

Albert Vizentini, an enlightened theatre director

José Pons

Dimitri was brought to the stage by Albert Vizentini (1841-1906), a man of great versatility, who was totally dedicated to opera. He was a violinist, conductor, composer, librettist and music writer. Later he worked as stage director with Albert Carré at the Opéra-Comique, where together they were responsible for the mise-en-scène of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, when it was premièred in 1902. He had seen and appreciated Victorin Joncières's *Sardanapale* (1867) and *Le Dernier Jour de Pompéi* (1869) at the Théâtre-Lyrique, which had ceased to exist in 1871. In 1875, with a wealth of experience behind him, he launched into the hazardous adventure in the nineteenth century of creating and managing his own theatre, his ultimate aim being to revive and direct the Théâtre-Lyrique. When Jacques Offenbach, who was a friend of his, had become director of the Théâtre de la Gaîté in 1873, Vizentini had gone to work with him as his *chef d'orchestre*. This magnificent theatre, situated on the rue Papin, across from the Square des Arts et Métiers (now the Square Émile Chautemps), had opened its doors in 1862. It had a capacity of 2,000 and, despite some setbacks in the past, appeared to have all the prerequisites for artistic and financial success. Using his own resources, Albert Vizentini took out a lease on the theatre (in the name of 'A. Vizentini et C[ompagn]ie') and on 25 June 1875 obtained the directorship from Offenbach's hands. In October, as agreed, the theatre presented the lavish première production of Offenbach's four-act 'opéra-féerie', *Le Voyage dans la lune*, starring 'the

Patti of operetta', Zulma Bouffar, as Prince Caprice. In February 1876 the cast was joined by Thérésa (stage name of Eugénie Emma Valladon) – a star of the Alcazar and the Eldorado, who brought fame to songs such as *La femme à barbe* and *Les canards tyroliens* – as Queen Popotte. With the aim of boosting ticket receipts, which were down on the previous year, Offenbach, at Vizentini's request, added four new airs for Thérésa, thus guaranteeing the work's success. But Vizentini's vision for the theatre was larger and more ambitious. In September 1875 he requested permission from the Ministry of Public Instruction to form a double troupe at the Théâtre de la Gaîté for opera and *opéra-comique*. Offenbach, learning of this on his return from a trip to America, threatened him with a lawsuit, but in the end took no action. Thus the Théâtre National Lyrique came into being, an event that was widely reported in the press. Vizentini was named director of the theatre for a four-year period beginning on 20 November 1875.



What better than an important new work to gain public, artistic and political favour and ensure the theatre's future? Victorin Joncières was looking for a stage for his new opera, *Dimitri*. The work had been ready for some time. Originally it was to have been premièred at the Théâtre-Lyrique, which had gone up in flames during the Paris Commune in 1871. Vizentini accepted the work, and made every effort for it to be a success. He strengthened the chorus and the orchestra, bought costumes from a Russian opera company that had been unsuccessful in France, and engaged one of the top French conductors, Jules Danbé (who, after *Dimitri*, went on to conduct the first performances of Jules Massenet's *Manon* and *Esclarmonde*, Léo Delibes's *Lakmé* and Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* at the Opéra-Comique). Without more ado, making the most of his address book, he set about auditioning. With the première scheduled for May 1876, time was short. Joncières had made specific requests for the two principal female roles. For Marpha, he wanted a mezzo-soprano or

contralto *de caractère*, capable of singing Fidès in Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète* or Léonore in Donizetti's *La Favorite*. For Marina, he had in mind a light soprano, with great vocal flexibility if not virtuosity, who was capable of singing both Marguerite in Gounod's *Faust* and Ophélie in *Hamlet* by Ambroise Thomas.

The Russian-born mezzo-soprano Speranza Engalli (b. 1848; d. ?) was ultimately chosen for the role of Marpha. This beautiful artist, who had made her début in 1875 as Maddalena in *Rigoletto*, was to have a relatively short but brilliant career, later appearing at the Théâtre-Italien and the Opéra-Comique, as Carmen and as Eros in *Psyché* by Ambroise Thomas (1878), then at the Paris Opéra (Palais Garnier) as Amneris in Verdi's *Aida* (1882). After her success as Marpha, she received high acclaim as the slave Méala in Victor Massé's three-act opera *Paul et Virginie* (libretto by Michel Carré and Jules Barbier, based on the famous work of the same name by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre), when it was premièreed at the Théâtre National Lyrique on 15 November 1876. Speranza Engalli appears among the musical personalities mentioned by Marcel Proust in *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*Sodome et Gomorrhe*).

For the part of Marina, Vizentini chose the coloratura soprano Zina Dalti (dates unknown), who appeared frequently in Spain (Madrid, Seville), Portugal (Lisbon) and Italy (Naples) in her major roles, which included Rosina in Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, the title role in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* and Amina in Bellini's *La Sonnambula*. She had made her stage début at the Opéra-Comique in 1870 and had made a strong impression there in 1874 in Meyerbeer's *Le Pardon de Ploërmel*, then Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*. On 26 December 1882 she was to have the honour of opening the season at La Scala, Milan, as Catherine in Meyerbeer's *L'Étoile du Nord*, with the great French baritone Victor Maurel (as Gritzenko), who later created both of Verdi's late Shakespearian baritone roles, Iago in *Otello* (1887) and the title role in *Falstaff* (1893).

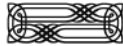
Victorin Joncières expressed no particular wishes for the (demanding) leading male roles. For the part of Dimitri, Vizentini engaged Adolphe Duchesne (b. 1840), who had sung the part of Max in Weber's *Der Frei-*

schütz at the Théâtre-Lyrique in 1868, and then, after recovering from the serious injuries he had received in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, had appeared at the Opéra-Comique from 1872, in Hérold's *Le Pré aux Clercs* and Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* (with Marie Miolan-Carvalho), then as Vincent in Gounod's *Mireille* and in the title role of Grétry's *Richard-Cœur-de-Lion*. On 22 May 1872 he had taken part, as Haroun, in the première of *Djamileh*, an *opéra-comique* in one act by the young Georges Bizet.

The part of Job (bass) was taken by Léon Gresse (1845-1900), who had made his début at the Paris Opéra in 1875 (Gravedigger in *Hamlet* by Ambroise Thomas), going on to lead a very active career there for more than twenty years: Bertram in *Robert le Diable*, Brogni in *La Juive*, Sparafucile in *Rigoletto*, the king in *Hamlet*, the French première of *Sigurd* by Ernest Reyer (1885) – he had taken same role (Hagen) in the world première of this work at the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels the previous year – then Hundung in *La Walkyrie* (1893), Pogner in *Les Maîtres Chanteurs de Nuremberg* (1897). At the Théâtre de la Monnaie, he also created Phanuel in Massenet's *Hérodiade* (1881). The thirty year-old Léon Gresse was thus in the early years of his career when he came to sing Job in *Dimitri*.

The strongest element in the cast was undoubtedly the famous baritone Jean Lassalle (1847-1909), who took the part of the Count of Lusatia. After making his début at the Liège Opéra in 1868, he had built up a repertoire in Belgium and at French provincial opera houses, before being engaged in 1872 by the Paris Opéra, where he took the parts of Nelusko in *L'Africaine* and Nevers in *Les Huguenots* (both by Meyerbeer), the latter with Adelina Patti as Valentine. But since the position of first baritone there was held by Jean-Baptiste Faure, Jean Lassalle sang at other theatres in Paris, including the Théâtre National Lyrique, at the invitation of Albert Vinentini. The première of *Dimitri* put him in the news and undoubtedly left its mark on his career. After succeeding Faure as principal baritone at the Opéra, he took part in many French and world premières: as Scindia in Massenet's *Le Roi de Lahore* (1877), Sévère in Gounod's *Polyeucte* (1878), Ben Saïd in *Le Tribut de Zamora*, also by Gounod (1881),

the title role in *Henry VIII* by Saint-Saëns (1883), Gunther in *Sigurd* by Ernest Reyer, Malatesta in *Françoise de Rimini* by Ambroise Thomas (1882), the High Priest of Dagon in *Samson et Dalila* by Saint-Saëns (1892). Jean Lassalle led an accomplished international career, notably in London and New York, and with his friends, the legendary Jean and Edouard de Reszke, formed the so-called 'French Trio'. In 1890, at the Opéra-Comique (Salle Favart), he appeared as Escamillo in *Carmen* at the famous final performance by the original Carmen, Célestine Galli-Marié, with Jean de Reszke (Don José) and Nellie Melba (Micaela) also taking part.



Albert Vizentini was to pursue his ambitious artistic project with firmness and tenacity, presenting the premières of the delightful *Timbre d'argent* by Saint-Saëns (23 February 1877), *Le Bravo* by Gaston Salvayre (April 1877) and *La Clé d'or* by Eugène Walter (September 1877) – the latter two composers were very well known at the time, but have since been completely forgotten – as well as new productions of *Martha* (Friedrich von Flotow), *Sigurd* (Ernest Reyer) and *Si j'étais roi* (Adolphe Adam). Soon, however, debts began to accumulate, the promised subsidies were a long time coming, and in January 1878 Vizentini was obliged to tender his resignation to the Minister of Public Instruction and Fine Arts. The following month, he filed for bankruptcy with liabilities of 900,000 francs.

Meanwhile Vizentini and Offenbach were on good terms again, having ironed out their differences during the former's stay at the composer's summer home in Étretat. Since the aging Offenbach was unable to find a theatre in Paris for *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, Vizentini had included it in the eight works he intended to present during the 1877-78 season at the Théâtre National Lyrique. Sadly, that was not to be. Vizentini nonetheless had the consolation of directing the chorus at the private 'première' of the work given at Offenbach's Paris home (8 boulevard des Capucines) on 18 May 1879.

Albert Vizentini nevertheless bounced back. He resumed his activities as a conductor (in Paris and St Petersburg). In the mid-1890s he became director of the Grand Théâtre in Lyon, where in 1896 he staged and conducted the French première of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* (*Les Maîtres-Chanteurs*). On 9 June 1881, in a letter to a friend, he analysed the reasons for the failure of the Théâtre National Lyrique: he mentioned the excessive financial burden, the enormous expenditure incurred by the works presented, and the exorbitant fees demanded by some of the singers. 'Never, I may say, did a theatre involve so much work, so much devotion [...], we did our utmost to save the ship and prevent it from sinking.' Thus, despite artistic success and public sympathy, Vizentini's fine artistic undertaking lasted for only twenty months, and the première of *Dimitri* marked its culmination.

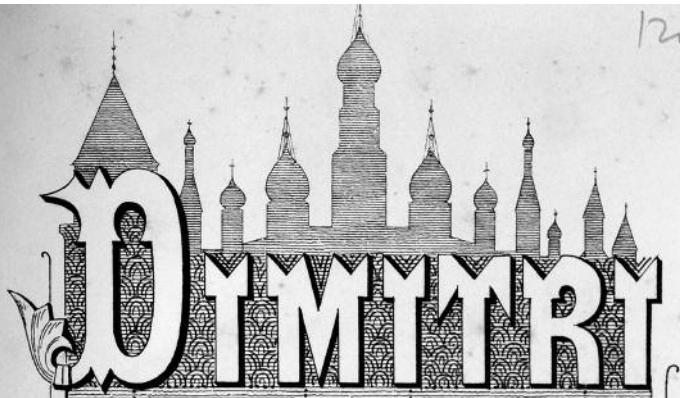
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