

La Jacquerie: an overview

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Nineteenth-century criticism invented the category of ‘symphonists’ as a way of pigeonholing those composers whose pronounced taste for complex rhythms, rare harmonies, unprecedented modulations and recondite orchestrations supposedly prevented them from achieving success in the operatic genre. Berlioz, Gounod, Saint-Sa ens and even Bizet had to confront this prejudice. And  douard Lalo still more. Until 1865, Lalo had shown very little interest in vocal music beyond his six *romances* on verse by B ranger and six *m lodies* on poems by Victor Hugo, while producing works of chamber music (piano trios, a string quartet) on a quite different scale. He preferred to live modestly by giving lessons and playing the violin or the viola here and there rather than knocking on the doors of the theatres. It was probably to offer a role to his young wife, Julie de Maligny, that he embarked in May 1866 on a *grand op ra* based on Schiller’s play *Die Verschw rung des Fiesco zu Genua* (Fiesco’s Conspiracy at Genoa), in which the republicans struggle in vain against the despotism of Duke Doria. The subject, which was in accordance with his liberal political convictions, left it virtually no chance of receiving a performance under the regime of Napoleon III. Lalo nevertheless submitted his score to the competition organised in 1867 by the *Minist re des Beaux-Arts* with the lofty motto ‘*Qui ne lutte ne choisit*’ (Who does not struggle does not fall). Placed third out of forty-three, it achieved a very honourable result.

All the same, *Fiesque* was destined never to reach the stage; but Lalo borrowed several motifs from it to nourish his mature compositions –

both instrumental (the Symphony in G minor) and operatic (*Le Roi d'Ys*) – and even his late works. The success of *Le Roi d'Ys* on 7 May 1888 marked a decisive turning point in his career. Now certain of having his work staged, Lalo did not tarry long before embarking in 1889 on *La Jacquerie*, a setting of a poem by Édouard Blau, librettist of *Le Roi d'Ys* and co-author of Massenet's *Werther* and *Le Cid*. This period witnessed the return of historical subjects, now with a concern for accuracy to which *grand opéra* had been a stranger. Let there be no mistake, however: *La Jacquerie* is no more faithful an adaptation of Prosper Mérimée's *Scènes féodales* than Hérold's *Le Pré aux clercs* had been, in 1832, of the same author's *Chronique du temps de Charles IX* – a few names, a period and half a situation.

There was in this, nonetheless, a powerful subject. The legitimacy of the peasant's demands, and the excesses to which they led, were well suited to the composer of *Fiesque*, who had written on 7 March 1871, during the siege of Paris:

If the republican idea had set France ablaze from one end to the other, the German machine would have been broken, or at least held in check. [...] These Republicans, divided as ever into blue, red and socialist camps, waste their time insulting each other and don't seem to realise that the monarchy is triumphant and the republic is already dead.

In the light of this letter, the choice of *La Jacquerie* assumes its full significance. Édouard Blau's initiative of introducing a love story, an element Mérimée had dispensed with, upset the composer, who wanted a lofty drama, as he wrote to his collaborator on 19 May 1889:

You may retort that I wish for men who are not drawn from life; perhaps that is so. An example closer to us will show you what I mean: the protagonists of [17]93, when examined at close range, reveal themselves to us as men, possessing our failings, our vulgar passions; but seen at the distance of a century, they acquire through the events they willed or underwent a strange character of grandeur. Similarly, the terrible period of the

Jacquerie certainly had its petty passions, if not our morals, but it seems to me that the peasants [*bonshommes*] we invent (for the needs of our cause) should all, men and women, give the savage impression of the Jacquerie, *seen from afar*, without any literary naturalism.

Both the artifice of interweaving the impossible love between Blanche and Robert with a class struggle of which the initiator becomes the victim (as in *La Muette de Portici* and *Rienzi*) and the reminiscence of Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète* in the intense bond between Jeanne and her son Robert were singled out for comment at the time of the premiere. The fact that Blanche heals the wound of the man whom she will later accuse of having killed her father likewise recalls both Isolde and Chimène. That adds up to rather a lot of influences for so short a work. But, with hindsight, one finds it easier to acknowledge the merits of this sacrifice to the demands of the musical theatre.

Lalo had the time to work on the first act only, and without excessive inspiration, disappointed as he was by the gulf between the project he had hoped for and Blau's libretto. In the same letter quoted above, he further observed:

Robert recounting his love to his mother's attentive ear like a student from the Latin Quarter seems to me out of place here. I would like a Robert who is madly in love, but who is above all fanatical and immediately allows us to foresee the Jacquerie; I would also like a mother who doesn't spend her time lamenting, but who is fierce and visionary. That was the impression I gained from our conversations; their realisation leaves me with a sort of coldness that the slowness of the music will emphasise further.

Blau did not do a great deal to comply with the urgings of the composer, who continued:

One needs excitement in the theatre; all the dialogue must serve the action directly, without any overlong passages, and irrelevancies must be rejected.

In the second tableau [act] in the forest, I expected to find a great popular tumult rather than monologues that slow up the drama; the fable of the woodcutter and the oak will put a damper on things; it would be preferable for the communard [Guillaume] to hurl imprecations while proposing frenzied projects for storming castles; then we would have the terrifying spectre of the Jacquerie and not a conspiracy without musical colour.

The fable of the oak did not disappear completely, the first act remained as it was, and Lalo contented himself with reusing and revising excerpts from *Fiesque* to which Blau adapted new words faithful to the spirit of the old ones (thus, for example, 'L'enfant rêvait' replaced 'J'avais rêvé'), just as, before him, the librettist of *Fiesque*, Charles Beauquier, had tacked verse onto pre-existing music. The result is a work more of marquetry than of operatic composition. Hence the confrontation between the Seneschal and the people lacks tension, and the intervention of Jeanne (borrowed from *Fiesque*) is too long and too introverted; it is only with Guillaume's aria ('Jacques Bonhomme!') that the action gets under way. After Robert's touching account of his Parisian adventure, the arrival of the Count (taken over from *Fiesque*) and his dialogue with Blanche seem stiff and decidedly pale. More regrettable still, Blanche's aria, which should have closed the act on a highpoint ('Rêve insensé, coupable ivresse'), suffers from having been borrowed from *Fiesque* (no. 18: 'Ah! je le sens, ce sont des larmes'): this is not the right music for the situation, fine though it is. Lalo orchestrated his score up to the entrance of Robert, then had to break off in order to compile the music for *Néron*, a 'pantomime à grand spectacle' (premiered on 28 March 1891 at the Hippodrome Parisien on the avenue de l'Alma), from further borrowings from several works, naturally including *Fiesque*...



After the composer's death on 23 April 1892, Julie found in Arthur Coquard (1846-1910), a close associate of her husband, admirer of Berlioz and former pupil of César Franck (whose first biographer he was), a musician sufficiently perceptive and talented to give *La Jacquerie* some chance of success while respecting Lalo's style. Coquard had already written several operas including *L'Épée du roi* (Angers, 1884) and *Le Mari d'un jour* (Paris, 1886), a symphonic poem called *Ossian*, and *dramas lyriques* for chorus (*Cassandre, Pompée*), more conspicuous, by all accounts, for craftsmanship than for personal expression. Since the fourth act of Édouard Blau's libretto was not even written at that stage, Coquard obtained permission for it to be finished by Simone Arnaud, his collaborator on *L'Oiseau bleu* (1894), with whom he was then preparing *Les Fils de Jahel* (Lyon, 1900). The quality of the verse does Arnaud credit; one might quote, among others: 'La mort nous fait égaux / Des mourants peuvent bien s'aimer sur des tombeaux', or, shortly afterwards, 'Tu m'apportais la vie et je buvais la mort'.

Nevertheless, it is not possible to assert with certainty that Lalo had no part in the music of the last three acts aside from the recurrence of four motifs heard in the first. A number of turns of phrase are very much in his style: in Act II, there is Jeanne's arioso 'Reste avec elle', Robert's 'Ah! le jour vient' and Jeanne's 'Ô mon enfant, quel sacrifice'; in Act III the chorus 'Vive le mai!'; and the *Marche féodale* and the *Chant d'amour* that open Act IV. But unless Coquard drew on unpublished sketches, these may well be particularly faithful pastiches.

If Arthur Coquard's contribution is preponderant, if it is true, as Isidore Philipps was to observe in *Le Ménéstrel* of 17 March 1895, that 'his [Coquard's] orchestration is flexible, colourful, interesting; his harmony is modern and his style very dramatic, very lively, full of spirit', the style of *La Jacquerie* remains the style established by Lalo in the first act: clear-cut ideas, a luminous diatonicism far removed from the tortuous chromaticisms then beginning to come into fashion, a preponderance of straightforward enharmonic modulations, resolute rhythms, the presence of elements 'in the folk style', alternation between outpourings of naïve

tenderness and of eloquence. The borrowings from *Fiesque*, the conception of which preceded the dissemination of the Wagnerian aesthetic, constitute one factor that gives *La Jacquerie* its originality. The other factor is the reappropriation of the old ingredients of opera: prayers, choruses of rejoicing, oath scenes, a lullaby... Only the cor anglais solo that opens the last act and the use in the harmony at key moments of the augmented fifth (C-E-G#), a device typical of the turn of the century, indicate the generation that separates the two composers, and it is no reflection on the admiration one owes Lalo to regret that Coquard did not contribute more to the first act, for if the work moves forward effectively to its conclusion, it is certainly thanks to him.

The arias assigned to each of the protagonists are sufficient to show off their voices without holding up the dramatic rhythm; aside from Blanche's first number ('Rêve insensé'), they are distinguished from the simple lyrical outbursts only by the symmetrical reprise of the material heard previously. The occasional recurrences of prominent motifs are so discreet that it is inappropriate to call them leitmotifs, and there would be no point in labelling them. The idea associated with Blanche, first stated by Robert ('Près de moi je vis une enfant') and reprised at the conclusion of Act I, reappears when he intervenes to save her, but only because the device is self-evident. The growling figure in the violas that doubles the words of Guillaume's first aria (at 'Si tu fléchis sous les fardeaux') is the only one that runs all through the work, ensuring its unity like a centre of gravity. Right from the Prélude to the second act, Coquard adopts and transforms it. He takes it up again to reinforce the characterisation of Guillaume's arioso 'Nos faux n'auront pas plus de peine', then when the peasants invade the castle, and finally to underline the murder of Robert. Its sombre brutality contrasts with the melodious idealism of Robert ('Ah! le jour vient, l'heure est prochaine'). These two aspects of Lalo's style seem ready-made to characterise the two facets of revolutions. Coquard adds skilful pastiches of *Le Roi d'Ys*: Jeanne's arioso 'J'aime mieux avoir faim' would be suitable for Margared; the Count's ('Tout seul quinze ans je demeurais'), introduced by archaic-sounding

motifs; the songs for the spring festival ('C'est demain le mois du bel âge'), which could well be Breton; and the cantabile cello melody embedded in the Prélude to Act IV (like its counterpart in the overture of *Le Roi d'Ys*), which announces the love duet that will form the climax to the act.



Costume for a peasant woman in Act I.
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Costume pour une paysanne à l'acte I.
Bibliothèque nationale de France.