### SIR EUGENE GOOSSENS (1893-1962) D. Mus., F.R.C.M.

### by Anne Goossens

My father, Eugene Aynsley Goossens, always claimed he was born within the sound of Bow Bells, which made him a true Cockey and Londoner. In fact he was born in Camden Town, 26 May 1893, in a theatrical boarding-house when his father was on tour. In 1896, after the birth of their second child, Marie, his parents returned to Liverpool to join Eugene Goossens I who had retired after a long career as an operatic conductor.

For my father it was the first of many moves to different cities and countries which were to become a feature of his peripatetic life as conductor and composer. This journey was also significant in that it united three generations of the Goossens family, whose eldest sons were all named Eugene, and favoured the continuity of a family

musical tradition.

The early history of the Goossens family is related in my father's book *Overture and Beginners*. His great-grandfather, Jean-Baptist Maria Goossens, was born in Bruges in 1793. A Fleming and devout Catholic he became a master silversmith and worked from his house in Rue du Vieux Bourg. He married a Brugeoise *couturière*, who had a large class of student-apprentices, and they had three children, Adolphe (1841), Eugene I (1845) and Julia. The Choirmaster of Notre Dame de Bruges discovered that the two boys had beautiful singing voices and arranged for them to join his choir, which started the brothers on their musical careers.

Both entered the Brussels Conservatoire. Adolphe later devoted his work to choirs and choral training, and succeeded Beuwens as conductor of Belgium's finest choir, 'L'Orphéon'. Eugene won the Conservatoire's Premier Prix for violin. He married Célanie van Diegham, a dancer, who became better known in London as Madame Sidonie. A picture of her used to hang in the Alhambra Theatre. Eugene accompanied her on tours of France and Belgium as solo violinist. It was on one of these tours that the second Eugene, my grandfather, was born in Bordeaux, and the family returned

to Bruges where they remained until Jean-Baptist's death in 1873.

Eugene I now faced a dilemma: as an impecunious artist with a family to support his future in Belgium appeared bleak. There were only limited opportunities to make a name. So 'in the belief, like Mr Micawber, that something was bound to turn up',² he left his son at the College of St. Louis, Bruges, and departed to London with his wife. His ambition was to become a conductor of light opera, but the miraculous opportunity to do so only came after playing the violin at a London nightspot and joining the Covent Garden Opera House orchestra. Kate Santley engaged him to conduct *La Périchole, La Marjolaine* and *Orphée aux Enfers*. This led to other engagements culminating in 1883 with his long association with the Carl Rosa Opera Company.

Carl Rosa was a German musician and businessman who dedicated himself to producing opera in the English language. After his death Eugene Goossens I became principal conductor and conducted nearly forty operas in English during the next decade, including a first performance of *Tannhäuser*, and a command performance of

The Daughter of the Regiment before Queen Victoria at Balmoral.



**EUGENE GOOSSENS** 

Courtesy of Anne Goossens

Meanwhile his son, Eugene II, was studying composition under Gevaert and violin with Cornelis at the Brussels Conservatoire. He then spent two years at the R.A.M. London before joining the Carl Rosa Company where he soon became engaged to Annie Cook. The Cook-Goossens families were prominent members of the Company: Aynsley Cook sang all the leading bass roles, Annie small contralto parts; Eugene I was principal conductor and Eugene II leader of the second violins. Aynsley Cook was a gay colourful character whose own father claimed descent from Captain Cook, the explorer. As a lad Aynsley Cook started singing at St. George's Catholic Church, Southwark, and at concerts directed by Mendelssohn and Spohr. He married Harriet Payne who had a rich variety of theatrical relations. Their daughter, Annie, was born in Boston at the outbreak of the American Civil War, while the couple were on an operatic tour. Annie inherited her father's twinkling blue eyes and sharp sense of humour. She married Eugene Goossens II in 1892 and they enjoyed as happy a marriage as I have ever seen.

After Eugene and Annie returned to Liverpool with little Eugene and Marie, three more children were born: Adolphe, Leon and Sidonie. They were all destined to become eminent musicians. Their training began as soon as they could hold an instrument. Young Eugene started the violin when he was five, by the age of six his father was taking him to Sunday concerts conducted by Granville Bantock, and to his daily rehearsals with the Rosa Company. When he was eight he was sent to St. Francis Xavier's School in Bruges and enrolled at the Muziek-Conservatorium for violin, piano and harmony. In 1904 he returned to the new family home near Liverpool's Philharmonic Hall where he regularly watched Richter conducting the Hallé Orchestra, Nikisch and all the famous conductors of the day. He and his brothers now attended the Christian Brothers Institute but, knowing he wanted to be a musician, Eugene had little sympathy for ordinary studies. He obtained permission to study with Alfred Ross at the Liverpool College of Music where the student orchestra under Carl Courvoisier gave him a sound grounding in Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms. As the youngest member of the Societa Armonica, an amateur group, he gained useful experience with orchestral literature.

Eugene I died suddenly in 1906 after a trip to Lourdes. Eugene was thirteen and finding school increasingly irksome. He was a lively, intelligent and handsome boy with an introspective streak which could make him seem withdrawn and aloof on occasion. He read avidly and already showed a great gift for drawing. All his life he would amuse himself with fine pen-and-ink drawings of ships, steamers, steamengines, buildings, comic gargoyles, dragons and monsters. He sat the Oxford Local Examination which he passed in all subjects except music! Undaunted he set off to London to compete for the 'Liverpool Scholarship' at the Royal College of Music, which he won. Sir Hubert Parry allotted him to Achille Rivarde for violin studies, but after a year Eugene realized that conducting and composition were his goals. He was at home with harmony and counterpoint but too nervous to make a virtuoso violinist. Nevertheless he was promoted to leader of the second violins in the College orchestra, then allowed to study composition under Charles Villiers Stanford.

A Christmas present of Debussy's *Estampes* revolutionised his musical ideas and made a lasting impression only equalled by the discovery of Ravel's *Jeux d'Eau*. Debussy arrived in London in February, 1908 to conduct *La Mer* and *L'Après-midi*. From the gallery Eugene was spell-bound by the music and the composer's personality.

Other seminal experiences were hearing the first performances of *Elektra*, *Samson and Delilah*, *Louise*, *Pelléas et Mélisande* and *Salomé*.

During these College years Eugene lived in a boarding-house in the genteel poverty of Edwardian London. When he needed extra pocket-money the College granted him permission to seek small engagements. This led to a period as violinist in hotel and theatre orchestras playing anything from Liszt to Léhar. Extra money made it possible to attend the extraordinary performances of *Scheherezade* and *The Firebird* by Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Spurred on by these events Eugene composed his *Variations for Orchestra on a Chinese Theme, Op. 1*, which he conducted at the College's final concert in 1912. He was made an Associate of the R.C.M. and was also awarded the silver medal of the Worshipful Company of Musicians.

The Goossens family now moved to 70 Edith Road, West Kensington. As Eugene's father was usually away on tour it fell to his mother to run the home and maintain discipline. Adolphe and Leon entered the College with Marie and Sidonie who were to study the harp. The next seven years were among the happiest of Eugene's life. He joined the Queen's Hall Orchestra as violinist and spent four years learning the symphonic répertoire under Henry Wood, England's most picturesque orchestral figure.<sup>3</sup> At home he found the necessary peace to compose the first fourteen of his published works.

Joining the Langley-Mukle Quartet which performed at private houses in London and the country brought lasting friendships with Eric Coates, Warwick Evans, Cyril Scott, Percy Grainger, Roger Quilter and Arnold Bennett; while playing with a virtuoso ensemble (Beckwith, Jeremy, Sharpe) inspired his *Twa Sketches* for String Quartet, and the C Major String Quartet written around the personalities of his three colleagues. His many engagements as a gifted ensemble-player brought him in close contact with the artistic world. At one musical party alone, given by Mrs Muriel Draper, he found himself playing with Thibaud, Kochanski, Rebecca Clarke and Casals. They were later joined by Arbos, Cortot, Persinger and Felix Salmond while Henry James wandered around praising the beauties of classical music.

More importantly Diaghilev's return in 1913 with *Petruschka* and *Le Sacre du Printemps* confirmed Eugene's recognition of Stravinsky's genius. His admiration for Scriabine who came to London to perform his *Prometheus* was equally sincere. When just before the War Beecham organised his Grand Season of Russian Opera and Russian Ballet at Drury Lane, Eugene, from the first violin section, experienced the full impact of the new idioms and musical tendencies in the music of Borodine, Rimsky-Korsakov, Moussorgsky, Stravinsky and Ravel.

Eugene's first recognition as composer came when Henry Wood asked him to conduct his *Variations*, *Op. 1*, at a Promenade Concert and it was well received. Public performances followed of his Suite for Flute, Violin and Harp, Op. 6, and *Five Impressions of a Holiday*, *Op. 7*, reflecting his love for the English countryside. The London String Quartet gave the première of his *Phantasy String Quartet*, *Op. 12*, which used an old English form he was to return to again. His friend, Philip Heseltine (Peter Warlock), admired the work and sent it to Delius 'who pronounced it the best thing he had seen from an English pen...'.4

After World War I was declared Eugene wanted to enlist but was turned down on grounds of poor health. His war work remained in the field of music and he donned a uniform when put in charge of the massed divisional bands of the Canadians which he took to France. Several of his early trios and quartets were played at the De Lara

'War Emergency Concerts' promoting, for the first time in England, works by modern English composers. Here he conducted his *Symphonic Prelude on a Poem by Ossian* watched by Thomas Beecham who, impressed by his handling of the orchestra, offered him two new works to conduct: *The Critic* by Stanford and *The Boatswain's Mate* by Ethel Smythe. A contract followed to join Beecham's Opera Company as conductor which marked the beginning of Eugene's career as conductor and the end of any violin-playing. He was soon conducting a full repertoire of grand opera, and guest-conducting with the Hallé, Liverpool Philharmonic and Scottish Orchestras.

The death of Adolphe, killed in the Somme offensive, was a bitter blow to the Goossens family. However work had to carry on as usual as there was a growing patriotic demand for opera in English. Eugene Goossens Sr. joined his son as one of the Beecham Company's conductors, and remained with the Company until its disbandment after the War. Composing on trains and in hotel-rooms Eugene finished the musical settings to Edwin Evans' poems *Persian Idylls* and *Deux Proses Lyriques*. They were the first of many settings possessing, as he did, a very special ability for marrying words to music. A French influence is strong in the subtle arrangements of verses by Alfred de Musset and Jean-Aubry. Some of his most individual settings are *Three Songs* set to Elizabethan poems; *Two Songs* of William Blake; *Searching for Lambs*, an old English air which recurs in his String Quartet No. 2, the song-cycle from James Joyce's *Chamber Music*, and the haunting *When Thou art Dead* by Margaret Kennedy for *The Constant Nymph*.

The end of the War brought an invitation to stay with George Davidson whose house at Harlech in Wales was a centre for artists. Cyril Scott, Joseph Holbrooke, Granville Bantock, Margaret Morris and John D. Fergusson were all staying nearby. Here Eugene wrote the *Prelude* to *Philip II*, by Emile Verhaeren, for the Plough

Society's production.

By now Eugene's name as a conductor was established, Chesters were publishing his music and many commissions were coming in. Elegant and debonair he was much in demand, his life was crowded with work and social engagements. He went off to Brussels to perform his *Kaleidoscope*, twelve witty piano sketches about childhood memories, and conducted his *Lyric Poem* for Violin and Orchestra at the Salle Gaveau in Paris. The first performance of his Sonata No.1 in E minor for violin and piano, a vigourous and rhapsodic work, was played superbly by Albert Sammons and William Murdoch at the Wigmore Hall. Between opera seasons he conducted the Playfair production of *The Beggar's Opera*, an outstanding success at the tiny Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith.

Eugene's burning ambition was to perform modern music. A concert was booked for 7 June 1921 at the Queen's Hall with 105 orchestral virtuosi (including Leon, Marie and Sidonie), but the backer withdrew at the last moment and it was Lord Howard de Walden who saved the day. The programme consisted of *Spanish Fantasy* by Lord Berners, *The Forgotten Rite* by John Ireland, *La Valse* by Ravel, and the first concert performance in England of *Le Sacre du Printemps* which received an enthusiastic ovation. Then with Lord Lathom's help Eugene formed the Goossens Orchestra, which gave four concerts of modern music before being defeated by lack of support 'from those who matter'. First performances included *Aubade* by Cyril Scott, *El Amor Brujo* by de Falla, *Alborada del Gracioso* by Ravel; other works were by Bach-Elgar, Ireland, Bax, Bliss, Honegger, Holst, Schönberg, Holbrooke, Debussy, Poulenc, Malipiero and Stravinsky.

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# An Orchestral Concert of Contemporary Music

CONDUCTED BY

# EUGENE GOOSSENS

TUESDAY, JUNE 7th, at 8.15.

### PROGRAMME.

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AND

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Diaghilev persuaded Eugene to conduct *The Sleeping Princess* at the Alhambra, but the marvelous production folded after only three weeks. Another fiasco was Walter Wanger's attempt to turn Covent Garden into a moviehouse with music synchronised to films with the L.S.O. under Eugene. Not even *The Three Musketeers* with Fairbanks Sr. could attract a London audience.

New commissions came in: Basil Deane wanted incidental music for Somerset Maugham's *East of Suez* which Eugene wrote after listening to authentic Chinese musicians in Limehouse; a choral work for the Gloucester Festival resulted in *Silence*, a Fragment for Chorus and Orchestra to words by Walter de la Mare. Then a period spent at home allowed Eugene to finish his *Sinfonietta*, *Op.34*, (performed several times by Toscanini in New York), and to prepare Mrs. Elizabeth Sprague's commission for a chamber music work, the *Sextet for Strings*.

One feels, at this point, that Eugene was turning in too many directions, and a dissatisfaction with the means available for getting modern music accepted was beginning to make itself felt. The 'Goossens Chamber Concerts' was another attempt to build up an audience for contemporary chamber music, this time with a series of five concerts financed by Herbert Bedford and himself at the Aeolian Hall. Despite the originality of the programmes the hall was only half-full during the last concert.

Quite unexpectedly came an offer from George Eastman, the 'Kodak King', to co-direct the Rochester Orchestra in America with Albert Coates and turn it into a major symphony orchestra. After conducting Delius's music for the first night of *Hassan* Eugene sailed to the States on the *Aquitania*, the first of his annual journeys across the Atlantic. On arrival he went straight to the Pittsfield Festival to hear his lively *Sextet for Strings* approved by the radicals, and found many English friends there, Myra Hess, Frank Bridge, Arthur Bliss and others. He conducted his first Rochester concert in October, 1923 with music by Wagner, Debussy, Rimsky-Korsakov, Grainger and Brahms. His sole directorship of the Rochester Philharmonic was later confirmed, and he began guest-conducting in New York, Pittsburgh, Los Angeles and seasonal concerts at the Hollywood Bowl. From now on five months a year were to be based in London, and during the 1920's these periods were usually in association with Diaghilev. He saw young Carmen Amaya dance when conducting the Ballets Russes in Barcelona in 1925, an event remembered in the evocative *Ballet Flamenco* of his *Divertissement*, *Op.66*.

While sailing back to the States on the *Carpania* Eugene composed the music for *The Constant Nymph*. He also took with him his nearly completed one-act opera, *Judith*, adapted by Arnold Bennett from his three-act play. *Judith* was produced at Covent Garden in June, 1929 in under-rehearsed circumstances, billed between *Sylphides* and *Petrushka*. To both librettist and composer the English text was of vital consequence, yet a Swedish singer, Göta Ljungberg, was given the role. Eugene went specially to Berlin to coach her in English pronunciation, but the final event proved 'somewhat melancholy for him'. Though enjoyed by the public the critics were apathetic, only Ernest Newman saw the work 'as a marvel of subtlety'. In New York in 1930 with Bianca Saroya in the lead the opera was a success, later repeated in Australia when Joan Sutherland made her début as Judith.

The winter of 1927 saw Eugene Goossens Sr. conducting *Manon* at Covent Garden and celebrating his fortieth year devoted to opera, while Eugene was conducting Mary Garden in *Carmen* at the Eastman School in Rochester. By now he had finished

several new compositions: *Two Ballads* for Harp, for Sidonie and Marie, *Three Greek Dances for Orchestra*, dedicated to Margaret Morris, and the *Oboe Concerto*, *Op.45*, written for Leon, a brilliant and difficult piece which the brothers presented during some concerts they gave together in New York. His Concertino for Double String Orchestra, Op.47, was also premièred by the Mangeot and Poltronieri Quartets in New York.

Eugene again approached Arnold Bennett to do another opera and they decided on the privately printed play, *Don Juan de Manara*, adapted from the elder Dumas. Alterations were carried out by correspondence and Bennett completed the libretto in 1930 shortly before his death. Eugene wrote, 'Bennett had a tremendous flair for the short, precise sentences I needed to fit my musical idiom...'.' Bennett's conception of Don Juan is that of a man searching for an ideal, for whom the end justifies the means. Eugene worked on the opera for five years before it was published in 1935 by Chesters.

He gave up his conductorship in Rochester in 1931 to become Musical Director of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and the Cincinnati May Festivals. The latter were biennial undertakings with choirs of 500 singers. His first Festival, probably never equalled, included Mahler's Symphony of a Thousand, Pierné's Children's Crusade and Honegger's King David. Besides grand opera productions he was responsible for an enormous output of music during the Seasons: 32 pairs of Symphony Concerts, 10 Popular Concerts, 5 Young People's Concerts. The work involved many managerial problems and occasional trouble with the Union which wanted him to join it and change his nationality which he resolutely refused to do. To round up his schedule he was also teaching and always composing.

Eugene came over to London in 1937 to direct *Don Juan de Manara*, the only English opera included in the Coronation festivities at Covent Garden. Lawrence Tibbett as Don Juan 'wooed, duelled and seduced his way' through the lavish production with sets designed by Aubrey Hammond. The press was divided in its reception. Beecham, Evans and Newman were firmly in favour, Constant Lambert and others were not. Ernest Newman maintained it was the best work to come out of English opera for sixty years. \* Some of the lyrical feeling of the music can be heard in the *Romance* for violin and piano transcribed from the opera.

On his return to Cincinnati Eugene completed the orchestration of his Symphony No 1, Op.58. He declared, 'It has no message...it deals with the old abstractions, or what my master Stanford rather portentously used to refer to as The Eternal Verities.' During the 1940's he composed several works: the String Quartet No.2, Op.59, expresses his inner preoccupation with the fate of family and friends in wartime England. He heads the Second Movement with Coleridge's Lines, 'There lives nor form nor feeling in my soul/Unborrowed from my country.' There followed a *Phantasy Concerto* for piano for José Iturbi, the beautiful *Phantasy Concerto* for violin, Op.63; and a mature work of calm beauty, Symphony No.2, Op.62, expressing distress but also faith in a better world to come after the conflagration of war.

He had hoped that his parents would join him in the States during World War II but they preferred to remain on familiar terrain. A close correspondence kept them in touch, with Eugene Sr. sending clippings and reports on all matters musical in England. On his way back to London, after the War, Eugene made a tour of Australia for the A.B.C. with the result, after negotiations with Sir Charles Moses, that he accepted the double appointment as Resident Conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and Director of the Sydney Conservatorium. The challenge was

immense, no less than to make the S.S.O. one of the world's six best. His dream to create a new venue for an all-purpose Opera House started the long battle to build and complete the Sydney Opera House at Benelong Point.

Eugene's nine years in Australia were devoted to the development of the Sydney Orchestra, to the improvement of the training of singers and instrumentalists at the Conservatorium, to fighting the bureaucracy in his drive for higher standards and better opportunities for the Sydney public to hear concerts and see good opera and ballet. He got the A.B.C. to première John Antill's *Corroboree*, a landmark in Australian art. That he largely succeeded in many of his aims is reflected in the knighthood he received in 1955.

Of his own compositions there is no doubt in the minds of those who have heard it that Eugene's Oratorio, *The Apocalypse*, is his masterpiece. Begun in 1943 it was first performed in Sydney in 1954. It belongs to the grand tradition of choral works, is set to a selected text from the Revelations of St. John the Divine. It requires two choirs, five soloists, an organ and a brass band. Stewart Harvey remarked that the Voice of God needed 'a sense of monumental calmness and serenity'. <sup>10</sup> He sang the role

through a megaphone, his voice rising over and above the choirs.

Two years later Eugene resigned his post in Australia and returned to London in poor health. Helen Bainton wrote, 'Goossens's work will never be forgotten...he left the legacy of his teaching and the unassailable wealth of knowledge that accrued to us from the riches of his mind.'11 He was now 63 years old and the immense programme of work he had maintained for so many years was taking its toll. He settled in a roomy flat in St. John's Wood, accessible to his close family and many friends. He travelled a good deal, conducted in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, having long been a champion of Bartok, Kodaly and Janacek. He conducted at the Proms and gave first performances of *The Cenci* by R.S. Coke, *Vörösmarty* by Järdänyi and Franz Reizenstein's Piano Concerto No.2. His last concert with the L.S.O. in 1962 presented Robert Still's Symphony No.3, and Leon Goossens performed Eugene's Oboe Concerto.

He was also occupied making many fine recordings. Mostly he was busy composing, and his last completed work, *Divertissement*, *Op.66*, is remarkable for its youthful

dynamism and fine orchestral writing.

My father married three times and had five children of whom I was the eldest. We all loved and admired him. He was a man with great charm, a delightful companion, full of humour and a fine conversationalist. His complete dedication to furthering the art of music was only equalled by an unusual modesty with regard to his own compositions. It is as an English composer that he would undoubtedly want to be remembered and it is to be hoped that his works will not be forgotten.

A kneeler commemorating his name lies in the Musicians' Chapel of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Newgate, close to the tomb of Sir Henry Wood, the window dedicated to John Ireland, and beneath the figure of St. Cecilia, Patron Saint of

Music.



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