FENWAY · COURT

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

1984

Contents

Viola d'amore, Thomas Eberle, Neapolitan, *ca.* 1775, Inv. No. U1e14, Yellow Room.

Charles Martin Loeffler and the Eberle Viola d'amore

On the eve of her birthday, in April 1903, Mrs. Gardner was host to a concert of the music of Charles Martin Loeffler. The following day, a messenger arrived at Fenway Court with a birthday gift from the composer. It was a beautiful viola d'amore, made in the 1770's by the Neapolitan violin-maker Thomas Eberle. This very exotic-looking instrument can still be seen in a glass case in the Yellow Room of the Gardner Museum.

The Eberle viola d'amore is a fine example of the work of its maker, a student of the famous Gagliano family. It was restored by W.E. Hill & Sons, of London, at the end of the nineteenth century and survives in an excellent state of preservation. It is elegant and simple in form, yet has all the essential earmarks of the genre: flame-shaped tone-holes suggesting Middle Eastern influences; a viol-shaped, flat-backed body that imparts a delicate, blending character to the sound; a characteristically wide neck and bridge, which support seven playing strings and allow seven thin wire resonating strings—"sympathetic strings"—to run under and through them, out of the way of the bow; and finally, a long pegbox and scroll that display fourteen tuning pegs.

Charles Loeffler acquired this instrument in the fall of 1897. It was his second viola d'amore and was sent to him as a present by London's celebrated luthier Arthur Hill. It arrived in time for the world premiere (Symphony Hall, May, 1898) of the composer's opulent orchestral tone poem "La Mort de Tintagiles," which in its original form was written for two violas d'amore and orchestra.

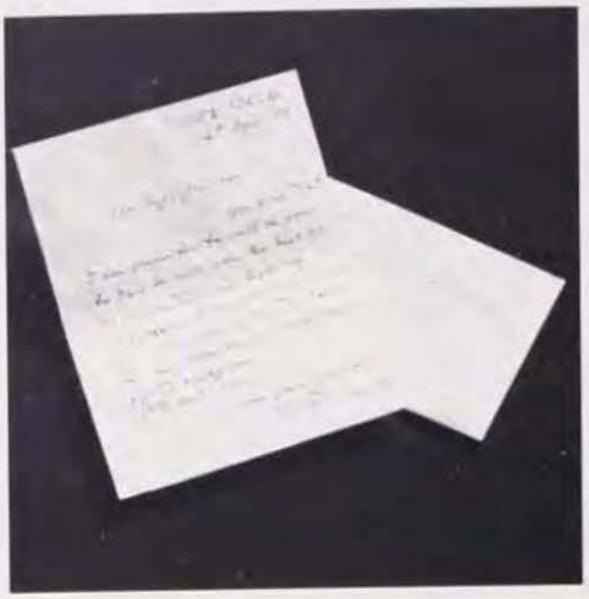
In September, 1900, Loeffler revised the piece and this final version for orchestra and solo viola d'amore received its premiere with the Boston Symphony in 1901. In 1905 it became one of his few published pieces (still in print and available on rental from G. Schirmer, New York). This composition was one of Loeffler's favorites and during the three decades following the 1901 premiere, it received a score of performances in the United States and abroad, many of these promoted actively by Loeffler himself during his travels.

Charles Loeffler was a popular figure in the musical life of Boston in the late 1800's and early 1900's. A dashing though somewhat reserved character, he was regarded as a virtuoso violinist and in his position as assistant concertmaster of the Boston Symphony was often called upon to perform as a soloist. In addition to concertos, he also performed many recitals in private homes. A journalist, commenting on the first rehearsals of "La Mort de Tintagiles," wrote that "there is probably no more popular member of the Boston Symphony. . . ." Another contemporary critic described him as having a "tone of fine-spun silk. . . ."

"La Mort de Tintagiles" was one of his most successful works, receiving ample critical acclaim. A review of the 1898 premiere reported "brilliancy and variety of coloring, abundance of melody, and rich, artistically developed harmonies. . . ." Another critic of the day cited a "climax of intense power . . ." and "dainty, delicious harmony. . . ."

On the other hand, some found "La Mort de Tintagiles" morbid. Such an opinion is hardly surprising, as its subject is the inexorable progress of a young child towards an untimely death. There were also those who criticized the structure of the work, finding the themes "too short and fragmentary. . . ." For the most part, however, the notices were glowing.

The composition, focusing attention on an esoteric, antique instrument by put-



Note sent by Loeffler on the occasion of the gift.

ting the viola d'amore in a solo role, must have seemed a bit exotic to the concertgoer of the time. It was also episodic in nature, something that an audience steeped in the classical forms was only very recently encountering in the tone poems of Richard Strauss. Similarly, Loeffler's sweeps of chromaticism and oriental-sounding scales must have had an unsettling effect on the ears of an audience not yet introduced to Debussy.

Perhaps the events immediately preceding Loeffler's writing "La Mort de Tintagiles" can shed some light on the composer's choice of subject and structuring of the piece. He had only very recently discovered the viola d'amore. He was in mourning over the death of his fifteen-year-old brother. And, he had just been introduced to Maeterlinck's new symbolist play, the drama for marionettes of the same name on which "La Mort de Tintagiles" is based.

A synopsis of the text of Maeterlinck's play was printed as the frontispiece of the orchestral score. Briefly summarized: the handmaidens of a wicked queen (Death) wrench a young boy (Tintagiles) from the desperate embrace of his sister (Ygraine). In their pitiful separation from one another on either side of a massive and unyielding door, brother and sister vainly call to each other, as the weakening boy collapses and then dies. Ygraine's impotent rage at her loss to the Destroyer gives way, finally, to sobs at the cold, iron door.

In "La Mort de Tintagiles" Loeffler pitted the entire forces of the symphony orchestra at one moment (the Destroyer) against a tiny complement of strings, solo winds, viola d'amore and harp at the next (Tintagiles and Ygraine), alternating one after the other. The last few bars mirror the end of the play, as the last sighing notes of the solo viola d'amore rise and fall through the sustained chords of the winds and brass. But in most other respects this tone poem does not follow the story line strictly. It is primarily a sound-poem, painting a macabre and fantastic scene.

The viola d'amore is an instrument uniquely suited to the strong emotions Loeffler was seeking to portray. It had been used by other composers at a particularly poignant moment, as in Handel's opera *Orlando*, where two violas d'amore are used to conjure up sleep for the hero at the emotional peak of the opera; or in Ferenc Erkel's *Bánk bán*, where the haunting strains of the viola d'amore are paired with the Hungarian cimbalum to support "Melinda's Farewell" aria as she prepares to kill herself.

Hector Berlioz, in his treatise on orchestration, wrote: "The quality of the viola d'amore is faint and sweet; there is something seraphic in it, partaking at once of the viola, and of the harmonics of the violin. It is particularly suited to the legato style, to dreamy melodies, and to the expression of ecstatic or religious feelings...." Loeffler's composer colleague Clara Rogers wrote of the viola d'amore's "mysterious tones—as of passion unrevealed—of love unconsciously brooded...." Charles Loeffler himself stated: "I thought of the viola d'amore as the only instrument capable of expressing the spirit and mood of the doomed...."

Charles Loeffler shared his feelings about the viola d'amore with Mrs. Gardner from the very outset. In 1894, upon the heels of obtaining his first viola d'amore in Paris, Loeffler detoured to

Anders Zorn, *Charles Martin Loeffler with Violin*, 1894, pen and ink on paper, 22.5 x 26.7 cm., Musicians Case, Yellow Room.

London to show it to her en route back to the United States. Mrs. Gardner became, over the years, a good friend and patron of Loeffler's. On numerous occasions she invited him to perform recitals on violin and viola d'amore for her guests, both at 152 Beacon Street and subsequently at Fenway Court. She loaned him her beautiful Stradivarius violin and finally gave it to him in 1918. Even after he retired from the symphony and no longer performed in public, he continued to play for her occasionally, until her death in 1924. They maintained throughout a mutually-admiring, if formal correspondence.[1]

On October 26, 1984, the viola d'amore made by Thomas Eberle, and later the gift of an acclaimed composer and performer to his friend and patron, left its case at the Museum for a symbolic reunion with Loeffler in the form of the first recording of "La Mort de Tintagiles." After minimal adjustments to the instrument by William Monical, a renowned expert in violas d'amore, the author had the unique privilege and pleasure of being the viola d'amore soloist in two performances and the recording of "La Mort de Tintagiles" with the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, John Nelson conducting. This recording will be released by New World Records in the fall of 1985.

Jennie Hansen

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1 The author wishes to acknowledge the benefit of Ellen Knight's studies on Loeffler; see, for instance, E. Knight, "Mr. Loeffler, Mrs. Gardner, and the viola d'amore," *Viola d'amore Society of America Newsletter*, V/1, April 1981, 4–7.