

The reception of *Dimitri* in the press

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Hurrah! Hosanna! Alleluia! Today's the day! Paris has its Théâtre-Lyrique once more! [...] By seven o'clock a huge crowd had formed opposite the theatre and on the boulevard. Municipal guards were there on horseback, organising the approaching carriages into single file. It was like the Place de l'Opéra on a gala night.

(Arnold Mortier, '5 May 1876', *Les Soirées parisiennes*.)

There was great excitement and general rejoicing on that first night of *Dimitri*, which was to be Joncières's most successful opera. The work had been announced in the press months ahead and word of mouth had done the rest. Parisians were doubly excited: curious to see the new opera and eager to attend the new Théâtre-Lyrique – in the form of the Théâtre Lyrique National, replacing the defunct Théâtre de la Gaité, in the rue Papin – which (most recently at the Salle de l'Athénée) had been closed to the public since 1872. Victor Wilder was among the first to praise the quality of *Dimitri*:

The new Théâtre-Lyrique opened recently with what was incontestably a very great success. M. Albert Vizentini inaugurated his new theatre with an essentially French score, a very ambitious work by one of our young French composers. The new directorship could not have got off to a more auspicious or more splendid start. [...] It was a great success for the authors, a great success for the artists and for the theatre.

(Victor Wilder, *L'Opinion Nationale*, 10 May 1876.)

Dimitri was performed an amazing forty-seven times in 1876 alone, and despite the mixed reception of the same composer's *Le Chevalier Jean* in 1885, was deemed worthy of revival at the Opera-Comique fourteen years later (5 February 1890). Georges Servières went so far as to affirm, in the weekly journal *La Fantaisie artistique et littéraire* (2 October 1880), that it was the brilliant success of *Dimitri* that gained Joncières entrance to 'la grande boutique', i.e. the Paris Opéra, where *La Reine Berthe* was mounted in 1878. Many critics noted that Joncières had made clear progress in his writing by the time he came to compose *Dimitri*. His earlier *Sardanapale* (1867) and *Le Dernier Jour de Pompéi* (1869) seemed less elaborate and, in the eyes of many, the composer attained a degree of maturity in *Dimitri* that could also be felt in his *Symphonie romantique* of 1873.

M. Joncières must have worked very hard during the seven years since the musical disaster of *Pompéi*, for his new score marks a significant improvement, and the *Symphonie romantique*, which he presented at the Concerts Populaires, was by no means a waste of effort. For him, as for many other young composers, such study, such assiduous practice in the art of writing symphonies will have been profitable in rounding off his studies, while giving him the thorough understanding of the orchestra without which music is no longer possible today in the theatre. It is undoubtedly for the treatment of the orchestra that *Dimitri* deserves the highest praise; the author has used it to enhance many of the recitatives and to lend greater charm and interest to some of the melodies. M. Joncières now undoubtedly possesses the qualities that were lacking in *Pompéi*: he has the orchestra well in hand and handles it with ease.

(Adolphe Jullien, 'Opéra National Lyrique', *Revue et Gazette musicale*, 14 May 1876.)

Joncières was also described as a 'colourist':

And since we have just pronounced the word 'colourist', we may say that colour is M. Joncières's great quality as a symphonist. His instrumenta-

tion, vigorous without being noisy, reveals a strong sense of drama.

(Émile-Ferdinand Mugnot de Lyden, 'Opéra National Lyrique', *Le Monde artistique*, 20 May 1876.)

The critic Benedict, in *Le Figaro*, was even more precise: he described the orchestral 'sound effects' achieved in *Dimitri* and intimated that, despite his Wagnerian aspirations (noticeable in particular in his use of brass instruments and in his briefly interwoven melodic lines), the composer never loses sight of his aim: dramatic effectiveness and a 'French' transparency – hallmarks of an *elegance* inherited from the generation of Auber.

It is in the great orchestral passages, the picturesque episodes in the instrumentation, and in the massed choruses that M. Victorin Joncières is truly at ease. He knows perfectly well how to distribute sound in the high and low orchestral registers; choruses and orchestra express exactly what he wanted them to express; even in the passages containing the most intricate interweaving, his thought is formulated with the clarity of the artist who knows exactly what he is doing and leaves nothing to chance. M. Joncières takes great care, and rightly so, to include as much diversity and colour as possible in his instrumental discourse, and he likes to associate timbres in such a way as to take the ear by surprise with unexpected charm.

(Benedict, *Le Figaro*, 10 May 1876.)

This overall impression is confirmed by Victor Wilder ('*Dimitri*', *Le Ménestrel*, 14 May 1876), who gives various examples: the very effective, Weber-like sallies of the horn in Marpha's third-act arioso ('Mon fils, il est mon fils'); Marpha's 'Ô nature puissante et douce', rising with great impetus and vigour, then exploding on the passionate cry of the mother finding her long lost child, 'Voici mon fils! voici mon fils!'; then the effect of the invocation scene before the walls of Moscow in Act III, in which: 'The simple, clear melody is taken entirely by the voice, with a little emphasis from the violins only at the ends of the phrases: it unfolds, grow-

ing tender in keeping with the poet's words, over a harmonic framework dominated by the two persistent notes representing the bells, the indistinct sound of which is conveyed with poetic realism by the combined timbres of the horn and the harp. The effect is charming and truly irresistible.' (*Ibid.*)

The figure of Victorin Joncières was often associated in the late nineteenth century with that of Richard Wagner. This was mainly because the theoretical ideas he expressed as a music critic were quite close to those of the German composer. The press thus launched an interesting discussion on the subject of the musical styles that appeared to inspire Joncières. He was certainly not Wagner (but he remembered *Tannhäuser*); he did not imitate Gounod (but he felt the effect of his aura); he hated Italian music (but gave the Count of Lusatia a decidedly Verdian cabaletta).

There are in M. Victorin Joncières two very different men: the man of systems, first of all, who readily praises Wagner's principles, while condemning a little too lightly perhaps everything that deviates from those principles; then the practical man who, in the spontaneity of his work, gives himself up to his inspiration without submitting it to his theories. This is quite clear in *Dimitri*, and far be it from me to criticise M. Joncières, for this new work is most spontaneous in its nature; even Wagner, a man of the ory par excellence, proclaimed that creation was spontaneous. (Victor Wilder, 'Dimitri', *Le Ménestrel*, 14 May 1876.)

It is time the author was logical and made no concessions to the musical forms that he rejects; above all, he needs to have the courage to be himself. A work written in a new and personal style is much better than an imitation of the great masters. M. Joncières's talent has the rare and remarkable quality of being dramatic.

(Georges Servieres, 'La musique française moderne: Victorin Joncières', *La Fantaisie artistique et littéraire*, 2 October 1880.)

The first reminiscence, that of the march from *Tannhäuser*, which becomes more apparent in Act V, is present in the overture, for, unlike most composers of this time, M. Joncières has written a proper overture for his opera, and quite rightly so, for this symphonic piece, remarkable in its pace and character, and interrupted by a few bars of religious music, sung out of view of the audience, is undoubtedly one of the finest pieces in the score.

(Adolphe Jullien, 'Opéra National Lyrique', *Revue et Gazette musicale*, 14 May 1876.)

In his new work M. Joncières proceeds from both Chopin and Gounod, strange though that may at first appear. Of course, he is not yet as much of an all-round artist as the former – and who could claim to be a second Chopin? – but he sometimes has that composer's expression and feeling. He has not yet all the forcefulness of Gounod in his symphonic writing, but he is following the same path; unfortunately it is too early to expand on this theory. Yes, Mr. Joncières proceeds from Chopin and Gounod, and perhaps Meyerbeer; but given time he will assert his own individuality. What we denied in M. Joncières was melodic inspiration. He has now proved that he is not only a melodist, but that he is such above all else. (Émile-Ferdinand Mugnot de Lyden, 'Opéra National Lyrique', *Le Monde artistique*, 20 May 1876.)

Victor Wilder ends his article in *Le Ménestrel* by pointing out that the musical eclecticism found in *Dimitri* is not so much an impoverishment of the author's style as evidence of his perfect grasp of the operatic repertoire; he clearly belongs to a lyrical tradition that he respects and knows well.

One might, on the other hand, criticise the author of *Dimitri* for being over-eclectic and too ready to adopt ideas without always giving them his own stamp [Wilder goes on to give examples.] I could mention further instances, but what would be the use? These are accidents that can hap-

pen to any composer, particularly those whose minds have been nourished by their reading of the works of the great masters and, to my eyes at least, that by no means diminishes the value of the score of *Dimitri*; for although the author's memory has proved a little too reliable in a few passages in the work, there are many others that reveal his rich and lively imagination. Lack of imagination is certainly not the reason for those few borrowings, and that, as far as we are concerned, is the main thing. (Victor Wilder, 'Dimitri', *Le Ménestrel*, 14 May 1876.)



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