

The true tradition of the French school

André Lénéka

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This premiere at the Théâtre de la Michodière was an exquisite evening. M. André Messager, more youthful and ebullient than ever, ravished us with the freshness of his melodic ideas and the finesse of his pure, classical orchestration, brimming with musical learning. And what wit there is in these numbers, what charm they exude, subjugating an audience that allows itself to be lulled and seduced as it listens to them. Here we have true operetta music, and French operetta music into the bargain. Which is very much to our liking.

After all, we are beginning to weary of the imported American music that we are forced to consume to the point of indigestion, while the Americans, since the war, have given up drinking our champagne, as sparkling, amusing and effervescent as the music of our French operettas, when it is signed by such men as Messager and Reynaldo Hahn today, and yesterday by Offenbach, Hervé, Lecocq, Planquette, Métra, or indeed Audran, Serpette, Varney and others whom I forget. In those days, too, we danced, we still dance to that music, which has always retained its youth, but we danced ‘without shaking our fleas’, as one of our most famous humorists observed one evening while watching a couple writhing, wriggling, rubbing against each other to the rhythm – *is it a rhythm?* – of the shimmy.

All our modern operetta composers, highly gifted though some of them are, have wasted their time and talent trying to Americanise themselves to please a cosmopolitan clientele to whom French good taste is

no longer relevant. Messenger has sounded the charge, despite his age, and with what vigour! Let our young people rally to his gesture of deliverance and regain faith in themselves and in our bright French musical genius. Let them go and hear *Passionément* again and again, let them reread the scores of the composers whose names we have mentioned and all of Messenger's output, and they will return, their spirits high, to the true tradition of the French school, which is that of melody – melody eternal as truth. Melody, without which music is no more than a combination of notes produced by a creatively impotent technician.

This may all seem terribly serious when we are discussing an operetta. Perhaps! But it needs to be said, precisely because the score that Messenger has written for the libretto of *Passionément* renders even more... pointless a number of 'Franco-American' pieces, which in truth are neither French nor American, and which popular taste had the pretension of imposing on us as the new music that should replace the old sort. Whoa there! We have the opportunity, at the end of an evening that was a real treat for the ears, to protest once again – for all our readers will be aware that this is not the first time we have defended French music against French composers themselves, who know neither how to defend themselves nor how to shake off the foreign yoke, to which they owe only one thing: the loss of their personality! And since the masterly Messenger provides us with this opportunity, we seize it with both hands and protest once more against the invasion of all our theatres by exotic music, which means our national composers can no longer earn a living from their work in their own country.



And now, should we tell you the story, nimbly handled right up to the denouement by two master librettists, Maurice Hennequin and the prince of lyrics, Willemetz, which has provided Messenger with the pretext to write another delightful score? What would be the point? All the newspapers have related it to you in great detail. Since our magazine is published last of all, we prefer to express our joy and try to share it with you.

Go to the Théâtre de la Michodière to hear bright, cheerful and tender music, a distinguished and graceful emanation of our national genius by a master of the genre, whose technical skill has no other purpose than to underline and illuminate his melodic inspiration, constantly renewed just as sunshine renews the spring.

Is the interpretation of *Passionnément* equal to this choice work? Yes, as far as the spoken dialogue is concerned; less so for the sung part. For example, we must unreservedly praise M. Koval, an artist of rare and personal imagination. Koval portrays his American, Stevenson, in unforgettably caricatural fashion. His amusing accent, his invariably appropriate movements, his mobile, mischievous facial expressions, his subtle comic acting in the most outrageous situations are in perfect style. This is art. Great art. Finally M. Koval, with his small, reedy voice, sings tastefully and never breaks the line of the music. He is a precious player for operetta. Let us also congratulate M. Géo Bury (Robert Perceval) for his acting and vocal skill and his comrades Lucien Baroux and Charles Lorrain, both excellent actors. Mlle Jeanne Saint-Bonnet, whom we found infinitely pleasing in *Elle ou moi* at the Théâtre Daunou and *Trois Jeunes Filles nues* at the Bouffes-Parisiens, is always charming to watch on the stage. She speaks her lines to ravishing effect, but it seemed to us that she was less comfortable in the important vocal part of her role. It is true that she had stage fright and that Messenger's music does not suit everyone. Mlle Denise Grey was the joy of the evening, along with Koval. In her soubrette role she was delectable and as sunny as one could wish. She is full of energy and enthusiasm, cheerful... and so pleasant to look at too. Mlle Renée Duler sings with wit and acts as she sings. She was perfect as Hélène Le Barrois.

The piece was well staged under the direction of Edmond Roze, and it is unnecessary to add that its varied sets were remarkable and picturesque.



Illustration for the work's premiere at the Théâtre de la Michodière.
 J. Gana Collection.

Visuel pour la création de l'œuvre à la Michodière.
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