

The SYMPOSIUM OPERA COLLECTION – Volume 5

POL PLANÇON (1854-1914)

Compiling fictitious, favourite casts is a well known pastime of opera lovers. My own favourite cast, however, is not fiction; it is to be found on the programme of the Metropolitan Opera House matinée of 12 January 1895, for a performance of *Les Huguenots* with Nordica, Melba, Scalchi, Jean de Reszke, Édouard de Reszke, Ancona and Plançon - seven stars indeed. That afternoon Pol Plançon appeared as St. Bris, the role of his début at the Grand Opéra in Lyons in 1877. It was the second of his twelve seasons with the Metropolitan; eventually he made a total of 612 appearances in opera and concerts with the company.

Paul Henri Plançon was born at Fumay in the Ardennes in 1854. He was taught by Duprez and Sbriglia. Lyons was a reasonably significant centre for a first engagement, and he stayed there for two seasons. Little is known of his repertoire at that time, but he did appear as Méphistophélès in *Faust* as well as in Gounod's *Cinq Mars* and Saint-Saëns' *Étienne Marcel*. Early in 1880 he sang for the first time in Paris at the Gaité Théâtre, with a company euphemistically described as 'L'Opéra Populaire'. Plançon sang the part of Colonna in *Petrarque* by Duprat. There is some confusion about this season at the Gaité since its management had, prior to the arrival of the Opéra Populaire, agreed to let the house on Tuesdays and Saturdays for a series of performances by a company led by Adelina Patti and Nicolini. Naturally there was no interchange between the two companies. It is a happy speculation that Plançon took the opportunity to hear Patti; though alas, it would seem that he never sang with her.

Documentation for these early years is scarce. According to James Dennis, writing in *Record Collector*, there were successful appearances in the Concerts Lamoureux. In one of these he sang the role of the King in a concert performance of the first act of *Lohengrin*. A review of a concert at the Chateau-d'Eau early in 1882 praises the tastefulness of Plançon's execution of a song by Dvorák, commending also his style and voice. The following year saw his entry into the world of international opera with an engagement at Monte Carlo to sing small parts in *La Traviata*, *Faust* and Meyerbeer's *Le Pardon de Ploërmel (Dinorah)*. However, on 7 February he stood in for none other than Jean-Baptiste Faure as Méphistophélès in *Faust*, opposite van Zandt and Talazac. T. J. Walsh in his history of the Monte Carlo opera claims that Plançon won 'the sympathy of the audience by his remarkable ability'. Whatever that may mean it seems likely that this unexpected event helped pave the way for his début at the Paris Opéra, also in *Faust*, just four months later, on 25 June 1883. However, the tone of the lengthy review of the début, in the annual survey of musical events by Noël and Stoulig, suggests that musical opinion in Paris had recognized a rising star.

Clearly many of the characteristics later associated with Plançon were already present. There was general praise for the quality and timbre of the voice as well as for his articulation, although some suggestion that the delivery could be smoother. His stage manner also won plaudits. Perhaps not surprisingly for Parisian critics, there are

suggestions of a certain 'provincialism' in some of the theatrical gestures. All in all 'a successful début boding well for the future of a young artist'.

Plançon was a regular member of the Opéra troupe for the next decade. There is an interesting reference in one book to his annual requests for salary increases around Christmas time! His repertoire consisted of 24 roles in 17 operas. At various times he portrayed three different characters in Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*, likewise in Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*. In November 1885 he appeared in the first performance of Massenet's *Le Cid*. The star-studded cast included the de Reszke brothers, Fidès Devriès and Melchissèdec. All works at the Paris Opéra were sung in French at that time, and for many years thereafter. In fact the bulk of Plançon's Paris repertoire was made up of French operas - *Der Freischütz*, *Lohengrin* and *Rigoletto* the only exceptions. The very apex of his Paris years may have been the gala performance of *Guillaume Tell* on 29 February 1892 to mark the centenary of the birth of Rossini. The cast for this grandest of grand operas included Mmes. Bosman, Bréval and Deschamps-Jehin and Messieurs Affre, Delmas, Plançon, Renaud and Vaguet; a reminder that this was indeed a golden age of French singers. However, Plançon's Paris years were coming to an end. In June 1891 he appeared for the first time at Covent Garden, and in November 1893 he made his début at the Metropolitan.

His début role at Covent Garden was again Méphistophélès. It was a portrayal 'which more closely approaches the ideal than any of his forerunners' wrote Herman Klein, who considered Plançon to be 'among the most accomplished and distinguished artists that France has ever sent here. . . a superb voice allied to a style that was at once elegant and impeccable; a splendid actor who adorned every part that he played'. P. G. Hurst, whose own opera-going started rather later, considered the Covent Garden season of 1891 to have inaugurated the Golden Age (!), for the company included the de Reszkes, the Ravoglis, Melba, Eames, Nordica and Maurel. Plançon only sang seven performances as against the forty-one of Édouard de Reszke, who was the leading bass. In this context particular interest attaches to Hurst's view that 'Plançon, judged by beauty of timbre and by his finished style, was a more polished singer than Édouard de Reszke. . . although generally rated as a basso cantante this was more on account of the lightness and flexibility of delivery than from any lack of profundity. . . in all his roles he was intelligent and musicianly. . . and a very memorable stage figure'.

During the first half of his career Plançon sang, as far as can be ascertained, almost exclusively in France and mostly in Paris. During the second half, the bulk of his time was divided between Covent Garden's international summer seasons, and the rather longer winter and spring seasons at the Metropolitan Opera, including its tours in other North American cities. It may be inappropriate to describe this as a fully international career, for he never travelled to South America or Russia, and I can find no traces of alleged performances at La Scala. It might be supposed that his years in Paris gave a bedrock to his repertoire. This is not in fact the case; some of the roles were inconsequential, and a good many of the works were simply not in the repertoires of Covent Garden or of the Metropolitan. The most important operas carried forward from the Paris years were *Faust*, *La Favorite*, *Les Huguenots*, *Lohengrin* and *Roméo et Juliette*. Operas such as Reyer's *Sigurd*, Paladilhe's *Patrie* and Saint-Saëns' *Ascanio* disappeared from his repertoire.

By my reckoning Plançon appeared in twenty-two different operas at Covent Garden. Only six of these had been in his Paris repertoire. The new operas, many of which were also sung with the Metropolitan, made him much more of an international

artist. In his very first season at Covent Garden he appeared as Rocco in *Fidelio* - a somewhat improbable role for him; he only sang it once. His first Landgraf in *Tannhäuser* was with the Metropolitan Opera in 1894; the part entered his Covent Garden repertoire two years later, when he also appeared twice in Donizetti's *La Favorite*. Extant documents suggest that both then and at the Metropolitan in November 1895, the opera was given in Italian, as well it might have been, given that the other principals were Ancona, Cremonini and Mantelli. We can only speculate as to whether a quintessentially French artist such as Plançon would have sung a role already in his repertoire from Paris, in what would be from every point of view (his, the opera and the audience) a foreign language. Or was it another polyglot performance? On the same theme it is fascinating to find a suggestion in the *Metropolitan Opera Annals* that the performance of Thomas' *Hamlet*, at the Metropolitan on 4 December 1895, was sung in Italian; presumably to suit Kaschmann and Mantelli. The authors of the *Annals* do not preclude the possibility that some of the cast sang all or some of their roles in French, and it would seem more than likely that these would have included Plançon and Calvé. In 1899 Plançon appeared twice at Covent Garden as Oroveso in *Norma* with the peerless Lilli Lehmann in the title role. Bellini was then out of fashion. These two performances of *Norma* and two with the Metropolitan Opera in *La Sonnambula* would seem to have been the artist's only opportunities to sing music seemingly written for such a voice; a proposition re-enforced by his recording of 'Vi ravviso'.

In the last years of the nineteenth century the repertoire at both the Opéra and at Covent Garden frequently included new works. At the latter Plançon found himself appearing in the first (and last) performances of de Lara's *The Light of Asia*, Bemberg's *Elaine*, Stanford's *Much Ado About Nothing* and Bunning's *Princess Osra*. Allegedly the first two of these composers did not lack in influence at the Royal Opera House. The cast for de Lara's work included also Lassalle and Eames, whilst the de Reszkes and Melba joined Plançon in *Elaine*. Bunning's opera, written in English, was sung in French with Mary Garden in the title role. At the opposite end of the spectrum from unsuccessful dabbling with novelties were the State and Gala performances at which Plançon was a regular participant. In 1893 he sang Capulet in a performance of *Roméo et Juliette* given to mark the marriage of the Duke of York. Four years later he was in some ways the mainstay of the State Performance to mark the 60th anniversary of Queen Victoria's accession to the throne. Plançon, uniquely, appeared in all three of the separate single act offerings, and in each case his name is listed first on the silk programme which commemorated the event. In Act Two of *Tannhäuser* he was joined by van Dÿck, Renaud and Eames; in Act Three of *Roméo et Juliette* by the de Reszkes and Melba (as in 1893); and in Act Four of *Les Huguenots* by Renaud, Alvarez and the rather less well known Miss MacIntyre.

Whilst the Metropolitan was more conservative in its repertoire (or less open to influence by aspirant and minor composers), its longer seasons offered more opportunities. Between 1893 and 1908 Plançon appeared in twelve seasons singing a total of thirty-six roles in thirty-two operas. On average he appeared fifty times each season. As in London, he had to share the position of leading bass with Édouard de Reszke, and there was a good deal of overlap of repertoire. Parts sung by the French bass with the greatest frequency were Ramfis in *Aïda*, Méphistophélès in *Faust*, Saint Bris in *Les Huguenots*, Capulet and also Frère Laurent in *Roméo et Juliette*, and the Landgraf in *Tannhäuser*. All six of these were in his Covent Garden repertoire, whilst Méphistophélès, Saint Bris and Frère Laurent were also amongst his Paris roles. It would

seem that Édouard de Reszke only sang Frère Laurent in *Roméo et Juliette*, and he had first call on the role. Thus when they were both in the cast Plançon sang Capulet, but otherwise he opted for Frère Laurent. The two also appeared together in *Les Huguenots* with de Reszke as Marcel.

Paul Eisler's fascinating account of the first twenty-five years of the Metropolitan Opera notes that Plançon 'quickly became recognized as one of the outstanding artists in Metropolitan history'. A review in *The Times* of his first performance in Gounod's *Philémon et Baucis* describes him as a 'consummate vocal artist. . . his phrasing the very essence of elegance'. Krehbiel described a 'sonorous bass and suave and finished style'. At a later date Henderson refers to Plançon as 'a picture in his black coat and gray beard as Saint Bris. . . the dignity of his presence, his voice and his style added much to the genuine impression of the performance'. The same critic later complimented his 'grave and sonorous Sarastro'.

It is uncertain just how many performances Plançon gave during his entire career - probably somewhere between 1,000 and 1,500. As well as in opera, he appeared in numerous concerts. Of his more than six hundred Metropolitan performances over one hundred were in the regular gala concerts given on Sunday nights. Amongst other locations, there was at least one concert at Buckingham Palace. There, on 9 July 1894, he joined Albani, Alvarez, Ancona, Saville and Scalchi. He contributed arias from *Die Zauberflöte* (in French) and Gounod's *La Reine de Saba*. Almost his entire adult life was devoted to singing. He was in his early twenties at the time of his début in Lyons. His thirty year career closed on 30 March 1908 with a performance as Plunkett in *Martha* in a cast which included Bonci and Sembrich. It was only a short retirement, for he died in Paris shortly before the outbreak of the First World War.

Most fortunately for future generations, he is one of the earliest singers, and certainly one of the most significant, to leave a reasonably substantial recorded legacy. An early issue of *The Record Collector* lists sixty-nine published commercial recordings of some forty titles. Whatever other titles or unpublished takes there may once have been, none has survived.

His earliest recordings were cylinders for Bettini, of which no copies are now known, and cylinders made by Mapleson, on which Plançon is all but inaudible. To all intents and purposes these can be safely ignored for the purposes of analysing the legacy, albeit not without a touch of nostalgia. On 19 January 1901 Mapleson tried to make at least one recording from a performance of Massenet's *Le Cid* with a cast which included three of the original principals who had created the work in Paris. Alas, what comes down to us is amongst the noisiest and least successful of all Mapleson's efforts, barely a note or a word being audible.

The main legacy consists of recordings for The Gramophone and Typewriter Company made in 1902 and 1903, and for Victor in each of the years 1903 to 1908. Whilst some of the songs are rather dull and perhaps barely worth the effort of recording them, and recognizing that Plançon's vocal powers were beginning to wane by 1907, it is still the case that he never made what could be fairly considered as a bad record. The voice is instantly recognizable, and can thus be considered a 'central' voice. The word 'unique' is frequently used by collectors of all kinds of artifacts and often without justification. However, the sound made by this singer has so far proved inimitable.

All his versions of the aria from *Le Caïd* can be considered 'sans pareil'. 'Vi ravviso' from *La Sonnambula* is delivered with the smoothest imaginable legato. The

vocal line in the aria from *Le Chalet* is exemplary. Finally, and worthy of particular mention, is King Philip's aria from *Don Carlos* which is in the original French. We overhear a sad old man, but still a King, reflecting on his private grief; a truly beautiful piece of singing. In modern times various musicologists claim to have 'rediscovered' *Don Carlos* as a French rather than an Italian opera. Plançon is not known ever to have appeared in the work, but he may well have studied it as a student in Paris, where it had relatively recently been first performed, and hence known it in French.

Stanley Henig

This compilation includes all of the music from oratorio and opera recorded by the artist, and a selection of songs. For completeness the trio from *Faust* is included, although it is artistically little but a curiosity.

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