

# CENDRILLON

Fairy tale in four acts by Jules Massenet. Libretto by Henri Cain after Charles Perrault's tale.  
Premiered at the Opéra Comique on 24 May 1899

**From 5 to 15 march 2011**

## BACKGROUND

On 24 May 1899 the Opéra Comique is bubbling over with excitement. The newly elected President of the French Republic, Émile Loubet, is to attend the premiere that emblemizes the institution's revival: *Cendrillon* by Massenet.

The theater had reopened a few months earlier, on 7 December 1898, after five years of works. The third Salle Favart, designed by Louis Bernier, rose from the ashes of the 1877 fire. The press reported its unchanged proportions since the *Ancien Régime* ("Let us not complain: the Opéra Comique will not be able to stage lavish productions, which might save it"), its exemplary safety devices, the beauty of its architectural setting designed by the cream of official art and above all its electrical installation which made it the most modern theater in Europe. During the works, the Opéra Comique carried on its activities at the former Théâtre Lyrique at Place du Châtelet. But Albert Carré, the director who took office in 1898, also wanted to propel his theater among the leading French institutions, a scheme understood by chroniclers: "Everything contributes to symbolize the light and pleasant character of a musical genre of which the Opéra Comique is now the established temple." Novelty is all-important. Carré has programmed new works by Reynaldo Hahn, Vincent d'Indy and Giacomo Puccini at Châtelet - a way to claim that the Opéra Comique is to welcome new schools and great successes from abroad. But first of all, he has carefully prepared this *Cendrillon*, the seventh work offered to Favart

by the most renowned and prolific operatic composer of his time, whose *Manon* greets the public in the theater's entrance hall.

The opera is eagerly awaited since it is mounted by the new director and must prove that the stage is technically capable of entering a 20th century that will highlight scenography. The tradition of painted scenery, which begins to lose ground, inspired the six tableaux of *Cendrillon* by Rubé, Moisson, Carpezat, Jambon and Jusseaume. Also featured are devices making use of the three dimensions afforded by electric lighting such as the fairies' tree - reminiscent of the tree in the Brothers Grimm's version. The costumes are by Bianchini and the choreography by Mariquita, the outstanding ballet mistress of the Opéra Comique for an art form Carré intends to develop: the libretto includes ballets in Acts II and III, treated in the spirit of Loie Fuller. The subject of *Cendrillon* is especially appropriate to create a visual extravaganza in harmony with the theater's delicate scenery.

It is also relevant as it belongs to a long tradition. From the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, writers and society women gathered folk tales, spread them in salons and gave them a literary form at a time of discovery of the Eastern corpus. The published collections exhibit variations across space and time as between Charles Perrault's *Cendrillon* ou *La Petite Pantoufle de verre* (1697) and the Grimms' *Aschenputtel* (1812). The Enlightenment rationalism could have triumphed over the popular success of fairy tales by giving them a courtly turn, amending their moral content or confining them to a public of children. But in a 19<sup>th</sup> century that witnessed national awakening, this was to ignore the philologists' interest in folklore and the subjective relationship to the

world woven by the Romantics who revived the production of the genre by directing it toward the fantastic.

Opera evolved under the *Ancien Régime* by relying upon a dramaturgy based on the musical, scenographic and choreographic display of the marvelous (*le merveilleux*). Besides, folk tale and opera are “modern” genres as meant by Perrault (i.e. produced during his century). In post-revolutionary entertainment, the fantastic challenges historical subjects by leaning on the development of stage lighting. While Romantic ballet is inspired by folk tales, a specific genre emerges, *féerie*, which exhibits a thoroughly enchanting world. Wagner promotes a renewed interest in legends in his operas and his tetralogy which compiles Scandinavian myths and medieval stories. He encourages composers to draw themes on their folklores in order to reestablish the national character of their productions.

As early as its first season in 1715, the Opéra Comique staged musical entertainments in which “the marvelous usually prevails,” wrote author Alain-René Lesage. Furthermore, the rival then associate Italian comedians produced the first adaptation of the *Contes de ma mere l’Oye* the year of their publication in 1697. This vein lasted until after Favart’s *La Fée Urgèle* in 1765 as a genre that was becoming bourgeois. In the Opéra Comique repertoire, two versions of *Cendrillon* – the most frequently adapted of Perrault’s tales – predate Massenet’s: the first by Louis Anseaume, set to music and vaudeville by Laruelle in 1759 then by Duni in 1762, the second by Charles-Guillaume Étienne to Nicolo Isouard’s score premiered in 1810 – whose libretto was adapted for Rossini’s *La Cenerentola* in 1817.

At the turn of the 20th century, with a new generation of literary tales (Alice, Peter Pan, Pinocchio), the Opéra Comique premieres *Hänsel und Gretel* by Engelbert Humperdinck in French (1900), *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue* by Paul Dukas (1907), and *Snegurochka* by Rimsky-Korsakov in French (1908). While Massenet’s *Cendrillon* is performed with the subtitle “fairy tale”, other Cinderellas flourish especially in Germany: Johann Strauss’s ballet *Aschenbrödel* (1901), Wolf-Ferrari’s opera *Aschenputtel* (1902), Pauline Viardot’s chamber opera comique (1904) and Leo Blech’s opera *Aschenbrödel* (1905).

The linear, flexible and well-known plot enabled the librettist Henri Cain to imagine new figures and incidents and Massenet to compose an ambitious and continuous score in 1894-1896 under director Carvalho which was supplanted by his naturalistic Sapho. By the end of the century, the marvelous was mixed with sentimentality. Cain’s *Cendrillon*, who is akin to the Pre-Raphaelite young girl, was created by Julia Guiraudon, the dedicatee who soon married the librettist. At Salle Favart, which was then the place where high society arranged marriage meetings, *Cendrillon*’s family gained in importance: a buffo stepmother and stepsisters created by Blanche Deschamps-Jehin, Jeanne Tiphaine and Jeanne Marié de Lisle, a moving father meant for the talented baritone Lucien Fugère, and a very art nouveau fairy godmother, empress of the plant kingdom, embodied by Georgette Bréjean-Gravière. The part of Prince Charming, like Chérubin and Siebel, is sung by a woman, Miss Emelen, thereby regaining the purity of the male figure in the tale as well as the anxiety and tenderness of childhood. The premiere is conducted by Alexandre Luigini.

In 1899 *Cendrillon* was critically and publicly acclaimed, reaching its 50th performance by Christmas. The production was regularly played until 1903, running for the 60th that year. It was performed in Milan in 1899, quickly followed by tours in several countries, including the American premiere in New Orleans in 1902. It is currently more often staged across the Atlantic than in Europe. Because Carré’s production was shown at the Gaîté Lyrique in 1909, *Cendrillon* disappeared from the Opéra Comique repertoire. Less performed at Salle Favart than contemporaneous *Fortunio*, *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue* and *Pelléas et Mélisande*, today *Cendrillon* is rising from her ashes.

# SYNOPSIS

## **Act I**

Pandolfe, a weak-minded commoner, is sorry he left the country to marry the Countess de la Haltière, especially as his daughter Lucette is rejected by her stepfamily who call her Cendrillon. Resorting to a great many artifices, the ambitious countess prepares her two daughters Noémie and Dorothée to attend the king's ball. Left alone, Cendrillon thinks about the ball with regret and tidies up the house before falling asleep in the hearth. Her godmother the Fairy appears and bids her elves to produce a sky-colored gown and a full carriage. Upon awakening, metamorphosed Cendrillon leaves for the ball with the promise to return before midnight. Her enchanted slippers will make her unrecognizable to her family.

## **Act II**

At the king's palace everything is ready for the ball but the courtiers, doctors and ministers cannot relieve the gloomy Prince Charming who despairs to find love. As dances succeed each other for the prince to choose a bride, Cendrillon enters. They fall in love at first sight. But at the stroke of midnight Cendrillon runs away.

## **Act III**

Back home, Cendrillon is sorry she lost one of her slippers in her flight. Her stepsisters and stepmother arrive shortly thereafter, enraged that the ball was curtailed by the departure of the unknown girl whom they slander. Cendrillon is upset. Although Pandolfe found the strength to drive away the three harpies and promised Cendrillon to take her to his country home, she decides to flee to the fairies' Oak.

Under the Oak, the elves and spirits gathered around the Fairy disperse as Cendrillon and Prince Charming arrive from different directions. They both entreat the Fairy to meet again. They recognize each other's voices but cannot see one another. The Fairy allows them to embrace before plunging them into a magic slumber.

## **Act IV**

Several months have elapsed and Cendrillon emerges from a long sleep punctuated with visions. She wonders whether she has dreamt everything, which her father confirms. But a call from the street comforts her: the herald summons all the kingdom's maidens to try on the lost slipper.

The maidens assemble in the court of honor at the palace. The faint Prince is brought back to life by Cendrillon's arrival. Pandolfe is stupefied by their reunion while Madame de la Haltière shows boisterous merriment.