

Sacha, Reynaldo and the *Bel Inconnu*

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If I say 'Reynaldo' when I speak of him, it is because there is between us a point – I would wish there were more than one – a point of resemblance: both of us have made a first name for ourselves.

(Sacha Guitry, *Le Matin*, 3 October 1933)

The tenth of January 1933: the 112th and last performance at the Théâtre de la Madeleine of *Mozart*, by Guitry and Hahn. This *comédie en musique*, premiered in 1925, had quite naturally enjoyed the same success – indeed, the triumph – that had greeted it seven years earlier. Yvonne Printemps as Mozart once again had all Paris at her feet, whereas Sacha had given up his role as Baron Grimm to the thoroughly commendable Georges MauLOY. Printemps without Guitry: the unmistakable sign of a relationship very much on the rocks. The detail is not without its importance for the venture that was to keep Reynaldo Hahn and Sacha Guitry busy over the next few months. While Yvonne had seduced Pierre Fresnay, with whom she was almost openly conducting an affair, Sacha was already appearing in a new comedy with the woman who was to become the third Madame Guitry – Jacqueline Delubac. One can assume that Sacha had initially imagined – as some clues in the libretto suggest – that *Ô mon bel inconnu* would be the new musical play he was to perform with Yvonne. Her bewitching voice, her charm, her wit and her unfailing musicality had played no small part in the resounding success of Sacha's revues and musical comedies. Mademoiselle Printemps had conquered theatre audiences as thoroughly as music lovers... and composers. But the break-up of the most famous Parisian couple, in real life as on the stage, completely changed the situation. *Ô mon bel inconnu* was to be Sacha's first musico-dramatic work with-

out Yvonne in thirteen years, but also his final foray into the genre. Why did Guitry pursue this musical project despite the absence of his favourite co-star? His new work, which can also be viewed through the prism of his life, might lead us to think that the husband-author was here indicating to his future ex-wife and ex-interpreter that she was not as indispensable to him as all that for producing a successful operetta... Reynaldo Hahn, for his part, would be reunited with the star of his *Mozart* only in the cinema, when he wrote three songs to words by Albert Willemetz for *La Dame aux camélias*.

The Guitry/Hahn collaboration owed nothing to chance. André Messager had given up the task of composing the score of *Mozart* – deeming that he would not manage to set such a subject to music – and Sacha had turned to Hahn, who, as an intimate and loyal friend of Sarah Bernhardt (herself closely associated with Sacha and his father Lucien Guitry), seemed a logical choice. A great enthusiast for the dramatic arts and, like Messager, a true musician of the theatre, Hahn mastered all the mysteries of composition and vocal expression. The latter, in his view, did not repose on purely musical criteria, but on the relationship of voice to text and the combination of their respective expressive qualities. The composer's public pronouncements on the subject were all the rage with the cream of Parisian music lovers, and his opinions were regarded as authoritative. Philippe Blay observes in his *Reynaldo Hahn*:

Although his disquisitions on singing were more in the style of a talk than a class, Hahn attempted to give a complete overview of the subject, expanding it from purely vocal questions to those of interpretation and aesthetics. Their programme was an eloquent one: Why and how do we sing? How can one 'speak'¹ while

¹ Hahn uses the verb *dire*, to speak, difficult to render in English in this specific sense, which implies skill in conveying the meaning of the words while singing. It is considered a compliment to a singer of *mélodies* or *chansons* to say that she is a fine *diseuse*. (Translator's note)

singing? What is style? How to move one's listeners? What explains the decadence of singing? What is 'expressive' singing and 'descriptive' singing? What is taste? The common denominator of all these questions, the relationship between text and music, was particularly important to him. The quality of declamation is essential to that relationship, and he therefore unreservedly advocated the 'subordination of music to words':

The words [...], charged with feeling and thought, confer meaning on the melody, give it a direct and precise effect on the mind and the heart. If, between the words and the melody, one were to dominate, it is indisputable that it should be the words; both common sense and artistic sense decree it thus.

(Reynaldo Hahn, *Du chant*)

Starting out from this principle, Hahn grants an essential role to prosody and does not believe 'that one can "speak [*dire*] well", really well, and sing entirely badly', whereas 'singing [...] that is beautiful simply in itself [...] is not a work of art'.

Sacha greatly admired Reynaldo's learning and his feeling for vocal expression. In a 1933 letter preserved in the Hahn family archives, he wrote:

I must tell you what an exquisite memory we have of your visit here. What charm you possess! You keep all the promises one makes to oneself while waiting for you – and there is always a surprise. This time, the surprise was 'Mes Enfants' from *M. de Charrette* [a royalist song by Paul Féval (1853)]. Who is the singer, who is the actor who could invest so much nobility and so much love and so much hope in a single word?

And he was well aware of the difficulty of setting his irregular verses and 'formless' musical numbers to music. For 'Guitry-esque' verse contains

within itself its own scansion and its own music. Guitry is the musician of the word: each group of free verses, of assonant prose is conceived as a *musical phrase* – colour and rhythm – which, fundamentally, can stand on its own. The musical rhythm of the metre and the melodic colour added by the composer can, if the latter is not careful, destroy the special flavour of Sacha's verses. A few days before the dress rehearsal of *Ô mon bel inconnu* Guitry declared:

To work with Reynaldo Hahn is to work with Reynaldo. It is an incomparable joy. Why, you see, I'm not someone who can produce couplets in the skilful manner of the 'master of lyrics', my dear friend Albert Willemetz. My verses are uneven, bizarre, free and singular: one-legged lines sit cheek by jowl with centipedes! But Reynaldo makes the best of them, thank the Lord. Reynaldo Hahn, as Messenger did, as great musicians have always done, composes his music on the verse he is given.

(*Excelsior*, 1 October 1933)

It should also be noted that the cast assembled at the Bouffes-Parisiens, and for which the joint authors wrote, consisted of singing actors – and not singers who could also act, which, obviously, was not without consequences on Hahn's decisions on vocal style.

Hahn explained to the readers of *Le Matin* (3 October 1933) how this new collaboration came about (though the facts were rearranged for the occasion, since the meeting he mentions could not have taken place 'three months ago'):

When I met Sacha Guitry in a theatre corridor three months ago and he told me, in the tone of voice one uses to impart a precise piece of information, 'We're doing an operetta together for the reopening of the Bouffes', I replied: 'You must be mistaken!' For I believed I knew – I had it from an unimpeachable source – that

I was already working on three pieces and that I was not about to embark on a fourth.

It was indeed a matter of fact that Hahn was far from being at a loose end: in addition to having an operetta on the stocks with Alfred Savoir – intended to replace *Le Garçon de chez Prunier* (André Barde/Joseph Szulc) at the Théâtre des Capucines in the spring of 1933 (although in the end the piece never saw the light of day) – he was working on *Le Marchand de Venise* and was probably already preparing *Malvina*, two works premiered almost simultaneously in March 1935 at the Opéra and the Gaité-Lyrique respectively. But Guitry was a very persuasive man.

The press officially announced the birth of the new work in May 1933:

At the Bouffes-Parisiens – The first new work to be staged at the theatre next season will be a musical comedy by Sacha Guitry, with a score by Reynaldo Hahn, and M. Aquistapace has been engaged to create the leading role.

(*Excelsior*, 19 May 1933)

Le Matin even specifies the date of the dress rehearsal, fixed for 29 September. This new opus by the Guitry/Hahn team was to follow the sparkling revival of *Phi-Phi* (Willemetz/Christiné) which was currently enjoying huge success at the Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens. We can date the musical setting of the libretto to the first half of 1933. Guitry sent his book and lyrics to Reynaldo at the end of 1932:

Dear Reynaldo,

Tonight I'm expecting my secretary, who is coming from Paris, and in forty-eight hours you will have a fair copy of the scene and song for Guy Ferrant and other numbers too. But how frustrated I am not to read them to you! Much less so in my capacity as author than as an actor, because I can see in the piece a number of theatrical effects that are impossible to explain in a letter and

which can only be achieved by rhythm and timing. You are a wonderful musician, but perhaps I'm not such a bad actor.

I affectionately clasp both your hands,

Sacha Guitry.

(Hahn family archives)

The process of collaboration was not devoid of a certain friction. Guitry might well have been the great Sacha, but Hahn was no less punctilious and demanding. The musician abhorred all forms of vulgarity – a vulgarity that Guitry, who had remained very much a schoolboy at heart, sometimes liked to skirt in his revues or his music-theatre works. Reynaldo urged Sacha to eliminate every trace of it, and finally won his case:

Well, let's remove the second verse of the girl's song about hats [Air, no.3, 'Allons, Monsieur, laissez-moi faire'] if it seems obscene to you. You will have told me so three times. The first time, I doubted it, the second time, I rewrote it, the third time, I delete it.

(Letter from Guitry to Hahn, [summer 1933?],
Hahn family archives)

On the other hand, you have made my life a misery by asking me to extend the 'pinching' song for you [Duet, no.4, 'Vous m'avez pincé le derrière!']. I will, of course, but when we've had another meeting. I'm delighted with everything you've already written for my piece. I look forward to the read-through, I look forward to the dress rehearsal, I look forward to the hundredth performance...

(Letter from Guitry to Hahn, [summer 1933?],
Hahn family archives)

Guitry was well versed in the public relations tricks of his time, and since any publicity is good publicity, he dropped a few crumbs into the begging bowl of the gossip columnists while the two artists were hard at work:

A telegram from Sacha – Sacha Guitry is currently resting in La Baule [...]. ‘Resting’ in a manner of speaking. The other day, Reynaldo Hahn telegraphed him this message: ‘I need four lines to finish my operetta.’ [...] And half an hour later, Sacha replied: ‘Reynaldo Hahn, 7 rue Greffulhe, Paris.

‘Eh bien, que pensez-vous, monsieur, de la riposte?

Tandis que je reçois votre dépêche ici

Vous recevez mes vers à Paris par la poste,

Quant à mes amitiés très vives, les voici.’²

Sacha Guitry

(*Excelsior*, 22 July 1933)

The premiere was prepared with great care. Albert Willemetz, director of the Bouffes-Parisiens, insisted on the set being already built and painted for the first rehearsal. Guitry feigned worry in *Excelsior* a few days before the curtain was due to rise: ‘We are about to find out [...] if I was right to write *Ô mon bel inconnu* and if Reynaldo Hahn was not wrong to set it to music.’ ‘We have produced an operetta – no, it’s not an operetta, what is it exactly? I don’t know – well, we’ve produced something that has three acts and is due to be performed in two days’, added Hahn, apparently unsure of the name of the genre to which the new work belonged. He thereby signified the subtlety and complexity of the categorial term ‘comédie musicale’ that Sacha had noted under the title of the work – a term already employed for *L’Amour masqué* (André Messager) in 1923, *Mariette* (Oscar Straus) in 1928 and Hahn’s own *La Carmélite* (1902) and *Le Temps d’aimer* (1926). Nowadays one would tend, on principle, to place ‘musical comedy’ and *gaieté* in the drawer marked ‘frivolities’ – whereas it is not a question of the content but of the form of the work. For if *La*

² Well, what do you think, Monsieur, of my reply? / At the same time as I received your wire here, / You will have received my verses in Paris by post. / As for my warm regards, I enclose them herewith.
The four lines of the telegram are perfect alexandrines. (T.N.)

Carmélite is a *comédie musicale*, it is because of its destination (the Opéra-Comique), the musical continuity which excludes all spoken dialogue without musical accompaniment and entails a division into scenes rather than into airs, ensembles, duets, trios etc., and, finally, the type of performers required – opera singers. It is similar to the 'comédie lyrique' of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which enjoyed a form of resurgence in the Belle Époque with works such as *Fortunio* (Messenger, 1907) and *Marouf* (Rabaud, 1913). The *comédie musicale* of the 1920s is different in nature. *La Petite Fonctionnaire*, a successful spoken comedy from the beginning of the century, was set to music in 1921. It was André Messager who wrote the score for this... *comédie musicale* – Messager, whose long association with the musical comedies staged in London's West End inspired the designation of a type of work with rigorous artistic standards, in which the spoken part is in no way subservient to the musical element. The 'comedy' is a genuine play, into which the 'musical' part is interpolated with equally substantial numbers. Such was *L'Amour masqué* under the pen of Messager and Guitry; the latter adopted and popularised the name of the genre – so much so that it is often claimed that it originated with him – and added the detail that completes its modern definition: it is written above all for performance by singing actors. And it was this filiation that produced *Ô mon bel inconnu* – which, moreover, the term *comédie musicale* usefully distinguishes from the types of operetta widespread at the time: jazz, swing, or Viennese.

The musical rehearsals were overseen by Reynaldo himself, assisted by a youthful conductor who was to enjoy a notable career in the light repertory, Marcel Cariven. The composer thanked the young artist the day after the dress rehearsal, in a letter that the columnists hastened to make public:

Bouffes-Parisiens – M. Reynaldo Hahn has addressed the following letter to M. Marcel Cariven, conductor of the Bouffes-Parisiens:
'My dear friend,
'I would like to thank you once again for the invaluable assistance

you have given me during the delicate and sometimes awkward rehearsals of *Ô mon bel inconnu*.

'It is a joy to have by one's side, at such moments, an artist of your quality, an educated, refined musician, who understands every note without its significance needing to be spelt out for him, and who, moreover, devotes himself to his task with tireless dedication.

'Allow me to express my profound gratitude to you and to ask you to convey my affectionate regards to our dear and admirable little orchestra.

'Reynaldo Hahn'

(*Excelsior*, 9 October 1933)

During the dress rehearsal – held as a matinee performance, since Guitry, appearing at the Théâtre des Variétés in the evening, would otherwise not have been able to attend – Hahn came down from the balcony and took the baton. He conducted Act Two. At the curtain calls, the ovation for the authors was immense. This augured well for the future of the piece, because, as *L'Œil de Paris* (dated 14 October) pointed out, 'this start to the season is really not a brilliant one. Most of the theatres are more than half empty. Only the music halls are sold out every night. Operettas are also attracting customers: *Le Pays du sourire* is still running and *Ô mon bel inconnu* promises to be a success'.

The critics heaped laurels on the work. Henri Malherbe wrote a rave review in the columns of *Le Temps* (11 October), expressing the general opinion:

The score of *Ô mon bel inconnu* displays a freedom of conception not to be found in M. Reynaldo Hahn's earlier compositions. This freedom from dogma is evident right from the overture of this musical comedy. [...] Such is this score, polished with unparalleled elegance, and masterfully orchestrated. One might think one was listening to a very advanced improvisation, great music handled in playful fashion. No matter how independent or simple

he wishes to appear, M. Hahn never abandons his elevated diction, or rather his elevated melody. Beneath his nonchalant exterior, he cultivates his musical language with the utmost purity. [...] The new work of the composer of *Nausicaa* is of a higher order, showing complete accomplishment; thanks to it, the public will at last accord him the eminent status he deserves, and which we have long designated for him.

Sacha Guitry's mercurial wit received extravagant praise. The press was amused by his inimitable jests and flights of fancy, which he renewed indefatigably: commonplace situations giving rise to hilarious musical numbers – here, the Aubertin family breakfast, just as, two seasons earlier at the Théâtre de la Madeleine (*La S.A.D.M.P.*, Guitry/Beydts), the entrance number for Henri Morin had spent three minutes riffing on the subject of the steps and the staircase he is climbing; the giddy finale of Act Two with its sparkling puns; the hilarious 'alphabet' duet, a direct descendant of the advertising slogan 'L.S.K.C.S.KI' that Guitry had thought up for the dried milk and cocoa manufacturer Elesca in 1911;³ and many other pages where the author's whimsical verve flourishes in dazzling pirouettes of humour. The whole cast found favour – except for Simone Simon, whose reedy voice was judged much too thin. Aquistapace, a bass-baritone 'de l'Opéra' turned actor, charmed the audience once again; Guy Ferrant seduced it with his natural acting and elegant tenor; Abel Tarride, much loved by the Parisian public, had the spectators in the palm of his hand a few seconds after making his entrance. René Koval,

3 The initials, when pronounced in French, sound like 'Elesca, c'est exquis' (Elesca is exquisite). This is perhaps the moment for the present translator to confess the impossibility of rendering most if not all of Guitry's puns in English: in the alphabet duet, the literal meaning of the words spelt out by French pronunciation of the letters is indicated in square brackets (only the punch-line has a direct English equivalent!); in the Act Two finale, the double meanings of the French place-names are lost in English. (T.N.)

a schoolfellow of Sacha – who was not very fond of him, and so gave him a mute role almost until the end of the work – amazed everyone with the success he managed to make of a part without dialogue, and Suzanne Dantès was an irresistible Antoinette. Arletty played a fizzing, delightfully droll Félicie. Émile Vuillermoz reported in *Excelsior* (7 October):

A glittering cast defends this delightful work. The role of the hatter with an insight into female psychology is taken with rare mastery by Aquistapace. In reality, it was a part intended for Sacha Guitry, who would have played it incomparably; but perhaps Aquistapace sings it better. Tarride only had to walk onto the stage to conquer the entire audience, hold it in the palm of his hand and do whatever he liked with it. What an admirable actor! Koval has achieved such a degree of virtuosity in his facial expressions that Sacha has amused himself by getting him to milk the applause in a silent role. Guy Ferrant, a high-class singer and an elegant actor, brought a great deal of style to a rather difficult part. Pierre Viot was quite charming in no less tricky a role, and Numès *fils* triumphed in the bit part of a shop assistant, filled out with admirable strength and truculence. The female cast is dominated by the prodigious comic force of Arletty, who, with clenched teeth, radiant countenance and eyes sparkling with mischief, gives all her lines and songs an inimitable savour. Her success was overwhelming, and perfectly merited. Mlle Suzanne Dantès lends a gracious presence to the misunderstood wife preparing to abandon herself to the 'handsome stranger' who is to console her. And Mlle Simone Simon, whose amusing little spoilt-child pout is familiar to cinemagoers, played a single card, her youthful freshness, and won the game.

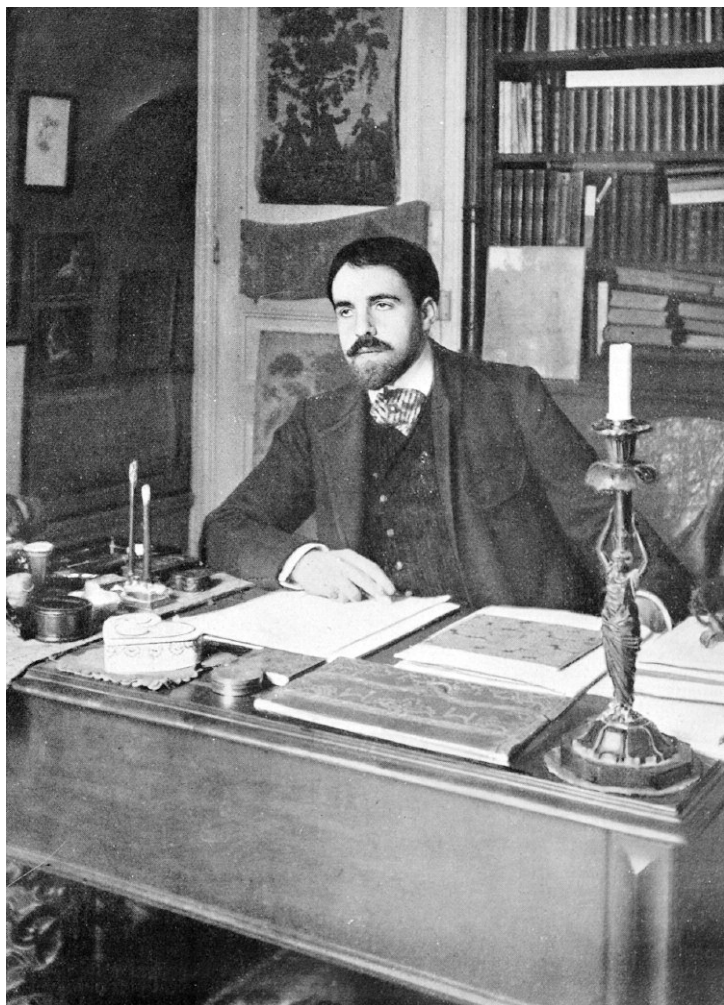
But 'Poucette', a Parisian spectator and reader of *La Femme de France*, was not of the same opinion, and aired her views on the readers' letters page (6 May 1934):

I have just seen *Ô mon bel inconnu* at the Bouffes-Parisiens; I would never have believed that Guitry, who chooses his performers with such subtlety, could offer us an artist of such paltry stature as Simone Simon. She is ugly, mannered and sings very badly. Around me, during the performance, I heard many critical remarks about her, and I wonder how, with the fine artists we have who are waiting in vain for an engagement, we can be presented with such mediocrity. As for the fellow who plays the fiancé [Guy Ferrant], I wanted to throw him, along with a few rotten tomatoes, a complete wardrobe.

The show ran at the Bouffes-Parisiens for ninety-two performances. It was an unqualified success. Radio-Paris broadcast it live from the Bouffes-Parisiens at 8.45 p.m. on 9 November 1933, the same day on which Claude Autant-Lara's film *Ciboulette*, based on the operetta by Reynaldo Hahn, was released. The Pathé company recorded the musical numbers of *Ô mon bel inconnu* between 30 November and 18 December 1933. Those 78s offer a fine memento of the work, which was never seen again in Paris. The Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens distributed little publicity leaflets adorned with excerpts from reviews of *Ô mon bel inconnu*. Including this one, published in *Le Journal*:

Sacha Guitry and Reynaldo Hahn have in common a lightness of touch, a veil of irony thrown over a quivering tenderness, which, when bundled together in a single bouquet, make their new work one of the most delightful shows one could see. It satisfies mind, heart and ear alike.

The same still holds true nearly ninety years later.



Reynaldo Hahn at his desk.
Musica, March 1911.

Reynaldo Hahn à son bureau.
Musica, mars 1911.