

## **Ali Baba** by Charles Lecocq

OPERA-COMIQUE in three acts and eight tableaux.

Libretto by Albert Vanloo and William Busnach.

Premiered on 11 November 1887 at the Alhambra in Brussels



### **SYNOPSIS**

#### **Act I**

In Cassim's store, business is in full swing, animated by enterprising clerks. Chief clerk Saladin dances attendance upon pretty Morgiane who is but poor Ali Baba's maidservant. She turns him away kindly but firmly. Cassim and his wife Zobéide emerge in the middle of a quarrel. Cassim refuses to grant a bargain to Ali Baba: apart from being his wife's cousin, he is his tenant and creditor. Besides, Cassim has called the qadi to expel Ali Baba that evening.

In the face of such inflexibility, Ali Baba can only think of one solution, suicide. He is about to hang himself when Morgiane enters and comforts him by reminding him of what he did for her: buy her from a slave trader, bring her up and protect her. Regaining his composure, Ali Baba goes back to work and is surprised by the incursion of sinister-looking men. These are forty thieves whose chief Kandgyar is working out a burglary with Zizi, Cassim's former clerk. When they are gone, Ali Baba enters their den thanks to the magic words "Open sesame" he heard.

In the absence of Ali Baba and in front of his hut, his scanty possessions are put up for sale by qadi Maboul to Cassim's satisfaction. The furniture is disregarded but Morgiane arouses lust. Ali Baba arrives just in time to double the price in order to get back his protégée. He puts forward a discreet benefactor who enables him to pay cash. Cassim can but suspect his wife.

#### **Act II**

While Ali Baba asks Morgiane to fetch scales in order to weigh his possessions, Zobéide reminds him of the tender feelings they shared in their youth. Cassim overhears his wife's confidences but on seeing the scales, curiosity prevails over jealousy.

After the couple's departure, Ali Baba reveals his fortune to Morgiane and the thieves' secret, unsuspecting that Cassim is listening. Ali Baba goes to prepare a feast in the palace he has just acquired while Morgiane says goodbye to their hovel. Cassim rushes to the thieves' cave and takes a bath of gold. But on getting out with a bagful, he forgets the magic words. The thieves come back with their new booty and discover Cassim. As he knows their secret he must die. But Zizi saves his former boss by claiming he is dead. He makes him up as a thief and names him Casboul.

#### **Act III**

In front of the closed shop, Zobéide entreats Ali Baba to inquire about her husband. Cassim is lurking around with Zizi under his new identity and learns that Saladin cheats him. When Ali Baba announces his death, Saladin is delighted while Zobéide seems to feel grief.

Ali Baba's alms inform the chief of the thieves about the source of Ali Baba's fortune as the money is marked. Zizi inscribes a cross on the door to the palace but Morgiane, who saw him, multiplies crosses on the street. Zizi and Cassim work their way into Ali Baba's banquet. Cassim sees that his wife already declares her love to her cousin. Acknowledging the fact that a

rich man should be married, Ali Baba suggests they celebrate their wedding that evening.

Horrified, Cassim denounces the source of Ali Baba's wealth to the thieves. Morgiane is disturbed by the marriage plan whereas Ali Baba now sees her with a fresh eye. Disguised as a merchant, Kandgyar requests Ali Baba's hospitality for him and his jars which contain his thieves. Morgiane saw the plot and has the qadi arrest them. Only Kandgyar and Zizi escape and intend to kill Ali Baba as well as Cassim who hastens to get away from them. During the feast Morgiane denounces the last two thieves and Cassim reveals himself to Zobéide. While the latter intervenes to save their former clerk Zizi from the punishment reserved for the thieves, Ali Baba can marry Morgiane.

## BACKGROUND

“In gathering firewood, the elementary class of human society adopts the attitude of someone who puts things in order concerning the produce of the elementary natural force. It is the same for the produce which, increasing by chance, is a sheer accident of ownership and does not result from the activity of the real owner.” In accordance with this argument by Karl Marx (from the *Augsburg Gazette* in 1842), the poor woodcutter Ali Baba takes possession of the treasure accumulated by the forty thieves deep in the forest.

Coming from the Age of Enlightenment with the *One Thousand and One Nights* translated by Antoine Galland, the Oriental tale of *Ali Baba and Forty Thieves Exterminated by a Slave* aroused a good many echoes in 19th century society. With the development of labor conditions, the industrialization of human activities and large-scale trade, the issue of ownership arose with as much strength regarding the fruits of nature and the products of the mind as for work products. The character of Ali Baba, which was widespread through popular publications, illustrations and the development of grand spectacles, demonstrated that wealth and property, which structured society, had neither basis nor moral value. “I am no thief unless stealing thieves is to be one,” explains Ali Baba to his wife. To cheated thieves, he could quote Proudhon: “property is theft!”

In 1822 Pixierécourt turns the tale into a melodramatic show on music by Alexandre for the Gaîté. In 1833 the great official composer Cherubini draws from it his last operatic work, with an *opéra bouffe* spirit, to a libretto by Scribe and Mélesville for the Paris Opera. In 1853 the Théâtre impérial du Cirque presents a version in nine tableaux by the Cogniard brothers to music by Fessy. In 1868 the Théâtre du Prince Impérial (the future Gaîté Lyrique) utilizes the same title to music by Diache. In 1872 *Les 400 Femmes d'Ali Baba*, an *opéra bouffe* by Frébault to music by Nibelle, is performed at the Théâtre des Folies-Marigny.

In 1887 Charles Lecocq, William Busnach and Albert Vanloo embrace the subject. They intend to make it a popular production of which the three authors hold the secret, Lecocq as the most renowned operetta composer since the death of Offenbach in 1881, Busnach as the director of the theater, a vaudeville writer and a stage adapter of literary successes, Vanloo as the author of successful operettas.

The tale is simplified and softened. The maidservant Morgiane is no longer in the service of rich Cassim but of poor Ali Baba, thanks to a stroke of inspiration: he bought her from a hardhearted master as a child. The motive, which likens her to Ambroise Thomas's Mignon, justifies her being sold in Act I and the noble deed of Ali, who wraps himself in a Goethean romantic touch by buying her back. As clever as in the tale, Morgiane gains in sentimentality and forms an ingenuous couple with Ali against the grotesque Cassim-Zobéide couple in an opposition typical of *opéra comique*. More colorful than in the literary source, the thieves are true operetta brigands, justifying the absence of the violence of the tale in which Cassim's body is quartered, the brigands slaughtered and their chief eventually killed.

The Third Republic is less favorable to operetta than the Second Empire. Lecocq, who is its main representative, struggles to raise its level at the risk of confusing it with *opéra comique* – a term he uses to qualify *Ali Baba* and most of his scores. Vanloo is anxious to do the same: “Operetta is in the blood of the Frenchman born shrewd. What is it but another form, modernized and modified, of the early *opéras comiques*?” However, the specificity of operetta is its humor, a spice overlooked by the *Opéra Comique* which devotes itself to tragedy as viewed by Massenet, Delibes, Saint-Saëns and Lalo in the 1880s. But “those who say that light music is an insult to great art talk nonsense,” claimed Lecocq in 1913. “It has always existed under other names and will always exist. In France, Gallic humor will never be killed.” This kind of humor infuriated Bismarck after a performance of *La Fille de Madame Angot*: “These people have been defeated but they are not vanquished!”

Lecocq's tenacity earns him contempt from his friends – Bizet, Chabrier, Saint-Saëns: "This good Charles" writes the latter, "I have but one problem with him; that I cannot admire his works; yet I make him believe that I admire them and I am delighted when he is successful." In fact, like all operetta composers, Lecocq makes commercial art, not art for art's sake, and he laments: "When one makes great things that are not successful, one has the possibility of being taken for a misunderstood genius. In operetta, one must succeed or else one is taken for an absolute moron." And so *Ali Baba*, written by an internationally famous 55-year-old composer, is turned down by the director of the Gaîté who prefers to bet on younger talents.

Fortunately, Brussels has been offered Lecocq's first masterpieces – *Les Cent Vierges*, *La Fille de Madame Angot* and *Giroflé-Girofla* – and the Belgian capital is proud to have launched such a brilliant career. Thus, the Alhambra eagerly welcomes *Ali Baba*. Built to rival the great Parisian stages, the Alhambra was inaugurated in 1846. Its stage and machinery made it possible to produce grandiose spectacles and it could hold about 2000 attendees. It was compared to the Palais Garnier when it opened up in 1875. From 1887 to 1895 it chiefly produced operettas, tragedies and music hall. Closed and neglected from 1957 onwards, it was destroyed in 1977 despite strong mobilization by the people of Brussels.

This is where *Ali Baba* premieres on 11 November 1887 in a luxurious production and choreography by the excellent Mariquita. Some of the first-rate actors come from Paris: the baritone Dechesne as Ali Baba, Juliette Simon-Girard (who led in *Madame Favart* and *La Fille du tambour major* by Offenbach) as Morgiane, Mme Duparc as Zobéide and comics like Mesmaeker. The brilliant score includes 25 musical numbers of all kinds. It is not Oriental in character since an operetta composer does not pit himself against Félicien David but against Offenbach or Lecocq! The 122 consecutive performances proved that Lecocq had reached the height of his art. This triumph continued the following year at the Galeries Saint-Hubert for nearly 80 evenings. Unfortunately, the work failed two years later in Paris: now Lecocq belonged to the past.

The Opéra Comique has always been hesitant toward operetta. Offenbach and Lecocq were recognized only after they died: the former on the premiere of *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* in 1881, the latter when *La Fille de Madame Angot* entered the repertoire in 1918 – conducted by Reynaldo Hahn.

In 2014 the Opéra Comique presents *Ali Baba* for the first time. The score is played in its 1887 version with cuts in ballets as planned by the composer. The delightful and amazingly modern spoken text is tightened up yet almost unaltered.

The protagonists of the tale appear to be as materialistic as operetta consumers. Therefore, happy Ali Baba should not be expected to wonder like Marx: "When, for lack of legal titles, I make a personal source of income out of the criminal act of a third party, do I not become the accomplice of this third party? Or am I less his accomplice because the sentence for the crime is for him and the benefit for me?"