

The *Péricholes* of Offenbach, and Marc Minkowski's version

Alexandre Dratwicki

Although *La Périchole* is one of Jacques Offenbach's most famous *opéras-bouffes* today, its genesis and first run initially seemed fairly unpromising. After the great successes of 1867 – Offenbach had shows running simultaneously in four Parisian theatres – the year 1868 began disastrously with the failure of *Le Château à Toto* and the lacklustre revival of *Le Pont des soupirs*. But the autumn saw his anxiety abate, culminating as it did in the premiere of *L'Île de Tulipatan*. Then came the turn of *La Périchole*, given at the Théâtre des Variétés on 6 October 1868 with Hortense Schneider in the title role. Partial success... or partial failure? The audience did not derive as much enjoyment as expected from this gallery of poverty-stricken, starving characters, despised by a tyrant, however ridiculous he might be. Some were even offended by the 'tipsy' scene – whose protagonist is a woman! – and the wedding that ended Act One, with bride and groom both inebriated... The few hit numbers (the *Couplets espagnols* and the 'Letter Song') were not enough to keep the work in the repertory, despite music as inventive and catchy as that of *La Vie parisienne* or *Orphée aux Enfers*. It was not until after the upheavals of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 had died down that the score returned to the theatre, in extensively revised form. While the first version was in two acts, the revival of 25 April 1874, again at the Théâtre des Variétés, comprised three acts and four tableaux. A new chapter begins with this music,

which is less sarcastically humorous than that of the previous decade, heralding a new 'opéra-comique' aesthetic that was to ensure the triumph of Lecocq, among others.

The 1868 version has nineteen numbers, five of which were to disappear in 1874: no. 15 (*Duo des bijoux*), no. 16 (*Couplets*, 'Aie donc confiance'), no. 17 (Chorus, *Le Couvert du Roi*), no. 17bis (*Entrée des chanteurs*) and no. 18 (*Séquedille*, 'Le Chanteur et la Chanteuse'). Act One was to remain identical for the revival, although the *Séquedille* (no. 5, 'Le Muletier et La Jeune Personne') was mentioned then as 'skipped in the theatre'; it was therefore not sung systematically in the nineteenth century. The first part of Act Two, unchanged, constitutes the complete second act of the 1874 version. It ends with no. 14, the ensemble of the 'Recalcitrant Husbands', which thus becomes a finale, whereas it is the central number of Act Two in the 1868 version. For the occasion, Offenbach modified the refrain on which the curtain now falls. The evolving structure and dramatic progression of this extended number make it an ideal conclusion to an act; among other things, it opens up interesting theatrical perspectives by creating a piquant suspense effect.

The version seen in 1868 continues with no. 15, a duet between La Périchole and the Viceroy entitled *Duo des bijoux*, whose line 'Ah! que j'aime les diamants' is a nod to the hit number 'Ah! que j'aime les militaires' from *La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein*. No. 16 is a reprise by La Périchole of the song 'Les femmes il n'y a que ça', in which she sings to Piquillo that one should not be afraid to follow one's beloved when she knows where she is going. No. 17 – the 'Couvert du Roi' – is a chorus sung while dinner is served to Don Andrés... who refuses to eat anything for fear of being poisoned. No. 18 is a full reprise of the *Séquedille* from the first act with new words summarising the entire plot of the work. Don Andrés forgives the couple and allows La Périchole to keep her diamonds, and the Finale (no. 19) was to remain the same in 1874, namely a reprise of 'L'Espagnol et la jeune Indienne' with new words. None of this is recorded here, and the different numbering of the two versions does not facilitate comparisons between them.

The 'Second *Périchole*' (1874) skilfully contrives a prison scene that possibly harks back to the huge success then enjoyed by the prison scene found in Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*, a model of its kind in those years, even if the situation had been a theatrical commonplace since the middle of the eighteenth century. This first tableau of the new third act initially gives centre stage to the two character roles of Panatellas and Hinoyosa. Their catchy *Couplets-Boléro* is Offenbach at his best. However, the tableau's key number was allotted to Piquillo – the tenor lead, deprived of a real solo in the 1868 version – who is now allowed to express himself at great length in a highly poetic scene. Piquillo's gradual descent into slumber is perfectly rendered by a delicate orchestration, with muted strings and flutes in their low register weaving a vaporous halo around him. Another striking number, the *Trio du joli geôlier*, blows a blast of derision upon a situation which, up to that point, would not have been out of place in an *opéra-comique de demi-caractère* by Auber or Ambroise Thomas.

Because he has had occasion to conduct both versions in full, and because absolutely complete recordings – though not on period instruments – already exist of both versions, Marc Minkowski has decided to present his own conception of an 'ideal' *Périchole*, rooted in the comic and dramatic effectiveness of the original 1868 score up to its no. 14 (with the 'Maris récalcitrants'), but introducing the situation and the highlights of the 1874 prison tableau, while omitting – from Act Three of the 1874 version – the *Trio de la prison* no. 19, the *Mélodrame* no. 19bis, the *Finale* no. 20, and the *Chœur des patrouilles, Ariette-valse des Trois Cousines et Ensemble* no. 21.

FANTASIE
SUR
LA PÉRICHOLE
Opéra bouffe
DE
J. OFFENBACH
pour le Piano par
EMILE TAVAN
Prix: 7f50
Paris, PH. MAQUET, Éditeur, 25, Rue de Londres.
Imprimeur Mmes BRANDELS
Propriété de l'Éditeur pour tous pays
Tous droits d'exécution publique, de reproduction et d'arrangement réservés.
By Edouard Thury, Del.

Fantasia on *La Périchole* by Emile Tavan.
Palazzetto Bru Zane Collection.

Fantaisie sur *La Périchole* par Emile Tavan.
Collection Palazzetto Bru Zane.