

The origins of *La Vie parisienne*

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Was the most famous French operetta born disfigured?

The premiere of *La Vie parisienne* by the troupe of the Théâtre du Palais-Royal on 31 October 1866 took place in conditions of extreme anxiety, if we are to believe one of the librettists, Ludovic Halévy, who was driven ‘almost insane’ by the rehearsals (manuscript diary, 20 October 1866). According to him, the actors had condemned the piece, declaring: ‘What’s the point of learning the last two acts? You’ll have to bring the curtain down in the middle of the third.’ These last two acts – the fourth and fifth, which are now often replaced by a single scene, as elliptical as it is summary – lie at the heart of the conflict between the authors and the artists, who were overwhelmed by the ambitions of the score. The chronic vocal insufficiency of these actors, and the resulting consequences, will be examined in detail below. In a letter dated 9 October 1866, Eugène Labiche – the favourite author at the Palais-Royal in the 1860s – was amused by these chaotic rehearsals in which attempts were made ‘to transform Lassouche into a tenor [whereas] he maintains that he is only a baritone’ (letter to Alphonse Jolly, Souvigny, 9 October 1866), pointing out that ‘[Gil-]Pères and Thierret are still scrabbling around for their notes and are not sure of the singing part they are supposed to perform. The theatre is in a really tight spot, with the actors singing wrong notes and handing in their roles’. In the face of these difficulties, the librettists yielded, and Halévy wrote on 12 October 1866: ‘The last two [acts] did not produce the effect we expected in the theatre. We must rewrite them, and we are doing so.’

The haste with which the replacement numbers were written explains why they did not give complete satisfaction either, since their chief merit was to be much shorter and easier to sing. The result of this revi-

sion was the abandonment of many numbers and a considerable reduction in the importance of several roles (in particular that of Urbain). After this, the authors constantly retouched these new Acts Four and Five, which were judged to be badly balanced, and finally merged them for revivals in Vienna, Brussels and Paris, not without also presenting avatars ‘in four acts and five tableaux’. On the subject of these rewrites and the musical changes they entailed, we refer the reader to the preface to Jean-Christophe Keck’s critical edition of *La Vie parisienne* published in 2000 by Boosey & Hawkes / Bote & Bock (hereafter referred to as OEK).

What if, in truth, the two acts never performed were the best in this long series of constantly revised pages? And what if abandoning them – along with several numbers in the first three acts – were a more painful loss than one might imagine for Offenbach and his librettists? The search for answers to these questions lies at the heart of the meticulous collation of the sources carried out by Sébastien Troester (director of musical editions at Palazzetto Bru Zane) and of the resulting new version of *La Vie parisienne*. This recording demonstrates that the investigation was successful beyond all expectation.



REFERENCES

It was standard practice, in popular plays of the nineteenth-century, for characters, anecdotes and jokes to circulate from one work to another; because they were known to everyone, they served as shared references for the audience and facilitated collective compassion or laughter. *La Vie parisienne* makes full use of this device, drawing on an extremely wide-ranging fund of cultural topoi, while at the same time presenting an astonishing number of current events on stage.

The very title ‘La Vie parisienne’ had come into common usage in 1834, when Balzac published a series of novels entitled *Scènes de la vie parisienne*. But for the city dweller of 1866, Offenbach’s score would have

chiefly evoked the illustrated magazine *La Vie parisienne*, founded by Marcelin in 1863 and published without interruption until 1970.

Meilhac and Halévy's libretto, for its part, draws on a large number of then-fashionable successes. For example, he cites *Michel et Christine* (Scribe and Dupin, 1821), whose plot was reused in *J'invite le colonel!*, a one-act comedy 'mêlée de couplets' (including songs) by Eugène Labiche and Marc Michel, first performed at the Palais-Royal on 16 January 1860: there, a certain Carbonnel sings the song 'Du haut des cieux, ta demeure dernière', which the authors of *La Vie parisienne* recalled when they gave Gabrielle an entrance in the guise of 'la veuve du colonel'. The plot also takes some elements from *La Clef de Métella*, a one-act comedy by Meilhac and Halévy, first performed at the Théâtre du Vaudeville on 24 November 1862. It is above all the character of Gontran (since the *Métella* of the title does not actually appear in the play in question) that anticipates his namesake in *La Vie parisienne*. Offenbach's caricatural Brazilian probably originated in Meilhac and Halévy's *Le Brésilien*, a one-act comedy first performed at the Palais-Royal on 9 May 1863, while Gardefeu and *Métella* had already figured in *Le Photographe*, a one-act *comédie-vaudeville* by the same authors, first performed on 24 December 1864, again at the Palais-Royal. This also featured a baron and baroness, husband and wife, who are tricked in a theatrical situation reminiscent of Offenbach's Act Four of 1866 (in the version of the premiere).



A NOD TO POLITICS

Of course, *La Vie parisienne* indicts the political abuses of the day. But the censors took care to dilute overly virulent caricatures, so that the authors did not take the risk of going too far. As a result, the piece deals less with politics than with questions of society, and chiefly mocks the relationship between the various layers of the Parisian population: Meilhac and Halévy sets the foreign aristocracy (the Gondremarcks) against servants of all

stripes disguised as Parisian personalities of the Second Empire, whose manners are parodied to the point of grotesqueness.

Nevertheless, national and foreign politics are not excluded. The presence of a chorus of Marseillais, the quotation of a Provençal song and stage directions such as 'accent bordelais' (with a Bordeaux accent), for example, draw on the perpetual jokes contrasting Paris with the provinces. In political terms, the focus is mainly on points east and north. Prussia's rise to power had recently been demonstrated by the Schleswig-Holstein Question. Meilhac and Halévy's original libretto referred to the Second Schleswig War (1864), ending in Denmark's capitulation to Prussia and Austria, which henceforth shared control of the duchies of Schleswig, Saxe-Lauenburg and Holstein. The topic became particularly delicate following this annexation, and the censors struck out all mentions of Denmark. In order to preserve the rhymes, 'danois' was replaced by 'suédois', and so the Gondremarcks acquired Swedish nationality. Nevertheless, the Baron does not hesitate to ask Prosper and Urbain (whom he takes to be the great strategists and politicians of the day) about the 'Scandinavian Question' during the party in Act Three.

For the audience of 1866, the character of the Brazilian could not be dissociated from the events that were shaking South America at the time, namely the issue of French intervention in Mexico, which began in January 1862 and was to come to an end in 1867. In a game of competition and colonial expansion between European countries, and with the aim of counterbalancing the power of the young United States, then embroiled in the American Civil War, France sent almost 40,000 men to besiege the strongholds of Mexico and seize the capital. The political instability caused by this invasion, which became apparent as early as 1863, led to the failure of the occupation. Should we see an allegory of this episode in the character of the Brazilian, who tells us he has already made two return trips from South America to spend in Paris every last penny 'of what [he] stole there [in Brazil]'?



MODERN PARIS

La Vie parisienne is full of references to the urban landscape of the City of Light. The first act opens in the setting of the Gare Saint-Lazare, one of the termini of the western railway line, whose stops the chorus enumerates in the manner of a Rossinian *opera buffa*. Although the initial structure had been in operation since 1837, the building was considerably enlarged to accommodate visitors to the Exposition Universelle of 1867, and inaugurated in that form in June 1867. In presenting a brand-new station concourse on the Palais-Royal stage before then, in October 1866, *La Vie parisienne* seized the opportunity to criticise the delays incurred by the contractors.

Another building is the main focus of the exchanges between the protagonists of the first act: the Grand-Hôtel, where the Baron and Baroness are supposed to sleep. Built between 1861 and 1862, again in preparation for the Exposition Universelle of 1867, the luxury hotel and its restaurant – the Café de la Paix – were inaugurated by the Empress Eugénie on 5 May 1862. The audience of *La Vie parisienne* was well aware of the economic stakes in play at the time between the major French and foreign operators, who were investing heavily in this district destined to become a favoured destination for luxury leisure.

Act Five takes place in another fashionable Parisian building, partially recreated on the stage of the Palais-Royal: the Café Anglais. Opened in 1802, and initially frequented by customers from modest backgrounds, from 1855 onwards it had become the favoured meeting place of the wealthy Parisian elite. Its twenty-two salons and private rooms made it possible to hold secret assignments there, and many individuals of loose morals had every reason to praise the discretion of the maîtres d'hôtel. This is what is referred to as the curtain rises in Act Five (chorus, 'Nous servons dans les cabinets') and, a little later, when Métella describes in her big solo the wild goings-on there, particularly in 'le Grand Seize', the most popular of the salons, which formed one of the corners of the first floor.

At the time *La Vie parisienne* was being written, the Musée de l'Artillerie, which Gardefeu mentions when he tells of his drive in the woods (and which the Baron wishes to visit), occupied the cloister and outbuildings of the Hôtel de l'Artillerie, on place Saint-Thomas d'Aquin in the seventh arrondissement of Paris. This site, which had become an armament factory after the French Revolutionary, then Gay-Lussac's chemistry laboratory and finally a metallurgical forge belonging to the army, was also used to store obsolete weapons in the second half of the nineteenth century; these were soon presented for public viewing, before the collection was transferred to the Musée des Invalides in 1871. But it is actually to the Bazar Bonne-Nouvelle that Gardefeu takes the Baron. This was a five-storey shopping centre, built at no.20 boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle in 1836, which by 1866 was one of the most modern and flourishing of its kind in Paris. It was known for the strict morality of its internal rules and regulations, which made it the point of convergence of the aristocracy and the respectable bourgeoisie. One can imagine, then, the disappointment of the Danish couple, who had hoped for a louche evening.

Among the more obscure details mentioned in the libretto, Meilhac and Halévy make a fleeting reference to the 'cannon of the Palais-Royal', when Prosper's hat explodes in his hands in Act Three. This is a reference to the small cannon that can still be seen in the garden next to the Théâtre du Palais-Royal and which, between 1786 and 1911, indicated mid-day to the inhabitants of the district and to strollers who had come to set their watches.

Alongside the urban landscape of Paris, references to the city's cultural life abound in the work. The two most important are evoked in the 'Guide' Trio in the first act. First, the Baroness says she wants to applaud 'La Patti in *Don Pasquale*'. She must have got wind of the young Italian singer's success in the Danish magazines. But she is just as keen to hear 'Thérésa in *Le Sapeur*'. The idol of the *cafés-concerts* had adopted this stage name in 1863 and became the muse of L'Alcazar and the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin, where she cultivated a repertory of popular chansons.

Some commentators regretted that these were confined to risqué rather than moral subjects. *Rien n'est sacré pour un sapeur* was one of her iconic songs, premiered at L'Alcazar d'Hiver in 1864. What with Patti and Thérésa, the Baroness's musical tastes are perfectly representative of those of the upper middle classes of the time.

In Act Five of the original *La Vie parisienne*, several quotations from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* hit the bullseye, the first of them emphasised by a line from Mme de Quimper-Karadec: 'A little Mozart can't do any harm!' This is another echo of current events. For two simultaneous revivals of *Don Giovanni* (in French) had just taken place in the spring of 1866: one at the Opéra, the other – more faithful to the original work – at the Théâtre-Lyrique. The dilettantes were still debating the respective merits of the productions, and it is amusingly apt that Offenbach, who was known as 'the Mozart of the Champs-Élysées', wanted the Théâtre du Palais-Royal to resound in its turn with the melodies of the Mozartian seducer, and while he was at it, without any words, thus avoiding the need to choose between French and Italian.

The homage to the Viennese composer goes even further: as our readers will hear, the end of the original Act Five presents a mounting cacophony, superimposing four pianos and three choruses on stage or in the wings, which is interrupted by the final 'round dance'. Just as Mozart, in *Don Giovanni*, took pleasure in quoting from his own *Le nozze di Figaro*, Offenbach drew his material for this 'charivari' from *Orphée aux Enfers* (1858) and *La Belle Hélène* (1864), to which he added *Rien n'est sacré pour un sapeur* by Louis Houssot and Auguste de Villebichot (1864). This superimposition of multiple sound sources is reminiscent – in a parodic way – of the ball scene in *Don Giovanni*, where Mozart intermingles the rhythms of three orchestras simultaneously playing a waltz, a contredanse and a minuet.



THE PREMIERE

Following the first performance on 31 October 1866, the press reported an indisputable triumph, although some doubts were expressed. One of the recurring topics in the reviews was the vocal capacities of the actors in the company. For example, the *Revue et Gazette musicale* wrote: 'Now, shall we look for singers in this Palais-Royal troupe, which must have been astonished by such pretensions? Why not?' The journalist waxes lyrical over Offenbach's ability to 'make marvellous use of even the most recalcitrant voices. Who would have expected to sit through a performance of an operatic work sung by Hyacinthe, Lassouche, Priston, Gil-Pérès *e tutti quanti*, without significant damage to sensitive ears or impressionable nerves? And yet Offenbach has accomplished this miracle.' *Le Journal des débats* shared this opinion, though expressing it more ironically: '[Offenbach] has made a tenor of Brasseur, a baritone of Hyacinthe, a bass of Gil-Pérès; he has made a Lablache of Lassouche, a García of Priston, a Viardot of Mlle Honorine, a Cabel of Mlle Zulma Bouffar, a Sontag of Mlle Massin' (19 November). Conversely, *La Liberté* reported that, apart from Zulma Bouffar, 'no one sang [at the Palais-Royal] or seemed to have a notion that there was anything resembling music to sing'. *Le Figaro* preferred to emphasise that the composer 'has accomplished a veritable tour de force by transforming a group of knockabout comedians into *tenori, bassi* and *soprani*' and does not dwell on the inadequacies of some of them, except perhaps Lassouche, who 'was not up to his usual standard as a singer; he had to display great artistry to triumph over his momentarily rebellious voice'.

This Lassouche (1828-1915) deserves a moment's attention, as his role is undoubtedly the one most substantially retouched in the various musical sources. When Labiche wrote that Offenbach tried to make him a tenor when he was only a baritone, he put his finger on a particularly marked disagreement between the composer and his interpreter. Several manuscripts found in the Arts du Spectacle department of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France show major alterations in pencil to the vocal line of the role of Urbain – assigned to Lassouche – that amount to the outright

deletion of various numbers involving him (among them his ‘Hat Song’, the ‘Diplomatic Trio’ and the ‘Snoring Trio’). Moreover, the artist made no claim to glory for his part in the creation of *La Vie parisienne* in his *Mémoires anecdotiques*, published much later, which never mention either the work or his collaboration with Offenbach.



WHICH GENRE?

In the libretto published by Michel Lévy, *La Vie parisienne* is described as a ‘play with songs in five acts’ (*pièce en 5 actes mêlée de chant*), which underlines its hybrid nature and the fact that it was specifically designed for the Palais-Royal troupe, whose experience lay in the fields of vaudeville and spoken theatre. ‘For, in the end, what is *La Vie parisienne*? a comedy? an operetta? a vaudeville? None of these. It is not even a play. A semblance of plot drowns in an ocean of subsidiary details’, was the opinion of *Le Tintamarre* dated on 11 November. The evocation of vaudeville found echoes in the columns of the *Revue et Gazette musicale* and the *Journal des marchandes de modes*: the former considered that ‘with Offenbach, music is gradually invading all our vaudeville theatres, and the mixed style inaugurated by the Bouffes-Parisiens completes the dethronement of *La Clef du Caveau*,¹ while the latter opined that the score combined vaudeville and *opéra-bouffe* in a highly unusual mishmash (‘it is a mixture of the deux genres’). In the view of *Le Ménestrel*, further adding to the terminological cacophony, the work was something entirely different again: ‘Quite simply what is known as an end-of-year revue.’

Perhaps more important than the deliberately imprecise genre to which the work lays claim is the striking originality of the subject. While

¹ ‘Le Caveau’ was the name of a succession of societies whose members sang satirical vaudeville songs, collected in an anthology entitled *La Clef du Caveau* (1819). (Translator’s note)

the farcical plot recycles the most successful musical and theatrical recipes from *Barbe-bleue* and *La Belle Hélène*, this time the subject concerned the audience itself in the first instance: the contemporary world that is directly projected onto the stage. This 'urban Naturalism' was not so common at the time in operetta, which might offer, at most, a depiction of grotesque countryfolk. But in October 1866, the whole of Paris crowded into the cramped auditorium of the Palais-Royal, so much so that the orchestra pit had to be enlarged and several rows of stalls seats removed, much to the chagrin of the theatre's manager.



A PROLONGED SUCCESS

My dear friend, you have no doubt heard about the big hit at the Palais-Royal, *La Vie parisienne*; it's insane, in the sense of [the asylum at] Charenton, it has no form as a play, but it's amusing, grotesque, farcical and witty. They have a three-month success on their hands that will delay our own little play.

(Letter from Labiche to Jolly, 9 November 1866)

From October 1866 to the summer of 1867, one performance followed another without respite. Labiche, who was waiting patiently for one of his plays to be premiered, expressed his despair every week to his friend Jolly: '*La Vie parisienne* is still bringing in huge sums (4,200 fr) and naturally the theatre is in no hurry to renew its repertory. I fear that the success will last until March and then is bound to be revived by the Exposition' (letter of 16 December 1866); 'The rainy weather has boosted the takings for *La Vie Parisienne*, and if you add to that the announcement, on the poster, that these will be the final performances, you can understand this fresh increase. In the end, they made 3,400 and 3,500, but here comes the sun and it won't be long before takings go down once more. But the barometer is falling again, and then the takings will rise again. It could go on like

this until the end of the world' (18 May 1867); 'Nothing new at the Palais-Royal, every day they advertise the final performances of *La Vie parisienne*, and as the rain has returned, the takings invariably exceed 3,000 fr' (22 May 1867); 'My dear friend, I've just received a letter from Léon Dormeuil who tells me that the takings of *La Vie parisienne* have risen again with the bad weather, to 2,800 and 2,900, and that he can't possibly put another play on when he's earning so much' (18 July 1867) – and so on. Hence the cut version – although hastily revised and pretty incoherent – established itself by dint of its box-office takings. And that success made the authors forget their initial ambitions for the work.

In September 1873, when *La Vie parisienne* was revived at the Théâtre des Variétés, the rewrite of the *opéra-bouffe* (now in four acts) went in yet another direction.



This account of the vicissitudes of the creation of *La Vie parisienne* explains many of the cuts and alterations made in the weeks leading up to the premiere. It was long thought that the numerous pieces cut during rehearsals had been lost – though did anyone ever make a systematic search for them? The well-nigh disastrous circumstances in which Offenbach's work entered rehearsal were in themselves sufficient motivation for this publishing and recording project: if, just a few weeks before the premiere, Offenbach undertook at the last minute the composition of an entirely different Act Four and the concomitant reworking of Act Five as previously conceived, it was because he and his librettists were forced to change tack. Perhaps the music they abandoned en route was not so bad? Perhaps it was even excellent? How could we be sure without the research undertaken today? Curiosity, the intuition that everything is relative, a desire for musical discovery – these were what drove us on irresistibly in our urge to hear this music for the first time and enable others to hear it too.



Robert Priston as Gardefeu. Photograph by Numa fils, 1866.
Jérôme Collomb Collection.

Robert Priston en Gardefeu. Photographie Numa fils, 1866.
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