

The evening of the premiere

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There are two opposing trends in the present management of the Opéra-Comique: one, taking with it a few young members of the New School, embarks for the East, the land of reverie, the land of chimeras; the other peacefully pursues its course towards the setting sun. Between these two forces pushing in opposite directions there is emulation, but there can be no struggle. It was thus that the great philosopher Tin and the little mandarin Li-Fou lived in peace under the same roof in the blue land of China. Both men had caused a great commotion by the diversity of their beliefs; but one day, having admitted to each other that they were no more devoted to the doctrines of Confucius than to those of Lao-tse, they left their disciples to fight it out, threw in their lot together, and, while continuing to preach different religions, made such a good union that they were never parted again. I like the Chinese very much, but I prefer the Japanese. In the sciences and the arts the latter have long since surpassed their masters; they are polite and gentle, and the bronze magots of Miyako smile with infinitely greater wit and finesse than the porcelain magots of Peking. I have already made a trip to Japan, a very interesting one, in M. de Beauvoir's book; I am very happy to be taken back there with *La Princesse jaune*, by the whim of M. Gallet and the will of M. Camille Saint-Saëns.

The 'yellow princess' is a little woman painted on the Japanese screen which decorates Dr Kornélis's study,

A bizarre image

Which he keeps near him like something rare

and of which Léna, the doctor's cousin, is extremely jealous. And Léna is absolutely right to feel that way, since Master Kornélis, for all that he is a Dutchman and a scholar, possesses a susceptible heart and a mind in such turmoil that he addresses madrigals to the little princess. Here is one of which M. Gallet gives us both text and translation; it is Léna who sings it.

Outsou Sémisi Kamini,
O Ming! If my body is a slave,
Tayénèba Harèùté,
If it cannot break its fetters,
Asa Nagéku Kimi Sakariùté,
Lulled by dreams of love,
Waga Korou Kimi,
Towards you my thoughts fly!
In the humble nest of my tenderness,
Yoiméni Miyé Tsaourou,
You reign alone, O my mistress!

The music of this song must naturally be written in the Japanese style, which differs essentially from the Chinese. It is very simple in harmony, the accompaniment being in unison with the melody, and it is certainly not any difficulty of execution that will prevent it from becoming popular. I have no idea whether it is an original theme or a felicitous imitation, as I did not deem it absolutely indispensable to find out.

When the song is over, Léna angrily crumples up the manuscript and, changing her intonation and style, gives her yellow rival a sharp dressing-down to the rhythm of one of those boleros so well known and invariably applauded at the Opéra-Comique:

What is your power?
Must one have
(Tell me, witch!)

Long slanting eyes
And painted features
In order to please him?

Enter Kornélis who, without seeing Léna, throws his snowy coat onto the furniture and carefully places on the table some phials and other objects which he takes from his pockets. 'It was *kokha!*' he exclaims. 'When I think it took me ten nights to translate the word!' *Kokha* is a variety of hashish. One can produce from it a beverage that gives the drinker marvellous dreams, without any risk of death, and turns his most extravagant desires into reality. Kornélis fills his cup with the brown liquor and drains it in one gulp. Then the ecstasy begins: everything changes around him. We were in a doctor's study in Holland, but now we are in a Japanese interior, and the portrait of Léna has taken the place of the yellow princess on the screen.

Through the open window,
Here I see the throng of merchants!
Here are the pagodas, the fields,
The houses and the verdant plain
Whence the breeze wafts to me
The delicate aroma of tea!
Here are the roof of rushes and the painted wall,
The brightly coloured silken hangings,
And the bronze monsters that guard the boundaries
Of the flowering gardens.
Nothing is lacking here,
Save the idol on whom I call!
My charming vision, where can she be?

The reader will have guessed that the princess who presents herself before Kornélis's charmed eyes is Léna, in a dazzling Japanese costume. After a love scene that leaves the learned doctor a little disenchanting, Léna runs

off, the dream fades, the objects return to their original form, and we hear in the wings the joyful strains of a fair which, unfortunately, the authors do not permit us to witness. Perhaps this will be an even greater disappointment for regular spectators at the Opéra-Comique, who are always fond of the festivities which, in conventional pieces, accompany the expected wedding at the end. But, although Léna marries Kornélis, I assure you that neither M. Gallet nor M. Saint-Saëns intended to make this a conventional piece. Call it what you will, a reverie, a *japonerie* (as one of my colleagues has dubbed it), M. Gallet's verses are delicious, full of colour and adorable fantasy.

The score is the first dramatic work of M. Camille Saint-Saëns, or at least the first to be performed, for there exists in the young master's portfolio or in the archives of the Opéra-Comique an opera which was composed long before *La Princesse jaune*, and which is called *Le Timbre d'argent*. My excellent friend Xavier Boisselot had set most of it to music when the libretto was taken away from him to be given to a composer who was quicker on his feet and better ensconced in the musical milieu than the (alas!) somewhat forgotten creator of *Ne touchez pas à la reine!* And so *Le Timbre d'argent* has generated only music that will probably never be known, and music that is not yet known.

M. Camille Saint-Saëns, whose childhood was very precocious, began to play the piano with only one finger. At the age of fifteen and a half, he composed a symphony which was performed with great success at the Salle Sainte-Cécile, under the direction of M. Seghers. It was on this occasion that, arriving one day in the aforementioned hall, where everything was ready for the rehearsal of a work by one of his colleagues, M. Saint-Saëns sprang up to the music stand of the absent conductor (this time it was not M. Seghers who was awaited) and conducted the performance at sight with his umbrella. I would have forgotten this incident if M. Saint-Saëns himself had not reminded me of it. Today M. Saint-Saëns plays the piano with all ten fingers, and the organ as well. He is one of the masters of the keyboard. And when he has the honour of being placed at the head of an orchestra, he leaves his umbrella in the cloakroom and uses the

traditional baton to beat time. The time for childish things is past. I believe it was in 1864 that M. Saint-Saëns competed for the Prix de Rome. It was M. Victor Sieg who won it. The self-esteem of M. Saint-Saëns, whose reputation as a great musician was already well established in 1864, must have recovered from this failure easily enough. But academic traditions have always been dear to him, and it is wholly inaccurate to say that he rejects them today.

Everything is clear, everything is correct in *La Princesse jaune*. It is a fine, elegant, colourful work, and one does not need to torture one's mental faculties to understand and appreciate it properly. The author moves from the Japanese style to the customary Opéra-Comique style, and one would follow him much more easily through the caprices of his imagination if one had not repeatedly heard it said left, right and centre that M. Saint-Saëns belongs to the New School and that he is a disciple of Wagner. Moreover, M. Saint-Saëns would not have chosen so modest a framework as that of *La Princesse jaune*, whose score, Overture included, comprises no more than seven or eight numbers with little development, to reveal himself as the zealous advocate of a new system and provoke a serious discussion. He is cleverer and much more astute than that. If his orchestral parts are written with great care and sometimes take on an importance that somewhat overshadows the melodic line, if in the scenes with two characters the voices sing neither in thirds nor in sixths, if, even, recitatives and ariosos sometimes blend into airs and songs, it cannot be said that these are the characteristic signs by which one recognises an innovative and bold genius.

The Overture to *La Princesse jaune* consists of some of the work's principal motifs, at least two of which are in the Japanese style. I have already quoted Léna's song; I will now quote Kornélis's air, giving it much higher praise:

I love, in its distant mystery,
A glittering land...

– while regretting that I cannot reproduce the poetic and fragrant stanzas of M. Louis Gallet in their entirety. The composer's inspiration is here wholly equal to the poet's. It would be impossible to paint a more beautiful subject for a Japanese fan with more discreet, more harmonious, more delicate colours. This evocative air is also one of the most successful and interesting numbers in the score. An accompaniment of jingles and a few tam-tam strokes played from the wings add considerable spice to the little chorus sung by women's voices... in Japanese. In the ensuing duet, the motif from the evocation of Japan reappears and we listen with pleasure to a little folksong:

Over the clear, unrippled water
Glides my boat...

This is, I believe, a translation of a Japanese song, and, given its melodic contour and the reproduction of certain intervals which the composer has already used, would seem to indicate that the Japanese style does not possess much in the way of variety. The little fairground waltz, heard from the wings, and the final duet are a tribute paid by M. Camille Saint-Saëns to the true, the eminently French genre of *opéra-comique*. And at least this time no one was in any doubt about that.

The instrumentation of *La Princesse jaune* is full of delightful details, ingenious combinations of timbres and imitative effects that could not be bettered. However, I will take the liberty of recording one reservation. When Kornélis empties the goblet which is about to make him oblivious to reality and introduce him into a dream, why does the orchestra play an ascending chromatic scale, since it is indisputable that a drink *descends* when it is swallowed? I find the flute motif that M. Gounod placed in the third act of *Le Médecin malgré lui* much more characteristic and strikingly realistic.

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