

Le Diapason. Revue musicale de Bruxelles (1850-1852)

Published by Peter Schott in Brussels, the weekly music journal *Le Diapason. Revue musicale de Bruxelles* was issued on Sundays from 21 February until 26 December 1850 and on Thursdays from 2 January 1851 until the final issue, 19 February 1852. Each of the journal's 103 issues measures 11.8 by 8.8 inches and comprises four and occasionally six pages printed in a two-column format. The pages are numbered consecutively beginning with the number 1 for each of the first two years. The first year begins 21 February 1850 and concludes on 13 February 1851; the second year begins on 20 February 1851 and ends on 25 December of that year. The third year begins on 1 January 1852 and concludes on 19 February 1852; however, its issue and page numbers continue consecutively from the preceding year.

In the 19 February 1852 issue, the journal's masthead announces a change in content for the third year: "*Le Diapason* will undergo a few minor changes in the future; [including] a change of title to *Revue et bibliographie musicale*."¹ However the changes did not take place and the journal ceased publication without the cause being known. In spite of its short existence, *Le Diapason* is of interest, being the first weekly Belgian journal entirely dedicated to music. The Belgian musicologist Henri Vanhulst remarks on its importance:

Le Diapason deserves our attention; for the first time we are dealing with a weekly journal devoted entirely to music, it has correspondents in the provinces and abroad ... Its critical content ... reviews, analysis of new works and polemics ... constitute the journal's interest.²

From the beginning DIA demonstrates its independence from the publisher: the journal aims at informing without partiality and deals with musical facts, whenever they occur:

The *Diapason* contributors, entirely independent, ... see it as their first obligation to mention periodically ... all noteworthy musical events, [and] all musical works of value, not only in France, Germany, England, but also everywhere where harmony and melody find attentive and intelligent listeners.³

The journal does not fail to maintain its high standards and does not hesitate to suppress items when musical news is not of sufficient interest:

The almost complete absence of musical news of any importance during the current season, prevents us from giving the issues of *Le Diapason* all the

¹ DIA 1, no. 52 (10 February 1852): 209.

² Henri Vanhulst, "Les Revues musicales et la critique en Wallonie et à Bruxelles au XIX^{ème} siècle," *Periodica Musica* IX, (1991): 16.

³ DIA 1, no. 1, 21 (February 1850): 1.

interest they deserve—we will not publish them when no news of any artistic importance comes to our attention ... The decision we take today has no other goal than not to be obliged to sacrifice worthy news in the interest of that which offers none.⁴

Few articles are signed in *Le Diapason* and the name of the editor is not given.

Each issue begins with general articles or reviews of important concerts, such as the performance of guitarist and composer Zani de Ferranti,⁵ or that of soprano Henriette Sontag at the Théâtre des Nouveautés in Brussels,⁶ where she sang a noteworthy aria from Donizetti's *Linda di Chamounix*.⁷ Also of interest is a concert at the Royal Music Conservatory in Brussels featuring “two important works by composers from Brussels”: a new overture by Mr. Lassen, in which the rich melody and harmony are praised and a symphony by Mr. Kufferath which is thought to be in the Mendelssohnian manner.⁸ A section titled “Nouvelles” follows, consisting of concerts reviews, always beginning with Brussels followed by other Belgian cities: Liège and its Cercle Artistique, Namur, Bruges, Ghent, Louvain, etc., and then by Paris and other major cultural centers such as London, Vienna and Weimar. National pride is expressed in reviews of works by Belgian composers and the performances of Belgian soloists abroad. Thus the performances of Grisar's *Les Porcherons* at the Paris Opéra-Comique⁹ are mentioned, as well as concerts by pianist Achille Desvignes in the Netherlands,¹⁰ or those of Vieuxtemps at the Théâtre des Arts in Rouen.¹¹ Numerous performances of the recently premiered Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète* receive much attention.

From the beginning, the importance that will be attributed to church music is noted. “Among the subjects we necessarily treat, we put church music in the first place ...”¹² Thus there are several articles on Gregorian chant, its evolution and coordination by Saint Gregory the Great in his antiphony, and a series of six articles entitled “Études sur les anciens notations musicales de Europe” [Studies on the ancient musical notations in Europe] that constitutes an historical study of Neumatic notation.¹³ Two unsigned articles deal with psalms by Venitian Benedetto Marcello.¹⁴ The organ, privileged instrument in

⁴ DIA 2, no. 20 (26 June 1851): 79.

⁵ DIA 1, no. 2 (28 February 1850): 1-2.

⁶ DIA 1, no. 2 (28 February 1850): 5.

⁷ This review contains a biographical sketch of the singer.

⁸ DIA 1, no. 2 (28 February 1850): 2.

⁹ Ibid.: 4.

¹⁰ DIA 1, no. 3 (7 March 1850): 15.

¹¹ DIA 2, no. 17 (5 June 1851): 70.

¹² DIA 1, no. 1 (21 February 1850): 1.

¹³ In the following issues: DIA 1, no. 42 (5 December 1850): 175-76; 1, no. 43 (13 December 1850): 179-80; 1, no. 46 (12 January 1851): 192-93; 1, no. 47 (19 January 1850): 207-08; 1, no. 50 (30 January 1851): 207-08; and 1, no. 13 (18 May 1851): 51-52.

¹⁴ DIA 1, no. 33 (7 November 1850): 159-60, and no. 34 (14 November 1850): 163-64.

church music, is dealt with in four articles, among which are two on instrument making in Belgium and two others on organ history. In “État actuel de la facture des orgues en Belgique, comparé à la situation en Allemagne, en France, et en Angleterre” [The current state of organ making in Belgium, in comparison with that in Germany, in France and in England], Fétis harshly criticizes Belgian organ makers who do not fail to reply.¹⁵ A two-part article¹⁶ entitled “Orgues, Les Anciens ont-ils connu l’harmonie?” [Organs — Did the ancients know harmony?] presents an historical and critical study of the instrument’s origin.¹⁷ These articles constitute the principal part of the historical and theoretical studies published in *Le Diapason*.

The journal’s major interest lies in its excellent reviews. In some issues, reviews appear in the “Correspondance particulière” from Ghent, Liège, Antwerp and Paris, and also in those locations referred to in the above-cited “Nouvelles” section. As there are far too many reviews to discuss, we will only consider those that are of primary importance.

Brussels possesses the country’s most eminent musical institutions: the Conservatoire Royal de Musique de Bruxelles [Royal Music Conservatory of Brussels] and the Association des Artistes Musiciens [Association of Musician Artists]. Concerts of both institutions are regularly reviewed in the journal which is critical of their respective conductors, Fétis and Hanssens, both, according to the reviews, incapable of achieving an ensemble performance despite the quality of performers at their disposal. The journal also regrets the regular repetition of the same works.

Can we not say that the Conservatory Concerts rest a bit too much on the reputation made by the performance of a given number of works regularly repeated for a certain number of years? It is wise to remain faithful to the repertory one builds up thanks to persistent and conscientious investigation, to continue to cultivate it by repetition ... but an orchestra like that of the Conservatory, rich in the study of the great masters, should quickly become at ease in performing works of lighter conception. Why then not allow this orchestra to perform recently written compositions, bringing to the interest of the new, the very qualities of the works themselves? The Conservatory concert programs would stop being stereotyped season after season and the public would certainly commend more warmly a greater variety....¹⁸

The journal clearly does not lower its standards. In the main Belgian cities, the activities of the conservatories, casinos and royal theaters are commented on in detail, whether it is

¹⁵ Some go so far as to question Fétis’s qualifications to judge the qualities of the organs. The tone of both Fétis’s statements and of the responses they generate may suggest a “settling of scores.”

¹⁶ Articles signed F. G., unidentified initials.

¹⁷ DIA 3, no. 46 (8 January 1852): 183-84 and 1, no. 50 (19 February 1852): 210-11.

¹⁸ DIA 1, no. 4 (28 March 1850): 28.

the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels, the Cercle artistique in Liège, the Théâtre royal of Ghent or the Ostende Casino. For a while Brussels was unique in having two Italian theaters, resulting in a wealth of Italian operatic performances. Thus, the performances of Verdi's *I Masnadieri* by prima donna M^{me} Medori, tenor Mazzi and baritone Morelli,¹⁹ was immediately followed by Rossini's *Mathilde de Shabran* with M^{me} Medori and Lucchesi. After its last performance, *Le Diapason* expressed the "great wish to see Italian opera establish permanent roots here," and noted that "we are happy to see that Rossini's work was the occasion of a real triumph for the main performers."²⁰ In addition to musical activities in the major cities, those of the bands and choral associations in small cities and villages are well documented in the journal.

In news from abroad Paris occupied a place of importance: the Opéra, Opéra-Comique and the Théâtre-Italien, as well as the various concert societies receive extensive discussion; events in London and its rich lyrical and musical season receive similar attention. *Le Diapason* also offers news from other capitals and major cities: Vienna, New York and St. Petersburg.

Unfortunately the very small number of signed articles in the journal and the lack of modern critical studies about it do not allow the identification of most collaborators.²¹ François-Joseph Fétis (1784-1871), the distinguished Belgian musicologist, conductor and Director of the Brussels Royal Music Conservatory Concerts signs only two articles. However, his activities as lecturer on music history at the Brussels Cercle artistique and his performances of his compositions (especially a Mass performed at the Queen of Belgium's funeral) receive attention. Some of his articles, published in the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, are mentioned in *Le Diapason*²² but are not signed. His limited contribution to the journal can be explained by the Italian tour he undertook with his son in the Fall of 1850 and by the "scandal" which erupted in February 1851 with the publication of an organ journal by Lemmens, an organ teacher at the Brussels Royal Music Conservatory. While Fétis supported the work of Lemmens, *Le Diapason* revealed Lemmens to be a plagiarist.²³ Provoking interest beyond the Rhine, the *Gazette musicale de Leipzig* reinforced *Le Diapason*'s opinions.

Two priests, Father N. A. Janssen and the Jesuit Louis Lambillotte wrote and signed articles on plainchant. Father Janssen, a music historian, composer, and author of *Le Répertoire de la musique d'église*, believed that Fétis was not competent to judge Belgian

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ DIA 1, no. 32 (26 September 1850): 136.

²¹ Apart from the few lines written by H. Vanhulst, op. cit.

²² In particular an article on the Sax piano, see DIA 1, no. 14 (15 May 1851): 56-57.

²³ By declaring that Mr. Lemmens "copied" J. S. Bach, *Le Diapason* was involved in a polemic with *Le Journal de Bruxelles*.

organs.²⁴ Louis Lambillotte, a composer, wrote an article on plainchant melodies preserved in England.²⁵ Moreover, his publications on the St. Gregory Antiphony and the St. Gall manuscript are often cited in the journal.

Initials of an author identified in *Le Diapason*:

J. G. Jacob Gantois

This RIPM publication is based upon a microfilm copy of the journal belonging to the RIPM International Center located in Baltimore (U.S.A.).

²⁴ DIA 1, no. 13 (6 May 1850): 55-58.

²⁵ DIA 1, no. 20 (4 July 1850): 88