The music of *Le Pré aux clercs*

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'It is quite the sort of *opéra-comique* music... that one hears every day, excellent Adam and no more than that', grumbled Jules Janin in the issue of the *Journal des débats* published two days after the premiere of *Le Pré aux clercs*. To be sure, one may notice some echoes of *La Dame blanche*, *Fra Diavolo*, *Le Comte Ory* and even *Der Freischütz*, but – quite apart from the cosmopolitanism of which Hérold was so fond – it is equally possible to find presentiments of the Overture to *Das Liebesverbot*, the orgy from *Les Huguenots* or the ball scene from *La traviata*, while the somewhat vulgar binary motifs of Ambroise Thomas seem to be modelled on those of the older composer. Though doubtless derivative in certain respects, the score of *Le Pré aux clercs* went on to serve as a recipe book for the next half-century: Lecocq, Offenbach, Varney, Audran and even Bizet consulted it with profit, each to his own ends.

While displaying the unbridled verve of a potpourri, the Overture is actually not one at all, because its themes are not taken from the opera. It opens in G minor, in a strict (Calvinist?) fugal style, as if to transport the listener to the period of the action, but does not tarry there for long and soon leads into a transition with two faces: a melancholic clarinet solo in the minor, an optimistic violin melody in the major. The Rossinian second theme is a brilliant quick march. There follow a modulatory development and a recapitulation in B flat major, the relative major of the initial key, a particularity that Castil-Blaze (in *Le Constitutionnel*) thought comparable to what he had observed in pieces by Jean Mouton and

Goudimel heard at the 'historical' concerts organised by Fétis... He also detected 'in the first bars, a Gothic phrase, played in thirds by the violins, which is appropriate to the colour of the subject'.

After the chorus of rejoicing ('Ah! Quel beau jour de fête'), the obligatory opening number of any *opéra-comique*, enlivened by the brief exchange between Girot and Nicette, the duet 'Les rendez-vous de noble compagnie' (in which Roland-Manuel pointed out a 'modal' harmonisation foreshadowing Fauré and Chabrier) begins like a solo aria. But it is rich in surprises: the female voice edges her way into the piece, then reappropriates the opening music for herself, leading her partner on. After the sop-rano's cadenza, Girot tries to hog the limelight by essaying a tender vein ('Dans la prairie'). But once again the dialogue turns into a duet, in sensuous thirds. A central section, evoking the practice of duelling, introduces a vigorous contrast and gives a foretaste of the work's subject. A second cadenza leads to an expanded reprise of the duet ('Dans la prairie'). Clearly a well-matched couple.

Mergy's air, by turns piquant ('Ô ma tendre amie'), with sparkling coloratura, and lyrical in its more sostenuto central section ('Ô toi, de qui l'absence'), was slated by Jules Janin for its stressed mute 'e's (*ami-e*, *ravi-e*, *vi-e*); but it is a better piece than this criticism suggests, and experienced singers smooth out the faulty prosody by repeating the 'i' sound and dodging the 'e'. The chorus of soldiers bursting in like a salvo of artillery ('Allons, allons, dressons la table') initially possesses the same 'energetic', binary function as the earlier townspeople's chorus, but when the situation grows more acrimonious the music takes an icy, rather disturbing turn. There seems no apparent reason why the arrival of Cantarelli should bring back Nicette's bouncy motif. The soldiers' departure to the same rhythm as their entrance provides a welcome reprise, rounded off by an orchestral diminuendo clearly influenced by *Le Comte Ory*.

Nimble and elegant, the Finale ('À la Navarre, à ses montagnes') includes Isabelle's tender *couplets* ('Souvenirs du jeune âge'), an archetypal *romance* with its obligatory lingering on the final phrase ('mourir'); the two brief excursions into neighbouring keys do nothing to alter its

idiomatic simplicity. It is difficult to overstate one's admiration for the rapidity and dramatic aptness of the exchanges between Isabelle and Marguerite, a real musical conversation that, as it grows tenser ('Je meurs' – 'Au secours!'), prepares the double explosion of the entrance of Mergy followed by Comminge. To depict the composure that all the protagonists must maintain, Hérold takes care to bring the orchestra back to the distanced stylishness of the opening. It is therefore to the chorus ('Vive la Reine!') that he allots the task of furnishing the necessary climax for the dénouement; the central episode, with Nicette, creates a charming diversion without breaking the mood.

The extended Entracte that precedes Isabelle's air has the cut of a violin concerto. The aim was to add glitter to the aria, which progresses in the course of its four sections – *Maestoso, Allegro, Moderato, Plus animé* – from sober interiority ('Jours de mon enfance') to swaggering virtuosity ('Soutiens mon courage'), offering the singer fermatas for decoration and a mirror for her technique. One realises, with hindsight, that the Romance was a mere hors d'œuvre.

The Trio ('Vous me disiez sans cesse') is impressive more for the skill with which the musical pulse sustains the progress of the action than for the quality of its ideas; moreover, there is the difficulty that combining a light-voiced comic tenor (*Trial*) with two sopranos creates a vocal disparity that is not without its dangers. The 2/4 motif of the Mascarade ('Ah! quel plaisir') recalls, perhaps deliberately, the opening chorus of Act One. The incongruous 'Neapolitan' colouring of the sham hermits' melody betrays the fact that they are impostors (even before the girls denounce them when they take over the tune), but also introduces a felicitous archaistic diversion. Another such diversion is the exclamation of Nicette ('Ah! Monsieur, de grâce'), who, to judge from this slithering harmony, seems to be enjoying her suffering. Then the Mascarade recurs like a refrain. The arrival of Mergy installs an atmosphere of solemnity and disquiet

through the impassive repetition of an unstable motif. The unexpected long timpani roll on low *A* throughout this episode in F major maintains an impression of strangeness that is even more marked beneath the ritornello that precedes the choral refrain in D major 'Allons, partons'.

The Finale begins with the virile and exceptionally concise duet for Mergy and Comminge. Its firm tone contrasts with the panic following Isabelle's fainting fit, to which the chorus responds with tranquil legato thirds ('Laissons-la, du silence'). This tender interlude reinforces the effect of the return to vivacity when Isabelle enters. Curiously, the vocal grand finale is launched by the Queen's faux-medieval lament 'Je suis prisonnière'.

The chorus that opens the third act ('Que j'aime ces ombrages') seems like a replica of its predecessors in the opera; one may view this as contributing to the unity of the work. Apparently Francis Poulenc had it in mind when writing *La Belle Jeunesse* (the seventh of the *Chansons gaillardes,* 1926). A standard feature of every *opéra-comique*, the Ronde assigned to Nicette ('À la fleur du bel âge') is typical of the genre – in 6/8 time, introduced without dramatic preamble – and entirely suited to the deceptively ingenuous character of the role, one of the best drawn in the piece: 'Je suis ménétrier, dansez sur mon refrain'. The variations from one verse to another are left to the singer's discretion. The syllabic Trio ('C'en est fait'), in which the jubilation of the Queen and Isabelle mingles with Mergy's anxiety, roused 'a furore, fanatical enthusiasm' at the premiere; it is indeed skilfully handled.

Much more remarkable, though, is the Finale, with the increasing rage of the duellists, the intervention of the Officer of the Watch, and the indifference of the watchmen symbolised by the somewhat vulgar dance music and contrasting with the quasi-prayer of the women, 'L'heure vous appelle'. Then comes the episode of the funeral boat. In his *Traité d'orchestration*, François-Auguste Gevaert noted as a curiosity the fact that the violas are

directed to tune their lowest string down a semitone in order to reach *B* and thereby double the cellos at the same octave. The music critic Arthur Pougin saw in this 'a special device which is in itself a stroke of genius... This unaccustomed note, lower than one usually hears, astonishes the ear with its strangeness, and, moreover, is imbued with a mysterious and desolate character marvellously suited to a dramatic situation. What is more, since the string is under less tension, it produces a slack, dull sonority... Hérold invented one of the most striking effects that exist in the theatre!'

Quite apart from the fact that Pougin, and those who have copied his remarks, wrongly assert that the cellos also retune their instruments here, it should also be pointed out that, since the violas only have three bars to do so, their intonation suffers more or less, and their dubious unisons with the cellos must have been the primary cause of the 'striking' effect. In the present performance, only half the viola section tuned their instruments down, with highly satisfactory results. Then Mergy bursts in, and sixty bars of *Agitato* suffice for the dénouement, following a tradition that Carl Maria von Weber described in 1817 in an article on Méhul's *Joseph*: '… after the final dénouement of the drama, the lively French intelligence tends to lose interest in a work and to let it play itself out without paying any attention. The German listener enjoys savouring the dramatic situation, and his sympathies are still engaged by the emotions of the stage characters who have won his affection.'

Costume design, probably for Comminge, made for a revival of the opera.
Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris.

Costume probable pour Comminge, lors d'une reprise de l'opéra.
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