



Opéra-Comique Overtures

**BOIELDIEU
DELIBES • GOUNOD
HALÉVY • HÉROLD
LECOCQ • MAILLART
MÉHUL • OFFENBACH**

**ORF Vienna Radio
Symphony Orchestra**

Michael Halász



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All the operas in this collection were produced in Paris.

Gluck, Mozart and Beethoven gave a general character to their overtures, as independent preface to a dramatic composition. Cherubini and Méhul also wrote special pieces appropriate to the genre of their works. The enterprising Boieldieu was one of the first to introduce reminiscences, a foretaste of motifs drawn from the work in question. Hérold, Auber and Adam followed his example, using a truncated sonata principle as developed by Rossini. The charming genre of *opéra-comique* was an intermediary between grand opera and burlesque operetta that emerged in the 1860s, with a radical change in tone after 1870. There is a development of the *opéra-comique* genre from Boieldieu and Méhul in the early 19th century, through the classic examples of Hérold, Halévy and Maillart, into the operetta style of Offenbach, Lecocq and Ganne – presenting a progression and radical social change in style, wit and taste.

Charles Gounod (1818–1893), the famous composer of *Faust* (1859) and *Romeo et Juliette* (1867). The *Ouverture dramatique* is an arrangement for smaller orchestra (*orchestre restreint*) made in 1925 by Charles Delsaux. It was intended as the overture to the unsuccessful Gothic opera *La Nonne sanglante* (Eugène Scribe and Germain Delavigne, after an episode in Matthew Lewis's novel *The Monk* 1795; first

performance: Opéra, 18 October 1854) before being replaced by a short dramatic prelude. The scenario was considered by eight other composers (including Verdi and Berlioz), before taken on by the young Gounod. The opera has been revived with some interest in Osnabrück 2008 and Paris 2018. This overture comes across as an abstract work, in the mode of Mendelssohn. (There is a suggestion of the supernatural in allusion to the latter's *Die schöne Melusine* Overture, Op. 32, 1834.) It is in strict sonata form, with a bland orchestral pallet. The introduction begins with a horn chord, over cello ruminations, rising to a quivering arpeggiated woodwind motif often associated with water, followed by mysterious fluttering triplet figures. The first subject suddenly starts, rising figures, upward runs over a deep bass. A leaping minor-keyed string motif leads into a somewhat yearning woodwind melody, with a slow horn call and answering winds. The quivering water figure returns to begin the development section with the aspiring string theme and responding woodwinds prominent. The recapitulation clearly enunciates the returning motifs, with a drum toll leading into a quick coda. Gounod's most famous works have short preludes; his notable overtures were provided for the *opéras-comiques* *Le Médecin malgré lui* (1858) and *Mireille* (1864).

Fromental Halévy (1799–1862), composer of the tragic and sublime grand opera *La Juive* (1835).

Les Mousquetaires de la reine is an *opéra-comique* in three acts (libretto: Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges; first performance: Salle Favart 2, 2 February 1846). The story is set in the 1620s, when Louis XIII and his court temporarily moved to Poitou to await the start of the siege of La Rochelle. The Queen's musketeers have been forbidden dueling. Bored, with no challenges or fighting to distract them, they drink, brag, brawl and dream of beautiful damsels. The composer depicted the characters with a thrilling veracity. The overture has more verve and elegance than any other orchestral work by Halévy. It generates a certain febrile atmosphere in its use of loud outbursts and exuberant rhythms. The opening is bold, with lighthearted woodwind cascades. Decisive chords lead into a suave horn solo with rushing commentary that transposes into the skittish, mercurial main subject. A grandiose passage with fanfares leads by tripping strings into a lighthearted march, woodwinds over strings. More fanfare developments transpose into the recapitulation of both main themes, with the march whipped up into a preroration and breathless coda. This was one of the composer's very best *opéras-comiques*, performed some 200 times until 1860.

Clément-Philibert-Léo Delibes (1836–1891), renowned composer of *Coppélia* (1870) and *Lakmé* (1883). *Le Roi l'a dit* is an *opéra-comique* in three acts (libretto: Edmond Gondinet; first performance: Salle Favart 2, 24 May 1873). The Marquis of Moncontour has become the favourite of Louis XIV, who mistakenly observes that the marquis has a son. The marquis, not daring to

contradict the king, adopts a peasant boy, who leads a wild life, and is eventually presumed dead in a duel. When the king expresses his condolences, the marquis takes the opportunity to send the errant boy back to the fields. The music is graceful, lively, skillfully written. The overture uses a gavotte and march in the archaic style. It begins with a bright sharp processional theme for full orchestra, shifting to a delicate motif for the strings with woodwind counterpoint. After a return to the opening, a quiet meditative melody for the clarinet emerges, and is taken up by the strings. Staccato woodwind figures lead into a bustling motif for the violins which broadens out before the emergence of a new meditative idea which is developed at some length. The staccato motif returns before being swept away by the strong emphatic coda. The work was revived with revisions on 3 June 1885.

Louis-Joseph-Ferdinand Hérold (1791–1833), composer of the ballet *La Fille mal gardée* (1828) and the charming *Le Pré aux clercs* (1832). *Zampa, ou La Fiancée de marbre* is an *opéra-comique* in three acts (libretto: Mélesville [Anne-Honoré-Joseph Duveyrier]; first performance: Salle Ventadour, 3 May 1831). The story resembles *Don Giovanni*, with a statue taking revenge on an inveterate seducer. Zampa is a marauding pirate chief in Sicily. When he approaches his latest unfortunate victim, Camille, she eludes him, and he finds himself in the embrace of the marble statue of his erstwhile love Alice Manfredi, who drags him into the sea with her. The opera was very popular and retained in the repertory until 1913. Hérold died

just as his genius flowered in his two final works. The overture is a particularly fine example of its type, perfectly paced, orchestrated with a remarkable instrumental colour, and anticipating the story of seduction and the supernatural to follow. It presents a suite of the most brilliant motifs, magnificently exuberant and dramatic, optimally scored. There are five themes from the work, immediately sweeping the listener away with its rushing opening *allegro*, the chorus of pirates from the Act I finale. The torrential music is pulled short by dramatic chords, and an eerie descending chromatic passage that establishes the supernatural aura of the tale. The ballad of Alice Manfredi follows, gentle and pathetic, before being slowly taken up by a quickening pace that builds into the explosively dramatic development, suddenly again pulled short by a chordal sequence, into complete silence, broken by a wistful recital for the clarinet. This deftly launches into a bouncing, bumptious skipping motif associated with Zampa himself, bursting into brassy fanfares and another development sequence, the melody repeated with strong horn syncopation, before the brilliant coda with its rushing strings.

Étienne Méhul (1763–1817), encouraged by Gluck, wrote Revolutionary music and was influential in the development of Romanticism. *Joseph* is an *opéra-comique* in three acts (libretto: Alexandre Duval, after the *Book of Genesis*, ch. 37:41–45; Feydeau, 17 February 1807). The action takes place in Ancient Memphis. Joseph tells how his brothers sold him into slavery, and of his subsequent rise to power after his prophetic interpretation of dreams and advice

to Pharaoh. Because of the widespread famine, Jacob's sons have come seeking food and refuge for their tribe. Joseph now reveals his identity, and forgives his brothers. All praise the God of goodness and mercy. The overture, with its chant-like motifs, establishes the setting, with its remote mood. It begins with a smooth *adagio*, an effect produced by the purity of the harmony, all the stringed instruments playing only two parts. This is followed by a four-bar theme of the greatest simplicity, developed in a masterly manner. This theme has a melodic formula borrowed from the eighth mode of plainchant, the hypomixolydian. This is repeated throughout the work, imparting a particular character of religion, antiquity and grandeur. Méhul's uses intervals and cadences recalling the first impressions of his youthful sojourn in the abbeys of Récollets and Prémontrés where he functioned as organist.

Hélène is an *opéra* in three acts (libretto: Jacques-Antoine de Révéroni Saint-Cyr and Jean-Nicolas Bouilly; first performance: Feydeau, 1 March 1803). Constantin, Count of Arles, has been accused of killing his father. He flees with his wife Hélène to escape the anger of the common people, egged on by the new count, Romuald. The couple wander through forests trying to escape their pursuers. The people demand that Hélène and her son should be executed unless Constantin surrenders himself. On his deathbed Romuald confesses to the murder of Constantin's father. The people are persuaded of Constantin's innocence and the opera ends happily. The overture is bright and arresting, and maintains a lively character throughout, with repetitive figures generating a motor propulsion. It is dominated

by the brightly emphatic opening motif (three identical semiquavers rising to a crochet), a chordal sequence dominated by the strings. This is the same rhythmic pattern as the opening motif of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*. This leads by way of an appoggiated bass line into the second subject, extensively repeated with woodwind commentary and bell-like figures. The opening theme returns only to be suddenly interrupted by a bright trumpet call, introducing a portentous stillness. The first theme now passes in variation between the various instrumental groups before a full reprise of both subjects, the first then transforming into the coda. There were 36 performances in 20 months before it disappeared from the repertoire. Beethoven's liberating trumpet call in *Fidelio* was inspired by *Hélène*.

Alexandre-Charles Lecocq (1832–1918), principal composer of the second period of French operetta (the early Third Republic), especially of the charming *La Fille de Madame Angot*. *Graziella, ou la Petite mariée* is an *opéra-bouffe* in three acts (libretto: Albert Vanloo and Eugène Leterrier; first performance: Théâtre de la Renaissance, 21 December 1875). This work is one of the best comic operas by this prolific composer. Graziella, having just married San Carlo, who loves her, is an object of interest to the *podestà* Rodolfo. To escape his attentions, she is obliged to pass for the wife of Montefiasco, himself in the power of a spouse who is uncompromising on the subject of her conjugal rights, insisting on them with riding crop in hand. The young married couple undergo a variety of comical incidents, many of them of a

touching and tender character. The overture is striking, essentially a potpourri in binary form. It opens with a grand marching theme, repeated *piano*, then *pianissimo*. There is a transition to a lyrical *adagio*, growing to an emotional crescendo. The main theme is a tripping *allegro*, like an equine canter, punctuated by loud chords. This transmutes into a *cantabile* melody for the trumpet with gentle string figurations, leading back into the first theme. Full chords initiate a loud transition to a reprise of the *cantabile*, now for high woodwinds then full orchestra, before launching into the sparkling coda. Act III is the most musical of the work, with the *couplets* of reproach 'Pour vous sauver, on se dévoue', and the touching duet of tears 'Tu pleures, Graziella'. The work was very successful.

Aimé Maillart (1817–1871), an obscure figure though he opened Adam's Opéra-National with his opera *Gastibelza*. *Les Dragons de Villars* is an *opéra-comique* in three acts (libretto: Eugène Cormon and Joseph Lockroy; first performance: Théâtre Lyrique, 19 September 1856). The story was borrowed from *La Petite Fadette* by George Sand, updated by the librettists to the time of Louis XIV. Rose Friquet is a young woman whose bizarre character has rendered her an object of suspicion and aversion throughout the countryside. Under this singular exterior, she hides an excellent heart and a perceptive spirit. Thanks to her, some wretched outlaws are able to escape from a cave in Cévennes where they had found refuge, and are able to capture Savoy. She saves the farmer Thibaud from a misguided marriage just in time. Finally, she inspires a

sincere and passionate love in the young villager Sylvain, and the two are married. The overture makes use of the military instruments to set the scene, and focuses on the character of the heroine, whose nodal aria is cited at length. The score abounds in charming, beautiful melodies. The prayer 'Soutien de l'innocent' has a strong harmony and largeness of melody that perfectly captures the energetic character and religious fervour of the inhabitants of Cévennes. The opera, which had 153 performances by 1863, became popular throughout Europe, passing to New Orleans (1859), New York (1868), and even Mauritius (1872). Revived at the Opéra-Comique in 1868, it achieved 377 performances by 1917.

François-Adrien Boieldieu (1775–1834), composer of the famous Romantic *La Dame blanche*, and the father figure of the genre in the 19th century. *Le Calife de Bagdad* is an *opéra-comique* in one act (Claude Godard d'Aucour, after a tale from *A Thousand and One Nights*; first performance: Salle Favart 1, 16 December 1800). This was the composer's first great success. Two years later he married the dancer Clothilde Malfleurai, but disillusioned by her infidelities, he left for St Petersburg to work for Tsar Alexander I (1804–10). The Caliph Isaoïn wants reassurance that he can be loved for his own sake, and in disguise pays court to the lovely Zetulbé. Despite all his deceptive tricks, the young girl's affections remain constant. The music is charming, of great freshness. The overture is one of Boieldieu's best orchestral pieces, a delightful fantasy on the opera, notable for its depiction of local colour, with restrained use of Oriental effects

in the manner of the 'Turkish operas' prevalent since Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. It begins with a serene, almost languorous melody for the strings before the commencement of the cheerful and vivacious *allegro*, announced on dancing strings with woodwind ripostes before an exhilarating *tutti*. Three mildly exotic themes are developed with skill, and there is persistent use of jangling percussion (cymbals and triangle). The work had nearly 800 performances into the late 19th century.

Jacques Offenbach (1819–1880), the famous creator of the first period of French operetta (the Second Empire), with the legendary *Orphée aux enfers* (1858). *Le Mariage aux lanternes* is an *opérette* in one act (libretto: Jules Dubois [Michel Carré] and Léon Battu; first performance: Théâtre des Bouffes Parisiens [Salle Choiseul], 10 October 1857). This was a reworking of Offenbach's *Le Trésor à Mathurin* (1853). Denise, industrious, but taciturn and sad, works on the farm of her cousin Guillot. Denise is in love with Guillot but does not dare to confess this to him. Both receive letters from an uncle, in which they are requested to come to the village linden when the bells ring for Vespers: there they will find a treasure. When the two appear at the fixed time, the meaning of the letter becomes clear. Under the light of the nightwatchman's lantern, Denise and Guillot are betrothed. This was one of the composer's most popular one-act works, one in his more pastoral and sentimental style rather than the *bouffonnerie* of some of his contemporary stage works. The short overture begins with a slow dotted rhythm, moving into

a woodwind melody for the lovers, repeated in broken form, transitioning into 6/8 for the oboe, then all the woodwind, then the full orchestra. This builds in crescendo to a second melody, very lyrical, for high strings and bell, of gossamer delicacy, representing the Vesper hour. There is another transition to an augmented repeat,

accelerating in crescendo to a reprise for the full orchestra, before launching into the exhilarating coda. The work was produced in Berlin, Vienna (1858), Prague, Graz, Budapest (1859), London, New York, Brussels, Stockholm (1860), Moscow (1871), Milan (1875), and Grahamstown (1972).

Robert Ignatius Letellier

ORF Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra



Photo:
Lukas Beck

An ensemble of international renown, the ORF Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra (ORF Vienna RSO) is a paragon of Viennese orchestral tradition. Known for its exceptional programming, the orchestra combines 19th-century repertoire with contemporary works and rarely performed pieces from other periods. All ORF Vienna RSO performances are broadcast on the radio, and the orchestra performs

in two subscription series in Vienna, in the Musikverein and the Konzerthaus. In addition, it appears every year at major Austrian and international festivals, such as the Salzburg Festival, musikprotokoll im steierischen herbst and Wien Modern. The ORF Vienna RSO enjoys a successful collaboration with the Theater an der Wien, has an excellent reputation as an opera orchestra, and is also equally at home in the film music genre. The orchestra regularly tours internationally, and its discography spans a broad range of cross-genre recordings. Under the leadership of its former chief conductors, which include Milan Horvat, Leif Segerstam, Lothar Zagrosek, Pinchas Steinberg, Dennis Russell Davies, Bertrand de Billy and Cornelius Meister, the orchestra has continuously expanded its repertoire and its international reputation. Marin Alsop is the current chief conductor.

www.rso.orf.at

Michael Halász

Michael Halász's first engagement as a conductor was at the Staatstheater am Gärtnerplatz, Munich, where, between 1972 and 1975, he directed all operetta productions. In 1975 he moved to Frankfurt to work as principal Kapellmeister with Christoph von Dohnányi, and here he conducted the most important works of the operatic repertoire. Many engagements as a guest conductor followed and in 1977 Dohnányi took him to the Staatsoper Hamburg as principal Kapellmeister. From 1978 to 1991 he was GMD (general music director) of the Hagen Opera House and in 1991 he took up the post of resident conductor at the Wiener Staatsoper for 20 years. Michael Halász's recordings for Naxos include ballets by Tchaikovsky, operatic excerpts of Wagner, symphonies by Beethoven, Schubert and Mahler, Rossini's overtures, three volumes of Liszt's symphonic poems (the latter critically acclaimed by the *Penguin Guide*), *Fidelio* (8.660070-71), *Don Giovanni* (8.660080-82), *Le nozze di Figaro* (8.660102-04), *Die Zauberflöte* (8.660030-31), and a pioneering recording of Schreker's opera *Der ferne Klang* (8.660074-75). He has also recorded Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* and *Orfeo* (8.550766), Richard Strauss's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (8.553379), Rubinstein's *Don Quixote* (8.555394) and, for Marco Polo, ballet music by Rubinstein (8.220451) and Schmidt's *Symphony No. 1* (8.223119).



Opéra-comique emerged in the 19th century as an intermediary between grand opera and burlesque operetta. This album charts its progression as a distinct genre, tracing the origins from Boieldieu and Méhul early in the century via the classic vitality of masters such as Hérold and Maillart into the operetta style of Offenbach and Lecocq. With innovative features, colourful orchestration, drama, wit and atmospheric writing, the operas proved very popular and these overtures encapsulate their immense vivacity and charm.

OPÉRA-COMIQUE OVERTURES

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| 1 | Charles GOUNOD (1818–1893)
La Nonne sanglante ('The Bleeding Nun') – Overture dramatique (1854)
(arr. Charles Delsaux, 18??–1958) (1925) | 8:10 |
| 2 | Jacques Fromental HALÉVY (1799–1862)
Les Mousquetaires de la reine ('The Queen's Musketeers') – Overture (1846) | 7:28 |
| 3 | Léo DELIBES (1836–1891)
Le Roi l'a dit ('The King Has Spoken') – Overture (1873) | 6:33 |
| 4 | Ferdinand HÉROLD (1791–1833)
Zampa – Overture (1831) | 8:07 |
| 5 | Étienne-Nicolas MÉHUL (1763–1817)
Joseph – Overture (1805) | 5:53 |
| 6 | Hélène – Overture (1803) | 5:29 |
| 7 | Alexandre-Charles LECOCQ (1832–1918)
La Petite mariée ('The Little Wife') – Overture (1875) | 6:00 |
| 8 | Louis-Aimé MAILLART (1817–1871)
Les Dragons de Villars ('The Dragoons of Villars' or 'The Hermit's Bell')
– Overture (1856) | 6:00 |
| 9 | François-Adrien BOIELDIEU (1775–1834)
Le Calife de Bagdad ('The Caliph of Baghdad') – Overture (1800) | 7:23 |
| 10 | Jacques OFFENBACH (1819–1880)
Le Mariage aux lanternes ('Marriage by Lantern Light') – Overture (1857) | 5:37 |



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Recorded: 10, 11 and 30 January 2019 at Großer Sendesaal, ORF Funkhaus, Vienna, Austria
Producer and editor: Erich Hofmann • Engineer: Friedrich Trondl • Booklet notes: Robert Ignatius Letellier
Cover: *François-Adrien Boieldieu* (c. 1800) by Louis-Léopold Boilly (1761–1845)
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