

Maître Péronilla: opéra-bouffe or opéra-comique?

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Experience – in the absence of the slightest actual evidence – has shown that the title of an operatic work accounts for half of the interest generated on its appearance and three-quarters of its durability or, on the contrary, of the lack of confidence it inspires. All the same, the composer's reputation can still help a score to emerge from the shadows where it has been slumbering in peace. What, then, are we to make of a work by Offenbach whose name springs less readily to mind than, say, *La Jolie Parfumeuse* or *Les Deux Aveugles*, when even those intriguing titles (The pretty perfumer, The two blind men) have been consigned to obscurity? *Maître Péronilla* sank without a trace after fifty performances at the Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens in March-April 1878. Not only has its title not served as a lifeline; it has actually had a deterrent effect, because it does not obey the laws of the genre, which require something attractive, piquant, suggestive, like 'Les Deux Maris de Manoëla' (Manoëla's two husbands), an idea that was momentarily considered before probably being dismissed as too licentious or because it immediately gave away the surprise of the impending imbroglio. All that remained was to name the piece after the leading role, and the choice fell on *Maître Péronilla*.

Yet, however central to the plot is the father's delusion in imposing an inappropriate son-in-law and his subsequent ardent pleading in favour of another, the character is far from occupying the place of the eponym-

ous hero. The role, tailored for Daubray, whose comic speciality was whispering, includes as its only solo number the *Couplets du chocolat*, in which his psychology is suggested with a masterly stroke when he croons ‘Le meilleur chocolat est celui de Péronilla’ on a touchingly anachronistic *romance* tune, right down to the final little sob. We are far here from what the poster promised, because the title of ‘Maître’ announces a stature lacking in this confectionery manufacturer, distinguished by no more than a slight penchant for fraudulent mislabelling of his products. It is only after the fact that the title’s justification will become apparent.¹ The very first title envisaged, ‘Frimouskino’ (or ‘-quino’), was by no means lacking in piquancy with its apparent wordplay (*frimousse* – ‘cute little face’ in French/mosquito/*moschino* – ‘midge’ or ‘gnat’ in Italian) – but how to justify it? All the same, when one thinks about it, he is the character who pulls the strings throughout the piece, who prevents the planned marriage by dictating to the notary a different age from that of the bride, and packs the future husband off to Madrid...



Madrid? Ah! Spain! Very much *à la mode* in the Paris of those years, when groups of costumed guitarists performed in public spaces and private courtyards. One might almost say that France was, musically, a Spanish colony for nigh on a century, celebrating its singers, welcoming its composers, succumbing to the pernicious charm of its dances. From *Le Cid* to *Don Quichotte*, from Adam’s *Toréador* to his counterpart in *Carmen*, from the exotic flavours of Halévy’s *Guitarrero* to those of Ravel’s *L’Heure espagnole* or Massenet’s *Chérubin*, from the tragic madness of the same composer’s *La Navarraise* to Raoul Laparra’s even darker *La Habanera*, Spain occupied a prominent place in the French operatic repertory. For

¹ ‘Maître’ in French, in addition to its general historical usage as the equivalent of English ‘Master’, is the title accorded to qualified lawyers, and so its true meaning is revealed only in the third act. (Translator’s note)

librettists, it was the *locus classicus* of fatal passions, mystery, duels, unparalleled adventures, while – over and above a concern for local colour – the ‘*manière espagnole*’, by lending itself to all manner of rhythmic, timbral and melodic inventions, exerted a rejuvenating influence on the imagination of operatic composers. Exhilarating, naturally vigorous, sparkling and highly flavoured, this somewhat stereotyped Spain was, of course, a fantasy. It was in fact Auber who, in *Le Domino noir* (1837), created what could be called the ‘genuine Parisian Spanish style’ underpinned by its characteristic rhythms. After him, almost all French composers, inspired by collections of Spanish tunes or motifs heard here and there, amply satisfied the public’s tastes, sometimes innovating, sometimes merely following fashion.

As in *Les Brigands* and *La Périchole*, Offenbach’s alert pen drew on the Spanish style to give *Maître Péronilla* just the right amount of local colour. Once a quick march has roused the audience’s attention, guitar-like pizzicato arpeggios, supported by a castanet ostinato, launch the Overture’s second motif, whose syncopated rhythm and altered minor mode are enough to confirm that we have crossed the Pyrenees. But scarcely has it arrived in sunny Spain than Offenbach’s itinerant pen turns back north: replacing the click of castanets, the silvery timbre of a triangle (doubled *pianissimo* on the bass drum) illuminates the outline of a Viennese waltz progressing through chromatic shifts.

Once these anticipations of Act Two have delimited the stylistic boundaries of a score that also borrows from old-fashioned French *opéra-comique*, the curtain rises. The chorus describes what we hear (‘Roulez, sonnez et faites rage, / Castagnettes et tambourins’), confirming that we are indeed in Spain, but on such a flatly regular rhythm that it reveals the enthusiasm is merely polite convention. This explains why the chorus then performs a speedy volte-face to join in Frimouskino’s melancholic *Sérénade*, whose minor mode and Neapolitan-sixth harmonies hark back to the Hispanism of the Overture’s second motif.

There is no concern for local colour in what follows, especially not where one would most expect it, in the *Ballade de la belle Espagnole*, where

the archaic style of the complaint combines with the deliberate silliness of the words ('Il était un joli jeune homme'), the better to frame the frenzy of the central section ('pincé, bâtonné, échiné, trépané, assassiné, empoisonné'), an obvious nod to Osmin's litany of torments in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. In the sentimentality of the conclusion ('Mais sans qu'elle pût s'en défendre'), Léona shows herself to be a true sister of Péronilla's. In the slapdash word-setting of this number (quite deliberate, since it would be so easy to correct), Offenbach might be said to affix his signature at the bottom of the painting, before underlining it even more clearly in the duet of the Vélasquez brothers, which has no other function than to tell us who the composer is: 'signez' to rhyme with 'Vélasquez' and 'florès', 'on vous le di... (bis) on vous le dira', and so on. No more Spanish is the *Romance d'Alvarès*, which (like the *Couplets du chocolat* and the *Chœur des invités*) owes a much more considerable debt to the Weber of *Euryanthe*. This is, of course, to preserve the piquancy of the *Couplets des petits valets* and the iridescence of the *Malagueña* (the biggest hit of the show, for no other reason than the hypnotic effect of the constant shift between F major and D minor). It is doubtless an irrelevant set piece, like the Vélasquez duet, Frimouskino's *Rondeau* and the *Chanson militaire*, but all of them are ingenious inventions and merit their place alongside those numbers that move the plot forward. If we add Manoëla's two *ariettes* about mature husbands and the disadvantages of marriage, of which a witty soprano can make delectable capital, the resulting whole would seem to earn *Maître Péronilla* a place among its composer's elect.



But... there's no betrayal like a family betrayal, and it was Offenbach's grandson, Jacques Brindejont, who wrote the assessment doubtless least likely to prompt a revival of *Maître Péronilla*: 'We understand that M. X. [the librettist] was none other than the composer himself. But we will not enlarge on this piece.' The magisterial annotated list of works in the

lengthy chapter devoted to operetta in *Cinquante ans de musique française de 1874 à 1925* (Paris: Librairie de France, 1928), which makes it so invaluable, is even-handed enough with respect to Lecocq, Chabrier, Hervé, Audran and Messenger to justify reservations about their great rival. But while the precision of the comments on a deluge of works (most of which sank into oblivion after their premiere) suggests they stem from an eyewitness, the date of birth (1883) of this skilful writer, a member of the Académie Française, clearly indicates that it is in fact a compilation of reviews limited to the publications to which he had access. In the case of *Maître Péronilla*, the source is clear – *Les Annales du Théâtre et de la Musique*, edited by Édouard Noël and Edmond Stoullig, whose comments were written up not at the time of the premiere but at the end of the year in question, on the basis of memory... or information received:

Maître Péronilla was definitely lacking in fantasy and verve. The same situation, which was still not very comical, was prolonged over two acts. The roles were barely sketched in. Just a single number made its mark: the *Malagueña*, a melancholic drinking song, well sung in the second act by Mme Peschard. One might prefer to this somewhat banal refrain the serenade that Mme Paola Marié sang when the curtain rose. The rest does not deserve the honour of being recalled.

It cannot be said that the press was sparing in its criticism: ‘The music is by M. Offenbach, that says it all’, Clément Caraguel summed up in the *Journal des débats*. He continued:

A great deal of facility, of skill, of stage movement; but also of banality and outdated formulas. Novelty was neither sought nor found. Nevertheless, there are several numbers that were rightly applauded, including the *Malagueña*, marvellously sung by Mme Peschard.’

In *Le Figaro*, Benoît Jouvin (‘Bénédict’) anticipated the critics by invoking the situation of the operetta composer:

If his musical wings that bear a felicitous comic action are too long and rise too high, the poor composer will choose to pre-empt the humiliation that would force him to clip them. His inspiration is a *tethered balloon* the cable of which is in the public's hands, so that for him the Muse, attentive to the slightest jolts, must not forget herself in space, *but look downwards*.

It is a curious remark; but, as a mere music-lover rather than a professional musician, Jouvin perhaps did not discern the perceptible development of Offenbach, who, forsaking the casual approach that had provoked his great successes, now had to reckon with the triumphs of Lecocq, which were founded on a quality of inspiration and writing (harmony, modulations, orchestration) closer to *opéra-comique* than to *opéra-bouffe*. A change that the poet Jules Ruelle, no doubt more knowledgeable, underlined in *L'Art musical*:

The contours of the musical phrase are very elegant in *Péronilla*; the orchestration has developed and is no longer in the least comparable with the ferocious effects of the past.

For the orchestra is no longer content to provide a rapid introduction, to support (or double) the voice discreetly, and to conclude brilliantly enough to whip up applause. It is active (observe the imperious bass line in Frimouskino's *Rondeau*); suggestive without undue heaviness when military rumblings fleetingly emerge to underline Ripardos's aspirations ('Que ne suis-je colonel!'); mischievous in the elegantly antiquated pastel portrait of Péronilla traced by the countermelodies, dotted rhythms and staccato notes in the *Couplets du chocolat*; soberly expressive, too, when, with a simple chromatically altered turn on violas and cellos, it effortlessly gives Alvarès's *Romance* a touching quality right from the first words: 'Quand j'ai dû, la mort dans l'âme'. The refrain of Frimouskino's *Romance* in Act Three ('Fais comme moi, cousin, je me confie'), where the vocal line, doubled by clarinet and flute in octaves, displays a certain placidity above the unsettling tremolos of the violas and violins (themselves underpinned

by lively arpeggios on pizzicato cellos that inject ambiguity), recalls the climax of the great duet from *Les Huguenots* ('Tu l'as dit'). A significant evolution, therefore (discussed here only in terms of the instrumentation, which is easier to perceive), but one that prompted no more than polite enthusiasm from the mischievous pen of Parisine, in *La Soirée parisienne*:

I am now going to tell you about the new *opéra-comique* at the Théâtre des Bouffes. Take due note that I absolutely refrain from printing the words *opéra-bouffe*. I accidentally uttered them backstage last night, and was almost torn to pieces. *Opéra-comique*, at the behest of the composers fashionable in our genre theatres, has killed off *opéra-bouffe*, so long live *opéra-comique*!

Given that *Maître Péronilla* was subtitled on the poster (and on the score) 'Opéra-bouffe en 3 actes', the regret expressed here with irony is that, even at the Bouffes-Parisiens, *opéra-comique* had tacitly usurped the place of *opéra-bouffe*. Yet the subject contained the substance of a true *opéra-bouffe*, as Lavoix fils observed in the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*: '[T]he device of the two husbands, presented in this way, is genuinely original; moreover, the author knows his theatre, and, thanks to some amusing details, the piece works right to the end without too many longueurs.' That last phrase puts its finger on the problem, since 'longueurs' were incompatible with the very essence of *opéra-bouffe*. For François Oswald (*Le Gaulois*), they are situated in the last act, set in one of

those whimsical courts that all too often appear in the third act of *opéras-bouffes*. But the author, visibly discomfited, as if he had before him a model from which he was seeking to draw inspiration while trying not to copy it, could not give his piece the developments it would have entailed, and stopped short at the point when the plot should become more complex and generate the comic effects and amusing situations called for by its exposition.

The work was seen, then, as an *opéra-bouffe* that had lost its soul to the more refined style of *opéra-comique*, at a time when, at the Théâtre de la

Renaissance, *Le Petit Duc*, clearly designated as an 'opéra-comique en trois actes', kept the *bouffe* spirit going. It is true that the libretto of Charles Lecocq's new work was signed by the much more expert pens of Meilhac and Halévy – a collaboration that earned the co-authors of *La Belle Hélène*, *Barbe-Bleue*, *La Vie parisienne*, *La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein*, *La Périochole* and *Les Brigands* a bitter letter from Offenbach stigmatising their decision to work with 'Le Meyerbeer de la Renaissance'. And, without reading into this any more than a coincidence, is it not curious that Frimouskino's *Rondeau* ('Je pars, je vais, je vole'), as superfluous to the action as it is finely polished, seems to echo the *Rondeau de la paysanne* from *Le Petit Duc*, premiered seven weeks earlier? Though more crudely written, the latter number is much funnier with its pauses and hesitations, whereas Offenbach's *rondeau* races on without leaving the performer the opportunity to highlight the details of Frimouskino's adventures, those details that add spice to its counterpart in *Le Petit Duc*. However, it is worth pondering a remark by François Oswald in *Le Gaulois*: 'Let us also mention a *rondeau-galop* performed with excessive finesse of nuances by Mlle Marié.' 'Excessive' suggests that Paola Marié may have wanted to compete with Jeanne Granier (like Offenbach with Lecocq?). In any case, the situation of a female singer in the role of a teenage boy disguised as a peasant girl who, pursued by a regiment, breaks her eggs in order to save her virtue, is infinitely more *bouffe* than that of Frimouskino. Let us go further, without in anyway detracting from the value of Offenbach's *rondeau*: is not this young boy who witnesses lovemaking, a voyeur in spite of himself, a stock character of historical *grand opéra*, a cousin of Urbain in *Les Huguenots*?



The management of the Bouffes-Parisiens had conceived things on a large scale. 'For the sixty-five characters who people the small stage, where we see in succession the gardens of Péronilla's château near Madrid, the interior of the Marquis's château and then a courtroom of the Hall of Justice, Grévin and Robida have designed one hundred and thirty costumes

which, for the most part, are charming', announced *Le Figaro* on 6 March. Parisine confirmed the fact in delightful detail:

Grévin has plunged headlong into a fantasy Spain that has inspired him to produce truly original costumes: those of MM. Daubray and Jolly are very amusing. The liveried valets, soldiers, peasants and judges contribute to an incredible variety of dazzling, even crude colours, vividly contrasting with each other in a riot of pompoms, fringes and frills. One notices that Grévin has dressed Mmes Peschard and Paola Marié this time: he has succeeded in slimming them down for these breeches roles. The costume for Alvarès-Peschard is at once very rich and very distinguished: black silk vest, with red silk garters, black velvet jerkin embroidered with steel beads, red cloak with steel tassel, black velvet cap. All this with a little red satin here and there, discreetly, just to set off the black background. Mlle Paola-Marié has tight black velvet breeches with grey stockings and woollen coat in the same shade, red belt and black three-cornered hat of the kind worn by Spanish students, decorated with a bone spoon and ribbons in the national colours. Hence, when the charming singer made her entrance, some members of the audience shouted out: 'La Estudiantina!'

(*La Soirée parisienne*)

So as not to invite invidious comparison with the names of Meilhac and Halévy, the librettist's name was not mentioned, but it was known, supposed, murmured that it was Offenbach himself. Jean-Claude Yon tells us that it was written in the period 1866-70 and remained in the composer's bottom drawer until such time as a collaborator took an interest in it. Offenbach is thought to have gone back to it for want of anything better, asking Charles Nutter and Paul Ferrier to versify the sung texts, which in fact turned out to be very well crafted and expressive. The *Couplets du chocolat* and Alvarès's Act Two *Romance* demonstrate this particularly clearly, but so too do Frimouskino's *Rondeau* and *Romance*. The libretto as a whole is therefore better than has generally been claimed, and there is nothing to stop performers from pruning dead branches or graft-

ing fresh shoots onto them – such as the Hugolian 'Bon appétit, messieurs!' uttered by the Marquis in Act Two in the partial recording made by the ORTF in 1970.

The libretto's chief fault is its over-evident concern to be a 'well-made play', following the model of Eugène Scribe, in which everything is explained a posteriori, sometimes in roundabout fashion. Hence the first dialogue between Péronilla and Léona insists on the fact that he is a chocolate maker only to make him admit that he was initially a lawyer! In what follows, the exclamations 'Tonnerre de cacao' or 'Chocolatier!' used as an insult will always be intended to conceal the lawyer who eventually emerges. Nevertheless, in the end there is nothing to explain why Péronilla let himself be persuaded by his sister into choosing a husband so obviously unsuited to his daughter. The fact that Frimouskino just happens to be the notary's clerk and that the Marquis is Sergeant Ripardos's colonel makes certain situations more plausible. Finally, if Alvarès is a singing master, is it not, logically, to enable him to sing the *Malagueña*? *Opéra-bouffe*, unlike *opéra-comique*, would dispense with all these precautions, and a hint of craziness in the dialogues would better throw all the qualities of a flawless score into relief.

MAITRE PERONILLA			
OPÉRA-BOUFFE EN 5 ACTES			
Représenté sur le Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens, le 15 Mars, 1878.			
Personnages.	Artistes.	Personnages.	Artistes.
Alvarès	N ^{os} PENCHARD.	Péronilla	MM. DAUBRAY.
Frimouskino	— PAOLA MARÉ.	Guardona	— JULY.
Léona	— GIRARD.	Ripardos	— THOY.
Manoëla	— HUMBERTA.	Bridoison, Le Notaire.	SCHIFFON, PESCHIEUX.
Antouio	— FANNY ROBERT.	Les 2 Vélasquez ..	— MAXNÈRE, DEBOIS.
Paquita	— DESCOT.	2 Juges	— JANNIN, CHAMBERY.
Felipe	— BLOT.	Le Marquis	— SASSARD.
Juanito	— BLANCHE.	Don Fabrice	— MONTAUBIY.

The cast of the first performance.
Private collection.

La distribution de la création.
Collection particulière.