A LOOKER-ON IN PARIS.

MASSÉ AND AUBER.

PARIS, JULY 23, 1884.

Musical art has suffered a cruel loss in the person of Victor Massé, the author of "Galathea," at the age of sixty-two, after a six-year confinement to his rooms at Saint Germain, the summer residence in past days of the kings of France. His sufferings during this long period recall those of Heine.

His musical career began half a century ago; he was born at Lorient, March 7, 1822, and was a Breton of the Gælic race. He entered the Conservatory of Paris the eighteenth of October, 1834. His piano and composition masters were Zimmermann and Halévy. After obtaining several prizes for composition, fugue and counterpoint, his efforts were crowned by the "Grand Prix de Rome" in 1844, in his twenty-second year.

Five years later he succeeded in forcing the doors of the Opera Comique and produced "La Chanteuse Voilée," words by Scribe and Leuven. The public now understood that a new star had risen in the musical world. Then followed "Pigmalion et Galathée" in 1852; "Les Noces de Jeannette" in 1853; "La Fiancée du Diable" in 1854; "Miss Fauvette" in 1855; "Les Saisons" (that musical bucolic) in 1855; "La Reine Topaze" in 1856; "Les Chaises à Porteur" in 1858; "La Fée Carabosse" in 1859; "La Mule de Pédro" in 1863; "Fior d'Aliza" in 1866; "Le Fils du Brigadier" in 1867; "Paul et Virginie" in 1876, with several minor compositions.

If, after 1860, his productive powers relax, it was due to the new duties incumbent on this indefatigable worker, as leader of the choruses of the opera—formidable and obscure labor, demanding much time and patience. Halévy had held this honorable position before him.

In 1866 he obtained the professorship of composition at the Conservatory.

Knight and Officer of the Legion of Honor, he became a Member of the Institute in 1872, filling Auber's chair. On this occasion he pronounced the eulogy which will be found below.

Victor Massé belonged altogether to the French school by the character of his talent, the abundance, purity and clearness of his melodic inspiration; to that special branch of the French school in which the expression, the tender or pathetic grace, the passion and sentiment, rather melancholy than sprightly, hold a greater place than outbursts of gayety or joy. This phase of French art, without leaving modern times, we inherit from Méhuland. It is continued by Boildieu, Hérold, Halévy, up to the present day, reaching Massé and Gounod. They all have this common mark of musical genius, that they have never tried to communicate to their hearers the feelings of their soul by any other process than that of melodic invention. Endowed with more or less science, very profound and vibrating in some, less marked and more discreet in others, they never caused the symphonic part to play other than a complementary rôle, very interesting, no doubt, but generally subordinate.

Massé was a purely dramatic composer; his music was inspired only by the stage; he never wrote—like Meyerbeer—a page of symphony, though a perfect master of orchestral effects.

During the rehearsals of "Tannhauser," the task of leading and rehearsing the choruses fell on him, and he did his work so nobly, with such zeal and perseverance, that it drew forth Wagner's admiration and gratitude. "Tannhauser" proved a fiasco in spite of all; prejudice blinded everybody.

"Pigmalion et Galathée," that charming work with a classic text, is perhaps his best known production. "Romeo et Juliette" may be placed as second. He leaves "La Nuit de Cléopatre," which rumor credits as the best and most complete of all his efforts. It is now being rehearsed at the Opera Comique, and will soon be given.

It was at his house, Avenue de Frochot, that Massé composed all the works whose melodies are so familiar in every French household. In the garden of this sanctuary, which he had occupied for thirty years, where every tree was planted by the master's hand, a choice circle of his friends met in summer evenings: Hébert, Cabanel, Jules Verne, Delioux, Millet and many others.

The seclusion of his latter days and his ill-health had not alienated his faithful friends. Heine had said of his own suffering, "Quand ça dure plus d'un an il n'y a plus que les amis tout-à-fait vrais qui vous pardonnent de n'être pas encore mort." Massé's sweet disposition had kept him all his true friends. He would bitterly say, "Je m'enterre, je ne suis pas encore dans la terre mais je suis dans le tiroir," alluding to the editor's drawer, where are placed the biographies of those who are not expected to live long.

"Paul et Virginie" and "La Nuit de Cléopatre" were written after he became an invalid; we can account for this unusual fact by his never composing when he felt the grip of the nervous pains which tortured him so mercilessly. He would say, "I would not that my compositions showed the least trace of my disease, and were I to wait a whole month to obtain a five minutes' respite, I would prefer to have patience and wait rather than not feel perfect control over my thoughts."

His body was accompanied to its resting place at Montmartre, and interred by the side of his friend, Heine, by numerous societies and hundreds of literary and artistic notabilities.

Noble Massé, thou didst make us laugh and weep and feel nobler and stronger. All of us who have heard thy genial manifestations in the celestial art of harmonies regret thy loss. Genius, seconded by constant work, calls for universal love and respect.

The death of Victor Massé has vacated the third chair of the music department of the Academy of Fine Arts, which has seen but two predecessors since 1795: Auber and Gossec.

The institute maintains six chairs of music, each of which has from the beginning been occupied by musicians so universally known, that it may be found interesting here to record their names and the date of their occupancy:

Chair No. 1.—Méhul, 1795; Boildieu, 1817; Reicha 1834; Halévy, 1836; Clapisson, 1857, in place of Halévy, who was named secretary for life of the Academy of Fine Arts; Charles Gounod, 1866.

Chair No. 2.—Molé, 1795; Cherubini, 1816; Onslow, 1842; Reber, 1853; Camille Saint-Saëns, 1881.

Chair No. 3.—Gossec, 1795; Auber, 1829; Victor Massé, 1872.

Chair No. 4.—Grétry, 1795; Monsigny, 1813; Catel, 1817; Gaër, 1831; Spontini, 1839; Ambroise Thomas, 1851.

Chair No. 5.—Préville, 1795; Grandménul, 1795; Berton, 1816; Adam, 1844; Berlioz, 1856; Félicien David, 1869; Ernest Royer, 1876.

Chair No. 6.—Mouvel, 1795, who died in 1812 and was succeeded by Gérard from the painting department; Lesueur, 1816; Carafa, 1837; Bazin, 1873; J. Massene, 1876.

From the above data it will be seen that Victor Massé succeeded Auber. He was therefore called to deliver the eulogy on his predecessor before the united academy, as is customary. Massé reveals himself to us in a new light; he has charmed us as a composer, he now shows himself equally in his element in the literary sphere. His eulogy of Auber is as follows:

"At the commencement of the year 1842 the austere muse of religious song drawn by Ingres in a famous picture, appeared in mourning: the illustrious Cherubini had just died. Auber's undisputed position as head of the French school designed him to succeed Cherubini in the directorship of the conservatory.

"It was at this epoch that Auber became known to the artists of my generation owing to his new function.

"In 1842, contrary to the commonplaces given out regarding his eternal youth, Auber was an old man; but he retained an extreme vigor, and remained the same physically and morally during thirty years. Everybody remembers his gentle, manly ways and prepossessing appearance; he might have been taken for an English diplomat; he was cold, very little familiar, but always courteous. His eyes and glance had remained extremely beautiful and vivacious. He had continued in his artist's life the habits of a man of the world, and in spite of labor without respite he could be seen at the Conservatory and at the Bois de Boulogne during the day; at the theatre or at a soirée during the evening.

"This Anacreon of music sought the society of women by preference; the reputation of a youthful galant has ever been a coveted prize in France. His wit was proverbial, and yet he never kept up a conversation; he took part in it after the manner of a skilful archer who spies the right moment to send forth his dart; he resumed and ended the conversation by a sally. His words were like his motives: sprightly and prominent.

"He would answer good-naturedly the questions addressed to him concerning his way of living, realizing that this curiosity was a homage paid to his fame. We all know also that Auber followed two rules which, according to him, gave health and leisure for work; eat scantily (one meal a day) and sleep little.

"He would very willingly speak of his art, and his conversation on this subject was always interesting. 'Music is not in music,' he would say, 'but in a half-veiled woman who passes by in the tumult of a holiday, in a retiring regiment.' Auber's exaggerated view must be taken for what it meant to convey; for my part I am inclined to think that it was the impression of the retiring regiment which dictated to him the first part of the overture of 'Fra Diavolo.'

"There was in his nature a love of society mingled with a love of solitude. So it was that after the theatre, in the small hours of the morning, the witty old man might be seen, his head slightly inclined or thrown backward, his hands in the pockets of his gray vest, on his way to his house in Rue Saint Georges; soon after entering it the ray from his lamp would show he was at work, and the night oil would often last till morning.

"Auber was just to all deserving praise, though always very moderate in bestowing it.

"He worshiped the great masters! The names of Mozart and Rossini, his two mentors, came oftenest to his lips, followed by that of Cherubini. He rendered homage to our ancestors in music when he corrected with perfect tact the instrumentation of 'Epreuve Villageoise' by Grétny, when he transcribed Handel's 'Variations' for the orchestra, which work he executed at the 'Société des Concerts,' and when he instrumented Mozart's 'Turkish March' for the ballet of 'Don Juan.'

"Auber, though possessing the consciousness of his high worth, showed always great modesty. He told me several times, when hearing some of his works, that he would have liked to write over again the passage he found faulty. I recall also that one day at the examinations of the Conservatory he was listening to the half comic evocation of Rafael in the first act of the 'Part du Diable.' The simple Spaniard calls Asmodee a first time, then a second time, but on a lower note. 'There, that is really bad,' says Auber to me, 'I should have put this second evocation on a higher note!'

"Auber, like Rossini, seemed tired of music—pure affectation, for both loved it. The author of 'La Muette' playing this rôle, would say to me with his traditional smile, 'When I compose I never feel like it.' This was perhaps a sincere confession, in which case it proved that a truly endowed musician always feels like it, and that he composes somewhat as a tree produces its fruit, as the branch gives its flowers.

"Auber caused 'La Part du Diable' and 'Sirène' to be given upon the boards of the Opera Comique on January, 1843, and March 26, 1844—two twins by their merits and success—two really amusing scores. This epithet must be taken in earnest. The overtures of these two operas are the last of the series which contain so many charming masterpieces.

"'La Barcarolle' proved a non-success. A bouffe duet for basses in the third act must, I think, be saved from oblivion.

"Then, December 28, 1847, he gave the comic opera of 'Haydée,' which I esteem as his second great opera after 'La Muette.'

"Auber's manner in this opera changed; he wished to enlarge it; and succeeded in various parts. The finale of the third act which begins at the pretty duet for female voices, 'C'est la fête au Lids,' and is continued by the hallucination of 'Lorédan,' I consider an unrivalled piece: here are accents of an extraordinary force of expression, previously unknown in the manner of Auber.

"We may recall the 'Song of the Breeze' in the second act, and a fine duet in the third, where Haydée's phrase so full of passion should be remarked: 'Je t'aime, oh mon maître! Je t'aime!' 'It speaks and sings to us both at once; why was he not stirred to sentiment oftener!'

"After this remarkable work, his last in my estimation, Auber was named Commander of the Legion of Honor.

"If we mount slowly to the summit of Auber's musical work, the delightful world of his creation, and turn back to look at the traversed way, we are astonished at the number of villages, villas, woods, lawns we leave behind! We are astonished, speaking without metaphore, at the enormous quantity of work furnished by the imagination of the composer.

"From 1820 until 1847 we find indeed thirty scores, fourteen of which are of the first order.

"Work was with Auber an absolute necessity; he must needs produce. In order to satisfy this need of expansion he often accepted for his distribution of rôles artists of little note, acting in this respect the reverse of Meyerbeer who, if need be, waited twenty years for a tenor or a prima donna.

"The works following 'Haydée' seems to me written in order to satisfy what Auber called his 'hystérie musicale,' but were not to add an atom to his glory.

"He gave successively 'l'Enfant Prodigue,' 'Zerline ou la Corbeille d'Oranges,' 'Marco Spada,' 'Jenny Bett,' 'Manon Lescaut,' 'La Circassienne, La Fiancée du Roi de Garbe,' 'Le Premier jour de Bonheur,' which renewed the success of Voltaire in 'Trènn,' and lastly his comic opera, 'Irène d'Amour.'

"He had been made leader of the band of the Emperor Napoleon III. in 1852. In 1864 he was raised to the grade of grand officer of the Legion of Honor."

Few men have been as constantly happy as Auber, for the great success he obtained had given him the philosophy which makes endurable the disappointments inseparable from the life of a composer who writes for the theatre. He was at the climax of honor and glory. A fortune honorably gained by his work had made him independent.

Especial favors rarely obtained by an artist in his lifetime were granted to him with munificence. He could extend his promenade through a street named in his honor, or see his bust decorating the façade of the opera. He used to say, "Mr. Haussmann has been kind enough to favor me."

But it is not permitted to a human creature to enjoy so much happiness undisturbed. The moment approached when Auber also must, according to a poet's expression, s'acquitter de souffrir. The misfortunes of France stabbed him to the core. He would not leave his dear Paris; he remained in it during the seige; he remained in it during the commune. His fine gayety ceased; his mind darkened. "Exaggeration is a mistake," he would say with melancholy, "I have lived too long." Nevertheless he worked, and had commenced a few musical sketches of chamber music. He asked a friend to bring him the quartettes of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, adding with his former smile, "These masterpieces will no doubt decide me to destroy what I have commenced."

Death had marked him. He would say in a weak voice in a touching way, "I cannot hold my pen any longer; I can no longer work."

He expired the twelfth of May, 1871. The commune was raging. His body was placed temporarily in the Church of the Trinity, and after the arrival of the French army a religious service worthy of him was celebrated July 15 following.

Auber awaits his burial; his friends, his admirers wish to raise him a monument in return for that which he has raised to his own fame and the glory of his country; that monument is made with "La Muette," "Le Maçon," "Le Philtre," "Fra Diavolo," "Actéon," "Haydée," "Le Domino Noir," and with as many more scores; it is a solid one, and will outlast the work in stone, which is destined in memory of him.

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