

A master of operetta

Adolphe Jullien

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How many people, artists and writers have passed away in the course of this long war, without obtaining, I will not say tributes, but even mere valedictory compliments commensurate with their merit! And such was the case, most striking of all, of a universally famed composer, whose death, at the age of eighty-six, was all but lost amid the noise of the decisive battles and of our victories. The only time the doors of the Salle Favart opened for him, Charles Lecocq – have you not guessed that he is the man I am talking about? – was scarcely favoured by fortune, and his *opéra-comique* *Plutus*, after Aristophanes, achieved only a small number of performances, in 1886. Yet it is no less true that he was a superior composer to many others, before or after him, who had free access to our second national opera house, and that the best of his works are, in reality, charming *opéras-comiques* appropriate to the more restricted setting and the more modest resources of the second-rank theatres that were to perform them. What was characteristic of Charles Lecocq and what made him so successful was precisely the fact that, starting to work for the theatre at a time when the mad flights of fancy of Hervé and the wild buffooneries of Offenbach were at the height of their popularity, he seemed to be reacting against them; and that, possessing a less impulsive but more delicate talent, with a better musical education, he naturally wrote works of a more amiable inspiration, of a more delicate yet at the same time more solid workmanship, which made them the ideal response to the tendency that was emerging in the public's preferences after the war. *La Fille*

de Madame Angot, which was performed in Paris in 1873 after enjoying the most dazzling success in Brussels, marks a date, the date of the evolution of comical music and the triumph of lively, light and graceful operetta over exaggerated caricature and frantic *opéra-bouffe*.

The composer who had just achieved this extraordinary success and whose name was spreading throughout the world was then exactly forty years old and had had a rather difficult start. Born in Paris on 3 June 1832, he had already studied music to a fairly high standard and acquired a real talent for the piano by the time he entered the Conservatoire, where he won prizes in Bazin's harmony class, then in Halévy's fugue and composition class and Benoist's organ class. He had left the institution in 1854 and had gone into teaching, since he needed to support his mother and himself, when a competition sponsored by Offenbach at the Bouffes-Parisiens gave him the opportunity to try his luck in the theatre: he was fortunate enough to win first prize *ex aequo* with Bizet, and *Le Docteur Miracle* by the former alternated for a few days with *Le Docteur Miracle* by the latter on the small stage of the passage Choiseul. This occurred in April 1857. Other slender works performed at the Folies-Nouvelles, the Folies-Marigny or even the Palais Royal, took him modestly up to 1868, when his mythological operetta *L'Amour et son carquois*, and his joyous *chinoiserie Fleur de thé*, performed at the little Théâtre de l'Athénée which had just been opened in the rue Scribe, brought him to prominence and attracted the attention of the leading musicians. 'M. Lecocq', Reyer wrote in this very journal, 'has verve, originality, fluent inspiration, and many other more serious qualities that he will certainly have the opportunity to reveal one day or another on a larger stage.'

War broke out in 1870 and Lecocq, condemned by a cruel infirmity to walk with a pair of crutches, took refuge in Brussels, where he established solid relationships with theatre directors whose interest his previous works had already aroused. Hence, once the turmoil had passed, he succeeded in having two and even three of the works that were to make him famous produced at the Théâtre des Fantaisies-Parisiennes there. First came *Les Cent Vierges*, which was performed shortly afterwards at the

Théâtre des Variétés de Paris, then *La Fille de Madame Angot*, which the Folies-Dramatiques soon appropriated in order to make a fortune from it, and finally *Giroflé-Girofla*, which was the first milestone in the great prosperity of the Théâtre de la Renaissance in Paris. Did Lecocq not seem to be pointing the way to other French composers, and some of the most prominent among them, who were also about to take the road to Brussels in order to have their *Hérodiade* and their *Sigurd* performed there?



After the double triumph of *La Fille de Madame Angot* and *Giroflé-Girofla*, which were, and still are, true models in their secondary genre, and whose ingenious and meticulous construction, melodic grace and very light spirit confirmed Reyer's flattering predictions, the fortunate composer unquestionably held first place in the many theatres that were then performing operetta. If he was less lucky with *Le Pompon* and *Les Prés-Saint-Gervais*, he regained the public's favour with *La Petite Mariée*, which is perhaps his masterpiece, *Kosiki* and *La Marjolaine*, and with *Le Petit Duc*, which together with *Giroflé-Girofla* and *La Petite Mariée* completes the triptych of the most resounding successes of the Théâtre de la Renaissance. But Lecocq did not stop there: he went on to write *La Camargo*, which it is surprising that no theatre has yet revived, *Le Grand Casimir*, *La Jolie Persane*, *Janot*, *La Roussotte*, *Le Jour et la Nuit*, *Le Cœur et la Main*, *La Princesse des Canaries* and *L'Oiseau bleu*; *Plutus* for the Opéra-Comique; *Ali-Baba*, *La Belle au bois dormant*, the little ballet *Le Cygne*, and so forth.

This prolific output for the theatre did not prevent Lecocq from keeping himself busy with pure music, by composing for himself or his friends a number of short piano pieces, pleasant *mélodies* and even pieces of sacred music. He also satisfied his taste for the old masters of French music by making a vocal score of Rameau's *tragédie lyrique* *Castor et Pollux*, published at his own expense, before anyone else paid the work any attention. He even tried to emulate these illustrious models by setting great scenes from Corneille or Racine to music for his own pleasure; and

finally, since his pen never remained inactive, he amused himself until recently by writing short ironical poems, or satirical fantasies, or even complete parodies of famous works in which Gallic verve and Attic salt are mixed in the most agreeable manner.

All in all, through being compelled to work for theatres other than the Opéra-Comique, Charles Lecocq may have acquired a preferable situation and a greater reputation than that which he could have acquired at the Salle Favart for works that would necessarily have been fewer in number, since they would not have been spread among three or four rival houses. Yet it was at Favart that his place was marked out, and it was a lasting sorrow for him not to be able to occupy it; for his very pronounced taste for the masters of the old *opéra-comique*, the care he took, like them, to suit his music to the words, and even the quality of his melodic vein, which might sometimes have been more original, but was always eminently theatrical, are enough to prove that he was indeed of their lineage. He had every reason to consider himself the worthy heir to the masters of the *comédie à ariettes*, such men as Dalayrac, Grétry, Nicolò [Nicolas Isouard], and he could not but think that he would have had as great a claim as Grisar, Poise or Bazin to replace them on the very stage they had rendered illustrious... Should he not have consoled himself for not having risen as high as he had dreamed of doing by observing the popularity of his music and its widespread success?



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