

A Polynesian idyll in the time of Gauguin

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It is hard to imagine today the prodigious success enjoyed by the novels of Pierre Loti (1850-1923) when they first appeared. In 1879 this naval officer, whose real name was Julien Viaud, published anonymously *Aziyadé*, presented on the title page as 'an excerpt from the notes and letters of a lieutenant of the British Navy who entered the service of Turkey' and who had supposedly been killed in action after having had a passionate affair with a young Circassian girl from the harem of a Turkish dignitary. The following year, the same publisher, Calmann-Lévy, issued *Le Mariage de Loti*, attributed, again anonymously, to 'the author of *Aziyadé*', following its serialisation in *La Nouvelle Revue*. This second novel is dedicated to Sarah Bernhardt and was even more warmly received than its predecessor. It is set in Tahiti, where its hero, another English naval officer, named Harry Grant, after being christened 'Loti' in Queen Pōmare's gardens, temporarily sets up house with a fifteen-year-old Polynesian girl named Raharu. Returning to England after a year, he receives two affectionate letters from her and subsequently learns that after a brief liaison with a French officer she lived a 'dissolute and wild' life and died at the age of eighteen. Although this main plot is fictional, the novel is nonetheless an autobiographical transposition: in Tahiti, Harry Grant is retracing the steps of a deceased older brother, and in particular of the woman the latter loved there and who has gone half-mad, just as Julien Viaud had followed

in the footsteps of his brother Gustave (the Rouéri of the novel and the opera), who had died in 1865. For it was not Loti but his brother who had lived out the 'Polynesian idyll' that *L'Île du rêve* transferred, in its turn, to the operatic stage.

The notion of adapting a successful novel into an opera was as common at the end of the nineteenth century as it is nowadays to turn a best-seller into a film or telefilm. As early as 1882, the idea had been mooted of an operatic version of *Le Mariage de Loti* set to music by Robert Planquette, composer of *Les Cloches de Corneville* and the patriotic song *Le Régiment de Sambre et Meuse*. Eight years later, the project was taken up again by Georges Hartmann (1843-1900), who, alongside his career as a music publisher, had collaborated on the librettos of Massenet's *Hérodiade* and *Werther*. In fact, with the poet and playwright André Alexandre (1860-1928), Hartmann eventually co-signed no fewer than three operatic adaptations of works by Loti, now at the height of his fame, who in 1891 had succeeded to Octave Feuillet's seat in the Académie Française: *Madame Chrysanthème*, with a score by André Messager, premiered at the Théâtre Lyrique de la Renaissance in 1893; *Le Spahi* (based on *Le Roman d'un spahi*, Loti's third novel and the first to be published under his pseudonym), with music by Lucien Lambert, first performed at the Opéra-Comique in 1897; and finally the piece originally intended to be entitled *L'Île des rêves*, which Hartmann agreed to entrust, on Massenet's recommendation, to an almost unknown composer, only seventeen years old, and who, to boot, was not even French.



Born in Caracas in 1874 to a German-Jewish father from Hamburg and a Venezuelan mother, Reynaldo Hahn grew up in Paris. Although he was a protégé of Massenet, his foreign nationality barred him from entering for the famous Prix de Rome, for which all young French composers had competed since 1803. *L'Île du rêve* was a kind of compensatory measure for him, a setting of a libretto Hartmann gave him as supposedly not

definitive. Hahn did not suspect that this trial piece – this ‘holiday homework’, as he called it – would become, thanks to the cunning, all-powerful Massenet, the official consecration usually reserved for a winner of the prize upon his return from the Villa Medici: the premiere of an operatic work by a state-subsidised theatre.

Begun in Münster in the summer of 1891, the composition of *L'Île du rêve* continued in Aachen and then in Hamburg, where Hahn completed the first act in September. The second act was mostly written the following summer, on the Normandy coast, and the third a year later, in Saint-Germain-en-Laye; the score was provisionally completed in London in September 1893, and revised in the summer of 1894. At the same time, Hahn began to orchestrate the work, and Massenet, impressed on reading the first act, declared *L'Île du rêve* worthy of being staged. In September 1894, when the orchestration had just been completed, Massenet introduced his student to Léon Carvalho, director of the Opéra-Comique, and attended the play-through of the work in person on 2 October. However, after much procrastination, Carvalho refused it. Massenet, who was not easily intimidated, had the vocal score printed by his publisher, Heugel, in 1897. Dedicated to Hahn’s teacher ‘as a token of affectionate gratitude’ and presenting Loti as co-author of the libretto along with Hartmann and Alexandre, it then briefly attracted the attention of the American soprano Marie Van Zandt, creator of *Lakmé*, who even considered singing *L'Île du rêve* in North America and Russia.

The way was cleared of obstacles once Albert Carré took up his post as director of the Opéra-Comique on 13 January 1898, following the sudden death of Carvalho on 27 December of the previous year. Keen to encourage the creation of contemporary operas, Carré was already familiar with Hahn’s score, and immediately proposed *L'Île du rêve* for his inaugural season, with the enthusiastic support of Messenger, his music director. On 21 January, Hahn played the work through in front of the troupe, and the cast was decided at once. The role of Loti was assigned to the lyric tenor Edmond Clément (1867-1928), then at the dawn of his great international career but already acknowledged to be a model of technique and style;

even today, he is still regarded as one of the foremost singers of the time. After some hesitation, the female lead went to a young singer, Julia Guiraudon (1873-1966), who had previously made a in the role of the heroine of Lambert's *Le Spahi*, and whom Carré also chose to create the role of Mimì in Puccini's *La Bohème* during the same season as *L'Île du rêve*; she interrupted her career in 1904 to marry the librettist Henri Cain. When the mezzo-soprano Charlotte Wvyns, originally cast as Téria, the second female role, had to withdraw, it was Jeanne Marié de l'Isle (1872-1926) – niece of Célestine Galli-Marié, the first Carmen – who replaced her. The baritone Mondaud, whose name appears on the score reissued at the time of the premiere, pulled out of the run the day after the dress rehearsal, and it was the bass-baritone Hippolyte Belhomme (1854-1923), one of the mainstays of the troupe, who took on the role of the heroine's father. The young composer's work was therefore entrusted to a first-rate cast, not to mention one of the leading conductors of the time, André Messager. Rehearsals began in February 1898, while the trial of Émile Zola was being held. A committed Dreyfusard, Hahn attended several sessions in court while participating in the preparation of his opera. The premiere took place on 23 March, at the Salle du Châtelet, the former premises of the Théâtre-Lyrique, which the Opéra-Comique was still occupying at this time, while waiting for the opening of its new Salle Favart to replace the one destroyed by the disastrous fire of 1887. The first part of the evening consisted of a new two-act version of Léo Delibes's *Le Roi l'a dit*.



To make an operatic adaptation of *Le Mariage de Loti* was no easy task. Presented (though without trying to deceive anyone) as a document rather than a fiction, the book subtly blends third-person narration (whose novelistic voice is sometimes ambiguous), ethnological digressions, alleged diary fragments, epistolary exchanges and accounts from outside observers. In addition to the title, which Loti wished to be different from the original, the librettists introduced significant changes at his request or with

his agreement. The hero is English in the novel for reasons of professional discretion, since the author was a serving naval officer. In the opera he is promoted to an officer in the French Navy – the *Rendeeer* [sic] of the novel becoming the *Neptune* – and bears the quintessentially Breton name of Georges de Kerven (perhaps borrowed by the authors from a forgotten play by Roger de Beauvoir and Lambert Thiboust, *Les Enfers de Paris*). This change of nationality may have been dictated by the desire to mitigate the inevitable comparison with *Lakmé*, whose hero, Gerald, wears British uniform. The heroine is no longer fifteen – which might have alarmed the censors – but sixteen, and her name is changed from Rarahu to Mahénu for reasons of euphony; likewise, her adoptive father, Tahaapaïru, is renamed Taïrapa (but does not die in the opera, unlike the novel). Out of political or diplomatic reticence, Queen Pōmare IV, who died in 1877 and whose son, Tamatoa V, had been forced to abdicate in 1871 after having ceded Tahiti to France in 1870, is not named or involved in the story, except for a reference to the ‘Queen’s ball’: Hartmann and Alexander replaced her by a ‘Tahitian princess’ called Oréna. While the names of Téria and Faïmana come from the book, the libretto, to avoid any confusion, makes the former the Taimaha of the novel, formerly the companion of Rouéri, the dead brother of Georges. The episodic character of Henri, another officer of the *Neptune*, who forms with his ‘wife’ Faïmana a sort of counterpart to the couple of Loti and Mahénu, may have been inspired by Plumket, the ‘brother John’ of the novel (and thus a discreet avatar of ‘brother Yves’ in *Madame Chrysanthème*). The only character to undergo a degree of development compared to the novel is Tsen-Lee, the Chinese merchant who is courting Mahénu: it must be said that this ridiculous and obnoxious figure, whose musical treatment seems to have given Hahn a lot of trouble, is above all representative of the image of the Chinese people presented by the theatre of the time, of which Sidney Jones’s *The Geisha* (1896) offers another example.

Written in irregular rhyming verse, as is customary in opera, the libretto is organised in three acts that summarise and stylise the plot of the novel, combining its episodes and modifying its narrative framework for

the purposes of simplification. The first act, located at the foot of the Faatūa Falls, depicts Princess Oréna's introduction of Mahénu to Kerven, followed by the 'baptism' of the French officer; while the other sailors go to the Queen's ball, Mahénu keeps Kerven with her and the last scene is a long love duet at nightfall. In Act Two, set in Mahénu's hut, Loti tells his brother's former companion Téria, who has gone half-mad, about his death. After Téria leaves, the two lovers sadly recall the happiness of their meeting, while in the background we hear Mahénu's adoptive father and other old Tahitian men singing religious texts. The third act is set at Princess Oréna's residence, at a farewell party for the French officers, who are about ready to set sail again. On learning of Kerven's imminent departure, which he has been concealing from her, Mahénu gives vent to her despair, invoking the fallen existence that awaits her. Kerven is moved and offers to take her with him and marry her. But once he has left, the princess shows Mahénu that this is an impossible dream and persuades her to return to her hut to take care of her father. The curtain falls as the melancholy song of the Tahitians is heard in the distance. (We know from Philippe Blay's research that the librettists had initially envisaged a fourth act where, as at the end of the book, Kerven, back in Europe, would have learnt of Mahénu's moral and physical degradation and death.)



The premiere of *L'Île du rêve* was a brilliant occasion: the Minister of Public Instruction and Henry Roujon, his Director of Fine Arts, both attended, and the presence of the exiled Queen Natalie of Serbia in Pierre Loti's box was noted. Though warmly welcomed by the audience, if we are to believe the newspapers, the new work – the first premiere under Carré's management – was much less fêted by the musical press, whose writers, for the most part, vied with each other in the nastiness of their comments. One does not need to read between the lines to feel that this was above all a manifestation of jealousy directed, in terms that did little honour to those who employed them, not only against the twenty-three-year-old

composer (who, it was de rigueur to point out, was neither French nor a Prix de Rome winner), but also and perhaps above all against Massenet and, quite certainly for some of these writers, against Albert Carré. First prize goes to the composer Gaston Salvayre who, in *Le Gaulois*, unleashed his bile on the libretto, the music and the performers, reserving his harshest (and some of his stupidest) remarks for the 'young Venezuelan musical amateur', a 'son of the other hemisphere', a 'schoolboy lost in the theatre' worthy at most of wearing 'des oreilles d'Hahn'.¹ Reading this catalogue of nonsense, one's clearest impression is that the critics were unable to categorise the score with precision. Only the composer Alfred Bruneau, writing in *Le Figaro*, recognised in Hahn's opera 'five or six themes representing his characters – well-chosen ones, by the way – which he has recalled from page to page without developing them symphonically'. But even Bruneau does not avoid clichés or contradictions, reproaching his young colleague for imitating Massenet yet simultaneously for not drawing sufficient inspiration from his teacher to 'infuse a few vaguely masculine strains into his vocal and orchestral writing, whose effeminate limpness and vaporous monotony are not challenged for a minute'. If the malevolent allusions to Hahn's homosexuality are obvious when he is accused of lacking 'virility', it is equally striking to find in many of these reviews a denunciation of the 'half-tone' aesthetic that would reappear in *Pelléas et Mélisande*, premiered four years later (although the two works are almost exactly contemporary in their conception).

For, like Debussy, Hahn, armed with his already impressive experience as a composer of *mélodies*, displays in this work what was to be a lifelong concern with granting primacy to the vocal expression of the text, rendered perfectly comprehensible by a clear, natural style of word-setting that respects the demands of breathing. His use of reminiscence motifs (*motifs de rappel*), more flexible and complex than Bruneau's superficial analysis implies, does indeed suggest the Massenet of *Manon* and *Werther*. But it

¹ A pun on 'des oreilles d'âne', ass's ears. (Translator's note)

remains discreet – again, as in *Pelléas* – and dictated essentially by the aim of conjuring up an atmosphere, while giving the impression of great formal freedom. Far from being ‘visiting cards’ (as Debussy wittily, though somewhat excessively, described the Wagnerian leitmotif), the motifs are rather associated with places or affects; they allow listeners to find their bearings in an open musical discourse, where the traditional ‘numbers’ follow one another without interruption. The same concern for simplicity characterises the vocal writing, which is deliberately devoid of spectacular effects and avoids wide intervals, leaps in tessitura and flattering high notes. Even the few vocalises of Mahénu in the last act are not only heard from behind the scenes, but are also perfectly justified from a theatrical point of view. Even the only real ‘aria’ in the score, ‘Ne plus te revoir, ô ma petite case’, which Loti sings in the last act, is very brief and does not rise above *a*.

Handicapped by its discouraging critical reception, *L’Île du rêve* achieved only nine performances at the Opéra-Comique in 1898. Philippe Blay reports a private performance, limited to the first act, in Madeleine Lemaire’s salon in 1900, with Clément reprising his role as Kerven, and a second in Toulon in 1903. More unexpected was a revival in 1942 at the Casino Municipal de Cannes, where Hahn, a refugee in the Free Zone, was music director, with the young Geori Boué as Raharu (the heroine regained her original name on this occasion). The work was heard again in Papeete in the year 2000, and in 2016 in Rochefort (Loti’s home town), in a production subsequently revived at the Théâtre de l’Athénée-Louis Jouvet in Paris.



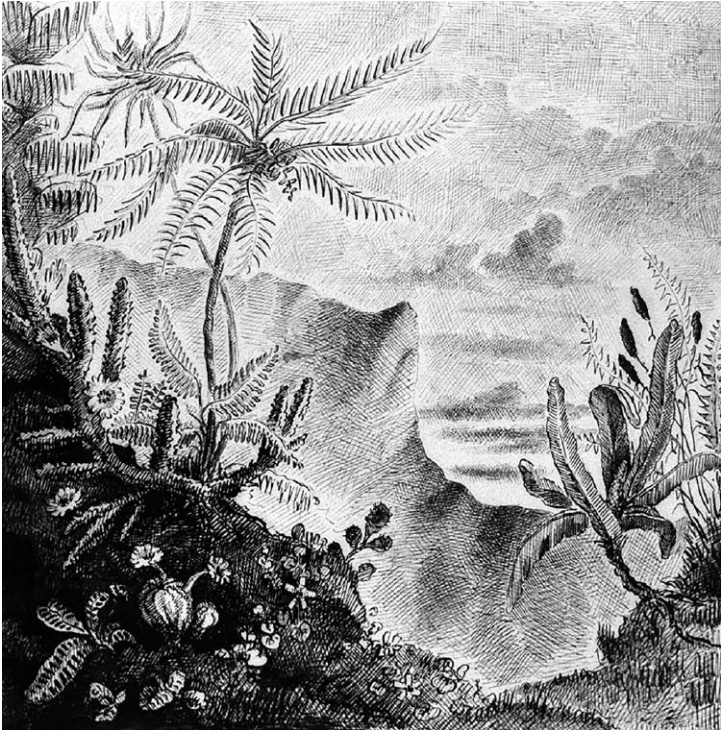
For today’s spectator, freed from the prejudices of 1898, *L’Île du rêve* is a work whose interest greatly exceeds mere curiosity. Far from being banal, the operatic adaptation of this novel by Loti – a writer whom Roland Barthes, among others, taught us to rediscover – is rich in perspectives, not the least of which is the ambiguous nature of exoticism in its Polynesian

incarnation. *L'Île du rêve* thus takes its place in an artistic context that embraces the early novels of Herman Melville, the paintings of Gauguin and F. W. Murnau's unforgettable film *Tabu*. Was Hahn himself not an 'exotic' figure in the Paris of the Dreyfus Affair? Half-Latin American, half-German, Jewish, homosexual, this cosmopolitan personality became more French than the French themselves out of love for his adopted homeland's language and culture, which he mastered better than anyone else. He was therefore all the better prepared, in this works where texts in French are juxtaposed with passages in Polynesian, to combine an idiom inherited from Gounod and Massenet with exogenous musical references which, while discreet, nonetheless bespeak a quest for authenticity very different from 'local colour' as traditionally understood at the Opéra-Comique.

More broadly, *L'Île du rêve* takes its place in a line of operatic works that runs from Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine* (1865) to Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (1904) and was to continue with Lehár's *Das Land des Lächelns* (1929) and Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* (1949), right up to *Miss Saigon* (1989) by Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil. All these pieces treat in dramatic and musical terms the theme of the supposedly impossible, if not dangerous, encounter between an 'East' presented as seductive, enigmatic, and, by definition, 'other', and a 'West' that is the dominant power and the master of the discourse between the two, but is nonetheless shaken in its certainties.

One cannot end discussion of *L'Île du rêve* without recalling a biographical circumstance which, although external to the work, gives it special resonance. The opera's genesis coincides with the first meeting of Reynaldo Hahn and Marcel Proust, which took place in Madeleine Lemaire's salon on 22 May 1894, while the composer was working on the orchestration of the opera. Their passionate love affair, Proust's only real liaison, was to end in the summer of 1896, mainly on account of the writer's obsessive jealousy, traces of which can be found in *Un amour de Swann*. This love between the composer wreathed in his precocious glory and the budding writer who was on his way to becoming the greatest French

novelist of the day (eventually transmuted into an enduring affection, described by Philippe Blay as almost marital) had an influence that is only now beginning to be understood on the conception of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, in which Proust wanted his friend – who had so dazzled him in his youth while he was working on *L'Île du rêve* – to appear ‘like a god in disguise whom no mortal man recognises’



Imaginary landscape by Pierre Loti.
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Paysage imaginaire par Pierre Loti.
Bibliothèque nationale de France.