

La Périchole, step by step

Gérard Condé

There is the colourfast Offenbach, hard-wearing, crease-resistant though well-worn – the Offenbach of *Orphée aux Enfers*, *La Belle Hélène*, *La Vie parisienne*; the Offenbach with a single refrain that ensures the work's glory, as in *Les Brigands*, with its Carabinieri who 'always get there too late' and the sound of their boots that has become proverbial, or *La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein* with its heroine who 'loves military men' and celebrates 'her father's sword'; the Offenbach of countless skits in one act (*Monsieur Choufleuri*; *Ba-ta-clan*; *Les Deux Aveugles*); the tender Offenbach of *La Chanson de Fortunio*, *Vert-Vert*, *Fantasio*; the Offenbach of the collector of curios – *Barkouf*, *Robinson Crusoé*, *Le Pont des soupirs*; the Offenbach of the prissily precious who will tolerate only *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*. And then there is *La Périchole*, which enjoys special favour with those who, without being able to explain why, place it at the peak of his output.

The appeal of this luminous, tender and slightly bitter work – whose sole qualification as an *opéra-bouffe* is the generic designation printed in the scores – begins, like most love affairs, with a misunderstanding: the promising oddness of its title. If it is the name of the heroine, an unconscious reference to Italian (*pericoloso/a*: dangerous) might seem to announce a Carmen-like creature – an irrelevant reference, since the action takes place in Peru, a Spanish colony. Nevertheless, brought to the operatic stage by the same librettists, Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, who in both cases were borrowing from Mérimée, the Gypsy

and the Peruvian, nurtured on the same milk, should at least show a family resemblance. Shouldn't they?



PERRA COLLA, PERRI COLLI

Sisters, perhaps, with a dark complexion, a devastating glance and a mane of black hair, but that is all. An essential difference: one is the embodiment of a fantasy, that of the *femme fatale* equally disastrous for herself and for those who cross her path, while the other is a historical character. A Creole from a good family (her father was a poet and musician, her mother descended from two viceroys), Micaela Villegas (1748-1819) initially attracted attention for her beauty. Her intelligence, character and theatrical gifts earned her success as an actress and the distinction of becoming, at the age of nineteen, the mistress of the Viceroy of Peru, without leaving the stage. It is he who is said to have nicknamed her, during a short-lived quarrel, 'perra colla' (mongrel bitch), which he pronounced with a Spanish accent as 'perri colli'.

After the departure of her protector in 1786, the nickname still hung around her neck, as pejorative as it was unfair, given her beneficial influence on behalf of her fellow citizens and the life she led afterwards. Only nine years after her death, Mérimée derived a play from a picturesque episode during her reign, entitled *Le Carrosse du Saint-Sacrement*, which was published in 1828 and first performed in 1850.



IF THE GRAIN DOES NOT DIE...

Curiously, Offenbach's librettists turned this singular figure into a tenacious little woman of the people, enamoured of a cretin. The story speaks for itself: Piquillo and his companion, La Périchole, street singers

in Lima, live on love and fresh air; the Viceroy, in search of an affair and finding the beautiful woman famished, invites her to dinner. She consents, justifying her actions with a note whose tenderness and sincerity escape its recipient. Ready to commit suicide, the half-drunk Piquillo agrees to marry a stranger at the palace. When he realises that, in accordance with court protocol, he has been made to marry the Viceroy's mistress who is in fact none other than La Périchole, he insults her and is sent to rot in prison. His lover joins her there and explains the situation; they arrange to escape. But the gaoler she seeks to corrupt interferes: it is the Viceroy in disguise, who has them placed in irons. An old prisoner (who plays the bassoon) frees them. In the main square, they sing the *Complainte des amoureux*. The Viceroy, flattered and disarmed at observing the incurable love of a clever woman for a fool, lets them go with his blessing and a little gold.

The Old Prisoner, accompanied by an instrument by turns melancholic and comical, is no less pseudo-historical a character than the others: his fate is inspired by that of the Marquis François de Bassompierre (1579-1646), Marshal of France, who was imprisoned in the Bastille for twelve years. This addition for the new version in three acts has the merit – quite aside from its piquant incongruity – of permitting plot twists that reveal the Viceroy's perversity: his disguise as an obliging gaoler, his subsequent joy at chaining the lovers together and, still more, his sham generosity.



NOTHING AT ALL

This action is so disdainful of the ordinary ingredients of opera – the very direct allusion to the plot of Donizetti's *La Favorite* (and the literal quotation 'Épouser la maîtresse, la maîtresse du roi') underlines its distance from tradition – and the psychology of the characters seems so summary that one can understand the singer who, rehearsing the Letter Song

(‘Ô mon cher amant, je te jure, / Que je t’aime de tout mon cœur’), asked her colleagues if *La Périchole* was really sincere. There would be more scope for acting, indeed, if she were only half so... like Manon Lescaut in the eponymous novel by the Abbé Prévost, whose note to her lover Meilhac paraphrased.

La Périchole is not Manon, any more than poor Piquillo is Des Grieux; but perhaps that is precisely what appealed to Offenbach: to interest the public in the improbable destiny of the kind of characters we may find anywhere, even when we look in our own mirror. One thinks of Flaubert’s letter to Louise Colet (16 January 1852):

What seems a fine thing to me, what I would like to do, is a book about nothing, a book with no external attachment, which would stand on its own through the internal strength of its style, a book that would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible, if that were possible. The finest works are those where there is the least material.

In an attempt to approach this ideal, Flaubert wrote *Madame Bovary*, and one would like to believe that *La Périchole* corresponds to a similar aspiration: an underlying plot solid enough to carry music more substantial than itself, yet light enough to let it take flight.

Since Offenbach knew better than anyone else that one cannot make a good opera (be it *bouffe*, *comique* or *lyrique*) from a libretto devoid of qualities, it must be admitted that while taking care not to inflate the protagonists’ stature, the authors enlarged the scope of the work and made it easier for the audience to identify with this couple just flawed enough to ring true. But if the poor fool’s only motivation is ordinary male jealousy, his partner may well embody (like, though differently from, Emma Bovary) the irreducible eternal feminine evoked or invoked at every twist of the libretto and in every possible register.



CHERCHEZ LA FEMME

Hence the Viceroy's only distraction from the burdens of his office is to go and visit 'les petites femmes' (that is, ladies of easy virtue). La Périchole, in her letter, puts the blame on physiology: 'Je suis faible, car je suis femme.' Piquillo, so drunk that he cannot even recognise the woman he is about to marry, and playing on the double meaning of the word 'femme' (woman and wife), warns her, 'En bon époux, / Que j'aime fort une autre femme'. A double meaning that delights the ladies of the court: 'Eh! bonjour, monsieur le mari! Qu'avez-vous fait de votre femme?' Piquillo, who has been promised that after the wedding he can 'dump his wife' and find 'a certain woman I love, who has abandoned me and whom I love a hundred times more since she has...', is not afraid to proclaim that women are the only thing that is worthwhile: 'Les femmes, il n'y a que ça'. The reward of artists, the obsession of men: 'Les femmes, les femmes'. Whereupon the courtiers, driven to lassitude or lewd remarks by 'seeing a husband introduce his wife at court', hear the scathing answer of the interested party: 'My God! How stupid men are!' All that remains for Piquillo is to ram home the message of common-or-garden misogyny – 'The most seductive woman... / And the most false at the same time!' – and to conclude, as he is being dragged to the dungeon reserved for recalcitrant husbands: 'His love will make you more beautiful, / More beautiful and more infamous than ever.' Lying alone on the damp straw, Piquillo wonders, like the husband he has nevertheless become: 'My wife, my wife, what can she be doing at the moment?'

In the two-act version, the *Couplets de l'aveu* placed the refrain about women in La Périchole's mouth, giving it a completely different meaning:

Quand au lieu de s'conduir' soi-même,
On se laisse conduire par les femmes,
Les femmes il n'y a qu'ça!

(When instead of following one's own lead, / One lets oneself be led by
women, / Women are all that count).

The lesson has disappeared from the three-act version, but if women are no longer specifically mentioned in La Périchole's replacement number, it is because it is obviously a lesson administered in feminine fashion, tender and caustic:

Tu n'es pas beau, tu n'es pas riche,
Tu manques tout à fait d'esprit [...]
De ce qu'on doit avoir pour plaire
Tu n'as presque rien, et pourtant...
Je t'adore, brigand, j'ai honte à l'avouer...

And, indeed, Piquillo fails to understand that the Viceroy cannot refuse his mistress anything because she has refused the Viceroy everything.

The ellipsis of the Old Prisoner (who only frees La Périchole after having kissed her 'furiously half a dozen times'), 'Forgive me, it's been twelve years...', speaks more eloquently of the nature of what he has been missing than if he had actually pronounced the expected words. It falls to the Viceroy, tied up by the lovers, to utter them in an episode omitted here: 'Ah! les femmes! les femmes!' and to hear the moral of the tale from the very mouth of his ex-mistress:

Qu'est-ce qui, dans un tas de circonstances,
Fait aux rois comme aux vice-rois
Commettre une foule d'imprudences
Dont, plus tard, ils se mord'nt les doigts?...
Les femmes, il n'y a que ça!
(What is it that, in all sorts of circumstances, / Makes kings and viceroys /
Commit a host of imprudences / Which, later, they will regret? / Women,
they're all that count!)



THE RULE OF THREE

Three acts, three cousins, three protagonists (the husband, the wife and the lover), three servants of the Crown (the Governor of Lima, the Chamberlain, the First Gentleman of the Chamber): illusion or reality, (almost) everything comes in threes in this *Périchole*, starting with the three syllables of its title.

A Masonic opera? We won't venture down that road. But let us continue this investigation, since the figure does seem to open doors to analysis. For example, there are three recurring motifs:

- The refrain of the street song ('Il grandira') which returns, touchingly, to the lips of the spouses as they are separated and led, dead drunk, to their respective apartments, and which will be repeated by the tutti to conclude the work as brilliantly as the quotation of it in the overture was discreet: a fine symbol of growth.

- The 'Letter Song' (whose melody is deployed in the middle of the overture): sung by La Périchole ('Ô mon cher amour'); then whispered by the orchestra as a melodrama while Piquillo reads the message aloud, interpreting it against the sense of the music; and, finally, cynically taken up by La Périchole to attract the Viceroy in the last tableau. Here too the recurrence is charged with a specific, even contradictory meaning.

- Piquillo's exclamation 'Les femmes, les femmes!', paradoxically enthusiastic, since he believes himself abandoned, and which La Périchole will use in the last act to teach the Viceroy a lesson. This time, Offenbach did not quote it in the overture in order to keep it as scathing as possible.

Another triad: the street songs. It is impossible to overemphasise the care the composer took to diversify them.

- The first, *L'Espagnol et la Jeune Indienne (Complainte)*, with its dotted rhythms and its *paso doble* cut, celebrates the virtues of paternalistic, militaristic colonialism, though with critical exaggeration.

- The second, *Le Muletier et la Jeune Personne* (*Séguedille*), is much livelier: here we are dealing not with interbreeding by mutual consent but with a (metaphorical) ride on a mule...

- The *Complainte des amoureux* in the final tableau is the only one of the three street songs that obeys the laws of the genre: the minor mode, the swaying 6/8 time, the elisions ('Écoutez, peup' d'Amérique'). It is on this number and its pathetic alterations that the happy outcome will depend. Of the three, it is the least striking, and we have gained the impression that it irritates the Limeños (and, worse still, the audience!) in the first act. What makes the failure of the other songs with the onstage audience interesting is that they are genuinely catchy, especially the second one, which drives the onlookers to go off to watch the performing dogs. All of this is carefully calculated, and of course Offenbach will conclude with the most memorable version of 'Il grandira'.

In addition to the 'Letter' arioso, more elegant than touching – one notices the absence of expressive appoggiaturas and sensual ornaments, as if the music were reluctant to rise to the pitch of exaltation dictated by the words ('Ô mon cher amant, je te jure / Que je t'aime de tout mon cœur') – La Périchole sings three highly contrasted arias.

- The most adventurous is undoubtedly the *Griserie-Ariette* ('Ah! quel dîner je viens de faire'). Drunkenness on stage is often laboured, and a tipsy woman runs the risk of being merely vulgar. On a structure as simple as it is solid, Offenbach set the words in such a way that the performers can tauten or expand the discourse without breaking the ingenuous grace of its melodic thread: this is a waltz, in which tradition authorises musicians to lengthen this or that beat.

- The *Couplets* 'Mon Dieu! que les hommes sont bêtes!' implicitly answer 'Les femmes, les femmes', except that both words and music here offer a lesson in distinction and *savoir-vivre*. The oboe and flute solos that echo the voice reflect both the approval of the audience and the calm fury of Piquillo, who remains tense here, the better to pounce later on. The ornamental vocalise on the final 'bêtes' is full of the tenderness we found

lacking in the Letter, with a touch of mocking connivance that the interested party does not grasp.

- He is irresistibly stupid, and this is what La Périhole's last number will detail with cruelly surgical precision. Though less laconic than the traditional insult to women 'Just shut up and look pretty', it comes to much the same thing. Talent, it is said, can excuse everything? Exactly, and this is the pivotal point of the melody: 'Le talent, c'est une autre affaire: / Tu n'en as guère, de talent.'

Nevertheless, Piquillo too has three well-characterised solo numbers.

- Coming after La Périhole's *Griserie-Ariette*, her lover's confession of drunkenness (also a waltz: 'Pour avoir bien bu') is less elaborate: her intoxication was sensual, his is merely that of a mechanism that has gone wrong, with a ringing in his head.

- The *Rondo de bravoure*, whose élan would not be out of place in a serious opera by Donizetti or Verdi, presupposes a solid voice, for though it only rises to a high G, it requires sonorous low Ds. Has the little street singer's voice broken? It seems more likely that he is overplaying his role: getting on his high horse, he gives way to excess, he hams it up.

- The third solo, 'On me proposait d'être infâme', is the one that hits the mark; it is touching in its suppressed despair. With its obsessive refrain ('Ma femme, ma femme'), this number is formally one of the most original in the score; equally original is the choice of the major mode and the modulation (from G to B major) on 'qui dort oublie'.

The role of the Viceroy, intended for an actor rather than a singer, favours syllabic word-setting. Doubled by the violins, he can whisper rather than sing his *Couplets de l'incognito* ('Sans en souffler mot à personne'), thus immediately giving the Viceroy, whose words declare him to be a libertine, the air of a dissembler. He subsequently confirms this by singing in a new disguise: 'Je suis le joli géôlier'. That makes only two numbers; the third ('Si plus tard tu deviens raisonnable'), lurking as an aside in the Prison Trio (cut in this version), lasts just sixteen bars, yet they express

the greatest passion in the entire work. Assigned to the character least susceptible to such impulses, they make a man out of a puppet and this, of course, is what will precipitate his fall, as he accepts La Périchole's alluring appeal 'Ô mon cher amour' at its face value.

Finally, three choruses deserve mention.

- The first, which evokes the Viceroy's name day, fulfils its jubilatory function as curtain-raiser: we will not find out anything more about this festival, but its *paso doble* rhythm will at least have got the spectators into the swing of things while informing them that people in Lima are merry, or at least are paid to be so... under supervision, so much so that this chorus seems to be sung standing to attention.

- In the second act, the chorus of female courtiers ('Eh! bonjour, monsieur le mari') affects the polished style of the minuet, so as to make the irony concealed under the lace the more biting.

- The *Chœur des patrouilles* ('En avant soldats'), in the third act, would not call for any special comment were it not for the fact that it unexpectedly shifts into triple time ('Les bandits... Sont partis... Tous les trois... À la fois') in three-syllable lines. This may be understood as being the central Trio of the March, but for the spectator the sudden switch is delightful. This number, already recorded several times, has been omitted in the present version which opts for a tighter denouement.



A Monsieur Léon COGNIARD.

1906

LA PÉRICHOLE

Opera-Bouffe

de J. Offenbach

Polka-MAZURKA

pour Piano 4^e

à quatre mains 6^e

A. LINDHEIM

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