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Orientalizing Europe, Europeanizing Africa: The fantastical lives and tales of Jan Gysbert Hugo (The Marquis) (Louis de) (Vere) Bosman di Ravelli, also known as Gian Bonzar

“Oh Ravelli”, she whispered, “you have taken me to Heaven—I shall never consider anything beautiful after this—how wonderful it is to be with you—one lives through so many lives.”¹

Countess Carmencita Monteleon of Spain

Before he was being invented by others, or started imagining himself in autobiographical texts, he was creating new names for himself. Born Jan Gysbert Hugo Bosman on 24 February 1882, the first of these names was the Italianate Vere di Ravelli, a name made up for the concert stage.² Combining the name he had read in a book with a shortened form of the Spanish for “Gysbert” or “Gilvere”, he was using the stage name in 1902 during his second concert tour of the cities of Berlin, Magdeburg, Paris, Strasbourg and Cologne.³

A letter to Johannes J. Smith of 15 November 1912,⁴ includes two Sapphic reconstructions by “Gian Bonzar” for translation into Afrikaans and possible

* This article is based on a paper entitled “The lives of Bosman di Ravelli: (Auto)biography, colonial identity and music”.

¹ Incomplete typescript copy version of Bosman di Ravelli’s autobiographical phantasy *Saint Theodore and the crocodile*, Nasionale Afrikaanse Letterkundige Museum en Navorsingsentrum (NALN), Bloemfontein, 181. In the rest of this article this document will be referenced as the NALN manuscript.

² Rykie van Reenen, “Rykie van Reenen gesels met ‘n gevierde komponis: Wat stilletjies na S.A. teruggekrom het”, *Die Burger* (18 January 1958).

³ Bosman di Ravelli, *Outobiography* (sic), Facsimile of holograph document, no date, Africana section, Merensky library, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, 210. In the rest of the article this document will be referenced as the Merensky manuscript. In a review of the Cologne performance, the *Kölnische Zeitung* refers to Bosman as “Ravelli”. It is fair to assume that the stage name was adopted earlier for Bosman’s first concert tour in (also in 1902), although evidence of this could not be found in the extant documents. Bosman explains the origins of the name in SABC archive recording 6514, catalogue number 17/37-38(60), SABC, Johannesburg.

⁴ Johannes Jacobus Smith (1883–1949), the first editor of the popular Afrikaans journal *Die Huisgenoot* and the *Woordeboek van die Afrikaanse Taal* [Dictionary of the Afrikaans language].

publication. The letter, signed by Bosman with his invented stage name, “Vere di Ravelli”, goes on to state:

I do not write under my own name, in fact I am distinctly averse to anyone knowing that I write at all. You will respect my nom de plume, I know, simply because I should like it to be so. I am not anxious that my name should even be mentioned in the matter. It may seem very silly to you—all this—but please forgive me—it is my little madness.⁵

It is fair to assume, therefore, that by 1912 Jannie (as he was called by his parents) Bosman *had become* “Vere di Ravelli”, necessitating the adoption of yet another transformed appellation. The name “Gian Bonzar” is clearly derived from Jan Boonzaaier (his mother’s maiden name), and this letter to Smith is the only instance found by the present author where its use is suggested. However, on the cover of an undated manuscript of Bosman’s translation from Arabic into English of *The travels of Ibn Jubayr* (2 volumes) in the Nasionale Afrikaanse Letterkundige Museum en Navorsingsentrum (NALN) in Bloemfontein, the author’s name appears as “the marquis Louis de Vere de Ravelley”, with “the marquis” subsequently scratched out.⁶ Another undated typescript, this time a translation from Arabic into English of *The Diwan of Al-Hansa* is appellated “By Louis de Vere”.⁷ Also in Bloemfontein, a typed manuscript of eighty-eight poems, some of them also appearing in the collection *In an Italian mirror* (and thus presumably predating them), is by the author “Louis de Vere”.⁸ Nine years after his letter to Smith, the name “Vere di Ravelli” appears on the cover of *In an Italian mirror*. The “little madness” of hiding the stage name (standing in for the real name) behind various nom de plumes, had abated somewhat.

Creating and then parading different names for oneself is one thing; providing these names with historical alibi’s and characterizations another, more fantastical pursuit. Although the changing preference of names outlined above doesn’t suggest matching different autobiographical accounts, the ambiguity of identity created by this strangely fascinating Frenchification and Italianization of a Boer name is somehow carried over into Bosman’s autobiographical narratives. Until recently, it was believed that these were restricted to a series of articles written by him and published in the journal *Vita musica* in 1963 until 1964

⁵ Letter of Vere di Ravelli to J.J. Smith, 15 November 1912, J.S. Gericke library, University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch, 333. K.B. 35.

⁶ The typed MS of about 115 000 words bears the stamp of John Paradise (literary agent), 86 Strand W.C. 2. The book consists of a preface, 1–15, the text (462 pages), n. 1–15, and an index 1–38. The NALN reference numbers are M240/89/476 en M240/89/477.

⁷ The typed MS bears the stamp of John Paradise (Literary agent), 86 Strand W.C. 2. The book consists of an Introduction (1-45) and the text. NALN reference number M24089/478.

⁸ Collection of typed poems by Louis de Vere (NALN reference number M240/89/474) on loose leaves. At the back of many of the poems is the address: Louis de Vere Esq, c/o Miss Tyrwhitt-Drake, Palazzo Pauer [?], 41 Via Romana, Florence, Italy.

(entitled “Music’s exile: The autobiography of Vere Bosman di Ravelli”) and the book *Saint Theodore and the crocodile*, an autobiographical fantasy published in South Africa by Tafelberg in 1964. However, during many years of trawling in South African archives for mostly other material, and of speaking with colleagues, friends and students, the present author has discovered two unknown, or forgotten, unpublished and, in both cases, seemingly incomplete autobiographies. A forgotten facsimile of a holograph text containing a partly unknown autobiographical narrative was found in the Africana section of the Merensky Library at the University of Pretoria. This document of 343 pages, which will be called the Merensky manuscript, refers to the book *Saint Theodore and the crocodile*,⁹ and it is therefore safe to assume that it postdates the completion of the *Saint Theodore* manuscript, and was written somewhere between 1962/63 and Bosman’s death on 20 May 1967 in the Strand near Cape Town. There are striking resemblances between the content and structure of the Merensky manuscript and the four articles comprising the series “Music’s exile”. However, the article series (and the journal *Vita musica*) was discontinued after four installments, and the Merensky manuscript contains much that is unknown, and in some cases more detailed and personal descriptions of historical events and people mentioned in the article series.¹⁰

The second “unkown” autobiographical text became known to the present author through one of those mysterious “coincidences” that sees material converging, as though attracted by a magnetic forcefield, on a researcher becoming immersed in a subject. A chain of unlikely conversations and personal connections led to the “discovery” of yet another autobiography, of which the existence in a private collection in Pretoria has hitherto been unknown to scholars.¹¹

⁹ Merensky manuscript, 53.

¹⁰ The author should like to thank Santie de Jongh of the Documentation Centre for Music (DOMUS) at the University of Stellenbosch for procuring these and other sources relating to this article. The dates of the *Vita musica* articles (June/July 1963; August/September 1963; December 1963; August 1964) suggest that the Merensky manuscript may have been the original draft of the clearly much edited article versions. The last article in the series of “Music’s exile” (August 1964) states at the end “To be continued”. However, as far as the present writer has been able to ascertain, no further installments ensued. Jacques Philip Malan’s entry on Bosman in *Die Suid-Afrikaanse Musiekensiklopedie* [South African music encyclopaedia] (Cape Town, 1980) vol. 1, 217–9, lists just these four articles in the series, also suggesting that the series was discontinued after August 1964. Cf. also English edition: *South-African music encyclopaedia*, ed. by Jacques P. Malan (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1979–1986).

¹¹ One of the present writer’s postgraduate students, Carina Venter, had a conversation with a friend in Pretoria shortly before the paper on which this article is based was given in Belgrade. The conversation touched on Bosman, upon which it came to light that Jozua Loots’s father, also Jozua Loots, happened to be in possession of nineteen small exercise books containing yet another version of the Bosman autobiography, as well as several other Bosman mementos including photographs. It turned out that Jozua Loots is the twin brother of the man who had donated the bulk of the Bosman material now in the possession of NALN in Bloemfontein, Izak Loots, and is

The holograph marked “Outobiografie B 1-19” [Autobiography B 1-19] consists of nineteen exercise books totalling 560 unnumbered pages and will be called the Loots manuscript, after its owner Jozua Loots (cf. Figure 1) who generously provided the present author with access to his materials. The Loots manuscript is for most of its narrative more detailed than the Merensky manuscript, but unlike the latter it stops short of Bosman’s first public performances in 1902. It is impossible to put a date to the Loots manuscript, and it seems reasonable to deduce from the narrative and the way in which it ends, the existence of more exercise books, presumably now lost.



Figure 1. Jozua Loots and Bosman di Ravelli, early 1960s

Saint Theodore and the crocodile differs markedly from the Merensky and Loots manuscripts. Like “Music’s exile”, the latter two contain substantially more information about Bosman’s childhood and youth, his journey to Leipzig at the age of sixteen (including an extended stay en route in London in the Loots manuscript),¹² his audition at the Leipzig Conservatoire for Carl Reinecke and Alexander Winterberger and his subsequent concert career which was launched with a tour of the Chopin E minor piano concerto in 1902 under the baton of a young Nikisch pupil, only identified by the surname Hess. Some of this detail is documented in *Saint Theodore and the crocodile*, but in a much-condensed form. Whereas the Merensky and Loots manuscripts are more or less conven-

the father-in-law of fellow undergraduate music student in Pretoria in the early nineties and a personal friend of many years’ standing, Hilton Anspach (who married another fellow undergraduate music student, and Jozua’s daughter, flautist Handri Loots). Jozua Loots was kind enough not only to allow the present author access to this material, but also to give permission for electronic and hard copies of this document and the photographs to be made. These are now held in DOMUS at the University of Stellenbosch, where it can be consulted by researchers.

¹² Cf. the Book 6, Loots manuscript.

tional chronological accounts spanning respectively the time from Bosman's birth in 1882 until the early 1900s (Loots) and approximately his first return to South Africa in 1905 after the suicide of the mezzo-soprano Isabella Valliers (the object of his untouchable and unconsummated noble, knightly love) (Merensky),¹³ *Saint Theodore and the crocodile* is a staged, synchronic account of highlights and significant people in Bosman's life as presented in conversations with his friends: primarily Juanito (Stowe) de Monteleon and his wife Carmencita, and his young guest, Charles.

Both the Merensky and Loots manuscripts also provide more information of Bosman's musical activities during his first extended stay in Leipzig between 1899 and 1905.¹⁴ Although the account is hardly systematic, one is able to reconstruct some sense of his musical background, his training in Leipzig and his early career. We read that his decision to study music was sparked by a dream vision that developed into a kind of mad obsession:

Was it a dream? I don't know. But I woke up and found myself at a grand piano on a platform playing to an audience as far as the eye could see. And from that moment I could see nothing else... I was already well advanced in next year's work when my madness seized me—I use this word for it was just like a wild beast seizing its prey, and I had nothing more to do with it... I now imagined myself not only a great pianist, but a great man with a definite message to my country—almost like a call, a vocation. The voice was insistent, torturing me with reproaches for my cowardice...¹⁵

Bosman hears Brahms for the first time on the Union castle line ship the Briton (on which he departs on 1 October 1899 from Cape Town),¹⁶ and when the ship docks at Madeira he is informed of the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer war in South Africa. When he hears the Beethoven Violin concerto played by Lady Hallé in The Queen's hall, he doesn't know what a concerto or a symphony is,¹⁷

¹³ The omission of the love affair with Isabella Vallier is the most important difference between the *Vita musica* articles and the Merensky manuscript. In most instances the Merensky manuscript contains more descriptive detail and sustains a more personal tone (frequently through direct speech) than the *Vita Musica* articles. Exceptions are the descriptions of famous musicians heard by Bosman in Leipzig, including reports on concerts by Emil Sauer, Leopold Godowsky, Ferruccio Busoni, Ignaz Paderewski and Vladimir de Pachman. Cf. "Music's exile" (August 1964) 7–8.

¹⁴ In a SABC radio interview broadcast on 1 June 1960, Bosman states that he left South Africa in 1899 and returned in 1956 when he was seventy-four years old, excluding only the "brief" return to South Africa from 1905 until 1910 (SABC Archive recording 6514, catalogue number 17/37–8 (60), SABC, Johannesburg).

¹⁵ Merensky manuscript, 49, 55.

¹⁶ The specific date is given in "Music's exile: The autobiography of Vere Bosman di Ravelli", *Vita musica* (June/July 1963), 9.

¹⁷ Merensky manuscript, 82. These events are also described in SABC Archive recording 6514, catalogue number 17/37–8 (60), SABC, Johannesburg. Cf. also the Loots manuscript, book 3, unnumbered 20.

and during his visit to the National Gallery in London he is confronted for the first time with art in this kind of setting.¹⁸ His meeting with professor Carl Reinecke in Leipzig is described in vivid detail,¹⁹ as is the subsequent conversation with the “medium-sized dark man with graying hair... deep-set warm black eyes” and the most “un-German” person who is the Liszt-pupil Alexander Winterberger.²⁰ Bosman tells us how he initially has lessons with Winterberger’s assistant Dufour (twice a week, Mondays and Thursdays, with Fridays reserved for theory),²¹ who studied at the Paris Conservatoire. Referring to Bosman, the professor instructs Dufour: “You must begin from bed-rock—nothing, absolutely nothing.”²² The result is two hours of technical exercises every day. His first public performance in 1902,²³ also recalled in *Saint Theodore and the crocodile*,²⁴ is described with vivid immediacy in the Merensky manuscript:

The orchestra began—something happened to me—my mind became a complete blank—what must, what can I do? Run off? O, if only the end of the world would come, or the roof fall in, or there was a fire to stop it all. I heard the orchestra coming nearer, nearer, like a creeping wild beast—just before my cue. Hess with his baton held the orchestra, looked me in the eyes, smiled, nodded—a light from Heaven descended upon me—I dashed with great vigour into the first chords—in a hall your tone sounds much bigger than in a room—when I heard this beautiful sound drifting to the farthest corner, I was inspired—the whole first movement was played with a strongly accentuated rhythm—warm applause—imagine I was the first

¹⁸ Merensky manuscript, 92.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 105–8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 108–9.

²¹ Loots manuscript, Book 11, unnumbered, 21. A description of how Dufour and Winterberger worked together, is found in the Loots manuscript, Book 12, unnumbered, 6. A certain character, Field, explains: “Dufour is an excellent trainer—thorough, conscientious, he never fails you however much you may fail him. I know his pupils the moment they begin to play—something precise, rather old-maidenish, a little sour perhaps, but clean, correct, a shade mechanical. All that Winterberger corrects with the first lesson—they are a fine team together. When I heard Winterberger play the first time, I was then with von Bülow, I was in despair. What is the good of playing any more after that? All the technique in the world cannot make you interpret like that.” An technical description by Bosman of Dufour’s teaching is found in the Loots manuscript, Book 14, unnumbered, 14–6.

²² Merensky manuscript, 123.

²³ In the Merensky manuscript Bosman states that he was nineteen at the time of his first public performance (194), which would imply that this performance happened sometime between 14 February 1901 and 24 February 1902. Elsewhere in the same manuscript, however, he says that he first started playing in public in 1902 (177), a fact he confirms in a SABC radio interview broadcast after his death on 1 June 1967 (SABC Archive recording 16024, catalogue number A 67/68, Johannesburg). Thus this first performance probably happened in January or early February 1902.

²⁴ Bosman di Ravelli, *Saint Theodore and the crocodile* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1964) 90–1.

British student playing in a Leipzig concert for a long time past—all the British and Americans clapping loudly. (...) I was not completely myself, calm, without a trace of nervousness or excitement. The second movement, being perhaps on the sentimental side, I was nineteen, was a fine piece of musicianship, thanks to Winterberger whom I had begged not to come—and the Rondo I romped through with evident enjoyment and that of the public showed their appreciation.²⁵

Bosman ends up doing various tours with Hess, amongst others to Poland, the Rhinelands, Paris, Vienna and Berlin. He plays both the Chopin concertos, the Beethoven Third, Fourth and Fifth piano concertos, the Grieg piano concerto, Mozart A major piano concerto (probably number 23, K. 488) and, the last addition to his Leipzig period repertoire, the Čajkovskij First piano concerto. In addition, he lives, works and socializes in a galaxy of aristocratic patrons and famous musicians, including Louis Persinger, Albert Coates, Arthur Nikisch, Camille Saint-Saëns and Vladimir de Pachmann. The Merensky manuscript in particular is a strange book that stops with a letter informing Bosman of Isabella Vallier's death. It is clearly no end to the book, and implies a continuation, which, if it existed, we are at present unaware of. But the void left by Bosman's reaction is somehow typical of the manuscript as a whole. For all its colorful anecdotes and intimate glimpses, these do not add up to a vivid picture of the autobiographical subject. The anecdotes remain fragmented. The promised revelations never come. On the one hand the manuscript is positively bursting with detail; yet not a single date or reference anchors the material in historical time. Of the man behind the pseudonyms, the reader learns little.

Saint Theodor and the crocodile is, if anything, an even stranger book. For one thing, it indulges in name-dropping on a truly epic scale. More than one hundred personal names find their way into this 156-page book as acquaintances of Bosman, including artists (like Stefan Zweig, Lina Cavaliere, Emma Calvé and Rupert Brooke), countless minor aristocrats, two popes and the Kaiser. Venice is the stage for this parade of characters, and the visit of the young man Charles—ostensibly the son of a woman once love by Bosman—the excuse for a guided tour of the city and meetings with old friends and acquaintances with whom much reminiscing takes place. The conceit of the book is illustrated best by a passage near its beginning, when Bosman and his young friend admire St. Mark's square and in which description changes without warning into metaphor:

As we stepped ashore at the Piazzetta he took my arm. We walked up between the library and the Doge's palace. In front of St. Mark's we stood silent. I felt a slight trembling through his body as his eyes absorbed its breathtaking beauty. All of us were silent for a few minutes. The Piazza is

²⁵ Merensky manuscript, 194–5.

the great drawing room of Europe. People go there from all over the world. Soon we were surrounded by friends—those who knew me, those who had heard me play, others whose friends were my friends. Charles opened his eyes wide and said to me, “But, Uncle Ravelli, one meets the world here.” Cipollato added, “A great world.” And, turning to Charles, “I don’t mean a material world, but a spiritual world. When you hear an artist play you will understand what I mean.”²⁶

The metaphorical significance of this passage is clear enough. In this book the reader is presented with a stage filled with Bosman’s acquaintances over many years, traveling through time and space to appear telescoped within its pages against the backdrop of Venice. The autograph copy of *Saint Theodore and the crocodile* survives in the Documentation centre for music in Stellenbosch, and so does a pre-edited typescript copy of the autograph in Bloemfontein. This unedited version portrays interesting differences with the 1964 book, not least with regard to the passage quoted above. The unedited version ends as follows:

“But uncle Ravelli, it is *not a person one meets in you*, but a world.” Cipolato added, “A vast world.” And turning to Charles, “I don’t mean a material world, but a vast spiritual world. When you hear *him* play, you will understand what I mean.” [Italics by the current author]²⁷

In this version the world described to the reader in such detail is personalized and internalized. It inheres in the performing artist and makes itself present through his playing. The unedited version makes clear that which is only implied in the corresponding passage in the book: that Bosman not only introduces the world to Charles, but that *he* embodies it in *his* playing. It makes Bosman into the medium facilitating access to the “vast spiritual world” of Western art and culture through music. “Over and over again I came up against that blank wall—a lack of tradition”, Bosman wrote in 1964. “What a German boy probably knew at ten or twelve, was still unknown territory to me. It was a great handicap.”²⁸ In the Loots manuscript he refers to the place of his youth as “that medieval world”.²⁹

It is indeed the absence of the sense of self that stands central in Bosman’s autobiographical narratives, and it is in this absence that music becomes central to facilitating identity transactions between belonging and alienation, limitations and aspirations. Bosman’s early-Romantic musical self (“my Romantic spirit” as he refers to it)³⁰ is related to the Romantic sense of self typical of

²⁶ Di Ravelli, *Saint Theodore and the crocodile*, 15.

²⁷ NALN manuscript, 9.

²⁸ “Music’s exile” (August 1964) 7.

²⁹ Loots manuscript, book 1, unnumbered, 4.

³⁰ Loots manuscript, book 2, unnumbered, 12.

autobiography as a genre, but also to the understanding of music as a primary medium of expression of the self in the nineteenth century. If the sense of geographical and conceptual disjuncture characterizing settler identity inevitably gravitates towards a model of identity, the Romantic self constitutes such a model. In this sense the Romanticism of the post-colony is recognizable as a part of modernism, in that it recognizes the Romantic self primarily as model (rather than as creative possibility). This allows it not to be seen as a regressive tendency, but one alive with the particular possibilities characterizing the post-colonial condition.

It is exactly this difference between appreciating Bosman as historical figure and valuing his symbolic value that becomes important in the assessment of his significance for Afrikaner culture in South Africa. In an obituary broadcast by SABC radio after his death, the programme was introduced by saying that “with the death of the highly civilized and widely read Jan Bosman di Ravelli, we have lost an irreplaceable link with the musical world of romanticism”.³¹ The poet W.E.G. Louw’s obituary in the Afrikaans-language newspaper *Die Burger* (of which the influential Louw was then the arts page editor) appeared under the following banner “This young Boer conquered old Europe spiritually”.³² *The South African music teacher* reprinted an obituary from *Handhaaf*, which ended thus:

Jan Gysbert Hugo Bosman—ahead of his own time—was, when it comes down to it, a young Boer, a man from our own soil, whose talents had to be developed and appreciated abroad, who out of necessity had to follow his career in foreign lands but who never disowned his own soil, who did not become entirely estranged in strange countries, and made a contribution to his own people; a contribution that could be of lasting significance.³³

³¹ Translated by the present author from the Afrikaans. All translations from Afrikaans in this article are by the present author. The original reads: “Met die afsterwe van die fyn beskaafde en wyd belese Jan Bosman di Ravelli, het ons ‘n onvervangbare skakel met die ryke, vergange musiekwêreld van die Romantiek verloor.” The producer of the programme “‘n Hoorbeeld oor Suid-Afrikaanse pianis Bosman di Ravelli” was Johan Stemmet and the programme was broadcast on 1 Junie 1967 (SABC archive recording A 67/68: 16024).

³² W.E.G. Louw, “Dié boerseun het ou Europa geestelik verower”, *Die Burger* (32 May 1967). Letters in the document collection of W.E.G. Louw in the J.S. Gericke library at the University of Stellenbosch attest to the warm friendship that developed between Louw, his wife (the composer Rosa Nepgen) and Bosman in the decade spanning Bosman’s return to South Africa in 1957 and his death in 1967. Cf. letters 158.K.B.30.

³³ No author. “Bosman di Ravelli (1882–1967)”, *The South African music teacher* 73 (December 1967) 13–14. Translated from the Afrikaans, which reads: “Jan Gysbert Hugo Bosman: Sy eie tyd vooruit, was op stuk van sake ‘n boerseun, ‘n man uit ons eie bodem, wie se talente in die buiteland tot uiting moes kom en gewaardeer sou word, wat noodgedwonge sy beroep in die vreemde moes beoefen—maar wat tog van sy eie bodem nie afgesterf het nie, wat in die vreemde nie geheel vervreem het nie, en ‘n bydrae gelewer het wat vir sy eie mense van blywende betekenis kan wees.”

And yet, if Jan Bouws is to be believed, Gustav Preller wrote in 1936 how Bosman had been “pushed away” by fellow Afrikaners.³⁴ To what extent it was known that Bosman, as an anglicized Cape Afrikaner, considered himself British rather than Afrikaans for most of his life, is an intriguing question. In the Loots manuscript Bosman recounts a conversation between his father and elder brother on the eve of the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer war:

[My brother], a naturalised official of the Free State, was ... supporting Oom Paul Kruger against the British Government. My father, moderate, born a British subject for several generations saw matters in a different light. He assured my brother he was wrong to think that in the event of war, all the Cape colony Dutch would rise and join the Boer Republics. “We have our own parliament—and as for England, we know her, but you we don’t know.”³⁵

Indeed the “Britishness” of this young “Boer pioneer” is a consistently present though mostly silent narrative strand of this story. “The Transvaal and the Free State held no interest for me”,³⁶ Bosman writes during the Anglo-Boer war, later remarking of his debut in Leipzig in 1902 that he aroused considerable interest because he was the first *British* pianist to perform there in many years.³⁷ Its potential wider dissonance in an otherwise pure musico-genealogical line connecting newly established colonial Afrikaner culture to Beethoven (most clearly through Liszt and Czerny), remains largely unexplored today. Of interest, at least to the present writer, is not so much inverting the claimed oppositions imagined between fixed and antagonistic white language-power complexes in South Africa, but recuperating the Britishness of early Afrikaans patriotic identity and cultural aspirations. For patriotic Bosman certainly was, as his presence at the founding meeting of the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns (South African Academy for Science and Art) in 1909 testifies.³⁸

If writers in the second half of the twentieth century were uncomfortable with this more ambiguous identity, it was because virulent anti-Britishness had progressively become a fixed point of reference of Afrikaner nationalist identi-

³⁴ Jan Bouws. *Suid-Afrikaanse komponiste van vandag en gister* [South African composers of today and yesteryear] (Cape Town: A.A. Balkema, 1957) 27-29, esp. 29.

³⁵ Loots manuscript, book 3, unnumbered 4.

³⁶ Merensky manuscript, 81.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 194.

³⁸ Cf. Louis Hendrik Claassen, *Die onstaansgekieiedenis van die Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Taal, Lettere en Kuns* [Founding history of the South African academy of language, literature and art], (M.A. thesis, Randse Afrikaanse Universiteit, 1977) 232. The present author should like to thank prof. Gerhard Geldenhuys for alerting me to this reference. In an interview broadcast after his death in 1967, Bosman also explained how his friend Gustav Preller presented his ideas for a State academy for music to generals Smuts and Louis Botha during this time. Cf. in this regard SABC Archive recording 16024, catalogue number A67/68, SABC, Johannesburg. This project was never to come to fruition.

ty during the twentieth century, obliterating the very real British ingredient of this identity (and culture) so eminently recognizable not only in die life and career of Bosman, but also in places and names touched by 'Englishness' and later reclaimed by Afrikaner nationalism.³⁹ Writing about the end of an old English tradition in the former Boer republic of the Orange free state and its capitol, Bloemfontein, Karel Schoeman cites Stephen Vincent Benet's *John Brown's body* and calls the 1950s and 1960s "the last bright August before the Fall".⁴⁰ The way in which this English tradition was gradually erased from the identity of the city as the Afrikaners retook possession of it, echoes the de-emphasis in South African music historiography of Bosman's cape (read "English") Afrikaans background. Schoeman writes:

When, many years later, with the end of the paper [The Friend], I was asked by the *Volksblad* to write a commemorative article on it, I pertinently focused attention on this [English] tradition. That exactly this sentence was omitted in publication under the pretext that the article was too long was, for me, significant: in 1985 the Afrikaans Bloemfontein, as represented by its smug daily paper, wanted no reminder of an older English tradition.⁴¹

In interviews and published writings after his return in 1957 to a South Africa politically controlled by the Afrikaner-dominated National party, Bosman also omitted earlier references to his "Britishness". In 'Music's exile' he writes that the manager of the Hotel Sedan in Leipzig (named as one Müller in the Merensky manuscript)⁴² tells him: "the whole of Germany [is] pro-Boer and that, on account of my name, I [will] find people everywhere inclined to be kind to me".⁴³ However, the comparable passage in the Merensky manuscript

³⁹ Writing in the book *Westerse kultuur in Suid-Afrika* [Western culture in South Africa], apartheid ideologue Geoffrey Cronje states the case against the influence of British cultural identity as follows: "... a section of the Afrikaners identified with the carriers of the British imperial idea and became lukewarm and indifferent and even condescending with regard to Afrikaner cultural property ["kulturbesit"] while displaying a pro-Englishness. This cultural schizophrenia ["gespletenheid"]—the usual fate of conquered peoples—dealt Afrikaans cultural life a telling blow, because a section of the Afrikaner *volk* started worshipping strange gods instead of their own culture and because inner *volk* division—an inevitable result of the pro-Englishness of a part of the Afrikaners—weakened the power of the *volk* and hindered the single-minded advancement of the Afrikaans culture; Cf. "Sosiologiese faktore in die Westerse kultuur-ontwikkeling en kultuurbevordering" [Sociological factors in the development and advancement of Western culture], in: *Westerse kultuur in Suid-Afrika*, 96. The author should like to thank Carina Venter for bringing this passage to my attention.

⁴⁰ Karel Schoeman. *Die laaste Afrikaanse boek: Outobiografiese aantekeninge* [The last Afrikaans book: Autobiographical reminiscens] (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 2002) 302.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 302. Translated from the Afrikaans.

⁴² Cf. Merensky manuscript, 102.

⁴³ "Music's exile: The autobiography of Bosman Vere di Ravelli", *Vita musica* (June/July 1963) 8–10, esp. 10. Another example of this tacit identification with the Boer forces during the war reads as follows: "But, of course, the Germans were so excited and pleased about the initial successes of our Republican warriors in South Africa, that I found it relatively easy to make friends."; "Music's exile", *Vita musica* (August/September 1963) 6–8.

also contains a retort from Bosman, omitted from the published article: "But I am not from the Transvaal."

Resuscitating this ambiguity in a historical figure like Bosman unshackles other fascinating, and often interlinking, dissonances. Behind the claim made of Bosman as a pioneer of Afrikaner cultural awareness in the early twentieth century and the link thus established to European spiritual values through music, looms the discomfort with art music as an unstable signifier for Afrikaner nationalism in the twentieth century. Music introduces a tension between the desire to identify emergent Afrikaner high culture with the predominant European art of the nineteenth century, and a palpable distrust of music as an open signifier. In doing so it amplifies the already-existing ambiguous identity of Bosman's Britishness. The musical world of Bosman is, ultimately, not the heroic world of Beethoven, but the women's world of the early-nineteenth century salon inhabited by Chopin's music. It was as Chopin interpreter that Bosman excelled ("I had always an intimate feeling for Chopin, as if he belonged to me", writes Bosman in the Loots manuscript)⁴⁴ and the later nineteenth-century stigma of effeminacy that attached itself to the space and genres of a man whose music was even in its own time considered less universal than exotically national, also ambivalently colours especially Afrikaans reception of Bosman. In an introduction to the poetry of early Afrikaans poet Eugène Nielen Marais, one-time benefactor of Bosman, Gustav S. Preller, contrasts what he calls the "powerful emotion of a man" expressed in the Afrikaans poetry of Marais to the Chopin interpretations of the "sensitive [fynbesnaarde] technically masterful young piano virtuoso Bosman di Ravelli".⁴⁵

An over-emphasis on Bosman's status as a composer rather a performer could well be explained by this unease with the sensuality of sound in performance (contextualized by Chopin-reception), as opposed to the setting of Afrikaans language poetry to music. The fact that Bosman's entire known oeuvre consists of only three such songs and two small piano works (now lost) has not prevented Dutch music historian Jan Bouws from claiming especially the songs as "an enormous cultural event and, together with the Second Afrikaans language movement, proof of the resurgence of the Afrikaner volk."⁴⁶ The

⁴⁴ Loots manuscript, book 1, unnumbered 27.

⁴⁵ Gustav S. Preller, in: Eugène Nielen Marais: *Gedigte* [Poetry] (2nd, Cape Town: Nasionale Pers, 1932) 3-4. Translated from the Afrikaans. The present author should like to thank Prof. Gerhard Geldenhuys for alerting me to this reference. It is possibly this reference alluded to by Jan Bouws when he writes that Preller found Bosman too young to understand Chopin during his South African sojourn of 1905-1910. Cf. Jan Bouws, *Suid-Afrikaanse komponiste van vandag en gister* [South African composers of today and yesteryear] (Cape Town: A.A. Balkema 1957) 27-9.

⁴⁶ Jan Bouws, *Komponiste van Suid-Afrika* [Composers of South Africa] (Stellenbosch: Albertyn, 1971) 50. Translated from the Afrikaans. The works mentioned are the three songs

importance of Afrikaner identity is also evident in F.Z. van der Merwe's description of the songs as striving to "develop a new Afrikaans musical style based on the work songs of natives".⁴⁷ The hyperbole of especially the Bouws citation makes sense only if the immense importance of art music culture in the formation of Afrikaner cultural identity is accepted, and if this importance is understood to be qualified by an often unarticulated imperative to contain musical expression within the desired narrative functions of Afrikaner national myth. Clearly, musical works (especially settings of Afrikaans verse) were more suited to this than sensitive Chopin interpretations.

There can be little doubt that Bosman's linguistic abilities, literary interests and activities comprise another strand of his symbolic value as an early Afrikaner cultural icon.⁴⁸ "Bosman de (sic) Ravelli had a vast knowledge of

comprising *Drie Lieder* [Three songs]. They are "Die Howenier" [The gardener] (Totius), "Winternag" [Winter's night] (Eugène Marais), "Die veldwindjie" [The veldt breeze] (Jan Celliers). They were published in 1908 by *De Volkstem*; cf. C.G. Henning, "Bosman, Jan Gysbert Hugo", in *Dictionary of South African biography*, ed. C.J. Beyers (Pretoria: Nasional Boekhandel for National Council for Social Research, 1968–87) vol. 4, 38–9. Jacques Malan dates the publication of the songs in 1909 and F.Z. van der Merwe as 1908. Cf. Malan, *Suid-Afrikaanse Musiekensiklopedie* [South African music encyclopaedia], 219 and F.Z. van der Merwe, *Suid-Afrikaanse Musiekbibliografie, 1787–1952* [South African music bibliography, 1787–1952] (Pretoria: J.L. van Schaik, 1958) 133. Two piano works, *Zulu wedding chant* and *Zulu funeral chant* date from 1910. The present author has been unable to find copies of these works in South Africa. In SABC Archive recording 16024, catalogue number A67/68, Jan Bouws also calls these compositions Bosman's "most important contributions" to the musical life of South Africa, and connects them to the second Afrikaans language movement while anointing Bosman as the first composer of the Afrikaans art song.

⁴⁷ F.Z. van der Merwe, *Suid-Afrikaanse Musiekbibliografie 1787–1952*, 15. Van der Merwe's description is no doubt based on Bosman's own "Preface" to the publication of his songs: "To forestall the probable accusation that the music of my lyrics is plagiarism, I would like to explain its origin. My ideas about what our national music should be have so often been discussed by the press that they do not necessitate elucidation here. Those who will aver that they have heard my lyrics before are perfectly right, because all South Africans, especially those living in the vicinity of Kaffir territories, have heard that music from their youth upwards. In order to study Kaffir music at its source I made several holiday excursions, especially into Zululand, where through the kindness of the Chief I had all the opportunities I would wish for. I find that the Kaffirs in their great national songs, like Wedding Song and Battle Song, have a remarkable ear for almost Bach-like harmonies—harmonies which are extraordinarily rich on account of the frequent use of even third tones. There certainly is not much change of key amongst them, but otherwise with the limited means at their command they produce marvellous results. I have tried to remain faithful to my models, except where for the sake of atmosphere I employed excessive modern construction. These few songs were not drawn from their great songs, but are simply everyday folk-songs that are of very well-known. I hope that these attempts will be the cornerstones of the foundation of a great national movement in music."

⁴⁸ This iconic status cannot be disputed. He appears, for instance, in a limited edition book entitled *Suid-Afrikaanse Heldegalerie* [South African hero's gallery] (Cape Town: Kiecks, 1947) 220–1. Bosman is one of only two musicians included; the other is the soprano Betsy de la Porte. Bosman's entry describes him not as a composer, but as "South Africa's greatest pianist", and states

languages. He could understand and read 16 languages!”, writes *Handhaaf* in 1967, before assuring its readers that “It was significant how well he could still speak Afrikaans after his long absence [from the country].”⁴⁹ But as with his Boer/British national identity and his composer/performer musical identity, the meaning for his countrymen of this remarkable polyglot talent was unclear. For one thing, Bosman preferred writing copious amounts of poetry in English (the language he also preferred for correspondence).⁵⁰ For another, his was no modernist verse or even late nineteenth century poetry as would change the Afrikaans language in the hands of writers like N.P. van Wyk Louw in the 1930s. It was early-nineteenth-century English poetry: frequently sentimental and anachronistically romantic in content as well as in language and imagery. The “otherness” of this language and form was, if anything, enhanced by an undeniable, though soft-pedalled homo-erotic current pulsating through the verse no less than through Bosman’s autobiographical writings. One sonnet entitled “Norrardino”, reads thus:

As in Brancaleone’s arms I lay,
Tasting the brutal strength of southern heat,
And the cool silences my trembling feet
Had trod so often on shores of the bay,
Carved in sapphire, tipped with silver spray,
By the erring moon on its bosom; sweet
Unbidden memories of a joy complete
With you drew my warm lips from his away.

If Brancaleone were only you,
If you were Brancaleone we would
Possess in splendid perfect brotherhood
Love, friendship and passion without purlieu,
Now each of these with heat I must pursue
To still the burning instincts of my mood.

erroneously that he died in 1938. According to Henning this mistake arose due to confusion over Bosman’s brother’s death in Munich in 1938, an occurrence that could not be verified. Cf. C.G. Henning, *Dictionary of South African biography*, ed. by C.J. Beyers (Pretoria: Butterworth, 1987) vol. 4, 39.

⁴⁹ Article reprinted in “Bosman di Ravelli (1882–1967)”, *The South African music teacher* 73 (December 1967) 13–4. In a later interview, Bosman would claim that he could read and write eighteen languages (SABC Archive recording 6514, catalogue number 17/37–8(60), SABC, Johannesburg).

⁵⁰ Apart from the published volume, *In an Italian mirror* (London: Erskine Macdonald, 1921) the Bosman collection in NALN in Bloemfontein contains eighty-eight typed poems (NALN reference number M240/89/474) on loose leaves. In the Loots manuscript Bosman writes about his early reading: Marie Corelli (pseudonym of Mary Mackay), Mrs Henry Wood, Quida (pseudonym of Marie Louise Ramé), Arthur Conan Doyle, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, Charles Dickens and the poetry of Byron, Shelley, Keats and Shakespeare. Cf. Loots manuscript, book 1, unnumbered 23–24.

The tone and emotional register is recognizable from passages in *Saint Theodore and the crocodile*: “His hand sought mine. “It has made me very happy to have talked to you like this. You are old enough to be my father, but in time there is no age—I feel and know that you understand all the immature longings of youth. No one has ever come so near to me as you have tonight.”⁵¹ Of the many differences between the two extant versions of *Saint Theodore and the crocodile* remarked on earlier, the most startling is perhaps the ending of the unedited version that appears in the publication as part of a “Prologue”. The paragraph in question reads as follows:

Love, then, is like this—ever trailing sorrow in its turbulent waters. Love is as long as life, moving like a lingering dream, with episodes of splendour and promises so rarely fulfilled, and yet its glory remains undimmed. Sometimes I have a hunger for you, not material, yet not easily appeased. It is more like a hunger for the love of God. A part of my soul seems torn away, left bleeding. Your physical presence would stop the bleeding but would not heal the wound. It will be one of the great discoveries of our age to know how to heal the wounds of love.⁵²

Placed at the end of the book (as it initially was), its ambiguity suggests the just departed Charles as the object of Bosman’s love. Placed at the beginning in the edited version, it displaces this love to Charles’s mother, with whom we read that it “never came to embraces or kisses between us—the social gulf was too deep”.⁵³

Yet the use of English and the sexual ambiguity of his texts are not the only potentially unruly signifiers of Bosman’s linguistic prowess. Although it was widely known in South Africa that in his later years he had translated Arabic texts into English, unlike for instance J.P.J van Rensburg’s 1963 translation of *The Odyssey* into Afrikaans, or the translation of Goethe’s *Faust* into Afrikaans three years later in 1966 by W.J. du P. Erlank (Eitemal), Bosman’s translations remained unpublished. Converting world literature into Afrikaans was a priority during the booming decades of Afrikaner self-confidence. The oriental fascinations and English-romantic sonnets of the Europeanized Bosman were clearly of less appeal to the society he had returned to in 1957 than the German, Greek and Latin that his Oxford tutor had taught him as a child in the Karoo town of Murraysburg. Europeanizing Africa was not supposed to happen via an orientalized Europe. It is the Dutch music historian of South African music, Jan Bouws, who connects the ethnic, genderized and oriental otherness of Bosman when he writes:

Half a century ago, at the beginning of the Second Afrikaans language movement, it looked as though he was destined to take the lead in the early Afrikaans musical life. It worked out entirely differently. In subject-specif-

⁵¹ Di Ravelli, *Saint Theodore and the crocodile*, 106.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵³ NALN manuscript, 7.

ic technical knowledge he might have been far advanced in comparison to his fellow Afrikaners, but a pioneer, a leader also has to possess other qualities. In the end Bosman had no inner certainty about the future of South African music, and in his decadent desire to achieve excessive civilization [oorbeskawing] he became in essence a stranger to the young, emerging art of his own volk.⁵⁴

Little is known about Bosman's life after 1912. The *Dictionary of South African biography* tells us that he "maintained his success as a concert pianist until 1955",⁵⁵ the year in which he returned to South Africa. However, in an SABC interview in 1958, the then seventy-six year old Bosman stated that his last performing season, totalling sixty-two concerts, was in 1938.⁵⁶ Although he also had a full contract for the following year, the war intervened. A South African (and thus Allied) national resident in Italy,⁵⁷ Bosman spent three and a half years in a German concentration camp, and by his own admission was too ill to continue working after the war. Sometime in 1948⁵⁸ he suffered full-thickness burns to his shoulder, making it impossible for him to resume playing the piano. Bosman later said that the shock of the accident left him deaf.⁵⁹ After having returned to South Africa in 1956, Bosman went to live with the then already elderly painter Maggie Laubser in her house in the Strand near Cape Town. It is not known how he and Laubser became acquainted, but it seems reasonable to deduce that this must have happened in Europe (the painter studied in various European countries between 1913 and 1924), perhaps while Laubser was working Italy in 1920–1921. A Laubser sketch of Bosman is reproduced in *Vita musica* of August 1964, and the present author has found a copy of another sketch, which is reproduced in figure 2. In 1959 Bosman was awarded honorary membership of the South African Academy of Arts and Science "for his contribution to the development of Afrikaans musical life".⁶⁰ Of his playing, which was never recorded, we know nothing beyond his own vague and romanticized descriptions.

Jan Gysbert Hugo (The Marquis) (Louis de) (Vere) Bosman di Ravelli, also known as Gian Bonzar, was a man of many lives, and times and places. In

⁵⁴ Translated from the Afrikaans. Jan Bouws. *Suid-Afrikaanse komponiste van vandag en gister* [South African composers of today and yesteryear] (Cape Town: A.A. Belkema, 1957) 27–9, esp. 27.

⁵⁵ Henning, *Dictionary of South African biography*, 39.

⁵⁶ SABC Archive recording 6509, catalogue number 21/19(58), SABC, Johannesburg.

⁵⁷ Since the early 1920s, Bosman lived near the Baboli Gardens in Florence. In the Merensy manuscript Bosman alleges that he lived there for twenty-five years (185).

⁵⁸ Ibid. The *Dictionary of South African biography* sets the date as 1955, presumably to bring it in line with its own statement that Bosman performed until 1955. This date has perhaps been inferred from Bosman's return to South Africa in 1956. Cf. Henning, *Dictionary of*, 39.

⁵⁹ SABC Archive recording 6509, catalogue number 21/19(58), SABC, Johannesburg.

⁶⁰ Henning, *Dictionary of*, 39.

conclusion, however, we return to the image of Saint Theodore and the crocodile on the column in Saint Mark's square. In the published version of his fantasy, Ravelli tells his young guest, Charles, that the story of inner transformation invented by him as the story of the crocodile and the saint, springs from personal experience. "I know this," he says "for I was too a crocodile once."⁶² Not another name then, but a mythical persona linking Venice and North Africa, the twentieth and the fourteenth centuries, reality and myth. But the denouement of the elaborate story is strange, in syntax no less than in the striking absence



Figure 2: Sketch of Bosman di Ravelli by Maggie Laubser⁶¹

of narrative support for its dramatic potential. The reader cannot accept that this is what the author and story is about. The guided tour of personages, architectural wonders and art works is no stage to effect transformation of an 'I'. And sure enough, consulting the earlier typescript version of the book, this confession, this identification of the author with the book's title, is missing. Instead it is his young charge who is changed by his Venetian vacation, and by implication, Ravelli who has affected this transformation: "... you have created a new being in me ...", says the young Charles. This, perhaps, was also the meaning intended to survive into our time; the colonizing vision of South Africa as a space to be transformed by Europe through the actuating power of culture. Jan Bosman emerges as an exemplar of the traveling virtuoso whose European success infuses the colony with European (musical) kudos from afar, becoming both message and medium to his country in the way he dreamt of so many years before as a young boy studying in Stellenbosch. But transformation is an open-

⁶¹ The copy that is reproduced here is in the possession of Alta Roux, whose mother was a cousin of Bosman. Roux got to know Bosman as a child in 1965, and recalls seeing this reproduction on Maggie Laubsher's desk. All efforts to find the originals of the sketch reproduced here, and the one published in *Vita musica*, came to naught. Dalene Marais writes in the preface to her book *Maggie Laubser, her paintings, drawings and graphics* (Pretoria: Perskor, 1994)—the most comprehensive catalogue on Maggie Laubser's works to date—that the sketches are "well documented and can be viewed at the Art Documentation Centre of the History of Art Department at the Rand Afrikaans University". However, the History of Art Department was shut down during the 1990s and most of their collection was transferred to the Johannesburg Art Gallery. However, the curator at the Johannesburg Art Gallery assured the present writer that the University would never transfer such valuable art works elsewhere, and knew nothing of their existence. Both the Rare Books Department and the new Arts Centre at the University were unable to help and referred enquiries elsewhere. Further enquiries to Dalene Marais and the Sasol Museum in Stellenbosch (which houses much of Laubser's work) were unfortunately fruitless. The present writer should like to thank Hilde Roos for her help in conducting this search.

⁶² Di Ravelli, *Saint Theodore and crocodile*, 106.

ended process of uncertain outcome and direction. Thus it is the “transformed” Charles that informs his mentor Jan Gysbert Hugo Bosman: “I have seen the sacred light, I am no longer a crocodile’. We are left to ponder who changes whom when he concludes: ‘And I am going to call you just Ravelli in future.’”

Abstract

Jan Gysbert Hugo Bosman (also known as Vere Bosman di Ravelli) was born in 1882 in Piketberg, South Africa. Shortly before the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer war in 1899, he travelled to Leipzig where, despite having had little previous musical training, he managed to persuade the Liszt-pupil Alexander Winterberger to take him on as pupil. Di Ravelli soon had a modest, but thriving, solo career, enjoying particular recognition for his Chopin interpretation.

Although little is known about him, di Ravelli owes his place in South African music historiography to two things. First, recognition that he was the first South African-born concert pianist with a European career. Second, his brief return to South Africa in 1909 and the subsequent musical setting of three poems in the still developing language of Afrikaans (he also composed two piano works based on Zulu folk music).

In 1964 di Ravelli published an autobiographical fantasy called *Saint Theodore and the crocodile*. The discovery of an undated facsimile of a different di Ravelli autobiography in the Africana section of the University of Pretoria’s Merensky library has provided a second, less fictionalized historical perspective of his life.

This paper will consider how the construction of di Ravelli’s life in his autobiographies and other biographical fragments depends on music to imagine a contested South African colonial identity. On the one hand, it is an identity dependant on its European past; on the other it is one radically marked by an emergent Afrikaner nationalism.