Fragrant and peaceful as a rose-garden at evening is 't Avondt (The night draws nigh).

*Lento, con calma.*

*pp legato molto.*

*con Ped.*

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff for the right hand and a bass clef staff for the left hand. The music is in a minor key and 3/4 time. The tempo and mood are indicated as 'Lento, con calma.' The dynamics are marked 'pp legato molto.' and 'con Ped.' (con Pedal). The right hand plays a series of chords and single notes, while the left hand plays a steady, flowing accompaniment.

But the purest "pastoral" song of Mortelmans's is 't Groeit een blomken (A little flower is growing), of which the melodic theme runs like this:—

*Moderato amabile.*

't Groeit een Blomken in de walden

*p*

The image shows a musical score for a song. It features a vocal line on a single staff and piano accompaniment on two staves (treble and bass clef). The tempo and mood are indicated as 'Moderato amabile.' The time signature is 2/4. The lyrics are 't Groeit een Blomken in de walden. The piano part is marked with a dynamic of 'p' (piano). The vocal line is a simple, melodic theme.

I cannot mention every work, and must needs pass by some of the best, such as the deeply religious 't Pardoent (The Angelus). Before passing on to the third period I wish to say a few words about the philosophical and poetical 'k Hoore tuitend hoornen (I hear the horns blowing). The sense of the poem is as follows: "I hear the horns blowing, the night is near; children, come to me, the night is near for me." Mortelmans has given the deep meaning and sentiment of this little poem in such a striking way that it is impossible, when you know the song, to read the poem without hearing the music; here is the last sentence, which is, so to say, an epitome of the whole:—

*(Lento misterioso con gravita.)*

'k Hoore tuit - end' Hoor - - nen

en de na - vond is na - bij voor mij

As a rule, blitheness and contentment with what God has given is the undertone, if not the key-note, of all these works from first to last.\*

The third period begins in a severer tone; without ever being grim, the voice of the composer sounds more earnest. It is thus that we hear it in a few religious songs to words by Gezelle, which can compete with the very finest of Bach himself. They are less contemplative, but

\*Some songs of the first period have been published by G. Faes, Antwerp; twenty of the second (including a dozen Gezelle songs), by Alsbach and Co., Amsterdam, the latter with French and German translations. I may as well add that of most of the songs English translations by my wife and myself exist in MS.

mor human and lyrical than Bach's. *O mocht ik* (Oh, night I stand before the holy shrine) begins as follows:—

*Andante.*

*p poco cres.* *poco rit* *dim.*

O mocht ik, O

*cresc.*

mocht ik, voor't hel - lig ta - ber - na - kel staan, O

Nowadays we hardly ever find such a deep religious spirit combined with so much human feeling and perfect art.

During this period Mortelmans has more than once an irresistible outburst of enthusiasm, such as in *Hoe leutig* (How merry!), and

especially in *Meidag* (May-day), also to Gezelle's words, a song for soprano and orchestra, so radiant with sunshine and so well poised everywhere and in every sense, that I do not hesitate to call it a masterpiece. A couple of extracts will be more convincing than a wordy analysis. After a description of the cherry-tree on a May-day comes a reminiscence of winter:—

Ze win - ter was zyn schoon - heid als een

*p*

Ped. \*

and soon the cherry-tree is in full blossom: -

Maar al dat .. schoon is .. al dat ..

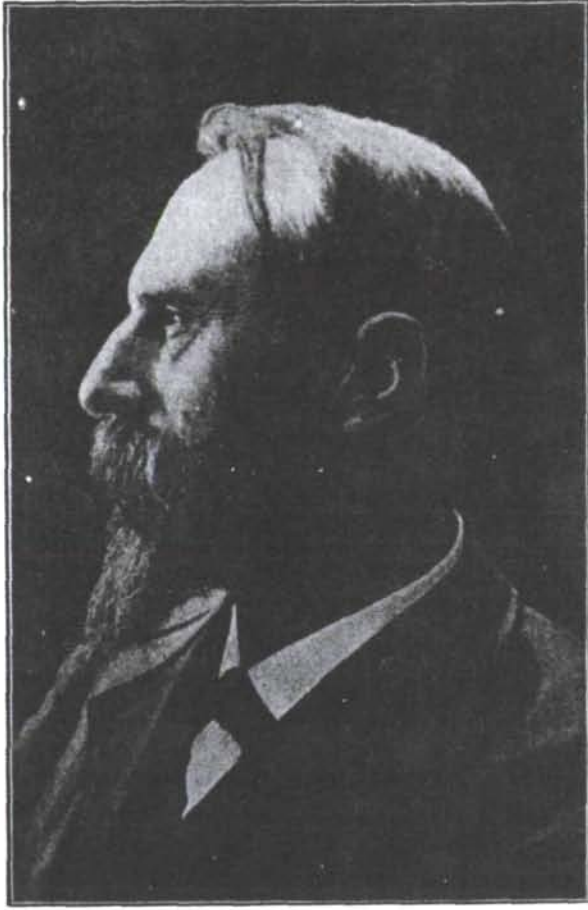
*Con fuoco.*

*p*

le - vend en dat lief .. ge - tal ..

*p* *Espress.* *ff*





LODEWIJK MORTELMANS  
(in 1918)

Mortelmans is indisputably the greatest composer of songs in Belgium, and, I feel sure, one of the best of modern times.

The music for the piano has developed in a way nearly similar to that of his songs—which, of course, is only natural. He is in love with love and life and music; and his first album-leaves, some of them timid, others passionate in expression, are the overplus of that love which had not found a way out into his songs. In short, they are so many "romances sans paroles," but even in those early days of a fine make and distinction.

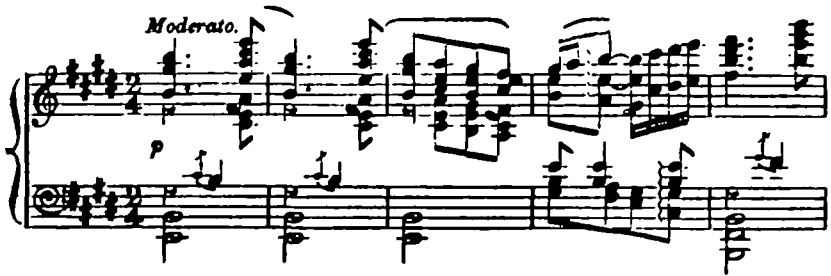
The later piano-pieces are "pastorals": simple and charming lyrical impressions from Nature, which has found in Mortelmans an insatiable lover. Those little works also stand in close relation to the later songs.

The last piano-works come after the songs of the third period and contain new elements.

Fate has struck the strong man in a pitiless way: in less than a year's time he has lost his beloved wife (his "maiden with the rose-bud mouth") and two children in rather tragic circumstances. He has turned more and more unto his own soul, and the finest poems cannot help him any longer to utter the inexpressible. There are moments, though, in which his muse sings with a delightful gentleness and spurs him on to the achievement of a bewildering virtuosity; such is the case with his *Menuet varié*, which served, in 1918, as "morceau de concours" for the young pianists at the Brussels Conservatory. It is a work full of delightful charm and humour. The theme is delicacy itself:

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece. The top system is marked "Moderato" and begins with a piano (p) dynamic. The bottom system includes markings for "mf", "poco rit.", and "p a tempo." The score is written for piano and features a mix of chords and melodic lines in both hands.

and the variations, down to a strong polonaise and back again to the original, almost fragrant melody, are a feast for ear and mind. The *Bridal March*, which might also be taken as a concert-piece, is in the same optimistic vein, and its mood breathes his old love of country sights and sounds:



His compositions of these years show him to be in full possession of his craft and receptive to passing fancies of his mind, but also conscious of the sadness and loneliness of his inner life. He strikes a deeper note, and in his *Herdenking* (In memoriam), written in remembrance of his late "unforgettable" wife, he reaches a depth and a greatness which inevitably calls up the figure of the tortured Beethoven:



It is considered by many who know it to be one of the most perfect works of the present time.

Sadness, hitherto unknown, has come into Mortelmans's music. In the series of the *Three Elegies*, of which I mentioned already *In Memoriam* and *Uplifting of the Heart*, it appears in successive cumulation. Deep sorrow in the first, moving resignation in the second. The last, *Verlatenheid* (Desolation), written in 1919, a beautiful work, is the heart-rending wail of a God-forgotten despair; it is the wordless but eloquent lament of a man who has lost his heaven on earth.

But with the last elegy the last chord has not been struck. When the inner strength of the stricken man conquered despair, the artist,



too, became serener. Poignant grief made place for resigned but ineffaceable melancholy, and in *Idyllische Naklank* (Idyllic Reminiscence), where the note is once more rustic, we find again all the delightful qualities of the second period—all but the childish gladness, which has been transfigured into smiling earnestness. So Mortelmans remains what he has always been, an optimistic artist.

His very last piano work, *Stemmingsbeeld* (Image of a mood), has been a surprise for his friends; it sounds actually "modern" in the harmony-clashing sense of the word, though without any sophistication; yet it is every inch of it Mortelmans. Does this mean a new period? We shall have to wait and listen. For the moment the composer, who is always sincere, and submissive to his inspiration, is as surprised by the outbreak as his friends.

All Mortelmans's orchestral works, with the exception of his opera and the orchestration of some of his songs and later piano-pieces, belong to his romantic years. Yet they are not songs without words or orchestrated piano-music, as is often the case with other song composers, e.g., Schumann; no, the character of the works is purely symphonic. In the first symphonic poems we cannot but discover some influence of Wagner, but his *Homeric Symphony* in four movements is personal and fine music moulded in a classical form. The orchestration is always well balanced and laid out with taste and distinction, bearing testimony at the same time to a thorough knowledge, as well of the power and the character of the different instruments, as of the result of their mutual co-operation.

Mortelmans has composed an opera, *De Kinderen der Zee* (Children of the sea), to a rather tragic text. It is out of the question to give an analysis here of a work of such magnitude. It is sufficient to say that the opera is equal, in geniality of inspiration and perfection of craftsmanship, to the best of his other works. It was created at Antwerp at the Flemish Opera under rather adverse conditions. Notwithstanding blunders of every kind, the performances were a feast to ear and heart and mind, and the Press was unanimous in hailing *Children of the Sea* as a masterpiece of dramatic music, and the best opera ever written in Belgium.

I must leave many other works untouched: chorals and cantatas, for instance, among which there is not one that ought to be neglected. I have given all the space to those works which are best suited to be introduced in England without delay. In the last few weeks Mortelmans has been transposing for the piano some of the finest old Flemish folk-songs, providing them with simple but adequate accompaniments. His very latest work is a choral composed for a mixed choral society. It is called *Caecilia* and was encored at the first performance. One of our most sceptical critics whom I met after a rehearsal told me spontaneously: "C'est beau à faire pleurer!" And so it is.

At the close of this more or less discursive essay the reader will, perhaps, expect some summing up of Lewis Mortelmans and his art. It is impossible, however, to give final judgments on artists who still possess full creative power. Only history will be able, in a distant future, to judge truly that past which for us is the present. We can only give our opinion, which is more or less partial according to our greater or less infatuation with our topic; and then we say not only how we see and feel things, but also, unconsciously, how we wish that they may be. We try to fetter history in our opinion, and do not observe, in our short-sightedness, how vain that effort is.

Yet our opinions, if they are circumstantially introduced, may be elements for the history of art. My opinion on Mortelmans is easily drawn from the foregoing pages; Mortelmans is a noble and genially gifted composer who has, at the same time, a full command over the almost boundless means of his technique. His aim is not, like that of several modern masters, to do otherwise than others do; he wishes, principally, to transpose his feelings into music, as beautifully and sincerely as possible, without making himself a victim of clever tricks which often freeze into a system. I find Beethoven and Schumann still fresh and strong; theirs is music of the present time and of the future. Much of what modern composers wrote yesterday seems old to me now. Unconsciously Mortelmans links up those two masters, and if I premise that they still belong to our day, I may contend that Mortelmans is a very modern composer. I fervently believe that he is one of the greatest, and that his work, instead of decaying, will grow and strengthen in the future.

LEO VAN RIEL.