

*Le Pré aux clercs* in its context

Agnès Terrier

In 1832, the Opéra-Comique felt the full force of a crisis that struck Paris particularly hard. The epidemic of cholera, the riots, the rumours of conspiracies, the state of siege in June, the insurrectional machinations of the Duchesse de Berry, the change of government... all these elements weakened the theatre, which also had to move, between March and September, from the large Salle Ventadour to the smaller and less expensive Salle des Nouveautés in the place de la Bourse. Its director, Émile Laurent, did not dare demand an auditorium free of charge, but did remind the Deputies of his theatre's role in the national culture:

*Opéra-comique* is a wholly French creation, a type of spectacle that combines the interest of the drama with the charm of vocal compositions. By turns National, Imperial and Royal, the Opéra-Comique has always been included among the great theatres expected to compete for a share of the funds allotted by the State to support dramatic establishments. The Chamber of Deputies, keen to ensure France preserves that supremacy in the arts which even foreigners are pleased to acknowledge, will certainly not wish to deprive the capital of a truly French genre. The fall of the Opéra-Comique would lead in its turn to the fall of the Conservatoire and the School of Music in Rome, where our young composers take lessons from the great masters. Most of the theatres in the provinces, which can survive only on the repertoire of the Opéra-Comique, would soon be closed...

As has often been the case in the history of the institution, salvation came not from a gesture on the part of the state, but the success of an artistic creation. At the moment when the director was appealing to the Chamber, Ferdinand Hérold was completing *Le Pré aux clercs*. Since the success of his *Zampa* the previous year, the forty-year-old composer was the great hope of the Opéra-Comique. As he had done two years earlier, he took his inspiration from a historical subject, this time set not in early sixteenth-century Sicily but in late sixteenth-century France. The fashion for troubadours and the neo-Gothic, born at the end of the Enlightenment period, still enchanted the Romantics. In literature and drama, the humanist ideals and the religious conflicts of the Renaissance added a speculative dimension to the picturesque quality of the past. Can individuals make a place for themselves in the collective destiny? At what cost can they preserve their freedom of conscience? The most liberal-minded among Hérold's contemporaries did not hesitate to raise even more precise questions about state religion and the responsibilities of a monarch. Behind Charles IX, the instigator of the Massacre of St Bartholomew's Day, one can perceive Charles X, whose reign stifled many liberties...

In 1827, in the Preface to his play *Cromwell*, Victor Hugo suggested that the theatre of his time should 'skim through the centuries, examine the chronicles, reproduce the reality of social mores, bring history back to life, immerse itself in the colour of past eras'. Two years later, Vigny and Mérimée inaugurated a new literary genre, the historical novel. The former set out, in *Cinq-Mars*, to recreate the great personalities who made history. The latter, with *Chronique du règne de Charles IX*, asserted the value of anecdote and railed ironically against the imposture of historical discourse. And now, after the rivalry between Hérold and Meyerbeer in 1830-31 (when the former premiered *Zampa* before the latter's *Robert le diable*), both composers were working on adaptations of the *Chronique*, respectively by Eugène de Planard for the Opéra-Comique and Eugène Scribe for the Opéra. The institutions therefore contrived to differentiate themselves: the Opéra in rue Le Peletier dealt with the carnage of St Bartholomew's Day and the impossible passion between a Catholic lady

and a Huguenot; the Opéra-Comique at the Bourse chose a more peaceful period – ten years after the massacre, and thus in the reign of Henri III – and a harmonious idyll, threatened by the absurd custom of duelling.

In contrast with the title *Les Huguenots*, which immediately evokes a bloody historical divide and promises a tragedy set between the church of Saint-Germain-l’Auxerrois\* and the fortified stronghold of the Louvre, we have here a bucolic place name, *Le Pré aux clercs*. This site, just inside Philip Augustus’ city wall, was a popular destination for strolling bourgeois and partying or brawling students. History also records Huguenot assemblies there to the sound of Marot’s translations of the Psalms. The Pré aux clercs was a social melting pot, which in the reign of Louis XIII – according to Dumas’s novel – saw the decisive encounter of D’Artagnan and the Three Musketeers...

In Hérold’s *opéra-comique*, Marguerite de Valois is the only strictly historical character. She is not, here, the political animal Dumas was to show in *La Reine Margot*, but is more like the licentious intriguer labelled by her contemporary Agrippa d’Aubigné. The other protagonists, more or less inspired by Mérimée’s fiction, are less interested in defending their faith than in satisfying their amorous penchants or their ambitions. Exeunt the meaty theological debates invented by Mérimée! The story creates sufficient dramatic urgency around the characters’ destinies – political for Marguerite, aristocratic for the couple formed by Isabelle and Mergy, bourgeois for the couple of Nicette and Girot – to fill out a multi-strand three-act plot and engender the most varied score possible. As will have become obvious by now, the novel is no more than a starting point. Mérimée was to be treated with greater respect by Offenbach (*La Périchole*) and above all Bizet (*Carmen*).

The premiere on 15 December 1832 featured meticulously prepared sets and costumes. The company’s stars determined the dramatic profile of each role: the comic tenor Féréol was the inspiration for the Italian

---

\* The signal for the Massacre of St Bartholomew’s Day was given by the tolling of the bell of Saint-Germain-l’Auxerrois.

Cantarelli; the romantic tenor Étienne Thénard played the Protestant Mergy; the arrogant Comminge was assigned to the elegant tenor Lemonnier; the buffo bass Fargueil took the part of Girot. On the female side, M<sup>me</sup> Ponchard sang Marguerite with nobility; M<sup>lle</sup> Massy played the soubrette role of Nicette, and M<sup>me</sup> Casimir deigned to lend her talents as 'première amoureuse' to the part of Isabelle. Hérold, already coughing blood and too ill to take his bows on the first night, had to cope with the defection of the last-named diva after that same performance. Véron, the director of the Opéra (where Hérold was principal vocal coach), made a handsome gesture: he allowed the Opéra-Comique to borrow the services of Julie Dorus (later Dorus-Gras). In five days, Hérold taught the new virtuoso her role, although she remained ill at ease in the spoken dialogue and acting style required by the genre.

The work was an immediate success, especially Act Three, in which the trio was encored. The press praised the expressiveness, elegance and diversity of the score, which was conducted by Valentino. The only exception to this was the crushing review in the *Journal des débats*. Its anonymous author eventually revealed his identity... thirty-seven years later!

Certain critics have reproached Berlioz with speaking ill of Hérold and *Le Pré aux clercs*. It was not Berlioz, however, but someone else, an ignorant young man who knew nothing about anything at the time, who abused Hérold's masterpiece in a wretched column. He will regret it all his life. That ignoramus was called (I am ashamed to admit it!)... Jules Janin.  
(*Journal des débats*, 15 March 1869)

The work achieved its eminence through two key qualities: it expanded the genre of *opéra-comique* and freed it from the influence of Rossini. But Hérold died just five weeks later, on 19 January 1833, thus depriving French music of an immense hope. With its 1608 performances in 117 years, that is, more than one performance a month on average until the end of its final run in March 1949, *Le Pré aux clercs* is the fifth most programmed work at the Opéra-Comique, after *Carmen*, *Manon*, *Mignon*

and *La Dame blanche*. In 1840, it was chosen to inaugurate the second Salle Favart – where, incidentally, the Opéra-Comique still had to pay rent for another forty-seven years... Performed also in the provinces and the principal cities of Europe, it was for more than a century the ambassador of a nation that triumphed over fear and violence through elegance and beauty.



The tenor Féréol in the rôle of Cantarelli.  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Le ténor Féréol dans le rôle de Cantarelli.  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.