Women and the Revolution in French opera

Thierry Santurenne

It took a hundred years, no less, for France to assimilate the legacy of the French Revolution and finally establish the foundations of the Third Republic. Works about that period written by nineteenth-century authors Jules Michelet, Edgar Quinet, Adolphe Thiers and Jean Jaurès encouraged awareness through an expression of republican zeal, while their predecessors Joseph de Maistre and Louis de Bonald, who had been severely critical of both the Revolution and the philosophy of the Enlightenment, had influenced writers such as Honoré de Balzac and Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly in their portrayals of a society built upon the ruins of the *Ancien Régime*. As for the Goncourt brothers, well-known for their keen interest in the eighteenth century, their consequent aversion to the cataclysm of the Revolution is perfectly summed up in the final words of the play *La Patrie en Danger* (1868), uttered with lofty composure by an old canoness when she is summoned to mount the scaffold: 'On y va, canaille!' ('We're going, you scum!'). And shortly before the First World War (1912), Anatole France referred to the Reign of Terror when he expounded his thoughts on fanaticism in the novel *Les Dieux ont soif*.

The various political powers in the nineteenth century were obliged to accept and accommodate the principles and attainments of 1789, while striving to avoid revolutionary violence, the spectre of which was to rear

its ugly head again during the insurrections that shook the successive regimes. That was no easy task and, amongst other things, it meant keeping a watchful eye on dramatic productions, which could so easily be used as a vehicle for seditious ideas. However, subjects to do with the Revolution were accepted. But they were rarely treated in French opera before the time of the Third Republic. Indeed, after the Exposition Universelle of 1889, celebrating French achievements on the centennial of the French Revolution, it became impossible for republican institutions to call the events of that time into question, and operas on the subject began to appear.

Significantly, several of them – *Charlotte Corday* (Alexandre Georges, 1901), *Les Girondins* (Fernand Le Borne, 1905), *Thérèse* (Massenet, 1907) and *Madame Roland* (Félix Fourdrain, 1913) – make reference to the Girondins (or Girondists), a political faction within the Legislative Assembly and the National Convention that represented the moderation and political awareness that were claimed as models by a Republic then in the process of buffing its respectability. Furthermore, the secular martyrdom of the Girondins, executed en masse at the beginning of the Reign of Terror, sanctified a regime belonging to the same filiation. Those with patriotic feeling based on republican values found critical views of the Revolution hard to tolerate, so much so that when Victorien Sardou's *Thermidor* – a play strongly criticising Robespierre and the period of the Terror – was staged at the Comédie-Française in 1891, it met with such violent protests that the government was forced to prohibit its performance at any venue funded by the State.

In the final tableau of his opera *Les Girondins*, in which the Girondins are taken to the scaffold, Le Borne made befitting use of the *Marseillaise*. All the operas mentioned above are patriotic and, like French operas in general set at the time of the Revolution, feature enlightened representatives of the revolutionary spirit and explore the drama of their sacrifice. In 1875 Jules Claretie declared that 'if France is to be saved and reconstituted [...] it will be by the picture of her past greatness, of the devotion, the dissensions, the martyrdoms, the sufferings, and the glories of other days' (*Camille Desmoulins, Lucile Desmoulins: étude sur les Dantonistes*)*.

The operas we are concerned with here fit in with those specifications in all but one respect: they make the sacrificial climate of the Revolution fascinating for audiences. Xavier Leroux noted this in his review for *Musica* of the 1914 revival of Fourdrain's *Madame Roland* at the Gaîté-Lyrique in Paris: the 'fierce executioners vociferating songs of death to relentless rhythms, the panting victims proclaiming in spirited hymns the joy of martyrdom,' he wrote, introduced 'a musical element that quivers with terror and dread, as if streaming with the blood that watered the soil of our fatherland, with unknown consequences'.

However, Alexandre George's rather elementary psychological portrayal of Charlotte Corday** as little more than a woman obsessed by killing, could not possibly have won over audiences that as yet had no experience of excesses such as those depicted in *Elektra* (R. Strauss, 1909). As Alfred Bruneau pointed out after the première (article published in *Le Figaro*), political passion is of all passions 'the one that is the least likely to aggrandise an operatic heroine or a *drame lyrique*'. But in choosing a woman, Marianne, as its national emblem, the Republic grasped hold once more of what it was in danger of losing – the political opinions of women. For indeed, in *La Femme* (1859), Michelet had already shown severity towards a sex that was suspected of counter-revolutionary sympathies because 'the daughters of France are carefully educated to hate and contemn what all France loves and believes in'. Barbey d'Aurevilly had already provided a good example of such a woman in his novel *L'Ensorcelée* (1855), in which Jeanne Le Hardouey, the wife of a *nouveau riche*, falls in love with a nonjuring priest. Of course, in *La Vivandière* (Benjamin Godard, 1895), the *cantinière* Marion's vibrant recruiting song, 'Viens avec nous, petit', with its snatches of the Marseillaise, was meant to appeal to nationalist feeling. But the sensitivity of members of the female sex – less rough around the edges, easily charmed by the past splendour of the *Ancien Régime*, and with a sentimental attachment to the sacrificial victims of the Revolution, including Marie-Antoinette and her sister-in-law Madame Élisabeth – apparently confused their political sense, as is evidenced by the story of the genesis of *Thérèse*, as told by Massenet in

his memoirs (*Mes souvenirs*, 1912). He and friends were visiting the former Carmelite convent in Paris that had witnessed bloody scenes at the hands of the perpetrators of the September Massacre in 1792, when they suddenly caught sight of a ghostly white figure wandering in the gardens and for a moment took it to be 'the soul of Lucile Desmoulins'. But it was the singer Lucy Arbell, who, 'overcome by a painful fit of emotion, had moved away to hide her tears'.

Massenet's *Thérèse* was to present that very feminine dilemma of choice between the attractiveness of the past and the necessities of the present, with the heroine torn between her love for the aristocrat, Armand, and her loyalty to her husband, the Girondin, André. In uniting husband and wife in death at the end, the composer and his librettist pledge allegiance to the Republic; however, the rest of the opera nostalgically exalts the charms of the pre-revolutionary era, represented in the first act by the château, dating from the time of Louis XIV, the autumn leaves slowly fluttering down into an ornamental pond, and the statue-less pedestals – a scene accompanied by the strains of a minuet, played on the harpsichord. In *Vendée!* (Gabriel Pierné, 1897) the banter between the Duc de Guérande and his fiancée, the Comtesse de Julignac, recalls the delights of courtship in another age. Tribute is also paid to the aristocratic virtues of courage and intrepidity, with the countess becoming involved, at the peril of her life, in the activities of the royalist insurgents, the Chouans. When Jeanne, the young peasant girl, also in love with the duke, exchanges clothing with the countess to enable her to escape, and then goes on to conquer the duke's heart, she is in fact showing qualities that belong to a different era. Likewise the Republic was to choose its diplomats from among the followers of the *Ancien Régime* – representatives of the idea of France as a country that was noble, glorious and prestigious. The same dialectic opposing past and present is to be found in Félix Fourdrain's *Madame Roland*, but it is treated in a different way: the destiny of the heroine – Manon Roland, an embodiment of high civic virtue – enables the librettist, Arthur Bernède, to make indirect criticism of a republican regime that, in those years immediately preceding the First World War,

was running out of steam. At a time when the instability of the government was often the butt of caustic derision, the young woman's attitude becomes particularly interesting when her husband's discouragement and desire to give up his ministerial office causes her to admire all the more the combative qualities of François Buzot, one of the leaders of the Girondist faction of the Jacobin Club. The misdemeanours and limitations of the governments in power encouraged Bernède to champion the image of a Republic whose strength lay in fidelity to the principles embodied by Manon Roland. The fatherland could thus count on the symbolical value of feminine ideals.

On a very different level, the tragic death by the guillotine of heroines in opera did not have the same connotations as it did in literature – in several nineteenth-century fictional works decapitation became a focus of erotic fantasy. Representing the sexual climax, bloody death by guillotine fascinated writers, who readily associated it with the most disturbing aspects of sexual desire. In his novel *Les Dieux ont soif* (1912), Anatole France was to encapsulate the combination of violence and eroticism that was associated with the instrument in his description of Élodie Blaise's feelings for her lover, the fanatic Évariste Gamelin: 'She loved him with all her flesh, and the more terrible, cruel, atrocious she thought him, the more she saw him reeking with the blood of his victims, the more consuming was her hunger and thirst for him.' The finest works dealing with the less sinister *topos* of lovers dying on the scaffold are *Le Chevalier de Maison-Rouge* by Alexandre Dumas (1845) and *Les Autels de la peur* by Anatole France (1884). The Italian Umberto Giordano was the first to provide an operatic equivalent, with *Andrea Chénier* (1896), in the final scene of which the lovers, joyfully reunited, face death by the guillotine together. But basically the only French operas in which we find sacrifice as the sublimation of love are Massenet's *Thérèse* and Le Borne's *Les Girondins*. In the former, Massenet's heroine, in a suicidal act (crying 'Vive

le roi!' to the crowd down below in the street), chooses to share her husband's fate, thus ending the dilemma of having to decide between love and duty. In *Les Girondins*, Laurence's decision to die with Ducos, her lover, when honour requires him to refuse the possibility of escape and share the fate of his companions, appears to have been inspired by the dramaturgy of Giordano's work, with the lovers showing the same ecstatic delight at being united in death. However, although their end is supremely orgasmic, the intensity of their Wagner-inspired jubilation is diminished by the requirements of ideology and historical re-enactment: the amorous joy expressed in the last two tableaux is attenuated by the inevitably recurring references to 'sacrifice' and 'liberty'. In the other works, too, patriotic values are given precedence over the final reuniting of the protagonists. Moreover, the systematic departure of the heroines to the guillotine, amidst the cries of the mob, recalls the Republic's fear of the danger represented by the proletariat masses and also its desire to maintain law and order – we remember that Gustave Le Bon's *Psychologie des foules*[***] was published in 1895. While measures for social control were taken at that time – using the armed forces, urban redevelopment (the 'Haussmannisation' of Paris) and other means – the finales of 'revolutionary' operas served as a catharsis in showing the emblematic figures of the Republic delivered up to the chaos of the destructive impulses that were the regime's true matrix, the alarming fertility of which needed to be halted.

But beyond their explicit subject matter, some of these works use the female figure in the revolutionary context as the central motif in a self-reflective discourse that exploits for its own use that which goes against the current of the affirmed ideology. Indeed, insofar as women are credited with having counter-revolutionary sympathies, they are likely to represent an aesthetic position that, though not necessarily retrograde, is at least associated with values or creative reflexes that are open to criticism. In *Thérèse*, Massenet thus manifests his problematic assignation within the field of creation by identifying personally with the main character, as he does in several other works written in the latter part

of his career, such as *Le Jongleur de Notre Dame* and *Don Quichotte*. Thérèse, who is sensitive to the past, while having a high moral character that makes her aware of present values, is a fine example of the work of 'the musical historian of the feminine soul', as Debussy described Massenet. The use of musical formulas from an earlier age, such as the presence of the harpsichord in Act I, in which the *entr'acte-menuet* participates in the celebration of womanhood; the nostalgic nature of women – already perceptible in *Le Portrait de Manon* (1894) – is consistent both with female sentimentality and with the sensuality of the eighteenth century as the composer imagines it. In that light the rumblings of the Revolution become a projection of the moroseness of that time, among critics as well as in a society dominated by the values of the male and the bourgeoisie. A few months after Massenet's death, his former composition pupil Félix Fourdrain paid tribute to him and to his aesthetic in his opera *Madame Roland*. Indeed, the latter was inspired, in its musical and dramatic arrangement, by *Werther*. Fourdrain took the basic elements – from the idyllic climate of the beginning to the final sacrifice, and including the temptation to commit adultery – and arranged them around his own heroine. Finally, the later one-act piece by Gabriel Pierné, *Sophie Arnould* (1927), also shows an outdated charm, with a score including pastiches of eighteenth-century dances and references to old forms and works such as Rousseau's *Le Devin du village*. It tells of two long-parted lovers, the eighteenth-century opera singer Sophie Arnould (1740-1802) and her former lover Dorval, Comte de Lauraguais, who meet again much later in life – a reunion that gives rise to tender and teasing reminiscence. The work reflects Pierné's love for obsolete forms and French music of earlier centuries, but without claiming to set a precedent. The Revolution – in this case merely a backdrop – is represented by the attentions of a mosquito, which Sophie describes as being 'more enraged than a sans-culotte', before promptly crushing it – an allusion to the composer's indifference to any form of aesthetic tyranny.

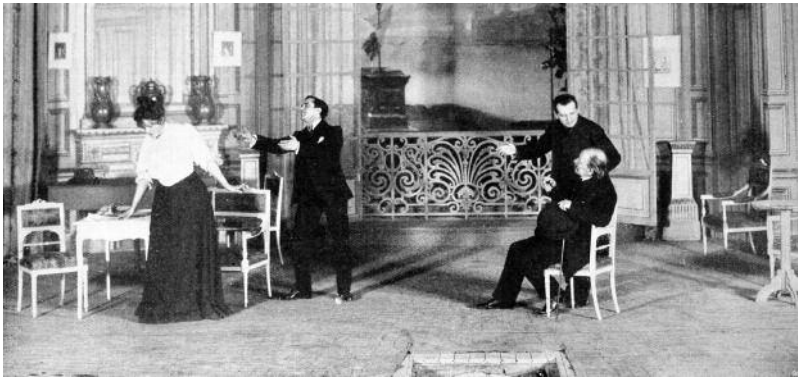
What better way to conclude this overview of works in which women and the turmoil of the French Revolution play such a prominent role, than by mentioning the most recent of them, one that epitomises the genre for French audiences: Francis Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites*, a work of the twentieth century, premièred in 1957 under the Fourth Republic, and presenting several of the features mentioned above. Furthermore the finale, with its decrescendo, echoes that of Le Borne's *Les Girondins*. In Poulenc's opera, the nuns, sentenced to death, solemnly singing in chorus, slowly mount the scaffold, one by one, with the voices gradually becoming fewer and fewer as each nun in turn is guillotined. Beneath the religious plot we discern the equivalent of what was implied in the discourse of the operas we have examined, namely the oppression of marginalised members of our society, represented by the nuns, the initiatory character of the heroine's Via Dolorosa, and the affirmation of the stylistic singularity of a composer who had withdrawn from a particular expression of modernism. Perhaps we today are forgetting that in 1957 the martyrdom of the Carmelites recalled that of the victims of the Second World War, and that the Resistance, reflected in different ways by Blanche de la Force and her companions, gave France a positive image of herself in a post-war period that was plunged deep in the Gaullist myth of a heroic nation. The country had not yet done with the patriotism of the 'revolutionary' works of the Third Republic.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

* Published in English the following year as *Camille Desmoulins and his wife, passages from the history of the Dantonists.*

** After first supporting the monarchy, Charlotte Corday cast her lot with the Girondins as the Revolution unfolded; she murdered the Jacobin publisher Jean-Paul Marat, who had been calling for the execution of Girondins.

*** This work appeared in English in 1896 under the title, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind.*



Massenet rehearsing *Thérèse* on stage at Monte Carlo Opera House.
Musica, September 1912.

Massenet faisant travailler ses interprètes lors d'une répétition de *Thérèse* à Monte-Carlo. *Musica*, septembre 1912.

Thérèse in Monte Carlo: the closing scene of Act I.
Musica, March 1907.

Scène finale du premier acte de *Thérèse* à Monte-Carlo.
Musica, mars 1907.