

La Jacquerie on the stage

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In the press file of the Monte Carlo premiere of *La Jacquerie*, and in that of its revival at the Opéra-Comique in Paris nine months later, numerous aspects of the libretto and the score are analysed. But, astonishingly, this is not the case with the visual component: none of these articles gives an account of the different stagings of Lalo's posthumous opera completed by Coquard.

Until today, we could only try to imagine the scenography of this opera in medieval garb, for it seemed that no contemporary document existed that could give us a precise idea of it, with the exception of a press engraving published in *L'Illustration*. There was no trace of a *livret de mise en scène* (staging manual) – a document that set down on paper the layout of the decor and indicated the movements of the singers in the space thus defined – either in the archive of operatic stagings of the Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra or in the extremely imposing collection of the Association de la Régie Théâtrale (ART, Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris). The latter institution's catalogue, however, does contain a 'different' *Jacquerie*, much older than ours, attributed to Joseph Mainzer (Paris, Théâtre de la Renaissance, 10 October 1839).



THE 'FIRST' JACQUERIE OF JOSEPH MAINZER

This composer and writer on music active in the first half of the nineteenth century (1807-1851) devoted himself to the teaching and theorisation of choral singing, in accordance with the pedagogical function he assigned to this form of popular music-making. It was precisely his commitment to workers' education that led him to compose *La Jacquerie* on a text by Ferdinand Langlé and Alboize. The plot, as in the work by Lalo-Coquard, is divided into four acts, but the settings and the names of the characters diverge:

- Act I: a crossroads in the forest with a Madonna to the right
- Act II: another part of the forest, with the houses of Robersart and of a villager facing each other and the mountains in the background; to the right, the abbey church; to the left, the walls of the castle
- Act III: the great hall of the castle; a large balcony in the background, with beside it a prie-dieu and a statue of the Virgin covered by a veil embroidered with silver
- Act IV: an enclosed field; the people and the Jacques surround the fence

This libretto does not feature the filial relationships so important in the text by Blau and Arnaud presented to Lalo and subsequently Coquard. Both operas, however, feel the need of a love story to counterbalance the ferocity of the struggle between Jacques and feudal lords, in order to vary and underline the dramatic situations.



AN UNEXPECTED DISCOVERY

Curious to know more about this opera of Mainzer which has left barely a trace in the history of the genre, we wanted to study how it had been performed on stage. But once we had the document of the Bibliothèque

Historique (shelf mark BHVP, 8-TMS-02593 [RES]) in front of us, we realised that this was not the *mise en scène* for Mainzer's *La Jacquerie* but, in fact, the staging prepared for the work of Lalo and Coquard.

The manuscript volume contains two documents: the *mise en scène* for Benjamin Godard's *La Vivandière* followed by that of Lalo's *La Jacquerie*. The cover is inscribed with the words 'Lyon – Saison 1895-1896', and at the end of the notebook we find the signature of the copyist, 'Maurice Stréliski'. The various components of the staging appear in their entirety: the description of the sets (one for each act), the stage movements and, at the end, a list of the costumes.

After the Principality of Monaco, where it was staged on 9 March 1895 by Raoul Gunsbourg, director of the Monte Carlo Opera, *La Jacquerie* began a veritable tour of France. This took it first of all to the Grand Cercle d'Aix-les-Bains (9 September 1895), where it was performed according to the convention of the 'version de concert' without stage production, and featuring one of the singers and the conductor of the premiere: M^{me} Deschamps-Jéhin in the role of Jeanne and her husband, Léon Jéhin, in the pit. It then went to the Grand-Théâtre in Lyon (27 November 1895), before the production of the end of the year at the Opéra-Comique (Châtelet, 23 December 1895, this time with Marie Delna in the role of Jeanne). It is now difficult to establish whether it was the 'soirée triomphale' (*Le Figaro*, 10 September 1895) at Aix-les-Bains that prompted the newly appointed director of the Grand-Théâtre de Lyon, Albert Vizentini, to select this opera for his impending season. But we do know that, ever since the Monaco premiere, the press had already been spreading the rumour of the Parisian revival at the Opéra-Comique. *La Vivandière* was also revived in the same Lyon season, in early January 1896.

After comparing the handwriting in this notebook with that of others (for different operas) held in the ART's collection of operatic *mises en scène*, we are able to confirm with certainty that the document was written by Maurice Stréliski (1870-1950), who also appended his signature to it. Stréliski had come to the Grand-Théâtre as *régisseur général* (stage manager or production coordinator), the first time he had occupied

a senior position in a prestigious theatre. He had started work under the aegis of his father at the age of sixteen (1886-1892), and had subsequently left Paris for the provinces, always in the field of operatic production. It was his post in Lyon that later enabled him to move on to the Théâtre de Liège (where he was *directeur de la scène* from 1911 onwards), then, in 1923, to the Gaité-Lyrique in Paris.

One of the tasks of the *régisser général* was to procure copies of stagings (deriving essentially from the Parisian theatres) for use in the house for which he worked. He was not supposed to *create* a new *mise en scène* (for which purpose there was now the 'metteur en scène', a figure who became established from the 1890s onwards), but to ensure that the meticulously detailed indications of the *livret de mise en scène* were respected to the letter. For this reason, it seems to us unlikely that the staging recorded in Stréliski's notebook was devised by him for the Grand-Théâtre de Lyon. But one may put forward the hypothesis that he went to the Opéra-Comique in Paris to study the production then in preparation for the December performances, and copied it out for use in Lyon (given the very short time available for rehearsing the music and the staging after the arrival of that house's new director and new *régisser général*). The practice of the Opéra-Comique, the nation's second opera house, was to allow around three months of rehearsal to prepare its new productions, which would mean September-December 1895 in this case and would therefore confirm our hypothesis of an exchange between Paris and Lyon.

But what is the artistic vision conveyed by this precious document? That of a traditional staging according great importance to movements in the crowd scenes, and thus respecting the spirit of Lalo and Coquard's score. The image it represents is that of a Middle Ages which, to borrow the words of Pierre Sérié elsewhere in this book, 'cannot give the spectator the slightest frisson, so dependent is it on stock formulas'. We are far from the powerful passions suggested by Lalo: Robert seems to be neither 'madly in love' nor genuinely 'fanatical' in the cause of the Jacques, and Jeanne, for her part, appears as a hieratic, restrained figure rather than 'fierce and visionary'.

The staging reproduces a rigid, sumptuous world, in which the echoes of Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète* and Lalo's *Le Roi d'Ys* are visually present even in the description of the costumes:

Jeanne: costume in the style of Fidès (in *Le Prophète*)

Blanche: costume in the style of *Le Roi d'Ys* [...]

Ladies [in Act III]: costumes from *Le Roi d'Ys*

If the newspaper and periodical reviews of the premiere at the Opéra-Comique contain no comments concerning, at least, the crowd scenes mentioned above, this may be because the Parisian public had been accustomed to this type of spatial organisation at least since Massenet's *Manon* (1884), directed by Léon Carvalho. In the Monegasque press, by contrast, the utilisation of the chorus and extras on stage had captivated the critics who attended the first performance:

A DIRECTOR-ARTIST

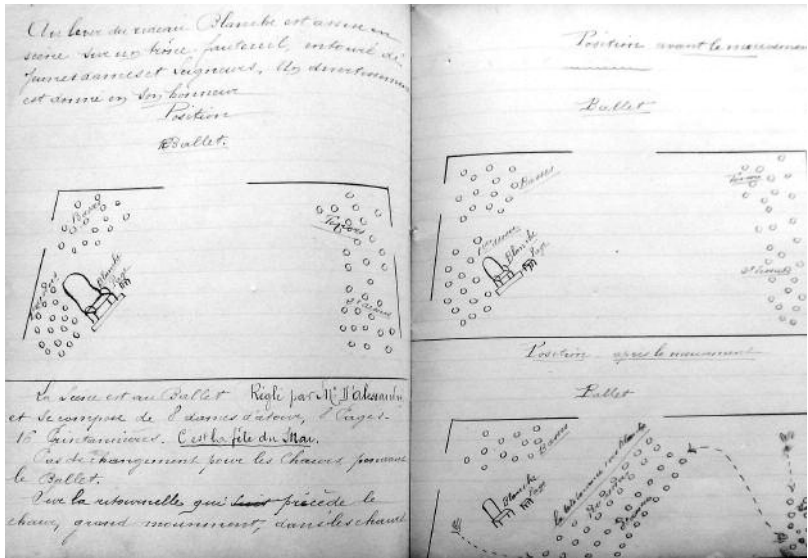
As to the staging, M. Raoul Gunsbourg, director of the Opera of Monte Carlo, has accomplished genuine miracles. With his iron will and great resourcefulness, he deploys a level of activity that has something prodigious about it, taking care of every detail and leaving nothing to chance. On this most cramped of stages, he manages to make relatively large numerous choral masses move with a liveliness and ingenuity that give the illusion of reality.

(Antonin Proust, *Le Matin*, 10 March 1895)

One of the episodes most admired by the audience at each performance was Jeanne's *Stabat Mater*, which closes the second act: it is very short (barely a minute long), but of decisive importance for the meditative atmosphere it creates. The dramatic tension between Robert and Jeanne reaches its peak here, while taking on a 'sacred' tinge at the end of the scene.

The reasons why *La Jacquerie* has never been revived between the Paris run of the 1895-96 season and the present day must be sought in elem-

ents independent of the score. The visual component often takes on a decisive role in opera, sometimes distracting attention from the music itself. In *La Jacquerie*, it is probable that the representation of a Middle Ages that was already familiar and could arouse no genuine *curiosity* on the part of the public did a disservice to a very interesting and often extremely modern score.



Double page from the *livret de mise en scène* of *La Jacquerie*.
Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris.

Un extrait du *livret de mise en scène* de *La Jacquerie*.
Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris.