

Albert Willemetz at work

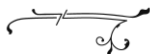
Georges de Wissant

Le Soir, 6 February 1926

Among the authors of 'lyrics' (a term he himself introduced into French), the great master is unquestionably M. Albert Willemetz. With his astonishing flexibility, his invariably unexpected, spontaneous wit, his *métier* of a deftness one might well describe as acrobatic, M. Willemetz enjoys a richly deserved reputation that has been firmly established by such operettas as *Phi-Phi*, *Ta Bouche* and *Dédé*. It is even rather curious to note that no other writer of *couplets* has so far managed to match him.

When I telephoned him to make an appointment, he said: 'I don't want to take you out of your way – I'll give you my answers right now.' I had heard of telephone collaborations between him and composers, and I thought it might work out rather expensive, since I was paying for the call. But, all too pleased to have him at the other end of the line and save some of my always precious time, I took up pencil and paper and listened to him talk: 'In general,' he told me, 'I work from the outlines or "skel-etons" that the composers bring me. Messenger is the only one with whom I changed my working method. I brought him my finished verses, and he fitted his music to them without changing a line. People have expressed amazement at the introduction of the system of writing the verse to the music. The truth is that we were forced to do so by the syncopated rhythms characteristic of modern music. There is no denying that a musical evolution has taken place, the transformation of which is analogous to that of social mores. This music corresponds to the age of the telephone, the aeroplane, the wireless; it is the music that suits our feverish, intense existence. Every form of art, from dance to painting, has been

influenced by the mentality of our contemporaries. The rhythm of the jazz band is the very expression of our modern life.’



THE LYRICIST MUST YIELD TO THE COMPOSER

‘I believe that when this working method is used, the lyricist must subordinate his outlines to those of the music to the greatest possible extent. Only one thing matters: the piece as a whole, which must give an impression of perfect unity. The lyrics must “stick” to the music as closely as possible. I rarely ask a composer to change a note or a musical syllable; it’s up to the lyricist to do what’s necessary to achieve complete homogeneity, even to the detriment of his text. For example, M. Vuillermoz, criticising this way of doing things, once wrote in an article: “How can a composer be inspired by a phrase like *Elle n’est pas du tout si mal que ça?*”¹ The truth is that the composer had no need to find inspiration in my words, since, on the contrary, it was I who had written my words to his music, and the precise outline of that music meant it was impossible to find any words that could fit it better. The popularity of the number in question is sufficient to justify this thesis.

‘Yet let no one think that it is easy to achieve this close correspondence of words to music. Rip called me “Ludovic Halévite”. He is completely mistaken. Sometimes I have spent three or four days on part of a song. One need only try the experience to realise how difficult it is to solve this sort of puzzle, which consists in fitting sufficiently sonorous and appropriate words to music as discontinuous as today’s music is. The other day I happened to be re-reading the *couplets* Meilhac and Halévy wrote for Offenbach. They have nothing in common with the work we do today. Almost all the lines have eight syllables, especially in *La Fille de Madame Angot*,² where the authors never tried to use any other metre.’



HUMOUR IN WORD ASSOCIATIONS

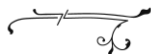
'In that way, they may have achieved a certain fantasy in the [verbal] idea, but no humour in the aural expression of that idea. For what we have contributed with our modern formula is the association, the clash of certain words that can produce comic effects when associated with the appropriate music. This is what happens, for example, in the famous quartet from *Ta Bouche*:

Lui faisant dire maman
 Je veux savoir comment
 Elle dit maman, ell' crie maman
 Dans le moment du grand moment.³

'It's almost always the first phrase of the refrain that gives me my starting point. I manage to find the phrase in question among the sort of things we often say in real life:

Moi, j'ai fait ça machinalement,
 Ça c'est une chose qu'on ne peut pas oublier.⁴

'Most of the time I give the composer his starting point, while at other times I find that starting point in the music he has composed. The strangest thing is that I can't read a note of music, but I have a very strong sense of rhythm. All I need is for the tune to be played once or twice and I can pick it up. I hum it and it turns naturally into a rhythmic phrase. The great difficulty is to find a good "skeleton" for the lyrics, in which the keys are respected and the male and female rhymes fall in the right place. It's a technique one acquires after a while, but it calls for a very special sense of metre and rhythm.'

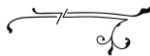


I MAKE MY OWN SKELETONS

'I frequently work very closely with the composer. While he plays his music on the piano, I try to fit the lyrics immediately. Sometimes I also work alone, from skeletons that I always make myself. Composers have a tendency to give you inaccurate skeletons, and you avoid a great waste of time by making up yourself what we call "dummy lyrics", that is, words that don't make any sense, but which indicate the caesuras, the pauses, the rhymes of the lyrics to come.

'It took Maurice Yvain and me just twelve days to write *Ta Bouche*, but we worked without a break, even at night. It must be said that we were in Le Trayas, where the heat was scorching. We were devoured by mosquitoes and incapable of sleeping. Our temples covered with compresses of camphor water to soothe the pain caused by the bites, we spent in working the hours when it was impossible to sleep. On that occasion I broke all my speed records for producing a score. *Phi-Phi* was written in twenty-four days. On the other hand, it took me three years to finish *Dédé*.

'For fifteen years of my life I worked from four o'clock until ten in the morning. Today I work early every morning, trying to get away from the phone calls that are so dreadful for sustained work.'



As I hang up the receiver, after having thanked M. Willemetz for his remarks, it occurs to me that if he dreads phone calls, his are just as much to be dreaded by the other subscribers. I reflect with horror that an interviewer colleague might have beaten me to it by and I could have waited half an hour for the call.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

- 1 'She's really not so bad as all that' – from Christiné's *Madame* (1923).
- 2 Willemetz's mistake: the work in question is by Lecocq, and Meilhac and Halévy were not among its three librettists.

- 3 Untranslatable onomatopoeic wordplay.
- 4 'I did it mechanically – / It's not something you can forget' (viz., lovemaking) – also from Yvain's *Ta Bouche* (1922).



TOILETTES PORTÉES PAR M^{lle} JEANNE SAINT-BONNET DANS « PASSIONNEMENT », DE MM. HENNEQUIN ET WILLEMETZ, MUSIQUE DE M. MESSEGER, AU THÉÂTRE DE LA MICHODIÈRE. — CREATIONS WORTH.

Mlle Saint-Bonnet's costumes.
J. Gana Collection.

Les costumes de M^{lle} Saint-Bonnet.
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