

Victor Hugo

Everything in my youth seemed calculated to keep me far removed from romanticism. Those about me talked only of the great classics and I saw them welcome Ponsard's *Lucrece* as a sort of Minerva whose lance was to route Victor Hugo and his foul crew, of whom they never spoke save with detestation.

Who was it, I wonder, who had the happy idea of giving me, elegantly bound, the first volumes of Victor Hugo's poems? I have forgotten who it was, but I remember what joy the vibrations of his lyre gave me. Until that time poetry had seemed to me something cold, respectable and far-away, and it was much later that the living beauty of our classics was revealed to me. I found myself at once stirred to the depths, and, as my temperament is essentially musical in everything, I began to sing them.

People have told me ad nauseam (and they still tell me so) that beautiful verse is inimical to music, or rather that music is inimical to good verse; that music demands ordinary verse, rhymed prose, rather than verse, which is malleable and reducible as the composer wishes. This generalization is assuredly true, if the music is written first and then adapted to the words, but that is not the ideal harmony between two arts which are made to supplement each other. Do not the rhythmic and sonorous passages of verse naturally call for song to set them off, since singing is but a better method of declaiming them? I made some attempts at this and some of those which have been preserved are: *Puisque ici bas toute âme*, *Le Pas d'armes du roi Jean*, and *La Cloche*. They were ridiculed at the time, but destined to some success later. Afterwards I continued with *Si tu veux faisons un rêve*, which Madame Carvalho sang a good deal, *Soirée en mer*, and many others.

The older I grew the greater became my devotion to Hugo. I waited impatiently for each new work of the poet and I devoured it as soon as it appeared. If I heard about me the spiteful criticisms of irritating critics, I was consoled by talking to Berlioz who honored me with his friendship and whose admiration for Hugo equalled mine. In the meantime my literary education was improving, and I made the acquaintance of the classics and found immortal beauties in them. My admiration for the classics, however, did not diminish my regard for Hugo, for I never could see why it was unfaithfulness to him not to despise Racine. It was fortunate for me that this was my view, for I have seen the most fiery romanticists, like Meurice and Vacquerie, revert to Racine in their later years, and repair the links in a golden chain which should never have been broken.

The Empire fell and Victor Hugo came back to Paris. So I was going to have a chance of realizing my dream of seeing him and hearing his voice! But I dreaded meeting him almost as much as I wished to do so. Like Rossini Victor Hugo received his friends every evening. He came forward with both hands outstretched and told me what pleasure it was for him to see me at his house. Everything whirled around me!

"I cannot say the same to you," I answered. "I wish I were somewhere else." He laughed heartily and showed that he knew how to overcome my bashfulness. I waited to hear some of the conversation which, according to my preconceived ideas, would be in the style of his latest romance. However, it was entirely different; simple polished phrases, entirely logical, came from that "mouth of mystery."

I went to Hugo's evenings as often as possible, for I never could drink my fill of the presence of the hero of my youthful dreams. I had occasion to note to what an extent a fiery republican, a modern Juvenal, whose verses branded "kings" as if with a red hot iron, in his private life was susceptible to their flattery. The Emperor of Brazil had called on him, and the next day he could not stop talking about it constantly. Rather ostentatiously he called him "Don Pedro d'Alcantara." In French this would be "M. Pierre du Pont." Spanish inherently gives such florid sounds to ordinary names. This florid style is not frequent in French, and that is precisely what Corneille and Victor Hugo succeeded in giving it.

A slight incident unfortunately changed my relations with the great poet.

"As long as Mlle. Bertin was alive," he told me, "I would never permit *La Esmeralda* to be set to music; but if some musician should now ask for this poem, I would be glad to let him have it."

The invitation was obvious. Yet, as is generally known, this dramatic and lyric adaptation of the famous romance is not particularly happy. I was much embarrassed and I pretended not to understand, but I never dared to go to Hugo's house again.

Years passed. In 1881 a subscription was taken up to erect a statue to the author of *La Légende des Siècles*, and they began to plan celebrations for its dedication, particularly a big affair at the Trocadéro. My imagination took fire at the idea, and I wrote my *Hymne à Victor Hugo*.

As is well known, the master knew nothing at all about music, and the same was true of those around him. It is a matter of conjecture how the master and his followers happened to mistake some absurd and formless motif for one of Beethoven's sublime inspirations. Victor Hugo adapted the beautiful verses of *Stella* to this halting motif. It was published as an appendix in the *Châtiments*, with a remark about the union of two geniuses, the fusion of

the verse of a great poet with the admirable verse of a great musician. And the poet would have Mme. Drouet play this marvellous music on the piano from time to time! Tristia Herculis!

As I wanted to put in my hymn something peculiar to Victor Hugo, which could not possibly be attributed to anyone else, I tried to introduce this motif of which he was so fond. And, by means of numerous tricks which every musician has up his sleeve, I managed to give it the form and character which it had lacked.

The subscription did not go fast enough to suit the master, and he had it stopped. So I put my hymn in a drawer and waited for a better opportunity.

About this time M. Bruneau, the father of the well-known composer, conceived the idea of giving spring concerts at the Trocadéro. Bruneau came to see me and asked me if I had some unpublished work which I would let him have. This was an excellent occasion for the presentation of my Hymne, as it had been written with the Trocadéro in mind. The performance was decided on and Victor Hugo was invited to come and hear it.

The performance was splendid—a large orchestra, the magnificent organ, eight harps, and eight trumpets sounding their flourishes in the organ loft, and a large chorus for the peroration of such splendor that it was compared to the set pieces at the close of a display of fireworks. The reception and ovation which the crowd gave the great poet, who rarely appeared in public, was beyond description. The honeyed incense of the organ, harps and trumpets was new to him and pleased his Olympian nostrils.

“Dine with me to-night,” he said to me. And from that day on, I often dined with him informally with M. and Mme. Lockrou, Meurice, Vacquerie and other close friends. The fare was delightful and unpretentious, and the conversation was the same. The master sat at the head of the table, with his grandson and granddaughter on either side, saying little but always something apropos. Thanks to his vigor, his strong sonorous voice, and his quiet good humor, he did not seem like an old man, but rather like an ageless and immortal being, whom Time would never touch. His presence was just Jove-like enough to inspire respect without chilling his followers. These small gatherings, which I fully appreciated, are among the most precious recollections of my life.

Time, alas, goes on, and that fine intellect, which had ever been unclouded, began to give signs of aberration. One day he said to an Italian delegation, “The French are Italians; the Italians are French. French and Italians ought to go to Africa together and found the United States of Europe.”

The red rays of twilight announced the oncoming night.

Those who saw them will never forget his grandiose funeral ceremonies, that casket under the Arc de Triomphe, covered with a veil of crape, and that immense crowd which paid homage to the greatest lyric poet of the century.

There was a committee to make musical preparations and I was a member. The most extraordinary ideas were proposed. One man wanted to have the Marseillaise in a minor key. Another wanted violins, for “violins produce an excellent effect in the open air.” Naturally we got nowhere.

The great procession started in perfect order, but, as in all long processions, gaps occurred. I was astonished to find myself in the middle of the Champs Elysées, in a wide open space, with no one near me but Ferdinand de Lesseps, Paul Bert, and a member of the Académie, whose name I shall not mention as he is worthy of all possible respect.

De Lesseps was then at the height of his glory, and from time to time applause greeted him as he passed.

Suddenly the Academician leaned over and whispered in my ear,

“Evidently they are applauding us.”

About the Author

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