

LEON CARON: HIS ROLE IN THE MUSICAL LIFE OF 19TH-CENTURY MELBOURNE

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Léon Victor François Caron was born Jan. 13, 1850 at Boulogne-sur-Mer, France. He had the fortune to be taught music for a while by Alexandre Guilmant (later to become one of the best known organists in Paris, and organist in the Trinité church). According to several reports Caron kept up correspondence with Guilmant all his life – if it could be found, this correspondence would indeed provide a valuable insight into musical life in Melbourne. Caron majored in the violin and was sent by the local municipalities to study in Paris. In 1870 he was in the running for the *Prix de Rome* but the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War meant that no prize was awarded that year. Obviously no Communard, Caron hurriedly left Paris and escaped to London where he stayed for a year then left for America, heading first for New Orleans where he was engaged as a first violin for a French Opera company. In 1872 he was engaged by the conductor Patrick Gilmore (1829-1892) to play in an orchestra for the Boston World Peace Jubilee where a choir of 20,000 performed with an orchestra of 2000 (inspiration for Caron's *Victoria Cantata*?). Caron then took a position with the orchestra of Theodore Thomas remaining there until 1876 when the orchestra disbanded through lack of funds. The last venture Thomas undertook was to organize and provide music for the Philadelphia exhibition of 1876.

On the advice of the English composer C.E. Horsley (who from 1866-1872 had lived in Melbourne) Caron decided to leave America and try his luck in Australia. He arrived in 1876 and joined Lyster's *Opera Company* as first violinist, thus he would have performed in the ambitious production of *Lohengrin*, as well as the first performance of *Aida* in Melbourne. At some point in these years (1877-1878) Caron began conducting as well, starting by one night replacing Alberto Zelman who was unable to perform. Lyster's *Grand Opera Company* went on tour to New Zealand in 1879 (under the management of G. Musgrove not Lyster) and Caron apparently did a lot of conducting (in Dunedin, 18 operas in 22 nights, according to Caron himself in an interview in *Table Talk*, 13 Feb. 1902).

On his return to Melbourne he met up with a former acquaintance the French violonist Camilla Urso who was touring Australia. She had first heard Caron perform as a young boy in Boulogne. She commissioned him to engage and conduct an orchestra for twenty-five concerts. During the 1880s Caron also conducted for the *Montague-Turner Opera company* – for instance in 1882 he conducted two seasons with them at the *Bijou* theatre, where programmes included Gounod's *Faust* and Thomas's *Mignon*. He also worked in collabo-

ration with the singer Emilie Melville.

In 1880 Caron won the first prize of 100 guineas for his *Victoria Cantata* which was performed at the opening of the Melbourne Exhibition by a choir of 1000 and orchestra of 125, conducted by Caron himself. He was also musical director and chairman of the musical committee for the 1888 International Exhibition in Melbourne (his experiences in Philadelphia possibly would have helped him here).

After the death of Lyster, Caron attempted to set up his own opera company in Melbourne performing works in English such as Thomas's *Mignon*, and Massé's *Paul et Virginie*. The venture was disastrous. He tried again in Sydney with equally disastrous results.

In 1889 Caron was asked to join J.C. Williamson's (Triumvirate of Williamson, Garner & Musgrove) Royal Opera Company to conduct *Yeoman of the Guard* at the recently opened (1886) Princess Theatre (*Table Talk*, 1888). He remained with J.C. Williamson's off and on for the rest of his life, as conductor and musical director.

Caron wrote the music for two highly successful pantomimes *Djin Djin* (1895) and *Matsa* (1896). As conductor, or more appropriately, musical director, he did a lot of minor orchestration (as Zelman had for *Lohengrin* and J. Siede for *Les Huguenots*), wrote many interpolated ballets and songs, as well as coaching chorus, orchestra and soloists.

Caron's musical output includes numerous songs, ballets, a choral symphony, 3 string quartets, violin concerto and grand opera *Mata-Mati*, which was never performed (*Table Talk*, 1902). He also wrote music for ceremonial occasions such as the Coronation celebrations of 1902.

Caron died in Sydney 1905, Australia had become his home, and in an interview in *Table Talk* (1902) he spoke very warmly of its many attributes, its climate like that of Southern France (!) and above all its wonderful voices "Australian voices are the best in the world."

To look a bit more closely at Caron's music, The *Victoria Cantata* (performed recently by Richard Divall in the Exhibition Building for a sesqui-centenary concert) is conventional, very reminiscent of Sullivan (whom Caron considered the best modern English composer) and Verdi. It is stirring music and although not wildly original it is nicely written and has a vigour and momentum to it — certainly very appropriate for the occasion for which it was written.

The pantomimes: *Djin Djin* is a quite outrageous pantomime in which every possible gimmick seems to have been employed — including the eruption of a volcano on stage (surely inspired by Auber's *La Muette de Portici*, a popular opera in Melbourne usually performed under the alternative title *Masaniello*). *Djin-Djin* involves the antics of Prince Eucalyptus and his mate Tom Wallaby in Japan. Sullivan's *Mikado* is another obvious influence. The musical numbers

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composed by Caron were highly praised by critics, the *Argus* critic described them as “full of briskness, local colour and variety; sometimes operatic... at others sentimental and piquant... and sometimes humorous” (*Argus*, 27 Dec. 1895). The pantomime of the following year *Matsa: The Fire Queen* was a similar extravaganza, an Egyptian affair (influenced by *Aida*) with an opening scene set in the middle of a pyramid where mummies rose up out of their coffins (surely inspired by the famous Cloister scene of *Robert le diable* where the nuns rise out of their tombstones and dance a seductive ballet).

Caron's Grand Opera, *Mata-Mati* was based on Victor Hugo's *Les Orientales* and he himself arranged the libretto. It was apparently never performed and I have unfortunately not been able to trace it down. The only music of Caron's that I have been able to look at is the *Victoria Cantata* and assorted minor pieces such as songs and a dance. This is disappointing, since it means that my assessment of his music is obviously restricted and probably does not do him justice. The craftsmanship of the *Victoria Cantata* suggests that Caron may well have written other music of similar standard.

The most striking impression one has of Caron as a musician, is that of a professional – that is, someone who could whip up a pantomime, chorus, song, ballet, more or less on call and with little fuss. Apart from the value of his music, his value to Melbourne musical life was assured by his skill as a conductor, and as a musical director, and his obvious concern with achieving high standards in orchestral playing – innumerable reviews comment on this, just to give a quotation from one:

M. Leon Caron is the most popular conductor in Melbourne. This ideal Frenchman retains all the best characteristics of his race – the grace and sparkle, the touch of artistic Bohemianism, the bright and charming temperament, that is more nearly allied to wisdom than the muddy article usually associated with the heavy ‘philosopher’ in Anglo-Saxon countries (*Table Talk*, Feb. 1902).

Indicative of the extent to which Caron had become recognized as an Australian, is the number of times his music was performed on occasions of national significance. Apart from the *Victoria Cantata*, he was also chosen to organize and conduct the musical proceedings for the opening of the first Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901.

Caron's influence on Melbourne's musical scene warrants further study – it would be especially interesting if one could trace down his more “serious” musical out-put.

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