

## ÉDOUARD COLONNE

(1838~1910)

JUDAS (called ÉDOUARD) COLONNE was born in Bordeaux on July 23rd 1838, the family had Italian roots. His father and grandfather were musicians and he began to learn several instruments, including flageolet and accordion, at a very early age. He was also taught violin by Baudoin in Bordeaux. In addition, he began to earn his living at the age of eight. He went to Paris in 1855 and entered Conservatoire in 1857. After studying composition and harmony with Elwart and Thomas and violin under Gérard and Sauzay, he gained premier prix for harmony in 1858 and for violin in 1863. At first he worked at the Théâtre Lyrique, then, from 1858 to 1867 he was leader of the Opéra orchestra and second leader of the Lamoureux Orchestra. He also conducted at the Concerts Padeloup. In 1860 he became a member of the Lamoureux Quartet, with which he took part in the first French performances of works by Brahms. Thus he came to conducting with a background of orchestral playing and chamber music. With experience in New York as concertmaster of an opéra-bouffe company and as conductor of the Niblo's Garden Orchestra, he returned in 1871 to direct the Concerts du Grand Hôtel. In 1873 he and Hartmann, the music publisher, founded the Concert National. The two seasons of these concerts, at the Théâtre Odéon and then at the Théâtre du Châtelet, were buoyed in prestige, but not financially, by the fervent nationalism engendered by the Franco-Prussian war. The series included the premières of Franck's *Rédemption* and Massenet's *Marie-Magdeleine*.

Unlike violinists and pianists, conductors can practice their craft only in front of a body of experienced musicians; Vincent d'Indy, in charge of the chorus of the *Rédemption* was less than complimentary of Colonne's abilities.

On Hartmann's retirement in 1874 Colonne founded the Concerts du Châtelet. At first it barely survived, being in competition with the well established Concerts Populaires under Padeloup. Later it achieved great success and was renamed the Association Artistique des Concerts Colonne. Concerts were given on weekend afternoons to a public largely of students and people in business. Initial success lay in Colonne's promotion of works by younger French composers. These included orchestral compositions of Dubois, Franck, Lalo and Massenet. There were also foreign works, but, so soon after 1870, nothing of Wagner.

Colonne, sensing the posthumous rise in popularity of Berlioz in France, built on this success by giving most carefully prepared and complete performances of his major vocal works, *L'Enfance du Christ*, *Roméo et Juliette* and *La Damnation de Faust*, thus, with the last work in particular, taking the lead in public esteem from the Concerts Populaires. These performances were rewarded not only with financial success, but also, in 1880, with the Légion d'Honneur. By 1914 he, and his orchestra after him, had given *La Damnation de Faust* 172 times. In 1878 Colonne conducted ten concerts at the World Exhibition at the Trocadéro and in the years 1891 to 1893 he conducted at the Opéra, where the works he produced included *Samson et Dalila*, *Die Walküre* (French première) and *Salammbô* (Reyer).

His first visit to London was in 1896; his last, in 1907, included several Promenade Concerts at the Queen's Hall. He also conducted in Lisbon, Russia and Strasbourg.

Colonne's second marriage was to Eugénie Élise Vergin, also a pupil of the Conservatoire. She had a considerable career at the Opéra, the Opéra Comique and the Théâtre Lyrique. Her roles included Marguérite in *La Damnation de Faust*. Colonne died in Paris on 28th March 1910. He was succeeded by Gabriel Pierné.

The careers of Colonne and his near contemporary, Charles Lamoureux (Bordeaux 1834-Paris 1899) show many similarities. Both managed their own concerts, which included auditioning and hiring players, and financial risks. And both, according to Pierre Monteux, Carl Flesch and many others, were very unpleasant; players accepted long rehearsals, sarcasm and bullying in preference to unemployment and hunger. (Perhaps this, in part, is behind d'Indy's appraisal.) However, Lamoureux's repertoire included such works as the *St. Mathew Passion* and the *Messiah*, but Colonne's performances of romantic composers, especially of Berlioz, were particularly acclaimed, and the French school of his time and after is in his debt; works of Beethoven were also frequent in his programmes. The critical picture is, inevitably, unclear and imprecise. Each had his own admirers, then as now admiration of one might involve detraction of the other; audiences and critics do not change. However, G. B. Shaw, Grove and Henry Wood are always worth consulting. In this instance Shaw makes no report. Grove comments that, "If Colonne's performances always struck by their artistic tendencies they were somewhat lacking in care, firmness and clearness." Henry Wood felt that at the Queen's Hall Colonne was somewhat overshadowed by Lamoureux, perhaps he was promoted more zealously, yet he "always thought Colonne the more talented of the two; certainly his readings were broader—more German—even though he was not the trainer Lamoureux was." [*My Life of Music*-Victor Gollancz]. For the Royal Philharmonic Society in 1901 Colonne was admired "for the clarity and polish of his renderings." Henry Mapleson [*Memoirs*, 1888] regarded Sir Charles Hallé's Manchester orchestra as the only English orchestra with perfect ensemble, "A larger and better orchestra ... is that of M. Lamoureux. Better even than [that] is that of M. Colonne." However, even this, he thought, was surpassed by the (mainly German) American orchestra conducted by Mr. Theodore Thomas. According to the American critic Philip Hale, performances by Lamoureux were better finished and showed better proportion in detail, though they generally left the hearer cold, but Colonne stirred the blood. Likewise, Saint-Saëns, asked which he preferred, replied, "Both. Lamoureux is more precise; he is colder. Colonne is more elastic, more inspired."

Sousa detested records, but he did not deny his orchestra the opportunity of income from them. Consequently, records of "Sousa's Band" were not conducted and did not claim to be conducted by him. The French Pathé company, however, which made Colonne's records, was keen to make clear his involvement, both in printed material and on the records themselves. Thus we read, "Orchestre Direction Colonne" or "Direction Colonne" or "Orchestre Symphoniques, dir. COLONNE", but sometimes only, "Exécuté par l'Orchestre Colonne". The records were made probably in one sequence in 1906. [A catalogue of apparatus which is undated, but which refers to *Prix-Courant général (octobre 1901)* advises the reader to *Consulter les Catalogues spéciaux* in which are to be found *Cylindres*

*enregistrés par l'Orchestre Colonne, sous la direction même de Ed. Colonne.* In 1901 Pathé only issued cylinders, however no cylinders of Colonne have been reported and the sound quality of what we have is in any case much too advanced for the time.]

This edition of Colonne's records is believed to be complete; the numbers are in an unbroken sequence, but rarity and mislabelling make certainty impossible. (E.g. The *Lohengrin* Prelude seems always to be labelled "Marche des Fiançailles", early labels, refer to Hungarian Dances numbers 1 and 2, later they are 5 and 6, and some copies of the *Jocelyn* Ballet may be labelled "Berceuse".)

Early Pathé recordings were usually announced, frequently by the artists, but the announcements were omitted from later transfers. On early pressings of Colonne's recordings announcements have been noted in only two cases. As they are clearly not by a regular studio announcer, it is reasonable to suppose that they are by Colonne himself. They state clearly *dirigé par M. Colonne*.

Until about 1917 Pathé recorded on giant master cylinders, using them rather like tape today. Several selections were recorded on one master cylinder from which mechanical transfers were made to whatever format was required. Thus a particular recording could be issued on both cylinder and disc, each in several sizes; and discs could be outside or inside start.

Limitations in sound quality included:

1) Reduced and uneven frequency response of early recordings. In visual terms we are viewing a picture not in white light, but in white light from which the red and violet ends of the spectrum are absent, and in which orange and green, say, are too strong and the other colours too weak.

2) Reduced dynamic range; very quiet passages had to be played louder to be heard over surface noise, and very loud parts quieter to avoid overload.

Records of voices and violins were most satisfactory; piano and orchestra less so; organ virtually impossible.

3) Various rumbles and resonances arise in the acoustic recording process; yet more in the mechanical transfer system.

Some of these can be largely eliminated; others can be reduced only to some extent beyond which the feeling of presence is lost. It is then found that for the most part the sound quality of Colonne's recordings is surprisingly vivid for the time and considerable detail can be made out. One notes that players were moved forward to give prominence to particular solo passages. (This is still done today, but with microphones or, on television, by close-up.) However, the quality does vary, probably as the condition of the mechanical transfer equipment and the care with which it was operated varied.

The repertoire was, presumably, determined by the popular taste and limits of record duration of the time. Even so, many pieces are truncated. Incidentally, in many cases these must have been first recordings, and in some cases, until the all-embracing compact disc arrived, only recordings.

Édouard Colonne 1838 Arthur Nikisch 1855 Karl Muck 1859 Gustav Mahler 1860 Franz Schalk 1863 Felix Weingartner 1863 Richard Strauss 1864 Arturo Toscanini 1867 Willem Mengelberg 1871 Bruno Walter 1876. As this list, it includes Mahler only on the excuse of five piano rolls of very dubious worth, indicates, Colonne is by a generation the earliest born significant conductor on

record. Inevitably, assessment of his abilities through his records must be cautious.

Mozart's Turkish March is played very precisely and with excellent ensemble, but there is a certain four-squareness, evident also in a number of other performances, almost a military feel. The effect of troops marching by is largely lost in *The Ruins of Athens*; the necessary crescendo from silence and decrescendo back to silence not being possible, but a good performance, with swing and panache. The Moment Musical is well played, but perhaps not the way Schubert had in mind. What is left of Weber's severely truncated Invitation is precisely, but unimaginatively played. Colonne championed the music of Berlioz, but, if there was contact between them, nothing is now known of it. Chopin receives very military treatment, but the solemnity is lessened by over prominent lower brass and an abrupt ending. Some sensitive playing is heard in the Spinning Chorus despite rather noisy recording of a quiet piece. The Lohengrin Overture is impressive. Gounod's somewhat slight piece comes off well, assisted by very clean sound. The Hungarian Dances come off well, glissandi in the strings are clear and controlled. There is dash, but we ask whether Colonne was more relaxed in the concert hall; a pity the violins, given prominence here, tend to shriek. Henry VIII's ballet is exciting and in remarkably good sound; here and elsewhere cymbals, normally forgotten on acoustic recording, are clearly audible. The very quiet excerpt from Sylvia comes across very well, fortunately assisted by a good, quiet pressing. Colonne conducted the first performance of the 'L'Arlésienne' Suite and went on to give more it than five hundred times. These three movements, the Intermezzo and Minuetto related to the composer's Agnus Dei and *La Jolie Fille de Perth* respectively, receive adequate treatment; a lack of sparkle perhaps related to the somewhat distant sound. The remaining pieces fare rather better.

Conclusions. This album is something of an experiment. It has taken many years to assemble what is believed to be a complete set of Colonne's records. It has been accepted that Pathé's record format and duplicating process are by their nature noisy and that the likelihood of ever finding perfect copies of all of the discs is remote. It has taken many hours of detailed work to make each record sound as good as possible; to give the music an air of life and presence rather than application of noise reduction to the point of leaving a 'canned' sound reminiscent of tooth paste being extruded from a tube.

Musicologists and music historians are increasingly aware of the heritage of performing practice preserved by the gramophone. This album, for all its deficiencies, adds significantly to our knowledge of performing practice in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Symposium Records believes that the listener who troubles to hear this album several times as a concert with a critical, but fair ear will find a conductor who knows how he wishes the music to sound, and through authority and discipline brings his vision to performance.

[Performance keys: track 6 in B minor, track 10 in G minor, track 11 in D]

Acknowledgements: The portrait is from the Tully Potter Collection and Symposium Records thanks Paul Lewis and Adrian Tuddenham for assistance with the production.

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