

***La Esmeralda* in Besançon**

by Douglas M. Bennett

(Please note that the pagination does not match that of Newsletter 86)

After the publication of my first preparatory article on Louise Bertin's *La Esmeralda* in Newsletter 85 but still before the single performance in Besançon my studies into the background to the opera continued. Firstly by rereading the relevant chapter of Anselm Gerhard's *The Urbanization of Opera* (The University of Chicago Press), I was reminded that Henry Chorley's *Music and Manners in France and Germany* starts with an interesting independent view of the work. He attended one of the few performances on his first visit to the Paris Opéra. I have included the relevant parts of his text as Appendix 1 to this article because access to the original is now quite difficult and readers may want to have the benefit of a contemporary view when considering the opera's somewhat confused history.

Chorley's 'independent view' (when judged in the context of the journalistic politics arising from Bertin père's proprietorship of the *Journal des Débats*) is certainly not even-handed from the viewpoint of modern feminism. We shall need to return to this aspect later in this article. Chorley ends with a reference to Hugo's poem *La Sagesse* from the collection *Les Rayons et les Ombres* of 1840. This lengthy poem (not included in anthologies of Hugo's poetry) is indeed addressed to a 'Mlle Louise B' who, from the correspondence, is clearly our composer. The poem seems to be an attempt to salve the wounds left by the *Esmeralda* experience.

*Comme je m'écrivais ainsi, vous m'entendîtes;
Et vous, dont l'âme brille entout ce que vous dites,
Vous tourâtes alors vers moi paisiblement
Votre souriere triste, ineffable et calmant:*

.....

*Les hommes sont ingrats, méchants, menteurs, jaloux.
Le crime est dans plusieurs, la vanité dans tous;
Car selon le rameau dont ils ont bu la séve,
Ils tiennent, quelques-uns de Caïn, et tous d'Ève.*

.....

*Le vers qu'à moitié fait j'emporte en mon esprit
Pour l'achever aux champs avec l'odeur des plaines
E l'ombre du nuage et le bruit des fontaines!*

Avril 1840.

This led me to question the nature of the collaboration between poet and musician. A search of the British Library catalogue revealed a short limited edition book, *Lettres...aux Bertin, 1827-1877*, Paris 1890. Most of the letters are addressed to Louise and many relate to *Esmeralda*. Here are some examples:

Fevrier 1834; Vous voyez, Mademoiselle, que vous avez le choix entre de bien mauvais vers, mais vous les voulez ainsi. C'est votre faute.

17 fevrier 1834; Notre Dame de Paris vois assome et vous ruine. Mais le jour de la première représentation tout sera compensé, effacé, recheté—Vous serez au septième ciel et moi dans le troisième dessous.

9 septembre 1836; A bientôt, Mademoiselle, votre musique est bien belle et votre succès sera beau aussi.

23 juin 1837; Outre les vers qui sont à vous, vous serrez quelque part dans ce livre un souvenir de notre chère Esméralda. C'était à moi de vous venger.

The picture painted is of a collaboration curiously balanced between the use of the formal ‘vous’ and protestations of abject servitude by the poet. Passages of pronounced testiness are followed by effusions of exaggerated ‘respect’. The picture left with the reader is of a collaboration in which neither contributor had their eye on the main objective—the writing of a successful opera.

Henry Chorley’s description also raises some factual questions. He describes the performance he witnessed as the third and last of *La Esmeralda*, and that it took place on a Monday in November 1836. These statements add further fuel to the confusion reigning over the performance history of the opera. Luckily further research revealed a source of the definitive facts, the archivist of the Opéra in the form of a Preface to a book published in 1888 of costume designs for the original production. A small special edition of the book was made with duplicate hand-coloured prints of the designs and one copy of this version is in the British Library (and well worth a visit to see watercolours over a century old that have been immaculately preserved by simply never being exposed!). Most of the Preface I have included as Appendix 2 to this article (in the original French) as another definitive source.

From this it is clear that Henry Chorley was guilty of some journalistic licence because he witnessed neither the third nor the last performance. The date of his visit is most likely the 21st November when he would have witnessed the fourth performance at which the box office receipts for *La Esmeralda* were the least of the whole ‘run’. Perhaps the most unexpected part of the tale revealed by this Preface is the role of the censor in forcing changes on the increasingly successful author, and the amusing fact that the performers largely ignored the censor’s changes, giving rise to a self-serving bureaucrat’s appeal to his boss for guidance that received the reply: ‘tell them to stick to what was approved!’ No wonder the lily-livered Léon Pillet went on to become Directeur under the increasingly arbitrary changes of political direction in the Paris of the time! The one subject on which this Preface is, unfortunately, unhelpful is the reduction process from 4-act to 3-act (what was missed out?) and then single-act (described as being a performance of Act 1 complete, which is quite likely).

After that long peroration concerning the background to the opera that might have been in my last article, I must now get down to the performance in Besançon itself. And first I would like to point out one aspect of the performance in February that grew in relevance for me during the time I was there, and has, in my opinion, played a major factor in making this unique performance of *La Esmeralda* such a significant event for me. Besançon nestles in a hill-entrapped loop of the Doubs river and its architecture has to a large extent resisted the baleful influence of modernisation that has blighted so many urban landscapes. Besançon is also a small town when compared with modern Paris. Indeed it looks similar to the Paris imagined by Hugo as a late-mediaeval town of 1482 in his novel *Notre Dame de Paris*, to judge from the illustrations in the book and the original designs for the opera in 1836.

During the day I spent between the dress rehearsal and the performance of *La Esmeralda*, and with the music of the opera still ringing in my ears, it was impossible to avoid imagining the events of the plot occurring in the cobbled streets of Besançon. The narrow alleys and overhanging buildings made more irregular by the ravages of centuries of settlement, and, above all, the mixture of young and old people, both distinguished and ordinary, milling around cafés and markets became indistinguishable from the characters in Hugo’s story. I draw this parallel to awaken readers to how the close interaction between senior society dignitaries and the people of the street was so important to the plot of *Notre Dame de Paris*, and it becomes so much more believable when imagined in the context of Hugo’s birthplace rather than in the anonymity of the modern metropolitan Paris.

When I reread my preliminary article from the last issue of this Newsletter I found I had been preparing to be disappointed. I had also invoked a strong dose of the ‘special pleading’ from which Louise Bertin has suffered in all the literature I have sampled—whether because she was a woman, or that she suffered an unspecified disability or was inflicted with a Papa who was both over-protective of, and over-ambitious for his daughter. What we saw and heard in February was about 80% of the drama (but we heard nearly 90% of the music because many of the cuts were repeats). Of the original 15 ‘numbers’ in the score only 2 were omitted completely (scene 1 of Act 2) and of the remaining 13 most were substantially complete. The staging was simple but as sophisticated as is usual nowadays when money restrictions limit complexity but not creativity. It is a shame that about 60% of the audience seemed to be school children getting their dose of the national poet, and that even with this level of ‘educational programme’ the house was not full. Many operatic explorers missed a unique adventure.

In order to understand the opera it is necessary to do some direct comparisons:-

Act 1 is concerned with events leading up to the meeting of Phoebus and Esmeralda. The Priest Frollo (a confusing amalgam of the two brothers of the novel) is already besotted with Esmeralda as he expresses in the largest scena of the Act (which received an unjustified round of applause from the audience: the singing of Matthieu Lécroart seemed to be not at its best). The entrance of Esmeralda introduces a lighter air (in the dance music) but sadly one yearns for the power of Franz Schmidt’s portrayal in his later opera *Notre Dame de Paris*—perhaps it was predictable that only full unison Viennese strings can evoke for us the Romany world of the gypsies since they share a milieu that is far from Paris.

Act 2 is concerned mainly with events related to Phoebus’ ‘other’ love—the respectable Fleur de Lys—who, in the novel, wins him back from Esmeralda. Here in the opera he does not revert to type (and class). Hugo’s pain over this compromise with the needs of opera lives on in his preface to the text. In this production Act 2 was severely truncated and played to some extent ‘en travestissement’ thus parodying upper crust society beyond the intent of the original and perhaps polarising further the world of the streets from that of the ‘Ancien Regime’.

Act 3 leads up to the wounding of Phoebus. In reaching this point the music rises to its highest—an arioso of wayward chromatic inflexions for Phoebus (tenor) that could be a pre-echo of Berlioz’ *Aenée* (Berlioz remained curiously respectful of this opera), and an elaborate duet for the lovers (with Frollo’s dark interjections making it a trio) that obeys most faithfully the Italian multi-part scena construction developed by Rossini. The tenor (Andrew Forbes Lane from Manchester) was most unfortunate in not getting any acknowledgement of his adventurous singing (made all the more perilous by the lack of orchestral support). The Act ended with a tableau frozen under the stark lights that inspired the audience to its first spontaneous applause.

The audience, having found itself getting involved in the drama, became positively partisan in its support of Esmeralda and Phoebus in Act 4. She, imprisoned in what looked like a grave tended by a silent gaoler whose parentage included a brush with the gravedigger from *Hamlet*, was rewarded with the most honest applause for her big romance. Quasimodo (almost a bit-part in this version of the story) then sang his Bell Song as a sort of interlude during which the momentum achieved at the end of Act 3 was lost. The Bell Song was the ‘hit’ of the original production, but now sounds over-promoted (it is obvious that ossias for an encore were already written into the printed score). Simple, repetitive clanging harmony and a rocking melody had all the sophistication of a street song. Frankly if it had been drowned by a tape recording of real bells little would have been lost musically and the dramatic point of the interlude in shifting attention to the looming cathedral better achieved.

The final ten minute scene brings musical anticlimax amid melodramatic nonsense. Phoebus returns fatally wounded to accuse Frollo and die, only to be followed by Esmeralda—in the

text she dies of a broken heart, but this production insisted on self-administration. Was it Falcon who demanded an ending centring on Esmeralda? We shall never know. What is on later record is Hugo's reluctant acquiescence with the changed denouement for reason of 'musical exigencies to which the poet is bound to submit, and which, at the opera, are entitled to be first considered'. Either way the music is weak. The link Hugo then makes with Corneille and Molière acting as librettists for Lully's tragédie-ballet *Psyché*, a parallel that he leaves dangling incomplete in terms of relevance, smacks of injured amour-propre. Do I detect the heavy hand of Bertin-père in this retranchement by a campaigner of otherwise Napoleonic bravery? The correspondence does not reveal at what stage this shift occurred—there are two 'treatments' of the plot linked with the published libretto (I refer to an English translation of 1896 that includes an 'édition définitive' that is much closer to the novel but would have presented difficulties in staging as well as perhaps overburdening the demands for musical characterisation). Chorley clearly had heard some of the tale of this change and attributed it to the Opéra management rather than the collaborators.

The above description serves also as a review of many aspects of the production. But there remain one or two topics to be covered. The lack of an orchestra proved a growing frustration. The music, for all Liszt's transcription skill and the energy of Madame Tillard's advocacy, cries out for the colours of the orchestra. Chorley was inspired by the performance he witnessed to write a panegyric on the Opéra orchestra, and the example on the following page shows the extent of the colouring lost by the performance on piano only. It is, however, necessary to pay tribute to the stamina of Madame Tillard—playing Liszt for nearly 2 hours without a break is a wonderful achievement on top of her obvious contribution as the driving force in making the performance happen at all!

As I wrote in my introductory remarks that the novel *Notre Dame de Paris* works through the interaction of a cocktail of class and ethnic types in the streets of a mediaeval town. The literature concerning *La Esmeralda* makes much of the depiction of this world, including the Cour des Miracles (see for example Anselm Gerhard's book already referred to). In the period following the July Revolution of 1830, prior to which an experiment without censorship may have contributed to the rising demand for change, the graphic depiction of 'people power' at work in the streets of Paris can only be described as 'brave'. The Besançon production reinforced this aspect by having the chorus recite their text in the manner of *sprechgesang* to further emphasise the 'language of the streets'. If the score had supported such a performance style then it would have predated the 'invention' of the technique by some 80 years! A study of the score shows that the chorus was always given pitched notes to sing, but that the word setting was largely monotone chanting to invoke the speech of the streets. The shift to spoken delivery may sound like a big change, but it didn't seem so during the performance.

The question on the lips of many that were not at Besançon will be 'What did it sound like?' My answer will be personal, and the other members of the Donizetti Society who were there will probably disagree with me. I want to avoid the myriad references evoked by particular phrases or harmonies—Schumann, Mendelssohn, Chaminade—and try to identify the overall impression with which it left me. The composer that comes closest for me is Offenbach. In drawing such a comparison I am being conditioned in part by the universal sound of sung French. Also the amalgam of musical styles and the production, which sought more than a hint of parody in much of the melodrama, and was rewarded by some (unintended?) laughs arising from operetta-like situations. Indeed the production trod a narrow line between melodrama and farce. It is a credit, however, to the strength of the piece and the commitment of the performers that one potential 'joke' didn't raise a laugh. As Esmeralda sat in her open

grave/prison in Act 3 she was accosted by a hooded figure:

“Quel est cet homme?”

“Un prêtre.”

“Un prêtre! Quel mystère!”

My waggish (and not very colloquial) French translates that last line as “A priest, what a surprise!” Bear in mind that the same hooded figure has haunted the opera since scene one, so the audience knows who it is. At this late stage in the tale I expected audience cynicism to be in the ascendancy, but instead the production had won the audience’s suspension of disbelief and the event passed without spontaneous giggling. The music of *La Esmeralda* may lack some of the spontaneity of Offenbach and his rumbustiousness. But if the main closed-form pieces do not carry all the humorous connotations this is no disadvantage for a piece with romantic aspirations. So it is the Offenbach of *Les Contes d’Hoffmann* rather than the opérettes, and as we only know Hoffmann through the ministrations of other composers it can be considered a comparison that is both a historical compliment (to Mlle Bertin’s modernity) and yet a comparison without fixed reference.

ACTE I.^r
SC. 1.
OUVERTURE ET INTRODUCTION.

The musical score is arranged in six systems. The first system is for the Piano, starting with a *Lento.* tempo and *ff marcato* dynamics. The second system continues the piano part. The third system introduces woodwinds: Flute II (Flet IIb), Clarinet (Clar.), and Horns and Clarinet (Hb. et Clar.). The fourth system introduces the brass and percussion: Trumpets and Ophicleides (Troupe Trombe, Ophic.), Horns and Basses (Altes et Basses.), Percussion (Ped. Timb.), and other Percussion (Ped. O). The fifth system continues the brass and percussion parts. The sixth system concludes the introduction with brass and percussion parts, including a section for *Instruments de cuivre.* (Copper instruments).

And now it is necessary to deal with the one consistent, though often implicit, criticism of Mlle. Bertin's opera, namely that it was written by a woman. Although to our modern sensibility the criticism may seem trivial it needs more than a dismissive refutation in the face of Chorley's almost vitriolic formulation.

I am not of the view that music embodies gender but it can, I believe, reflect it, and the music of *Esmeralda* supports such a view. Yes, it is sometimes reminiscent of the salon, but in that respect it is 'of its time'. There were more gender-specific connotations in Italian opera of the time—think of the many first scenes that are martial, choral and involve 'calls to arms' to be followed immediately by domestic scenes of reading or embroidery accompanied by harps? No, where I find a gender bias in *Esmeralda* is in the dramatic structure and it is revealed in the manner in which *Esmeralda* is introduced onto the stage. In Schmidt *Esmeralda* is 'announced' in Wagnerian fashion with strongly characterised music. In contrast Bertin 'discovers' her heroine in response to crowd calls and leaves the characterisation to her looks, her dancing and some light decorative vocalisations. For any soprano this is a tough assignment, and Anne Marchand tackled it with admirable enthusiasm, and if it didn't quite come off it wasn't entirely her fault. The piano accompaniment, for example, evoked something of the air of a Berlin night-club.

And gender has an impact on the transition from the novel to the opera. *Notre Dame de Paris* (the novel) pivots on the concept of ANAGKH seen as graffiti in the cathedral linked with the word *Anagneia*. The two words relate roughly to the concepts of 'oppressive fate' and 'tainting impurity' but both are in danger of being over-simplified by operatic treatment. Deprived of the capacity for verbal debate and its analysis of concepts the opera focuses solely on simplified 'fate' leaving the counter-running theme of demeaning temptation to the stage impact to be made by *Esmeralda*'s dancing and its impact on the various male characters. This leaves the notion of *Esmeralda*'s redeeming purity in danger of not registering; a problem further aggravated by the omission from Act 2 of the scene of Quasimodo in the stocks and the drink of water that *Esmeralda* gives him. It also puts a heavy dramatic burden on the soprano's ability to dance—a bit like *Salome*!

In contrast the characterisation of Quasimodo in the opera rests mainly on the Bell Song in Act 4, the 'hit' of the first production. Christophe Crapez earned a well-deserved round of applause for his performance of the piece, but did not earn an encore. Its impact was helped by the bell-like tone of the grand piano. But in fact the much reduced role of Quasimodo as a whole gives the whole drama an unbalanced air—without the notion of a pure soul in a deformed body Quasimodo becomes no more than a figure of fun, and the denouement lacks ironic poignancy. With the plot mechanism operating solely on the notion of arbitrary fate the outcome is inconceivable as the consequence of random chance alone. This makes me think that contemporary governments, in this post-revolutionary period, tried to portray their more extreme actions as having been forced on them by a necessity that was actually of their own instigation. Were audiences fooled?—No, I think not, but they were distracted. *La Esmeralda* shows by its place in operatic history as a victim of a politically motivated clique that the underpinning manipulations were not entirely invisible. Sadly the long-term consequence of this cynical manipulation has been the loss of an interesting composer. Louise Bertin wrote nothing after *Esmeralda* on anything like the same ambitious scale.

My hotel in Besançon was on the opposite bank of the Doubs river from the old town. As a result on my journey the next morning to the railway station I passed none of the sites that had previously reminded me of events in the drama of *Esmeralda*. Instead I probably felt more like Casanova who, when his travels brought him briefly to rest in the town, quickly restarted his journey. I was surrounded not by the remains of a mediaeval town but by the post-war (either first or second) rebuilding of the twentieth century. All my thoughts were of

coping with modern railway travel and the coming impact of Paris, where no temptress from beyond the Carpathian Mountains was awaiting me!

I still had to answer the question I posed in my first article; what was the secret of Mlle Bertin's ghostly smile? My mind was blank. On the one hand the music of the opera rang in my ears. Was it my imagination, or had some of the school children been humming the Bell Song as they left the opera house the previous evening? My memory was not deceiving me—some of the music from the opera was eminently hummable, and I hope that some of the singers who had learnt the music for the performance will go on to record these pieces when given an opportunity. As a staged version of the novel *La Esmeralda* leaves something to be desired. Maybe getting closer to the novel is just not possible. Even the recent musical version created in the Palais de Congres in Paris is at best a summary of the novel's dramatic moments delivered like a Pop pageant rather than a recreation of the story. But its music couldn't compete with that of the opera. If only *Esmeralda* had been given that amount of promotion!

When I found the small book of Hugo's letters to the Bertin family I found it had a frontispiece—an engraving of a young woman in profile. It doesn't claim to be a picture of Louise, but it can't be anyone else—the hairstyle looks distinctly familiar.



The artist, Amaury-Duval, was a pupil of Ingres and was famous for his portraits of young women. As I look at it now I see an ageing woman averting her eyes in disappointment. So much for her attempt to break into the gilded world of the Paris Opéra. This had proved to be a sanctum that even her talent for memorable musical characterisation as well as the tainting impurity of her father's considerable financial resources could not get her entrée to. But even the most oppressive fate can relent with time (although Greeks from classical times might disagree). I hope that the love of the work expressed by the creative team behind this performance and shared by those of us who witnessed it, will communicate to others who will appreciate the resurrection of an opera that rewards those that seek it out.

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