

The Goossens: A Musical Century

Carole Rosen

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At the outset I must confess that I approached this book with a primary interest in the Eugene Goossens of the Australian years, culminating in *that* incident. This is not as marginal an interest as one might suppose; more than a fifth of the text is taken up with Rosen's account of this period from Goossens' first ten-week conducting tour of Australia in 1946 to his forced resignations in 1956 after being convicted *in absentia* of bringing into the country 'prohibited imports' including a large number of so-called indecent photographs.¹

'Our' Goossens' father (Eugene II) and paternal grandfather (Eugene I) were Belgian conductors; his paternal grandmother was a dancer and his mother a singer. Of Eugene III's younger siblings, Léon (1897-1988) was a celebrated oboist, and Marie (1894-1991) and Sidonie (1899-) both gifted harpists. The fourth sibling Adolphe (1896-1916) was a promising horn player who died in action during the Somme offensive in World War I. The prominence in the text of Eugene III's Australian years is remarkable both in light of the size of the Goossens clan and their remarkable careers, and also because Rosen herself visited Australia only once for less than two months in early 1992. Her list of Australian interviewees during her stay is prodigious, and her reliance on their memories is at once a strength and a weakness of her work.

Most of *The Goossens* is devoted to Eugene III and his siblings, the musical century of the sub-title being neatly framed by the former's year of birth and the date of the book's publication, 1993, by which time Sidonie was the lone survivor. Eugene III's career and achievements warrant the greatest amount of space but Rosen's accounts of Léon, Marie and Sidonie are also fascinating. The book is laid out chronologically, which is an appropriate enough choice. For most of the book, chapters deal with Eugene's career alone, while the intervening chapters 'catch-up' the elapsed years for the other three, usually discussing their careers together. This is appropriate as Eugene III spent long periods overseas—in Rochester, Cincinnati and then Sydney—and also symbolic, as his personality set him apart. Eugene never 'enjoyed the same extrovert friendliness' (p.18) and easy manner of his siblings, some-

thing Rosen attributes in part to the three years spent from aged eight at a Bruges boarding school (pp.17-18). Perhaps something could also be made of the death of his twin sister at the age of six months.

Léon Goossens was the most famous British oboist of his time, and the founder of an English school of oboe playing. His unusually mellow tone, extraordinary breath control and exquisite phrasing made him an unforgettable soloist. He is the dedicatee of over one hundred oboe works by composers including Bax, Britten, Elgar and Vaughan Williams (p.126). Marie had an extended career with the London Philharmonic and London Symphony Orchestra. In later life she played light music for radio, film, television and commercial recordings; she is heard on the famous Gracie Fields recording 'I took my harp to a party and nobody asked me to play' (p.327). Sidonie played mostly with broadcasting orchestras and like her sister has an extraordinary list of solo and orchestral recording credits. She continued to play with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and teach at the Guildhall School of Music until she was ninety. In view of their accomplishments, it is striking that the four were not brought up as child prodigies or even treated as soloists in the making. Their father and grandfather decided that they 'had the necessary musicality to earn their living as competent orchestral musicians' (pp.27-28), chose their instruments and enforced their training regime accordingly.

Particularly remarkable to me in the book's account of Eugene III [hereafter Goossens], is his career in the 1920s. Those he mixed with and conducted in those years form an extraordinary roll call of musical eminences, including Melba and Chaliapin. He gave the first concert performance in Britain of *Le sacre du printemps* with Stravinsky, Diaghilev and Massine in the audience, and conducted the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra in a concert of British music for the International Society for Contemporary Music in 1922. He also conducted for Diaghilev in Spain and England in the mid-1920s. Given Goossens' wealth of accumulated experience, it is not surprising that he was allowed to dominate the public podium when he took up residence in Sydney; the resentment of this by Clive Doug-

las, associate conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra [SSO], therefore seems particularly misplaced.²

Rosen highlights Goossens' untiring championship of contemporary music. In the early days he had to organise and promote his own concerts in order to conduct recent works. His initial efforts—six Queen's Hall concerts from June to December 1921, which included the above mentioned performance of *Le sacre*—met with resounding success. Later, during his major residencies, he consistently sought out and programmed new music. Critiques of Goossens' own compositions were sometimes unflattering and it is interesting to read the following example from 1940: one critic described his Symphony no. 1 as 'old fashioned and [lacking] a distinctive signature of the composer' (p.221). During his years in Australia he used this same criticism to admonish local composers, to the chagrin of at least some.³

Goossens' career had plateaued by the end of his 15 years as resident conductor in Cincinnati. Rosen gives a good account of his earlier attempts to find another residency with a more eminent orchestra, and his eventual acceptance that further ascent was unlikely. Striking too is the extent to which his health problems were already modifying, indeed limiting, his conducting style by the later Cincinnati years. He was persuaded to take up residence in Sydney not only because of the notoriously large salary package for his double appointment as SSO conductor and director of the State Conservatorium of New South Wales and because the ABC could accommodate his European conducting engagements (p.270), but also surely because the adventurous move to Sydney could be seen as neither a step up nor a step down in the conductors' hierarchy.

Goossens put great energy into his early years in Sydney: the orchestra improved, he began a campaign which bore fruit many decades later in the Sydney Opera House, and he was greatly admired personally, even lionised. Perhaps the high-point of Goossens' Sydney career came in 1952, the year of the Goossens commemorative issue of *Canon*,⁴ which Rosen does not cite. This issue of a widely read Australian music journal is crammed with articles and testimonials from politicians, including the then NSW Premier Cahill,⁵ and musicians unstinting in their praise of the first five Goossens' years. If there were unbelievers in the orchestra or wider community in this and subsequent years, in Rosen's book they find voice only in the opinions of SSO brass player Cliff Goodchild. He feels that Goossens' popularity was wearing thin by 1955, something which Rosen dismisses as 'tall poppy syndrome' (p.346) and wisdom after the event!

In her detailed treatment of the customs scandal in the chapter 'Fall of a Titan', Rosen begins with a day-by-day account, mostly from newspaper sources, of the unfolding of events. Even Rosen's lucid prose has difficulty delineating the many possible, likely and downright absurd speculative explanations for Goossens' claim, conveyed by his Defence Counsel twelve days after Goossens was searched at the airport, that he carried the 'pornographic' films, books and photographs into the country 'as a result of threats' (p.356). Those who have read Ava Hubble's and Phillip Sametz's accounts are in for few surprises, though mercifully Rosen omits some of the rumours Hubble includes.⁶ New to me, however, is some material on Goossens' connection with bohemian artist and occultist Rosaleen Norton (pp.365–66) which explains why some members of the press were so near at hand when the customs search and subsequent police questioning took place.

Rosen is judgemental of Australian society and rightly criticises the disproportionate penalty exacted from Goossens for the possession of the 'offensive' items. She does not say however, how she thinks the British authorities would have dealt with a similar offence, once made public, under their own jurisdiction.

Particularly moving is her Chapter 25 'Aftermath' which takes up the story following Goossens' return to England and Europe. Although the BBC Director General resolved that 'after a suitable interval here there should be no ban on his use as a conductor by the BBC' (p.368), his career, like his health, was in decline. He never again held a post as resident conductor of a symphony orchestra and died six years after leaving Australia.

Rosen's style is light and readable; she tells her story well and is never dull. The book is a work of biography, not musicology, and she interpolates no comments of her own on Goossens' compositions, save a quixotic remark on an unfinished opera found amongst his effects after his death as a 'tantalising glimpse of what his operatic development might have been' (p.204).

Rosen's principal sources, apart from published and unpublished memoirs and the Goossens' archive (controlled by Goossens' late-life companion and heir Pamela Main) are newspapers and interviews. I find the interviews problematic, although those with family members would have been enormously useful and interviews certainly generate new material for the book. However for Goossens in Australia, she quotes almost exclusively the remembrances of eminent musicians and administrators of some forty years ago.

Apart from time dulling the memory somewhat, in their response to the customs scandal, for instance, the interviewees are unlikely to reminisce in such a way as to paint themselves in an unattractive light. More reliable, surely, is contemporary correspondence, such as the letter from musician and Sydney resident Noël Nickson to his father in the early stages of the scandal. Nickson reported that 'everywhere there is sympathy among the public at the sadness of the situation' and that 'opinion seems to be pretty definite that he...ought to be reinstated in due course with the ABC' and much more besides.⁷ Contemporary journals such as *Canon*, as well as correspondence, could have been used more widely as sources.

Besides this heavy reliance, I find Rosen's use of interviews somewhat vexatious. She seems to quote at excessive length and sometimes includes passages irrelevant to the concerns of the moment. On the positive side, she does not seem to have been overly constrained by the wishes of the family and does not stray into the realm of hagiography. Conflicting versions of events, assessments of personality and reviews of compositions and conducting are allowed to stand, though in the case of reviews she may explain away the less favourable ones.

The transition from manuscript to published book was perhaps a little precipitous; the most recent interview cited in the 'Notes' dates from 13 June 1993, the year of publication. The book is refreshingly free from literals, but the section on the Australian years has a number of obvious errors. For example Franz Holford, not Walter Wagner,⁸ was editor and founder of the Australian journal *Canon* (pp.275, 304). The July 1947 issue of 'Tempo, the Australian Musical News Magazine' (pp.275, 431) Rosen cites is mysterious; her quotation appears in neither the *Australian Musical News* nor the British music journal *Tempo*. And the process of transcribing interviews goes astray when the northern NSW town of Moree is rendered Mori (p.361). Sources could have been more extensively documented; Rosen usually acknowledges only direct quotations. The photographs are fascinating, and the book closes with useful lists of Goossens' compositions and family dis-cographies, none compiled by the author.

Goossens' personality and private life remain an enigma, despite Rosen's strenuous efforts. This is certainly no fault of the author. She was unable, for example, to speak to Goossens' third wife Marjorie. His three marriages are mystifying and his alleged affairs obscure. A man who could apparently keep his own counsel for the remaining six years of his life about so personally destructive an episode as the customs scandal would surely ultimately defeat any biographer.

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Notes

1 Technically there was only one resignation, that from the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. Goossens' contract with the State Conservatorium of New South Wales expired on 8 March 1956, so his resignation was unnecessary; *Age* [Melbourne], 12 April 1956.

2 Jennifer Hill, 'Clive Douglas and the ABC: not a favourite aunt', *One Hand on the Manuscript: Music in Australian Cultural History, 1930-1960*, ed. Nicholas Brown et al, Humanities Research Centre monograph ser. 9 (Canberra: Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, 1995), p.234.

3 Eugene Goossens, 'Where are the Scores?' *Canon* 2.1 (August 1948), pp.5-6, and Clive Douglas, 'Autobiography of an Australian Composer' (unpublished MS, held State Library of Victoria), ii (1947-1953), p.88.

4 *Canon* 5.12 (July 1952).

5 It was Joe Cahill who in 1952 committed his Government's support to realising Goossens' idea of an opera house for Sydney. In 1954 he appointed a Committee, which included Goossens, to develop the plan and decide on a site. The Bennelong Point proposal was Goossens' own early inspiration and was announced as the location for the Opera House by State Cabinet in May 1955; Rosen, pp.316-18.

6 Ava Hubble, *The Strange Case of Eugene Goossens and Other Tales from the Opera House* (Sydney: Collins, 1988), pp.46-72, and Phillip Sametz, *Play on! Sixty years of Music-Making with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra* (Sydney: ABC, 1992), pp.173-82.

7 Unpublished letter from Noël Nickson (Mosman) to A. E. H. Nickson, 17 March 1956. Access to the Nickson Collection courtesy of Grainger Museum, The University of Melbourne.

8 Wolfgang (not Walter) Wagner became associate editor during 1953 and was not involved in the early history of *Canon* except for co-editing the Goossens Commemorative issue of July 1952 and as an occasional contributor.