

Caroline Branchu at the zenith of her career

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Hector Berlioz, in his correspondence and other writings, expressed his great admiration for the singer Caroline Branchu, who in 1810 took the part of Laméa in *Les Bayadères*. On his arrival as a young man in Paris in 1821 he heard her sing Hypermnestre in Antonio Salieri's *Les Danaïdes* at the Salle Le Peletier (to which the Opéra had recently transferred) and shortly afterwards Clytemnestre in Gluck's *Iphigénie en Aulide*. Caroline Branchu was then in her early forties and nearing the end of her career, gradually giving up the great roles, such as Julia in Spontini's *La Vestale* (1807), that had established her fame. He nevertheless heard her again in the title role of Gluck's *Alceste* (1825 revival, when the pitch was lowered to enable her to sing the part), as Valérie in Berton's *Virginie* (1823), and as Ève in Rodolphe Kreutzer's *La Mort d'Abel* (1823 revival, with Adolphe Nourrit as Abel), before she retired from the Paris Opéra in February 1826, following a triumphant final appearance as Statira, the widow of Alexander the Great, in Gaspare Spontini's *Olympie*, after which she was crowned on stage by the great actor François-Joseph Talma to great acclaim from the audience. For Berlioz, Caroline Branchu was 'tragédie lyrique incarnate', with a style based on the highest French Classical operatic tradition inherited from Gluck. Her splendid voice, with a particularly rich middle register, a wide range of colours and dynamics, including an unforgettable extreme *pianissimo*, as well as her superb dic-

tion, sent him into raptures. She made a deep and lasting impression on him and may well have been in his mind when, in the late 1850s, he came to write the roles of Cassandre and Didon in his epic opera *Les Troyens*. He idolised Madame Branchu, and having found a means of being introduced to her, he cultivated her friendship.



Alexandrine-Timoléone-Caroline Chevalier de Lavit was born on 2 November 1780 in Cap-Français, now Cap-Haïtien in Haiti but then the capital of the French colony of Saint-Domingue. A niece of the last governor of the colony, and the goddaughter of Jean Paul Timoléon de Cossé-Brissac, who led the French vanguard at the Battle of Minden (1759), for which he was made a Marshall of France, she soon showed a remarkable aptitude for music. Through the famous composer and virtuoso violinist Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-George, she was admitted to the Paris Conservatoire in 1796, a year after the official opening of that institution directed by Bernard Sarrette. Studying with Richer, Laÿs and Dugazon, the young woman made rapid progress, and shortly went on to work with the famous baritone and leading voice teacher, Pierre-Jean Garat, who was to advise her throughout her career. At the age of seventeen, she presented the aria 'Divinités du Styx' from Gluck's *Alceste* before a distinguished jury of composers – Luigi Cherubini, Henri-Montan Berton, Étienne-Nicolas Méhul, Charles-Simon Catel and Jean-François Lesueur – many of whom were to play a key role in her subsequent artistic career. Caroline Chevalier was awarded *premiers prix* for singing (1798) and declamation (1799). She then entered the Théâtre Feydeau, but she was not in her element in the *opéra-comique* repertoire and in 1800 she moved to the Paris Opéra – then in the Salle Montansier, on the rue de Richelieu, in a fine new building that had been financed by the actress Mademoiselle Montansier (Marguerite Brunet) and requisitioned by the French State – and there she made her *début* as Antigone in Antonio Sacchini's *Cédipe à Colone*. That same year, she married the dancer Isaac Branchu and took his name.

Her success was immediate and she was soon the envy of the leading sopranos. But there was no escaping from the strict hierarchy of the Opéra; leap-frogging was out of the question and Caroline Branchu, like everyone else, had to work her way up, becoming the principal singer of the company only after the retirement in 1815 of Mademoiselle Maillard, a great dramatic soprano particularly noted for her performances in the works of Gluck. In her twenty-five years with the company, Caroline Branchu sang ninety-one different roles at the Paris Opéra, as well as performing regularly in the provinces. She premièred two major works by Luigi Cherubini: *Anacréon ou l'Amour fugitif* (4 October 1803, the part of Corine) and *Les Abencérages ou l'Étendard de Grenade* (6 April 1813, Noraïme). Other parts she took included Julia in Gaspare Spontini's *La Vestale* (15 December 1807), arguably her most splendid role; Amazily in *Fernand Cortez ou la Conquête du Mexique*, also by Spontini (28 November 1809), and Clorinde in the now almost forgotten *Jérusalem délivrée* by Louis-Luc Loiseau de Persuis (8 September 1812).

In their *Vie et aventures des cantatrices célèbres*, published in 1856, the brothers – journalists, music critics and publishers – Marie and Léon Escudier wrote:

Endowed with a powerful, sonorous voice, Madame Branchu was able to make herself heard above the noise of the orchestra, but her cries of passion came from the soul; her expressive acting and pantomime added much to their effect.

And the music scholar, composer, critic and teacher François-Joseph Fétis noted in his *Biographie universelle des musiciens* (1835-44):

She had every quality [...]: a strong voice, a wide range, fine, broad registration, expressivity and dramatic feeling, intelligent use of facial expressions, and with these soon won public favour. The impression she made as Didon, and in the roles of Alceste, Julia in *La Vestale*, Hypermnestre in *Les Danaïdes* was irresistible.

Napoleon Bonaparte, then First Consul, heard her sing in a performance of *Iphigénie en Tauride* in April 1802. Apparently she was his mistress for a short time. Later he made her the principal singer of the imperial court and she was to hold a similar position during the Restoration, under Louis XVIII and Charles X. Napoleon attended many of her performances, notably with the new empress, Marie Louise, whom he married in the spring of 1810. The première of Charles-Simon Catel's *Les Bayadères*, which took place on 8 August of that year, in the presence of the sovereigns (Marie-Louise was then expecting the future king of Rome), marked an important stage in Caroline Branchu's artistic career. She was then at her zenith, radiant as Laméa, leader of the Bayadères of the great pagoda in Benares:

The role of Laméa is sublime: this bayadère [...] is a great tragic princess and, in her impassioned feelings at least, almost a Cornelian heroine. Nothing is more conducive to the development of Madame Branchu's talents as an actress, and I am not surprised that in this respect the role showed her to great advantage. As a singer too she was well served, with some fine arias, fraught with difficulties that enable her to triumph all the more gloriously.

(*Journal de l'Empire*, 10 August 1810.)

When Caroline Branchu retired in 1826, she was at the peak of her fame. But her life had not been success all the way; there had also been some unhappy events: the sudden death of her son in 1818 at the age of seventeen; her husband's dementia, due to a bullet lodged in his brain (she nursed him for many years until his death in 1823); her daughter Pamela driven by a violent husband to attempt suicide. At the age of almost forty-seven, Caroline Branchu met and fell in love with an impecunious adventurer ten years younger than herself, one Claude Charles Pierquin (he called himself Pierquin du Gembloux), who abandoned her. We know this from her correspondence with her close friend, the poetess Marceline Desbordes-Valmore. She also enjoyed a lifelong friendship with the great

ballet dancer of the Paris Opéra, Emilia Bigottini. They had made their stage débuts almost at the same time and Bigottini, who was noted for her lightness and elegance, had taken part in Catel's *Les Bayadères*, amongst other works, and in 1813 she had triumphed in the title role of the ballet version by Milon and Persuis of *Nina ou la Folle par amour*. Caroline Branchu died in Emilia's arms on 4 October 1850, at her home in Passy. She was buried in the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris.



Bayadères dancing. Engraving (anon.), nineteenth century.
Palazzetto Bru Zane Collection.

Danse des bayadères. Gravure anonyme du XIX^e siècle.
Collection Palazzetto Bru Zane.