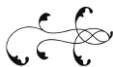


A few remarks about *Passionnément*

Christophe Mirambeau

In the 1920s, following the international success of *Monsieur Beaucaire*, André Messager became an icon of French operetta and musical theatre. The Institut de France welcomed him into its ranks: he was elected to the chair of Émile Paladilhe in 1926 – too late, he remarked. Nevertheless, the composer participated in the sessions of the academy, read the works sent from Rome by the residents of the Villa Medici and regularly reported on them to his colleagues. Now that his duties as President of the Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques had come to an end, Messager was offered the possibility of writing a new work: he met Albert Willemetz at the Guitry house in Royan – Willemetz and Sacha Guitry were very close friends – and the great wordsmith of chansons and operettas proposed he should set the libretto of *Passionnément* for the Théâtre de la Michodière. A *comédie musicale* for modest forces that was to be performed by the leading Parisian actor-singers of the moment.

Messager buckled down to work on the project. He went to stay with the Willemetz family in Royan in order to make a start on the music. There he suffered a major kidney attack that utterly exhausted him. But he continued to compose... On 15 January 1926, Paris gave *Passionnément* a triumphant reception. The highly amusing book was by the brilliant author of *vaudevilles* Maurice Hennequin, while Willemetz wrote the lyrics.



The most fascinating aspects of this musical comedy lie chiefly in the psycho-affective situations that arise from the encounter between the protagonists, and the genuine character – if not, indeed, moral – study that the authors present in both dialogue and lyrics. The business deal between Robert and Stevenson over the sale of the former's oil-rich land is a dramatic situation that is, in the end, of trivial importance; its true purpose is to bring the characters together. They offer us a portrait gallery in which each of the protagonists displays characteristics defined by popular tradition and stock 'types': the American businessman, the ruined 'ladies' man', the actress who has 'put a full stop' to her career and is trying to be a perfect wife, the maid who aspires to the stability offered by marriage, the sublime cuckold, the mistress slightly past her prime, not forgetting the abandoned lover... A strong and unequivocal character, Stevenson, perfectly unbearable almost throughout, is transformed into a man who is amiable, indeed lovable. He experiences redemption through alcohol (French wine, naturally!) – a witty apologia for 'sin', highly characteristic of Willemetz's style. His wife, conventional at first glance, turns into a sensual young romantic lead, since the burden of social custom weighs on her only when she wears the glasses and wig imposed by her husband: divested of these accessories – and thus of her inhibitions – she permits herself the adventure of her dreams. Julia, who initially seems frivolous, turns out in the end to be a paragon of morality, admittedly of a new kind: the sole purpose of her amorous and sexual experiments is to find love and marriage.

This is, in fact, one of the salient features of Willemetz's philosophy: immoral acts are justified by entirely honourable and legitimate motives. Hélène le Barrois is not merely a comic 'type', the jealous woman: she is also a woman who doubts, as she gets older, whether she has retained all her powers of seduction. Cruelly, the authors confirm her fears and hint at a precious moral: jealousy is a ridiculous and pointless blight. But they make amends for that cruelty with a tender, respectful vision of old age: in her 'elderly' persona, Ketty overplays a wisdom that only Hélène understands, almost in spite of herself. The character of Robert follows the

opposite path from *Ketty*: having started as the prototype of a pleasure-seeker at ease with himself, he discovers – even if it makes him outrageously sentimental – that true love of which he has previously enjoyed only physical knowledge. Under its entertainingly vaudevillesque surface, *Passionnément* is doubtless a more profound work than it appears to be. These people indulge in the sport that has been in vogue since the end of the war: the transgression of the prohibitions imposed on everyone by their respective social condition. Willemetz never pushed the psychological analysis of his creatures further than he does here: the solo songs are mostly conceived, like an opera aria, as episodes of introspection. These meticulously detailed profiles and complex interpersonal circumstances, although distanced by theatre and song, make direct reference to a catalogue of attitudes, situations and social postures with which all the various layers of the bourgeoisie that frequented La Michodière were familiar. And this was probably not the least important element (whether perceived or not) in ensuring the success of the latest creation by the triumvirate of Hennequin, Willemetz and Messager. Once again, the music theatre of this period of the twentieth century closely mirrors real life and situations, just like the *opéras-comiques* of the eighteenth-century Théâtre de la Foire, to which the musicals of the post-Great War period bear such a strong resemblance.

Singled out as a ‘masterpiece’ right from the evening of the premiere, the score of *Passionnément* is written in a musical style that reiterates the same qualities of inspiration Messager had developed for *L’Amour masqué* in collaboration with Sacha Guitry (1921). He tends towards an art more austere than it had once been – even compared to his most recent work, *La Petite Fonctionnaire* (1923) – and towards greater simplicity of means. Here he has adapted the manner of the hugely popular Henri Christiné (composer of the ‘jazzy’ musical comedies *Phi-Phi* (1918) and *Dédé* (1921)) and absorbed it into his own. At the age of seventy-three, the supremely elegant Messager does with his music as he does with his wardrobe: he renews it in accordance with the canons of fashion. The work is written for small orchestra, and its scoring possesses the specific flavour of French music. With its quicksilver colours and timbres, laid out in subtle and skil-

ful instrumental combinations, its light orchestral texture (even though it covers a wide compass), its simple, limpid melodic universe whose every inflection is derived from the text on which it depends, this generous and inspired music alternates between scenes of dazzling vitality and gently nostalgic, sentimental episodes.



The biggest hit of this copious score – twenty-one numbers, without a single 'reprise' other than the traditional repetitions of the act finales – was naturally the seductive waltz-song of the title number, a huge publishing success that soon entered the repertory of all the restaurant bands, and also became a *mélodie de salon* particularly popular with amateurs. But one should also mention Julia's mischievous comic songs 'Je ne suis pas très exigeante' and 'Vous avez comblé ma patronne'; the bright-eyed buffo quintet 'Nous apportons vos valises'; the dazzling 'Oath Duet', bubbling over with wit, charm and vivacity; and Stevenson's parodic songs (the irresistible 'régime sec' number which explains the commercial success of the United States by the practice of Prohibition). Ketty's elegant airs, too, are capable of a discreet touch of disillusionment ('Ah! pourquoi, pourquoi, vraiment / Les bons moments / Passent-ils si vite'), as are Hélène's numbers – the delicately pathetic *rondeau* 'N' imaginez pas'.

Passionnément proved so popular that it was soon decided, at the suggestion of the publisher Salabert, to produce a reduced orchestration in order to exploit it in smaller theatres, that is, those which had even more exiguous orchestra pits than that of La Michodière. Messenger was delighted – orchestration was for him a pleasure rather than a chore – and did not hesitate to do the job himself. He went to live in a hotel in Étretat for a month in the summer and accomplished the task which so relaxed and diverted him. Unfortunately, though, it would appear that the publisher lost this small-scale version of the piece.

The premiere of *Passionnément* was greeted with rave reviews and public enthusiasm. Henri Malherbe wrote in *Le Temps* dated 20 January 1926:

Has good music reconquered the smiling domain of operetta that it seemed to have lost in recent years? We are tempted to believe so, since following its recent reappearances in *L'Amour masqué* and *Monsieur Beaucaire*, we see it once again laying claim to the resounding success enjoyed last night by *Passionnément*.

The latest score by the most melodious and polished of our musical masters is no less skilful in its fantasy than M. Messenger's earlier works. *Passionnément* sets out to be a very modern operetta. It is built on a Franco-American plot, the easygoing morality of which is obviously in keeping with current tastes. [...] M. André Messager has written delightfully imaginative music for it. The contrast [between subject and music] is pleasingly audacious and touches more than it offends. Our taste is compensated in this respect for what it finds missing elsewhere.

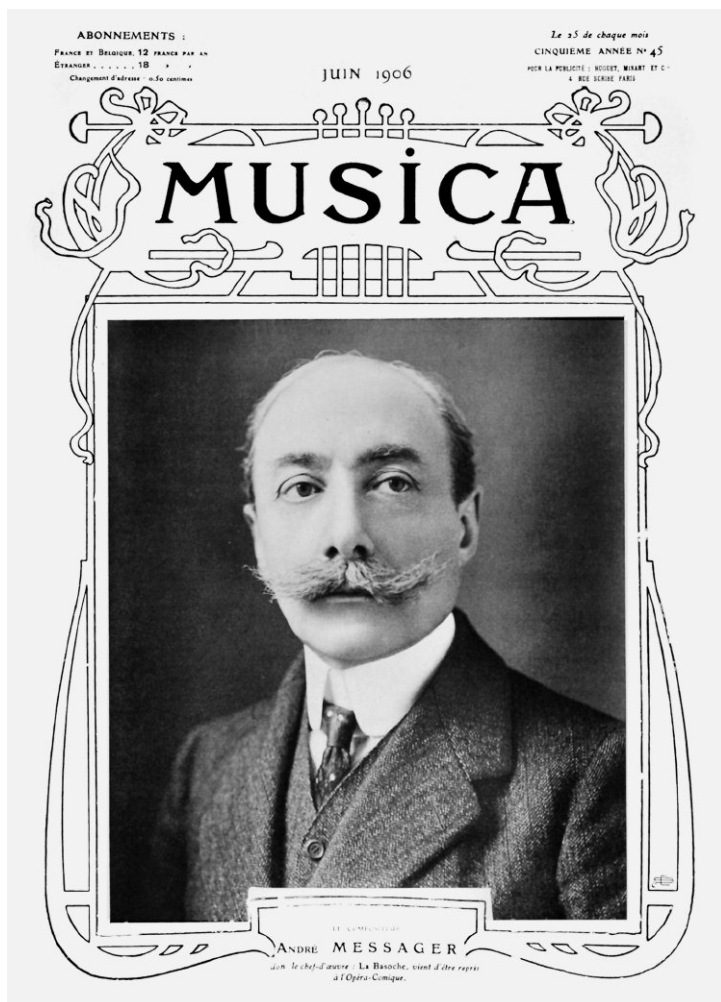
The composer of *Passionnément* seems to live in an enchanted world from which sadness and weariness are banished; his art has never expressed anything but the keen, free-flowing joy of love and youth. The melodic vigour of the scores he continues to write at an already advanced age remains miraculously vernal. M. Messenger conserves the singing lines of which he is the master and which cannot, on any occasion, at any time, fail to appeal. Without appearing presumptuous, he is the most enlightened of our lyrical technicians. However strong our admiration for him may be, it leaves us with sufficient sense to observe that his light-hearted muse is not to the taste of austere musicologists. Yet his genius is of the most precious essence. Gabriel Fauré, whose authority one can never invoke too often, excused the style adopted by the composer of *Isoline* in these words: 'There are not many examples in musical history of an artist with such comprehensive culture, such deep learning, who consents to apply his qualities to forms that are, for some reason, regarded as minor. How many masterpieces has this prejudice deprived us of? And it is there, too, that the delicacy of Messenger's thought is revealed; it is there that his eclecticism appears to us an enviable direction for art.'

One understands these remarks in the context of the high degree of freedom that Fauré wished to instil in music. M. Messenger has been

instructing us in his perfections for almost half a century now, in a series of infinitely varied works. Choice between them is as pleasant as it is glorious. We would like to think that the Institut as a body will not remain indifferent to such merit.

Passionément will not deny this witty composer the dignity [of election to the Institut de France] that we wish for him. For all its modern appearances, it is a score that is completely and utterly 'Messagerian'. From the very first pages, one can recognise the inimitable mark, the inimitable magic.

The production, staged by the actor-director Edmond Roze, a specialist in the *opérette-jazz* that was then triumphing on the Paris stage, boasted a first-rate cast whose members were well known to frequent theatre-goers in the capital. René Koval played the truculent Stevenson. His delectable and wholly credible impersonation of the American millionaire earned him one of the biggest successes of his career. So much so that he now became the regular first choice for roles as Englishmen and Americans; he had already tried out the accent, initially in the duet 'I am Riri, I am édéé' in *Riri* (Willemetz and Charles Borel-Clerc) in 1925, then for an entire role in *J'aime!* (Willemetz and Christiné), the month before the premiere of *Passionément* at the Bouffes-Parisiens. Jeanne Saint-Bonnet was a suave and graceful Kitty; she was seduced from the path of virtue by Géo Bury, a more charming juvenile lead than ever; and her chambermaid Julia was played by Denise Grey, then still a young actress. Intimidated by the heavy responsibility of having to sing the music of the old master, and not too confident of her vocal talents, she was nevertheless Messager's personal choice: he had been captivated by this frail, acidulous voice issuing from a mouth with an impish smile. Denise Grey was also a close friend of Bibi Messager, who insisted that her father should cast Denise in the work. The resulting success was the first highpoint of her exceptionally long career as a supporting actress in theatre and film.



André Messager on the cover of *Musica*, June 1906.
Palazzetto Bru Zane Collection.

André Messager en couverture de *Musica*, juin 1906.
Collection Palazzetto Bru Zane.