

CD Review

André Messager, *Les p'tites Michu* (operetta or opéra-comique, 1897)

Violette Polchi (Marie-Blanche), Anne-Aurore Cochet (Blanche-Marie), Marie Lenormand (Mme. Michu), Caroline Meng (Mlle. Herpin), Artavazd Sargsyan (Aristide), Philippe Estèphe (Captain Gaston Gigaud), Boris Grappe (General des Ifs), Damien Bigourdan (M. Michu), Romain Dayez (Bagnolet)
Orchestre national des Pays de la Loire and Choeur d'Angers Nantes Opéra, Pierre Dumoussaud *cond*
Bru Zane 1054 (2 CDs: 103 minutes, plus a 174-page book in French and English)

Scholars and critics tend to forget light opera. We write as if the serious operas that fill the stages of La Scala, Covent Garden, the Metropolitan Opera, and Bayreuth *are* the world of opera.[1] But light opera (often incorporating extensive spoken dialogue) has had its own vital and varied life and stage career. This relative neglect is natural enough, given that light operas (e.g., even the best *zarazuelas*) have often not been much heard and seen beyond their original language-region. Also, when light operas do travel (e.g., some well-known Viennese operettas), they tend to get drastically reworked.

One of the most important light-opera genres was French operetta (or *opérette*), whose skilful composers included Hervé (e.g., *Mam'zelle Nitouche*), Offenbach (e.g., *La vie parisienne*), and Chabrier (*L'Étoile*, one my favourite light operas, in any language).[2] French operettas were written to a largely comical or even satirical text and were intended to be performed by actor-singers who could delight an audience as much in longish spoken interchanges (requiring thespian skill and sharp comic timing) as in sung arias and ensembles.

French operettas, and indeed operettas generally, were mainly intended for, and performed in, halls much smaller than today's Met, which seats nearly 4,000

[1] See, for example, Conrad L. Osborne's 827-page-long, and immensely insightful, *Opera as Opera: The State of the Art* (New York: Proposito Press, 2018). I particularly appreciated Osborne's discussions of recent operatic stage productions of Halévy's *La juive*, Wagner's *Lohengrin*, and Borodin's *Prince Igor*; see Ralph P. Locke, 'On the Diseased State of Opera and Suggested Cure', *The Boston Musical Intelligencer*, 10 February 2019, www.classical-scene.com/2019/02/10/opera-cure/#more-43588.

[2] The main features of French operetta are laid out in Richard Traubner, *Operetta: A Theatrical History*, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 2003; first published 1983) and Gervase Hughes, *Composers of Operetta* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1974; first published 1962). *L'Étoile* has been particularly well served in recent years. Conductors D.-É. Inghelbrecht and John Eliot Gardiner made cherishable recordings of the work, and Gardiner also conducts on a captivating DVD. A first-rate critical edition was prepared by Hugh Macdonald (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2014; full score and piano-vocal); it makes available the complete, and witty, spoken dialogue, edited by Paul Prévost.

people and has problematic acoustics in seats beneath an overhang. The orchestra was, similarly, smaller than what was normal for grand operas of the day. The light instrumentation and the lively acoustic of an intimate hall helped singers switch back and forth with ease between legato singing and quick declamation of the spoken (grumbled, whispered, etc.) passages.

Most operagoers today, except perhaps in French-speaking lands, have not encountered first-rate staged performances of *opérette*. At most, we tend to know the Viennese equivalent, often in bloated productions (such as the Met's latest version of *The Merry Widow*, first seen on 31 December 2014); or the British equivalent: Gilbert and Sullivan's 'Savoy operas' (e.g., *The Mikado*), which many of us encounter in amateur or student productions that, however spirited, may not convey the full richness and elegance of Sullivan's music nor the incisiveness of Gilbert's keenly chosen words.

This new recording of André Messager's modest masterpiece from 1897, *Les p'tites Michu*, reminds us just how enchanting operetta, and specifically the French variety, can be. The work – I am tempted to call it a 'show', in the Broadway sense – was a long-running hit not only in Paris but in London, New York and elsewhere, sometimes in versions that added characters and inserted new numbers (or omitted some of the numbers found in the original version).

The recording gives us Messager's complete score and nearly all of the spoken text. Dialogue scenes can sometimes go on for up to six minutes. One of the longer stretches of dialogue occurs near the end of Act 2, when Monsieur Michu, a cheesemonger in the Paris produce-and-food market (les Halles), gives everyone on stage (and us in the audience) some crucial information that he and Madame Michu have withheld for the past 17 years.

During the French Revolution (Michu explains), the Marquis des Ifs went into exile to escape the enraged mob, leaving his pregnant wife behind. (Yes, the marquis is a selfish idiot.) The marquise died in childbirth, and the infant, who survived, was entrusted to the local cheesemongers, Madame and Monsieur Michu, who had an infant daughter of their own. One day, the well-meaning but absentminded Monsieur, after bathing the two baby girls, realized that he could not remember which one was the Michus' own and which one was the high-born Irène des Ifs. Doing the best they could, the couple raised the girls as similar-looking but non-identical twins, giving them the intertwined names of Blanche-Marie and Marie-Blanche.

The operetta begins with the two young women, now age 17, playing happily with classmates at a boarding school run by the demanding but kindhearted Mademoiselle Herpin. The 'sisters' are inseparable, and are loved equally by their classmates. We soon learn that Aristide, a young man who works at the Michus' cheese shop, is so fond of both of them that he cannot decide whether he would rather marry Blanche-Marie, who (he explains) is poetic and dreamy, or Marie-Blanche, who has a darling nose and makes him laugh.

The central problem that shapes the plot is that the Marquis des Ifs – now General des Ifs, because of his military service under Napoleon – returns, having promised the hand of his 17-year-old daughter Irène (whom he has never met) to the soldier Gaston Rigaud, who saved his life during the French army's brutal Second Siege of Zaragoza (1809).[3] Gaston, for his bravery, has been promoted to

[3] This brutal episode, in which tens of thousands died on both sides, resulted in Napoleon's brother Joseph being put on the Spanish throne. He ruled Spain in a spirit of 'enlightened absolutism' until forced to flee in 1813.

the rank of captain. The 'handsome officer' (to quote the libretto) meets the two intriguingly similar-looking young women at the school and charms them both, quite unaware – as are they – that one of them is the sought-after Irène des Ifs.

A series of well-managed plot manipulations causes General des Ifs to conclude that Marie-Blanche is Irène and should thus marry Gaston.[4] But Marie-Blanche, realizing that Blanche-Marie is attracted far more to Gaston than she herself is, dresses Blanche-Marie up in clothes and makeup matching a painted portrait of the general's late wife. Des Ifs 'recognizes' Blanche-Marie as perfectly matching the marquise's portrait. This pleases all four young people, because Marie-Blanche has gradually come to realize that she is far more drawn to the working-class Aristide than Blanche-Marie ever was and would also rather work in the cheese shop than attend formal parties in a palace.

One of the most fascinating aspects of this work is that, as critics noted at the time, it plays with the concept of 'atavism'. This belief holds that a child of noble parents will retain noble traits even if raised from infancy by a working-class couple (and the reverse). But the critics overlooked a crucial fact: the libretto offers no evidence that Blanche-Marie *is* the abandoned child of the Marquis (now General) des Ifs. For example, there is no mention of a tell-tale birthmark (as on Figaro in Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*.) All we or any character on stage ever see is that Blanche-Marie is the more polite and meditative of the two (raised-as-)sisters, and that she is bored by Aristide whereas Marie-Blanche is fond of the goofy guy and deals comfortably and sassily with customers in the cheese shop.[5]

The librettists and the composer encourage us to read Marie-Blanche this way by giving her brusque and taunting statements (presumably these are to be taken as typically working-class traits) in the dialogue and the sung passages. Marie-Blanche also takes matters into her own hands, much like other wily servants in comic opera, such as Mozart's Figaro and Susanna. Messager emphasizes Marie-Blanche's earthiness of manner by making her a mezzo-soprano, whereas Blanche-Marie is a soprano: the distinction is made evident in their duets, where Marie-Blanche sings 'below' her sister. In the recording under review, Violette Polchi reinforces the characterization by rendering some of her spoken and sung lines with a forthright directness rather than a ladylike demureness. (More on the recorded performance in a moment.)

André Messager, who studied with Fauré and Saint-Saëns, was a very successful composer in his day. His best-known works include four more or less light operas: *Madame Chrysanthème* (a semi-serious work, but with spoken dialogue and several highly caricatured roles; 1893), *Véronique* (an operetta; 1898), *Fortunio* (entirely sung; 1907), and *Monsieur Beaucaire* (an operetta in English; 1919).[6] Messager also composed important scores for the ballet (e.g., the colourful

[4] The libretto is by experienced theatre professionals Albert Vanloo and Georges Duval.

[5] So this work could just as well be interpreted as, at once, a *repudiation* of social-class atavism and an *affirmation* of a different kind of stubborn 'nature': namely each person's highly individual, deeply embedded behavioural tendencies.

[6] *Fortunio* was recorded under John Eliot Gardiner in 1987. Of these works, *Madame Chrysanthème* particularly deserves a complete modern recording; it is based on Pierre Loti's novel of the same name, which, soon thereafter, would serve as an indirect source for Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (1902–6). Traubner mistakenly states that the music in *Madame Chrysanthème* is entirely 'continuous', with no passages of spoken dialogue (*Operetta*, p. 213): perhaps he was influenced by the work's sole recording (currently on Cantus Classics 5.01906F), from 1956, which omits nearly all the dialogue.

Les deux pigeons, 1886). He was also widely prized as a conductor, leading the world premiere of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (Debussy dedicated the work to him). All of this helps explain why the orchestration in *Les p'tites Michu* is at once economical and imaginative – not least in its many passages for solo winds, e.g., a single well-placed horn note or some burbling patter from a bassoon. Yet, as Richard Traubner perceptively notes, the violins (or cellos in the case of Gaston) often double the voice in a way that makes the work feel 'symphonic', by which I think he means 'more like "a real opera" than an operetta'.[7]

The diverse musical style-topics that Messager uses from one number to the next, or within a number, demonstrate that the music in an operetta need not be simple, predictable, and uninspired. Indeed, page after page in the score supports the claims of operetta authority Richard Traubner that Messager was 'the last of the titans' of French operetta and 'probably the most graceful operetta composer of any era'.[8] Gervase Hughes goes even further about Messager's operettas: 'to much of his music … he brought a measure of Massenet's fluent grace, Saint-Saëns's aristocratic elegance, even Fauré's refined subtlety'.[9] In the present case, librettists Vanloo and Duval help by setting up a range of contrasting musical situations. For example, they allow the first act to close, as it had opened, with references to military comportment and military music, thereby creating a nice sense of closure. Better yet, the end of the act invokes *different* military elements (and involves different characters onstage) than does the opening, thus avoiding any sense of unimaginative sameness.

The single biggest stroke of musico-dramatic genius occurs in the middle of Act 2, when Blanche-Marie and Marie-Blanche sing a lovely hymn-like prayer to Saint Nicholas, in which each of them begs that she not turn out to be Irène des Ifs (which would oblige her to leave the Michu family).[10] As soon as their old-style canticle ends, the handsome, brave, and gallant Captain Gaston Rigaud appears and mentions casually that he is looking for Irène des Ifs, whom he is to marry but has never met. This comes as extremely welcome news to both young women. In an airy trio, they assure Gaston that he will easily recognize Irène because she looks remarkably like *them*. Gaston then leaves and Blanche-Marie and Marie-Blanche sing the music of their prayer again – but with a new set of words. Each sister now begs Saint Nicholas to arrange that *she* be Irène (heiress to the des Ifs fortune and future wife of the clearly desirable Gaston).

On a more local, technical level, Messager's score reveals some masterful touches. 1) Unpredictable phrase structure is always treasurable in operetta, a genre otherwise largely committed to units of four and eight bars. The trio just described features a refrain that is intriguingly ambiguous in phrasing. Is the first half of the first bar actually a half-bar upbeat, with the true downbeat coming in the middle of the bar, thus launching a seven-and-a-half-bar phrase? Similarly, the gorgeous orchestral transition leading into the sisters' second, reworded statement of their hymn to Saint Nicholas is flexible in its phrase structure. In addition, it features a touching flute solo in the parallel minor – aptly, given the two women's pained realization that they are vying for love of the same man. 2) The score gives much evidence that

[7] Traubner, *Operetta*, 214–15 (cf. 220, 296).
[8] Traubner, *Operetta*, 211.
[9] Hughes, *Composers of Operetta*, 91–9 (here 91).
[10] Traubner, *Operetta*, 212: 'Graceful throwbacks to earlier musical forms … would become a Messager trademark'.

Messager was 'listening around' (and perhaps reading a wide range of scores). The beginning of the playful first trio for the sisters and Captain Gaston (in Act 1) makes what I think is a sly reference to the octave-leap opening of the scherzo from Beethoven's Ninth. A theme early in the Act 2 finale echoes the manner, though not the notes, of Iago's drinking song in Act 1 of Verdi's *Otello*. And the short prelude to Act 3 seems indebted to the harmonic practices of the Russian Five.[11] Another 'old-music' touch (like the prayer to Saint Nicholas): Marie-Blanche gets a pseudo-eighteenth-century minuet to sing (appropriately enough) as she dresses Blanche-Marie to match the portrait of the late Marquise des Ifs. The tune is fascinating for beginning with a bar that may or may not be a kind of 'upbeat' to the second bar, much as occurs in John Ireland's Minuet (much loved today) from his 1932 *Downland Suite*.[12] I wonder if Ireland knew *Les p'tites Michu*. (An adaptation of Messager's score was performed some 400 times in London and was published, as *The Little Michus*.)[13]

Some of the ensembles become gratifyingly complex, in response to the growing intricacies of the plot. But Messager also finds strength in (relative) simplicity. This can be seen in a strophic number assigned to a single character, namely Aristide's 'Blanche-Marie est douce et bonne'. The aria – almost a popular song in character – begins in a habanera rhythm that suggests the young man's playful flightiness (which he is openly confessing). But the refrain deepens the characterization, its ardent melody confirming that this seemingly addled character could prove a worthy partner for either sister.

The recording under review is the nineteenth in a series of French-opera recordings prepared by the scholarly organization known as the Centre de musique romantique française (Centre for French Romantic Music), which has its headquarters at the Palazzetto Bru Zane in Venice.[14] The Centre offers two other series as well: collections of Prix de Rome compositions by a given composer (e.g., Debussy) and 'portrait' albums gathering multiple works, in diverse genres, by a given composer (e.g., Théodore Gouvy or Félicien David).[15]

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[11] Messager was one of several French musicians 'applauding enthusiastically' at a concert of Russian music conducted by Rimsky-Korsakov in 1889. (Others present and equally enthusiastic included Fauré and Debussy.) Many Russian works were by this time available for study in the library of the Conservatoire. See Annegret Fauser, *Musical Encounters at the 1889 Paris World's Fair* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005), 43 (quoted passage) and 321–2.

[12] Ireland's suite is most often heard today in an arrangement for string orchestra.

[13] For that matter, was Frederick Loewe recalling the 'Ah! Quel malheur' duet (Act 2) in the extended 'Guenevere' ensemble number toward the end of *Camelot* (1960, book and lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner)? The first measures of 'Ah! Quel malheur' are in Hughes, *Composers of Operetta*, 99.

[14] I have published reviews of nine of the 'Opéra français' releases in the *American Record Guide*, and some of these reviews are now also available on one or another online site. See, for example, my review of Benjamin Godard's *Dante* in *American Record Guide*, March/April 2018, 96–97, now uploaded at www.operatoday.com/content/2019/01/a_first-ever_re.php. Until recently, all of the Centre's recordings were labelled with the name of the Spanish publisher of the shortish book that comes with each set of CDs (namely Ediciones singulares), even though the Centre entirely produced and edited the content. Newer releases, more sensibly, bear the name of the Palazzetto on the front and back and an order number beginning with BZ (i.e., Bru Zane).

[15] I reviewed a Gounod 'Prix de Rome' 2-CD album (choral works and cantatas) in *American Record Guide*, July/August 2018, 95, and a 'Portrait' 3-CD album of works in

All the singers in the recording are solid, though a few wobble a bit on long notes or sing louder than seems called for stylistically. (Perhaps a hefty manner was necessitated by the acoustics in the Nantes theatre where the live recording was made.) Baritone Boris Grappe has the roughest vocal production of them all. But this suits the role: General des Ifs is a crude soldier (now retired), whose noble title of marquis is largely contradicted by his bragging and boorishness. Indeed, his French diction (as carefully spelled by the librettists) is unrefined, much like that of the working-class Aristide and Madame and Monsieur Michu, e.g., 'voilà' becomes 'v'là'. (Blanche-Marie and Marie-Blanche, by contrast, most often speak correctly – testimony to their good training at Mademoiselle Herpin's military-style school!)

The most honeyed and nuanced singing comes from light tenor Artavazd Sargsyan, as the indecisive Aristide. Sargsyan's command of legato, vibrato, portamento, and *messa di voce* (swelling or pulling back on a single note) is exquisite. I have praised the artistry he showed in supporting roles in previous recordings from the Centre de musique romantique française.[16] But the role of the confused cheese-boy shows him off extensively – not least in spoken exchanges, which he handles expertly, helping us take the flatfooted fellow to our heart.

Equally accomplished is mezzo Marie Lenormand, who delivers, with smooth vocal production and plentiful theatrical flair, Madame Michu's 'I am' number in Act 1. (That Broadway term seems perfectly apt here.) Lenormand renders her many crucial spoken scenes with uncommon effectiveness, as she did in a previous recording in the series, Hérold's *Le pré aux clercs*.[17]

The punchiest singing comes from mezzo-soprano Caroline Meng, who repeatedly grabs our attention in the largely spoken role of the boarding-school mistress. I was delighted that she was assigned the song, toward the end of Act 3, praising the vigour and plain-speaking of people who work at les Halles. This song, with refrain for everyone else on stage, functions as an 'eleven o'clock number' (the Broadway term for an entertaining, up-tempo number that occurs close to the end of a show). The librettists and Messager assigned it to Marie-Blanche, no doubt to strengthen her connection to the world of the modest, hardworking Aristide, whom she will accept as husband shortly thereafter. The Centre's decision to shift this one number to the schoolmistress (despite her having no connection to shopkeepers and cheese selling) amounts to a small change in a production that is otherwise scrupulously faithful. The alteration is also consistent with a spirit of flexibility that has long been central to the operetta genre. Still, the reassignment should have been mentioned in the book, not left for listeners to ferret out by downloading a score (as I did) from IMSLP.org.

The aforementioned mezzo-soprano Violette Polchi has a wonderfully firm voice. In the spoken dialogue, she is brilliantly sardonic, self-pitying, desperate, or determined, as befits each new situation. Sometimes she pronounces her lines in the aforementioned lower-class manner – even when they are not spelled that

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multiple genres by Félicien David in *American Record Guide*, November/December 2017, 100–103, now uploaded to www.classical-scene.com/2019/01/19/felicien-david-revived-digitally/. See review of the same Gounod album by Clair Rowden in *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*, published online 18 February 2019, doi:10.1017/S1479409818000605.

[16] E.g., in Gounod's *Le tribut de Zamora* (which I reviewed in *American Record Guide*, January/February 2019, 100–102).

[17] Louis-Ferdinand Hérold, *Le pré aux clercs*, cond. Paul McCreesh, 2 CDs, Ediciones singulares ES 125. (See my review in *American Record Guide*, September/October 2017, 100–102.)

way in the libretto – or replies with a deliciously mocking guffaw. I look forward to hearing more from her.

Indeed, all the singers do the dialogue extraordinarily well, suggesting a kaleidoscopic series of moods and attitudes. Sometimes the spoken exchanges zip along; other times they pause for a sudden revelation. One can occasionally hear the audience chuckling at a comical moment.[18] Fortunately for noise-averse listeners like myself, the editors have preserved applause only at the ends of Acts 2 and 3.

The Orchestre national des pays de la Loire has the orchestral parts under total control. Conductor Pierre Dumoussaud gently shades the tempo faster and slower in ways that respond nicely to the characters' changing moods and to the singers' strengths and (mostly slight) weaknesses. I particularly admire the oomph that the conductor gives to the big tune with which Marie-Blanche ends Act 2. This emphasizes how she is glorying in her newly discovered aristocratic origin – an origin that she will, after assessing the full situation, be relieved to transfer to Blanche-Marie in the opera's final act!

Unlike other works in the 'Opéra français' series, *Les p'tites Michu* has been recorded before, in whole and in part. A French broadcast performance from 1953 was conducted by Roger Ellis. It offers some renowned singers (e.g., Lina Dachary as Blanche-Marie).[19] In 1958, a commercial recording of substantial excerpts was made, which later got re-released on CD (along with a recording of Messager's 1926 operetta or 'comédie musicale' *Passionément*).[20] The Gaston is Camille Maurane, a high baritone famous for several recordings of the role of Pelléas. I have heard one track from the 1958 excerpts: in it, Claude Devos sings Aristide's second aria ('Comme une girouette') sweetly but blandly. I have also seen mention of a (private, it seems) French DVD preserving a 2005 performance at the university in Clermont-Ferrand.[21]

A few excerpts have maintained a life of their own. In the early twentieth century, tenor André Noël made a recording of Aristide's first aria; he sings it with flair and with theatrically precise – rather than easy-going, conversational-sounding – enunciation.[22] In our own day, Susan Graham sings Blanche-Marie's Act 3 *romance* with marvellous vocal richness and control, and Graham and Renée Fleming have a grand time with the sisters' Act 1 duet.[23] Still, the new complete recording is the best and most convenient way to get to know Messager's delectable work.

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[18] Brief clips from the production can be viewed in the trailer for the recording: www.youtube.com/watch?v=pL9CLNM_eH4.

[19] It can be downloaded at www.ina.fr/audio/PHD89024470 (current price: 3.99 Euros). The recording includes newly written narration (to set the scene) and preserves some bits of dialogue that are not on the new recording.

[20] Pathé LP DTX30301, Musidisc CD MU 744 (and other re-releases, e.g., on the labels EMI France and M10 – now all out of print). The conductor is sometimes identified in catalogues as Jules Gressier, sometimes as Roger Ellis.

[21] Details at WorldCat.org, under OCLC number 690686976.

[22] The tenor is identified on the record label as 'André Noël de l'Opéra-Comique' (Pathé X.90019/N 203201): www.youtube.com/watch?v=hA5U3fzkSRc.

[23] Blanche-Marie's aria, 'Vois-tu, je m'en veux', is in *French Operetta Arias: C'est ça la vie, c'est ça l'amour*, 2002 (Erato 0927–42106–2); the CD was re-released in 2013 by Warner Classics International as *Susan Graham Sings French Operetta Arias*. The duet, accompanied by pianist Steven Blier, is online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAv6Oqki3Vw; mezzo Graham sings the somewhat lower part: that of Marie-Blanche. Traubner proposes that, in this number, '[the] Messagerian flow and lyricism over a preponderance of eighth and sixteenth notes is virtually unique' (p. 214).

The accompanying essays – by Alexandre Dratwicki, Étienne Jardin and Christophe Mirambeau – give plentiful information about Messager's life and career, the inner workings of *Les p'tites Michu*, and the work's initial reception and subsequent performance history (over several decades). The translations of the essays and of the libretto are generally adequate, sometimes remarkably good. The book is festooned with apt, wittily drawn images of twin rubber ducks afloat in a bubble-strewn bath. And two attached ribbons help the user toggle between the essays and the libretto.

Let us hope that the arrival of this fine recording heralds many more recordings (and DVDs, please!) of French operettas. If some modern translations into English and other languages can be made, the best of these works may yet reclaim the position in international musical and theatrical life that they rightly held for so long. But this will probably only happen if the works are performed in halls small enough to allow the features typical of the genre – witty spoken scenes, shapely and characterful vocal lines, and casual-sounding but carefully worked-out orchestral textures – to exercise their full magic.

To the memory of Michael V. Pisani (1954–2019), multi-talented and generous scholar, performer and teacher, whose pathbreaking studies of nineteenth-century music and theatre brought forgotten cultural worlds back to life for readers today.

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