

VICTOR HERBERT'S *Lament*

BY JOSEPH SMITH

Had Victor Herbert (1859-1924) not composed a single operetta, he would still deserve a place in America's musical history as performer, conductor, and composer. Following his arrival in the U.S. in 1886, he was quickly recognized as a great cellist. His performance of his second cello concerto aroused the admiration of Dvorak, who went on to compose his own cello concerto shortly afterwards. When the beloved band conductor Patrick Sarsfield Gilmore died, Herbert succeeded him in 1893, bringing his band—the closest rival to Sousa's—to new triumphs.

From 1898 to 1904, Herbert conducted the Pittsburgh Orchestra. The Pittsburgh years were marked both by artistic success and by constant friction with management. Interestingly, his enemies used his work with the Gilmore band as a stick with which to beat him—the association marked him as hopelessly *déclassé* in the symphony world. Already, though, he was drawn more and more to operetta (and its financial rewards!)—he had his first big hit, *The Fortune Teller*, in 1898.

Having found his *métier*, he never paused for breath. In a Broadway career spanning three decades, he composed more than forty operettas, including *Babes in Toyland*, *Naughty Marietta*, and *The Red Mill*. For most Broadway composers, this would have meant merely writing the songs. Herbert, however, like the greatest continental operetta composers, approached his works as a “composer” in the classical sense of the word: he orchestrated them all himself. As a result, his music has a distinctive Herbert sound—if reorchestrated, it is no longer Herbert. (The same is true of a later, very different composer of Broadway shows—Kurt Weill.) In 1916, Herbert became the first American to compose a symphonic film score. In his spare time, Herbert brought lawsuits that established composers' rights to performance royalties for performance and recordings of songs. He was a principal force behind the founding of ASCAP.

In 2008, Fordham University Press published *Victor Herbert: A Theatrical Life*, by Neil Gould. Considering that Herbert's previous major biography (*Victor Herbert: A Life in Music*, by Edward N. Waters, Macmillan, 1955) exceeds five hundred pages, one may ask whether we need a new one. The answer is yes. Waters, bullied by Herbert's daughter (who inherited her father's penchant for litigation), was forced to present Herbert as a perpetual saint and paragon. Waters's book is so defensive that it includes Herbert's final lunch check, in order to refute the rumor that gluttony was a factor in his death! Gould's excellent book proves that Herbert simply does not require whitewashing—he was not only an astoundingly hard-working artist who richly deserved his success, but also by and large an admirable man. Gould is highly informative not just on Herbert, but on the theater of this era. One regrets that this important book has been so poorly copyedited and indexed. For instance, the name of one of America's most famous Broadway composers is initially misspelled “Rogers,”

later written correctly as “Rodgers,” but is indexed under neither spelling.

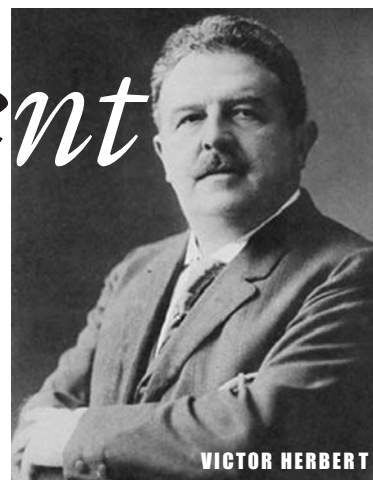
Calling Herbert an “American composer” is a simplification. He was born in Dublin in 1859, but was educated in Stuttgart, where he married a German soprano. They moved to the USA in 1886, when she was offered a Metropolitan Opera contract, and he was in turn engaged to play in the orchestra. (What in fact is more “American” than to immigrate in the interests of opportunity?) Herbert was culturally molded by his German years—he even swore in German! But he continued to identify himself as Irish—he joined the American Irish Historical Society, the Friends of Irish Freedom, and the Society of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, and he was honored by the Gaelic Society. He made Irish jokes at his own expense. His house was “largely decorated from top to bottom in shades of green.” As for Irish musical influence, he once said, “I rejoice that the memories of my earliest childhood are inseparable from the Irish melodies sung over my cradle by my mother.” Indeed, he was singing them back to her at the age of ten months! Herbert produced an *Irish Rhapsody* for orchestra, and his aficionados regard the score of his Irish operetta *Eileen* as one of his very best. Herbert called the show's opening “the happiest day of my life.”

Herbert composed *The Bards of Ireland*, five songs and the present piano piece, *Lament*, in 1908 for the 124th anniversary dinner of the Society of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, an organization dedicated to winning Irish independence. The composer's note tells us that the original folk tune of the *Lament* commemorates Owen Roe O'Neill, “A popular Irish General, poisoned, according to popular belief, shortly before Cromwell's landing in Ireland in 1648.”

There could hardly be more factors operating against the dissemination of a piece of music than those against the *Lament*. It was the sole piano piece in the middle of a group of songs. It was published exclusively for this club, rather than distributed to a general musical public. Herbert was not known as a piano composer—he never performed as solo pianist, and in fact described his playing as “rotten,” although he did play accompaniments in public. (He could, however, compose effectively for the instrument—see “La Coquette,” included in my Dover anthology *American Piano Classics*.) Thus this tasteful and harmonically varied setting has slumbered in obscurity for a hundred years.

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The American Irish Historical Society, 991 Fifth Avenue in New York, will present Joseph Smith in a lecture-recital November 18th at 6:00 PM, which will include piano pieces by Victor Herbert. ■



Lament

VICTOR HERBERT

Mournfully

The musical score is written for piano in 3/4 time, featuring a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It consists of five systems of two staves each (treble and bass clef). The first system begins with a dynamic marking of *f* and the tempo instruction **Mournfully**. The piece is characterized by a somber and expressive melody in the right hand, often supported by a steady bass line in the left hand. Measure 7 includes a *ff* dynamic marking. Measure 13 features a *sfz* dynamic marking and a *rit.* (ritardando) instruction. The score concludes with a double bar line at the end of the fifth system.