

## André Messenger: a biographical outline

*Christophe Mirambeau*

André Messenger was born on 30 December 1853 at Montluçon, in the Allier *département*, into a bourgeois family with no musicians in it. Wishing to give their child a good education, the parents entrusted him to the Marist Brothers, whose curriculum included piano lessons.

The Messengers suddenly found themselves ruined shortly before the Franco-Prussian War. Since young André had shown some talent for music and the piano, they obtained a scholarship that enabled them to send him to the famous *École Niedermeyer*, where he studied from 1869 until 1874 – including the war years, during which the school was evacuated to Switzerland. His teachers were Eugène Gigout (counterpoint), Adam Lausel (piano) and Clément Lauret (organ), and later Gabriel Fauré and Camille Saint-Saëns – two of the leading personalities of French music, to whom Messenger was always to remain very close. He was only twenty-one when Fauré passed on to him his post as organist of Saint-Sulpice so that the older man could replace Saint-Saëns, who was frequently absent, at the Madeleine. Messenger remained at Saint-Sulpice until 1880, when he moved on to the churches of Saint-Paul-Saint-Louis (1881) and Sainte-Marie-des-Batignolles (1882-84). While fulfilling his liturgical obligations, he embarked on a career as a composer. His First Symphony, which won a prize in the competition of the Société des Auteurs and Compositeurs in 1876, was premiered at the Concerts Colonne on 20 January 1878; his

cantata *Prométhée enchaîné* won second prize at the Concours Musical de la Ville de Paris of 1877.



Like Célestin in Hervé's *Mam'zelle Nitouche*, Messenger spent his days in church and his evenings at the Folies Bergère. He was the conductor and composer of the ballets performed there (among them *Les Vins de France*, *Fleur d'oranger* and *Mignons et vilains*) – ravishing dance episodes that already display the classiness and style of the future composer of *Véronique*. He spent the year 1880 in Brussels, where, as at the Folies Bergère, he was musical director and ballet composer at the Eden Théâtre (his compositions included *Insectes et Fleurs*). But Messenger's real breakthrough into the world of musical theatre came via his publisher Enoch in November 1883. The composer Firmin Bernicat – who had written many successful songs for the stars of the time, and had gained attention for his compositions with *Les Beignets du Roi* at Brussels in 1882 – had been commissioned to write an operetta for the Théâtre des Folies Dramatiques in Paris. But he died suddenly from chronic tuberculosis, and the work was still to be finished. Enoch then asked Messenger to complete it. On 8 November 1883 *François les bas-bleus* enjoyed a triumph on the stage of the 'Fol-Dram'. And Messenger, who had written most of the work begun by Bernicat, was now commissioned by the theatre's management to compose two new operettas. *La Fauvette du Temple* (Folies Dramatiques, 17 November 1885) and *La Béarnaise*, which followed a month later (Bouffes-Parisiens, 12 December 1885), confirmed his talent for combining a popular vein with musical sophistication. Along with success came love: he married a distant cousin, Édith Clouet; his friend Fauré played the organ at the ceremony.

The success continued. Now it was the Paris Opéra, on the recommendation of Saint-Saëns, that took an interest in the young composer, and commissioned what was to remain his most famous ballet, *Les Deux Pigeons* (1886), a musical gem that is still in the repertory. The following

year, the Folies-Dramatiques presented *Les Bourgeois de Calais*, but this unfortunately closed after just a few performances, and Messager had great difficulty in finding someone who would write a new libretto for him. His saviour was the celebrated Catulle Mendès, who offered him the *conte* (fairytale) *Isoline* (Théâtre de la Renaissance, 26 December 1888) – an elegant, poetic work that is regarded as one of its composer’s masterpieces. *La Basoche* (30 May 1890) marked Messager’s entry into the Opéra-Comique. This work, based on a fictionalised episode in the life of the Renaissance poet Clément Marot, represents the quintessence of Messager’s art and of *opéra-comique* as a genre. It proved to be an unqualified triumph, and its success was repeated in 1893 with the delicate and refined *Madame Chrysanthème* at the Théâtre de la Renaissance. This time the libretto was taken from a novel by Pierre Loti, and despite its different original source often foreshadows Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*.



At the request of the D'Oyly Carte Company, Messager wrote *Mirette* for the audience of the Savoy Theatre in London, where it was premiered on 3 July 1894. His collaborator was the songwriter Alice Davis, known under the pseudonym of Miss Hope Temple, who subsequently became the second Madame Messager after the death of Édith Clouet-Messager.

*Mirette* enjoyed only limited success, by London standards, and it preceded a total failure, in the shape of *Le Chevalier d'Harmental* at the Opéra-Comique in 1896, which greatly affected Messager. He considered settling in England and giving up composition in order to devote himself solely to conducting. But then he received the delightful libretto of *Les P'tites Michu* from Vanloo and Duval. Charmed, he took up his pen once more. The work swiftly became an international success, and Messager achieved the status of a composer with a considerable reputation abroad. His next venture made his name once and for all: *Véronique* – by the same librettists as *Les P'tites Michu*: one does not change a winning team – was premiered at the Bouffes-Parisiens on 10 December 1898. This time the

triumph could only be described in hyperbolic terms: every number in the piece at once entered the pantheon of French operetta.

That same year of 1898 saw the appointment of Albert Carré as director of the Opéra-Comique. Carré, who was also the librettist of *La Basoche*, was well aware of Messager's gifts as a rigorous conductor and his finely honed musical instincts: he offered him the post of music director of the institution. And it was there that Messager participated in the creation of two landmarks of French opera, Charpentier's *Louise* (1900) and Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902). His conducting talents were by now universally acknowledged: he led most of the premieres at the Opéra-Comique, and soon took over the direction of the season of the Grand Opera Syndicate at Covent Garden in London (1901-07). Admired and respected by critics and public alike, in 1907 he was appointed joint director (with Leimistin Broussan) of the Paris Opéra, where he remained until 1914, after a tenure as brilliant as it was eventful. In 1908 he obtained a job he had been angling for over the past few years: the music directorship of the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, which he conducted until 1919 in programmes combining the classical repertory with contemporary music by such composers as Florent Schmitt, Henri Büsser, Henri Rabaud and Richard Strauss, and featuring performers of the calibre of Ignacy Paderewski, Georges Enesco, Ferruccio Busoni, Jacques Thibaud and Claire Croiza.

Although the pace of his musical output slowed down as a result of this hyperactivity, Messager nonetheless enriched his catalogue with further successes. The delectable *Les Dragons de l'Impératrice* (Théâtre des Variétés, 13 February 1905) and the dazzling *Fortunio* (Opéra-Comique, 5 June 1907) preceded the superb 'légende lyrique' *Béatrice*, premiered at the Opéra de Monte Carlo (21 March 1914) and revived at the Opéra-Comique in 1917. And, in 1919, the eminently British *Monsieur Beaucaire* was initially presented in English at the Prince's Theatre in London (19 April); Paris did not have an opportunity to applaud it in a French version until 1925.



The end of the Great War saw Messager return to composition and operetta, but also to the music directorship of the Opéra-Comique, whose destiny was once again in the hands of Albert Carré. He devoted himself to the latter job with undiminished passion for two years before the kidney problems that were eventually to kill him affected him so violently that he had to relinquish it.

His first work for Paris following the Armistice was *La Petite Fonctionnaire*, on a libretto by Alfred Capus, premiered at the Théâtre Mogador on 14 May 1921. The work is well made, charming even, but did not meet with the expected success. In 1923 Messager was elected president of the French composer rights society, the SACEM. That same year, Sacha Guitry asked him to compose the music for *L'Amour masqué*, a 'comédie musicale' (the term for the genre, though not strictly new in France, was popularised by Guitry) which he had tailored especially as a vehicle for his wife and muse Yvonne Printemps. Right from the first notes of the overture on 15 February 1923, the audience knew it was attending a major Parisian creation. The 'old master' of sixty-eight had produced a score of unequalled freshness, youthfulness and invention. The work became one of the flagships of the Guitry-Printemps duo, who gave numerous performances of it from Paris to New York by way of London. The *couplets* 'J'ai deux amants', so wittily crafted by Messager, naturally became the signature tune of Yvonne Printemps. The collaboration between Messager and Guitry – which also blossomed into a close friendship – should have culminated in the *Mozart* that the dying Lucien Guitry had asked his son Sacha to write for Yvonne. Alas, after numerous attempts – the idea of writing about Mozart using Mozart's own music seemed unworkable to him – Messager abandoned the project, which ended up with Reynaldo Hahn (1925). The two men worked together for the last time on the incidental music for *Deburau*, which Guitry asked 'Grandpa' (*Papi*) Messager to write for the play's revival in 1926.

In that same year Messager was elected to the Académie des Beaux-Arts, taking the seat of Émile Paladilhe (composer of the opera *Patrie!*), and presented the latest musical comedy for which he had written the

music, *Passionnément!* (text by Maurice Hennequin and Albert Willemetz), at the Théâtre de la Michodière in Paris (15 January 1926). From the first performance onwards, the waltz-song that gives the piece its title was on everyone's lips. A delicate, witty composition that delighted the Parisians, *Passionnément!* immediately entered the repertory of theatres throughout the French-speaking world, as did the irresistible *Coups de roulis* premiered on 29 September 1928 at the Théâtre Martigny (book and lyrics by Albert Willemetz), the final work of an old master who had showed a spectacular capacity for moving with the times. He took his leave a few months later, as he remarked before breathing his last, 'to see how they make music on the other side'.



André Messager at the end of his life.  
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