

# The genesis of *Les P'tites Michu*

Christophe Mirambeau

The year was 1897. Messenger was trying to come to terms with the ignominious failure he had suffered at the Opéra-Comique with *Le Chevalier d'Harmental*, taken off after just a few performances. Speaking of this period, he told the magazine *Musica* in September 1908:

This last piece [*Le Chevalier d'Harmental*], on which I had worked for a long time, having begun it three years previously, was a lamentable failure, and its disappearance from the stage was all the more painful to me because I attached great importance to it and thought I had given in it the full measure of what I could do. It was so discouraged by its lack of success that I didn't want to write anything else at all and tried to retire to England...

And then a parcel arrived in the post. It was from Vanloo and Duval, two famous and highly experienced librettists, who had sent him a text for a new operetta: *Les P'tites Michu*.

The subject of the piece is simple: the antecedents of the story lie in 1793, at the height of the Terror, and the action takes place in 1810. Two girls have been raised by a couple of respectable tradespeople, the Michus, who run a shop at Les Halles, the central Paris market. The girls are the same age, and are utterly convinced they are twin sisters. But in reality only one of them is the Michus' offspring. The other is the daughter of the Marquis des Ifs. One can easily imagine the misunderstandings that arise when the time comes for them to marry...

On this amusing and good-natured basic framework, Messager skilfully wove a nimble, joyful score, as graceful as it is invigorating. Beneath a superficial facility, the composer's sureness of touch is expressed in all its plenitude. The melodies are simple yet stylish, possessing an easy fluency; though classical in cut, they never sink into cliché, growing tender or lively as the emotion dictates, from the most cheerful to the most restrained – we even come abruptly across a hymn-like motif to remind us that Messager was a pupil of the *École Niedermeyer*.

But if these straightforward, elegant melodies are immediately attractive, it is their harmonisation and instrumentation that give them their true value. A refined colourist, Messager dresses his orchestra and garnishes his tunes with elegance, varying the colours with a skill that enables the band – a small one, since the pit of the Bouffes-Parisiens could not accommodate large forces – to sound as sparkling and full-toned as a bigger formation. Debussy, who admired Messager and his works, had a special fondness for *Les P'tites Michu* – as did Fauré and Saint-Saëns, who always looked kindly on the music of their friend Messager.

The work was an overnight success at its premiere at the Bouffes-Parisiens on 16 November 1897. The cast included two big stars of the Parisian stage in the title roles, Alice Bonheur (Marie-Blanche) and Odette Dulac (Blanche-Marie). The great comedian Barral took the part of General des Ifs. The audience reception was exceptionally warm; every number in the score quickly became a 'hit song'. Among the highlights are the duet 'Blanche-Marie et Marie-Blanche', in which Messager harks back to Lecocq's *La Fille de Madame Angot*, adopting the writing in thirds of its duet for Clairette and M<sup>lle</sup> Lange, 'Jours fortunés de notre enfance'; the irresistible trio 'Michu! Michu! Michu!'; Gaston's *Madrigal* ('Quoi, vous tremblez ma belle enfant'); and Aristide's delicate 'Blanche-Marie est douce' – not forgetting the refreshing choruses of schoolgirls, the Act Two finale with its brilliant orchestral introduction, and Blanche-Marie's song in the third act, in which the strings waltz along with the melody of the refrain, 'Ah! sœurlette, ma sœurlette'.

A run of 150 performances confirmed public approval of the work, which then went on to enchant theatres in the French provinces. *Les P'tites Michu* also found its way to Switzerland and Germany after its Parisian triumph, before being staged in London in 1905 (Daly's Theatre, 29 April) under the title *The Little Michus*. Messenger himself conducted the premiere; several new numbers were added for the benefit of the London audience.

*The Little Michus* only closed after more than four hundred performances, and was also exported to the Southern Hemisphere: its apotheosis continued in Australia and New Zealand from 1906 to 1908 thanks to the extensive tour of the British company managed by James Cassius Williamson. The show enjoyed the same success on Broadway in 1907, and these performances were followed by a tour covering the entire United States. Paris renewed acquaintance with *Les P'tites Michu* in 1909, for a revival that further consolidated its reputation.



Quadrille by Déransart on *Les P'tites Michu*.  
Leduc Archives.

Quadrille de Déransart sur *Les P'tites Michu*.  
Archives Leduc.