

THE GOLDEN AGE OF OPERA IN FRANCE

Throughout the nineteenth and into the early part of the twentieth century, Paris was one of the most important centres in the world of opera. For much of the time there were at least three Parisian opera houses with performances throughout much of the year. More opera could be seen in Paris than in any other city in the world. What might be considered the 'world of French opera' did, of course, extend beyond the boundaries of the capital; indeed even outside France proper.

The Théâtre de la Monnaie in Bruxelles was particularly important. It was quick to present new works by French composers; sometimes before any of the Paris houses. There were also numerous opera companies operating in the French provinces. The position of France in general and of Paris in particular in the world of international opera was determined above all by two factors: the continual flow of new works by French composers and the considerable number of first class singers.

It needs to be recognised that even though French operas formed a significant part of the international repertoire, many major French singers must have chosen to spend almost their entire careers on native soil. Language and culture may have contributed to this apparent tendency to look inwards; indeed some fine singers hardly ventured beyond Paris. However, the vast amount of opera being produced in Paris in particular and in France in general meant that there was always plenty of work at home. France was also a rich country even if fees for star singers were probably less than they were in London or New York.

And a further point. 'The French operatic tradition', discussed in detail in the notes to Symposium 1252, which appeared under that very title, embraced more than French composers and French singers. Non-French composers, Verdi is the outstanding example, would produce works, written in French, especially for the Paris Opéra, whilst 'foreign' singers might integrate almost seamlessly into the Opéra or the Opéra Comique; provided, of course, that they were prepared to sing in French. Thus of eight singers in this album at least two are Belgian, Hector Dufranne and Alice Verlet, the latter almost certainly of Flemish origin; whilst Lucette Korsoff was born in Italy of Russian parentage. Nonetheless, we would today regard all three as amongst the luminaries of the French operatic stage, and major contributors to its operatic tradition.

Alice Verlet (Belgium? 1873-Paris 1934) was born Alice Verheyden, which suggests that she was from the Flemish rather than French speaking community in Belgium. Her professional career on the operatic stage began in 1894, although there is confusion about both place and role. We do know that she first appeared at the Opéra Comique in Paris on October 11th of that year using her original name. Presumably she became 'Verlet' some time during the next twelve months, for that was the name used in January 1896 when she sang the title role in *Les Noces de Jeanette*. After further performances at both the Opéra Comique and the Monnaie, Verlet made her début at the Paris Opéra on December 1st 1903 as Blondine in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. This was in what is described as a French version by

Kufferath and Solvay. It had its première in Bruxelles early in 1902 with Verlet as Constanze. Interestingly, this was also the role she sang in what seem to have been her only operatic performances in London; in English, translation by Troutbeck, on 20, 25 and 30 June 1910 and one other date in Beecham's season at His Majesty's Theatre. Verlet remained a regular member of the Opéra until 1914. Her repertoire included *Le Cid*, *Faust*, *Rigoletto*, *Roméo et Juliette*, *La Traviata* and Zerlina in *Don Giovanni*. In 1908 she appeared in *Lucia di Lammermoor* at the Théâtre de la Gaîté. At some point there seems also to have been a successful tour of Central Europe.

Verlet probably spent most of the war years in the United States of America. Apart from a number of concerts she was also part of the Chicago opera company for the 1915-6 season. However her only appearances seem to have been as Philine in *Mignon* in a star-studded cast which included Supervia, Dalmorès and Journet. This may have been her final operatic performance. She stayed in the United States until 1920, returning thereafter to Paris where she became a teacher.

By way of contrast to Alice Verlet, we know very little of the life and career of Eugène de Creus (1884 - ?). It seems possible that he, too, may have been Belgian. According to Kutsch and Riemens he made his début in Antwerp in 1908. In 1911 he joined the Paris Opéra and this was his home until 1935. He seems to have sung an enormous variety of roles, ranging from leading parts in *Don Giovanni*, *La Fille du Régiment*, *La Juive*, *Manon* and *Mignon* to some of the more minor and even walk-on parts. Thus there are listings for de Creus as both Pinkerton and Yamadori in *Madama Butterfly*.

The name of Berthe Auguez-de Montalant (Baltimore 1865- ?) will be rather better known to record collectors, but the details of her career are if anything even more obscure than those of de Creus. She was born in Baltimore of a French family, which had lived in the United States since the French revolution. The family returned to France when Berthe was still young and she studied at the Conservatoire of Bordeaux. Almost all her career was in concert and oratorio; indeed the only reference I can find to the opera stage is that she sang Leonore in *Fidelio* at the Opéra Comique in April 1899, replacing the illustrious Rose Caron. In his *Les Annales du Théâtre*, Edmond Stoulig implies that Auguez de Montalant had decided to move her attention from concerts to opera and he commended her for 'un succès véritable'. Despite this plaudit she seems thereafter to have reverted back to concerts and oratorio.

Jean Vallier (Sète, Département Hérault 1863-Paris 1952) made his début at the Opéra Comique, but soon joined the Paris Opéra, where he appeared in *Sigurd* in February 1892. Ten years later he sang Hagen in the first Paris performance of *Die Götterdämmerung*, in a cast including Dalmorès and Litvinne. He was part of Oscar Hammerstein's troupe for the 1909-10 season at the Manhattan Opera in New York, where he appeared as Phanuël in *Hérodiade*, Ramfis in *Aida*, Hermann in *Tannhäuser* and The Old Hebrew in *Samson et Dalila*.

Following his 1903 début in *Mignon*, Pierre Guillamat (Carbonne near Toulouse 1877-Paris 1957) sang extensively at the Opéra Comique. A widely ranging repertoire included roles in *Fidelio*, *La Fille du Régiment*, *Lakmé* and *Pelléas et Mélisande*. He also sang a small part in the première of Bloch's

Macbeth, and appeared at the Opéra as Zuniga in 1907. As professor of singing at the Paris Conservatoire he trained a number of successful students.

Most of the singers in this album spent almost their entire careers in France. Hector-Robert Dufranne (Mons, Belgium 1870-Paris 1951) is an exception. He was born and studied in Belgium before making his début at the Monnaie as Valentin in *Faust* in September 1896. Richard Soper's fascinating *Belgian Opera Houses and Singers* gives full details of a remarkable international career. At the Monnaie between 1896 and 1900 Dufranne laid the foundations of an extensive repertoire, undertaking mostly small roles in a wide range of French, German and Italian operas. During the summers of 1897 and 1898 he was at Covent Garden. Again, he sang mostly minor roles, including Mercutio in *Roméo et Juliette* and Donner in *Das Rheingold*. From 1900 to 1907 the Opéra Comique in Paris was his base; the repertoire continued to expand and the roles were rather more important.

Dufranne sang Golaud in the première of *Pélleas et Mélisande* and this had a decisive impact on his career. Oscar Hammerstein's greatest contribution to the development of opera lay in his concentration at the Manhattan Opera on major works of the French repertoire often, until then, unperformed in the United States. The major 'signing' for his second season (1907-8) was Mary Garden; Hammerstein was determined to present *Pélleas et Mélisande* with his new star in the role she had created. To quote John Cone in *Oscar Hammerstein's Manhattan Opera Company*, "Garden would not sing it... unless other (sic) French artists with the requisite style were also in the cast. Hammerstein's answer was to go out and engage three other singers who had been in the original production". Dufranne's introduction to American opera goes with the first performance of *Pélleas et Mélisande*; "he sang superbly and triumphed over the very repugnance of the character he was portraying". Other good reviews followed and the trajectory of Dufranne's career was determined. He sang with the Manhattan Opera until it closed, thereafter transferring, with other leading artists, to the Chicago Opera, where he performed until 1921. He was highly rated by Hammerstein. During the 1909-10 season, the highest paid male singers were Renaud and Sammarco, at \$1,000 per performance. Dufranne received \$700. Interestingly this was more than Dalmorès, who was the leading tenor in French opera.

His 'galley years' long behind him, Dufranne's Chicago career was almost entirely in French opera, *Carmen*, *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, *Faust*, *Louise*, *Manon*, *Roméo et Juliette*, *Werther* and many others. His only non-French works seem to have been *Lohengrin* and *Salome*. There were breaks in his American career during which he returned to the Monnaie. The final phase of his career, after 1921, was in Europe. Once again he was on the roster of the Opéra Comique, and he also sang in the French provinces as well as in Belgium and The Netherlands. According to Soper he sang his final Golaud in Vichy in 1939, 37 years after creating the role.

There is no obvious dividing line between singers working almost exclusively in one country and those who have international careers. Inclination and opportunity may be as important as singing quality and acting ability. Whilst much of Dufranne's career was outside Belgium and France, Léon Beyle (Lyon 1871-Lyon 1922) like many other fine French singers seems only to have sung in his home country and almost exclusively at the Opéra Comique. There is no record of his having started with minor roles; his début was at the Opéra as Don Ottavio in

1897 and this was followed by Laerte in *Hamlet*. From 1898 the Opéra Comique was his home. His wide repertoire included major roles in *Mignon*, *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, *Fidelio*, *Madama Butterfly* and *Manon*. He was in the first performance of *Tosca* at that house and, according to *Großes Sängerlexicon* (Kutsch and Riemens), when the Metropolitan Opera visited Paris in 1910 he replaced an indisposed Caruso in that role, opposite Scotti and Farrar. Given that he was well known to Paris audiences and Caruso rarely sang in that city, this probably would have been a somewhat thankless task. Beyle also sang extensively in the French provinces. It is not clear whether or not he ever appeared in *Sigurd*. It was in the repertoire of the Opéra rather than the Opéra Comique and was frequently performed. Thus Beyle may have sung it on occasion, but he is not listed as having done so in the annals compiled by Wolff.

French record companies issued a good number of duets and these included various outstanding partnerships. This album concludes with duets featuring Beyle with Lucette Korsoff (Genoa 1876-Bruxelles 1955). Korsoff was born in Genoa of Russian parentage. Her father, himself a singer, had, according to Kutsch and Riemens, adopted the family name from a Milanese singing teacher, Corsi. This is consistent with a curious story in the Levik memoirs. He quotes Medvedyev on a baritone named Korsov with an 'exceptional voice', but who was not in fact Russian. According to this account Korsov was actually German and his real name Gottfried Hering. Rather little seems to be known of Korsoff's early years. There is some documentary evidence to point to a début as early as 1893 in Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona*. However, it was only later that she begun serious studies in Paris. Tantalizing snippets from her diaries and memoirs were published in the eighth volume of *Opera Annual*. Whatever her origins, Korsoff became in effect a French singer, another for whom the Opéra Comique was a home base. She first sang there in September 1902 as Lakmé, making the 'Bell Song' sound 'deliciously easy'. She soon took on many of the light lyric and coloratura roles, Rosina in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, Philine in *Mignon*, Marie in *La Fille du Régiment* and Norina in *Don Pasquale*. She also sang Marenka in the first performance of Smetana's *Prodaná Nevesta (The Bartered Bride)* at the Monnaie early in 1907. It seems that subsequently Korsoff did enjoy some international career, but there few firm details are available.

Professor Stanley Henig

Track 1 was recorded in London; 2 to 25 in Paris.

Albert Grisar (Antwerp 1808 -Asnières near Paris 1869) was apprenticed to a merchant, but then studied music in Paris under Reicha and in Naples under Mercadente. From 1848 he composed many operas in Paris. *Les Porcherons* (1850) can probably be translated as *The Young Swineherds*.

Berthe Auguez de Montalant – There are various spellings.

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