

# MIGNON

AMBROISE THOMAS

## BACKGROUND

“There are three kinds of music: good, bad, and Ambroise Thomas’s.” In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Emmanuel Chabrier’s joke, with the success of the all-powerful director of the Conservatoire, mirrors the embarrassment of César Franck’s and Wagner’s disciples, eager to transform the French musical landscape.

Ambroise Thomas was a paradoxical figure: cherished by the public and the institutions, regarded as the personification of French art, he was looked upon with fear, jealousy or contempt by a number of his young colleagues who strove to make him ignored. While the 20<sup>th</sup> century had a chiefly romantic image of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with its accursed poets and artists rejected from salons, Auber’s contemporaries viewed him as more representative of their time than Berlioz. Among the official figures, Ambroise Thomas was the most consensual. Is he not the sole composer who attended the 1000<sup>th</sup> performance of one of his works in the theater where it was first produced: *Mignon* at the Opéra Comique in 1894, twenty-eight years after its premiere? This great success resulted from the combination of a career with the spirit of a genre, the approach of an institution and the taste of a time.

Under the Second Empire the people who throng opera houses – the Mecca for sociality and even politics – appreciate the importation of literary masterpieces, thereby adopting the key figures of Romanticism not without strong distortions. In 1859 the success of Gounod’s *Faust* brings to fame two ingenious librettists, Barbier and Carré, who specialize in the craft. They write a second libretto for Ambroise Thomas based on Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* – retitled *Mignon* – followed two years later by an adaptation of *Hamlet*, a play subtly analyzed in Goethe’s novel. Then they adapt for him a canto from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. The model prospered with *Werther*, *Manon*, *Le Cid* and others, such themes making it possible to produce scores all the more daring since the original was (rather) known. The next generation was to be more scrupulous. On the French premiere of *Werther* in 1893 at the Opéra Comique, Debussy called Gounod, Thomas and Massenet forgers as regards Goethe, whom they however contributed to popularize in France.

Unlike the historical epics prized by the Romantics, these literary sources feature poetic emotions, mystical outbursts and atmospheres that can easily be adapted, all the more so as Barbier and Carré focus each plot on the female character. Thus, young Mignon embodies the need for purity of a materialistic period depicted by Zola in his *Rougon-Macquart*. Opposite actors and courtiers who live in artifice, this anonymous child helps Wilhelm to become himself by trusting to his heart’s truth. Something pertaining to formative novel – Goethe’s *Bildungsroman*, reputedly difficult – and to the initiation experienced by the protagonists of *The Magic Flute* passes through the *opéra comique* thanks to the German material.

The subject is gold with its drama inside drama, its tangle of intrigues, its colorful characters, Mignon and Lothario expressing themselves only through songs. Barbier and Carré adapt it to the *demi-caractère* found in *opéra comique*: Mignon is no more the fruit of incest, Wilhelm is no

longer a betrayed and disillusioned lover, Lothario is less dangerous a madman. They propose the libretto to Meyerbeer – who declines since a German cannot betray Goethe – then to Reyer, to Gounod – who finds it too “*opéra comique*” – and eventually to Thomas.

By the end of the rehearsals begun on August 5<sup>th</sup>, Thomas refuses the denouement to be faithful to the novel. The Salle Favart is a polished meeting place for marriage discussions, and traditionally only wicked personages such as Zampa and Fra Diavolo perish. Could Mignon die because of a love she cannot express? One of the two directors, Ritt, who knows his classics, tries to resist but his more pragmatic associate Leuven agrees with Thomas. Another concession to bourgeois taste: Célestine Galli-Marié who creates Mignon is not dressed as a boy – pants are so daring! – but as a poor little girl. Aged 26 and endowed with outstanding charisma, this mezzo accustomed to gypsy roles will create *Carmen* nine years later. The other members of the company prove equal to the task: the nightingale Mary Cabel as Philine, excellent Léon Achard as Wilhelm, Eugène Bataille as Lothario, *buffo* tenor Voisy as Frédérick and Couderc as Laerte. Thomas composed a specific music for each character so as to make them alive.

Staged by Ernest Mocker with a scenery by Despléchin, Rubé and Chaperon, the first performance was on 17 November 1866 under the baton of Théophile Tilmant. The denouement is happy and collective, combining the spirit of the genre with the *coup de théâtre* that concludes any “rescue opera” (a genre in vogue in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century) and the comical vein suggested by the Italian scenery in Act 3. Yet, for provincial and Italian theaters Thomas was to provide a simpler and intimist unraveling that ends with the Mignon/Wilhelm/Lothario trio.

The work is not a success among the critics, skeptical at first, but is acclaimed by the public, conquered by the mixture of Germanic poetry and French diversity. The 100<sup>th</sup> performance is held at the Opéra

Comique on 18 July 1867, eight months after the premiere. In the middle of the Universal Exhibition, the theater is always full and foreign stages soon demand *Mignon* while publisher Heugel markets transcriptions. In 1868 Thomas revised the score into an opera to be performed in Weimar then in Vienna, Berlin and Baden-Baden. His disciple Théodore Dubois took care of the recitatives and Thomas composed the tragic ending of the original libretto in which Mignon falls unconscious in Wilhelm’s arms. Gustav Mahler was to conduct this version in Budapest, Hamburg and Vienna.

In 1870 the opera version was translated into Italian to be shown in Trieste and a few arias were added for the London production in which Mignon was sung by soprano Christine Nilsson and Frédérick by mezzo Zelia Trebelli, who sang the rondo gavotte “*Me voici dans son boudoir.*” This rendition brought the work to the attention of audiences in the rest of Europe and across the Atlantic. It was performed in New York in 1871 and entered the Metropolitan Opera repertoire by 1883.

On 25 May 1887 *Mignon* could have left the Opéra Comique for long on its 745<sup>th</sup> production when the fire that ends Act 2 spread to the scenery and led to the burning of the theater. Despite the numerous casualties and destruction of the house rebuilt by the State eleven years later, the work was revived at Place du Châtelet. The Parisians not being superstitious, the free 1000<sup>th</sup> performance was given there on 3 May 1894. Under the supervision of the Opéra de Paris, the Salle Favart produced the 2000<sup>th</sup> on 1 April 1955 under Jean Fournet and scheduled in 1963, for the first time in France, the version with recitatives, presented as a “revamp” of the work.

If one omits the latter, our 2010 production, faithful to the 1866 happy *opéra comique*, is thus the 2062<sup>nd</sup> performance of the work at Salle Favart. Allegedly outdated for having been popular, *Mignon* has gone through purgatory long enough to be discovered anew. After all, its

music has charmed generations of listeners and can prompt us to read (again) Goethe, whose questions about the education of the young and their place in society are still far-reaching.

## SYNOPSIS

### Act I

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany many cities are without theaters and, as regards entertainments, they can only enjoy those performed by itinerant companies. So one day in a small town of Black Forest an old wandering and amnesic singer meets with a group of gypsies and actors short of projects. There comes a young bourgeois from Vienna, Wilhelm Meister, on a formative journey through Germany.

When Jarno, the chief of the gypsies, is about to hit Mignon, Wilhelm intervenes. He attracts the attention of a vivacious actress, Philine, who instantly appeals to him as he engages in conversation with her colleague, caustic Laerte. Mignon thanks Wilhelm for his gesture.

Speaking in verse and riddles, the strange and endearing girl seems to come from Italy where she was probably kidnapped. To protect her, Wilhelm buys her from Jarno and takes her into his service. Philine receives an invitation from the local lord to perform at his castle with her troupe of actors in honor of a traveling prince. She hires Wilhelm as poet of the troupe.

### Act II

First tableau - At the castle, Philine is welcome with the baron's favors. She is delighted that Wilhelm is there just for her but feels uneasy because Mignon, dressed as a boy, follows him about like a shadow. The actors rehearse Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* adapted to the style of the day according to custom. Alone in Philine's

boudoir, Mignon tries on some women's fineries. Frédérick, a student enamored of the actress breaks in. He is surprised by Wilhelm and the two rivals altercation. Mignon appears transfigured with a dress that perturbs Wilhelm who decides to leave her. As he tries to console her, Philine takes him to the theater. Their departure triggers jealousy in Frédérick and Mignon.

Second tableau - Desperate Mignon hides in the back of the park during the performance. The old musician Lothario comforts her but the acclaim from the stage leads Mignon to call down a curse. Insane Lothario runs to carry it out. While jubilant Philine walks out of the theater singing the great aria of her character Titania, the fire lit by Lothario sets the building ablaze. Philine sends Mignon to fetch a bunch of flowers. Wilhelm rushes to save her.

### Act III

First tableau - Wilhelm takes convalescent Mignon to a palace by Lake Garda, followed by the compassionate pyromaniac. Wilhelm intends to buy the Cypriani palace in order to cure her. Fifteen years earlier the family child disappeared. Her mother died and her father departed due to grief. Since then the palace has been in a trusty servant's care.

Laerte appears and tells Wilhelm that Philine is arriving with her fleeing company after the fire. Wilhelm is afraid that Mignon might die from a shock. She is slowly awakening as Lothario comes back from a walk in the palace. He has regained his mind: he is the marquis of Cypriani. When he produces the relics of his missing child, Mignon's memory is revived: she is his daughter Sperata. But Philine's voice from heard outside puts her to flight.

Second tableau - Philine is dancing in a nearby inn. When Mignon appears, she decides to forgive her rival. While the return of the marquis of Cypriani is celebrated by the villagers, Mignon and Wilhelm, who have attained truth, can join in wedlock at last.