

His Youth

Early musical talents

Ulric Voyer was born in Quebec City, July 5, 1892. He had undeniable musical talent that manifested at an early age. This amusing anecdote is revealing : Ulric was only five years old, his sisters were not in the house, and his father was upstairs. Ulric was amusing himself on the piano. In fact, he already played the piano well enough to confuse his father who, entering the living room, was surprised to find that it was Ulric who was playing the piano and not one of his sisters. Ulric's sisters were learning how to play the piano, but Ulric was not. Was Ulric gifted with perfect pitch and able to play by ear?

Studies and musical education

Ulric Voyer studied at the Saint-Roch College in Quebec City. He first studied music with Wallace, and then at Saint-Roch's with Giffard's organist, M. Lefrançois.

In the company of Edmond Trudel, he studied piano with Professor Hudson, and he studied organ and harmony in Montreal with Leon Dessane and M. Descarries. At that time, it was difficult to find instructors who taught orchestration in Quebec City, so he taught himself, learning from books that he purchased directly from Europe, like the *Traite d'harmonie* by Rimsky-Korsakoff, *Technique de l'orchestration moderne* by Widor, and the

Traite

pratique d'instrumentation et d'orchestration symphoniques
by Ithier.

His passion for the stage and theatre

In his personal diary, Ulric indicates that even while he was young, he was a lover and fan of theatre, and he rarely missed any performances in Quebec City.

La boisson : Ulric created *La boisson* as early as 1907 or 1908. This play consists of three acts with twelve scenes, the manuscript of which is kept in the family archives. This play was presented many times in Quebec City and was broadcasted by a local radio station, CHRC, after his death.

Triste réalité : Ulric set aside the theatre for a while in order to pursue his studies and to teach music. He did not compose again until 1923. *Triste réalité* was presented at the same time as excerpts from the opera

Jean-Marie

. The play summary indicates this play is an adaptation of
La boisson

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Early musical works

Early compositions and musical publications

The first musical compositions and early musical works date from 1911 to 1915, when Ulric was between 18 and 22 years old. Some of the hand-written pages of that period contain a series of waltzes composed on January 17, 1911. In 1912, he composed *Petite amie*, a "bluette," a short, unpretentious musical work.

Prends garde à l'amour - *Valse chantée*



rde à l'amour - *Valse chantée* was published in 1913, followed by publication in the United States of: *Si tu savais*, by John T. Hall Music in 1914.



Also created at that time: *À Mlle Alice Bédard: Je te dirais 'je t'aime'*, a waltz published in Montreal by the publisher, *Éditions Le Passe-temps*



Si vous voulez m'aimer un peu, a melody dedicated to Mlle A. B. was published in Montréal under the amusing assumed name of Jean Canada (lyrics)

First Operas

His first operas were composed in the early 1920s.

La Duchesse en sabots

A comic opera consisting of one act with 45 walk-on actors, was presented in Quebec City as a benefit performance for the construction of the Church of Saint-François d'Assise. This opera was performed on Monday, November 8 and Tuesday, November 9 of 1920. We cannot determine the original contribution of Ulric Voyer to this work because it was adapted from *Les chaussons de la duchesse Anne*

, a comic opera consisting of one act, initially composed by Ch. Le Roy-Villars. Andre Lesot, bookseller and editor, published the eleventh edition of the libretto in Paris in 1896.

Petit-mouton

A comic opera in four acts, consists of 144 pages of hand-written musical orchestration. This original work was composed between 1920 and 1923, and is kept in the family archives along with violin and song scores. Not much is known about this work, as Ulric did not write informative notes about this piece.

The Opera Jean-Marie

The year 1923 saw the presentation of excerpts from the opera *Jean-Marie*, a comic opera in four acts. Two performances were conducted in Quebec City on April 10 and 11 of 1923.

The program and fifteen musical scores for tenors, baritones, basses, and soprano, along with the scores for the piano, double bass, violin, clarinet, F horns, and the oboe are kept in the family archives.

The local press, *Le Soleil* and *L'Action catholique*, reported that this work was 'richly harmonized' and 'of a surprising truth and originality,' and was well received. The libretto was the result of close collaboration with Alfred Rousseau, and the performances were under the direction of F.-X. Mercier.

The first historical Canadian grand opera The Opera *L'intendant Bigot*

The most famous work of J. U. Voyer was the opera *L'Intendant Bigot*. It was performed five times. Two performances were held in Montreal on February 5 and 7 of 1929 at the theatre house *Monument National*, under the musical direction of Albert Roberval. Three additional performances were presented in Quebec City on March 22 and 23 of 1929 at the *Auditorium de Quebec*, which is now the *Capitol Theatre*, under the musical direction of Edmond Trudel and with the patronage of the Honorable L.-A. David.

Initially, the opera was to be presented only in Montreal. Following the success in Montreal, plans were made for one performance in Quebec City. In the end, three performances were presented at the *Auditorium de Québec*, with almost the same cast of renowned artists who had performed in Montreal: Arnold Becker in the title role, Louis Gravel, Paul Trottier, C. E. Brodeur, Marie-Rose Descarries, and Caro Lamoureux.



The three manuscripts of orchestrated music and a piano-voice reduction are bound and preserved in the family archives. Many scores of the opera, with the first act occurring on the heights of the city of Beauport, near Quebec City, are included in these manuscripts. Also

included: double bass, cello, violins, clarinet, bassoon, cornet, horns, oboe, trombone, viola, and flute. Many copies of the libretto, created in collaboration with Alfred Rousseau, and copies of the program for the performances, both in Montreal and Quebec City, are also kept in the archives.



More than fifty newspaper articles reported the event, including Montreal's *La Presse* and Quebec City's

Le Soleil
and
L'Événement
, etc.

The opera was presented by the *Société canadienne d'opérette*, who produced and presented it as the first Canadian grand opera. In a letter that he sent to the composer and that was later reprinted in the program, Honoré Vaillancourt, writing in the name of the Société as its director general, stated that Ulric Voyer was 'the first Canadian to produce a lyrical work with the scenes created in the form of an opera.' The Encyclopedia of Canadian Music, published in 1993, mentioned the work without considering the opera

L'Intendant Bigot
as the first Canadian opera.

First recordings of excerpts from L'intendant Bigot



An unpublished work

The Opera *Mademoiselle de Lanaudière*, a comic opera in three acts and four scenes

An unpublished work kept in the family archives is *Mademoiselle de Lanaudière*, a comic opera in three acts and four scenes.

There are two bound manuscripts consisting of 685 hand-written pages of orchestra music, composed in collaboration with G.E. Lefebvre, that are kept in the archives. Also kept is the piano-voice reduction of this work, the proofs of the libretto, and 36 scores: tenor, baritone, bass and soprano's; clarinet, cornet, violin, flute, bassoon, trombone, double bass, cello, horn, and oboe.

This work was written in collaboration with Henri Deyglun, author of the libretto, and slated for performance. Forward movement was halted due to the untimely death of the composer, Ulric Voyer. The project was very close to completion, as indicated by the handwritten memorandum that indicated: 'the income of each performer for their participation at the presentation of *Mademoiselle de Lanaudière*, under the musical direction of Mercier-Gingras.' M. Athanase Guy signed a contractual agreement in Quebec City on October 20, 1931. This agreement stipulated that the main character was to be played by Marthe Lapointe, the role of Salaberry, by Antonio Lamontagne, and artistic direction by Jean Riddez. A document signed on June 4, 1932 by G. E. Lefebvre asserted that he verified the quality and accuracy of the orchestration.

While the opera *L'Intendant Bigot* recalled France's abandonment of French Canada, *Madame de Lanaudière* expressed the relationship between the two halves of Canada. As *Madame de Lanaudière* states, 'We are good neighbors. We visit each other, and neither English nor French avoids the other, because from our good relations will rise a powerful nation.'

The various occupations of J.-Ulric Voyer and his dream of a life dedicated to music

Ulric Voyer had every possible occupation in order to support his wife and eighteen children. He was a self-taught musician, piano instructor, clerk for the Municipal Court of Quebec City, first organist of the Saint-François d'Assise Church, shorthand instructor, playwright, and the manager of publicity for J.B. Renaud.

In 1913, he



married Alice Bédard, and they had eighteen children during twenty-one years of marriage, although three of the children died at an early age. As soon as the others were old enough, they were introduced to the world of music: Madeleine learned signing, Gaston learned the clarinet and oboe, Françoise learned the piano, and Gemma learned the violin.

Many musicians and friends regularly stopped by the house to play music and talk about music: Edmond Trudel, the orchestra conductor who led the opera *L'Intendant Bigot* in Quebec City, F.-X. Mercier, the orchestra conductor who led the presentation of excerpts from the opera *Jean-Marie*, G.-E. Lefebvre, another orchestra director and the head of the

Cercle Philharmonique Haydn

who later revised the opera

Mademoiselle de Lanaudière

, Jean Riddez of the

Opéra de Paris

. The librettist Henri Deyglun of the

Société des auteurs dramatiques de Paris,

and the radio broadcaster Alfred Rousseau, who wrote the libretto of the opera

Jean-Marie

, the opera

L'Intendant Bigot,

and the livret of the comic opera

Coup d'soleil

by Omer Létourneau and Honoré Vaillancourt of the

Société canadienne d'opérette

and so many other.

How many other singers and musicians from Quebec City knew Ulric Voyer? There were some evenings during the early thirties when there seemed to be a concert being held on 13th Street in Quebec City. The priests of the *Collège de Saint-François d'Assise* would gather together with the rest of the neighborhood in the schoolyard to listen. On those evenings, they could hear the sounds emanating from the magnificent piano that was the pride of Ulric Voyer and that had once belonged to Joseph Vézina, the late composer and orchestra conductor.

Ulric Voyer was active in broadcasting circles: he co-founded the radio station, CHRC, with Narcisse Thivierge, and he was the musical director of the station in 1931, and continued in that post until his death. Once a month, he hosted a one-hour live broadcast of comic opera or a classical work.

He was so in love with music that in 1913 he wrote that he had decided to dedicate his life to music. But that was not an easy task in Quebec at that time. Ulric was only able to devote his spare time to his musical passion for composing operas, in spite of ill health that caused him to blackout, and heart problems evident even in his youth.

Tragic and untimely death

Ulric Voyer, composer, died at the age of 42 on January 8, 1935.

As a head writer from the Quebec City newspaper *Le Soleil* reported, using the assumed name of L'oncle Gaspar, 'The death of Ulric Voyer created an easily understood commotion throughout the city. Everyone, he wrote, was his friend. Someone always stopped him on the street to discuss music. And many others were accustomed to stopping him to discuss business because, having been one of the most highly thought of employees at the Maison J.-B. Renaud for twenty years, people valued his opinion and knowledge. But his passion was for music, and he always regretted that he was unable to dedicate his entire life in pursuit of that passion.'

Gilles Bizier, Quebec City, Canada.
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Edited by Michelle McKeeth and Pamela Cheers