

Widor, Balloons and the Cancan. La Belle Epoque

Talk by Roger Pulham to SOA 15 November 2024 in Newbourne Village Hall.

France and Prussia in the middle of the nineteenth century were competing for superiority in Europe. Eugenie, a Spanish aristocrat the Empress of France, became concerned that Spain would appoint a Prussian prince as its emperor, thus surrounding France with another potentially hostile neighbour. A dreadful and unnecessary war erupted in 1870. Prussia under Bismarck over-ran northern France, invaded Versailles, declared the new state of Germany to include those smaller independent states next to the Rhine and the capture of Alsace and Lorraine of which Strasburg was the main city. The destruction of Strasburg including its main Protestant church with its Silbermann organ, and world-renowned library of ancient manuscripts was accompanied by mass killings of its citizens. The siege of Paris quickly followed. Charles-Marie Widor, a young organist at St. Sulpice from 1870, was part of the artillery force defending the city and wrote letters to his family in Lyon describing day-to-day conditions in the city. He wrote of having shared a meal of dog and rat with his army officer, shells landing on St. Sulpice, Saint-Saens joining the local army, his knapsack on his back and having to sleep on frozen ground for a week. The Paris defenders were mere amateurs. Widor's apartment witnessed windows being blown out by the shelling, arrest of terrorists and the constant whine of overhead bullets and shells.

Widor's letters bear the instruction "par balloon monte." All supplies and services to and from Paris were halted, no incoming food, no outgoing mail. One of the railway stations was requisitioned to make large gas filled balloons. All Widor's letters were sent this way but could take weeks to be delivered. The army used balloons to communicate outside Paris, some instructions going badly astray. The balloons were piloted but relied on the caprice of the prevailing wind. 97 were dispatched this way. The population of Paris was angry that their government had stumbled into the war and when hostilities ceased early in 1871 there was an uprising of dissent in the form of the communards who burnt down the town hall, law courts and executed the archbishop. The remnants of the French army savagely quelled the situation, but Widor wrote the riots did more damage than the Prussian shelling. Just before this period Charles Garnier had designed the Paris opera house and during the siege arranged for the cellars to be

re-purposed as reservoirs of water because he discovered a hidden brook under the building.

The new state of Germany demanded huge reparations which France was able to raise from the banks and additional funds were raised for the repair of damaged building, farms, and other losses. In 1872 the defining year of the beginning of la Belle Epoque, Paris claimed for itself most of the repair funds so starting a “bounce-back” in social, business, artistic and recreational life. The Opera House was completed and quickly Paris rejuvenated itself. Widor was not idle during the siege, he rewrote earlier organ pieces and incorporated them in his new first four organ symphonies published in 1872. He used some written down improvisations played at the Portugal International Exposition. A fluent improviser, Widor played daily in the main hall on a J.W. Walker organ to the delight of some English ladies who asked for pieces to be played again, but as he had no recall, he invented composition titles and even names of the fictitious composers.

Widor was sponsored by Aristide Cavallé-Coll the organ builder from Toulouse. C-C became well established, built hundreds of organs in Europe and South America, and Moscow. Widor and Guilmant were always asked to inaugurate new organs and were kept very busy travelling, but the biggest organ by C-C had no world-class organist. Jacques Lemmens from Brussels was approached but was busy however Widor was encouraged to apply to the dismay of the Paris establishment. Widor was tutored by Lemmens, daily fugue writing and four-hour practice sessions, extreme attention to accuracy, use of pedals and posture were strictly enforced. Guilmant had also benefitted from this tuition. Lemmens had a long-lasting influence on organ design by insisting Cavallé-Coll provide the 56 note manual compass, a 30-note pedalboard and a proper principal chorus including mixtures so that Bach could be played in the correct manner. So dawned the modern concert organ. To demonstrate France was back for business a world trade fair was held in 1878. A huge circular concert hall, The Trocadero, was built heralded as a concert hall for the people. Needing a large organ in record time, C-C borrowed an instrument due for installation in a suburban church, added another keyboard, twenty stops in an enlarged design. At one of the inauguration concerts was Widor playing two more symphonies, the fifth and sixth which had been composed for this event. Cesar Franck also composed for the inauguration of the Trocadero organ, his “Trois Pieces.” of which the “Pièce

Héroïque” particularly appropriate for the location and period. The Exposition Universelle occupied a huge site and exhibited the head of the Statue of Liberty a gift from France to the USA. Ten years later the next Exposition Universelle was dominated by Gustave Eiffel’s new iron Tower and more vast galleries of exhibitions.

Paris had long been host to Salons, private recitals and gatherings of like-minded people, composers, artists, politicians, the wealthy and influential. Chopin was an attractive guest and played for the Prince Radziwill to commemorate the loss of Poland to the Prussians, Liszt played in the company of Paganini, Victor Hugo, and Rossini. Widor was a guest at these salons and was admired for his piano playing. He wrote songs, duets, and sonatas for these occasions, established his own salon in his apartment and the well-known attendances at mass in St. Sulpice where his invitees would surround the organ console. Not strictly a salon, Cavaille-Coll invited Widor and Guilmant to demonstrate completed organs in the erecting room of his workshop. The music press critics usually attended and illustrated the organ destined in 1870 for Bracewell Hall, Yorkshire for the MP for Clitheroe, John Hopwood. As Paris was under siege Cavallé-Coll sent his two voicers the Reinberg brothers to England to erect the organ. They were of Alsatian origin and would have come under the control of the Prussians. C-C built only a few organs for the UK as the costs were uncompetitive, they were Manchester Town Hall, Farnham Abbey, Carmelite Church London, and Sheffield City Hall.

Not every one benefitted from the post war bounceback. Many Parisians suffered from forced removal from their homes by the boulevard road scheme which had been in progress for two decades. The unfortunates were forced to live in squalor on rubbish heaps. Many took refuge in cheap wine and spirits but the population increasingly demanded recreation. Erards and Pleyels, the piano makers, the Paris Conservatoire and the college for young blind people supplied the classics and bars, dance halls supplied the popular. In 1870 the Folies Bergère opened as a dance hall, bar, and popular meeting place for all classes. Manet’s Bar at the F-B painted in 1882 is full of covert references, named bottles of wine, champagne, beer, absinthe, the legs of a favourite trapeze artist and the enigmatic expression of the girl serving behind the bar. Early electric lighting can be seen. The Moulin Rouge hosted dancing, drinking song-and -dance acts and a regular high-kicking dancer “La Goulou.” The Cancan was invented. This place and its dance became famous due to the artwork of Toulouse Lautrec. Borrowing Japanese drawing

techniques and bright use of colour, T-L made the plates in the printing house for each poster. He revolutionized poster design and added to the fame of the Cancan. High steps, frills, energetic music, and provocation made this a popular sport for which the Moulin Rouge was famous. The high-spirited entertainment was not without its dark side, and readers of Emil Zola's novels will discover relentless poverty. The need for young women to provide for themselves and possibly their children drove them to seek affairs with better off men who took advantage.

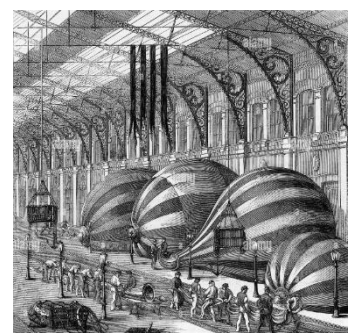
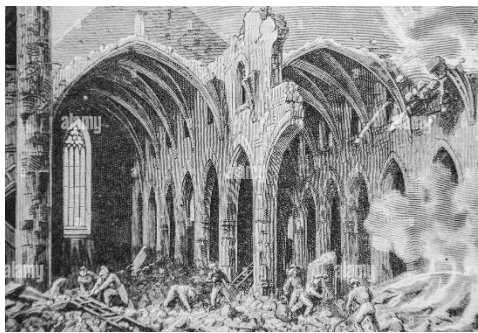
To atone for the mishandling of the Franco-Prussian war a fund was subscribed for the construction of the immense basilica of Sacré Coeur. But there was a growing faction who wanted it demolished as they disagreed with the war as it was their sons who died as soldiers. It was even voted on by the French parliament and its demolition was only very narrowly defeated.

To conclude. Fear of hostile encirclement of France prompted a mishandled short but devastating war with Prussia, the consequences were the foundation of the modern state of Germany, Alsace and Lorraine being taken. Our interest in church and organ music as seen through eyes of its probably best practitioner Widor reveals the horrors of siege and bombardment, however the rapid return to normal unleashed new art, entertainment, music, Art Nouveau architecture and a forward-looking attitude all brought to an end forty-two years later.

C.R.Pulham 19 November 2024

Siege of Strasburg

Paris balloon factory



St. Sulpice organ
Widor at St. Sulpice keyboards Exposition 1887



Moulin Rouge Cancan
Trocadero organ

Folies Bergere bar by Manet

