

The score in its context

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'Charles Lecocq is a greater composer than he is usually believed to be and than he himself believed', Paul Landormy once remarked, whether or not he did so as a riposte to the perceived despotism of Offenbach's genius in the field of operetta. Without looking into the matter too closely, one might say that Offenbach places music at the service of theatre: elementary, banal if need be, his principal elegance is to hide his technical assurance behind the apparent shoddiness of the writing. It is almost the opposite with Lecocq, where dramatic situations and diversions, suspensions or reversals of plotting stimulate appropriate musical settings whose grace, mischievous strength and sham naivety offer unapologetic delight.

Like the theatre of the Foire Saint-Germain a century earlier, operetta was born in the 1850s in response to the monopolies of the Opéra and the Opéra-Comique, which forbade any theatrical performance with singing to employ more than two protagonists. Its founding father, Hervé distinguished himself from the amiable *opéras de salon* that were in vogue at the time by launching a new lyric genre: the pathetic situations called for vocal expression, as in tragic opera (with its mad scenes and its conventional imbroglis), except that here the pathos became laughable: *Les Folies dramatiques*, *La Fine Fleur de l'Andalousie*, *Agamemnon ou Le Chameau à deux bosses...* A more rounded musician than Hervé, and shrewder in his career management, Offenbach followed in the footsteps of his slightly younger contemporary with such works as *Les Deux Aveugles* and *Ba-Ta-Clan*, before winning the day the day with *Orphée aux enfers* (1858) and a series of large-scale works on librettos by Meilhac and Halévy.

Meanwhile Charles Lecocq, who had shared first prize with Bizet in the *opéra-bouffe* competition organised by Offenbach in 1856, was keeping busy without managing a breakthrough, having been too solidly trained at the Conservatoire to combine banality and efficiency. At the age of thirty-six, his career was just beginning to get off the ground with a *chinoiserie* (*Fleur de thé*, 1868) when the defeat of 1870 and its aftermath – the siege, the civil war, the reparations to be paid to Germany – suspended all artistic activity in Paris. Seeking simply to survive, Lecocq approached Eugène Humbert, director of the Théâtre des Fantaisies-Parisiennes in Brussels, who had revived *Fleur de thé*. This resulted in the commission of *Les Cent Vierges*, which was applauded in Brussels on 13 March 1872 and appeared on the stage of the Théâtre des Variétés in Paris on 16 May. But the French public, whose insouciance had been undermined by two years of dramatic events, was more shocked by the subject matter of this piece of sheer buffoonery, decidedly scabrous if one took it seriously: two society women who have been mistakenly taken on board with the hundred maidens intended as brides for the colonists of Île Verte are joined by their husbands who, having disguised themselves in drag for convenience, are assigned to the Governor and his secretary...



THE FISHWIFE OF THE DIRECTORY

So when Humbert accepted a proposal to create in his Brussels theatre a new piece, this time more openly designed to conquer Paris after the Belgian capital, he made the librettists listen to reason when they got bogged down in a parody of *Romeo and Juliet*:

Above all, let your piece get away from the fashionable ribaldries, let it be popular and include dances and songs! After the grave events France has just suffered, people feel the need to sing to forget them. [...] What would you think of a work set under the Directory? All those produced so far

have been great successes. But the period has never been treated as a comic opera [*opéra bouffe*], and yet there is so much to do from the point of view of staging! By putting one of the fashionable women of the time into your piece, we could, in depicting her entourage, revive the fashions of that era, which the present generation finds so interesting to study.

At the beginning of July 1872, the text having been written, Clairville, the oldest of the three librettists (or possibly the sole author), read it through to Humbert, who later recalled:

He played every role and sang each air of the piece to the tune of the popular song [*pont-neuf*] that he had used as a model to write it, doing so in a hoarse falsetto that was uncannily reminiscent of the vicars choral of the Sistine Chapel.

Madame Angot, a fictional character, was a stereotype of the parvenue, unable to strike a balance between her sudden fortune and her lack of social graces. Her adventures made the fortune of a large number of plays between 1795 and 1803, *La Mort de Madame Angot*, *Madame Angot dans son ballon*, *Les Amours de Madame Angot*, *Le Repentir de Madame Angot*, *Le Mariage de Manon ou La Suite de 'Madame Angot'*, *Madame Angot au Sérail de Constantinople*, *Madame Angot dans son grenier* and *Madame Angot au Malabar* among them.



LOOKING BENEATH THE SURFACE

The Overture is more economical than the conventional medleys – the memorable refrains ('De la mère Angot c'est la fille', 'Barras est roi', 'Pas bégueule, / Forte en gueule') are excluded while the trivial 'Ah! c'est donc toi, Madam' Barras' skips along gracefully – and does not suggest anything very extravagant to come. Neither does the opening chorus: the

curtain has risen on the preparations for a wedding, in the pure tradition of *opéra-comique*, a wedding that will be delayed or compromised, but celebrated in the end... This time, though, the impediment is quite absurd: Clairette, probably the daughter of the Grand Turk, has been declared by the people of the market, who took her in as an orphan, as the daughter of old father Angot, who died three years before she was born. As for her mother, all that remains of her is a legend that must be sung, again according to the inviolable law of *opéra-comique* – an implausible legend, uttered in the language of the denizens of Les Halles by the fishwife in chief, named... Amaranthe. Naturalism à la Zola (who was about to publish *Le Ventre de Paris*, set in that same market) or derision? A bit of both.

Two or three interventions from the aggrieved husband-to-be are enough to designate him as the probable butt of the plot's jokes. Gone is the *tenore di grazia* of earlier decades; now it is a baritone (though the part is written so high that a tenor with a central tessitura appears just as appropriate) who, as was to happen in opera too, takes his place, exchanging the high tenor's gentlemanly naivety for conspicuous virility. Himself a contender for the bride's love, our baritone rails against the wedding but, having received (like Raoul in *Les Huguenots*) an invitation from a beautiful stranger, he expresses his chagrin ('Certainement j'aimais Clairette') in a brisk tone, combining cynicism, tenderness and flippancy, which is no longer that of *opéra-comique* or boulevard operetta; underneath the buffoonery, we begin to glimpse the subtle play on theatrical and operatic conventions that gives the work its appeal. The guileless machismo of Pomponnet's *couplets*, savouring his wedding night in advance, contrasts with the feigned ingenuousness of Clairette's. And thus it will continue, until the denouement, as uncertain as the beginning: will Pitou be Lange's lover? Will he become Clairette's once more? The only thing that is obvious is that Pomponnet is in for a hard time. As for the daughter of Madame Angot, she appears set to have as many adventures as her mother, but of a different order: those of the promiscuous 'Madame Arthur' in Yvette Guilbert's celebrated music-hall song...

This is a pastiche of the *opéra-comique* whose conventions it undermines, but also of the *grand opéra historique*, with its *final intermédiaire* relaunching the drama that we thought had been avoided (Lange's 'Je me vengerai', which confuses the issue since it is Clairette who is going to take her revenge!), its preoccupation with outward appearances pushed to the point of absurdity (the conspirators recognise each other by the uniformity of their costumes), its love story intertwined with external political events, in which fictitious characters mingle with distorted versions of historical figures. It is true that the royalist songwriter Ange Pitou, who was regularly arrested, was always released, but he only shared the rhyme of his first name with the surname of an actress who, although she shone among the Merveilleuses of Barras's salons, was not his mistress. There is no evidence that the fashionable painter and fine dancer Trénitz was ever a 'conspiwatow'...¹ As for Larivaudière, he stands for the three 'moneybags' who took care of the belle's expenditure.



NOTHING PONDEROUS, NOTHING PRETENTIOUS

A few months sufficed for Lecocq to mould, set and polish the seventeen flawless numbers, wholly devoid of longueurs, of this operetta, which he justly entitled *opéra-comique*. In the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris* dated 23 February 1873, Henri Lavoix praised the imposing dimensions, 'the sure

¹ To gloss a few terms found here and in the libretto: in the generally aristocratic counter-Revolutionary circles of the Directory period, young people liked to draw attention to themselves by extravagant, dandified dress, on which the stage directions insist several times. The women were known as 'Merveilleuses', the men as 'Muscadins' or 'Incroyables'. Many of them omitted the letter 'r' (standing for 'Revolution') from their speech, as Trénitz does in the libretto; this has been rendered by the effete English replacement of 'r' by 'w'. (Translator's note)

touch and clarity' of the finales. 'M. Lecocq's phrases', he continued, 'are subtle, supple and lively; they follow the words exactly and do not get lost in details. He finds the right note without needlessly striving for brilliance or sonic or rhythmic effects.' Then, before concluding that 'his music is merry without being farcical; one finds distinction and feeling when it is needed', Lavoix offers two examples of this. In the first act 'in the pretty duet in G, a little phrase in B flat: "Madame Angot n'aurait pas trouvé ça", reprised at just the right moment, adds a witty note in the most charming fashion [...]. The chorus of conspirators (in C) develops over a *piano* march rhythm, then suddenly, by means of an ingenious modulation into A, is enhanced in the most unexpected and original manner.'



IN THE LIMELIGHT

The triumphal reception in Brussels (4 December 1872) was repeated in Paris on 21 February 1873, the first of 411 consecutive performances at the Folies-Dramatiques on the rue de Bondy. One incident might have had fatal consequences: doubting whether the work would be a success, the theatre's manager had opted for economy, decorating Mademoiselle Lange's salon with superb paper hangings – which were set alight by a scone. The duty fireman, armed with a bucket and a sponge, overcame the incipient blaze: he tore down the curtain and extinguished it underfoot, after which his terse 'Et voilà!' gave the cue for the Waltz (no.13).

Unlike his colleagues, Lavoix did not mention the accident and underlined 'the piece's merit in having given the decorators a setting in which they could produce such charming effects without the slightest eccentricity of costume while remaining faithful to the historical tradition. The orchestra too deserves every praise; it has ensemble, colour and energy. The first violins in particular are excellent and M. Thibaud leads his little phalanx of artists with talent.' In *Le Ménestrel* dated 23 February, Moréno noted:

... a reactionary flavour that utterly delighted the aristocratic audience at this first performance. The lines 'c'n'était pas la peine [de changer de gouvernement]' were greeted by frenzied applause, then encored, it goes without saying, despite some protests from the upper galleries. [...] The performers are imperfect on the male side [...]. The beautiful Mademoiselle Desclauzas [Mademoiselle Lange] brings her distinction and her appealing vocal talent to a role that is, moreover, very grateful; as for the petite Mademoiselle Paola Marié [Clairette], she is truly adorable in her vivacity, petulance and good humour; one really should see her rising to her full height and peppering Mademoiselle Lange with sarcastic repartee borrowed from the language of the markets! A brilliant production, glittering, eccentric costumes, a large company, a *giorno* lighting, etc.

Of the artists in the two casts, only Paola Marié (1848-1920) has left a name and significant traces in posterity. The daughter of the tenor Marié de l'Isle, and the younger sister of Célestine Galli-Marié (the first Carmen), she had come to the attention of Hervé and was the star of the revival of his *Le Petit Faust* as Méphisto, then distinguished herself in Chabrier's *L'Étoile* (Lazuli) and the revival of Offenbach's *Les Brigands*. She also created leading roles in his *La Boulangère a des écus* and *Maître Péronilla*, which gives at least some insight into her personality.

In *Le Figaro* dated 23 February, Bénédict showed himself at once attracted by the raw realism and concerned to preserve his respectability:

I find that Mademoiselle Angot, while losing a little of her maternal accent, would gain in grace if she did not speak so crudely in the argot of the fish market and did not touch her chignon and her bonnet so often. [But] we are at the Folies-Dramatiques, where the realism of the fishwife duet, far from provoking nausea, on the contrary raised frenetic cheers and gave rise to a formidable encore. [...] The very picturesque and pleasant portrayal of Revolutionary society and of a ball under the Directory was highly successful; but the biggest success might well be the epic duet sung in the third act by Clairette and her fellow 'fishwife' Mademoiselle Lange.

[...] The music of M. Charles Lecocq [offers] a succession of felicitous and fluently written motifs, by turns cantabile, lively and rapid, which cannot miss their effect on the lazy ears of a French audience. This audience, too clever to be sensitive, demands from music pleasure without pain, the caresses of the courtesan and not the love of the maiden.

This is an all too superficial assessment of the theatrical qualities of a score that moves constantly forward without indulging itself by ostentatiously rehashing its abundant strokes of invention.



THE MONARCHICAL QUESTION

Notwithstanding the apolitical vocation of *Le Figaro*, Bénédict, equating ‘the spontaneous, warm, unanimous approval [*suffrage*]’ of the audience with universal suffrage, relishes the opportunity to aver that ‘in this archetypically popular theatre, the audience came down on the monarchical side in the choice between Royalty and Republic that needs to be settled one day’.

The replacement of no.11, the *Couplets* for Lange and Pitou (‘La République a maint défaut’), by the *Duettino* no.11bis (‘Voyons, Monsieur, raisonnons politique’) is probably to be explained by the political situation in France, where the advent of a new republic, after the failure of the Second, had to face criticism from the partisans of a return to the monarchy. It must be said, though, that the definitive adoption of no.11bis is sufficiently justified by its musical superiority.

Finally, Ernest Reyer, in the *Journal des débats* of 28 February, did not conceal the fact that he preferred to review more edifying masterpieces. He nevertheless acknowledged:

Pomponnet’s song about the bouquet of orange blossoms that adorns his fiancée’s bodice contains the bluntest reference, the most transparent

allusion to certain things [the violence and voluptuous delight of deflor-ation] which the faithful customers of our small specialised theatres have long since lost the habit of being disturbed by.

The neo-Rossinian volte-face of the stretta ('Ah! d'avance, / Quand j'y pense, / Quel effet / Cela me fait!') reveals a senile lechery. In pointing out 'the *romance* of Clairette, accompanied by the horn' as one of 'M. Lecocq's wholly personal inspirations', was Reyer unaware of the irony of the choice of that instrument (the traditional symbol of cuckoldry) to suggest the hypocrisy of an ingénue who, while claiming to be ready to obey the laws of marriage, fully intends to keep her lover, whom she will kiss in the next scene at the risk of creasing her dress?

After 'the legend of Mother Angot, composed in the form of a popular song' ('Mademoiselle Toudouze delivered it with a bravura that earned her the honour of an encore', according to Lavoix), Reyer was pleased to acknowledge 'attractive details, verve, spirit and a certain skill in the buffo duet sung by Larivaudière and Ange Pitou'. He did not know that the first section of this number exists in a substantially modified form, which seems to have cost its composer considerable labour. Reyer continues:

Let us mention, in the next act, the chorus of the Merveilleuses, Mademoiselle Lange's song 'Les soldats d'Augereau sont des hommes', the *romance* of Pomponnet, well accompanied ['Elle est tellement innocente'], a charming duet between Mademoiselle Lange and Mademoiselle Angot that is a felicitous blend of youthful memories and lively taunts borrowed from the arsenal of insults proper to the fish market, and the concluding waltz.

Curiously, Reyer does not mention the chorus of conspirators, even though it was encored. This is one of those light-footed male choruses typical of Lecocq, which achieves its effect by means of the specific relationship between the words and the music. Here it is the mildness of tone that betrays the cowardice of the conspirators; in Pomponnet's pure

romance it is his own inanity that he reveals – very prettily, it must be emphasised, for Lecocq does not overegg the pudding; just as, in adopting a military style that ostensibly evokes the valour of soldiers, Mademoiselle Lange celebrates the power women enjoy over those poor men...

Reyer does not say a word about the political duet, so piquant in its words and situation (confessions of love in the guise of a debate), so sensual in its contours; nor do his colleagues (except Lavoix, who ‘like[d] it less’ than the women’s duet), which confirms the unanimously criticised inadequacy of the baritone Mendasti.

‘The orchestra’, Reyer continues, ‘plays during the interval a *fricassée* that everyone would certainly have applauded if everyone had heard it. This dance, with its clearly marked rhythm and its melody typical of the colour and character of the period, is one of the appealing numbers in the score.’ After the *Légende* and the *Chanson politique*, this is the third allusion to old-fashioned styles. As a disciple of Louise Farrenc, Reyer could not fail to remark on this. After mentioning ‘Mademoiselle Angot’s *couplets* [“De la mère Angot j’suis la fille”], which electrified the audience’, he skipped to the end to affirm: ‘A few more successes like this one, and M. Lecocq will enjoy equal status with the master, whom there is no need to name.’



THE MEYERBEER OF THE RENAISSANCE

That prophecy was fulfilled, for although Belgium was still the first to see *Giroflé-Girofla* in March 1874, the Théâtre de la Renaissance, which played host to that work in November, was to become Lecocq’s theatrical home. Its director lavished attentions on the creations of his golden goose, so much so that Lecocq earned the nickname of ‘Meyerbeer of the Renaissance’ from that same Offenbach whom Rossini had once dubbed ‘the Mozart of the Champs-Élysées’. A quarrel with its director in 1881

banished Lecocq from a paradise which he nevertheless gratefully recalled much later:

Ah, how easy and pleasant it was to be a composer in the conditions in which I exercised that function in those happy times at the Renaissance! What rehearsals, what premieres! Everything went like clockwork, and with what spirit conductors and soldiers marched into battle! [...] I was the absolute master of my music, and no change was ever imposed upon me.

During the 1870s, as the composer of *La Fille de Madame Angot* rose to prominence, Offenbach and Hervé continued to produce prolifically, but Hervé's *Mamzelle Nitouche* bears the stamp of Lecocq, as does Offenbach's *Maître Péronilla*. The failure of the latter, two months after the triumph of Lecocq's *Le Petit Duc* (1878), was all the more cruel for Offenbach as his rival had joined forces with the former partners of his glory years, Meilhac and Halévy. The success of *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* at the Opéra-Comique marked a posthumous victory for Offenbach, who had previously had only failures in that house. On the other hand, *La Fille de Madame Angot* had to wait until it had triumphed in every other theatre before joining Offenbach in the repertory of the Salle Favart; that was in December 1918, and Lecocq could not savour his moment either, for he had died on 24 October. He was by then eighty-six years old and, since *Le Cœur et la Main* (1882), no new creation of his had recaptured the impact of the seven or eight to which he owed his place in the contemporary pantheon. During these last thirty years, which were less and less fruitful for lack of commissions, Lecocq continued to take a close interest, without bias, bitterness or regret, in the development of music (as is shown by his abundant correspondence with his close friends Saint-Saëns and Chabrier), and he had plenty of time to meditate on the objective causes, well founded or random, of his successes and setbacks.



LAST NOTES

Hence he left, at the head of the printed scores of his works, precious information on their genesis and reception, punctuated by remarks that are often delightful and sometimes very critical, as reported by Louis Schneider in his monograph published in 1924. We read of *Janot*, for example:

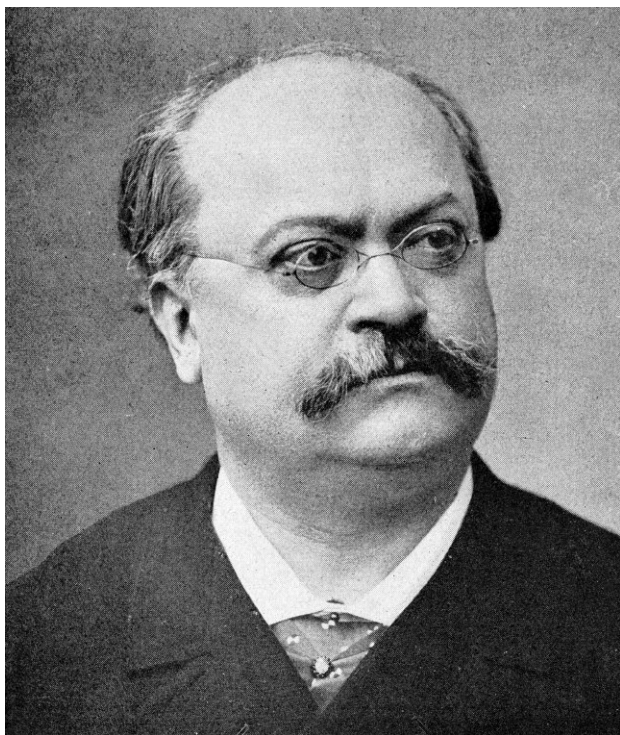
A mediocre piece that the authors [Meilhac and Halévy] never managed to hone to perfection... As for the score, it could have been better. While some parts are quite good, several numbers annotated in pencil in this copy (*Ridiculous song. This rondeau is stupid. These verses are not much use. Ah! Enough! Horrible. As silly as a goose*) demonstrate the extent to which a composer, when compelled to work by the director of a theatre, can display singular bad taste by writing, under duress, things that he himself disapproves of.

Conversely, concerning *Le Petit Duc*:

Happy pieces have no tale to tell, and this one came to the stage without a hitch or a snag. The only difficulty I had was with the song of the little hunchback, which I had written for a female voice... Transposed for Vautier's lyric bass voice, it became ponderous and banal. In any case, this third act is the weakest and has never completely satisfied me. If the work is ever revived on the Parisian stage, cuts should be made.

It would have been pleasant to be able to draw on this copious source for information about the genesis of *La Fille de Madame Angot*. Admittedly, to mark the 365th performance at the Folies Dramatiques, Lecocq had produced a sketch of its history, originally published who knows where, which is reproduced from its manuscript in Louis Schneider's book and which we have quoted above since it is certainly of unimpeachable accuracy. But it favours anecdote over artistic considerations. Schneider

cannot have been aware of the existence of the incomparably more delectable and enlightening article Lecocq wrote for *Musica* in 1912, in which we may enjoy his demonstration of a paradox, if not a rule: lasting success is more likely to crown ephemeral works or those conceived without much confidence in their chances of pleasing the audience, than pieces which, aiming for immortality, collapse under their own weight.



Portrait of Charles Lecocq.
Palazzetto Bru Zane Collection.

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