

A popular and sophisticated comedy

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Premiered on 15 December 1832 at the Théâtre des Nouveautés, then the headquarters of the Opéra-Comique, *Le Pré aux clercs* belongs to a period particularly rich in masterpieces. The decade had begun with Auber's *Fra Diavolo* (1830) and Hérold's *Zampa* (1831); it was to continue with Adam's *Le Chalet* (1834) and *Le Postillon de Longjumeau* (1835), then Auber's *Le Domino noir* (1837). The success of these works was as massive as it was lasting: several of them – including *Le Pré aux clercs* – reached their thousandth performance. In comparison with the *opera buffa* of the same period, in which only Donizetti and the Ricci brothers were still active, it must be acknowledged that French *opéra-comique* showed remarkable vitality in the 1830s.

As in the case of Bellini's *I puritani* two years later, the extraordinary success of *Le Pré aux clercs* was indissociable from the premature death of its composer. Hérold succumbed to tuberculosis in January 1833, a month after the premiere, at the age of just forty-one, and emotion ran high: attending the Opéra-Comique became a sort of obligatory homage to the deceased composer. But these circumstances are not enough to explain why the work remained popular until the end of the century and beyond, nor why it also enjoyed such popularity outside France. Wagner and Smetana both knew the opera well, and echoes of it may be found in *Das Liebesverbot* (1836) and *The Bartered Bride* (1866). For *Le Pré aux clercs* is a very special work: it naturally fits into an eminently

'national' vein, essential for adoption by the French public, but also presents elements capable of appealing to a wider audience than that of the Paris theatres.



A FORGOTTEN TRADITION: THE HISTORICAL VAUDEVILLE

The kinship between Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* (1836) and *Le Pré aux clercs* has often been remarked upon, like the earlier analogy between *Robert le diable* (1831) and *Zampa*. Act Three of *Les Huguenots* is indeed set in the 'Pré aux clercs' – the famous meadow that extended alongside the Seine, not far from the Louvre, in the sixteenth century, and offered a place for family entertainment when it was not the scene of bloody duels – and both works take place during the Wars of Religion, in the reigns of Charles IX and Henri III respectively. But comparison between them brings out the way in which the genres diverge. In the *grand-opéra*, it is religious fanaticism that dominates. The human dimension, from the comic scenes to the love scenes between Raoul and Valentine, representatives of rival clans, has no other function than to underline the tragic nature of the historical events. *Les Huguenots* illustrates the issue of the sacred and shows what human beings are prepared to die for. *Le Pré aux clercs* shows what they live for.

Several critics have pointed out how seemingly unusual it was to have a historical plot in the *opéra-comique* genre. Some of them have suggested a link with the vogue for the historical novel, launched by Walter Scott, which had undergone multiple refractions in French literature. In reality, however, an analysis of the repertory of the theatres in the preceding decade shows that plots of a historical character were nothing unusual, and in fact *Le Pré aux clercs* belongs to the tradition of the Restoration historical vaudeville. From their return to power in 1815 until the July Revolution of 1830, the constant preoccupation of Louis XVIII and Charles X was to consign to oblivion the twin traumas of the French

Revolution and the epic adventure of the Napoleonic era. With the aim of consolidating their legitimacy and exorcising the old fratricidal struggles between the different orders of the nation, the Bourbon kings staked their existence on public relations, to an extent rarely attempted by any of their ancestors: they elaborated a vast programme of festivities intended to celebrate both the regular festivals and extraordinary events. The most imposing instance of these was the series of celebrations organised by the city of Paris for the return of King Charles X from his coronation at Reims, which stretched over the whole month of June 1825.

Alongside the cantatas and masses composed for the occasion, specially written pieces were performed in the capital's leading theatres. The vaudevilles of the secondary houses, the 'Boulevard' theatres, were no exception, not to mention the large-scale spectacles that caused a sensation at the Cirque-Olympique. Most of these productions were forgotten a few weeks after their first performance; nevertheless, they provide crucial evidence for public taste and for the dramaturgical innovations that were to nourish the more serious genres for the rest of the century. The 'contemporary' vaudevilles were the simpler of the two varieties: a few stereotyped villagers, a love story, a slight complication, and everything ends good-humouredly after a few light-hearted songs. The royal family was continually mentioned, but never shown on stage. At most, a character of high rank might be seen passing through the wings, or else the audience heard, at the end of the piece, some villager who had succeeded in hiding for a few moments among the great personages of the realm and who told his or her story.

'Historical' vaudevilles were considerably more complex, precisely because great personages and mere subjects were presented together on stage. Here historical distance permitted what decency would have forbidden in a contemporary vaudeville. It was in this genre that the dramatists' imagination produced small marvels such as are to be found in the pieces of 1825. In *Le Vieillard d'Ivry*, old Thibaut, who fell asleep in 1590, the day after the Battle of Ivry, wakes up abruptly in 1825, believing he is still a soldier of Henri IV. In *Les Châtelaines, ou les Nouvelles*

Amazones, women who have been left alone in their castles in 1429 take up arms, following the example of Joan of Arc, but they still have to learn how to fight.

Such vaudevilles share several characteristics: with their fantasy – which sometimes verges on surrealism *avant la lettre* – they let us experience history viewed through the wrong end of the telescope, that is to say, as it is experienced by those who have little understanding of the absurdity of politics and reasons of state. It is exactly to this dimension that the Wars of Religion are reduced in Planard's libretto: in the end, everything boils down to the issue of a chicken leg. Those of the Huguenot persuasion ('de la vache à Colas', as the text picturesquely has it) eat chicken on a Friday, while Catholics must renounce it, which provokes the indignation of the King's light horse when they see Mergy feasting under their very noses (Act One, Scene VI). We are far here from the horror of the preparations for the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre and the Blessing of the Daggers in Act Four of *Les Huguenots*. As to the secret marriage of Isabelle and Mergy, both Protestants, it takes place in a Catholic chapel, conducted by a court chaplain, before the eyes – admittedly veiled – of Queen Marguerite. One notes with delectation the position of the Italian Cantarelli and his Jesuitical arguments.

Moreover, the historical vaudevilles celebrate the fraternity that unites the simple subjects of the kingdom with the royal family: the 'public relations machine' set up by the Bourbons – which the reign of Louis-Philippe took over without change – constantly insisted on this point. It is no accident that Nicette is the goddaughter of Queen Marguerite. The Queen is represented as a mother figure, just as the King, absent from this work, is a father figure for the nation, without whom society is in danger of collapsing. It may seem incongruous to talk about philosophy in the context of an *opéra-comique*, but this popular dramaturgy transmits in simple scenes the old Cartesian theory of 'continued creation', which persisted in France from the era of absolute monarchy to Jacobin statism. What is more, 'l'aimable Margot' is presented with deeply human traits, a prey to the same emotions as Countess Isabelle when she feels she is in exile at the

Louvre: her solo 'Je suis prisonnière' is in similar vein to Isabelle's 'Ô jours d'innocence'.



A POPULAR YET (VERY) SOPHISTICATED WORK

Given the simplicity of the plot, the richness and subtlety of the score of *Le Pré aux clercs* may be found surprising. But the case is not an isolated one: from Méhul to Bizet, some of the most sophisticated pages in the history of nineteenth-century French opera were written for *opéra-comique*. In reality, this is anything but coincidental. Hérold had received an all-round musical training, as a student of Méhul who had rounded off his education in Italy at the time when the peninsula was discovering a young talent of the same age as him, Rossini. From the early 1820s onwards, he occupied the position of head vocal coach (*chef de chant*) at the Théâtre-Italien; subsequently, helped by the fact that the two theatres shared the same administration, he was able to move to the same post at the Opéra. This may have been a modest role for one who had won the Prix de Rome, but it did enable him to observe at close quarters the production of the major French and Italian masterpieces of his time. It was his job to conduct the soloists and chorus, with the orchestra placed under the direction of Habeneck, in the strange (and unique) experiment in joint conducting tried out by the Opéra for the premiere of Rossini's *Le Comte Ory* (1828).

His position of *chef de chant*, however, meant that he was barred from having his own operas performed at the Opéra. This was why he composed ballets, among them *La Fille mal gardée* (1828), which includes pastiches of Rossini and Donizetti and has kept its place in the repertory right down to the present day. Ballet music did not then have the prestige of vocal music, but the experience was an inspiration to Hérold, at a time when orchestral accompaniment of stage movement was becoming an essential component of musical dramaturgy, especially after Auber's

La Muette de Portici (1828). And finally, since Hérold had no reason to renounce composing for the lyric theatre, he still had the possibility of presenting his works at the Opéra-Comique, and it was on that stage that he achieved a brilliant synthesis of the skills he had acquired in the three domains of Italian opera, French opera, and ballet.

The Italian – that is to say Rossinian – heritage is obvious: it had become the norm in *opéra-comique* since Boieldieu's *La Dame blanche* (1825), to the great displeasure of champions of the French school. What is more astonishing is the irrepressible urge of some critics, even today, to deny or minimise this situation: cosmopolitanism was an integral part of opera during the July Monarchy, in both Meyerbeer and Hérold, and the very fact that Wagner so vehemently rejected it should encourage us to rediscover this specific form of cultural hybridisation. If Hérold generally dispenses with the *largo concertato* of the modern finales in the Italian style, he nevertheless edifies large-scale chain structures after the manner of the late eighteenth-century Neapolitan school, thereby adhering to the tradition of Mozart and Cimarosa. It is in the concision of these articulated ensembles, and in the fluency with which the composer makes them suddenly emerge from the spoken dialogue, that one can measure the mastery Hérold had acquired in the domain of accompanying stage movement. That same quality is to be found in the chorus that accompanies the appearance of the ashen-faced Isabelle in the ball scene of Act Two. Berlioz proceeded no differently for the pantomime of Andromache's entrance in Act One of *Les Troyens* (1863).

Even in the nineteenth century, historians of music already praised the diversity and inventiveness of the orchestral effects with which the score of *Le Pré aux clercs* is teeming. In his *Histoire de l'instrumentation* (1878), Henri Lavoix mentioned several of these: the violas lowering one of their strings by a semitone to darken their sonority in the scene with the boat, the sighs of the wind instruments that accompany Mergy's Romance, and of course the obbligato violin accompaniment to Isabelle's Air. Many others may be found, notably the use of the old church modes to create a 'Gothic' colour, from the Overture onwards, and the use of

unusual vocal devices such as the Trio and Quartet ‘à voix basse’ (to be sung softly), both in Act Two. In sum, from the popular theatrical tradition enshrined in the libretto to the astonishingly sophisticated music of the score, there is more than one reason to deem this a highly attractive work. For the same reason, today’s directors and musicians have a very wide range of possibilities at their disposal when it comes to performing it.



Hérold at the end of his life.
Musica, November 1909.

Hérold à la fin de sa vie.
Musica, novembre 1909.