

## The History of an Opera-Comique

Young musicians often complain, and not without reason, of the difficulties of their careers. It may, perhaps, be useful to remind them that their elders have not always had beds of roses, and that too often they have had to breast both wind and sea after spending their best years in port, unable to make a start. These obstacles frequently are the result of the worst sort of malignity, when it is for the best interest of everyone—both of the theatres which rebuff them, and the public which ignores them—that they be permitted to set out under full sail.

In 1864 one of the most brilliant of the reviews had the following comments to make on this subject:

Our real duty—and it is a true kindness—is not to encourage them (beginners) but to discourage them. In art a vocation is everything, and a vocation needs no one, for God aids. What use is it to encourage them and their efforts when the public obstinately refuses to pay any attention to them? If an act is ordered from one of them, it fails to go. Two or three years later the same thing is tried again with the same result. No theatre, even if it were four times as heavily subsidized as the Théâtre-Lyrique, could continue to exist on such resources. So the result is that they turn to accredited talent and call on such men from outside as Gounod, Felicien David and Victor Massé. The younger composers at once shout treason and scandal. Then, they select masterpieces by Mozart and Weber and there are the same outcries and recriminations. In the final analysis where are these young composers of genius? Who are they and what are their names? Let them go to the orchestra and hear *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Obéron*, *Freischutz* and *Orphée* ... we are doing something for them by placing such models before them.

The young composers who were thus politely invited to be seated included, among others, Bizet, Delibes, Massenet, and the writer of these lines. Massenet and I would have been satisfied with writing a ballet for the Opéra. He proposed the *Rat Catcher* from an old German tale, while I proposed *Une nuit de Cléopâtre* on the text of Théophile Gautier. They refused us the honor, and, when they consented to order a ballet from Delibes, they did not dare to trust him with the whole work. They let him do only one act and the other was given to a Hungarian composer. As the experiment succeeded, they allowed Delibes to write, without assistance, his marvellous *Coppélia*. But Delibes had the legitimate ambition of writing a grand opera. He never reached so far.

## About the Author

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