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Music in Belgian Fine Arts at the Turn of the 19th and 20th Centuries



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Исследование выполнено при поддержке гранта РНФ для малых научных групп № 23-28-01577 «Рецепция музыкальных практик и ее репрезентация в визуальной культуре второй половины XIX – первой половины XX века».

Ключина Елена Витальевна

Музыка в бельгийском изобразительном искусстве рубежа XIX–XX веков

Abstract. The article is devoted to the specifics of the organization of musical life in Belgium at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries and its reflection in the iconography of Belgian fine art. Within the framework of the set objectives, the author determines the origins of the formation and features of independent artistic communities. One of the distinctive features inherent in Belgian non-institutional art is the high involvement of its representatives in various musical practices. Particular attention is paid to the initiatives implemented in the 19th century by the Brussels Conservatory, as well as the transformation of the theatre and music environment of Brussels in the second half of the century. Having briefly covered the history of the reconstruction of La Monnaie, the author determines the significance of R. Wagner's productions for this opera house. Particular attention is paid to the role of Belgian artists in the creation of theatrical costumes and scenery. In determining the organizational specifics of international concert activity in Brussels, great importance is attached to the figure of Octave Maus, secretary of the societies Les XX and La Libre Esthétique. Based on the analysis of the epistolary heritage and concert programs, a periodization of the musical life of the Vingttists, as well as representatives of La Libre Esthétique, is developed and introduced into scientific circulation. The last section of the article describes and analyses masterpieces of painting and sculpture, which should be considered key in the musical iconography of the fine arts of Belgium at the turn of the century, for example, the works of Anna Boch, Théo Van Rysselberghe, Fernand Khnopff, James Ensor, Constantin Meunier and some others.

Аннотация. Статья посвящена специфике организации музыкальной жизни Брюсселя рубежа XIX–XX веков и ее отражения в иконографии бельгийского изобразительного искусства. В рамках поставленных задач автор определяет истоки формирования и особенности организации независимых художественных сообществ. В качестве одной из отличительных черт, присущих именно бельгийскому внеинституциональному искусству, называется высокая вовлеченность его представителей в различные музыкальные практики. Отдельное внимание уделяется инициативам, реализованным в течение XIX века брюссельской консерваторией, а также трансформации театрально-музыкальной среды Брюсселя второй половины века. Кратко осветив историю перестройки Ла Монне, автор определяет то значение, которое имели для этого оперного театра постановки Р. Вагнера. Особо оговаривается роль бельгийских художников в создании костюмов и декораций. При определении организационной специфики международной концертной деятельности Брюсселя большое значение придается деятельности Октава Мауса, секретаря обществ Les XX и La Libre Esthétique. На основании анализа эпистолярного наследия, а также концертных программ разрабатывается и вводится в научный оборот периодизация музыкальной жизни вантистов и представителей «Свободной эстетики». В последнем разделе статьи приводятся описание и анализ произведений живописи и скульптуры, которые следует считать узловыми в музыкальной иконографии изобразительного искусства Бельгии рубежа веков — работы Анны Бох, Тео ван Риссельберге, Фернана Кнопфа, Джеймса Энсора и некоторых других.

Introduction

The present article is aimed at demonstrating the importance of a simultaneous study of symbolist visual art and musical practice. The two were often inextricably intertwined. At times, musical practice appeared to be the main catalyst for the creative searches of the masters who attributed themselves to the independent artistic groups of the 1880s and 1890s. Achieving the research goal is possible only with the application of the contextual approach that can highlight the complex ways of convergence of the designated creative practices. The article examines several factors characterizing the specifics of the Belgian visual and musical culture at the turn of the century. First of all, it specifies the role of the individual in the development and dissemination of the current pan-European musical tradition in the artistic environment of Belgium. In the centre of attention is the figure of Octave Maus, permanent secretary of the independent art society Les XX and organizer of the salons La Libre Esthétique (The Free Aesthetics), music lover and passionate Wagnerian, who, along with Maurice Kufferat and Guillaume Gide, put in considerable effort to maintain and spread the interest of the Belgian and, more broadly, the European audience in the musical heritage of the Bayreuth genius. Special attention is paid to the peculiarities of the organization of musical events and identifying their role in the life of independent art societies of Belgium. In this work we propose a periodization of the musical practice of Les XX and La Libre Esthétique, which, as will be shown, was directly dependent on the personal preferences and friendly contacts of Octave Maus. Particular attention is paid to the role of music in the lives of the prominent representatives of Belgian fine art. Not only does the article analyse individual paintings, but it also demonstrates the high level of integration of artists into the musical life of Brussels.

The specifics of the organization of the artistic and musical life of Belgium in the second half of the 19th – early 20th century

Even before gaining political independence, Belgium was distinguished by the exceptional diversity and richness of its artistic life. There successfully coexisted numerous institutions providing intense artistic training, e.g. Arts Academies in Antwerp (1663), Brussels (1711), Bruges (1717),

Ghent (1748), Liège (1775), etc. Each of them had its own analogue of the Paris Salon and on a regular basis held academic exhibitions, in which promising students could participate alongside with academicians. In 1814, the Belgian Salon started to take place in Ghent, Brussels, and Antwerp alternately. This contributed to stronger competition, increased quality of the exhibited works and the establishment of a steady stylistic pluralism, which in the second half of the 19th century became one of the distinctive features of Belgian artistic culture.

Like in most European countries, by the end of the 1860s, in Belgium there appeared certain preconditions for the emergence of artistic communities outside conventional academic structures. Thus, in 1868, the Free Society of Fine Arts (La Société Libre des Beaux-Arts, 1868–1876) was founded; its representatives mainly followed the realistic trend. The mid-1870s were marked by the appearance of the following associations: The Cocoon (La Chrysalide, 1875–1881), The Rise (L'Essor, 1876–1891), and the Union of Arts (L'Union des Arts, 1876–1885).

However, the most significant platform for the development of Belgian independent fine art was the Les XX group (1884–1893), the establishment and development of which was largely the result of the activity of Octave Maus. Having taken the position of executive secretary, he was responsible for the preparation of the annual February Salon, corresponded with regular and invited members of the society, was in charge of the safe-keeping and integrity, packaging and hanging of the works sent for exhibiting, looked for new names, prepared catalogues and advertising, participated in negotiations with exhibition venues, etc. After the voluntary dissolution of Les XX and its reorganization as La Libre Esthétique (1894–1914), Octave Maus took charge again and continued to put in considerable effort to develop national Belgian fine arts and preserve the results of the fruitful international artistic exchange of the 1880s – early 1890s.

The creative work of the members of Les XX and subsequently of La Libre Esthétique was not distinguished by stylistic unity. Among them were prominent representatives of the symbolist movement, as well as supporters of the fading realism and impressionism. After the performance of Georges Seurat and Paul Signac at the 1887 salon of Les XX, the permanent members of the society formed a bloc of adherents of the neo-impressionist method.

Among the independent artistic communities of the late 1890s, we should also mention Pour L'art (In the Name of Art, 1892–1939) modelled on the Parisian Salon of the Rose+Croix of Joséphin Péladan. It was organized by Jean Delville, a symbolist artist who brought together those who shared Péladan's aesthetics of idealistic art. On November 12, 1892, the first exhibition of Pour L'art featured the works by A. Ciamberlani, É. Fabry, A. Hannotiau, as well as those by representatives of European symbolism whose works had been exhibited several months earlier in the gallery of Paul Durand-Ruel at the salon of the Rose+Croix: M. Chabas, A. Séon, C. Schwabe and some others. Internal disagreements soon led to a crisis, in an attempt to overcome which, in 1896, Delville founded Salon d'Art Idéaliste (The Salon of Idealist Art, 1896–1898).

No matter how diverse and numerous the independent art communities of the second half of the 19th — early 20th centuries were, their public demand, sustainability and viability were determined by a number of organizational features inherent specifically in Belgian culture. The activity of independent art groups in Belgium went far beyond the joint performances of like-minded artists and took on a broad educational mission. Salons of independent art served as a meeting place for the European intellectual elite. They were a cultural space for public lectures on a wide variety of topics. Additionally, they played an important role in the reformatting of the publishing industry in the second half of the 19th century. Moreover, exhibitions of independent art associations almost always turned into concert and music events featured by the outstanding performers of the time, and the musical program impressed listeners with experimental diversity.

The increased public interest in the events organized by independent art associations can be explained by the rich cultural life of Brussels, which in the second half of the 19th century became one of the musical capitals of Western Europe.

Success in the field of musical culture was largely due to official patronage of the king [Canning, 1992, p. 39] who spared no expense in developing the musical culture of Belgium. The scope of the state support is especially visible when considering the history of the reconstruction and development of the La Monnaie opera house.

Gas lighting had been installed at La Monnaie as early as the 1820s, but on January 21, 1855, the building suffered a major fire. The project for the new modern opera was made by Joseph Poelaert in his traditional

style. The building had a cast-iron frame which allowed for the increased height and four storeys with boxes. La Monnaie was revived in the 1860s, and with the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, it became an important centre for the dissemination of German music. The opera house attracted the Parisian audience eager to enjoy the music of R. Wagner, who was taboo in France. With the premieres of *Lohengrin* in 1870 and *Tannhäuser* in 1873, the spirit of Wagnerism reigned in La Monnaie and strengthened even more with the first performance of *Tetralogy* in the German language on the stage of the opera house in 1882.

The fascination with Wagner in Brussels was truly widespread. An ardent admirer of his creative work was Leopold I, who, as legend has it, even on his deathbed forced his pianist Alexis Erel to perform fragments of *Lohengrin*, *The Flying Dutchman* and *Tannhäuser* [Crapanne].

The new Wagner productions at La Monnaie received enthusiastic reviews in the Brussels press. On a regular basis, the magazine *L'Art Moderne* published articles that provided detailed descriptions of the Bayreuth festivals and analysed world events associated with the composer. On January 4, 1891, *L'Art Moderne* published a text that should be seen as a declaration of Wagnerianism of Octave Maus himself, as well as most representatives of Belgian culture at the turn of the century. In that publication, Maus censured the music of the past, criticised contemporary composers for their inability to reach the level of the Bayreuth genius, and discussed the tasks that modern listeners and composers should set for themselves. He ultimately postulated: "We want new scores in the form of drama, not opera. We demand that they be polyphonic, vivid, and richly orchestrated; we want music and action to be so closely connected, so completely fused with each other, that they could not be separated" [Maus, 1891, p. 6].

There were many admirers of Wagner among the Belgian symbolist artists. Of particular interest is Henry de Groux, who, having forcedly left Les XX [Klyushina, 2016, p. 125], following the example of Henri Fantin-Latour, set about creating a cycle of paintings and graphic works on Wagner's epic [Henry de Groux, 1992]. De Groux's fascination with Wagner was so deep that, despite not being personally acquainted with him, he modelled his appearance and behaviour after the German composer.

Another devoted admirer of Wagner was Jean Delville. He confessed his admiration for the composer's work in a letter of November 1895

addressed to Charles Buls, who was then the mayor of Brussels: “The appearance of a spiritual genius like Wagner, and that of another one still not understood — Péladan — is the undeniable symptom of a spiritual renaissance. The 19th century will not be the century of Zola, but that of the idealist Wagner!” [Laoureux, 2014, p. 48]. Among Delville’s work, there is a range of paintings and graphic works inspired by Wagner. Suffice it to recall the work *Tristan and Isolde* (1887, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels) which testifies to the master’s search for iconology where the musical reference would be linked to the expression of light exciting spiritual ecstasy; *Parsifal* (1890, Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels) and other works united by Wagnerian iconography [Westcott, 1990, pp. 5–14].

The La Monnaie opera house is associated with the later work of Fernand Khnopff. In 1900–1914, he was employed in creating sets and costumes for numerous productions, Wagner’s *Parsifal* (1914) included. The costume sketches he created continued the trend towards the revival of neoclassical searches of the early 20th century and had little correlation with Khnopff’s distinctive style of the 1880s and 1890s. Another artist to collaborate with La Monnaie was Émile Fabry. In the early 20th century, he created a series of monumental decorative panels for the design of the main staircase of the opera house. Their plot and thematic diversity were determined by the master’s immersion in the ancient philosophical thought, the ideas of F. Nietzsche, particularly from the treatise *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872), and the epic legacy of Wagner [Guisset, 2000, p. 142].

The public enthusiasm for Wagner’s productions at the Royal Opera House in Brussels was satirically interpreted in Georges Lemmen’s painting *The Twilight of the Gods at La Monnaie* (1903, Museum of Modern Art, Ostend). Lemmen depicts the action on stage from a sharp, high angle, imitating the view from the back rows of the gallery. The footlights are on the actors who appear to be playing a scene from the second act, when Brünnhilde, seeking revenge, reveals Siegfried’s vulnerable spot to Hagen. The bright lighting turns the figures into life-size cardboard puppets, hardly capable of expressing the passionate impulse of Wagner’s characters. Nevertheless, the dark silhouettes of the audience members show that house is full. Everything seems to have frozen. Only the twisted hands of the conductor, raised above the glowing music stand, fly up to mark the orchestra’s entrance the next second.

François-Auguste Gevaert combined financial support and successful management of the conservatory with a policy of inviting world-class musicians to Belgium to teach and give regular solo concerts in Brussels. The conservatory had a special bureau which, since 1865, annually held popular classical music concerts many famous foreign musicians participated in [Tompakova, 2003, pp. 8–9]. R. Strauss, E. Grieg, A. Nikisch, F. Weingartner, and N. Rimsky-Korsakov performed as conductors.

However, up until the beginning of the 20th century, the concert society organized at the conservatory on Gevaert’s initiative did not have a venue that would meet its needs. The lack of comfortable and modern concert halls was a rather serious obstacle many Belgian musicians complained about. For instance, in an open letter of May 3, 1903 in the *L’Art Moderne* magazine, Eugène Ysaÿe wrote caustically: “Are you sure, my friend, that the Belgians see in music something more than a pleasant way to kill time? The question I pose concerns residents of the capital which does not even have a concert hall!” [Ysaÿe, 1903, p. 164].

The problem indicated by Ysaÿe would partly be compensated, on the one hand, by the widespread practice of organizing house concerts in Belgium, and on the other, by the concert and educational activity of two independent artistic groups, Les XX and La Libre Esthétique, which would play a truly pivotal role in the development of pan-European musical culture.

Octave Maus and his role in the transformation of Belgian musical culture at the turn of the century

In the last quarter of the 19th century, Octave Maus (1856–1919) was well-known both in the artistic and in the musical circles of Brussels. In 1881, together with Edmond Picard, he founded the most important literary and artistic magazine in Belgium, *L’Art Moderne*, in which he was an art and music critic.

In 1883, Maus supported young artists who decided to form an independent association called Les XX, and became its secretary. As noted earlier, he took responsibility for solving a variety of administrative tasks. It was to Maus that the members of Les XX owed the annual salon, which worked like a well-oiled machine and attracted the whole constellation of great international names. It traditionally opened in early February and

successfully functioned as an artistic, musical, lecture and educational venue for a month.

However, researchers do not always evaluate the role of Maus unambiguously. Susan Canning, for example, accuses Maus of collaborating with the authorities, arbitrary use of censorship, biased attitude towards individual members of the group, and the deliberate dissolution of Les XX for the sake of personal ambitions and financial gain [Canning, 1992, pp. 38–39]. S. Canning's ambiguous characteristics of Octave Maus does not go in line with what we find in the monograph by Albert Vander Linden on Maus's contribution to the musical life of Belgium. Vander Linden provides numerous quotes from memoirs and obituaries on the death of Octave Maus in 1919 [Vander Linden, 1950, pp. 12–14]. There are no grounds to suspect the researcher of bias and to claim that he deliberately selected quotes to flatter Maus. They just convince us of the fact that the fundamental role that purposeful and tireless Maus played in the development of Belgian culture at the turn of the century was recognition by his contemporaries.

The influence of Maus in Belgium was overwhelming. His role was not limited to conducting the artistic sphere of Brussels by means of performing administrative and secretarial work. Octave Maus was literally omnipresent. Vander Linden lists the honorary titles of the practicing lawyer, patron of the arts and musician: President of the Association of Belgian Writers, President of the Union of Belgian Periodical Press, Knight of the Order of Leopold, Officer of the Order of the Crown, etc. [Vander Linden, 1950, p. 12].

When the Charter of Les XX was approved in October 1883, it was unanimously decided that Octave Maus would be in charge of organizing concert activity of the association [Maus, 1980, p. 18]. Over the following thirty years of Les XX and La Libre Esthétique, it was he who organized musical events every February, with the exception of 1885, 1898, 1899 and 1900.

The concert repertoire of Les XX and La Libre Esthétique was varied. Despite the fact that Maus was a staunch Wagnerian and generally had a keen interest in the German musical tradition, his personal tastes did not impede organizing the first Belgian concert dedicated to the work of the young C. Debussy at La Libre Esthétique in 1894. The deep affection that Maus had for Vincent d'Indy and the Schola Cantorum de Paris did not

get in the way with appreciating M. Ravel or, in later years, with growing fond of the music of I. Stravinsky [Vander Linden, 1950, p. 8]. What stands out in the program of the February concerts is the large number of musical pieces performed for the first time. According to Vander Linden, new works accounted for over 90% of the total music performed [Vander Linden, 1950, p. 25]. This proves the truly innovative nature of the events.

Based on an analysis of the concert programs of Les XX and La Libre Esthétique, it is possible to give a conditional periodization of the musical life of the two most important artistic associations of the Fin de Siècle era.

The first period (1884–1888) was characterized by the absence of a coherent program of musical events. It was largely based on the personal musical preferences of the organizers of the Les XX exhibitions, as well as on the tastes of the invited musicians. Madeleine Maus described the first musical event organized by Les XX in 1884 as follows: “[The first evening. — *E.K.*] featured the Instrumental Union of Gustave Kéfer, a recently created small orchestra; another chamber music session was conducted by the violinist Emile Agniesz and the great pianist Arthur De Greef. Schubert, Mendelssohn, some Belgian works” [Maus, 1980, p. 28]. The concert program objectively did not correspond to the innovative artistic image of the salon. Musical conservatism, and at times blatant amateurism, stood in stark contrast to the presented pictorial and graphic works by J. Whistler, J.S. Sargent, M. Liebermann and others.

In 1886, at La Monnaie, the secretary of Les XX met Vincent d'Indy, student of César Franck, and they quickly became friendly. Madeleine Maus notes in her memoirs that the acquaintance was fateful for both of them: “From the first letters about concerts (the correspondence soon became daily) we notice a remarkable similarity of views <...> In both of them there is the same method and the same punctuality. The same persistence, the same sense of reality, the same psychological insight that enables them to expect nothing from some people and everything from others; the same elegance in dealing with officials, the same natural politeness, the same optimism and cheerful mind. And above all, the same enthusiasm, the same devotion, the same zeal for the service of art. I say „the service of art“ meaning first and foremost Vincent d'Indy as an organizer: for him, performing his own works is secondary, if not tertiary. His letters testify to the major and sincere purpose of his — to

introduce the audience of Les XX to the works by Fauré, Chausson and others” [Maus, 1980, p. 74–75].

By 1888, music had become an integral and equally important part of the artistic life of Les XX. If in the first years (namely in 1884, 1886 and 1887) musical events were held without prior discussion and thorough preparation of the program, and the works varied depending on the performers’ preferences, in 1888 the approach to organizing changed drastically, and preparations became consistent and meticulous. Such a transformation of the attitude to concert and musical practice became possible due to the engagement of professional musicians. In 1888, Maus invited Vincent d’Indy to perform this difficult task. In 1893, he was replaced by Eugène Ysaÿe, and in 1901, the organization of musical events was entirely taken over by Maus himself.

In this regard, the correspondence between Maus and Vincent d’Indy of January 1888 is particularly representative. Vincent d’Indy’s letters came in Brussels almost daily. On January 16, the composer provided a detailed and well-argued draft of the future program [Maus, 1980, p. 78–79]. It follows from the letter that Vincent d’Indy had familiarized himself with the concert schedule of potential performers in advance, had preliminarily agreed on the sequence of the pieces to be performed, etc. The letter of January 26 clarified the program and gave its estimated time: 1 hour 55 minutes for the first part, and 1 hour 45 minutes for the second. On January 28, 29 and 31, the program underwent final approval [Programme, AACB 79631, 1888]. The letters prove that Maus completely trusted Vincent d’Indy and gave him *carte blanche*. In the following years, their correspondence retained the tone of 1888: Vincent d’Indy set the musical agenda, and Octave Maus made minor corrections to it as he thought proper.

The duties performed by Vincent d’Indy were very similar to those of Théo Van Rysselberghe. Always in search of new names, relevant plastic language, and current artistic trends, Van Rysselberghe, in essence, acted as an agent, regularly sending letters from different parts of Europe to Maus with detailed reports on the latest artistic events. From correspondence it follows that the paintings and graphics of H. de Toulouse-Lautrec, A. Guillaumin, J.-L. Forain, G. Caillebotte, A. Sisley, and A. Dubois-Pillet appeared in the exhibition halls of Les XX owing to Van Rysselberghe [Lettre, AACB 6330, 1887; Lettre, AACB 6331, 1887].

Vincent d’Indy on his own accord performed similar tasks, thought, not always as successfully as Van Rysselberghe, as he gave preference to musical representatives of the school of César Franck, which he himself came from, as well as to those whose works appealed to him personally — G. Fauré, C. Debussy, A. Roussel, P. Dukas, P. de Bréville and E. Chausson. Maus did not particularly object to such a choice, since he was also friends with the composers proposed by Vincent d’Indy: Gabriel Fauré was a regular visitor to Maus’s house; Breville and Chausson were his friends.

In 1893, Vincent d’Indy was taken over by Eugène Ysaÿe, whose name as concert director would appear on the programs for the Brussels musical evenings for the following nine years. From that moment on, the vector of Les XX and subsequently La Libre Esthétique turned towards the performance and promotion of Belgian music. The national tradition was presented to listeners in combination with works by Russian, Spanish, and German composers.

In the mid-1890s, La Libre Esthétique introduced the practice of holding musical and educational events in the form of a conversation concert. Among the most significant events of the kind, we should highlight Musical Psychology (Henri Maubel, 1895), Poems Set to Music (Tristan Klingsor, 1900), Instrumental Suite (Vincent d’Indy, 1903), Humour in Music (Octave Maus, 1903), and Modern Musical Evolution (Louis Laloy, 1904).

Music in the life and creative work of individual representatives of Belgian art at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries

The lack of convenient concert venues in Brussels played a positive role in the development of the culture of house concerts, which became a common practice in the artistic environment as well. Musical evenings held in the house of the artist Anna Boch on Mondays attracted much public attention. Apart from being written about in the diary entries and letters of the members of La Libre Esthétique, they were also discussed in the press. Anna Boch’s new mansion was located in the creative part of the Ixelles district, on the corner of Chaussée de Vleurgat and Rue de l’Abbaye. Zoom Walter recalled: “This Rue de l’Abbaye is a village of artists who diligently visit each other. On summer days musical excerpts come through open windows and cross the gardens. Cello by a conservatory professor, violin and piano by Eugène Ysaÿe, organ music from rehearsals at

Anna Boch's, Wagnerian chords by my musical aunt Julie" [Bauer, Paredis, 2023, p. 196].

From her very early age, Anna Boch (1848–1936) demonstrated a great musical talent. She mastered the piano and the organ, later she practiced during Sunday mass. As an adult, she studied the viola. Anna was so passionate about performing music that she seriously considered giving up painting. She wrote: "Many a time have I thrown away my brushes, swearing to myself never to pick them up again. I would sit down at the piano in a rage — a beautiful rage! A magnificent rage! And soon some delightful tune would return to my peaceful soul sweet anticipation of the coming aspirations" [Bauer, Paredis, 2023, p. 194].

Anna Boch gave concerts in Brussels and La Louvière, and supported young performers [Thomas, 2023, p. 17]. Her parents' house was a haven for Belgian musical talent [Caspers, 2023, p. 111], and so were her Brussels mansions. First, the one in Avenue de la Toison d'Or (1895), then the other one in Rue de l'Abbaye (1903) became the centre of the musical life of the capital [Bauer, Paredis, 2023, p. 194]. The artist herself regularly played together with Belgium's most famous musicians — violinist Emile Agniez, and cellist and teacher Édouard Jacobs. Eugène Ysaÿe belonged to her circle of friends and regular participants in her house concerts. On March 18, 1911, together they performed Mozart's violin concerto in E♭ major [Bauer, Paredis, 2023, p. 194].

The names of participants in the musical evenings at Anna Boch's can be found in the guest book. Among them were the Ysaÿe brothers, the Zimmer String Quartet, the pianists G. Kéfer, A. De Greef and D. Mitropoulos, the composers F.-A. Gevaert, V. d'Indy and G. Fauré. In 1906, in the article in *L'Art Moderne* dedicated to Gabriel Fauré, Octave Maus mentioned the "lovely performance" [Maus, 1906, p. 91] of Fauré's Requiem, given at Anna Boch's in the presence of the maestro himself. Fauré expressed his admiration in a letter to his wife on 26 March 1906: "We bathed in it, it sounded so precise, so perfectly performed. It touched me to the depths of my soul... The mansion is well-adapted for music, has a large organ; the audience is interested and enthusiastic" [Bauer, Paredis, 2023, p. 199].

Within a walking distance from the mansion of Anna Boch, building 59 in the same street Rue de l'Abbaye was the house of Constantin Meunier. Even though his name is primarily associated with the poeticization

of the life of the underclass and the search for a new iconography of factory workers, Charleroi miners, and Antwerp stevedores, it must be acknowledged that he made a remarkable contribution to the musical life of Belgium.

Constantin Meunier was deeply integrated into contemporary musical culture, which was facilitated by his wife, a music teacher from France [Nikityuk, 1974, p. 24]. In the 1870s and 1880s, Meunier maintained friendly contacts with the director of La Monnaie. He was also on good terms with the leading representatives of the European music who visited Brussels. In the 1880s, responding to the Belgians' fascination with Wagner, Meunier organized several thematic concerts in his studio. In particular, on March 16, 1886, with the support of the World Wagner Society, *The Valkyrie*, Act I, and *The Twilight of the Gods*, Scene II, were performed. Reflecting on the role of Wagner in Meunier's creative life, Roland Van der Hoeven notes sarcastically: "In those years, the Valkyries and Andalusian cigar makers outlined Constantin Meunier's creative horizon, probably reflecting the Bizet-Wagner aesthetic debate that agitated the European opera world" [Van der Hoeven, 2021, p. 57]. 'Andalusian cigar makers' refers to Meunier's cycle of paintings created in Seville, the most famous of which is *Tobacco Factory, Seville* (1883, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels). However, no matter how attractive such a formulation of the problem may seem, it is unlikely that one should see the Spanish themes of Meunier's works of the 1880s as a pictorial embodiment of the Wagner-Bizet musical antinomy.

In the studio of the music lover Constantin Meunier, music could be played right during the posing sessions. Describing the impression that the performing skills of Eugène Ysaÿe left on his contemporaries, Lev Ginzburg cites the words of one of the biographers of Ysaÿe who claimed that while working on a bas-relief depicting the violinist, Meunier asked him to prelude to the themes of the *Sonata in A major for Violin and Piano* by César Franck [Ginzburg, 1959, pp. 38–39]. This chamber work in itself was already an event for Belgian music. It was known to have been created by the French composer for the young colleague from Liège and sent to Ysaÿe in Arlon to be performed with the pianist Marie Bordes-Pène before the assembled audience on the day of Ysaÿe's marriage to Louise Bourdau in September 1886. Two years later, the *Sonata in A major* was solemnly performed at a concert in the salon

of Les XX. Madeleine Maus described the impressions of what she had heard: “But then something happened that no one could have predicted and that remained unforgettable. During the performance of the sonata, winter twilight quickly fell. The lights in the halls of the museum were not turned on. Soon everyone plunged into complete darkness. Ysaÿe and Madame Bordes continued to play from memory; and it was in such a mystical atmosphere that on February 7, 1888, Franck’s sonata premiered in Brussels at Les XX” [Maus, 1980, p. 77].

Returning to Constantin Meunier, it should be noted that the episode retold by L. Ginzburg is apparently connected with the history of the creation of the bas-relief shoulder-length portrait of Eugène Ysaÿe dated 1901 and currently kept in the collection of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium in Brussels. The stable compositional and spatial solution of the model presented in profile contrasts with the expressive molding of the form, as well as the fractional, nervous lines of the violinist’s tousled hair and his musical instrument, seemingly miniature.

Music was regularly played at the Villa Bloemenwerf of Henry van de Velde. This is evidenced by numerous photographs, some of which were used in the design of the *Album of Modern Women’s Clothing Executed According to Artistic Designs* (1900, Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels). In one of them we see Maria Sèthe, the architect’s wife, standing with her back to a Blüthner piano, which occupies the central place in the living room on the ground floor. On the music stand there is the music text of Debussy’s *La Damoiselle Elue*, nearby is the transcription of Wagner. The wall in the background is decorated with a portrait of Madame van de Velde painted by Théo Van Rysselberghe, *Maria Sèthe at the Harmonium* (1891, Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp).

This painting, according to recent studies, determined the entire architectural composition and colour scheme of the Villa Bloemenwerf [Van Loo, 2018, p. 43]. However, it is not only Belgian architecture of the Art Nouveau where it played a significant role. It was a benchmark work of national Belgian neo-impressionism, which by the early 1890s had acquired genre independence from the French model. Largely thanks to Théo Van Rysselberghe, the technique of pointillism was adapted in a particular manner to the needs of portrait painting and lost the ideological basis that was formulated by G. Seurat based on the theories of M. E. Chevreul, Ch. Blanc and O. Rood.

The profile portrait of Maria Van de Velde at the harmonium is part of a pictorial suite the models for which were the Sèthe sisters – Alice, Maria and Irma, daughters of a major industrialist Gérard Sèthe. All the three were musically gifted and enjoyed success in private and public concerts.

The portrait of Alice Sèthe (1888, Musée départemental Maurice Denis, Saint-Germain-en-Laye) was created by Théo Van Rysselberghe in 1888. According to Jane Block, it was not just the master’s first neo-impressionist work, but also the one in which he declared himself as a portraitist [Block, 2007, p. 188]. Alice Sèthe is portrayed full-length, wearing a white dress that takes on a bluish-violet hue in the light of the fading day. She leans shyly on the marble surface of the table, the rich decoration of the baroque legs and frame of which echoes the decorative pattern of the carpet at her feet. The space of the portrait is expanded by the use of a mirror, the reflection in which problematizes the space and poses the same questions to the viewer as Édouard Manet’s *A Bar at the Folies Bergère* (1882, Courtauld Institute of Art, London).

In 1894, to the two earlier works Théo Van Rysselberghe added the portrait of Irma, the most outstanding musician of the Sèthe sisters. She began to learn to play the violin at the age of five. Being nine, she started lessons with August Wilhelmj, who prepared her for the Royal Conservatory of Brussels, where she joined the class of Eugène Ysaÿe at the age of fourteen. From that moment on, her career developed rapidly. At the age of fifteen, she already gave concerts with Ysaÿe at St. James Hall in London. Up until the World War I, Irma Sèthe was one of the most famous violinists in Western Europe.

In 1894, when Irma Sèthe considered her musical education complete and began her independent musical career, Théo Van Rysselberghe completed his pictorial suite depicting the Sèthe family, adding the portrait of the younger sister (1894, Musée du Petit Palais, Geneva). Irma is depicted full-length, and her figure occupies almost the entire space of the canvas. The bow is raised above the violin and seems about to strike the strings. Irma’s gaze is directed sharply to the right, where, beyond the picture space, a music stand with the music text might be put. The soft pink dress hints at the youth of the performer, while her confident posture conveys experience and professional courage. In the background, one can see the half-hidden figure of a listener, probably Maria Sèthe [Leonard, 2017, p. 57].

For obvious reasons, Irma Sèthe regularly became a model for various works of art. The sculptor Paul Du Bois, married to Alice Sèthe, appealed to her image several times. In the small sculpture *The Violinist* (1889, Royal Conservatory, Brussels) he depicted her as a child prodigy. The appearance, silhouette and hairstyle suggest that the sculptor probably followed not so much natural impressions as a photograph by Adolphe Hamesse (undated, Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels). In 1890, Du Bois again turned to the image of Irma, creating an expressive shoulder-length bust (*Bronze Bust of a Girl, Presumed to be a Portrait of Irma Sèthe*, 1890, Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels). There is no trace left of the girl, instead, one sees a beautiful young lady with her hair loosely tied up and a side fringe. The collar of the concert dress, as if swinging in the wind, adds charm to the image.

Music was constantly heard in the Khnopff household. Georges Khnopff, brother of the artist Fernand Khnopff, even tried his hand at the professional stage. He was known in Brussels as a musician, conductor, and pianist. It was rumoured that he had taken lessons from Franz Liszt and, through Franz Servais, was acquainted with Wagner himself. Nevertheless, the star of Georges Khnopff was never able to take its rightful place in the Belgian musical firmament. In 1894, together with Servais and Strauss, he organized the Association of New Concerts in Brussels, traces of which have not survived to this day. In 1899, he left Brussels to engage in translating Wagner's letters in Munich. [Van der Hoeven, 2021, p. 59–60].

Fernand Khnopff was friendly with many musicians. This is evidenced by a number of works from the 1880s — the pastel *Portrait of the Violinist Achille Lerminiaux* (1885, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam), the *Portrait of Gustave Kéfer at the Piano* (1885, location unknown), and the most significant and famous (even notorious) work on the theme of music representation, *Listening to Schumann* (1883, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels).

In the centre of the composition, Fernand Khnopff placed a profile image of his mother, who, sitting in an armchair and covering her face with her hand, is intently listening to the music being born under the fingers of her sister Marguerite, whose right hand, raised above the keys of the piano, is visible in the upper left corner of the painting. The diagonal juxtaposition of the two female figures is complemented by a complex rhythm of verticals and horizontals, which seem to relay the musical

richness of Schumann's works. In the centre of the viewer's attention is the pictorial demonstration of the practice of thoughtful, intellectual listening, which had become the norm in European bourgeois society not long before [Johnson, 1995, p. 92–95]. *Comparing Listening to Schumann* by Fernand Khnopff and the *Portrait of Irma Sèthe* by Théo Van Rysselberghe, Anne Leonard notes that each painting is extreme to a sense, "showing the dependence of one activity on the other [music-making on listening and vice versa. — E.K.]" [Leonard, 2017, p. 57].

In 1886, the painting *Listening to Schumann* was at the centre of a scandal when James Ensor, after carefully examining Fernand Khnopff's work, accused him of plagiarism. It seemed obvious to Ensor that Khnopff, his classmate at the Academy of Arts and comrade in Les XX, had borrowed the idea for his painting in Ensor's work *At Miss's*, which is now known as *Russian Music* (1881, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels). Indeed, it was a well-known work, which James Ensor had exhibited multiple times at various venues: at the Brussels Salon of 1881, the Paris Salon of 1882, and at the Ghent Exhibition in 1883.

The paintings are definitely similar in terms of subject and theme, but there is no plagiarism to be seen. In working on his canvas, James Ensor presumably relied on the iconography of music-making of the 17th century. The painting reflects the master's familiarity with music lessons and concerts of Gabriel Metsu, Gerard ter Borch, and Jan Vermeer. Ensor placed the main character at the piano with her back to the viewer. Until recently, it was believed that the model for the girl at the instrument was the artist's sister Mitche. However, today researchers are inclined to believe that the image was painted by Ensor from Anna Boch [Ensor & Brussels, 2024, p. 82]. If this assumption is correct, it can explain the reasons why in 1886 she decided to replenish her personal art collection with *Russian Music*. By doing this, Boch supported her friend and colleague and demonstrated whose side she took in the scandalous dispute with Fernand Khnopff. On the music stand, music sheets are seen, which the performer, apparently, is reading at sight. Behind her, James Ensor placed his friend Alfred William Finch, who is fascinated not so much by the music as by the view from the window. Ensor is less concerned with the representation of home music-making and thoughtful, intellectual listening. The emphasis is shifted to a realistic demonstration of the everyday bourgeois situation, in which people's

personal relationships are forced to be placed above the creative activity they are engaged in.

Among the works by James Ensor there are relatively few that are united by musical iconography. However, this should not be considered evidence of Ensor's lack of interest in the musical life of his country. It is known that, like Anna Boch or Octave Maus, he was a great admirer of Wagner [Draguet, 1999, p. 209]. Sketches made by the master during the listening of *The Valkyrie* at La Monnaie in January 1883 have been preserved and are kept at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Antwerp. Moreover, James Ensor was a man of exceptional musical talent. At a very early age, he learned to play the piano. Without knowing musical notation and never practicing piano technique, he played music by ear [Wangermee, 1999, p. 221]. As an adult, Ensor mastered the flute. Visual confirmation of this can be found in a photograph of the artist depicted sitting on a chimney of one of the roofs of Ostend and playing the flute (1881, private collection).

At the beginning of the 20th century, after James Ensor's artistic career had already come to an end, he devoted himself to composing music. In 1906, he began creating a six-act ballet *The Song of Love* (La Gamme d'amour). In the margins of the score, the artist left expressive marginalia similar to those on the sheet music for a lullaby (1906, Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels). Being self-taught, Ensor could not rely solely on himself, so he sought the help of his friends – Aimé Mouquet, director of the Conservatory in Ostend, and Michel Brusselmans. In 1924, *The Song of Love* was presented to the audience at the Royal Flemish Opera in Antwerp.

Conclusion

The artistic and the musical life of Belgium at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries is inextricably connected. The activity of non-institutional creative associations aimed at the experimental search for new forms and meanings is in line with the reforms which at that time were taking place in the field of musical art. The country's financial prosperity, which was due to a number of external and internal political reasons, contributed to the renewal of theatre venues, the promotion of new names, the replenishment of private collections with works of contemporary fine arts, etc. People like Octave Maus came forward, capable of accumulating the necessary forces and turning traditional exhibition spaces into creative

laboratories, where Henri van de Velde and Eugène Ysaÿe, Gabriel Fauré and Théo Van Rysselberghe, Vincent d'Indy and Constantin Meunier worked shoulder to shoulder. Perhaps it was while listening to music performed by Gustave Kéfer that Khnopff confirmed his resolve to follow the principles of musical harmony in painting. Or Ensor might have come up with the necessary 'orchestration' for his Shrovetide masquerade in *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* (1888, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles) at one of Anna Boch's house concerts.

The conducted study shows that the musical and the artistic life of Belgium at the turn of the century must be considered together. Otherwise, James Ensor's *Russian Music*, Khnopff's *Listening to Schumann*, Théo Van Rysselberghe's portraits of the Sèthe sisters, as well as many other works united by musical iconography, will may their complex tonal and semantic transitions and a significant component of the author's narrative.

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