

Victor Herbert: An Irishman and the New York Philharmonic

By Marion R. Casey

The New York Philharmonic, America's oldest symphony orchestra, was founded in 1842 as the Philharmonic Society of New York. Its illustrious history also includes that of the Symphony Society of New York (founded 1878) with which it merged in 1928. Victor Herbert began his association with New York City and its orchestras in October of 1886. His wife, Therese Herbert-Foerster, was a headlining soprano at the Metropolitan Opera for the 1886-1887 season. Her presence on the stage in New York, and Victor Herbert's position as first cellist with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, was the result of a fortuitous meeting with Walter Damrosch in Germany earlier that summer. Little did the Irish-born Herbert realize, but his ticket to America would eventually secure for him a permanent place in American musical history. The New York Philharmonic would give Victor Herbert a forum for the display of his virtuosity as both cellist and conductor, a tradition it continues today for premier artists such as Mstislav Rostropovich.

Victor Herbert, cellist, conductor and composer, was born in Dublin in February 1859. He was the grandson of Samuel Lover, a celebrated Irish novelist, poet, composer and friend of Thomas Moore. It was from this extraordinary grandfather that Herbert seems to have derived his musical genius and a lifetime awareness of his Irish heritage. Herbert was raised in his grandfather's house after the death of his father and before moving to Germany for his education. It was in Germany,

upon the urging of his mother, that Herbert took up the study of the violoncello. His virtuosity on this instrument with a number of European orchestras, and his good fortune to be married to a pretty German soprano, is what eventually brought him to New York City, then the musical capital of the United States.

The first official introduction to New York City of Victor Herbert as composer came on 8 January 1887, just three months after his arrival. His debut as composer and solo cellist was provided by the Symphony Society of New York under the baton of Walter Damrosch. Herbert played the Andante, Serenade and Tarantelle from his Suite for Cello and Orchestra, Opus 3. This was the earliest known composition by Victor Herbert, and it had been premiered, to good reviews, in 1883 with the Stuttgart Orchestra. The New York Herald's critic described why Herbert's playing on this occasion was so impressive: "His style is infinitely more easy and graceful than that of most 'cello players, just as his tone is more liquid, more melodious and of a more noble quality, simply because he never forces the tonal quality of his instrument beyond its natural limits."

Therese Herbert-Foerster retired from the opera stage the following season, just as her husband's star began to rise. Herbert and three other musicians formed the New York String Quartet for the 1887-1888 season, giving their first concert on December 8 in Steinway Hall. Herbert was cellist, Sam Franko was first



Courtesy of the N.Y. Philharmonic Archives

violin, Henry Boewig (later librarian for the Philharmonic Society) played second violin, with Ludwig Schenck on viola. The Quartet provided New Yorkers with what had previously been seldom heard in the city--first class chamber music.

Two days later, on 10 December 1887, a Victor Herbert composition was heard in the city for the second time. Theodore Thomas conducted Herbert as soloist in the New York premiere of his Concerto for Violoncello, No. 1. Opus 8 (1884), first at a matinee concert for young people and, later that evening, with the Philharmonic Society of New York at the Metropolitan Opera House. Victor Herbert substituted on short notice for Emil Fischer of the Metropolitan Opera who had been scheduled to sing with the Philharmonic Society and who withdrew due to illness. A flyer in the program from that evening announced that "Mr. Victor Herbert will play instead a Violoncello

Concerto of his own composition."

The New York World called the Concerto "admirably written and very interesting" and remarked that the 28 year old composer played "with so much beauty of tone and such skilful [sic] and brilliant execution as to make his efforts not only entirely worthy of the high standard of performance of the Philharmonic, but so as to hold the audience bound in closest attention during his long solo." Although in the city just over one year, Herbert was already considered a New Yorker; in reviewing the December 10 concert, the Musical Courier wrote, "Thus the hitherto unheard of thing came to pass that the work of a local composer invaded the sacred precincts of the Philharmonic Society. May the success which attended this chance invasion encourage the board of directors to repeat the experiment."

The conductor of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra from 1885 was the famous Wagnerian interpreter, Anton Seidl. Seidl's wife was also a soprano in the opera and, consequently, the Seidls and the Herberts became good friends. When the Brighton Hotel Company hired the Seidl Orchestra in 1888 to initiate a season of summer concerts at the Brighton Beach Music Hall, Seidl appointed Herbert his assistant conductor. It is no surprise, therefore, to find Victor Herbert pledging himself a member of the Philharmonic Society on 9 October 1891, Anton Seidl's first season as permanent conductor of that orchestra.

Victor Herbert was on the teaching faculty of New York's National Conservatory of Music, probably from 1889. The Conservatory had been founded by Jeannette M. Thurber as a free institution for gifted music students and it addressed "itself

to all patriotic and music loving Americans as a NATIONAL ENTERPRISE of the utmost importance in the artistic future of the land." When Antonin Dvorak, the Czechoslovakian composer, came to America in 1892, it was as Director of the National Conservatory of Music. The Philharmonic Society premiered Dvorak's New World Symphony, which had been composed in America, on December 15, 1893 in Carnegie Hall. This occasion united, in public, Dvorak with Anton Seidl, who conducted, and with Victor Herbert, who was solo-cellist.

Three months later, Seidl premiered one of Victor Herbert's most important works, the Concerto for Cello and Orchestra, No. 2, Opus 30, which he had been working on since the summer of 1893. Herbert dedicated this Concerto to the Philharmonic Society of New York and was the soloist with them

at its premiere on 9 March 1894 in Carnegie Hall. The program for this concert noted that Herbert "during his comparatively short sojourn in New York" had "gained well-earned popularity both by his ability as a cello virtuoso and through his activity as a composer. The facility with which he invents charming melodies and the learning with which he weaves the accompanying harmonic texture, together with his thorough knowledge of instrumentation, have enabled him to create works entertaining to the public and interesting to the musician." The New York World commented that the Concerto gave "striking evidence of the composer's skill and musicianship."

Herbert was extremely active in the musical life of 1890s New York, although his popularity was increasingly more than a local phenomena. In addition to being a

Der
Philharmonischen Gesellschaft
in New York
gewidmet.

NEW YORK
PHILHARMONIC
SOCIETY

Zweites
CONCERTUM
Violoncell und Orchester
von
Victor Herbert
OP. 30.

Clavier-Auszug vom Componisten.

Orchester-Partitur Orchester-Stimmen

EDWARD SCHUBERTH & Co
(J.F.H. MEYER.)

NEW YORK,
23 Union Square.

LONDON,
2 Star Yard, Carey St.

Depot:
E. Ascherberg & Co
LONDON.

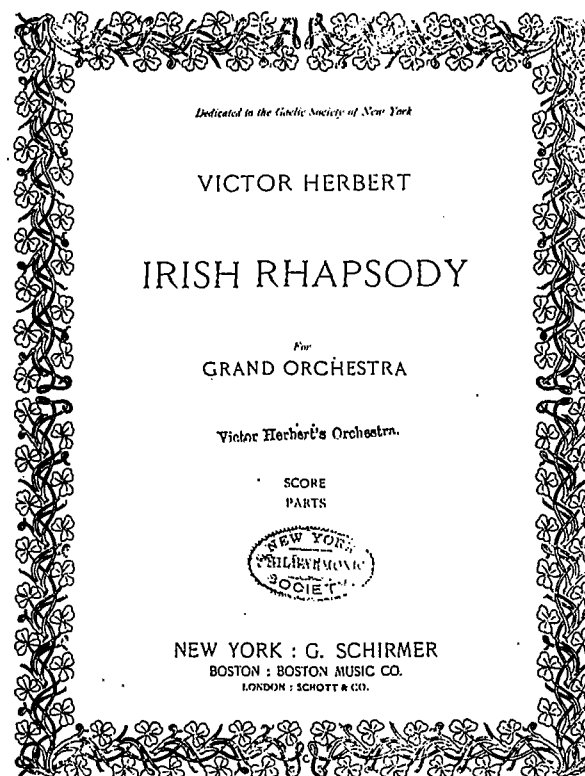
Depot:
C. Dieckmann,
LEIPZIG.

Leipzig, 1894

teacher, soloist, orchestra man, chamber musician (with the recently organized Schmidt-Herbert String Quartet), and composer, Victor Herbert was associate conductor of the Worcester Music Festival; director of the Boston Festival Orchestra (which toured with Tchaikovsky as guest conductor in the spring of 1891); bandmaster of the Twenty-second Regiment of the New York National Guard (known as "Gilmore's Band" after the Irishman, Patrick Sarsfield Gilmore, who had revitalized it in 1872); and one of the launchers of the American Symphony Orchestra, formed in 1894 with the aim of creating a first-class orchestra comprised solely of native American musicians.

As if this were not enough, Herbert began to compose for musical theatre. His earliest known operetta, Prince Ananias, was premiered at the Broadway Theatre in New York on 20 November 1894 by the Bostonians. Herbert's second venture, The Wizard of the Nile (1895), played over 500 performances in the United States and, when it opened in Vienna in September of 1896, it became the first American comic opera produced in a German-speaking land. Herbert wrote two more operettas before taking on yet another professional career. These were even more successful than his first two: The Serenade came to the Knickerbocker Theatre in New York on 16 March 1897 after test runs in Cleveland and Chicago, and The Fortune Teller, which opened in Toronto on 16 September 1898, which was presented on the 26th of that month in New York's Wallack's Theatre. Both operettas starred the young Alice Nielsen.

Victor Herbert's new career at this time, however, was conducting. He was offered, and accepted, the post of maestro with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra in 1898; fourteen conductors had been under consideration. Herbert



Courtesy of the N.Y. Philharmonic Archives

led the Pittsburgh Orchestra for six years, during which time he also wrote the operettas and musical comedies Cyrano de Bergerac (1899), The Singing Girl (1899), The Ameer (1899), The Viceroy (1900), Babes in Toyland (1903), Babette (1903), and It Happened in Nordland (1904).

Herbert's success with the Pittsburgh orchestra, which he brought to New York on tour, even caught the attention of Andrew Carnegie. Carnegie, then President of the Philharmonic Society of New York, was an ardent admirer of Victor Herbert and commented after a Pittsburgh concert in Carnegie Hall that his "idea of heaven would be to hear Victor Herbert and his men play for me twice every day." Carnegie was

one of the main subscribers to a 1903 Conductor's Fund for the New York Philharmonic; it can only be speculated on how influential he was in the choice of Victor Herbert as one of seven celebrated conductors for the Philharmonic's 1903-1904 season. Herbert led three private rehearsals and two public concerts to favorable reviews in his conducting debut with the Philharmonic Society. The program consisted of works by Schubert, Liszt, and Dvorak, and, at the 30 January 1904 concert, Herbert was asked to conduct his own symphonic poem, "Hero and Leander," Opus 33.

Herbert's biographer, Edward N. Waters, says that being asked to direct the New York Philharmonic was the "greatest

honor which Herbert ever received as a symphonic conductor." His first appearance with the Philharmonic was so successful that he was asked to conduct two pairs of concerts with the orchestra for the 1905-1906 season. His appearance with the Philharmonic is significant, because he is repeatedly referred to as the only "American" conductor awarded a hearing by them, and this at a time when Germanic influences prevailed in the symphonic world. Herbert was indeed an American, having become a citizen on 14 October 1902.

On 1 and 2 December 1905, Herbert conducted a program of works by Dvorak (the New World Symphony which he had helped premier with the Philharmonic 12 years earlier), Grieg, Schubert and Liszt. The occasion prompted music critic Henry Krehbiel, one of the Philharmonic's chroniclers, to write: "In strong contrast with most of the visiting conductors, Mr. Herbert made no effort to force the mere muscularity of the gigantic Philharmonic band upon the attention of the audience. Instead he seemed chiefly desirous to show its euphony as well as its virility, and in that he succeeded most admirably. He challenged the admiration of an audience that knew the music, and won a fine guerdon of praise." On 2 and 3 March 1906, Herbert again conducted the Philharmonic and this time the program included his Suite Romantique, Opus 31 (1900).

The Philharmonic's three seasons of guest-conductors (1903-1906) had incited much speculation in New York musical circles as to who would be chosen when the Society went back to having one permanent conductor. On 29 November 1905, the Musical Courier issued the following statement: "Victor Herbert seems to be the logical choice as permanent conductor of the Philharmonic

Society when that body gets ready to choose such a counsellor, guide and friend...Victor Herbert is the man for the place, by all means, and it looks to those on the inside as though the Philharmonic Society is already contemplating his engagement when it makes its final choice." No one was as flabbergasted by this as Herbert himself who had sued and won a settlement for libel from the Musical Courier in 1902! Edward Waters believes that, by this statement, the disreputable Musical Courier practically ensured that Victor Herbert would be dropped from consideration by the New York Philharmonic. The conductor finally chosen for the 1906-7 season, seemingly for his popularity as a guest-conductor, was the Russian Vassily Safonoff.

After leaving the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, Herbert had established the Victor Herbert New York Orchestra in September of 1904. Their Sunday evening concerts became a permanent feature of musical life in New York until Herbert's death, and their recordings with Edison's National Phonograph Company and with the Victor Talking Machine Company increased their popularity. While he continued to write for the musical state, Victor Herbert ventured twice into serious opera, writing Natoma (1911) whose cast included John McCormack, and Madeleine (1914).

Under conductor Josef Stranský especially, the Philharmonic Society of New York played many Victor Herbert compositions. In 1912 they played the new Prelude to Act III of Natoma; in 1915 the "Love Scene" from Herbert's 1889 Serenade for String Orchestra, Opus 12 was presented twice; and in 1916 the Cantata from The Captive (1891) was heard. Victor Herbert's 1898 American Fantasia for orchestra was played by the Philharmonic five times between January 1917

and March 1919. Other pieces were the overture to Herbert's operetta Mademoiselle Modiste, the suite for orchestra Woodland Fancies, Opus 34, and the Irish Rhapsody for Grand Orchestra.

Herbert composed the Irish Rhapsody in 1892 for the Gaelic Society of New York's annual Feis Ceoil agus Seanachus held on 20 April of that year in the Lenox Lyceum. The composition inspired James Gibbons Huneker, another Philharmonic Society chronicler, to call Herbert the "Irish Wagner." According to his biographer Waters, "the Rhapsody became so popular that it was played to death...It was so brilliant and facile, so associated with Irish festivities, and so adaptable to various ensembles that it killed itself as an independent concert number." The Irish Rhapsody is based on melodies used by Thomas Moore as settings for his verses, such as "Garry Owen," "Believe Me If All Those Endearing Young Charms," "St. Patrick's Day," and "Erin, Oh, Erin."

Victor Herbert died in New York City on 26 May 1924. His funeral from St. Thomas' Episcopal Church was attended by representatives of the organizations in the city in which he had been active; the Lambs, the Friars, the Lotos Club, ASCAP (of which he was a founding member), the Associated Musicians, the American Irish Historical Society, the Song Writers, the Bohemian Musician's Club, the 102nd Engineers (formerly the 22nd Regiment), and the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick. The honorary pallbearers were representative of Victor Herbert's varied life: Dr. Emanuel Baruch, Gene Buck, Nathan Burkan, Calvin Child, Daniel F. Cohalan, Nathan Franko, Henry Hadley, Henry L. Joyce, Jerome Kern, Morgan J. O'Brien, James A. O'Gorman, Walter W. Price (one of the Philharmonic's Directors).

John Philip Sousa, Colonel H.H. Treadwell and Emil Winter.

Of all his music for stage and orchestra, the New York Philharmonic chose to play the Irish Rhapsody in memoriam for the late composer at a concert conducted by Herbert's friend, Henry Hadley, on 29 November 1924. No fitter tribute could have been found for the Broadway bon vivant who had continued to associate himself with the land of his birth despite all the glory heaped on him as an American composer. As the Friendly Sons wrote of their former President in 1925, "Ireland gave him birth and America gave him opportunity, and both those nations will for many generations to come hold in grateful memory the character and genius of one of the worthiest descendants of Ireland's long line of bards and musicians, - Victor Herbert."

Sources: Edward N. Waters, Victor Herbert: A Life in Music (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955); Joseph Kaye, Victor Herbert: The Biography of America's Greatest Romantic Composer (New York: G. Howard Watt, 1931). The New York Philharmonic Archives has five first edition Victor Herbert scores, including the Irish Rhapsody.

The image shows a page of a musical score for Violoncello. The title is "Violoncello" and the tempo is "Allegro impetuoso". The score consists of ten staves of music. It includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like "mp", "mf", "f", "p", "pp", "fz", "molto cres.", "rit", "pizz", "arco", "pizz", "fz", "poco acceler.", "Fin Allegro", and "pizz". There are also performance instructions like "Ten.", "cres.", "Lento.", "rit", "molto cres.", "pizz", "arco", "pizz", "fz", "poco acceler.", "Fin Allegro", and "pizz".

Courtesy of the N.Y. Philharmonic Archives



Two Northeastern University history professors, Ruth-Ann Harris and Donald M. Jacobs, have compiled what promises to be a fascinating collection of 4,993 classified advertisements that

appeared in The Boston Pilot from 1831-1850. Future volumes will contain advertisements from 1850 to 1916.

The Pilot was one of the most influential of the Irish-American papers, and its "Information" and "Announcement" columns were frequently used by Irish immigrants to locate lost relatives. In an article in the April 23, 1986 edition of The New York Times, Mrs. Harris, one of the compilers, suggests that it is her hope that these advertisements which "offer a wide array of facts

about the seekers and the sought, including surname, sex, age and physical description, Irish county of origin and port of entry...will help to make up for poor government recordkeeping during that era."

The book, "The Search for Missing Friends", will be published this spring by the New England Historical Genealogical Society and the Northeastern University Irish Studies program. It is one example of the wealth of hidden and largely unexplored material in Irish American publications of the last century.