

HENRI KOWALSKI: FRENCH MUSICIAN IN MELBOURNE

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Kowalski, of Polish and Irish descent, was born in Paris in 1841 and died in Bordeaux in 1916. After studies at the Paris Conservatoire he began a concert career as a pianist which took him to Germany, Spain, England, the United States of America, Canada, and, from 1880-82, Australia.

In 1880 he gave a series of concerts in Melbourne, acted as French Juror at the International Exhibition, and toured country centres in Victoria. According to reviews in *The Argus* his recitals were highly successful, and they concluded with improvisations on tunes handed to him. However, the music critic remarked tartly: "The practice, we think, is hardly consistent with the high rank which M. Kowalski holds in musical art." (22 September 1880)

In 1885 he returned and settled in Sydney, and the following year was appointed conductor to the Sydney Philharmonic Society. In 1887 he co-founded the Sydney Orpheus Club with Léon Caron, and established a French musical depot to promote his native music. He appeared in concerts for the benefit of Australian artists, and called for a government subsidy for his training schemes.

His own piano pieces run to over a hundred: many of them, and some of his songs, were performed in Australia, and his three-act lyric opera *Vercingétorix* was given in Melbourne in 1881. His most famous composition was the "Marche Hongroise" – said to have been played in London on twenty pianos in concert. A copy of his "Chinoiserie. Impromptu pour piano", (Paris, 1894) is in the Boston Public Library, and his song, "Wilt thou be mine?", with words by Albert George Dawes, is in the La Trobe Library, Melbourne. His "Austrian" opera *Moustique* was first staged in Brussels in 1883, and in Sydney in 1889. This was based on a libretto by Marcus Clarke, with whom Kowalski was closely associated. The copy of his book *A travers l'Amérique* (Paris, 1872) held by the State Library of Victoria is a signed presentation copy to Clarke. Kowalski's song, "We banish love", was composed to words by Marcus Clarke.

According to Clarke's biographer, Brian Elliott, Clarke could never get Kowalski to accent English words correctly, and he quotes a Sydney *Bulletin* story of Kowalski saying of Clarke: "My goodness! He is good. He is clevare. But he is wild: so so wild. He come to my room and he say 'You have the first soprano here, and then you have her there, and then the tenor enters *au fond* and *rum-tum-tum!* and you call that opera!'" After Clarke's death, 2 August 1881, Kowalski gave the proceeds of one of his concerts to the fund for Clarke's family.

Oscar Comettant, who was a Juror at the 1888 Exhibition in Melbourne, composed for it a march, "Salut à Melbourne". He was rather nettled when Alfred Plumpton, music critic of *The Age*, suggested that it was too like Ko-

DENNIS DAVISON

walski's "Marche Hongroise". Comettant praised Kowalski in his book *Au pays des kangourous...* (Paris, 1890). He witnessed him directing the Sydney Philharmonic Society in the Australian première of "l'adorable *Marie-Madeleine de Massenet*" and mentions that a Miss Wood of Petersham was a pupil of Kowalski and a brilliant pianist.

When I staged the première of Clarke's unpublished comedy *Reverses* at Monash University in 1979, it seemed appropriate to use Kowalski's piano piece "The Belles of Melbourne (Valse de Salon)", played by Margaret Kilpatrick, as introductory music.

Henri Kowalski, once known as the "Prince of the Pianoforte", has been forgotten by Australian historians of music, but I would like to make a collection of his compositions associated with Victoria, and in particular use them in productions of Victorian plays of the nineteenth century.

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HENRI KOWALSKI

KOWALSKI, Henri

"The Belles of Melbourne", Melbourne, W.H. Glen and Co., n.d. (Copy in State Library of Victoria.)

There are some items relating to Kowalski and Sydney in the Mitchell Library, Sydney, including a copy of *Cosmos*, 1895, which has a portrait of Kowalski.

Eric Irvin's *Australian Melodrama*, Sydney, 1981, p. 38, refers to *Moustique*, and has a portrait of Kowalski.

Argus reviews of Kowalski's six Melbourne recitals are on 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27 September, 1880.

I possess a copy of "Marche Hongroise", Paxton, London, n.d., and photocopies of "Wilt thou be mine?", "We banish love", "The Belles of Melbourne", and Comtant's "Salut à Melbourne".