

A facelift for Madame Angot's daughter

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The political regimes of post-revolutionary France are very little known to the citizens of the twenty-first century, who nevertheless owe them some of their prerogatives and freedoms. The Directory and the Consulate are nowadays often thought of as no more than the first stirrings of the Empire, to the point of merging with it. However, when France experienced an unprecedented wave of nostalgia for the years 1790-1800 at the end of the nineteenth century (and in particular at the moment of the Revolution's centenary), it was careful to keep the figure of Napoleon Bonaparte at a distance and not to recall the splendours of his reign. The Third Republic was still too young, and the Second Empire too present in popular memory, to permit risking the slightest apologia for the conquering Eagle. And so it was the period of the Directory and the Consulate, as troubled as it was chaotic, no longer really the era of Danton or Marat and not yet that of Bonaparte, that gave rise to such works of musical theatre as Massenet's *Thérèse*, Godard's *Jocelyn*, Messager's *Les P'tites Michu* and Pierné's *Vendée*. And, of course, Lecocq's *La Fille de Madame Angot*.

The taste for historicising operetta was paralleled on the more high-brow stages in the neoclassicism of Massenet's *Manon*, for example. Librettos steeped in history multiplied precise references savoured by the erudite members of the audience. Hence, in Lecocq's work, the librettists call on real-life characters (Pitou, Mademoiselle Lange, Larivaudière, Trénitz) and insert historical references and anecdotes throughout the dialogue (even down to mentions of the Calypso ballroom and the success

of a waltz by Catrufo conducted by Gossec). In working against this backdrop, the composer does not seek to pastiche the music of the period. At most, a discreet minuet or a timeless waltz rhythm is juxtaposed with a popular song that the café-concerts of the 1870s would not have disowned. The aim of the work lay elsewhere: to restore the image of operetta, which had been damaged by the parodies and excesses of Offenbach and Hervé. For it is fair to say that Lecocq's scores look towards the traditions of the Opéra-Comique rather than allowing themselves to be nurtured by the vulgar humoristic caricatures overexploited by the generation that preceded him. The quality of the orchestration, the complexity of the harmonies, the use of the chorus, all these factors contributed to raising this new type of operetta to the status of high-quality music (and in the process, some people thought, to its 'bourgeoisification').

It is astonishing to realise that there has been no recent recording of *La Fille de Madame Angot*, a jewel of the French repertory, and that the earlier ones are of a questionable standard. As with many works of this type, the existence of French radio and television (ORTF) archives from the 1960s seems to be sufficient for observers to consider the music has been documented. The case of *La Fille de Madame Angot* is still more debatable in that there is not even an old recording of the original version. The lighter Brussels orchestration (a single oboe, a single bassoon, a single trombone) boasts a remarkable percussion part (triangle and bass drum without cymbal, whereas all complete or partial recordings make the mistake of doubling the bass drum with cymbal throughout, producing an exhausting cacophony in the Act One finale in particular). Two previously unpublished numbers are also included in the present recording: a different version of the duet between Pitou and Larivaudière in Act One, and of Mademoiselle Lange's *couplets* with Ange Pitou in Act Two – whose double-entendres on the 'république / raie publique'¹ of this promiscuous woman failed to avoid the scissors of the Parisian censors. The spoken dialogue has been retained and slightly shortened (but not rewritten). The complete libretto can be found on the Palazzetto Bru Zane's online database (bruzanemediabase.com) along with numerous images

and biographical details concerning the composer and his librettists. This recording benefits from the first edition (published by the Palazzetto Bru Zane) of an orchestral score in French. Until now, the work has always been conducted from a piano score with the details of the orchestration added in manuscript. A vocal score with German text was produced in Vienna in the late nineteenth century but is impractical for performances in French. Moreover, it contains neither the original Brussels orchestration nor the rare numbers mentioned above.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that this recording was made in February 2021, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. We would like to thank all the artists and the musical and administrative teams of the Orchestre de chambre de Paris and the Chœur du Concert Spirituel for having made this project possible despite the drastic health regulations, which were respected to the letter.



Quarrel scene in Act Three at the Théâtre de la Gaîté.
Palazzetto Bru Zane Collection.

Scène de la dispute à l'acte III au Théâtre de la Gaîté.
Collection Palazzetto Bru Zane.

¹ The word 'république' (the only one printed in the libretto) has the same pronunciation as 'raie publique', an obscene pun on the availability of Mademoiselle Lange's private parts to all and sundry. (Translator's note)