VICTOR HERBERT: ROMANTIC IDEALIST

Edward N. Waters

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, Pittsburgh was a town of some 320,000 inhabitants, approximately half what it is today. It had a symphony orchestra that might be called, approximately, half as good as the one it has today. And this eminent body of musicians of three generations ago had a conductor who, again approximately, was far more than half as good as the leader of today's truly distinguished ensemble. This surmise neither denigrates the present incumbent nor over-praises his early forerunner; it is a reasonable observation of all who reflect on Pittsburgh's musical history and who enjoy speculating on "what might have been." After all, it was Andrew Carnegie, a strong supporter of the early orchestra, who said: "... my idea of heaven is to be able to sit and listen to all the music of Victor Herbert I want to."

A chronology of Pittsburgh history is studded with dates that are important in America's development — industrial, cultural and sociological. Picking a few at random one finds that the first concert of the newly established Pittsburgh Orchestra (organized under the auspices of the Pittsburgh Art Society) took place on February 27, 1896. Frederick Archer wielded the baton. In 1898 Victor Herbert, immediately becoming a leading citizen,* was appointed conductor. That same year 22-year-old Willa Cather joined the staff of the Pittsburgh Dispatch and the Mesta Machine Company came into being. Both names were to have an impact upon American culture, albeit at different degrees of penetration. In 1899 the justly famed Duquesne Club erected a five-story building on Sixth Avenue. In 1900 Barney Dreyfuss started his 32-year career as president and owner of the Pittsburgh Pirates. One year later, on April 17, 1901, to be exact, Pittsburgh's first automobile accident was reported, and a new era of terror was inaugurated. On October 25, 1902, the great historian,

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An address given by Edward N. Waters before the Friends of the Music Library of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh in the auditorium of The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on February 6, 1967. Mr. Waters, an eminent musicologist, is Assistant Chief of the Music Division of the Library of Congress and the author of numerous magazine and newspaper articles on music and musicians as well as the standard biography, Victor Herbert: A Life in Music, 1955.—Editor

*Mr. Herbert resided at 519 Aiken Avenue, East End.
Henry Steele Commager, was born here, and on October 13, 1903, a doleful event occurred — at Exposition Park, Pittsburgh bowed to Boston in the first World's Series ever played. It could be said, at least, that these two cities were legitimate rivals in baseball teams and symphony orchestras!

Another doleful event occurred in 1904 — Victor Herbert departed, bitter and disappointed, sadly reluctant to leave the city that he loved and where he confidently expected to have a lifelong career as a great musical director. Six years later the whole orchestra collapsed — which would not have happened, I am sure, if Herbert had been retained — and Pittsburgh enjoyed no major ensemble of its own for nearly 20 years.

As is well known, Herbert's successor was Emil Paur (1855-1932), Czech conductor of considerable stature, who had already conducted the Boston Symphony, the New York Philharmonic and the Metropolitan. He was supposed to be quite a catch. But a tragi-comic sequence of events occurred in Herbert's departure and Paur's accession that should be re-viewed for present-day edification and amusement. It tempts one to say, in the vernacular, that Pittsburgh under Herbert didn't know when it was well off and never had it so good!

It is admitted nowadays, and always has been by those "in the know," that Herbert was an excellent musician, thoroughly trained in the science of composition and second to none as a virtuoso cellist. His conducting skills were developed under Theodore Thomas and Anton Seidl, and it was the great critic, Philip Hale, who steered him to the Golden Triangle. Herbert was also, I am happy to report, a bon vivant with a Rabelaisian temperament. He was fond of fancy comestibles and strong potables. He was gregarious, hearty in manner, quick in wit and repartee, and unable to appreciate persons whose values lay in genteel propriety and decorum.

Unfortunately, Herbert's orchestra manager, George H. Wilson, was just such a genteel individual, and it may be wondered how the two men could remain associated for even six years. Wilson despised Herbert, was mean and malicious behind his back, and utterly incapable of savoring, let alone appreciating that joie de vivre that Herbert represented so finely. Before Herbert's departure was definite, Wilson wrote to Paur on March 10, 1904: "If he is reelected [as conductor] I leave Pittsburgh as he is too low a man in character for me to continue even an official connection with."
Paur came to Pittsburgh, and Wilson thought that the future was rosy — but poetic justice manifests itself strangely and unexpectedly. On December 24, 1906 — Paur was beginning only his third season — Wilson himself resigned. He wrote that his years with the orchestra, his pride and pleasure in it have all constrained me during the past two years to bear with the personal idiosyncrasies, the superficiality of his musical faith, the narrowness of his musical horizon, the indifference to the success of the out-of-town concerts, the hazard (to Orchestra business) of an uncontrolled temper, the frequent distrust of my motives, and the peculiar and ever-shifting focus of the stupidity, of the present conductor . . . these things are characteristic of the man, not passing symptoms.

What was Herbert really like as a conductor? There are plenty of applauding criticisms that attest his competence, but the one that I like best, surely the fairest and most comprehensive, is contained in a letter to me from no less an artist than the late lamented Harold Bauer. It also provides a description of Herbert the man and affords a glimpse of those traits that displeased the unhappy and punctilious Mr. Wilson. Bauer wrote (on October 11, 1947):

My acquaintance with Victor Herbert was not intimate, but it was very cordial. I am sure I must have played with him at least half a dozen times, in Pittsburgh and in other cities when he was on tour with the orchestra. I dined at his house several times and I remember being impressed by the lavishness of his hospitality and the enormous quantities of food and drink that were served. It reminded me of a prosperous German household, the more particularly, perhaps, for the reason that he seemed to enjoy speaking German more than English, although on the other hand, nothing could be more natural than his occasional lapses into Irish, sometimes with lots of "brogue."

As a conductor I should say that nobody ever gave me the impression of understanding the orchestra and the technique of each instrument more perfectly than did Victor Herbert. I don't remember that his interpretations ever seemed in the least subtle or refined, or even original. I think that on the rare occasions when he played music that was not sympathetic to him, he took very little trouble, and the result was dull. He liked music that was hearty and straightforward like himself, and he became terrifically excited with dramatic works. On one occasion (I believe in Pittsburgh) [November 27, 28, 1903] I was rehearsing the Tschaikowsky Concerto with him and he worked himself up to an almost uncontrollable frenzy of musical ardor with the result, since the piece was spinning along fluently, that the orchestra and the soloist became equally excited. Finally the pace and the fortissimo was too much for me. I felt that I was being completely submerged, and I roared for mercy. He did not hear me for some seconds, but at last my shouts of "Stop for God's sake," reached him. He was quite breathless when he asked me, almost indignantly, what was the matter. "Your tempo and your dynamics," I retorted. "I can't possibly cope with them." Herbert wiped his streaming face and said rather disappointedly: "Is that all? All right." Then, raising both his hands high in the air, he yelled at the orchestra: "Let her go, me Bhoys!" and we were off again, just as before. The performance that evening was a huge success and my fingers were paralyzed and bleeding. This, of course, was over 30 years ago, and since then the Tschaikowsky concerto has been played faster and louder by many pianists. But up to that time I feel pretty sure that nobody had delivered it with the frantic excitement of Victor Herbert.
His Irish humor was very comical sometimes. I happened to be in Detroit when he came to lunch at Ossip Gabrilowitsch's home. Herbert entertained us all with his adventures on the orchestral tour he was then making, and spoke of a conductor of a local orchestra in one of the large cities he had passed through. He had attended one of the rehearsals. "The man certainly had an illegant baton," he said reflectively, "and it was a fair treat to watch his hands. Give it to me, gentlemen, he seemed to be saying all the time . . . I don't know what I want, but do, do, do please give it to me!"

As a composer Herbert is remembered almost solely as the creator of charming operettas and musical comedies. The best of them were so successful and so ingratiating, full of winsome melody and romantic passion, that we can only be grateful for his turning to this branch of art. But he began his musical career differently, and when he arrived in Pittsburgh in 1898 he had already composed two cello concertos that skilfully blended classical and romantic styles. The earlier is unpublished and almost totally unknown; the latter, especially in recent years, has gained considerable currency and has been recorded twice. A fine piece in its own right, it seems to have inspired Dvorák to write his masterly concerto in the same medium. Herbert had also composed a mellifluous Suite for cello and orchestra, a large secular cantata for solo, chorus and orchestra entitled The Captive, and numerous songs, all permeated with the spirit of romanticism that was then rampant.

And it was in Pittsburgh, as head of a fine symphony orchestra apparently destined for great achievement, that Herbert hoped to continue as a composer of serious art music. He wrote a long and ambitious symphonic poem bearing the title Hero and Leander, and he wrote it only because he was musically ambitious. Program music and symphonic poems were in vogue. Liszt had shown the way, Richard Strauss was the leader, conductors were supposed to be composers, and Herbert was impelled to write something, in his own words, "of no commercial value" for "critical and serious-minded musical people." Success would be, again in his own words, a "source of far greater satisfaction . . . than any light popular music or any comic opera can ever be." The first performance occurred in Pittsburgh on January 18, 1901, and New York heard it four days later.

The work, of course, was suggested by the well-known mythical tale of Leander, youthful lover of Hero, the latter a priestess of Aphrodite, who lived on the Thracian side of the Hellespont. He had to swim the forbidding waters from Abydos to Sestos, and one night he forfeited his life and he challenged the tempest-tossed strait. Hero, learning of her loss, threw herself into the churning waves and perished likewise.
The legend has great romantic appeal. Keats wrote a sonnet entitled “On a Picture of Leander” which concludes with these two lines: “Dead-heavy; arms and shoulders gleam awhile:/He’s gone: up bubbles all his amorous breath!” — and Byron sang of it in the opening of canto two in his “The Bride of Abydos.” Paying tribute to the lovers’ mutual affection Byron closed his first stanza by writing: “That tale is old, but Love anew/May nerve young hearts to prove as true.”

At another time, however, Byron made a different allusion to the legend. Wanting to test the veracity of folklore he swam the same passage (more than four miles including distance increased by a strong current) and took great pride in his accomplishment. Obviously he felt some strain, for on that very day (May 3, 1810) he wrote to a friend: “This morning I swam from Sestos to Abydos, the immediate distance is not above a mile but the current renders it hazardous, so much so, that I doubt whether Leander’s conjugal prowess must not have been exhausted in his passage to Paradise.” Then six days later, on May 9, he wrote a poem called “Written after Swimming from Sestos to Abydos,” and the two concluding stanzas cry for quotation:

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\text{But since he crossed the rapid tide,} \\
\text{According to the doubtful story,} \\
\text{To woo — and — Lord knows what beside,} \\
\text{And swam for Love, as I for Glory;} \\
\text{'Twere hard to say who fared the best:} \\
\text{Sad mortals! thus the Gods still plague you!} \\
\text{He lost his labour, I my jest:} \\
\text{For he was drowned, and I've theague.}
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I really doubt that Herbert ever read these two selections from Byron. If he had, they might have shattered his ultra-serious approach to the ancient tale.

After its premiere the Pittsburgh critics hailed the work as a masterpiece. This was a pardonable reaction, for Herbert was extremely popular in the city and the “hometown boy” had made good. He could write great art music as well as great entertainment music. But the New York critics, more experienced and more sophisticated, tempered their enthusiasm with judgments that were fair, unbiased and coolly observant. To the majority it was not a masterpiece. Krehbiel said that it was never trivial and that some of the music was genuinely emotional. Henderson described it as thoroughly modern, well sus-
tained in style, somewhat fragmentary but gorgeous in its instrumental color scheme.

There was one critic, however — and a good one — who idolized Herbert (indeed, he called him "the Irish Wagner"), and with gratifying consistency he praised *Hero and Leander* highly. This was James Gibbons Huneker no less, and he wrote in the New York *Sun*:

Mr. Herbert has clung to the barest outline of the story — the woman, her lover, the perilous passage across the stormy waters, the death. The psychology is not complicated, the expression of passion and pain evoked by poet's vision, ample but intense . . .

It would be folly to deny Mr. Herbert's musical forbears. He stems from Liszt, Wagner, Tchaikowsky and Richard Strauss . . . He has an individual style of his own . . . Hitherto his devotion to the purely external side of his art caused his admirers to wonder if he would ever explore other regions besides the prettily romantic or the picturesquely sensual.

The question was satisfactorily answered last night. "Hero and Leander" has a strong, passionate climax, an almost brutal climax, dramatic withal, and its tunes are good, virile and full of sentiment. But what is more desirable, the composer has contrived atmosphere, poetic atmosphere, and . . . the prelude creates definite images . . .

The interweaving of the themes, the constant play of ingenuity to avoid conventional assonances, harmonic commonplaces, trite rhythms, coupled with boldness of tinting, all these reveal the breadth and depth of the composer's studies during the past year. Even the storm episode is not banal because of its suppression of old-fashioned screaming chromatics and other banalities . . .

Alas, the work did not "take hold," and no other conductor offered to program it. It still remains unpublished, and the original manuscript is lost. (It must be admitted that Herbert was not a careful man when it came to preserving his autograph scores; the original manuscript of his first grand opera, *Natoma*, produced in 1911, has also vanished.) But of *Hero and Leander* there is a set of orchestral parts in the Library of Congress, and today the famous Fleisher Music Collection in the Free Library of Philadelphia can make available the score and parts to any orchestra desiring them. Recently Karl Krueger took advantage of this opportunity and recorded the work for the Society for the Preservation of the American Musical Heritage. I want you to hear it now, as played by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra of London, conducted by Mr. Krueger.

[At this point in Mr. Waters' address a recording by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra of Victor Herbert's *Hero and Leander* was heard for the first time in Pittsburgh since its premiere was conducted by the composer with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra in 1901.]

What you have just heard may be no masterpiece, but neither is it a triviality. It is an eminently serious work of an eminently serious musician who, for six years in Pittsburgh, served his art and his city
well. We shall always be indebted to him for his warmth, industry, effort and innate musicality. His approach to music was peculiar and, unfortunately, unique. I say this because more people in the world of musical art should share and feel the concept he entertained of the mysterious realm of tone. He told an interviewer:

Sit in a darkened room and leave your mind free from prejudice while you listen to a voice chanting an ancient Irish Banshee song. Give your imagination fair berth and see if it isn't the wail of a cantor in [a] synagogue — wonderfully beautiful music — or a song of the Far East, a Grecian folk song, the shriek of the American Indian in a war dance, a snatch of Gregorian music, or even some of the Chinese music that one hears a bit of in Frisco. It's all the same.

Taken literally this aphoristic reflection is nonsense; taken figuratively it is beautiful, for it is an attempt to bring the entire spirit of music, so differently manifested in contrasting civilizations and societies, into a concentrated humanistic unity. And the artist and man whose 108th birthday was celebrated five days ago never stopped trying to achieve it.

Before he left Pittsburgh Herbert had resumed the writing of musical comedies and operettas. Babes in Toyland (1903) was the most notable from this period. Then back in New York he embarked upon a remarkable series of shows, some of them (relatively speaking) immortal, some deserving revival, and some just as deservedly fallen into oblivion. Who does not remember Mlle. Modiste (1905) that precipitated Fritzi Schef to fame? and The Red Mill (1906) with its cloying but unforgettable sweetness? That same season saw the production of the unsuccessful double-feature Dream City and The Magic Knight, the second half being a delightful spoof of Wagner's Lohengrin. It could be a delightful, profitable and amusing exercise for the opera departments of music academies. The brilliant Naughty Marietta came in 1910, making such vocal demands that full-fledged opera singers had to be recruited for it. That same year brought out also the dismal failure, When Sweet Sixteen, which I call to your attention only because of the effort to introduce into it a scene from Shakespeare's As You Like It. The Enchantress of 1911 (featuring Kitty Gordon of the beautiful back) contains the loveliest waltz tune that I know (the refrain of the "Champagne Song"), and Sweethearts of 1913 was filled with graceful airs and sparkling verve. Herbert's last great work in this lighter genre was Eileen, first known as Hearts of Erin, which began its ill-fated career on New Year's Day of 1917 in Cleveland, was destroyed by fire, and never regained the permanence that it promised. Yet here is an excellent example of how true national color — in this
case Irish, of course — can be put to exquisite use in musical theater.

Curiously enough not one of his operettas ever had its first performance in Pittsburgh. Before he became conductor here there was little reason for such an event. During his brief stay such a premiere might have soured his appearance on the podium. After he was gone, his own affection for the town had probably lessened.

Herbert was a musician to his fingertips and he worked them to the bone — in making music and in aiding fellow artists regardless of the type of music that engaged them. His valiant efforts to obtain a just copyright law illustrates this, and so does his participation in founding ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers), that powerful and still little understood performing rights organization without which composers would have but a pittance of the financial benefits that now accrue to them. And Herbert, be it noted, wanted the serious composer to share equally with the popular. Put all the money into one pot, he advised, and divide it equally among all the members regardless of whether the composer has written a fugue, a symphony, an opera, a foxtrot, a waltz or a musical comedy. This was his constant thesis. But it did not prevail, and it must be admitted that it ran counter to all the history that we know.

He did enough, and far more than most. And he was a great human being besides. He was the man of whom Fritz Kreisler told me: “Victor Herbert had the greatest capacity for pure friendship of any man I ever knew.”

Among all the citizens that have graced the Pittsburgh area, Victor Herbert certainly stands at or near the top!