

Il segreto di Susanna & La Voix humaine

by Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari – Francis Poulenc



SYNOPSIS

Il segreto di Susanna

All would be going beautifully between the dashing Count Gil and his wife Susanna were it not for a dubious smell of Turkish tobacco at their home as soon as the husband is away for too long... Could the young woman, however obedient and attributed with every virtue, conceal a lover with the complicity of Sante, the servant?

La Voix humaine

The scene, small, framed with red painted draperies, depicts the uneven corner of a woman's bedroom; a dark bluish room with an untidy bed on the left, and a door, ajar, leading to a brightly lit white bathroom on the right. In the middle, on the wall, the photographic enlargement of some crooked masterpiece or a family portrait: anyway, an evil-looking picture. [...] The curtain unveils a murder bedroom. In front of the bed, on the floor, a woman in a long shirt is lying, as if killed. Silence. The woman sits up, changes her pose and stays still again. Finally, she makes up her mind, stands up, takes a coat from the bed, goes toward the door after stopping in front of the telephone. When she touches the door, there is a ringing. She drops the coat and rushes forward. [...] From this minute, she will speak standing, sitting, showing her back, her front, her profile, kneeling behind the back of the armchair, her head cut off, resting on the chair back, she will pace round the room trailing the wire till the end when she falls flat on her face. Then her head will hang down and she will drop the receiver like a stone. [...] The style of this act excluding anything akin to brilliance, the author advises the actress who will perform it without his supervision not to show any irony from a hurt woman or any bitterness. The character is a mediocre victim, in love throughout; she tries but one ruse: throw the man a line so that he admits to lying, so that he does not leave her with this petty memory. He wants the actress to give the impression of bleeding, like a limping animal, of ending the act in a room full of blood.

Jean Cocteau

BACKGROUND

This production brings together two works that experienced opposite fortunes in the history of the Salle Favart.

Il segreto di Susanna almost went unnoticed on its Parisian premiere at the Opéra Comique on 28 June 1921. As there were then no supertitles, the French version by Maurice Kufferath for the 1911 Brussels production was used. Despite its originality, it failed to do justice to the spice of the work. But the audience's indifference resulted mainly from the fact that Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari was hardly known in spite of a career begun twenty years earlier in Germany. The work by Ravel's exact contemporary was performed only once at a fund-raising reception in aid of the theater, but only as a curiosity since the highlight of the evening was the fifth act of Gounod's *Faust*: usually played at the Opéra Garnier, it was heard for the first time at the Salle Favart.

The originator of this twofold program was Vanni-Marcoux, a Don Quichotte, a Gianni Schicchi, a Golaud of international renown whose repertoire included the two roles of Méphisto and Comte Guy Count Gil). Close to Wolf-Ferrari in age and double culture – the singer was Franco-Italian, the composer German-Italian – Vanni-Marcoux had already sung his works in Italian and wished to convince audiences devoted to Puccini and verismo. Interested in the more private trends of post-Wagnerian modernity, Marcoux defended creators who defied categorization.

Unfortunately, *Il segreto di Susanna* belonged to the prewar past: it premiered some twelve years earlier on 4 December 1909. If only it had been a success on some great Italian stage! But it was at the Munich Hoftheater under the baton of Felix Mottl in the composer's unclassifiable German version. Neither did the conductor of the Opéra Comique, Albert Wolff, nor the charismatic soprano Marguerite Carré manage to establish the work any better than Vanni-Marcoux.

However, the characteristics of *Il segreto di Susanna* were familiar to French culture. It is an intermezzo, a modern version of the original *opera buffa* with its tight one-act plot and its small number of characters confined to a few confrontations.

This genre is akin to 18th century opéra comique in spirit. But who remembers it? Even if *Così fan tutte* is produced at the Salle Favart in the 1920s, Pergolesi and Grétry are somewhat forgotten in favor of Offenbach, Massenet, Fauré and Messager. Although Goldoniesque characters and misunderstandings in the style of Molière serve contemporaneous realities, such as women's status and the development of tobacco smoking, Parisian audiences prefer downright vaudevillian operettas or American-style musical comedies.

Wolf-Ferrari's sense of synthesis was probably overdeveloped. Popular in Germany, respected in Italy, celebrated in the United States as a great exponent of European culture, he was no longer to be staged at the Salle Favart despite a clear kinship between his literary, comical and highly European drama and the characteristics of the repertory performed at the Opéra Comique – which is perhaps more appreciated today.

Four decades after this failure, *La Voix humaine* had an almost reverse history. In the 20th century few composers were more familiar with the Salle Favart than Francis Poulenc. In 1932 his ballet *Les Biches*, choreographed by Bronislava Nijinska and produced by Marie Laurencin, premiered there. In 1947 his opera *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* revived Apollinaire's subversive spirit. In 1952 his concerto *Aubade* on Marcel Berger's choreography was played there. Even his opera *Les Dialogues des carmélites*, albeit more suitable for the Palais Garnier, was performed at the Salle Favart after his death in a production by Suzanne Laliq. At the premiere of *La Voix humaine* on 6 February

1959 under the direction of Georges Prêtre, Poulenc had been working at the Opéra Comique for nearly thirty years.

This is where in 1947 he met again with his favorite interpreter, an actress as well as a vocalist: Denise Duval who created the part of Thérèse in *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* upon her joining the company and acted Blanche two years earlier in *Les Dialogues des carmélites*. For her he composed the one role of *La Voix humaine*, the monodrama having been suggested to him to satisfy the ego of Maria Callas, who would have been overjoyed to bow to the audience alone.

The text to the work is famous. It was written by Jean Cocteau, a longtime partner of Poulenc since the interwar adventure of the Groupe des Six. They cooperated in the writing of the songs to *Les Cocardes* and the avant-garde productions *Le Gendarme incompris* and *Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel*. Yet *La Voix humaine* marked their true artistic collaboration, followed in 1961 by a soliloquy, *La Dame de Monte Carlo*, also meant for Denise Duval. The telephone monologue in *La Voix humaine* was created in 1930 at the Comédie-Française by Berthe Bovy, directed by the author in Christian Bérard's very first stage set. Despite the scandal triggered at the Salle Richelieu by the Surrealists led by Paul Éluard – Poulenc's favorite poet – the play was highly successful. Performed everywhere, it has been translated into several languages and the subject of many films, including *L'Amore* by Roberto Rossellini with Anna Magnani (1948) and *The Human Voice* by Ted Kotcheff starring Ingrid Bergman (1966).

The novelty of the play in 1930 – even though it was neither the first monologue nor the first ultrarealistic text in the history of French drama – was revived by Poulenc's music and a new production by Cocteau deemed “terrifying” by the composer. In 1959, while Pierre Boulez paved the way for new musical ideas to Olivier Messiaen's heirs, Cocteau and Poulenc, respectively 70 and 60 years old, still claimed to be moderns –

which is confirmed in 2013 on celebrating the fortieth anniversary of their death.

They described their work as a *tragédie lyrique* in order to better demonstrate that innovation is not disruptive and that an attack is more effective when coming from inside. This was all the more evident in 1959 at the Opéra Comique as the first part of the evening presented *Isoline* by Messager, a *féerie* dating from 1888... In the years following its premiere, the piece was performed worldwide, promoted by Denise Duval during two seasons.

La Voix humaine echoes *Il segreto di Susanna* through its reference to a classical genre and preeminence given to a rose declaimed naturally, yet its spirit is quite different. The waggish merriment of the intermezzo contrasts with the desperation of the tragedy composed by Poulenc stricken by a nervous breakdown. Only a genuine interpreter such as Anna Caterina Antonacci, our great *Carmen* of 2009, could shoulder such extreme emotions during the same evening.

Time and again, the female character finds herself trapped in a household world and clings to the object that could liberate her if it did not serve to offset abandonment and ward off desire. In this respect, both works have hardly become dated. Far from having a liberating effect, the “artificial paradises” and communication technologies only increase isolation in modern society. To this there is an infallible remedy: live entertainment!