

Recollections of the creation

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You ask me to furnish an account of the history of *La Fille de Madame Angot*. I neglected to take notes at the time, and it is only by calling on my memories that I can sketch out for you the various incidents that accompanied this work, from its incubation to its 800th performance; but I can guarantee the strict accuracy of my narrative.

One day in June 1872, Humbert, who was then director of the Théâtre des Fantaisies-Parisiennes in Brussels, arrived at my home bearing a manuscript. 'My dear fellow,' he said to me as he came in, 'I bring you your fortune.' He was quite right, for the manuscript was the libretto of *La Fille de Madame Angot* by Messrs Clairville, Siraudin and Koning. I had already given *Les Cent Vierges* at Humbert's theatre the previous year, with great success. Eager to have a new score from me, he came to ask me to write the music for *Madame Angot*.

I read the piece, which at first I thought a little on the creaky side. The dialogue seemed dull to me, but the numbers were charming, and the finale of the second act, where I immediately sensed both a theatrical and musical effect, convinced me to accept Humbert's offer. My publisher, to whom I spoke about the matter, looked at the libretto and returned it to me, saying: 'I wouldn't really encourage you to write the music for this piece. I don't find it original enough.' Deep down, that was my opinion too, but I told him that I would do it anyway. Before setting to work, I agreed with my colleagues that we would arrange for the director of a Paris theatre to undertake to stage *La Fille de Madame Angot* after

its performance in Brussels. The director of the Folies Dramatiques accepted the piece for his house. So I set to work, without much enthusiasm, and I would be deceiving myself if I said that I had initially foreseen the success that awaited me.

I composed most of the numbers quite easily, except for two that gave me trouble: the duet of the two women in the second act and – who would believe it? – the chorus of conspirators. The latter piece, even though I sensed there was an effect to be made, would not come to me. It was only after having attempted it in twenty different ways that I gave it its definitive form, and even then I was only half satisfied. I had grown weary of the chorus and had taken a dislike to it. The rest of my score, as I have just said, was composed quite quickly, which is easily explained: all the words to be set to music were well written, and the numbers, which were very varied in genre and format, were so well placed that I had only to compose, without having to request any changes from the ‘wordsmiths’. The only thing I asked Clairville to do was to add a quintet to the second act. I also deleted a small ensemble at the moment of Pomponnet’s arrest, because it seemed to me to detract from the effect of the finale. And that was all. I have never since been granted the opportunity to work under such favourable conditions; for it is very rare for a composer to come across a libretto that is completely settled, as *Madame Angot* was, with a ready-made musical aspect requiring no modification.



The Brussels company was quite good. I already knew Jolly and Mario Widmer, who were to play Pomponnet and Ange Pitou. The same was not true of Mademoiselle Luigini, whom I had never seen before, and whom Humbert had cast as Clairette. As for the part of Mademoiselle Lange, we had no one to play it, and that problem perplexed us, given the importance of the role, until one of my collaborators asked me if I thought Mademoiselle Desclauzas could do it. I did not hesitate for a moment. Desclauzas, at that time, was hardly known except for having appeared

in a few *féeries*; but I had had the good fortune to hear her in *Fleur de thé* at the Théâtre des Variétés, where she played the role of Césarine two or three times. That role did not suit her, and she did not make much of an impact in it. However, I could see that she sang with spirit and with a voice of delightful freshness. Moreover, Desclauzas was – and still is – a very pretty woman. I had found in her the ideal person for the exceptionally seductive character of Mademoiselle Lange! The contract was agreed, and before she left for Brussels I rehearsed her in the music of her role, which she understood and performed to my great satisfaction.

I stayed in Paris to complete and orchestrate my score, having to go to Brussels only for the final rehearsals. It was Humbert who, in the absence of the authors, read the piece through to the artists of the Fantaisies-Parisiennes. Contrary to his expectations, the result was disastrous. Just one incident amused his listeners. When Humbert reached the passage in the second act where the trumpet of Augereau's Hussars is heard in the wings, a noisy fanfare sounded outside. It was a company of the Garde Civique going past the theatre. Everyone burst out laughing. That was the only moment of gaiety in the entire reading.

The rehearsals began. The musical preparation was in the hands of the excellent Théodore Warnotts, whom I had already had the opportunity to admire when he had conducted *Les Cent Vierges*, and I could rely totally on him. But, as far as the play itself was concerned, I was much less at ease. I had received several letters from Brussels that did little to reassure me; one, sent by one of the female singers, told me that things were not going well, that the second act was completely lacking in gaiety and youthful spirits, and that it was necessary for the authors to come to direct the rehearsals and make some improvements to this flawed piece. In short, no one was happy, except Humbert, who had retained complete confidence in the work's reception.

I set off for Brussels, and when I arrived there with my colleagues, work was already well advanced. The singers knew their music and it came over very well. Fair inroads had been made on the dialogue, and the staging was pretty well in hand. Not having experienced the fatigue of the

first rehearsals, I was able to gain an overall view of the piece, and my impression was much better than I had expected. Moreover, the presence of the authors heartened everyone, and little by little things took an excellent turn. I finished on the spot what I still had to do, including the Overture, which I was only able to write the night before the first performance and which is therefore rather simple.

Finally, the big day arrived, and on 4 December 1872 the curtain rose amid general excitement, not least mine. The principal artists, as I have said, were Mesdames Luigini and Desclauzas, and Messieurs Jolly and Mario Widmer. Mademoiselle Luigini did not at first seem to me to have all the qualities required to play the character of Clairette Angot. Her voice was a little shrill, and her figure somewhat angular. Nevertheless, quite aside from her talent as a singer, she was endowed with a great deal of intelligence and enthusiasm, and she managed her task wonderfully. Desclauzas was truly delightful in every way as Mademoiselle Lange, Mario Widmer full of elegance as Ange Pitou, and Jolly extremely amusing as Pomponnet. As Jolly is not a singer, I had to cut the *romance* 'Elle est si innocente'.

The chorus and orchestra performed admirably. The scenery was new, as were the costumes, designed by Grévin, which Humbert had ensured were made with genuine luxury. Since the action took place in a specific period and did not have that fanciful character which has been so often abused in operetta, Grévin had followed historical truth by reproducing the costumes of 1798 almost exactly, but varied and embellished with exquisite taste. All this helped to give the piece a definite colour, a colour that already existed in the libretto and, I believe, also in the music, which I had endeavoured to match to the general tone of the work and to the characters of the various protagonists. This premiere enjoyed very great success, which was confirmed at the following performances. The Brussels press was excellent, and the success of *Madame Angot* was launched in Belgium, to continue in Paris and elsewhere.



It was in Paris that the troubles and setbacks started. As I said earlier, the piece had been accepted by the Folies-Dramatiques. By great good luck, Paola Marié was a member of the troupe there, and the role of Clairette might have been created especially for her. This little woman, with her boyish looks, her big eyes and her warm vocal timbre, was the very epitome of the girl from Les Halles. The role of Mademoiselle Lange was intended for Madame Geoffroy, another very small woman, who had just enjoyed a degree of success in Litolff's *Héloïse et Abélard*. But the artist did not want to accept the role, which she said was the second lead, and declared that she would play the part of Clairette or else we would have to do without her. So, no Mademoiselle Lange. Pomponnet was to be played by Luce, who would have been charming. But after the reading, which he listened to in rather a bad temper, Luce declared in his turn that, Pomponnet being a second comic lead, he would not accept it. So, no Pomponnet. What to do? The part was assigned to a young man named Dupin, gifted with a rather pretty little voice, but with very poor looks for the character he was to portray. The role of Ange Pitou was given to M. Mendasti, a fairly decent actor but who possessed no singing voice of any description. The part of Larivaudière was assigned to Lucco, and that of Louchard to Legrain.

A Mademoiselle Lange still remained to be found. Several engagements were proposed and rejected. Finally, as the hundredth performance in Brussels, which completed Desclauzas's contract, was coming up, the director of the Folies determined to bring her to Paris. So now we had our complete cast.

I have said that when I first read the manuscript the dialogue seemed dull to me, and that I thought it should be revised for Paris, and rewritten with more lightness and fantasy. I had not realised that it was precisely this sincerity and this somewhat naive conviction in the dialogue that were to contribute to the work's success. It broke with the bad habits that operetta had fallen into, bringing us back to the lovable genre so appreciated by our forebears, the old *opéra-comique*, or rather the *comédie lyrique*. Although my fears about the piece had partly evaporated since the performance in Brussels, I nevertheless wondered whether it would seem

merry enough to the Parisian public, and I dreaded hearing that exclamation which has so often chilled the blood: 'It's not funny!' The excellent Clairville, for his part, stood by his principles. As he had written his piece, so it would be performed. And how right he was!

The rehearsals, it goes without saying, did not run smoothly or without frayed nerves. I have only a vague memory of those little clashes so common in the theatre, but one thing I do remember perfectly well is having a run-in with Paola Marié concerning her verse of the 'slanging match', which she transposed down a fifth, singing it in her chest voice. I thought this was horrible and smacked of the café-concert, and I protested vigorously. But Paola continued to sing it the way she liked, and, all in all, she was not entirely in the wrong, since, though it was not in the best possible taste, that deep voice coming out of that small body produced a most peculiar and highly comical effect. Thus we struggled along to the dress rehearsal, which went fairly well. Nevertheless, the performance of some of the male roles seemed so poor that I was in a deathly trance. A remark that the conductor addressed to me after the rehearsal was hardly calculated to reassure me: 'It came off well,' he said, 'but I must confess that I didn't laugh once.' That's it, by Jove, I said to myself! *It's not funny!*

The premiere took place on 21 February 1873. At the beginning of the first act, M. Dupin, who had a cold, produced a cracked note in his *couplets*. There was muttering in the auditorium. Things were not looking good. However, the fishwife's song, which was encored, warmed up the audience a little. Finally, a few political allusions – if that is what they really were – finally broke the ice, and the first act ended to warm applause from some quarters and loud disapproval from others. A slight uproar ensued in the auditorium. During the interval, one of the censors came to ask the authors to remove anything to do with politics, if they did not want to run the risk of having their play taken off. The refrain 'C'n'était pas la peine de changer de gouvernement' had apparently offended certain sensibilities. As if those words, which are only a variation of Alphonse Karr's dictum 'The more things change, the more they stay the same', did not contain an age-old and therefore absolutely harmless truth!

The second act began. A poor set, consisting chiefly of red curtains that might have looked well enough in a wine shop. Desclauzas made her entrance and was well received. Pomponnet, who was hoarse by this time, husbanded his resources and sang his *romance*, 'Elle est tellement innocente', *pianissimo*. A shrewd move, for he got an encore. That was the only time that M. Dupin was ever to sing it so well. In the finale of the second act, following the conspirators, who created quite a stir, a candle placed too close to one of the nice red curtains set it alight. To extinguish it, a chorister could think of nothing better than to throw over it his blond wig, which immediately caught fire too. The audience, which had seen what was going on, was not perturbed, and once this tiny fire had been speedily put out, the finale resumed; the incident did not prevent it from being warmly applauded, and the waltz was encored.

In the third act, the slanging match made such an impact that it received two encores, and, at the end, there was a standing ovation for everyone, but especially for Paola and Desclauzas, who deserved it. On leaving the theatre, I overheard these two remarks made by two authors, Messieurs H... and B...: 'This is the year's biggest hit'; 'It is the *Pré-aux-clercs* of operetta'.

For three whole months, since the Folies Dramatiques was fully booked up, the box office did not even open in the evening. The theatre's director, who had put on the play without conviction – and without expenditure – and had predicted a run of forty performances, collected huge sums previously unknown there. From 21 February 1873 to 8 April 1874, *La Fille de Madame Angot* was performed without interruption and produced 1,632,400 francs in box-office receipts. It is worth noting that the royalties were fixed at 12%, which meant that for this series of 410 performances, the sum of 195,888 francs was divided as follows: 65,296 francs for the curtain-raiser, 65,296 francs for the three authors of the principal piece and 65,296 francs for its composer. And so it went on for hundreds of performances, always with the aforementioned curtain-raiser taking a third of the royalties. One day, the director of the Folies, being at odds with one of the librettists, found it amusing, in order to get back

at him, to put on *two curtain-raisers* instead of one, in order to reduce the authors' share further. But what are such woes in the face of a hit of this magnitude? If someone were to offer me its equivalent today, *and at the same price*, I would hasten to accept.

The success was such that there was talk of performing the second act at a benefit performance at the Opéra. This gave rise to lively controversy in the newspapers. Some musicians and critics claimed that it was a desecration of the Temple of Music to play such things there. Of course, I did not get involved in this debate, in which the bitter opponents of 'light music' won the day. However, I still think today that it would have been interesting to hear that second act in a large auditorium, with the chorus and the orchestra of the Opéra, for, to make no bones about it, both the libretto and the music are conceived from start to finish in the style of *opéra-comique*.



Act One finale in the revival at the Théâtre de la Gaité.
Palazzetto Bru Zane Collection.

Finale de l'acte I dans la mise en scène de la reprise à la Gaité.
Collection Palazzetto Bru Zane.



Costume for Trénitz by Grévin.
Palazzetto Bru Zane Collection.

Costume pour Trénitz par Grévin.
Collection Palazzetto Bru Zane.