

# HORACE REMI POUSSARD: 19th CENTURY TRAVELLING VIOLINIST

HORRIE POUSSARD \*

Horace Remi Poussard was one of a number of French musicians who came to Australia in the latter part of the nineteenth century, bringing with them musical styles and compositions that provided some contrast to the predominantly English-based classical music of the times. He was born in Chateau-Gontier, Mayenne, France in 1829 where his father, Charles, was a music teacher for some years. Charles became a member of the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire in Paris in 1835<sup>1</sup> and then in 1850 moved to Saint-Malo to teach music at the Collège de Saint-Malo.<sup>2</sup>

As a boy, Poussard was taught violin and piano by his father and at the age of 10 became the pupil of François-Antoine Habeneck (1781–1849), famous teacher and founder of the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, and Delphin Alard at the Conservatoire imperial de musique in Paris.<sup>3</sup> Poussard graduated from the Paris Conservatoire in 1849 with First Prize for violin, and *La Vigie de l'Ouest* printed the following review of his performance:

He enchanted the auditorium by the grace and sad sweetness of his rendition of the *souvenirs of Bellini* and here he was up against other recent and also delicious *souvenirs*: [. . .] Horace Poussard is not only a violinist of the highest order but he is also a talented pianist and teacher. He leaves the other pupils at the conservatoire far behind him, which is to say that he is privileged in his abilities and with work he could do anything.<sup>4</sup>

Poussard began his professional career in Paris and later performed further afield in Vienna, Greece, Germany, Hungary and other European centres, as well as in “the Orient” (Turkey, Egypt). He often played operatic fantasias that he had composed during his travels.<sup>5</sup>

In 1855 Poussard made his formal musical debut in Paris followed by further touring within France (St Malo, Brest, Vannes, Lorient). He married Marie Frin in Paris in April 1855 but nothing else is known of her. In 1858 he performed at a soirée in the Beethoven Room in Paris with cellist

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\* Great-grandson of Horace Remi Poussard.

Rene Douay, a younger fellow French musician who was also a First Prize graduate.<sup>6</sup> In 1859 he performed at a number of venues in England including the Crystal Palace, and also performed before Queen Victoria. He toured Wales and Scotland where he collected many local compositions and composed a number of English and Scottish "airs". He returned to England with Douay in 1860 for a number of performances in London and, finding their professional relationship so agreeable, the pair subsequently decided to tour Australia and New Zealand over the next five years.<sup>7</sup>

In 1860, Poussard and Douay left Southampton on the *Queen Victoria* bound for South Africa but unfortunately it was wrecked on Edgecombe Rock at the harbour entrance. After they had sued and won a case against the shipping company they sailed again, this time for Australia on the *Wellesley*. They arrived in Melbourne on 15 August 1861 and soon after began a busy schedule of concerts there, as well as touring throughout Victoria (the goldfields of Bendigo, Ballarat and Castlemaine were good potential sources of income), Tasmania and South Australia.<sup>8</sup> Two tours of South Australia were made, the first under the management of Robert Sparrow Smythe, a journalist with *The Age* turned entrepreneur who continued for the next fifty years managing theatrical performers of various sorts in Australia, New Zealand and Asia. These included the French writer Paul Blouet ("Max O'Rell") in 1893 and Mark Twain's visit to Australia in 1895. Smythe became a great friend of Poussard over the years.

It was typical of theatrical touring at the time to pack in as many concerts as possible. Within two months of their arrival in South Australia in May 1862, Poussard and Douay had given forty concerts in Adelaide and surrounding towns like Tanundra, Kapunda, Gawler, Burra and Clare.<sup>9</sup> Poussard had a falling out with Smythe on this first tour of South Australia in August. He returned to Melbourne and got together his own concert party, including Douay and three local singers, and toured South Australia extensively from October 1862 to March 1863.

During this initial period in Australia, Poussard and Douay played a mixture of "high class" works by composers like Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven and Schubert (reflecting their classical training), along with variations on popular songs, national airs and operatic fantasias. This latter collection included "Variations on 'God Save the Queen'" "Fantasia on English, American and Scottish Aairs", "Souvenirs of Hungary", "Souvenirs of Brittany" and "Variations on French National Aairs". These performance pieces were very popular in many places and provided Poussard with quite

a following, particularly when he included his own versions of "Home Sweet Home" and "Pop goes the Weasel"!<sup>10</sup>

Poussard and Douay also wrote their own comic songs, often based on Comic Opera compositions such as those by Offenbach. It should be remembered that they were touring at the time of the Gold Rush when audiences were often made up of miners and employees of local commercial industries which supported mining and agriculture. Many performers adapted their repertoire to suit the audiences at hand. Poussard and Douay could also play a number of instruments, which allowed them to present a wide range of pieces suitable for the piano or harmonium as well as stringed instruments.

Of particular interest at that time was their composition—"a musical poem"—of the trials and tribulations of the explorers Burke and Wills. The explorers had left Melbourne in August 1860 and the news of their death from starvation and exhaustion at Cooper's Creek in south-west Queensland was revealed in November 1861. The first performance of this musical poem was in Melbourne on 2 April 1862. It was titled "The Expiring Explorers" and comprised five sections: "Adieu! Farewell to the Metropolis", "The Departure", "The Trials of the Route", "The Prayer", "Death of the Australian Heroes".<sup>11</sup> This performance received mixed reviews from the Melbourne press. Some felt that while the technical performance was good, the music was not of a "sufficiently descriptive character to forcibly illustrate the incidents of the ill-fated expedition, and maintain the title of the composition".<sup>12</sup>

On their first tour of South Australia Poussard and Douay produced an extended version, renaming it *The Dead Heroes*. It comprised 17 sections and was a most elaborate composition that included sections on everything from "The Songs of the Birds" to "The Deserted Depot: Despair" and "The Closed Eyes".<sup>13</sup> It was a great feature of their many performances in South Australia and was occasionally used in a subsequent tour of New Zealand. Part of the reason for its popularity was the deep feeling in the community about the death of Burke and Wills. Poussard and Douay also used improvisations on popular tunes of the day in their "musical poem" including "Rule Britannia", "Home Sweet Home", "The Last Rose of Summer" and the tune played by a volunteer band of musicians when Burke and Wills left Melbourne—"Cheer, Boys, Cheer".<sup>14</sup> In addition to popular tunes, Poussard and Douay also used poetry to describe the events portrayed in *The Dead Heroes*, and this was considered a major improvement on relying solely on music.<sup>15</sup>

Douay also composed his own pieces on local themes including a harmonium solo on the theme of exploration, dedicated to the well-known South Australian explorer McKinlay who had been sent to Cooper's Creek to find the remains of Burke and Wills.

Following their successful tour of South Australia, the whole party then went on a tour of New Zealand, beginning in the South in Dunedin in April 1863 and finishing prematurely in Wellington in August. On several occasions, Douay was ill and could not perform.<sup>16</sup> This illness was intermittent and no specific diagnosis seems to have been reported in the local press. While in Wellington, Poussard met up with Florence Beverley, a singer who later took on the stage name "Florence Calzado". Poussard, Douay and Beverley returned via Sydney and worked their way overland to Melbourne, though sometimes Douay was too ill to appear. On arrival in Melbourne they were commissioned to perform but Douay "went mad"<sup>17</sup> and subsequently returned to France where he was sent for recovery, or perhaps committed, to the Asile de St Anne in Paris (a then state-of-the-art asylum), still playing his beloved cello. He died in 1892 at the age of 56 years.

Meanwhile Poussard and Beverley responded to a standing invitation from R. S. Smythe and his wife, singer Amelia Bailey, to meet up with them in Colombo to tour India and South Africa. They left on 26 July 1864 and gave their first concert in Colombo on 19 August. This was the start of an extensive tour, which took in much of India (October 1864 to December 1866) and South Africa (March 1867 to November 1868). They performed more than 300 concerts over the four-year period—an enormous number considering the time involved in travelling under, at times, quite primitive conditions. Poussard gained particular affection with audiences in Calcutta, and at some stage he married Beverley, and a child was born although documentation has yet to be found for either of these events. Meanwhile Smythe and Bailey had two children on tour. In India they travelled as far as Peshawar, further north than any other professional troupe of musicians had done,<sup>18</sup> and in South Africa were the first European musicians to visit the Orange Free State.<sup>19</sup> Their South African tour coincided with the discovery of diamonds in the Kimberley region in 1867.

The concerts were again a mix of classical and popular pieces with the two singers providing many contemporary and traditional songs with a predominantly European and British flavour. A typical programme was the 150th concert in South Africa, a three-part programme containing:



Later in 1886, however, the Poussards set up the Lottie Montal Opera Comique Company and produced an extravagant version of Offenbach's *Madame l'Archduc*. The production was strong on costumes and sets but the leading lady (Lottie) was considered by many reviewers to be lacking in talent and the main reason for the show's dismal failure.<sup>26</sup>

Shocked by their Melbourne experience, the Poussards moved to Sydney, which had a stronger European, and French, community. The next twelve years were to show a new facet of Poussard's musical influence. Unlike his earlier Australian ventures in the 1860s, his musical output now focused on the need to improve the musical tastes and standards of the colony. Gone were the popular songs to the miners and others. Instead Poussard began to work closely with a number of accomplished musicians, many of whom were French—pianists Henri Kowalski and Alice Charbonnet-Kellerman, singer Claudius Deslouis, conductor Leon Caron, organist Auguste Wiegand and cellist Edgar Strauss. Most, including Poussard, were staff at Alice Charbonnet-Kellerman's Conservatoire de Musique set up in the 1880s.

In 1887, Poussard helped found the Beethoven String Quartet. The Quartet was "organised for the avowed purpose of furnishing the Sydney public with increased opportunities of hearing the best class of 'chamber music'".<sup>27</sup> The Quartet invited visiting artists, including Madame Poussard, and performed six concerts from July to October 1887. Poussard also contributed to a second chamber music group (the Orpheus Society) which commenced in 1877. He performed several times each year between 1888 and 1890 when the group disbanded. Like many of the musicians he performed both "high art" and more popular instrumental music. He played his own compositions like his "Printemps", "Hungarian Dance" and "Andante in B Minor"<sup>28</sup> but also chamber music by Beethoven and Schumann. In 1893 Poussard formed the Sydney Quintette Society which produced two series of four concerts comprising chamber music, instrumental and vocal items. Many new works were brought to the Sydney public by this Quintette.

During this time, Poussard continued to contribute to the musical scene through his teaching and conducting. He was an examiner for the Australian Music Association and travelled in New South Wales in that capacity. He remained a teacher of students at the Conservatoire de Musique until his death in 1898. Over his long career he produced more than thirty compositions including a number of accompaniments to British and French popular songs, fantasias, provincial dances, and the *Dead Heroes* musical

poem, a copy of which has yet to be found. Copies of most of his other compositions have now been acquired from the British Library and will be available in mid-2008 at the Music Library, University of Melbourne Library, for further study.<sup>29</sup>

#### Notes

1. See the 8th Annual Report of the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire (1835) at <http://hector.ucdavis.edu/SdC/Chronology>.
2. See Eugène Herpin et al., *Histoire du Collège de Saint-Malo*, St Ives, Plomel, 1902.
3. Auguste Wiegand, *The Largest Organ in the World and the Musical Artists of Sydney*, Sydney, William Maddock, 1892.
4. *La Vigie de l'Ouest*, 14 September 1849, quoted in Marie-Laure Guezingar, "Vie musicale et culturelle à Saint-Malo de 1839 à 1870: musiques, théâtres, casinos", DEA thesis, University of Rennes 2, 1993.
5. *La Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris*, 4 February 1855, p. 39.
6. *La Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris*, 23 March 1858, p. 93.
7. *The Musical World*, 28 July 1860, p. 480.
8. *Illustrated Melbourne Post*, 24 May 1862, p. 38.
9. *South Australian Advertiser*, 23 July 1862, p. 2.
10. *South Australian Advertiser*, 17 February 1863, p. 3.
11. *The Argus*, 31 March 1862, p. 8.
12. *The Age*, 3 April 1862, p. 5.
13. *South Australian Advertiser*, 10 June 1862, p. 1. See also Peggy Lais, "Horace Poussard and *Dead Heroes*: a Musical Tribute to Burke and Wills", *Context: a Journal of Music Research* 23 (August 2002).
14. Tim Bonyhady, *Burke and Wills: from Melbourne to Myth*, Balmain, N.S.W., David Ell Press, 1991, p. 186.
15. *South Australian Register*, 12 June 1862, p. 2.
16. *Wellington Independent*, 9 July 1863, p. 3.
17. "Music Notes", *The Australasian*, 17 September 1898, p. 652.
18. *Bell's Life in Victoria and Sporting Chronicle*, 1 July 1865, p. 2.
19. *Natal Mercury*, 31 December 1867.
20. *Cape Argus*, 27 August 1868.
21. *La Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris*, 15 (10 April 1870), p. 116.
22. *The Age*, 25 January 1886, p. 8.
23. *The Australasian*, 4 April 1885, p. 650.
24. *The Argus*, 28 July 1884, p. 8.
25. *The Australasian*, 8 August 1885, p. 267.
26. *The Age*, 1 February 1886, p. 5.
27. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 July 1887, p. 8.

28. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 March 1888, p. 7; 10 January 1889, p. 8; 14 August 1890, p. 3.
29. For a discussion of Poussard's compositions see Peggy Lais, "The Changing Repertoire of Horace Poussard", honours thesis, Faculty of Music, University of Melbourne, 2002.