

Ciboulette by Reynaldo Hahn

OPERETTA by Reynaldo Hahn in 3 acts premiered at the Théâtre des Variétés in 1923. Revival of the February 2013 production.



At the Opéra Comique from 27 April to 7 May

SYNOPSIS

ACT I

One night of 1867 in Paris at a café in Les Halles neighborhood, some hussars drink the health of their new captain, dashing Roger de Lansquenet. Some courtesans partake in the feast but Roger's mistress, Zénobie, is busy with another lover, the wealthy Antonin de Mourmelon. No sooner has the landlord got rid of the group than Zénobie steps in with Antonin. She sends the young man on an idle errand in order to join Roger. The café is also frequented by a sentimental and nostalgic controller at Les Halles, Duparquet. The reunion of Roger and Zénobie is interrupted by the return of empty-handed Antonin. He learns from Duparquet how much he is deceived by Zénobie. Never mind: Antonin "gives" his mistress to the captain together with all her debts.

On the marketplace of Les Halles at the crack of dawn the market gardeners arrive from rural suburbs around Paris led by Françoise and Auguste. A little late, Ciboulette is warmly greeted: her freshness and repartee make her the mascot of the market. At her request, Auguste tells her that the fishmonger, Madame Pingret, failing to sell fresh produce, reads the future in the palm of the hand. That's exactly what she needs: she said yes to her eight suitors! Madame Pingret predicts her fame and love but also tests, or rather conditions: Ciboulette will find her man under a cabbage, will win him away from a woman who'll turn white instantly and will receive a formal letter in a tambourine.

A quarrel breaks out between a customer, Grisart and Ciboulette. Duparquet proves incapable of settling it but Antonin indemnifies Ciboulette. The two young people have a conversation. Quite drunk, Antonin lies down in a cart of vegetables. The sun rises, the vendors of lilies of the valley arrive, the market gardeners return to their suburbs.

ACT II

On their farm in Aubervilliers the Grenus are waiting for their niece Ciboulette. Today is her birthday. She arrives with Duparquet who's taking his day off. Ciboulette's uncle urges her to give up novels and choose among her eight suitors, but she loves none of them.

Fortunately, Antonin appears from the cart. Duparquet suggests him to pretend to be the fiancé and introduces him as the new sharecropper. Ciboulette agrees: was he not sleeping under the cabbages? Her uncle believes the stratagem. Once together, the two lovers are shier but more sincere.

The hussars arrive with Zénobie. Ciboulette locks up Antonin in the cellar and confronts the courtesan during a song recital before throwing flour at her. Antonin runs after Zénobie. Ciboulette realizes that she loves him but lost him. Heaping reproaches on Duparquet, she listens to his secrets: when he was known as Rodolphe, he led a Bohemian life and was Mimi's lover, but he still laments her death.

To redeem himself, Duparquet offers Ciboulette to introduce her to the director of an opera house who will make her a star in his troupe. The villagers heartily celebrate the departure of Ciboulette, alias Conchita Ciboulero, for the Boulevard des Italiens.

ACT III

At the Opéra Comique the director welcomes his friends: the Countess of Castiglione, an alluring lounge singer, Duparquet, a baron for the nonce, and Antonin, glad to have broken up with Zénobie. When Duparquet tells him that Ciboulette has disappeared, Antonin decides to kill himself. The two write his farewell letter to Ciboulette and go for a drink.

Ciboulette appears with her surrogate mother, Madame Pingret the fishmonger. They're wearing their best outfits. Antonin courts her without recognizing her. When the director gives Ciboulette the farewell letter in a tambourine, the three conditions are fulfilled. Antonin and Ciboulette fall into each other's arms.

BACKGROUND

While Reynaldo Hahn is associated with light musical theatre, his most famous *opérette*, *Ciboulette*, was not the result of a creative approach that had already been fruitful in this vein but, on the contrary, was a first attempt that could have been the last in a career thus far devoted to serious genres.

Although *Ciboulette* remains the most emblematic *opérette* in the history of the Opéra Comique, it neither belongs to its repertoire nor to the heyday of French operetta as it emerged during the interwar period, nearly forty years after the death of Offenbach, the founding figure of the genre.

Even if *Ciboulette*, with its fresh and spruce title, depicts the dawning of sentiments between two young people – the urban aristocrat and the little farm girl – it was written by an experienced and scrupulous composer of almost fifty.

Despite these paradoxes, *Ciboulette* is an eminently Parisian work, composed by a figure of the cultural life of the first half of the 20th century, at home in aristocratic salons and music halls, in museums and newspaper offices.

The plot begins in Les Halles district at the time of the Pavillons Baltard and ends at the salon of the renowned organizer of 19th century Parisian musical life Olivier Métra, with a passage in Aubervilliers – a Sunday destination for Parisians out for a good time after the extension of Paris boundaries in 1860. Had it been set in less emblematic areas, the work would be as much Parisian since it claims to pay homage to *opérette*. Not as vigorous today in Paris as in Vienna – where several major theaters are partly dedicated to it – this genre arose between the Champs-Élysées and Passage Choiseul. It developed on the boulevards redesigned by Haussmann, thanks to Hervé, Offenbach and Lecocq, before conquering Strauss and Lehár's Austria, Gilbert and Sullivan's England. Among the landmarks that contributed to its advent as genuine musical theatre is the premiere of *Mesdames de La Halle* in

1858, resulting from the permission granted to Offenbach to enlarge the cast of his production. *Ciboulette* does remember it as much as it remembers the other *opérettes* portraying this typical milieu, especially *La Fille de Madame Angot* by Charles Lecocq and *Les P'tites Michu* by Messager.

The action is supposed to take place in 1867, the year Offenbach composed *La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein* for Paris International Exposition in which Spanish music and singers triumphed under Empress Eugénie's protection. Olivier Métra was then thirty-seven and wrote waltzes and quadrilles for all the capital's public balls: he was to conduct those at the Opéra Comique, the Paris Opera and the Folies-Bergère. This was sixteen years after the publication of *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème* in which Henry Murger describes the utopia of the bygone Romantic decades: in the plot of *Ciboulette*, the character of Rodolphe, his self-portrait, is aged, gnawed by melancholy from Mimi's remembrance and hidden under the mundane name Duparquet. Émile Zola was to draw a bitter portrait of this Second Empire in his cycle of *Les Rougon-Macquart* by showcasing operetta – in *Nana*, a model of which was Hortense Schneider, the creator of the Grand Duchess – but also Les Halles – in *Le Ventre de Paris* whose hero is a controller like Duparquet. A whole era and society are thus revived by Reynaldo Hahn.

Ciboulette benefited from Hahn's exactingness and experience as a great and erudite musician, but also from his eclectic taste for popular music and expressive songs. The friend of Sarah Bernhardt and Marcel Proust was not only the refined musician who, in his early years, could charm both princes and the accursed poet Verlaine. Trained to theatrical pragmatism by his two mentors, Massenet and André Messager, Hahn truly loved quality popular art.

How did the opportunity arise? His longtime friend Robert de Flers, who had just been appointed editor of *Le Figaro*, offered him to take up a challenge: revive a genre threatened to be relegated to the past by

American-style musical comedy of the 1920s. "Would you accept compose traditional operetta music set at Les Halles, like *Fille Angot*? Yours, Flers."

This telegram received while traveling stimulated and reassured this lover of Mozart and Offenbach. Hahn was asked to devise something typically French and rather old-style. "I'm not made for innovation, I'm among those who come second and then coordinate," he answered Flers by way of agreement. The libretto was written along with Francis de Croisset and composed during 1921.

In March 1923 the press criticized the curiosity around the work rehearsed at the Théâtre des Variétés. It should be added that the first-rate composer was joined by two stars of the Opéra Comique company hired for the occasion. Edmée Favart (1885-1941), the "muse of *opérette*" according to Francis de Croisset, created *Ciboulette* after her debut as the Grand Duchess and a brilliant Véronique. Jean Périer (1869-1954) created Duparquet with his experience of numerous first roles specially designed for him: Florestan (*Véronique*), Pelléas, Landry (*Fortunio*), Ramiro (*L'Heure espagnole*) and Mârrouf. The rest of the cast, directed by Paul Letombe, included Henry Defreyn (Antonin), Jeanne Pierat (*Zénobie*), Madeleine Guitty (Madame Pingret), Jean Calain (Roger), Pauley (Grenu), René Koval (Olivier Métra), Pierre Larquey (the butler), Luce Fabiole (the Castiglione) and Jeanne Loury (Ma Grenu).

The press was so insistent on the revival of operetta that Hahn preferred to spend the evening of the premiere on 7 April 1923 at the movie theater! He thus missed the acclaimed first performance in which many passages were encored several times, especially "*Nous avons fait un beau voyage.*" Yet not all the reviews were overenthusiastic: the work lacked innovation for some and was too refined and scholarly for others. But many announced the comeback of a genre Hahn was now to serve with passion, particularly twice on texts by Sacha Guitry.

Soon disseminated outside the capital, *Ciboulette* was revived several times in Paris in a brilliant and eagerly expected production: at the Théâtre Marigny in 1926 with André Bauge, Edmée Favart, Danièle Brégis, Madeleine Guitty, Henri Defreyn and Victor Pujol; at the Gaîté-

Lyrique in 1931 with René Camia and Aquistapace. It was first performed at the Opéra Comique on 13 March 1953 with Roger Bourdin, Geori Boué, Raymond Amade and Lily Grandval, running until 1959.

These productions were recorded several times. Made into a film in 1932 by Jacques Prévert and Claude Autant-Lara, *Ciboulette* is among the most often recorded 20th century French operatic titles. This is the reason why the Opéra Comique, with Laurence Equilbey and Michel Fau directing our production, invites the audience to join the choir and partake in the performance. A good way to confirm the lasting relevance of Guitry's words to Hahn: "How charming you are! You honor all the promises one makes to oneself while waiting for you - and there is always a surprise!"

A work both lucid and cheerful, *Ciboulette* turns nostalgia into a creative force and a source of delight: it can teach us a great deal in 2015.