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As Julian Budden points out in his foreword to *Interviews and encounters with Verdi*, presented by Marcello Conati, and translated in the English language edition by Richard Stokes,¹ some of the articles in this fascinating book are familiar to Verdians but the tales they relate are at times incomplete. This is surely true of "The Orchestra of the Opera" (pp.40-43), Léon Escudier's account of Verdi's encounter with Pierre-Louis Dietsch, the conductor of the orchestra of the Paris Opéra, a few days before the performance of *Les Vêpres siciliennes* in July of 1863.² Verdi's requests for further or extra rehearsal (in fact the accounts differ) provoked from one or several members of the orchestra a kind of insolence that Dietsch was apparently unable to control. (At the time, the rules regarding orchestral rehearsals were not fixed; furthermore, the musicians felt that from the original performances of 1855 they were well in command of the score.) Incensed, Verdi walked out, and later attended neither the dress rehearsal nor the première.

The implication of Escudier's account is that the then director of the Opéra, Emile Perrin, was partly to blame for the orchestra's lax behavior, though as countless archival documents demonstrate, to say

nothing of public reports, such behavior was hardly uncommon at the Opéra under earlier directors. Perrin himself put the blame entirely on Dietsch, whom most of us already know as the feeble conductor of the disastrous Paris performances of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* in 1861; he thus reported the incident to the minister in charge of the Opéra, Maréchal Vaillant, Ministre de la Maison de l'Empereur, Grand Maréchal du Palais, Sénateur, Membre du Conseil privé, etc.--the highest officer in the immediate service of Napoléon III. On 21 July 1863 Vaillant replied to Perrin as follows:

You write to me that on the 16th of this month, during a rehearsal of Les Vêpres siciliennes, the Opéra's orchestral musicians committed the double offence of failing to recognize the administrative authority and seriously insulting the person of an illustrious composer, who had no choice but to leave the premises, given such an inexplicable refusal to cooperate, and who--still, to this very day--refuses, out of self-respect, to appear again in the Opéra theater. By allowing such insubordination to take place in his presence, and by failing to exercise his authority to ensure that the rules of discipline and propriety are

respected, the orchestra's conductor in turn failed to meet his own responsibilities, and proved yet again that he lacks the influence and firmness necessary to control and direct the artists placed under his command. He must no longer be permitted to remain at the head of the organization which the administration confided to his charge [. . .]³

Dietsch was thus immediately removed, and, by a letter delivered to the Opéra on Wednesday night, 22 July 1863,⁴ after the second performance of *Les Vêpres siciliennes*, involuntarily retired, as of the next day. A broken man, he died less than two years later, on 20 February 1865.

This is not the place, of course, to review Dietsch's biography,⁵ though some explanation has long been needed as to why such a clearly less than qualified man was permitted to lead the orchestra of what was at the time perhaps the world's leading opera company. In 1830 Dietsch won a Premier Prix at the Conservatoire as a double-bass player, and began a career in the orchestra at the Théâtre Italien. After working as Maître de Chapelle in several Parisian churches, he was hired by an earlier director of the Opéra, Léon Pillet, as Chef de Chant--the coach-conductor post recently vacated by Jacques-Fromental Halévy. Indeed, Dietsch appears to have been one of Pillet's protégés:⁶ he was hired on the very day that Pillet began his directorship (1 June 1840), and was no doubt promised an operatic commission on taking the job. It is for this reason that the opera produced at the Académie Royale de Musique on 9 November 1842 as *Le Vaisseau fantôme* was composed not by Richard Wagner, but by Pierre-Louis Dietsch. (The libretto, by Paul Foucher and Bénédicte-Henry Révoil, probably owes little or nothing to the prose draft Wagner sold for 500 francs to Pillet on 2 July 1841. And Conati to the contrary notwithstanding, [p.40], the 500 francs did *not* come from Pillet's own pocket.)⁷

Dietsch's opera shortly disappeared beneath the waves, as Henrich Heine later put it;⁸ but Dietsch remained afloat at the Opéra as Chef de Chant, receiving an increase in salary from 3000 to 4000 francs on 1 June

1852, and to 5000 francs on 1 July 1856.⁹ When Narcisse Girard died very suddenly (he had headed the Opéra orchestra, and with considerable firmness, since 1846), Dietsch, now the senior Chef de Service on the staff, was named conductor--on an interim basis--on 20 January 1860, at a purported salary of 9000 francs.¹⁰ Meyerbeer, too, was well aware of Dietsch's impotence, and had made it a contractual condition that Dietsch not be allowed to conduct the performance of his new opera, *L'Africaine*.¹¹

Wagner's "revenge" was thus carried out by Verdi. But Dietsch, from the tomb, may have had the last laugh. For his highly touted successor, François-Georges Hainl, soon ran into trouble as well: At the beginning of January, 1866, the orchestra apparently sabotaged successive performances of *L'Africaine* (even though the composer, too, was now two years in his grave). Hainl, well aware of the circumstances of his predecessor's downfall and thus anxious to show that the orchestra's insubordination was not due to his own weakness, wrote to Perrin: "This [i.e. the sabotage] was not a mere matter of everyday discipline. The rules simply could not have foreseen a case of this sort!"¹²

As Conati reports, Verdi's ill-feeling towards the Paris Opéra lasted a long time. His ire might have been mitigated (but I suppose it was not) by the grand gesture that Parisian musical "officialdom" made to him less than one year later, when he was offered the chair, left vacant at Meyerbeer's death on 2 May 1864, of "Associé Etranger" of the Académie des Beaux-Arts of the Institut de France. The six members of the Section de Musique of the Academy at the time included D.-F.-E. Auber, Antoine-Louis Clapisson, Henri Reber, Michel Enrico Carafa, Ambrose Thomas, and Hector Berlioz. And the "Associés Etrangers" of the Académie des Beaux-Arts as a whole included the Italian sculptor Pietro Tenerani, the German painters Heinrich Maria von Hess, Johann Friedrich Overbeck, and Peter Cornelius, the German architect Leo de Klenze, the English architect Charles Robert Cockerell, as well as Saverio Mercadante and, of course,

Gioacchino Rossini.

Verdi accepted the offer in a letter written in French and addressed to Charles-Ernest Beulé (1826-1874), the archaeologist who was chosen as Secrétaire perpétuel of the Academy on Halévy's death in 1862 (the other candidate for the post at the time was Berlioz). The letter, which I believe has not been previously published, is brief, polite, and conventional:

Monsieur Beulé

Secrétaire perpétuel de l'académie des Beaux-arts de l'Institut impérial de France.

J'ai reçu votre honorée lettre qui m'annonce ma nomination de membre de l'académie des Beaux-arts de France. Je ne m'attendais guère à cet honneur.

Je vous prie, Monseigneur, de vouloir bien être mon interprète auprès de l'illustre corps académique, et de lui faire agréer tous mes remerciements pour l'insigne honneur qu'il m'a fait.

Je vous prie, Monsieur, d'agréer personnellement l'assurance de tout mon dévouement.

Gênes 29 Juin 1864

*G. Verdi*¹³

This letter was officially received at the Academy's meeting of 2 July 1864. On that very day, at Fontainebleau, the Emperor Napoléon III signed the decree that named Verdi "Associé Etranger" of the Academy des Beaux-Arts of the Institut de France. Such associate members received no stipends, nor did they participate in the administration of the Institute (supervising the Rome Prize competitions and the French Academy at Rome, managing the Academy's endowed foundations, acting as jurors in consort with others for the salons, electing fellow

academicians, etc.), but they did, when in Paris, have a voice in the debate upon various questions of science and art.¹⁴ Among other distinguished citizens of the world, Joseph Haydn had been an Associé Etranger of Académie des Beaux-Arts--and Thomas Jefferson had been an Associé Etranger of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres. We can safely say, then, that Verdi was in reasonably good company. Indeed, the last thing F.-J. Fétis notes in his otherwise emphatically lukewarm article on Verdi in the *Biographie universelle des musiciens*--Fétis, who earlier in his career had sought a place among the "immortals" and who no doubt continued for decades after his departure from Paris to covet associate membership in the august fraternity at the Institute--is this particular honor.

But honor or no honor, Verdi's feelings about France, due to the unpleasantness of 1863, remained decidedly mixed. As Marcello Conati has pointed out in another context, Verdi had always found in French culture the embodiment of his own artistic faith.¹⁵ He was simply often put off by the French. "I've lived too long in France not to understand how insupportable the French have made themselves with their insolence, their pride, and their boasting," he wrote to Cesare De Sanctis¹⁶--and one can find similarly disparaging remarks throughout his correspondence. But at the time of the Franco-Prussian War, Verdi's sentiments were clearly with France--a nation whose philanthropy, progress, and civilization entitled her, he said, "to remain what she was, the head and the heart of Europe."¹⁷ No less an observer than Thomas Mann read these letters in admiration of Verdi's grief at the defeat of France with its prophecy of German domination: "How rightly he saw it," wrote Mann, "a simple composer of opera, but a man with the intuition of the cultured European."¹⁸

NOTES

1. (London: Gollancz, 1984), pp. xv-xvi. Edition in the U.S. as *Encounters with Verdi* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1984).

2. See Léon Escudier, "L'Orchestre de l'Opéra," *L'Art musical*, 23 July 1863, pp. 271-272.
3. Archives Nationales [Paris], AJ XIII 1019. I give the original French text of this letter in "The fortunes of the Flying Dutchman in France: Wagner's 'Holandais volant' and Dietsch's 'Vaisseau fantôme', in *Wagner*, volume 8, No. 2 (April, 1987), p. 62.
4. According to the account in *Le Ménestrel*, XXX (26 July 1863), p. 267.
5. For an appreciation of his career, see Emile Haraszti, "Pierre-Louis Dietsch und seine Opfer," *Die Musikforschung*, VIII (1955), 39-58 -- a study that must be supplemented with the unpublished archival documents contained in Archives Nationales F XXI 1056 and AJ XIII 1185.
6. See F.-J. Fétis, *Biographie universelle des musiciens*, VIII, 398.
7. See article mentioned in note 3 above, in which I show that the famous little receipt for 500 francs, which Wagner signed, and which has heretofore been thought to have been in Wagner's hand, was, in fact, prepared by Edouard Monnais, Commissaire Royal près le Conservatoire de Musique, l'Académie Royale de Musique, le Théâtre Royal Italien et le Théâtre Royal de l'Opéra Comique. Monnais was the well-known journalist who wrote under the pseudonym of Paul Smith.
8. *Lutèce* (Paris, 1855), p. 318.
9. Archives Nationales, AJ XIII 1185.
10. See *Le Ménestrel*, XXX (2 August 1863), p. 283. The conducting salary is not given in the archival dossiers mentioned in note 5.
11. Archives Nationales, AJ XIII 1019.
12. Archives Nationales, AJ XIII 1185.
13. Archives de l'Académie des Beaux-Arts, 5 E 45 (1864); letter No. 51.
14. The nature of the Academy is well set out for English readers in C. H. Stranahan, *A history of French painting* (New York: Scribner's, 1907), *passim*. Paul Landormy and Joseph Loisel give a fuller accounting in "L'Institut de France et le Prix de Rome," in the *Encyclopédie de la musique et dictionnaire de conservatoire*, ed. Albert Lavignac and Lionel de la Laurencie, part 2, vol. 6, pp. 3479-3575.
15. See Conati, "Verdi et la culture parisienne des années 1830," in Peter Bloom, ed., *Music in Paris in the Eighteen-thirties* (New York: Pendragon, 1987), pp. 209-210.
16. See *Verdi: the man in his letters*, ed. Franz Werfel and Paul Stefan (New York: Fischer, 1942), p. 276 (10 August 1870).
17. *Ibid.*, p. 287 (2 September 1870).
18. See *Letters of Thomas Mann*, ed. and transl. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Knopf, 1971), p. 397 (to Agnes E. Meyer, 12 May 1942). Mann was reading the book cited here in notes 16 and 17.