

A second youth for *Fausto*

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Might we not see the resurrection of a score that has lain dormant for almost two centuries as following the example of Faust himself, who, in aspiring to regain his lost youth, hopes to reverse an unhappy destiny? In any case, Louise Bertin's opera *Fausto* certainly deserves a second chance. After all, its premiere in 1831 at the Théâtre-Italien (and, therefore, sung in Italian) prompted many favourable reviews, suggesting that the composer possessed a rich artistic temperament and solid musical resources. But at a time when the generation of Gossec, Méhul, Catel, Kreutzer and Boieldieu was dying out, it must have been very difficult for journalists to predict what the music of the future might sound like in a Paris that had all of a sudden become the artistic home of such very different luminaries as Paganini, Meyerbeer, Liszt, Rossini and Chopin.

It was said of Louise Bertin that her style bordered on the strange or the bizarre, and perhaps it would have been asserted even more frequently if her output had been larger. Yet what was seen as stylistic awkwardness in 1831 could not fail to stimulate the curiosity of the Palazzetto Bru Zane in 2023: was this not the same reproach that was simultaneously levelled at Berlioz, and was he not himself a pupil of Reicha alongside Louise Bertin (to whom he later dedicated his *Nuits d'été*)? Is there not a little of the genius of one in the other? Our team's interest in *Fausto* goes back more than ten years now, but the full score was nowhere to be found at that time, and only a vocal score existed to confirm its undeniable musical and dramatic qualities. What a surprise, then, to see the complete autograph score emerge from the limbo of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in the early 2020s! It now became possible to pursue our investi-

gation, gradually enriched by the discovery of published and manuscript librettos in both French and Italian, as well as a fair copy of the recitatives that linked the musical numbers and which unfortunately appear neither in the full nor in the vocal score.

The sources that have now been assembled, supplemented by an exhaustive review of the contemporary press published a few years ago by Jean Mongrédien, nevertheless complicate the narrative of a gestation process that was not without its ups and downs. Some forty pages of the orchestral autograph feature a French translation that may indicate the intention to premiere the work in another opera house and another language. Appendices to the vocal score document transpositions for a low contralto voice of several passages in Fausto's part. The printed librettos indicate Mme Malibran as the intended performer of the role of Margarita and Mme Pisoni for the title role, while the press mentions Mme Méric-Lalande and the tenor Donzelli respectively. In short, the tale of the work's genesis promised to be as fascinating as the music itself, and the recent interest in reassessing forgotten women composers encouraged us to embark on the adventure of a revival. We decided to present *Fausto* in its version divided into four acts, even though the last two of these were finally combined into two tableaux at the premiere, to form a single Act Three. But Louise Bertin's original scheme is more powerful in its symbolism, with each of the four parts bearing a title that allows us to follow the hero's race towards the abyss: *La tentazione*, *La felicità*, *Il misfatto* and *La pena*.

Such an event called for specific artistic conditions, starting with an orchestra playing historical instruments capable of restoring Louise Bertin's highly sophisticated palette. Les Talens Lyriques and Christophe Rousset, who had already been our partners on such bold projects as Méhul's *Uthal* (2017), were quick to rise to the challenge. Karine Deshayes was the obvious choice for the part of Fausto, given her familiarity with Rossinian bel canto and with period instruments and pitch standards, not to mention her powerful and penetrating top register, essential for the heroic writing of the role.

Fausto is definitely not a relaxing work written with the casual *métier* of prolific composers. It combines the drama of its subject with the fervent call for attention of a female creator determined to gain admittance to the exclusive coterie of Parisian composers. The issues raised by this score make it worthwhile to listen to it several times in order to appreciate its originality and flavour to the full, and perhaps – who knows? – to grant its critical spirit a new lease of life.



Portrait of Louise Bertin by Amaury Duval, 1841.
Musée Carnavalet, Paris.

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