

## *Les P'tites Michu*, number by number

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In Messager's operatic catalogue, *Les P'tites Michu* embodies the shift between his first and second stylistic periods. The premiere of *Véronique* a few months later (December 1898) was to confirm his gifts with unprecedented impact, in a musical aesthetic that was soon to be regarded as the 'Belle Époque' style of the operetta repertory. This '1900' music has often been discussed; but what of the music of *Les P'tites Michu*?

In the important place it gives to the lower-class characters (the elder Michus, Aristide, Bagnolet), the libretto inscribes the work in the tradition of *La Fille de Madame Angot* (Lecocq, 1872), *La Fille du Tambour-Major* (Offenbach, 1879) and *Mam'zelle Nitouche* (Hervé, 1883): that is, it depicts the triumph of those social classes considered as inferior by the nineteenth-century aristocracy and bourgeoisie. This overall spirit of the libretto, as well as the vocal particularities of the characters (mezzo and character tenors for the Michu parents and Aristide, a baritone with a penchant for hamming it up as the General), moulds a musical style dominated by catchy rhythms and folklike structures (*ronde, couplets, villanelle*). Messager's talent consists in colouring this rustic framework with poetic harmonies and an orchestration that is all the more admirable in that it calls for very limited instrumental forces (only one oboe, one bassoon, two horns, one trombone, no harp or tuba).

At the start of the *Ouverture*, a triumphant, joyful theme surges zestfully forth, emphasised by the timbre of the solo trumpet. An adventurous harmonic transition, after only seventeen bars, leads to the *Andante*

obligatory in such potpourri overtures, which assemble some of the prominent melodies of the score the audience is about to hear. Then comes a vigorous fugato, divided between strings and woodwind, which highlights the agility of each section of the band. A *Più lento* briefly tempers the orchestral ardour before a waltz theme brings the overture to an end with a rousing apotheosis. It should be noted that the four themes chosen by Messager all come from the second act of the work and focus on the characters of the Michu sisters, Gaston and the General, since we hear successively Marie-Blanche's *couplets* ('Se pavanant comme une souveraine'), the sisters' duet ('Saint Nicolas qui faites tant de choses'), the General's *couplets* ('Me prenez-vous pour un conscrit') and the trio for Gaston and the two Michu girls ('C'est la fille du Général!').



Act One. The military music that introduces the *Chœur et Couplets des pensionnaires* (no.1) sets the tone for the austerity with which Mademoiselle Herpin runs her institute. The witty use of the side drum does not prevent us from noticing the orchestral depth of the theme of the opening chorus ('Le tambour résonne'), with the unison string melody unfolding generously beneath the rhythmic chirruping of the woodwind. The *Duetto* (no.2) immediately presents Blanche-Marie and Marie-Blanche at their most appealing. It is not by chance that this simple, catchy number became the signature tune of the entire score. It is typical of Messager in the way that – as Rameau said of his music – it 'conceals art by means of art itself': light orchestration, unpretentious melody (simple chains of consonant thirds), dialogue in brief imitations. It is impossible to forget the refrain when the two singers repeat it for the third time, and indeed it will return as the concluding *vaudeville*. The poetic *Madrigal* (no.3), quickly followed by the more vigorous *Trio* no.4, showcases the elegant vocal line of Captain Gaston Rigaud. Although the 'baryton Martin' (named after the singer who created this type of role during the First Empire) had long since replaced the lyric tenor as the romantic

lead in operettas by 1897, it is to Messenger and his contemporaries (especially Hahn) that we owe the most outstanding numbers for this vocal category. In the trio, in particular, the lyrical outbursts ('Elles sont ravissantes'), supported by broad string unisons, remind us that *grand opéra* is never far away with these sonorous, opulent voices. After this high-flown demonstration, the *Trio et Couplets* (no.6) radically changes the tone. But it does not do so by exercising restraint: on the contrary, since it now introduces the three lower-class characters of the plot, two shopkeepers and their assistant from Les Halles, full of cocky humour and common sense and blessed with a sturdy temperament, especially in the case of the mother. The full orchestral forces are required for a clamorous introduction, which derives its rhythm as much from the offbeat accents in the melody as from the robust strokes of the percussion instruments (especially the cymbals). The frequent elision of vowels in the text ('Nous v'là', 'R'gardez', 'dir', 'l'panier'...) originates in the *café-concert* song, a repertory that also rubs off on the clear-cut rhythms of Madame Michu's *couplets*. Yet Messenger does not neglect subtlety: the thunderous orchestral introduction of her solo is contrasted with the delicate punctuations of the piccolo, which set off the vocal line by hinting at its contours. Another characteristic of the popular repertory of the time, the introduction of lines of speech (notably to interrupt the rhythmic *moto perpetuo* and herald the refrain), suffices to add a touch of comedy to the role of *maitresse femme* that Madame Michu tells us she occupies. The *Ensemble* (no.7) has no dramaturgical function. The composer decided to make it a number of remarkable 'syllabic' virtuosity. The text rattles off the boarders' lips ('Nous allons mordre, mordre, mordre, mordre...') and the close imitations, distributed throughout the voices, once again prompt us to doff our hats to Messenger's wit. And he is no less amusing in Aristide's *Couplets* (no.8): the somewhat heavy round-dance rhythm tellingly reflects the simple-minded character of this indecisive lover, who will be satisfied with whichever sister he is given. The *Finale* (no.9) is astonishingly brief, but the obstinately memorable 'Tambour battant! Rataplan' is enough to make its mark. The

principals and chorus leave the stage as militarily as they had entered an hour earlier.



Act Two takes place at the home of General des Ifs. The fine orchestral *Introduction* with its crescendo leading into the *Chœur et Rondo* (no.10) radically modifies – and in just a few bars – the musical atmosphere that predominated in the first act. The exchanges between the soldier and his guests unfold naturally and smoothly over a rhythmic waltz motif. Messenger's genius consists in endlessly varying the accents of the word-setting, conferring on the prosody an originality and autonomy that complete and enrich the orchestral accompaniment. The *Quartetto* (no.11) depicts the agonies and panic of the Michus and their daughters, who must at all costs be hidden from the General's eyes. Their agitation is conveyed by an extremely fast tempo that makes this very brief musical section (less than two minutes) particularly difficult to hold together. This explains why, for many years, the quartet was traditionally omitted. Yet it is the number in which the motivic working is at its most accomplished in the orchestral writing: it sounds like a scherzo from a Beethoven symphony. With the *Duo* (no.12), Messenger's amiable operetta tips over into (relative) tragedy: the revelation of their origins plunges the Michu sisters into a state of unfeigned distress. The key of A minor, the abrupt initial crescendo in string tremolos, the sorrowing harmonies – everything here plays its part in modifying the way the audience listens and its state of mind. From this moment on, emotive numbers follow one another in close succession, and the dramaturgical framework grows much more intense. The librettists showed great skill in contriving this change of mood exactly at the centre of the work, halfway through the evening. The General's *Couplets* (no.13), for example, comply with the convention of the frenetic patter-song for Rossinian buffo baritone, but this angry father is none the less touching in the way he raps out his desire to find his daughter. The *Prière* (no.14), a prayer to St Nicholas, might also make us smile

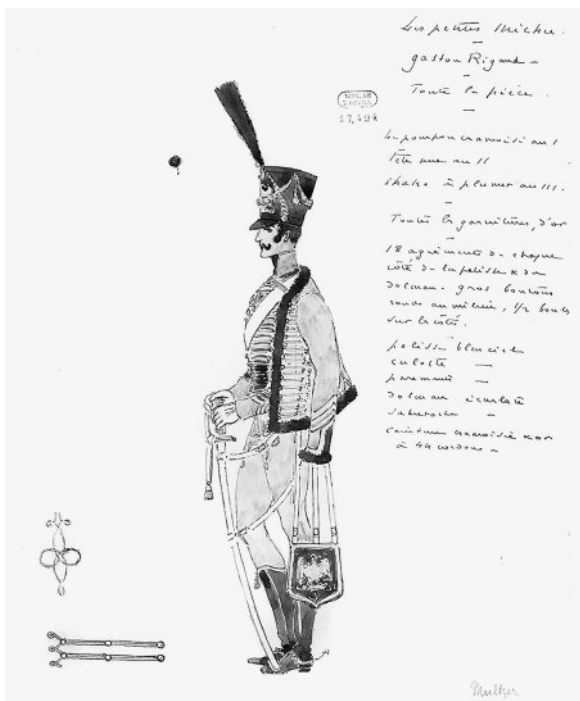
with the naivety of its text. But does not this childish faith, declaimed on such an expressive melodic line by two frightened teenagers, become sublime in its simplicity? Messenger was well aware of the fact, and contented himself with strings to accompany this moment of reverence. With the *Trio* (no.15), the composer reverts to the vocal combination of the Trio no.4 from Act One and again plays on the alternation between Gaston's amorous lyricism ('Ah! Parlez franc') and the witty banter of the two adolescents (who temporarily forget their distress). The reprise of the prayer to St Nicholas – this time beseeched to do the opposite of the earlier request – is a masterstroke on the librettists' part. Much more elaborate than that of the first act, the Act Two *Finale* (no.16) adopts a structure typical of the Romantic era. A *concertato* episode (a moment of collective stupefaction resulting in asides sung simultaneously) firmly imprints itself on the memory with its well-turned refrain ('L'une est des Ifs, l'autre est Michu'). It is followed by a chorus noteworthy for its amplitude and the length of its phrases ('Recevez notre compliment'). Finally, Marie-Blanche's picturesque *couplets* ('N'est-ce pas que j'ai de la branche'), whose refrain is taken up by all the singers present on stage, already suggest that the young girl will be out of place in the aristocratic world that welcomes her here. 'Se pavanant comme une souveraine' is one of the composer's headiest melodic inspirations.



To begin the third act, Messenger does not overdevelop the *Chœur et Ensemble* (no.17), perhaps because this kind of popular market scene had already lent itself to luxurious digressions a thousand times before (one thinks, for example, of the 'Indian Market' scene from Delibes's *Lakmé*, then universally familiar). This curtain-raiser is nevertheless effective and particularly sonorous. Aristide's *Couplets* (no.18) hark back to the psychological ambiguity of certain numbers in Act Two. We may smile at the punch-line that concludes the refrain ('Je suis un fiancé / Fixé'), but doesn't this honest lad who describes the storm of emotions raging in

his heart end up being more endearing than idiotic? And is he not a realistic and truthful human 'type' that we have all encountered many times? Blanche-Marie's *Romance* (no.19) takes a further step towards the tone of melodrama. To be sure, the refrain ('La pension avait du bon') does not seem, at first sight, to be of any great psychological depth, but that would be to misunderstand the subtext of the two verses: adulthood has swept away the illusions and innocence of youth. The injustice of social relations condemns the spontaneity of childish attractions. Indeed, the keyword is uttered: the quest for 'the Ideal', which passes through the three types of love interwoven in the framework of the libretto – parental love, sisterly love, marital love. Can one pretend? Should one renounce? This *romance* of Blanche-Marie, the jewel of the score, also anticipates the work's conclusion. The composer surpasses himself in economical and effective writing: a carpet of strings stirred by waves of increasing intensity, melancholic spirals on the clarinet, punctuations from woodwind in the medium register give a genuine 'vibrancy' to the musical texture, which reveals Messenger in his finest vein. After this poetic parenthesis, we must not listen with too distracted an ear to the *Chœur et Ronde des Halles* (no.20). Its chorus, in particular, exceeds the ambitions of the choral waltz from the second act and would not disgrace a serious *grand opéra*. Here again, Messenger seizes on a few modest lines of verse and stretches them out over a masterful musical structure. The *Duo* for Blanche-Marie and Gaston (no.21) forms the counterpart – or rather the complement – to the *Romance* no.19: after confessing her melancholy to her sister, the young girl moves on (or would like to move on) to confessing her feelings of love to the dashing captain. The lyricism of the refrain ('Sachons lui cacher mes alarmes') confers such irresistible charm on the piece that we almost regret that it ends so quickly. For, here too, economy prevails over luxuriance, and Messenger knows enough to curb any unwelcome attempts at development when the plot must move quickly towards its conclusion. It is the *Sextuor* (no.22) that is entrusted with this invariably complicated task of contriving the final twist to the tale. Inserted within it is a last number for Marie-Blanche, decidedly favoured by the

score, which is remarkable for its highly appropriate choice of a neo-Classical style. It is to a slow minuet rhythm, with archaic harmonies and orchestration, that she makes up her willing accomplice of a sister as the Marquise des Ifs and resolves the imbroglio of the libretto. One more feat of skill on the part of the composer, who presents this musical gem without trying the listener's patience. It is all supremely chic... and that, precisely, is the art of Messager.



Costume design for Gaston.  
 Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Maquette de costume pour Gaston.  
 Bibliothèque nationale de France.