

Ariane's galley

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Although *Ariane* represents, in musical and dramatic terms, a turning point in Massenet's stylistic evolution, the staging of the work aroused controversy, and analysis reveals the flaws in the visual conception of several key dramatic moments. To be convinced of this, one need only consult and compare the accounts in the press and the *livret de mise en scène* (staging manual) published by Heugel et Cie under the imprint 'Au Ménestrel'. The title page of this undated document states that it contains the 'staging by M. Pierre [Pedro] Gailhard, director of the Opéra, as recorded by M. Jules Speck, stage manager [*régisseur général*]'. Hence, alongside Gailhard who was coming to the end of his final term of office at the Palais Garnier (twenty years after his first appointment), we discover the future creator of the *mise en scène* of Puccini's *La fanciulla del West* at the Metropolitan Opera, New York, in 1910.

The purpose of a manual of this type was to fix the visual memory of a production and facilitate revivals of it in other theatres. *Livrets de mise en scène* were issued and distributed by the publisher of the music, who had a vested interest in promoting widespread performances of the works concerned. Generally supplemented by a description of the costumes, and by photographs or drawings of each act, these documents compile all the information required for stage production: the description and layout of the scenery, the position and movements of characters during the work, lighting directions, and so forth. The staging manual did not oblige users to reproduce all these instructions exactly, but merely informed them of the solutions adopted at the time of the first performance, for example

by specifying the actions or motivations of certain characters more precisely than the stage directions in the libretto or the score.

The *livret de mise en scène* for *Ariane* reveals that each act was staged in accordance with the authors' wishes:

Act One: The labyrinth, concealed behind high walls, with the sea towards the left.

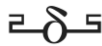
Act Two: A galley on the open sea.

Act Three: On Naxos. The inner courtyard of a Pelasgian building.

Act Four: In the Underworld. Tartarus.

Act Five: On Naxos. In the background, entirely the sea.

One of the peculiarities of this document, which adds considerably to its interest, is that it does not just contain the description of the scenography planned for the Paris Opéra. It was published only after a revival of the work: pages 46 to 64 present an alternative version of Act Two, devised by 'M. Villefranck, director of the Opéra de Nice' and 'recorded by M. Perron, stage manager'. In the first place, this element gives us a clue to the date of the manual, since the Nice performance took place on 1 February 1907 (barely three months after the Paris premiere) and the staging manual could therefore not have been published before then. This leads us in turn to wonder why the publication contains two versions of the same act. Was it to provide a cheaper alternative for secondary theatres that did not have the resources or space to build a huge set? Or are we dealing here with a proposed solution to an artistic problem?



PEDRO GAILHARD'S SECOND ACT¹

At the Paris Opéra, for the second act, the centre of the stage was occupied by Thésée's galley, seen from the side: a 'life-sized boat mounted

¹ See reproduction on p.24

on a pivot and turning on itself', as Pierre Lalo put it (*Le Temps* dated 27 November 1906). The ship is supposedly sailing through the Cyclades to take bride and groom to Athens. The staging manual informs us that a 'large sky-blue backcloth' hangs at the back of the stage, while just in front of it, the penultimate plane consists of 'sky-blue panorama-cloths and voussoirs [a portion of the vault that connects a ceiling with the cornice of a room]' that complete the illusion of a sky thanks to their concave curves. 'Wide tulle teasers [curtains that mask the flies, a wire grid suspended in the stage-house], studded with gold and silver sequins, imitate the stars.'

The surface of the sea surrounding the galley, however, was trickier to recreate: this was done by means of 'water strips, linked to each other by sea-cloths. A sea-carpet [...] passes under the galley and connects with the rest of the water. All the cloths that hide the wooden strips which operate them are fastened on the sides to the panorama-cloths', thus demonstrating the unity of the sea and the sky. Islands can be glimpsed in the distance, including Naxos, the closest to the galley.

The real brainwave, however, was to be found on the forestage: a small paint-frame (a wooden frame or chassis on which a linen canvas is fixed) 20 cm high was placed on the proscenium, on which an 'endless' painted canvas depicting 'small rocks and water' was constantly unrolled. Thésée's galley was 'splendidly painted and decorated; the sides (then called cheeks) are embellished with gold designs, with a figure of Cypris Anadyomene [Cyprian Aphrodite rising from the waves] at the bow'. The makeshift cabin for Thésée and Ariane, about two-thirds of the way along the galley and facing the audience, was 'half-closed with brightly coloured woollen curtains', delimiting a space with a metatheatrical function: it is as she glimpses the couple through it that Phèdre realises her love for Thésée.

The storm, the moment when Phèdre's heart changes dramatically, vanquished by Thésée, is not given a sophisticated *mise en scène*: the sail is simply furled by tying it to the mast and 'the sea-carpet is shaken furiously', while 'a sailor below deck swings a red lantern to show how the galley is being tossed'. The staging manual makes no mention at this point of the vessel itself, which remains *motionless*, subject to the forced

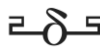
movements that occur all around it (the ‘waves’ of the sea-carpet and the red lamp swaying in the wind).

The press reports agreed that this section of the staging of *Ariane* was inadequately executed. While the first act was accused of presenting a spectacle outmoded in its visual realisation, particularly in its treatment of mass movements, the second act suffered even fiercer criticism. For Pierre Lalo, it was the galley that was to blame:

The whole staging of the second act consists of the enormous puerility of the boat, that boat whose sail is inflated against the wind, whose oars stop as soon as anyone sings, which remains absurdly immobile during the most violent storms, or more precisely, whose pitching and rolling are represented by the patient Pirithoüs, shaking the mast without pretending to do anything, and by an anonymous extra, frantically swinging a red lantern below decks.

(*Le Temps*, 27 November 1906)

The visual failure of the Paris premiere seems to be tacitly acknowledged in the *livret de mise en scène*, which indicates, before presenting that initial version of the staging: ‘NB In the theatre, this second act may be omitted, or the Paris Opéra staging may be replaced by the staging of the Opéra de Nice, which will be found below.’



VILLEFRANCK’S SECOND ACT¹

In Nice, the organisation of this scene underwent a revolution in comparison with Gailhard’s conception. As against the epic sets of the Paris Opéra, Villefranck chose to place only a section of Thésée’s galley centre stage: the space allotted to the two lovers now faces the

¹ See reproduction on p.27

audience, while the 'bow of the galley on the open sea' points towards rear stage.

The sky and sea form the backcloth, with transparent sections used to make flashes of lightning visible during the storm (an effect achieved by projecting light through the translucent surface of the canvas). The paint-frame representing the island of Naxos is suspended 5 metres from the ground, while a second, showing the other small islands, is placed at a height of 3 metres. A very large rectangular sail, 7 metres high and 4 metres wide, occupies the centre of the ship. It is fitted out like a kite, with 'four cables so as to produce the illusion of wind pressure' during the storm. Two cloud machines are placed stage left and right, concealed in the wings, to create vapour effects quickly.

The better to produce the illusion that the boat is moving, 'in theatres possessing sufficient machinery', the paint-frame depicting the small islands, which originally appeared stage right, moves round to disappear stage left, following a curve that indicates the direction of the boat's progress. The movements during the hurricane differ from one group of characters to another: for example, the sailors 'tend to the rigging, one on each cable, another to the mast, and the sail is lowered, remaining on stage as it descends.'

The conclusion of the act seems to have been less affected by changes. In both Paris and Nice, it ends with stage lights full up and a 'very slow' curtain to emphasise a static tableau, in order to imprint on the spectator's memory the dramatic crux (Phèdre's new sentiments for Thésée) that will lead to Ariane's suicide.



In Gailhard's version, then, the staging of the second act appeared rather dated, in terms both of theatrical machinery (especially the canvas depicting the sea and the movements of the waves) and of the excessively mechanical handling of the secondary characters' stage movements. As to the set design, the presence of the boat in the middle of the stage and

the other elements producing the depiction of the sea spread the spectators' attention too thinly, preventing them from focusing on the key spaces where the plot is developed.

Villefranck's version, on the contrary, is doubtless animated by a more modern sensibility, concentrating on heightening the emotional cross-currents between the characters on stage (*Ariane-Thésée-Phèdre*). The deck of the galley, which occupies almost all of the space, allows us to focus on the tent in which Ariane and Thésée take refuge. It also makes it easier to observe Phèdre spying on the two lovers; moreover, the use of only a portion of the ship solves the visual problem of the sea surface.

It would appear that Massenet was happy with this alternative, which was better able to set the scene for the impending tragedy – Phèdre's jealousy of Ariane, caused by her unavowed love for Thésée. An indirect source testifies to his enthusiastic behaviour during the rehearsals of *Ariane* in Nice:

The Maestro comes and goes on the stage [...]. He runs from one artist to another. He speaks. He sings. He beats time now with his cane, now with his foot. He falls on the tenor's shoulder to show Phèdre how she should yield to him. He weeps with Ariane [...]. This man is extraordinarily lively, spirited and youthful. He knows that he has an immense talent and he basks in the admiration of his work. He approves the passages that please him. He would applaud them if he dared.

(Dominique Durandy, *Passants de la Riviera*, 1922)





Lucy Arbell in the role of Perséphone. *Le Théâtre*, 1906.
Bibliothèque du Conservatoire de Genève.

Lucy Arbell dans le rôle de Perséphone. *Le Théâtre*, 1906.
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