

# A new operatic world

*Alexandre Dratwicki*

‘Although resounding flops are rare at the Opéra, successes as brilliant as that of *La Vestale* are rarer still.’ It was in these flattering terms that *Le Publiciste* dated 17 December 1807 began its review of the first night of Spontini’s opera, which had taken place two days earlier on the stage of the Académie Impériale de Musique. Observers had anticipated a significant event even before the curtain rose, for most operas of the time were underpinned by a strong political message associated with Napoleon’s expansionist strategy. The Empress Joséphine attended the performance, even though her husband had been off at the wars for several weeks.

The entire press agreed at once that libretto and music possessed equal merit (and what merit!) – a fact sufficiently rare to be worth noting. And yet the words of Étienne de Jouy, inspired by the writings of Winckelmann, had been rejected successively by the composers Méhul and Boieldieu. It was a pity for them that they did not perceive the magnificent stage effects implicit in the libretto. ‘The essential interest of the subject seemed to us to acquire a great deal of force in its developments; the progression is regular, rapid and interesting; none of the situations is ineffective’, observed the *Journal de Paris*, while *Le Moniteur universel* thought the plot was ‘treated in highly dramatic fashion’. The references to ancient Rome permitted a useful parallel with the ambitions of Napoleon’s empire: did not the courageous general Licinius embody Napoleon himself, protector of the oppressed, ready to defy ecclesiastical power and its unjust rules?

Spontini’s music was greeted with similar enthusiasm: ‘it succeeded in every respect’, according to the *Journal de Paris*. Although some commentators questioned the cogency of a duet that was a little too extended

or the occasional recitative that lacked vigour, all of them praised the originality of the harmony and the melodic invention. The critic of *Le Moniteur universel* assured his readers that regular exposure to the work would enable them gradually to discern details that had gone unnoticed at first hearing:

*La Vestale* must gain from frequent hearings. It is only since they have performed it that the artists have agreed on its merits: this is a good sign; it shows that the work is making progress in their minds as they hear, study and execute it. The same will be true of the public, and consequently of ourselves, who will enjoy discovering new beauties in it so as to point them out when we discuss subsequent performances of the opera.

The visual element of the production was by no means overshadowed, and also contributed to the success of the premiere. The set for the forum in the first act was admired for its superb neoclassical design, but it was above all the ‘Field of Execration’ – the fearsome place where Julia is to be buried in the third act – that impressed the spectators, thanks to ‘one of the finest moonlight effects hitherto simulated in the theatre’ (*Journal de Paris*). In these splendid sets, the characters moved with dignity and panache: ‘the entrance of Licinius on his chariot is truly imposing’, wrote the same journalist.

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that the libretto, music and sets would not have sufficed to achieve a triumph if they had not been served – or, better still, borne aloft – by a first-rate cast of singers. Sometimes mocked for their harsh, forced vocal style, Marie-Thérèse Maillard, François Lays, Étienne Lainez and Henri-Étienne Dérivis found in the Chief Vestal, Cinna, Licinius and the Supreme Pontiff roles commensurate with their abilities, in which their technique produced a splendid effect on this occasion. According to *Le Publiciste*, ‘Mlle Maillard sang the *Morning Hymn* with great talent. [...] Lays sang with the taste and skill that we know he possesses; Lainez invested in his role all the warmth and expressiveness with which he is wont to enliven the stage. The beautiful low notes of

Dérivis's voice, used with great artistry by M. Spontini, produced the most felicitous effects in the recitative.' If these artists shine so brightly, it was also because Spontini retouched many details of his original concept for them. There are numerous discrepancies between the autograph manuscript and the final score printed by Érard. The transpositions and variants for Mlle Maillard as the Chief Vestal can be explained by the specificity of a soprano voice that had once been comfortable in a high tessitura, but over the years had gradually acquired an abyssal low register and high notes of wall-shaking power: was she not known as 'Mlle Braillard' (Miss Bawler)? The case of Cinna and Licinius is considerably more complex. The Roman general was originally to have been sung by Lays, whom Spontini – despite the ambiguity of his highly individual baritenor voice – regarded as a baritone, while the role of Cinna was to have been sung by Lainez (hence its heroic tenor tessitura). The arrival in the company of Louis Nourrit, whose status would normally have led him to take on Licinius in the near future, and – above all – the protests of Lainez, who claimed the role of *premier ténor amoureux* (tenor romantic lead) which he had always sung in the past, forced Spontini partially to rewrite the parts. Lainez sang Licinius, and Lays took Cinna. But the final printed version still bears the scars of these hesitations, which remain a headache even today for artistic directors seeking to cast the roles.

If there was one singer for whom *La Vestale* marked a favourable turning point in her career, it was unquestionably the soprano Caroline Branchu, who had joined the Opéra company in 1798 and on whom Berlioz was still bestowing laurels in the 1820s (she retired in July 1825). The role of Julia was tailor-made for her, and enabled her to demonstrate both her sensitivity in introspective moments and her power in dramatic outbursts. Her voice, 'so pure and so melodious' (*Le Publiciste*), blossomed in airs of strongly contrasting character. The great scene 'Toi que j'implore... / Impitoyables dieux...', in the second act, is probably the longest – or at any rate the most demanding – monologue ever composed for a singer of the Opéra up to that time. But, with the hindsight of two centuries, it is above all the ariosos 'Ô des infortunés' and 'Toi que je laisse

sur la terre' that appear remarkably innovative: here Spontini both anticipates the Romantic *morbidessa* of Italian opera and creates an orchestral style that was to influence the *cantabili* of Donizetti and Bellini. The fact that Caroline Branchu was able to adjust her technique and vocal habits to this innovation was deemed worthy of mention, and her reputation was enhanced by the challenge: 'Mme Branchu has never had a role in which she has better developed the full richness of her voice, and this honours both the composer and the singer', declared the reviewer of *Affiches, annonces et avis divers*. Her triumph even took on unexpected proportions at the end of the performance: after Spontini and the ballet master Gardel took their curtain calls on stage, the audience – a rare occurrence – 'also wished to see once more Mme Branchu, who had displayed the greatest talent as actress and singer' (*Le Moniteur universel*). The librettist, all too conscious of his debt to his interpreter, produced a flattering quatrain of gratitude a few weeks later:

De tout ce que je dois aux charmes de votre art  
 N'attendez pas que je convienne,  
 Si vous acceptiez votre part  
 Vous diminuerez trop la mienne.<sup>1</sup>

And yet this unanimous success, which seemed so predictable to the reader of the press following the premiere, had been far from guaranteed: Spontini's work had traversed a purgatory of several months which it had very nearly not survived...




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<sup>1</sup> Do not expect me to acknowledge  
 All that I owe to the charms of your art:  
 If you were to accept your share,  
 You would diminish mine too greatly.

## THWARTING THE CABAL

Then began [...] the ordeal of rehearsals: a dreadful ordeal for an innovator who had not yet acquired any authority, to whom the entire company of performers was naturally and systematically hostile; a perpetual struggle against malicious intentions, harrowing efforts to move milestones, to heat icicles, to reason with madmen, to speak of love to eunuchs, of imagination to idiots, of art to hacks, of sincerity to liars, of enthusiasm to the envious, of courage to cowards. Everyone revolted against the alleged difficulties of the new work, against the unusual forms of this grand style, against the impetuous impulses of this incandescent passion kindled by the purest rays of the Italian sun. Everyone wanted to cut, trim, prune, flatten this proud music, with its severe demands, which tired its performers by constantly requiring attention, sensitivity, vigour and scrupulous fidelity. [...] The revisions to the instrumentation, the deletions, the restorations of phrases, the transpositions, had already entailed enormous copying costs for the administration of the Opera. Without Joséphine's indefatigable kindness and the *determination* of Napoleon, who demanded that the *impossible* should be done, there can be no doubt that the score of *La Vestale* would have been rejected as absurd and unperformable, and would never have seen the light of day.

(Hector Berlioz, *Journal des débats*, 12 February 1851)

Although one must take due account here of Berlioz's well-known ebullience in telling a story, several eyewitness accounts of the preliminaries and rehearsals of *La Vestale* agree that this period was extremely arduous for Spontini. As soon as the score was presented to the *comité de lecture* in July 1805, voices were raised against many allegedly inadmissible details. Given that some members of the committee (including the composer Persuis) strongly disapproved of the entry of an Italian competitor into the charmed circle of composers for the Opéra, it is easy to understand why they did everything in their power to slow down his ascent. Le Sueur, in particular, complained that his own opera *La Mort d'Adam* took

precedence over *La Vestale*, and the administration ruled in his favour, thus interrupting the rehearsals begun in October 1806, which were not resumed until April 1807. It was then the turn of the orchestral musicians, followed by all the singers, to dig in their heels, on the pretext of supposedly insurmountable difficulties of execution or memorisation. The most astonishing revolt was that of Caroline Branchu who, far from considering herself pampered by her prominent role, ‘declared that she could never learn such unsingable recitatives’, according to Maxime de Montrond. Berlioz confirms this statement in his account of a conversation with the singer, recorded towards the end of her life:

Composers sometimes encounter enemies even among their interpreters. I, who speak to you now, was a member of a cabal against Spontini for a fortnight when we began rehearsing *La Vestale*. I found his marvellous recitatives too wearisome to learn: they seemed unsingable to me. To tell the truth, however, I swiftly and thoroughly changed my opinion.

(*Journal des débats*, 24 October 1861)

Mme Branchu, then, soon realised the mistake she was making, and did not persist in demanding inopportune changes. For his part, Spontini, reassured, did all he could to place her at her ease and accompany her work on the part, so much so that a close rapport developed between the composer and his muse which was to last at least until 1819 and the creation of *Olympie*. The exacting Spontini checked daily on how the rehearsals were going, advising the singer in one missive to ‘enunciate the words clearly’ and to ‘sing the recitative much less slowly in general, except in a few absolutely essential places’. Nor did he shrink from making musical alterations, as when he sent Branchu a page of music accompanied by this supplication:

Madame,

I have just rearranged [...] two bars of the first air which I was asked to do again, as well as the cadence of the final bar. I hasten, Madame, to send it to

you immediately as it ought to be, urging you to pay careful attention to it, in order to complement the genuine merit of the air with your beautiful voice and your emotion; otherwise, I shall be eternally condemned to the bleak silence on the part of listeners and artists alike to which I was so manifestly subjected yesterday. Pray accept, Madame, my most respectful sentiments.

Aside from Berlioz, another later chronicler of the rehearsals for Spontini's opera was the music historian Castil-Blaze, who states in *L'Académie impériale de Musique de 1645 à 1855* that 'the changes Spontini made to his music raised the copying costs to 10,000 francs. Had it not been for the august patronage that supported the composer's efforts, *La Vestale* might never have been performed.' And, even more than the goodwill of Caroline Branchu, that patronage in high places was of decisive importance in the success of the work.



#### THE SUPPORT OF JOSÉPHINE

It is not clear what prompted Joséphine de Beauharnais, soon to be stripped of her imperial position on the grounds of infertility, to take up Spontini's cause while his *Vestale* was struggling against the cabal. It is true that there are a few extant letters of recommendation on his behalf addressed to the Empress in 1803 and 1804, but Spontini's first three operatic essays in Paris – the *opéras-comiques* *La Petite Maison* and *Milton* in 1804 and *Julie ou Le Pot de fleurs* in 1805 – had made virtually no impression on the spectators of the Théâtre Feydeau. Joséphine did have a special fondness for Italian opera, however, and once Napoleon had excluded Cherubini from favour, it seemed obvious to her that Spontini was the prophet who would be able to combine the best features of this native vocal school with French declamation. In his *Mémoires anecdotiques sur l'intérieur du palais et sur quelques événements de l'Empire*, Louis-François-Joseph de Bausset observed that 'the Empress Joséphine, a passionate

lover of the arts and most especially of music, felt more keenly than anyone else the need to introduce to our operatic stage the changes that time and taste had established in Germany and Italy, which are chiefly attributed to the immortal works of Mozart and Cimarosa’.

In order to give Spontini a legitimate position in the capital, Joséphine (who had been the dedicatee of *La Petite Maison* in 1804) began by appointing him director of her private musical establishment, and subsequently resolved to smooth out any difficulties that *La Vestale* might encounter during rehearsals. She was not mistaken in that respect, and did not waver when it proved necessary to act with thoroughly Napoleonic firmness: several notes ‘by order’ obliged the recalcitrant company to move in a direction it was refusing to take. Not surprisingly, Spontini gratefully dedicated the score of the sorely tormented work to her, as he would do again in 1809 with *Fernand Cortez*. Their companionship did not end there: Joséphine decided to attend the premiere in spite of the restrictions of court etiquette – in the absence of Napoleon, who was on campaign at the time, she should not have appeared at public performances. This well-nigh political support aroused considerable comment at the time. The *Journal de l’Empire* of 18 December 1807 underlined the fact that ‘by not concealing the interest [that the Empress] was so kind as to take in the success [of *La Vestale*], she greatly contributed to it. The sight of so rightly cherished a princess spread joy and enthusiasm throughout the theatre: when the heart is contented, the mind is favourably disposed to all the pleasures laid before it’. Spontini never forgot this decisive support from the sovereign. Georgette Ducrest relates that even when Napoleon repudiated her and confined her to Malmaison, the composer ‘continued his kindnesses on any occasion that might be agreeable to her. His attentions were just as eager after the divorce as when she had been on the throne, and he devoted to her all the time he could spare. She had created so many ingrates that she was glad to speak of M. Spontini’s gratitude’ (*Mémoires sur l’impératrice Joséphine*, 1828).





## RELUCTANCE TO RENOUNCE JULIA

Once the work was on the road to success, Spontini could count on Caroline Branchu's zeal to keep the flame of his triumph alive (rather better than she does in the second act of the opera, where she lets the sacred fire go out...). The role became her favourite part, in which she outshone all her replacements and understudies:

Since Mme Branchu created the role of the Vestal with such success, all the actresses of the Opéra have essayed it in their turn, more or less successfully. Mme Branchu has remained the actress par excellence in this role; after her, Mme Granier and Mme Ferrières have been singled out as those who came closest to the model. Mlle Himm has splendid qualities, a beautiful figure, a beautiful face, a beautiful voice, an air of modesty and naivety: what does she lack? A degree of warmth and expression.

(*Journal de l'Empire*, 25 August 1809)

It soon became apparent, however, that Julia exhausted Caroline Branchu some evenings, and she admitted it was her most tiring part. So much became apparent when she came back from a prolonged illness in August 1809: although the public expected her to play the Roman priestess, she surprised the critics by opting for Piccinni's *Didon* instead. Yet around 1814, even though her vocal cords increasingly betrayed recurrent fatigue, she would still not give up her much-loved Julia. The *Gazette de France* was moved to remark upon such zeal, which it thought might well prove fatal to her:

A singer who consumes herself in such efforts three times a week exposes herself to serious mishaps, and may even place her life in danger. However surprising the new method of singing adopted by Mme Branchu may be, I will not compliment her on this point: I pride myself on being one of those charitable souls who can no longer hear her without trembling for her.

That ‘new method of singing’ was evident in an increasingly forced style of voice production, a low register supported in a manner that we would call ‘veristic’ today, and a simplification of the tensest passages to make them as comfortable as possible (traces of this can be found in some of the later vocal scores of the work). Mme Branchu also made use of theatrical gesture to compensate for the more and more flagrant weaknesses of her vocal instrument. And when the time finally came to renounce Julia altogether, Caroline Branchu was mindful of her colleague Mlle Maillard who had been demoted from high soprano to *mezzo-soprano de force* (dramatic mezzo): she had the dignity to agree to sing the role of the Chief Vestal for a few years, playing opposite those successors who were in effect burying her alive, this time with no hope of being saved *in extremis*.

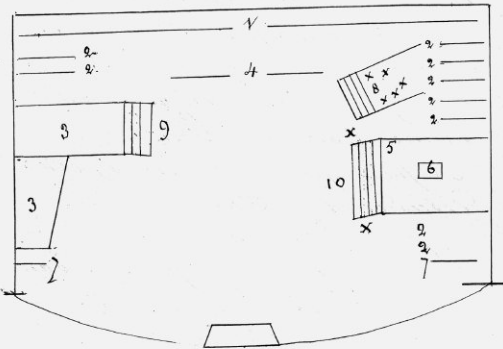


View of the Opéra by Henri Courvoisier-Voisin, 1815.  
Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris.

Vue de l'Opéra par Henri Courvoisier-Voisin, 1815.  
Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris.

Indications générales  
sur  
la mise en Scène  
de  
*La Vestale*.

Acte 1<sup>er</sup>  
Décoration.



1 Fond de Campagne. 2 Chassis  
de Campagne. 3 Comble de  
festa. 4 Arc de Triomphe. 5  
Trône de Licinius. 6 Chaise  
Cruelle. 7 Draperie. 8 Estrade

H. Michéau

Page from the staging manual of *La Vestale* (mid-nineteenth century):  
set layout for Act One.

Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris.

Extrait du livret de mise en scène de *La Vestale* (milieu du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle) :  
implantation du décor de l'acte I.

Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris.