

Presentation of the work

Gérard Condé

After the première at the Paris Opéra on 20 August 1801 of *Les Mystères d'Isis*, based on Mozart's *Magic Flute*, the *Journal des débats* ran an article drawing the following conclusion:

The pure, natural, simple style of this music sets a bad example; composers, librettists, orchestral musicians see it as a downright scandal! Terror has spread through their camp; they fear that the success of this new genre will put the habitués of the Opéra off the violent noise and screaming voices generally used there to stun them: they will be demanding melody instead of din next – what chaos, what a revolution in the music world! They will expect music to move and divert them instead of making their heads spin. How unreasonable! It is as if patients were to expect doctors to cure them!

Charles-Simon Catel appears to have taken up that challenge: *Les Bayadères* is a rare example in the French repertoire of an opera that assimilates the Mozartian style as a means of toning down the brazenness and sterility of neo-Gluckism. Of course, blazing brass and cymbals are to be heard in the overture, but the contrast between the warlike exoticism of the beginning and the striking grace of the second theme is handled so well that neither the initial fury of the piece, nor its resurgences at other points throughout the work, could be equated with pandemonium. The constantly perfect balance in the setting of the text, a score showing great

care and attention to detail, could even be the other side of the coin, especially when compared to the extreme irregularity that characterises *La Vestale*, première in 1807, the libretto of which, also by Étienne de Jouy, shares common features with that of *Les Bayadères*.

The following declaration by Saint-Saëns could also be taken as a description of Catel's ideas:

Form is for me the essence of art. The music-lover is most of all enchanted by expressiveness and passion, but that is not the case for the Artist. An artist who does not feel a deep sense of personal satisfaction with elegant lines, harmonious colours or a perfect progression of chords has no comprehension of true art.

Les Bayadères is far from lacking in expressiveness and passion, but the attentive listener will always derive pleasure from admiring the way, as in Mozart, everything falls naturally into place within a tonal framework of impeccable regularity. Like Mozart, Catel excels in the art of employing secondary ideas to lend density to the fabric without making it heavy – unlike Cherubini who, for fear of lacking consistency, overloads the middle parts. Whether transparent or powerful, the orchestration is always well balanced and it brings out all the subtleties of the score. Although vocal virtuosity is excluded, the singers are able to show the full extent of their resources.

Without taking the parallel with Mozart too far, Catel appears, like him, to be skilled in the art of synthesis: the first chorus ('Pour plaire enchaînons sur nos traces'), the Act II march of the Bayadères with cymbals, bass drum and piccolo, then their dance, refer to Rameau (possibly via Gluck's *Armide*); in the coquettish behaviour of the favourites ('D'une juste espérance') we are reminded of that of the three Ladies in *The Magic Flute*, while the religiosity of the Bayadère trio in Act I ('Dourga, des lieux où tu reposes') recalls that of the three child-spirits who guide Tamino to Sarastro's temple, and the Act III march, darkened by the rare colour of the English horn, is modelled on the march of the priests of Isis and

Osiris. The march in Act I ('Des prêtres et des grands') and the chorus 'Victoire infortunée' (also redolent of *Alceste*) were probably influenced by Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito*. And the influence of Joseph Haydn can be felt in 'De ses dons la gloire avare'. Olkar's aria 'Bannis à jamais de ton cœur' is in line with the arias sung by evil characters in Dalayrac and later Cherubini. Finally Catel's contribution to the aesthetics of the Revolutionary and Empire periods was sufficient to enable him to make the patriotic 'Aux accents de la gloire réveillez la victoire' ring true. The result is not an impersonal sort of patchwork, but on the contrary a work that it is well-balanced, one that constantly holds the listener's attention as it moves gradually towards a dénouement that is sufficiently predictable to enable the last act to unfold smoothly.

The very symphonic overture opposes Mars and Venus, and even kisses are evoked. The inverted recapitulation gives War a temporary victory over Love. The beginning of the first recitative is so remarkably expressive that we find ourselves regretting that the following ones are not always as inspired; but it is worth pointing out that Catel generally gives the orchestra more than just a punctuating role. The general chorus with dancing ('Pour plaire, enchaînons sur nos traces') is a delightful *hors d'œuvre*, whetting the appetite to morality worthy of Quinault. And the trio for the favourites ('D'une juste espérance') is a second *hors d'œuvre*, but already more active dramatically; it is later matched by another trio in the final act. Sensuality steps in (in the orchestra) with the chorus 'L'amour et la reconnaissance', which reveals the cause of Démaly's suffering. Does he mention the Mahrattas in order to inform the spectator, or is it an excuse to break his silence and reveal his true love?

Rustan's aria, 'Pourquoi cette tristesse', deliberately kept in the *opéra-comique* register, enrages Démaly and acts as a foil to his brief *agitato* in E minor ('Par le plus doux lien mon âme est enchaînée') and presently to his aria ('Viens Laméa'), more sober and more elevated in its expression, supported by a silken instrumental fabric. We are not fooled by the violence of Démaly's fears concerning the Mahrattas: at this point he is concerned with putting off a marriage that he does not want. The march 'Des



Indian costume for a member of the chorus.
Paris Opéra Library and Museum.

Costume pour un choriste habillé en Indien.
Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra.

prêtres et des grands' offers a superb musical progression appropriate to a spectacular event, and at the same time a scene that subjects the powerless hero to torture.

The entry of the Bayadères is in complete contrast (the overture has already revealed their grace and finesse combined with conquering strength). And now we find Laméa sighing, trapped in the same situation ('L'amour brûle au fond de mon âme'); Démaly, with the following aside, arouses suspicion and this leads to a vocal and choral ensemble that is beautifully rich in its polyphony. Nothing, it seems, can put off the ceremony, the sacred charms of which are boasted by the three Bayadères ('Dourga, des lieux où tu reposes') with the chromaticisms from the orchestra expressing agreement. All that remains now, in order to comply fully with the French Classical aesthetic, is to dance. This *divertissement* is the last straw: just when no one is expecting a reversal, Laméa, showing all the vigour she is capable of, decides to speak out: her angry aria 'Voyez-vous du haut des montagnes', launched by a superb recitative, immediately makes her the most active figure in the drama. Her appeal, 'Aux accents de la gloire, réveillez la victoire', subsequently taken up by the women (then echoed by the men), reflects a time when heroism was not only a manly virtue; Leonore is another illustration of this. The High Brahmin Narséa nevertheless interrupts this second ensemble (tenser than the first) in order to get on with the ceremony. The reference to the heavenly diadem gives rise at this point to instances of chromaticism. Démaly is about to reveal his secret ('Prêtres, peuple, écoutez') when the last episode occurs: on the announcement of the invasion, Rutrem and Narséa are discredited and Laméa, after confirming Démaly's ascendancy by urging him henceforth to heed only his own counsel ('Ne prends plus conseil que de toi-même'), repeats her war song ('Aux accents de la gloire réveillez la victoire') with a passion that is even more martial than before.

Laméa's prominent role is confirmed straight away in the discussions at the beginning of Act II. The chorus of Mahrattas, distant at first, burst onto the stage, full of violence like their leader, Olkar. The meeting between the conqueror and Laméa shows the latter's fear and the former's surprise.

Olkar's aria 'Bannis à jamais de ton cœur' is as stiff as the chorus sung by his men. It culminates on a high D, then an F. The form (A-B-A'-coda), that of most of the arias in this work, permits a break in the middle ('La fortune en brisant tes nœuds') and a richer reiteration, a source of progress. But the explosion does not happen: Laméa cunningly feigns submission and charm. Only when left alone does she embark on a bravura aria ('Sans détourner les yeux'), symmetrical in character and style with the previous one, but more fully developed and setting her on an equal footing.

A different tone (one of intimacy) and a concern for equality are revealed in the duo between Laméa and Démaly. The register is conversational, irrigated by a recurrent motif; only the middle and the coda, bringing together the two voices, suggest that their feelings are in tune. With the entry of the Bayadères the end of the act may be summarised in the contrast between the warlike strains, vocal or instrumental, and the invitations to partake in the pleasures of singing and dancing, which gradually weaken those strains and gain the upper hand. This gradual shift and reversal of the situation (after Laméa's sweet appeal for disarmament) is most remarkable and original. Note that the only vocalise in the work comes on Laméa's 'J'en atteste l'amour', an ambiguous promise. Olkar's final appeal to his men to fight ('Rassemblez-vous autour de moi; servez la fureur qui me guide') offers the baritone a fair exit and gives the act a strong ending.

When the curtain rises again, everyone is singing of the glory of Démaly, who nevertheless has yet to overcome Laméa's reticence. Their dialogue, begun in recitative, gradually moves towards an ardent and tender aria, 'Le sort peut changer ses décrets', in which the orchestra partners the voice as if to convey what is left unsaid by the words, Démaly's unspoken impulses. The following duo, 'Pour toi je ne peux vivre', much more passionate than the duo in Act II, marks a step forward in the relationship between the lovers, who, we note, are always presented as equals. This progression fires Démaly with determination, although he does not yet reveal what he plans to do in order to win over Laméa.

Introduced by a concertante solo for the clarinet, announcing its ostentatious grace, the trio sung by the favourites could be compared to

the 'trou normand' (a palate cleanser between courses) in a hearty meal. Despite its captivating charm, it would be superfluous were it not for the fact that its vanity confers a sudden gravity on the 'Jour de deuil et de larmes' announced by Rustan, an intervention culminating in the general chorus 'Victoire infortunée'. After the formal announcement by the Brahmin Hyderam, the 'call for candidates' is saved from ridiculousness by Laméa's eagerness to speak. The chorus that immediately congratulates her ('Honneur à l'amante fidèle') errs on the side of convention, but that is quickly made up for by the piece sung by the three Bayadères, launched by Laméa ('Pleurez!'): with the continuously undulating sextuplets from the violins, this is possibly the most touching piece in the whole score, because of the simple play of exchanges between the voices. It by no means detracts from the emotion that then emanates from Laméa's great *cantabile* 'Cher Démaly', in which the singer demonstrates new expressive qualities.

After the following march, Laméa gives up her jewellery and is prepared for her wedding; then she sings her last aria (with chorus), which rises a step higher, into a contemplative fervour. It makes the *coup de théâtre* of Démaly's appearance, alive, seated on his throne, all the more striking. The duo in dialogue recalls the one heard in Act II: all's well that ends well and the chorus of Bayadères sings it again, with other words. As was usual at that time, the work ended with a ballet, intended above all to retain that portion of the audience for which it was the high point of the evening. The final ballet in this case adds nothing to the work itself; the pieces preceding it are far more inspired.

NOTICE HISTORIQUE
SUR LES BAYADERES.

LA considération dont jouit, dans l'Indoustan, cette classe de femmes connues en Europe sous le nom de BAYADÈRES, repose sur une opinion religieuse, présentée dans les livres indiens comme un fait historique. Le récit très succinct que je vais en faire paraîtra d'autant moins déplacé, qu'on y reconnaîtra la source où j'ai puisé le dénouement, et quelques unes des situations du drame que le lecteur a sous les yeux.

On lit, dans un des *Puranas* (poèmes historiques et sacrés), que *Schirven*, l'une des trois personnes de la divinité des Indes orientales, habita quelque temps la terre, sous la figure d'un Raja célèbre, nommé *Devendren*. En prenant les traits d'un homme, le dieu ne dédaigna pas d'en prendre les passions, et il fit de l'amour la plus douce occupation de sa vie.

Son peuple, dont il n'était pas moins adoré pour ses défauts que pour ses vertus, le sollicitait en vain de donner un successeur à l'empire, en

b

Beginning of Catel's historical account, preceding the printed score of 1810.
Private collection.

Notice historique reproduite en tête du livret imprimé de 1810.
Collection particulière.