

## Removing the veils of oblivion

Alexandre Dratwicki

Artistic Director, Palazzetto Bru Zane

The posterity of musical works is a subject shrouded in mystery: nothing really explains it, and even the most convincing artistic, economic or social arguments can only do so much to disentangle the skein of reasons for the oblivion into which certain compositions have fallen. While many poor scores, jeered at their premieres, founder at once, there are other operas which have been booed before being adulated (*Carmen*), or which an exceptional artist has transcended and reinstated in the repertory (Maria Callas in Cherubini's *Médée* or Spontini's *La Vestale*), or to which musicological perseverance has granted a lustre they failed to achieve when first performed (Gounod's *Cinq-Mars*, Godard's *Dante*, Hahn's *L'Île du rêve*, among others). But the most curious case is that of works which, having enjoyed distinct and lasting success on the international stage, subsequently sink into oblivion. Now, in this category – to which Saint-Saëns's *Phryné* belongs – it should be noted that *opéra-comique* tops the list of works marooned by history. This is doubtless chiefly because, with its spoken dialogue that is so difficult to speak well, the genre suffers from its mixed status as both theatre and opera. The operatic dilettante is bored by the spoken passages and the theatre lover is disconcerted by the dramatic timescale of the sung numbers, whose text all too often escapes him or her.

Of course, the authors of *Phryné* adopted a solution that had already proved its worth in facilitating export of a bicephalous entity misjudged outside France: they transformed the dialogue into recitative, as had been

done for *Carmen*, *Mignon* and *Lakmé*. And it is this version, completed by André Messager (at the request of Saint-Saëns), that the Palazzetto Bru Zane has decided to record for our sixth CD-book devoted to the composer. But it must be admitted that, even draped in its new finery, the reworked *Phryné* continues to betray its genesis, so typical of *opéra-comique*: a lively but never melodramatic libretto, piquant but never hilarious humour, a *juste milieu* – to use a term current in early Romantic discussions of the visual arts – that produces no outstanding bravura arias or orchestral movements which can be excerpted for concert performance and easily achieve the status of ‘hits’, thus guaranteeing the work publicity and ensuring it enters the consciousness of the wider public. And it is a fact that no one knows any of the numbers from *Phryné*, cast as it is in a single mould, its parts inseparable from the continuous whole.

And yet, as the following texts explain, what a triumph this two-act opera enjoyed at its premiere in Paris in 1893, how quickly it spread to the provinces, and how effective were its Italian and German translations! Saint-Saëns himself wrote, in the twilight of his life, that it was one of his best scores, especially Act Two, which he regarded as perfect in both form and content. But the First World War, in closing a chapter of operatic art that some observers deemed outmoded, erased at a stroke both the ‘historical’ repertory of Hérold, Boieldieu and Auber, and more recent productions such as *Phryné*.

To resurrect this score today and ensure its qualities would be appreciated to the full, it was necessary, as always, to recruit singers experienced in the appropriate style: idiomatic French (with its famous rolled R, which is still the subject of debate), lively tempi, effective control of vibrato, renunciation of Italianate effects (portamento in particular), awareness of the pitfalls of the diphthong and of excessive darkening of the bright vowel sounds (*i*, *é*, *u*). It also called for a purposeful conductor, a lover of the voice, who would favour theatrical élan over orchestral grandiloquence and take care to homogenise the performances of soloists and chorus. In choosing the cast, it was also necessary to bear in mind this element, which is not always taken into account: a ‘recording’ voice – one

that remains pure, without a trace of unevenness, when the precision of the microphone reveals its slightest inflections – is often the antithesis of an ‘opera house’ voice, whose primary concern is to project vocal volume, sometimes to the detriment of textual intelligibility, multiplying technical effects in order to ensure a flow of beautiful sound. Finally, we needed a flexible, curious and committed orchestra, and an irreproachable qualitative partnership, which we found at the Opéra de Rouen Normandie. Our thanks go out to all of them, now that the lovely Phryne can once again take the stage to reveal beauties said to be more alluring than those of Venus herself...



Set design for Act One of *Phryné*.  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Esquisse de décor pour l'acte I de *Phryné*.  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Camille Saint-Saëns.  
Palazzetto Bru Zane Collection.

Camille Saint-Saëns.  
Collection Palazzetto Bru Zane.