EIGHTEENTH CENTURY LAUGHTER, A TONIC IN COVID TIMES

by Charles Jernigan, November 2020.

O, what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge has wither'd from the lake
And no birds sing.

—Keats

In these long months of a Covid-winter, when no birds sing, we opera fans have been blessed by a steady stream of archival performances from the Metropolitan and elsewhere, all of which have kept our ears a-tune and our eyes trained on tablets, phones, laptops, computer monitors and big screen TVs. Now, like the first buds of spring peeking up through the winter snow, some enterprising companies have started to find innovative ways to present opera live, staged socially distanced and offered remotely. Some of these performances hew to traditional repertory, some bend towards new and contemporary works, and some, perhaps surprisingly, continue to mine the vast treasure-trove of forgotten works imprisoned in dusty tomes on library shelves.

Two such recent performances looked to unknown works and composers of the late eighteenth century and presented them in very different Covid-era productions. Both were French comic operas with spoken dialogue: Opera Lafayette performed François-Danican Philidor's 1761 opera-comique ***Le maréchal ferrant*** in English translation as ***The Blacksmith*** on a Colorado ranch in October, while LA Opera performed Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges' ***L'Amant anonyme* (*The Anonymous Lover*)** in mixed languages, via video performance which kept the singers fifteen feet apart and recorded the orchestra and singers separately. There was no live audience.

Le maréchal ferrant – Opera Lafayette

Le maréchal ferrant was one of the last *vaudeville* type of operas comiques, that is a confection in which a comic opera plot with original music in a folk-like vein is alternated with traditional folk and popular songs which the audience would have known. These *vaudevilles* (a word which comes from the place of origin for this type of entertainment, the Vau de Vire, or Vire Valley, in Normandy) were often performed at popular fairs. *The Blacksmith*, in fact, was first performed at the Opera-Comique Theatre at the Fair of Saint-Laurent, the site of several Philidor premieres. It was immediately played in several popular venues, and for the court at Fontainbleau. It became very popular and was performed all over Europe until the end of the nineteenth century, in both French and in translation. It was the first French opera to be performed in Russia (in 1764) and made it to Boston in 1793, and even Jamaica in 1802. After an early twentieth century revival in Paris, silence.

The libretto, by Antoine François Quétant, is said (on the title page) to be drawn from Boccaccio's *Decameron.* The opera's plot concerns Marcel, the Blacksmith, who wants to marry his daughter Jeanette to Labride, Coachman at the local chateau, while she is much more interested in Colin, Labride's nephew. Labride himself is more interested in Claudine, Marcel's sister. Colin drinks some of Marcel's homemade wine, which knocks him out cold. When Jeanette can't revive him, she believes him to be dead, and so enlists the help of two passing "course peasants" to hide the body from her father by putting it in a cellar. When Colin comes to and reappears, he is thought to be first a robber and then a ghost, until all is settled amicably and Claudine and Labride are paired, as are Jeanette and Colin.



Cast of *The Blacksmith* in Mancos, CO

The story seems to be based on two of Boccaccio's one hundred tales, both of which are much bawdier in the fourteenth century telling. In one a doctor's wife entertains her lover, who drinks a narcotic prepared by the doctor for his patient, and he falls into a such a deep sleep that the wife believes him dead and has his "body" placed in a chest to hide it from her husband, with ensuing confusion. In another tale, another frisky wife married to a pious wool merchant convinces her husband that her lover, who appears inopportunely, is a ghost and the merchant and his wife "exorcise" the spirit, much to the lover's amusement. These funny tales of tricky wives who pull the wool over the eyes of their credulous and cuckolded husbands are bowdlerized and married to a typical opera plot about two young mismatched couples who find their proper mates and head for a double wedding by the end. Sex and infidelity are washed out of the story by the time it becomes popular entertainment for an eighteenth century bourgeois audience.

The story undergoes another sea change in Opera Lafayette's clever production, which moves it to the Old West, specifically to the real town of Mancos, Colorado (pop. c. 1,500), in the southwest corner of the state. The French peasants assume a new language (English) and a western twang, and the original French folk songs of the *vaudeville* are replaced by nineteenth century American folk songs, most of them tied to the American west. The plot and characters remain the same, except that some French names are replaced by American counterparts (Colin becomes Cody; Labride becomes MacBride, etc.). And French wine becomes very potent moonshine whisky.

The original idea of Opera Lafayette's Ryan Brown was to have *The Blacksmith* performed in Mancos' tiny restored opera house, but Covid intervened and the performance took place on the Brown family ranch, outdoors in front of a barn-like building which could easily have been a blacksmith shop. The audience sat, well distanced, on bales of hay in the field in front of the barn-stage. The original libretto specifies that scene is set in Marcel's shop, in the Autumn of the year, around 5 PM. Remarkably, the performances on the Reddert Ranch took place in October, and they began at 5 PM! The opera was played in a single act (as in the original), and lasted about 90 minutes.

To accommodate Covid restrictions, Opera Lafayette's cast, many of them regulars, traveled by car from eastern Canada and the eastern US, staying in tents on the way. In Mancos, they quarantined and created a safe "bubble," so that they did not need to wear masks or distance themselves during rehearsals or performances. The "orchestra" consisted of Maestro Brown on violin/fiddle, Adam Gardino, guitarist and Doug Balliet playing contrabass. They made a very effective ensemble with Gardino's plucked guitar often sounding like a harpsichord.

Nick Olcott translated the French libretto and adapted the work to its western setting along with Maestro Brown, who chose the American folk music to graft into the score. Olcott's text was often very funny and was always a clever translation of the original. Colin's "Charmant objet de ma flamme" became Cody's "Oh Jeannie, gal of my dreams" while Jeanette's "Si l'on dit que je t'adore" becomes Jeannie's "When folks say I'm crazy about you." I counted around fifteen American folk songs replacing the French originals, including "Shenandoah," "Red River Valley" and "The Colorado Trail." And of course "I dream of Jeannie," which, while not exactly a folk song, fit perfectly. Sometimes the traditional lyrics were altered to fit the plot, and still the Mancos audience sang along to many of them. The astonishing thing is that Philidor's eighteenth century score fit so well with the American folk tunes, probably because his own pieces were mostly *ariettes,* short, folk-like songs themselves. In his day, Philidor was accused of imitating Italians (and sometimes plagiarizing) rather than using the more courtly and decorated forms of French thêàtre lyrique, but Philidor's style obviously worked well with the original folk songs, and it blended seamlessly with the American songs. Sometimes it was hard to tell if a little aria was by Philidor—or a traditional American song.

The well-rehearsed cast was great. Pretty Pascale Beaudin, an Opera Lafayette regular, sang Claudine, and equally attractive newcomer Sarah Shaffer sang Jeannie. Dominique Côté was Marcel while Boston-based Frank Kelly doubled as Slim MacBride and Banjo. Young Arnold Livingston Geis was the handsome Cody, who returns as a "ghost, " while Joshua Conyers played Eustis, who, along with Banjo (the two "course peasants" of the original), helps move Cody's "corpse." I have to say that the French Canadians and the Boston-based Kelly managed the corny western accents with aplomb; it was part aw-shucks *Oklahoma!* and part parody-*Gunsmoke.* The practiced acting, under Olcott's direction, also strode the line between send-up and serious just right. Jeanette's ariette "J'ai perdu tout ce que j'aime," when she thinks Cody had died, is probably the most evolved piece in the score.

Philidor's own music plays with onomatopoeia. There is a song imitative of banging on an anvil, one imitative of a donkey's "hee-hawing" and a Coachman's song for MacBride which

imitates a galloping horse. (Frank Kelly as MacBride, aka Labride, sang this in both English translation and in French, perhaps to give us a taste of the original). The score ends with another kind of *vaudeville*—this time the meaning of that word referring to a musical finale in which each character sings a verse and there is a common refrain. It was a technique which Rossini was still often using fifty years later (as in the vaudeville finale to *The Barber of Seville*). *The Blacksmith* is a type of opera as popular entertainment which would persist in France for many decades, albeit without the inclusion of popular songs. Frédèric Herold's *Le muletier* (1825) is an example; it is also based ultimately on a Boccaccio tale via Lafontaine, and even Adolphe Adam's *Le postillion du Longjumeau* is a great example of the comic peasant tale in opera, complete with onomatopoeic imitation of a whip and a horse's gallop in Chapelou's famous coachman's aria "Mes amis, ecoutez l'histoire" with its high Ds. Even Rossini's *Le Comte Ory*, with its bawdy story based on a medieval fabliau, might be said to follow the type, although Rossini's highly evolved, decorated music is a long way from Philidor's simple vocal writing and harmonies.

Opera Lafayette plans to stage *The Blacksmith* in its D.C. home and in New York when circumstances allow, and Brown hopes to take it on tour one day, perhaps to small western towns like Mancos where many people aren't familiar with opera. Many small Colorado towns still have tiny opera houses dating from the mining era of the nineteenth century and they would offer great venues for such a fun and clever show. Until then, it is available to rent by way of streaming on demand for $23—a bargain. Details are on the Opera Lafayette website - https://operalafayette.org/the-blacksmith#tix .

The Anonymous Lover, LA Opera

Around the same time that Opera Lafayette was performing its hoedown opera outdoors to a live, well distanced audience, LA Opera was reviving another eighteenth century work via video to a home audience. This time the work was the chamber opera ***L'Amant anonyme***, which was premiered in 1780 in the private theater of Mme. Montesson in Paris. The composer was Joseph Bologne, also known as the Chevalier de Saint-Georges, a remarkable man, born on the island of Guadeloupe in 1745 to a wealthy French planter and his wife's African slave, called Nanon. Brought to France as a child, Saint-Georges was trained in both music and martial skills. He had a long career in both arenas, on the one hand as a composer, conductor and orchestra leader; on the other as a swordsman, soldier, diplomat and protege of the aristocracy. He played important roles in pre-Revolutionary Paris and in Republican France after the Revolution. He was imprisoned for a time during the turmoil of the Terror; he led his own military legion of Americans, most of whom were black.

Saint-Georges wrote a symphony, several symphonic pieces, chamber music, songs and six operas, only one of which survives complete. That work, ***The Anonymous Lover***, is LA Opera's fall offering with the Coburn School. The work suffers from a weak libretto based on a play by Mme. de Genlis. Léontine (Tiffany Townsend) is a lady who has sworn off love; however, she is secretly loved by her long time friend Valcour (Robert Stahley), who is advised by a wise elder, Ophémon (Michael J. Hawk); Dorothée is Léontine's lady in waiting. There is

a peasant couple too, Colin (Jacob Ingbar) and Jeannette (Gabriela Flores), whose wedding is being celebrated by the aristocrats. The meagre plot is based on Valcour's secret wooing of Léontine and his movement from being an anonymous lover to a declared one. All ends happily with a double wedding.

Saint-Georges' fine score is the reason to watch the free video streaming which LA Opera offered. The performance, conducted (and introduced) by James Conlon himself took place in an empty auditorium. The LA Opera Orchestra recorded the orchestral score separately and that sound was transmitted to the singers, who sang individually. Singers were always at least fifteen feet apart and were brought together by the magic of video editing. I enjoyed the work of all the singers, who sang in French, but spoke the dialogue in English.

Saint-Georges and Mozart likely knew each other when they lived in the same house in Paris for a time, and the music of *The Anonymous Lover* sounds Mozartean to my ears. Some hear echoes of Gluck and foreshadowing of Berlioz. In any case, it is a delightful, accomplished score, probably at its best in the trio which ends the first part and in an imported aria from Saint-Georges' first opera *Ernestine*, the only aria surviving from that work. Here it was assigned to Dorothée, who otherwise is relegated to a speaking role.

Variety was brought to the scenery-less, prop-less enterprise through video dissolves, color washes and other video techniques, which provided movement which was not otherwise possible in a production when the principals could not approach each other. Bruce A. Lemon directed, but the spoken dialogue was dispatched amateurishly and could not stand much scrutiny. There were graceful dancers (Andrea Beasom, choreographer) and a long, very pleasant overture.



Cast of *The Anonymous Lover*, practicing social distancing.

Saint-Georges' score is not entirely unknown to the stage in recent times. There was a New York production a few years ago, and it has been seen in France, but for the most part this was *terra incognita* for most opera fans, the fascinating work of a black composer, the son of a slave, who came to know Mozart, who was friendly with Marie Antoinette and the Prince of Wales in England, who composed, performed and fenced his way to International renown. The fact that he was almost forgotten for two hundred years only increases the fascination. Listening to his sole surviving opera on the 239th anniversary of its incarnation opens another unknown world.

With interesting works like these, this Covid winter seems not so bleak, and the birds are starting to sing again.