

Maître Péronilla : an introduction

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Maître Péronilla is a work of Jacques Offenbach's maturity, premiered on 13 March 1878 in a particularly awkward context for him. Accustomed as he was to having hits running simultaneously in several Parisian theatres, he had been forced that year to make the best of a bad job: *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* had been abandoned by the management of the Théâtre-Lyrique, which was forced to close, while *Madame Favart* was postponed at the Théâtre des Folies-Dramatiques because of the unexpected success of Planquette's *Les Cloches de Corneville*. There was also a project for a *féerie* at the Théâtre de La Gaîté, but this got no further than the discussion stage, following the triumph of Tréfeu's *Le Chat botté*. All the composer's hopes of glory for this 1878 season therefore rested on *Maître Péronilla*, a large-scale operetta set in Spain.

Spanishry had always brought Offenbach luck, from *Pépito* to *Les Brigands*, as an enthusiastic journalist reminds us: 'There is more Spain in Offenbach's brain than in Spain itself.' And it is true that this work too abounds in snappily rhythmic numbers with glittering orchestration, particularly the grand finale on the *Malagueña*, which the whole audience hummed as it left the theatre and which Offenbach subsequently reused to expand the role of Fiorella in a revival of *Les Brigands*. As usual, Offenbach mixes styles in order to produce a witty clash between types of music at the opposite pole from each other. Such is the case with the big finale of Act Two in the form of a slow waltz, of which the journalist Moreno observed that it 'seems to have been cut from the cloth of the Viennese composers. Here we have the same insinuating music, at once full of vague poetry yet

rigidly rhythmical'. The composer, then at his peak, also brings in all the formulas that had previously proved their worth: Frimouskino's frenzied *Rondeau* recalls the Brazilian's song from *La Vie parisienne* in its fast-patter delivery, Léona's solo could have been sung by the Grand Duchess of Gérolstein, Alvarès's *Romance* looks back to the pensive numbers of Princess Elsbeth (*Fantasio*) and Rosée-du-Soir (*Le Roi Carotte*), and so forth.

The refinement of the score, which forsakes the zany humour of the 1860s and is tinged with the *demi-caractère* style of *opéra-comique*, was generally applauded: 'Offenbach has resolutely embarked on a new path in operetta that is amiable rather than crazy, subtle rather than clownish', wrote Lavoix in the *Revue et Gazette musicale*. However, he pointed out that 'one can still sense, more or less anywhere, the light hand, the witty touch and the stagecraft of the beguiling musician'. Even more admirably, *L'Art musical* saw in the new work 'one of the composer's best scores', stressing that 'the orchestration has developed and is no longer in the least comparable with the ferocious effects of the past'.

Maître Péronilla is also an exceptional work in terms of the number of soloists it requires: nearly twenty characters exchange, with vivacity and irony, the contrasting viewpoints of three generations of individuals on a forced marriage. The whole gamut of vocal types is present, from the coloratura soprano to the 'trouser role' mezzo-soprano, the 'duenna', the character tenor and the *baryton Martin*. The furious pace of the work is also founded in part on spoken texts with an abundance of witticisms and puns. It is worth underlining that Offenbach wrote his own libretto here, thus giving the work a most unusual status in his output.

Having disappeared from the repertory in 1879, *Maître Péronilla* was apparently revived just once in the twentieth century, and then only partially, in a broadcast recording for French Radio (the ORTF). It unquestionably deserved to make a comeback in an easily accessible form, and the bicentenary of Offenbach's birth in 2019 provided the ideal opportunity to accomplish this.





Title page of the vocal score.
Private collection.

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