

## Operetta: mother or sister of musical comedy?

Alexandre Dratwicky

The history of French 'light operatic genres' (*genres lyriques légers*) is a curious one. Denigrated by posterity from the 1960s onwards, it has also been the battleground for a pointless and unfounded internecine conflict: the artificial opposition between operetta and musical comedy. The former supposedly represents the decadence of Romanticism, the latter the verve and wit of modernity: a clash between the 'passé' and the 'trendy', as it were. How has this come about?

Initial observation reveals a mistaken terminological distinction: what the pseudo-scholar terms the 'opérette' of the nineteenth century was almost always called 'opéra-bouffé' (by Offenbach, for example) or 'opéra-comique' (by Lecocq especially). The same imprecision recurs in the 1920s, since what writers on the subject call a 'comédie musicale' is often nothing more than an 'opérette' (sometimes 'légère') according to the title pages of the scores themselves. Messenger's *Coups de roulis* (1928)? An *opérette*. The same composer's *L'Amour masqué* (1923)? Also an *opérette*. Reynaldo Hahn's *Brummel* (1931)? Still an *opérette*; Maurice Yvain's *Ta Bouche* (1923)? Definitely an *opérette*... So, you may object, does this uncertain terminology actually matter? Well, it does show that the objects being compared were more closely linked in the minds of the creators themselves than might at first appear: the composers of the 1920s consciously placed their works within a tradition thanks to generic specificities of which they were perfectly aware. The separation into two genres, which

is alleged to have appeared from nowhere in 1914, is therefore a historical construct devoid of any scientific foundation. It was only after the Liberation, in the 1950s, that the term *comédie musicale* became firmly established, partly because – the fact is worth noting – certain scores were renamed on their reissue, thus making it possible to refer *a posteriori* to the repertory of the *Années Folles* under this more contemporary term in order to make it as modern as possible in the public mind, doubtless under pressure from producers and publishers starved of commercial success. The confusion thus created was destined to be long-lived, since it still persists today.



The abundance of works bearing one designation or the other is the obvious sign of the success of this repertory. The constant appearance of new titles, published at a sometimes frenetic pace, comes as a reminder that, between 1860 and 1900, France was the most prolific purveyor of light operatic music. What about the period after 1914? Here again, contrary to a widespread but totally false notion, it was not Broadway but Paris that remained the leading centre for operetta production during the *Années Folles*: between 1920 and 1930, nearly 400 different pieces were performed in the French capital, more than in either London or New York.

Another point in common between the works of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is the places where they were created. The nature of the *théâtres secondaires* (that is, private and not state-run) occupied by Hervé or Offenbach (Bouffes-Parisiens, Variétés, Déjazet, Folies-Concertantes, etc.) was exactly the same as that of the venues where Christiné, Yvain and Reynaldo Hahn were staged (Théâtre Michel, Capucines, La Michodière, Marigny, Bobino, Apollo, Gaîté Lyrique, Édouard VII, Théâtre Daunou, etc.). Although their seating capacity varied greatly, the status of these venues in the capital's theatrical pecking order, and their mode of operation and financing, were more or less identical. There was also – and above all – a similar popular audience that frequented these spaces,

and whose expectations in terms of entertainment, music and humour did not vary from one evening to the next.

Yet another common misconception is the idea that the repertory of the *Années Folles* swept away the works of the 1870s style at a single stroke. Once again, this is not the case: the older repertory continued to hold its own and have its champions. Hence titles ancient and modern crossed paths on the same stages. Moreover, some authors, such as Willemetz, refurbished the works of Offenbach and Lecocq by updating their librettos. In 1934 the Théâtre Marigny programmed *La Créole* (with no less than Josephine Baker in the title role), then the Apollo presented Lecocq's *Les Cent Vierges* in 1942. Then came the turn of a new *Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein* revised by Willemetz and a *Surcouf* (Planquette) reworked by the same, both in 1947. Examples of this type were legion, even more so in the provinces where municipal theatres thereby maximised the investment on their elderly stagings of old-fashioned *opéras-bouffes*, mounted at considerable expense before the First World War.

*Opérette* and *comédie musicale* are also, of course (and perhaps most importantly), linked by an absolutely identical musical structure. Both alternate sung numbers and spoken dialogue, both end happily, and both are distinguished from *opéra-comique* by the use of so-called 'light' rather than 'art' music. The vocal writing also calls for the same voice types: only exceptionally do we find coloratura or dramatic sopranos, none of the tenor parts goes very high, the 'barytons Martin' (whose parts are notated in the treble clef) use mixed voice at the top of their range in moments of tenderness, and – of course – colourful characters are legion. The stock types of the *Années Folles* (the flighty woman, the tyrannical father, the mischievous maid, etc.) do not in any way renew the gallery of roles present in works written around 1860.



It has been averred that the artistic difference between the two repertories consists in the fact that the *comédie musicale* incorporates then-new

popular music, notably imported from the United States, and more especially jazz. Does this mean that Offenbach's operettas turned a deaf ear to the modernities of their own era? Quite the contrary: the composers of the 1870s convoked the galop, the *chahut* and the cancan; those of the 1890s called for the new tango or the cakewalk (for example in Messenger's *Miss Dollar*). This modernity of discourse also involved the introduction of unusual harmonies: the *Couplets du flirt* – the very word seemingly highly redolent of 1930 – in Toulmouche's *La Saint-Valentin* possesses a lasciviousness and a rhythmic pattern that composers of the inter-war period would not have disowned, yet it dates from... 1895. A blind test of works from the 1890s would probably generate other amusing confusions of this type, revealing an aesthetic permanence that 'Musical History' seeks to erase.

The musical proximity between *opérette* and *comédie musicale* also lies partly in the similarity of their instrumentarium. Conceived for theatres whose pits did not have room for a full orchestra (any more than the operating budgets for this kind of show could afford one), their scoring makes do with single instruments in certain cases: in Offenbach, just one oboe, one bassoon, one trombone most of the time. In Hervé (as in Hahn), a single percussionist has the task of playing the timpani, the triangle, the bass drum and the side drum. And in both *opérette* and *comédie musicale*, revivals intended for more ambitious venues provided an opportunity to fill out the orchestration: Lecocq added an oboe, a bassoon, two horns and two trombones to *La Fille de Madame Angot* (Hervé did the same for a new run of *L'Œil crevé*, as did Offenbach for all the performances of his scores in Vienna) just as Yvain expanded his *Yes!* for increasingly plethoric forces in the 1930s.

Commentators have claimed to find a contrast between the two genres in the nature of their subject matter. As Jacques Gana has put it:

Henceforth [in the repertory of the *Années Folles*] the action takes place in the contemporary world and the subjects borrow from *chansonniers* and fashion: satires of modern morals ('liberated'

young girls with short skirts and boyish hairstyles), modern art (the art lovers of *Gosse de riche*), venality and crooked politicians (the pasta manufacturer in *Yes!*, the Breton member of parliament in *Kadubec*, the puppet cabinet in *Encore cinquante centimes...*), frequent allusions to contemporary history (a Rudolph Valentino look-alike and White Russians fleeing the Bolsheviks in *Bouche à bouche*, Communist servants in *Yes!*).

But... isn't all this already to be found in the *opérette*? Does not Hervé's Mam'zelle Nitouche frequent the Montmartre of her time? Are not the American bourgeoisie of *Miss Dollar* eminently of their period? Does not the deputy mayor of Serpette's *Le Petit Chaperon rouge* brandish the laws in vigour in 1885? In the same composer's *opéra-bouffe Adam et Ève*, are the eponymous protagonists (and this is the amusing part of the story) not precipitated directly from the Garden of Eden to the Paris of the date of the premiere (1886), which is to be their Hell? And when it comes to picking up all the references to the current events of 1866 in *La Vie parisienne*, it would be better to abandon the task at once, there are so many of them... Conversely, it is just as simplistic to think that the old-established subjects – with classical antiquity first among them – were systematically ousted after the second decade of the twentieth century: for example, Christiné's *Phi-Phi*, a key model for the repertory of the 1920s (and, incidentally, subtitled 'opérette légère'), relates the amorous affairs of the Greek sculptor Phidias in... 1918. And the poster for the premiere made no attempt to underplay its neo-antique inspiration.

The special genre of the *féerie* lends its share of confusion to this seething mixture. It has a close relationship with both *opérette* and *comédie musicale*, which proves yet again how close they are (whereas opera is less commonly interested in fairy-tale subjects, if we are to go by the few examples to be found in composers' catalogues). The *féerie* appeared in the middle of the nineteenth century and initially developed in parallel with operetta, with which it gradually merged: Offenbach's *Le Voyage dans la lune* and *Le Roi Carotte*, along with Lecocq's *Ali-Baba*, marked the apothe-

osis of this meeting of genres in the 1870s and 1890s. At the same time, titles such as Messenger's *Miss Dollar* included highly developed dance tableaux, inherited from the tradition of spectacular ballet cultivated in London, but also at the Folies Bergère. Without being built on a plot genuinely devoted to *féerie* or 'grand spectacle', these pieces deployed a profusion of resources in order to reach a splendid conclusion. Now, it is also possible to perceive a little-studied resurgence of the *féerie* in the 1930s: this was the 'opérette à grand spectacle' (here, once again, frequently confused with the *comédie musicale*) whose temple was the Théâtre du Châtelet. During the thirty-five years of Maurice Lehmann's management of the theatre, horseback chases, naval battles in the midst of a raging sea or spectacular volcanic eruptions formed the climaxes of shows specially tailored for its uniquely spacious and well-equipped stage. After the Liberation, the *grand spectacle* genre survived chiefly at the Théâtre Mogador, in the works of Francis Lopez, who showcased the immense popularity of the young tenor Luis Mariano.



Finally, one cannot disentangle the history of *opérette* and *comédie musicale* from that – exactly contemporary – of the *chanson de café-concert*. For all the great librettists also wrote numbers in the last-named genre ('Félicie aussi' by Willemetz, for example). The style and aesthetic of this repertory evolved with remarkable flexibility from the 1860s to the 1950s: just as certain titles for the Moulin Rouge anticipated the art of Maurice Chevalier and Mistinguett, so several hits of the 1940s still looked back to the vocal style and aesthetics of the chansons of Paulus and Thérèse.

Finally, the rise of the cinema was also an important vector for the diffusion of light music. Many of Willemetz's *comédies musicales*, for example, were adapted for the screen. But the Seventh Art drew just as frequently on the repertory of *opérette* (including several versions of Hervé's *Mam'zelle Nitouche*), thus proving that the spirit of the two genres formed a single entity in the eyes and ears of twentieth-century audiences.

It is therefore not surprising to note that both repertoires lost their popularity at the same time, falling victim to the same criticisms, but are now being reborn and arousing the same enthusiasm.



Advertisement for the Paris hat shop À l'Hérissé.  
Musée Carnavalet, Paris.

Publicité pour la chapellerie À l'Hérissé de Paris.  
Musée Carnavalet, Paris.