

Les P'tites Michu in the Parisian press

Étienne Jardin

Without being exceptional, the media coverage of *Les P'tites Michu* was surprisingly extensive. It went far beyond the commentary generated by the other premieres at the Bouffes-Parisiens in 1897 – *La Peur du gendarme* (Ferrier/Darien) and *Les Petites Femmes* (Sylvane/Audran) – and is closer to the volume of texts devoted to the reception of new works at the Opéra-Comique (such as Massenet's *Sapho*, also premiered in November 1897). Another surprising feature is the great benevolence with which most of the capital's newspapers, from generalist dailies to specialist journals, looked upon the new work. This quasi-consensus, which is concentrated especially on the quality of Messenger's score, stands out in an era that favoured permanent aesthetic controversy. However, it would be futile to look for reviews analysing the score point by point: a production at the Bouffes-Parisiens, even of high quality, could not be discussed as seriously as a new work at one of the principal theatres.

And what appealing music! How flexible, nimble, ingenious it is! How good it is at being cheerful without being banal, tender without being novelettish, learned without being pedantic. And it is amusement, charm; it is perfection itself. For, as you know, no contemporary composer is superior to André Messenger, who to this day is the only one to have achieved a musical comedy in France, with *Madame Chrysanthème*.

(Catulle Mendès, *Le Journal*, 17 November 1897)

We need hardly be astonished by the praise of Catulle Mendès – who had collaborated with Messager on *Isoline* in 1888 – while observing that no one really contradicted it. *Le Gaulois*, in the person of Félix Duquesnel, remarked upon a score ‘very far above the average; it is, first of all, distinguished in form, carefully orchestrated, and not the usual cheap trash; moreover, it is teeming with felicitous motifs’. The first brief reviewer (*soiriste*) of *Le Petit Parisien* was ‘seduced by [the] melodic grace and elegance’ of music that *Le Matin* found ‘charming, full of dashing grace and lively freshness’. Henry Bauer, in *L’Écho de Paris*, praised the score’s ‘stylish and ingenious workmanship, delicate and distinguished melody, light, elaborate and skilful orchestration’. He also used the adjective ‘charming’, which reappears in the columns of *Le Figaro*:

M. Messager has shown himself here to be a most charming musician, in the pleasant, clear and amiable tradition of the French masters. The trio of the two sisters and the Captain, the double prayer the former address to St Nicholas, protector of pure love, the duet for Blanche-Marie and Gaston in which they let slip the confession of their love, are absolutely perfect numbers in a poignant yet graceful tone. And, throughout the score, the orchestra, discreet and deft, gives pleasure without fatiguing us.
(Henry Fouquier, *Le Figaro*, 17 November 1897)

The press unanimously praised the work of a composer at the height of his powers, brimming with ideas while giving the illusion of simplicity ‘and, when it comes to operetta, that remark [...] becomes, after all, the most positive praise’ (*Le Petit Journal*).

But was it really an operetta? Like most of the works of light music produced in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, *Les P'tites Michu* had to pass the test of conformity to the genre. Emmanuel Arène, in *Le Matin*, opened the discussion: ‘This operetta is almost an *opéra-comique*, as much on account of M. Messager’s music, always highly refined and distinguished, as of the libretto, very good-natured and decent, in which, when the curtain falls, everyone gets married.’ The eminently serious

Adolphe Jullien took the subject up again in his regular column in the *Journal des débats*: deploring the productions on offer at the Opéra-Comique, he held up *Les P'tites Michu* as the model to follow.

Tell me frankly if we should not have switched works, if this straightforward operetta is not greatly superior to what our second opera house offers us, and if it does not continue, with much delicacy and ingenuity in both libretto and music, the series of great works that our fathers loved and our sons will perhaps love again.

Admittedly, it is written by M. André Messager, this score of *Les P'tites Michu* which seems to have restored the fortunes of the Bouffes-Parisiens, and M. Messager is far above ordinary composers of light music; he has had experience in every genre, and his fairytale *Isoline*, his Japanese fantasy *Madame Chrysanthème*, his fine ballet *Les Deux Pigeons*, his witty *opéra-comique La Basoche*, in addition to many operettas, have demonstrated that his true place is at the Opéra-Comique.

(Adolphe Jullien, *Journal des débats*, 19 December 1897)

However, this assimilation with a genre that had now acquired noble status did not always turn to the work's advantage: if it was indeed an *opéra-comique*, what was it doing on the stage of the Bouffes-Parisiens?

On this innocuous, but nonetheless entertaining anecdote, M. Messager has written music whose merits I am very far from denying, but which, as I have said above, belongs much more to the domain of the 'eminently French' or, if you will, old-fashioned *opéra-comique* than to that of the operetta. [...] But, once again, all of this lacks the inventiveness, the drollness and the preposterous fantasy that the genre imperatively calls for... Yes, the modern operetta, which must be to our time what those of Offenbach and Hervé were to the end of the Empire, still has to be found, and I continue to predict a splendid success for the man who, in some hilarious little work, will succeed in determining its formula.

(Gaston Salvayre, *Gil Blas*, 17 November 1897)

These remarks by the composer Gaston Salvayre echo those of Catulle Mendès (who denounced a libretto ‘absolutely devoid of good humour, brio and genuinely farcical farce’), but are nevertheless isolated within a flood of articles congratulating the theatre for turning its back on vulgarity with this story ‘exempt from the smut we are usually served’ (*Le Petit Journal*).

The libretto may seem a little mild, but how much I prefer this innocent story with its graceful passages to the pretentiously banal combinations, the coarseness of the gibes, the cheapness of the plot devices, the ignominious stupidity of the characters that reign in the commonplace type of operetta.

(Henry Bauer, *L'Écho de Paris*, 18 November 1897)

A simple, honest, almost ingenuous tale. A little love story, sentimental at times, which any mother would allow her daughter to read. And this little tale has turned out to please the public, precisely because it is simple and good-natured in a slightly naïve way. The word ‘nice’ might have been invented for this story. And in the favourable reception that the first-night audience accorded this niceness, there was, it seemed to me, a kind of reaction against the excessive ‘nastiness’ of other works.

(*Le Figaro*, article quoted above)

In the columns of these journalists, an argument emerges that one may well imagine was suggested to them by the producers of the show: unlike the last piece performed at the Bouffes-Parisiens, *Les P'tites Michu* was suitable for every audience; ‘it is a piece that all ears can hear and that all ages can enjoy’ (Adolphe Jullien).

After *Les Petites Femmes*, in a rather libertine style, *Les P'tites Michu*, a moral piece to which mothers can take their daughters. [...] This graceful adventure is told in a rather childish fashion; as a result, it will be the piece ideally suited to young girls; I do not guarantee that it will amuse

parents as much, but they will be consoled by listening to the attractive score of M. A. Messenger.

(*La Vie théâtrale*, 10 December 1897)

We will not accuse the director of Les Bouffes of lacking eclecticism, since he has followed the sauciness of *Les Petites Femmes* with an honest, sentimental and patriotic operetta, which would be entirely worthy of being performed before girls who have earned good marks at school, if girls were still taken to decent shows. But today their instruction is so advanced! In short, *Les P'tites Michu* is not quite whiter-than-white theatre, but it is already very pale pink theatre. I assure you that I did not blush even once.

(Monsieur Lohengrin, *Le Journal*, 17 November 1897)

By staging *Les P'tites Michu*, the management of Les Bouffes-Parisiens wished to react against the tendencies embodied by the last piece it performed [...]. *Les Petites Femmes* was not intended for families of inflexible virtue: *Les P'tites Michu*, on the contrary, seems to have been written mainly to please this category of spectators.

(Albert Dayrolles, *La Lanterne*, 18 November 1897)

All the critics saw in this operetta libretto a moral and amusing tale. However, the synopses they offered of the piece (an essential feature of any review of a premiere) differ as to how they interpret the outcome of the plot. Some took the denouement literally:

Finally, the noble daughter of the Marquis is clearly distinguished from the Michus' daughter when both of them are placed before a basket of eggs and a block of butter. One instinctively starts to serve the eggs and butter to the clientele as if she had done nothing else all her life, while the other performs the task gracelessly and sluggishly. The experiment is conclusive, it seems; it is the law of atavism from which no one can escape.

(Henri Heugel, *Le Ménestrel*, 21 November 1897)

Francisque Sarcey (*Le Temps*) followed Heugel by talking about ‘atavism’, but without going any further: the character of the supposed twins has given away their heredity; their social position corresponds to their innate dispositions. One is surprised not to find any discussion dealing head-on with this issue, which after all is at the heart of the libretto. The initial plot – will it be possible to recognise the nobility of a girl who was raised as a shopkeeper’s child? – resembles a scientific experiment, and the idea of placing the girls’ birth just after the abolition of privileges in post-Revolutionary France seems very like a hefty nudge to historical circumstances. Yet the predisposition of human beings to occupy such and such a place in the social spectrum barely even titillated the socialist press. ‘Fortunately, atavism, with which we were familiar before Zola and even before Ibsen, will be up to its tricks again here’, Charles Martel remarked ironically in *L’Aurore*. Other critics preferred a different perspective: it is love alone that guides the Michu sisters to choose their destiny.



Above: Set design for Act One – Departure from the Herpin Institute.
 Below: Set design for Act Three – the Michus’ shop in Les Halles.
 Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

En haut : Décor de l’acte I – Départ de l’institution Herpin.
 En bas : Décor de l’acte III – La boutique des Michu aux Halles.
 Bibliothèque nationale de France.

