

L'AMANT JALOUX OU LES FAUSSES APPARENCES

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BACKGROUND

First performed at court in 1778 by the troupe of the Opéra Comique, *L'Amant jaloux* almost met with difficulties from the outset: the rehearsals foreboded failure. Yet, the premiere on November 20th turned out a complete success. So much so that the work was given five further performances within four months, finding favor among the monarchs and courtiers at Versailles. Meanwhile, on 23 December 1778 *L'Amant jaloux* was produced at the Comédie-Italienne, as was then called the Hôtel de Bourgogne auditorium, shared by both the Opéra Comique and the Italian Comedians. According to the press of the time, the court's fervor was confirmed by the Parisian public. *Les Mémoires secrets*, which were pitiless with second-rate authors, reported that the work was "the greatest success for the poem and the music alike. The former [the poem] is in the genuine Spanish character, and it seems that the work is inspired by a comedy from that nation; while the latter [the music] is perfectly equal and worthy of the composer's genius." The audience's curiosity, aroused by such dazzling beginnings, was stirred by the waiting due to one of the singers' indisposition, postponing the next

performance for ten days. It resulted in a triumph even more resounding, the poet and the composer receiving unanimous applause, which was rather unusual at the time.

The harmonious combination of the text and the music made the reputation of the work for long. All the 18th century critics acknowledged *L'Amant jaloux* as a model. Based on Susanna Centlivre's *The Wonder: a Woman Keeps a Secret*, the libretto is devoid of any incidental or anecdotal aspect. The complex plot conforms to a truly classical architecture that is thrifty as to means and aims at efficiency. There are sharp psychological portrayals highlighted by dramatic motives with accuracy of tone and always perfectly relevant. The librettist successively distills all the comic effects that most favor the music. While the form is masterfully written, the content of the plot is no less remarkable. Although it belongs to a genre originally light and comic, *L'Amant jaloux* is one of the first great French *demi-caractère* works. Through a subtle balance of tonalities, farce and pathos meet every now and then so as to create a typically French atmosphere which Romanticism will vary ad infinitum under the signature of Boieldieu, Auber and Hérold. In the early 19th century many considered *L'Amant jaloux*, as famous La Harpe wrote, as "the masterpiece of the *opéra comique* to date."

This work was no doubt dearest to Grétry, about which he spoke most in his *Memoirs*, quoting it many times with pride as an example of the musical theories developed during his career. The score strongly confirms the composer's words. The melodic richness avoids monotony, each aria having its own shape. Grétry is particularly careful to local color: Florival's French nationality is thus called to mind by the minuet rhythm of his aria "Je me sens bien...," whereas Spanish Lopez's "Le mariage est une envie..." is built on a bass from Corelli's *Les Folies d'Espagne* (inspiring Grétry after he read the line "Mais ce serait une folie..." which he had to set to music). As for the serenade "D'abord,

amants soumis et doux...,” sung in the wings with a mandolin accompaniment, it remains one of the strongest moments of the work and certainly one of the most successful *coups de théâtre* of 18th century *opéra comique*. It directly or indirectly influenced a number of similar pages in several contemporaneous works, from Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* to Rossini’s *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. Among the other arias in the score, that of Léonore – which seems to be motivated by the sole taste for virtuosity – was a glowing tribute to the talent of one of the greatest artists of the time, as underlined by Grétry himself: “The bravura air that opens the second act is not the one d’Hèle and I had intended there; the former aria was but a *demi-caractère* such as ‘*Si quelquefois tu sais ruser*’ from *L’Ami de la Maison*, and it suited to the situation; but the desire to enable the finest voice ever formed by nature to shine, the desire to please the sweetest, most honest and least capricious actress, Lady Trial, made us consent to this dramatic contrast which the newspapers rightly criticized.” “*Je romps la chaîne qui m’engage...*” was abridged at the second performance in Paris and replaced with a more appropriate aria, though it was revived in the 19th century and is now fully rehabilitated by tradition.

The great dramatic strength of *L’Amant jaloux* chiefly lies in the ensembles, which prevail in number and quality in the arias: drama’s intuition is expressed in the form of piquant melodies, dramatic breaks and unpredictable asymmetrical structures that always challenge the audience. The finale of the first act is one of the most outstanding pieces in the repertoire of the time, which Mozart – who passed through Paris in 1778 – was to remember for the finale of the second act of his *Nozze di Figaro*.

SYNOPSIS

Act I

The prosperity of the business run by Lopez, a rich merchant of Cadiz, depends on the shares of his son-in-law who has just died. Lopez hopes to go into partnership with his daughter, which is possible only if she agrees to remain a widow. But Léonore is young and beautiful. So Lopez forbids Jacinte, the housekeeper, to let in a certain Don Alonzo, a penniless nobleman. Alonzo’s sister, Isabelle, is Léonore’s best friend. Jacinte shelters her as she has fled her old tutor who wants to marry her by force. She has been helped in the street by Florival, a French officer with whom she arranges a tryst for the evening under Léonore’s window. Florival goes away persuaded that the woman he helped and whom he loves is called Léonore. The latter hides her friend Isabelle in a closet as Alonzo announces himself. But as a true Spaniard, Alonzo is as jealous of his sister’s honor as he is of his paramour’s. Besides, he is soon convinced that a man is concealed in the closet and refuses to leave upon the arrival of Lopez, furious at the intruder. The appearance of veiled Isabelle astounds Alonzo but reassures Lopez who believes Alonzo chases the unknown woman rather than his daughter.

Act II

While Isabelle takes refuge in the garden pavilion, Léonore decides to break with Alonzo, who is too jealous a lover. However, she agrees to a final discussion despite Lopez’s watchful eye. As a true merchant, the latter welcomes Florival who is coming to withdraw money with a bill of exchange and chiefly to meet the man he takes for the father of his beloved. Intimidated, the young officer leaves not daring to confess anything. But as soon as Lopez is in bed, Alonzo arrives in order to be forgiven by Léonore. Unfortunately, their reconciliation is spoiled by the serenade Florival, in search of Isabelle whom he has not seen again, is singing under Léonore’s window.

Act III

Hidden in Léonore's garden pavilion, Isabelle hopes to see Florival again. After his serenade, he heads for the garden where the two lovers avow each other's feelings. But Alonzo appears, convinced that the Frenchman is after his own mistress. Astonished to find the two suitors in his garden at night, Lopez is told that they both woo Léonore! The three men turn toward the pavilion and enjoin Léonore to appear. First surprise: Léonore arrives from the opposite direction and confounds Alonzo's jealousy. Second surprise: Isabelle comes out of the pavilion. Amorous Alonzo can but accept his sister's tender feelings for the officer. And being his uncle's heir and marrying Léonore without dowry, this crazy night ends with the prospect of a double wedding.

