

## *Dimitri*: text and context

Alexandre Dratwicky

M. Joncières's talent has a remarkable and rare dramatic quality. Unlike some of today's composers, he has the merit of writing operas that are not so much *picturesque* – using music to set a scene, create a décor – as *powerfully dramatic*. He has greatly admired Meyerbeer and Verdi and has studied their works extensively, which has been of value to him. His recitatives are always well delivered, his orchestra is expressive, his melodies are always tailored to correspond to stage movement. The authors' intentions are rendered faithfully and compellingly. When he has been provided with a good plot, M. Joncières has never failed to treat it well, and when the libretto requires marked contrasts, as in *Dimitri*, for instance, each of the various acts has its own specific colouring. The first is picturesque, the second one lively and bright, the third and fourth ones dramatic, and thus, to his great credit, the author avoids monotony; finally, the fifth act expresses happiness and success, soon to be destroyed when disaster strikes. This art of transforming the music in order to be coherent with the different tableaux and scenes in the drama was completely lacking in Halévy and Félicien David; it was lacking in Wagner, and unfortunately M. Joncières had lost it by the time he came to compose *La Reine Berthe*. I think there are very few operas in which the character and the colouring of the different tableaux are as well defined [as they are in *Dimitri*]. This is one of the outstanding qualities of Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* and *L'Africaine*, Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust*, Gounod's *Faust* (much variety, but very uneven), Reyer's *La Statue* and Massenet's *Le Roi de Lahore*. (Georges Servières, 'La musique française moderne: Victorin Joncières', *La Fantaisie artistique et littéraire*, 2 October 1880.)

Felix Ludger Rossignol, better known as Victorin [de] Joncières, was born in 1839 in Paris, where he died in 1903. He first studied to be a painter in the studio of François-Édouard Picot, but then turned to music, entering the Paris Conservatoire, where he joined Elwart's harmony class and followed Leborne's classes in fugue and counterpoint. But he left that institution prematurely, apparently after quarrelling with the latter over Richard Wagner, whose avant-garde theories he was to defend for many years to come. He embarked on a career as a composer in the late 1850s, notably with incidental music for Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, then a first opera, *Sardanapale*, premièred in 1867. Another opera, *Le Dernier Jour de Pompéi*, presented at the Théâtre-Lyrique in 1869, was neither a public nor a critical success despite some fine moments, to which the performances do not appear to have done full justice. The critics felt that the composer's handling of the orchestra in particular was too simple. Thus, from 1870, in his *Symphonie romantique*, Joncières began to experiment with new instrumental sounds – experiments that reached their full accomplishment in his opera *Dimitri*, which was a resounding success when it was given in 1876 at Vizentini's Theatre Lyrique National, then in 1890 at the Opéra-Comique. However, the partial failure of both *La Reine Berthe* (Paris Opéra, 1878) – probably explained by a second-rate libretto and a substandard performance – and *Le Chevalier Jean* (Opéra-Comique, 1885), clouded his fame. Joncières did not recover from that difficult period. After *Lancelot* (Paris Opéra, 1900), he gave up composing officially. He felt that the latter, composed ten years previously, was presented too late for it to be fairly appreciated, there having been so many changes in musical aesthetics during the 1890s. Joncières's works also include an unfinished symphony, a dramatic cantata entitled *La Mer*, several art songs (*mélodies*) and a few unambitious genre pieces. He also worked as a journalist: from 1871 to 1900 he was music critic of *La Liberté*, in whose columns he supported his friends, including César Franck and Emmanuel Chabrier.

Joncières is exceptional among opera composers in that he turned to that complex and demanding genre straight away, without first of all com-

posing orchestral or chamber works. He appears to have felt very early on that he had a vocation for serious works with monumental (particularly medieval) subjects. He composed no *opéras-comiques* as such, and all his works, even those that were not presented at the major theatres, were devised with the same luxuriance and splendour as those intended for the Paris Opéra. Adrien Marx, writing after the première of *Dimitri*, mentioned the composer's single-mindedness and determination:

The author of *Dimitri* is among those who from an early age set their sights on a point on the horizon and, with an unwavering faith, keep aiming for that goal despite setbacks and disappointments. [...] Joncières shows perfectly that for an intelligent being bent on success willpower and tenacity are the surest assets. Long ago, already with a head full of melodies, he would knock on the doors of the greatest institutions with an assurance that caused some to smile. The directors would ask him to be on his way, without even listening to his music. And off he would go, begging for a stage, singers, an orchestra, as a poor man begs for his bread.

(Adrien Marx, *Le Figaro*, 12 May 1876.)

*Dimitri*, première on 5 May 1876, was composed immediately after *Le Dernier jour de Pompéi* (1869) and we know from George Servières that it was ready by 1871 (possibly even 1870); Joncières had originally 'intended his opera for the Théâtre-Lyrique and had written it accordingly':

The score was accepted; it was to be mounted in the course of 1871. But his hopes were suddenly dashed when the Théâtre-Lyrique was destroyed by fire during the Paris Commune. The work was not suited to the Opéra-Comique. It was offered to M. Halanzier [for the Paris Opéra], who went so far as to listen to it, but a trial performance was cut short by an indisposition of M<sup>lle</sup> Daram, and the project went no further. M. Joncières had no other alternative therefore than to have his work performed at a new theatre; in the press he had been one of the most ardent advocates of the creation of a Théâtre National Lyrique. When such a theatre

was founded in 1876, its director, M. Vizentini, could but agree to mount *Dimitri*.  
(Servières, *op. cit.*)

The work had thus been conceived, if not as ‘grand opera’, at least as an ambitious operatic work that (despite what Servières said) was perfectly suited to the Opéra-Comique, and indeed it was later revived there in 1890. Adapted from *Demetrius*, an unfinished tragedy by Schiller, *Dimitri* was undoubtedly intended to be a grandiose work, and above all to represent Joncières’s conception of modern music. In order to show his qualities to the full he needed an experimental theatre, one that welcomed young composers and new ideas. Furthermore Vizentini was not afraid to champion upholders of the German style – or *styles*, those of Mozart, Weber and Wagner. What exactly was the challenge that Joncières took up – he who was so critical of music that did not bear the Wagnerian stamp – in composing this work?



#### DRAMA AND MUSIC

The fact that Joncières regularly gave much thought to the subject of ‘continuous melody’, as practised by Wagner, supposes that *Dimitri* calls into question the traditional musical forms of French Romantic opera. While it was all very well for an ‘archaic’ composer such as Meyerbeer to create sequences and breaks, Joncières was expected to cast his discourse in quite a different mould. Nevertheless the opera made up of individual ‘numbers’ remained the model for *Dimitri*, for which the composer favoured the Italian form (i.e. a slow *cantabile*, contrasting sooner or later with a *cabaletta* or a highly rhythmical *stretta*), even though the sequence of pieces sometimes gives rise to subtle ‘dissolves’ (e.g. the modulation that introduces Marina’s *Rêverie* in Act I, Scene 6, ‘Pâles étoiles’, or the transitional prelude before Marfa’s *Arioso* in Act III, Scene 3, ‘Ô

nature toi si douce'). This 'old-fashioned' division of the work, which had been some-what neglected even in *Faust* and *Carmen* (at least in the large-scale ensemble pieces and the finales), can be explained first of all by the subject of the opera, which, with its epic-like historical action, presents a dramatic progression that is necessarily based on the fragmented aesthetic of the 'tableau'. The complexity of the plot and the variety of the episodes needing to be narrated oblige the composer – and the librettist – to increase the number of spontaneous moments that cannot really be developed: e.g. the presentation of the keys of the city of Moscow by the boyars (Act IV), the celebration held in Vanda's palace in Krakow in honour of the king of Poland (Act II). Within each tableau, the moments of individual expression can only be short: the longest aria lasts three minutes. Joncières deliberately removed two of the original four stanzas of Marina's *Rêverie* in Act I. Likewise he changed Dimitri's invocation as he contemplates Moscow (Act III) into a short *Arioso*, 'Moscou, voici la ville sainte...', instead of the fuller bipartite aria originally intended in the libretto.

Joncières was an alert and fastidious music critic, who rubbed quite a few of his colleagues up the wrong way in the feuilletons of *La Liberté* in the early 1870s. Anxious not to cause the whole of the Parisian intelligentsia to gang up against him, however, he soon had second thoughts. But by then the damage had been done and journalists made no effort to contain their virulence in criticising the contradictions they saw between Joncières the theorist and Joncières the composer. The subject of style was the first to come under fire: the plurality of his styles as a composer, as opposed to the single style he advocated as a critic. Indeed the influence of Wagner was deemed negligible, only occurring in a few places in the score. On the other hand, some considered that he used many elements inspired by Gounod, Verdi and Meyerbeer. And, somewhat naively, even Chopin was mentioned! But therein lies the great quality of this work: making the most of past innovations, accepting the legacy of the 1830s and showing good judgement – and true 'progress' – in combining Wagnerism with the new-style of 'lyric opera' as practised by Ambroise Thomas, Gounod and Bizet. When the work was revived at

the Opéra-Comique in 1890, Henri Moreno underlined that fundamental quality of synthesis:

M. Joncières took whatever he found that was good in the music of the German School, while infusing it with that ever-salutary antidote: French clarity. [...] With this mixture of various trends, pulling the composer in different directions, this is one of the most interesting productions to have emerged from the French School in the past twenty years or so. It has that finest of qualities: sincerity. And just after [Massenet's] *Esclarmonde* [in 1889], it was a real pleasure to hear it again.

(Henry Moreno, *Le Ménestrel*, 9 February 1890.)

The definitive printed version of the libretto (1876) enables us to make some interesting observations as regards the libretto itself and other things. Joncières appears to have fundamentally altered whole sections of the original text, just as Wagner was wont to do. According to Adolphe Jullien, he thus made the plot harder for the reader to understand:

[*Dimitri*] is a long historical charade, and the word [to be guessed] does not even appear in the libretto, for as a result of endless revisions, the printed text is completely different from the one that was set to music, with hardly an identical line between them.

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

Joncières did not eliminate the clichés and needless repetitions from the original text, but he did transform his librettist's verve as he thought fit. For example, he trimmed away some fine strophes intended for Marpha to create an equally fine but absolutely traditional three-part cavatina, with a contrasting middle section ('Ô nature toi si douce'). And he gave the Count of Lusatia a cabaletta ('À moi la gloire après l'affront!') which, according to some, spoiled the harmony of that admirable passage. Servières (*op. cit.*) applauded the 'most remarkable dramatic expression'

of this aria, except for ‘the *allegro* coda, a bravura piece with vocalises that are surprising from M. Joncières’s pen’. He did not realise that Joncières, who hated the vocalised *stretta*, deliberately employed it as a perfect means of blackening the most unpleasant (and most superficial) character in the plot. Taken within the general context of the work, the introduction of such a perilous piece at this point was, on the contrary, a stroke of wit, if not of genius.

The considerable changes Joncières made in the text also affect the character of some of the dramatis personae. By means of clever pruning, Vanda is made more sophisticated. In a nutshell, the situation is as follows: Vanda loves Dimitri, who is now passionately in love with Marina. Having discovered this, Vanda, feeling rejected and humiliated, is bent on revenge. She nurses the Count of Lusatia back to health after he has been stabbed by Dimitri, and it is she who, ultimately, with a gesture full of hatred, gives the fatal order for Dimitri be shot before his coronation. In the initial version of the libretto, Vanda is presented at first as being concerned both with love and with ‘greatness’ (and ‘power’, ‘elevation’, ‘glory’). Here is the solo quatrain that came after the opening chorus of Act II:

Je vais voir s’accomplir enfin mon double rêve,  
 Rêve d’amour et de grandeur !  
 Je vais donc le revoir, lui que ma main élève  
 Dans la puissance et la splendeur!

At last I shall see my twofold dream fulfilled,  
 my dream of love and greatness!  
 So I shall see once more the one whom my hand  
 raises in power and glory!

The composer felt that it was more interesting to present her at first as being truly in love with Dimitri, with that love as her sole concern. He therefore replaced the above four lines with the following text:

Dès ce soir!...  
Aujourd'hui même!  
Je vais revoir  
Celui que j'aime!  
Cher Dimitri, je vais donc te revoir!

Tonight!  
This very day!  
I am to see once more  
the man I love!  
Dear Dimitri, I am to see you again!

Later, in the tableau set in the military camp (Act III, Scene 5), Joncières gives Vanda an extra line, spoken to the Count: 'Lui que je chérissais de l'amour le plus tendre' (He whom I cherished with the tenderest love). Finally, the last bars of Act IV were revised to make them psychologically more subtle. Initially, Vanda's aside, spoken from the proscenium, informed the audience that the Count's wound was not fatal:

Triomphe, Dimitri ! L'espoir en moi demeure:  
Tu me paieras bientôt ta victoire d'une heure;  
Ta main n'avait frappé qu'un coup mal assuré;  
Lusace n'est pas mort, et je le sauverai!

Triumph, Dimitri! I still have hope:  
soon you will pay for your short-lived victory;  
your hand struck but a feeble blow;  
Lusatia is not dead, and I intend to save him!

Joncières moved this information to Act V – 'Mais un vengeur est là, qui m'a rendu courage. / Lusace, qu'il croit mort, par mes soins fut sauvé. / Lusace, qu'il frappa dans son injuste rage, / À ma juste fureur, le Ciel l'a conservé.' (But an avenger has given me fresh courage. / I saved Lusatia,



whom he thinks is dead. / Lusatia, whom he, to my just fury, struck down / in his unjust rage, has been saved by Heaven!) – preferring at this stage in the plot to focus attention on the decisive reversal in the relationship between the two characters: here, for the first time, Vanda turns against Dimitri, and whereas she had hitherto been in thrall the Count of Lusatia’s ambitions, she now intends to use the latter as a means of wreaking her vengeance. Two lines recited on the high notes of the tessitura over tremolos from the orchestra are enough to render the imperious nature of this decision:

Le sang de l’innocent retombera sur toi,  
À toi, traître, le trône, et la vengeance à moi !

The blood of the innocent will be upon you;  
yours, traitor, the throne, and mine the revenge!



#### THE QUESTION OF LEITMOTIV

If there is a Wagnerian inheritance that runs through the opera from beginning to end, it is the thematic reminiscence, used for psychological purposes. Each of the leitmotifs – short, constantly recurring musical phrases – is closely associated with a particular person and more specifically with a state of mind. Two musical cells focus our attention, beginning with the one representing the love between Dimitri and Marina. It takes the form of a descending chromatic curve, variable in its rhythm.



*Ex. 1: The love motif*

Surprisingly, this conjunct pattern adapts itself perfectly to the most diverse melodic and harmonic contexts. We find it announced in the overture, explained in Dimitri's *Arioso* in Act I, Scene 2 ('Le chaste amour de Marina'), given full expression in his duo with Marina at the end of the same act, and then there are reminiscences of it here and there cleverly embedded in the discourse. The most remarkable feat is the quotation of the motif at the end of the Invocation ('Moscou, voici la ville sainte', Act III, second tableau, Scene 3), a piece based on the permanence of two pivotal notes imitating the bells of the Kremlin. We may nevertheless wonder about this love theme, which appears in situations that are not related to Marina, but more generally to 'ideal love'. For example, when Dimitri tells the Prior of Vanda's love for him (Act I, Scene 2), or in the prelude to the aria in which Marfa gives free rein to her maternal feelings (Act III, Scene 3), and even – in a way – when Dimitri metaphorically addresses the city of the Tsars. The fact that it strongly permeates the whole score is justified by the broad meaning of this motif – forging links between almost all the characters, although logically it refers more particularly to the idyllic love between Dimitri and Marina.

The other strongly characterised motif is the one associated with the disturbing nature of the Count of Lusatia. This cell, much less affectionate than the previous one, is based on the contrary on an almost demonic energy: a trill followed by a large interval and a few staccato notes, always presented in a quick tempo.



*Ex. 2: The motif representing the Count*

Sometimes stated in close imitation (overture, prelude to Act IV) or slowed down in a sinuous triplet formulation (*récit* with Vanda in Act II),



with anguish and doubt, just before Dimitri dies, the words he spoke earlier (Act IV, Scene 6: 'Si Dieu, Marpha, qui nous compte les heures...'). Another 'motif' circulates, but it is not so much a particular pattern as the evocation of a general atmosphere. It first occurs when the Count of Lusatia tells the Prior about Dimitri-Vladimir in Act I. The same dark tone with sinuous melodic formulas recurs in Act IV, when Lusatia gives similar information to Dimitri himself. Servières (*op. cit.*) saw this as 'the culmination of the score. The whole of Lusatia's *récit* is admirably declaimed, there is not a single cliché that can be held up for criticism; there is no useless padding that needs to be removed. This scene is simple and powerful, and M. Lassalle showed what a great artist he is in his performance of it.'



#### A MASTERLY OVERTURE

It was common at the end of the nineteenth century for the orchestral introduction to present the main themes of the opera, including apparently anecdotal elements such as trumpet calls or dance motifs. But in the particular case of *Dimitri*, the composer achieves a spectacular assembly of significant motifs, which fit together with a naturalness that was rare in the 1870s, even in the now famous works of Gounod, Bizet and Massenet. The overture begins with Vanda's sombre theme (Act V), serving as a slow introduction and immediately giving the music a Russian colouring, while indicating that this woman, who suffers so intensely and, through her love, then her hatred, causes so much distress around her, might well be the real heroine of the work. An unexpected *allegro* presents the Count's ironic theme, in its simplest formulation (as in Act IV), with sharp, brutal 'whip-cracks' from the percussion; with the imitations, the character becomes invasive; it is as if he is self-centredly gazing at his own image. Then, skilfully brought together, we hear the fanfare announcing the entry of the king of Poland and the dance motif, both taken from

the Act II celebrations at Vanda's palace. The logical continuation of this decisive episode is outlined: the acclamations of the Prior and the soldiers ('Vive le Tsar', Act IV) before a quotation from the coronation march (Act V). An opportunity for Joncières to show his skill in deriving one motif from the other – in the course of the opera the similarity is not as obvious. Then comes a slow section, proceeding first of all from the duo for Dimitri and Marina (Act I) and the love theme, heard in different rhythmic formulations (Acts I and V). At this point Joncières goes much further than most of his contemporaries: he begins a second episode, truly Wagnerian in mood, that breaks away from the thematic fabric of the opera to present a sort of rhapsodic passage, with a melody that – although it is not the 'infinite melody' of Wagner – is nonetheless remarkably continuous. Notice, almost imperceptible in the meshwork of tremolos from the strings, the mysterious motif played by the basses, recalling the repetitive, panting passage from the Act V trio in which three times Vanda utters the word 'Hélas!'; the Act I love duet between Dimitri and Marina is then triumphantly repeated. This vast development takes up almost a third of the total duration of the overture and seems to symbolise the love between Dimitri and Marina as it should have been. But the return of the *allegro* precipitates the drama. In the same order as before, we hear again the Count's theme, the fanfare for the entry of the king of Poland and the dance motif from the celebration at Vanda's palace, all this in a sort of falsely joyful, ironic, mocking knell, reminding us of the character who is to settle Dimitri's fate, and of the occasion that is inexorably to seal that fate. We then hear, instrumentally, the wild cries of the people ('Jure! Jure!' – Swear! Swear!), representing the tragic dénouement of Act V. After a short and mournful suspension (the love theme mixed with the principal melodic pattern from the final duet of Act I), the overture ends with a surprise: the chorus, invisible in the wings, sings the funereal Kyrie that is to serve as a postlude to the work. Only the opening line is sung. Thus, when the curtain rises on the first tableau of the opera, all has not been said – but almost. Marpha is missing from this instrumental synthesis. Perhaps because absence and doubt are to be the only feelings that in-

habit the soul of this poor woman, held prisoner in a mysterious and distant fortress, the castle of Vyksa. The majestic final chords that solemnly end the opera itself also bring to an end this overture, Victorin Joncières's finest orchestral piece. Servières (*op. cit.*) wrote: 'This overture is remarkably composed as a preface to the drama; it is furthermore very beautiful and very eventful as a symphonic work.' The overture alone should have ensured that *Dimitri* went down in history. It is only justice that the work should be revived today.



Victorin Joncières. *Musica*, November 1909.  
Library of the Geneva Conservatoire.

Victorin Joncières. *Musica*, novembre 1909.  
Collection Bibliothèque du Conservatoire de Genève.