



The Choruses of Georges Bizet

BY HUGH MACDONALD

When it comes to the nineteenth century, choirs and choruses are accustomed to singing the great German works by Beethoven, Mendelssohn, and Brahms, and the Verdi Requiem is familiar to most big choruses. But French music is less often sung, especially by smaller choirs; they might sing some Berlioz or some Gounod, but few choirs have any choral music of Georges Bizet (1838–1875) in their repertoires unless they still sing *Ave Maria* to a tune from *L'Arlésienne* or join in the refrains of the Habanera or the Toreador Song from *Carmen*. While a few might know Bizet's *Te deum*, his name is so irrevocably attached to *Carmen* that even such popular works as his Symphony in C and the *L'Arlésienne* suites seem to lie in its shadow.

Choral works by Bizet are sufficiently various to fit any program of mixed works, and these are now all published by Fishergate Music, some of them never published before. As in Berlioz, Gounod, and a number of French composers of the period, women's voices are deemed to be "Dessus," so that altos in modern choirs are singing the second Dessus line and occasionally sharing the tessitura of the first Dessus. It was the influence of German and English choruses that led the French to adopt the SATB lineup, a process that was evolving during Bizet's working life.

Composition students at the Paris Conservatoire were expected to prepare for a career in opera, with

the Prix de Rome the first goal for ambitious young musicians. In the examination for this prize, the preliminary test required the composition of a fugue and a chorus. This is the origin of Ravel's five early choruses, and there are similarly four Bizet choruses that came into being this way, two of them in the examination itself in the years 1856 and 1857, two from practise efforts written in class for his composition teacher, Fromental Halévy. These are all accompanied by a small orchestra.

The earliest of these is the *Valse avec chœur* (Waltz for Chorus), dated January 11, 1855, when Bizet was sixteen. He was given verses from an earlier French opera, in this case *La Nuit de Noël*, an opéra-comique by Henri Reber on a libretto by Eugène Scribe, first played at the Opéra-Comique in 1848. The words are banal jollification in praise of waltzing and dancing, but the music is a brisk tuneful waltz with two B sections in contrasting keys. Likely from the same year is another "practise" chorus, the *Chœur d'étudiants* (Students' Chorus). The text is again by Scribe, this time taken from the opera *Le Lac des fées* by Auber, played at the Opéra in 1839. The riotous text is sung only by men's voices, with two tenors and two basses given brief solos, and student high spirits are in plain view.

In 1856, Bizet sat the exam itself and set *Le Golfe de Baïa* (The Gulf of Baïa), two stanzas from an evocative

The Choruses of Georges Bizet

poem about the Bay of Naples by Alphonse de Lamartine. This is a lovely work, with a soprano solo hovering above the chorus, especially at the end where the repeated “la la la” fades into the distance (Figure 1). Bizet liked it so much that he adapted parts of it for his opera *Ivan IV* ten years later.

He passed the preliminary test that year but failed the main exam, so he again entered for the prize a year later, 1857, when the set text was *La Chanson du rouet* (*Spinning Song*), a poem by Leconte de Lisle. This catchy piece calls for a soprano soloist and the same small orchestra and mixed chorus as *Le Golfe de Baïa*, and while the singer loves her spinning-wheel, a middle section ruefully acknowledges that the wheel will one day spin thread for her shroud.

Bizet passed the preliminary round and then went on to win the Prix de Rome itself. A year later he was in Rome with the obligation to write a sacred work as proof of his industry as a young composer on the state’s dime. He decided to write a *Te Deum*, which was composed between February and May 1858, soon after his

arrival in Rome. On April 17, 1858, he told his mother that the *Te Deum* was finished but still needed to be orchestrated. “I am not sure what to think of it. Sometimes it seems good, sometimes detestable. What’s certain is that I am not cut out for religious music.”¹

The *Te Deum* was first performed in 1971. It requires a full orchestra with soprano and tenor soloists. In four movements, it has a lively soprano solo for the “Tu rex gloriae” and a “Te ergo quæsumus,” which seems to take Mozart’s *Ave verum* as a model. A broad passage at “Pleni sunt cœli” in the first movement, repeated in the last movement, will be familiar to those who know *Les Pêcheurs de perles*, composed six years later.

In 1859, while he was still in Italy, Bizet composed his longest work for chorus and orchestra with reciter and vocal soloists. This is the “ode-symphony” *Vasco de Gama*, composed in Rome between January and March 1860 and submitted by Bizet as holder of the Prix de Rome. His plan was to write a “grande symphonie”² on the *Lusiad*, the Portuguese epic by Luiz Vaz de Camões (1524–80). The clear model for such a work was the

The musical score for measures 128-134 of Georges Bizet's *Le Golfe de Baïa* is presented for five vocal parts: Soprano Solo, Dessus I, Dessus II, Ténor, and Bass. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is common time (C). The score begins with the tempo marking "(comme venant de très loin)" and the dynamic marking "pp" (pianissimo). The Soprano Solo part features a melodic line with "Ah!" exclamations. The Dessus I and Dessus II parts provide harmonic support with similar melodic lines. The Ténor and Bass parts enter with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, accompanied by "La la la" lyrics. The score concludes with a final "La la la" in the Ténor and Bass parts.

Figure 1. Georges Bizet, *Le Golfe de Baïa*, 1856, mm. 128–134.
Fishergate Music. Used with permission.



ode-symphony *Christoph Colomb* by Félicien David, played in Paris in 1847, which has similar scenes of sailors setting sail, a catchy song for a young male sung by a soprano, a mighty storm, a prayer, and a happy arrival. Bizet's librettist was a French linguist living in Rome, Louis-Michel-James Lacour-Delâtre, although Bizet was not happy with his work and had to replace some lines with lines of his own.

The action covers the departure of Vasco da Gama's 1497 expedition from Lisbon. A double chorus of sailors and soldiers sings farewell to Portugal, and the young officer Léonard, a soprano, sings the *Boléro* that Ines used to sing to him. This is a gem, a clear pointer to the verve and character that Bizet put into *Carmen*. The giant Adamastor appears and causes a storm to threaten the ship with torrents of chromatic scales. The monster, sung by six basses in unison, warns the Portuguese to turn back. Calm returns, but fear remains. Vasco calls the men to prayer, a lovely movement for six-part chorus mostly unaccompanied. Land is espied and they all rejoice. Asia yields its treasures and submits to the invaders.

Vasco de Gama is a half-hour work for full chorus and orchestra with a reciter and three soloists. It was labeled "Part I," although no other part was ever composed. It was submitted to the Institute in June 1860, whereupon the Academicians warned the young composer against harmonic boldness but observed that the work promised a brilliant future. After his return to Paris, Bizet conducted the first performance at a concert by the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts on February 8, 1863. The next performance took place on July 17, 1863, in Metz with the Orchestre National de Metz Grand Est conducted by David Reiland, recorded with other choral works by the Palazzetto Bru Zane.

In complete contrast, *Saint-Jean de Pathmos* (*St John of Patmos*) is a setting for unaccompanied men's voices of a text by Victor Hugo based on the book of Revelation. It was composed for a Belgian choral festival in 1865. Bizet's friend Edmond Galabert wrote: "I was staggered by the elevated character of the piece and by its difficulty. So Bizet explained to me that Belgian choral societies [*orphéons*] were on a quite different level to that of French societies and that this choral piece would be very well performed. Unfortunately I do not recall the

Belgian town it was intended for. I have a vague idea that it was not Brussels, but I can't be certain."³ Galabert was probably referring to Cambrai, actually in France, where Bizet was a member of a twenty-five-man jury judging choruses from all over Belgium and northern France on August 20, 1865. Bizet's chorus was probably performed at that time, although no record of a performance has been traced. It is the only unaccompanied choral work Bizet is known to have written, and it offers a challenge for intonation and stamina, running for eight minutes unaccompanied and including a fugue.

For the Exposition Universelle presented in Paris in 1867, two composition *concours* were announced by the Minister in charge, one for a *Hymne*, the other for a *Cantate*. Bizet entered for both (his cantata *Les Noces de Prométhée* is lost). Of the two poems offered for the *Hymne*, Bizet chose *Hymne de la paix* (*Hymn of Peace*) by Gustave Chouquet, which was published on April 6, 1867. Compositions had to be submitted by June 1 and identified only by a motto, with the author's name and address attached in a sealed envelope. Bizet entered under his pseudonym Gaston de Betsi, and in pursuit of anonymity he had Galabert copy the score for submission, while the autograph has not survived.

Under the chairmanship of Gounod, the judges examined over eight hundred works, all today preserved in the Archives Nationales.⁴ Some were simple melodies without accompaniment for one verse only; some, including Bizet's, were extended settings. A few called for full orchestra. Bizet alone used full chorus and a large brass ensemble, heavy in Sax instruments. For his motto, Bizet chose "Fù il vincer sempre mai laudabil cosa," the first line from Canto XV of Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* (1516), "To win was always a splendid thing."

Bizet seems to have composed his *Hymne* tongue-in-cheek, hardly expecting it ever to be played. Galabert, who also competed in the two competitions, later said that the judges seemed to think the *Hymne* was just a choral work, with the heavy brass added as some kind of joke.⁵ No prize was awarded, and Bizet's *Hymne* has never been performed. The vacuously patriotic sentiments of the verse would make it hard even for French choruses to tackle without a few misgivings. The music, it must be said, shows every sign of having been writ-

The Choruses of Georges Bizet

ten in a hurry, and the unreasonably heavy demands of saxhorns and extra brass suggest that Bizet knew it would be rejected. After all, the prize for the cantata on this occasion was won by Saint-Saëns, who made no unreasonable demands, yet his piece was never played.

Perhaps Bizet's finest choral work is *La Mort s'avance* (*Death Awaits*), a setting of two somber verses from Cantique CLX of *Cantiques spirituels* (1728) by the Abbé Pellegrin, librettist of Rameau's *Hippolyte et Aricie*. Nothing is known of the work's origin or purpose, although its subtitle, *Méditation sur deux études de Frédéric Chopin*, reveals that it takes its harmonic sequence from Chopin's *Étude* op. 25 no. 12 in C minor and *Étude* op. 10 no. 1 in C major. It is clearly a mature work and was probably performed under Bizet's direction since he wrote out the choral and orchestral parts himself, and a vocal score was published in 1869.

One last choral piece is a brief *Ecce Sacerdos*, published after Bizet's death in 1885 in *Le Livre choral*, an immense collection of sacred works compiled by Prosper Sain-d'Arod. It is for soprano/alto voices in three parts and keyboard (piano or organ). The text is an antiphon and a responsory from the Liturgy of the Hours and the Graduale Romanum.

Choral music in Paris in Bizet's time was dominated by his friend and mentor, Gounod, and by the composer of *Mignon* and *Hamlet*, Ambroise Thomas, both of whom wrote abundantly for choirs. Bizet was often called in as rehearsal pianist. One great might-have-been is the thought of more operas if he had not died at age thirty-six shortly after the premiere of *Carmen*; but one might equally lament the unwritten choral music he might have written if he had been spared. His operas display magnificent choral writing, including little-known scenes from *Ivan IV* and *La Jolie Fille de Perth*, which could easily be extracted and performed on their own. What we have is worth the exploration by choirs both large and small.

Most of these choral works have recently been recorded for the first time in the admirable collection of four CDs issued as no. 6 in the series "Portraits" from Palazzetto Bru Zane (BZ 1059), the foundation that has done so much to support French music of the nineteenth century. The second CD in the box opens with the recording of *Vasco de Gama* mentioned above,

followed by *Le Golfe de Baïa*, *La Chanson du rouet*, *Chœur d'étudiants*, and *La Mort s'avance* sung by the Flemish Radio Choir also under David Reiland. These recordings are a revelation for anyone unaware that these vital works even existed.

Two of these pieces, *Le Golfe de Baïa* and *La Mort s'avance*, are published with singing English translations, and it is planned to provide English singing versions of all the rest. The distribution of these works in orchestral or piano/vocal score is handled by Ficks Music of Philadelphia.

An expert group could tackle *Saint-Jean de Pathmos*, but experts are not needed for the Prix de Rome choruses. These could be performed with piano, since vocal scores are published with piano reductions in all cases. *La Mort s'avance* makes a powerful impression, and *Vasco de Gama* would be a bold adventure for choruses, just as da Gama's famous voyage of 1497 was for him. 

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NOTES

¹ Letter of April 17, 1858. Hugh Macdonald, *Bizet in Italy* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2021), 41.

² Letter of August 3, 1859. Antoine Marmontel, *Symphonistes et virtuoses* (Paris: Chaix, 1881), 259.

³ Georges Bizet, *Lettres à un ami, 1865-1872*, ed. Edmond Galabert (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1909), 21.

⁴ F-Pan F¹² 3097-3099.

⁵ Georges Bizet, *Lettres à un ami*, 26.