

SELECTED OPERAS OF ISABELLE ABOULKER AS REPERTOIRE FOR THE UNIVERSITY OPERA STUDIO

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Aboulker's operatic works present an opportunity for opera workshop programs in the United States to perform contemporary operatic works in a foreign language, revitalizing the operatic repertoire and giving students the opportunity to prepare and perform roles without the weight and influence of significant performance history. Aboulker's style, which has been called "effectively simple," allows developing students to work on new French language repertoire without the burden of excessively difficult or atonal vocal lines. Aboulker's works are tuneful and humorous and her longest operatic work lasts a mere hour and a half. These qualities also serve to mitigate the challenge presented to the student by the French language. Many of Aboulker's works are conceived specifically to be performed with piano only, or have already been published in piano reduction. Most of her operatic works are very short or divide easily into scenes that could be performed separately where the performance of a longer work is either not feasible or not desired. All of these characteristics combine to make the operas of Isabelle Aboulker a viable repertoire option for the university opera studio.

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By

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this dissertation is to analyze selected operatic works of Isabelle Aboulker in order to ascertain their suitability for production at the university opera workshop level. As an aid to this process, and in the absence of pre-existing published guidelines, this dissertation also proposes a set of general criteria gleaned from pedagogical and other relevant texts by which the suitability of operatic works for performance by developing singers may be judged.

For the purposes of this analysis, nine works were selected from the larger body of Aboulker's operatic compositions: *Cendrillon*, *Jérémy Fisher*, *La Lacune*, *Leçons de Français aux étudiants américains*, *Monsieur de Balzac fait son Théâtre*, *Petit opéra thérapeutique*, *Le petit Poucet*, *Un Renard à l'Opéra*, and *Les Surprises de l'Enfer*. These works were selected because they contain significant solo passages for more than one character. Many of Aboulker's operas are intended for performance by children and as such contain mainly homophonic choral material with limited solo passages. Because that type of work is not ideal for giving university singers experience as operatic soloists, those works without significant solo passages were omitted from this study.

The process of analyzing an operatic work or operatic excerpts in terms of their production demands, as this study does with the works of Aboulker, is not a new one. In 1961 Quaintance Eaton published the first of what would later be two volumes on operatic production. The purpose of these volumes was to list operatic works and to provide for each a list of vocal

forces needed, a brief synopsis of the plot, and a description of major characters.<sup>1</sup> In their book, *Opera Scenes for Class and the Stage*, Mary Elaine and Robert Wallace provide the same sort of breakdown and analysis of scenes which might be suitable for study or performance by a variety of institutions and organizations.<sup>2</sup> In addition to these works, a dissertation by Wadad Aziz Saba used a similar format to analyze a collection of scenes from operas in the standard repertoire as well as two more obscure one act operas in terms of their suitability for opera scenes programs involving younger singers. Saba's work gives plot synopses and lists the vocal ranges and technical and dramatic demands made by each role in the works or sections of works analyzed. Saba is careful to note when a role requires significant use of the upper register, coloratura or extremes of range in general as these are perhaps better suited to the graduate singer as opposed to the undergraduate.<sup>3</sup> This dissertation proposes to make the same kind of observations regarding roles in Aboulker's operas which are more suited to specific levels of student singer. As highlighted by Joo-Young Jung in her dissertation "Young Singers and the Repertoire," care must be taken that younger singers do not over-tax their instruments while still learning to use them in an efficient and effective manner.<sup>4</sup> In keeping with this reality, it is useful to the director of a university opera scenes program to have the various vocal, dramatic and instrumental demands of works they are considering for production clearly spelled out. The university opera workshop

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<sup>1</sup> Quaintance Eaton, *Opera Production* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1961) and *Opera Production II* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> Mary Elaine and Robert Wallace, *Opera Scenes for Class and the Stage* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Wadad Aziz Saba, "Operatic Repertoire Suitable for Young Singers: A Guide for Opera Workshop Directors" (DMA diss., University of Washington, 1981), viii.

<sup>4</sup> Joo-Young Jung, "Young Singers and the Repertoire" (DMA diss., University of Washington, 2010), iv.

typically operates from a student base that has been admitted to the institution and works must be chosen which fall within the capacities of the singers and instrumentalists available.

It is the author's argument that the detailed analysis of nine of Aboulker's operatic works contained in this dissertation provides ample evidence of their viability as fresh repertoire for the university opera studio.

## CHAPTER 2

### ISABELLE ABOULKER: COMPOSER AND TEACHER

I love the theater, the word, and I also love the noise of the pencil on my staff paper, the rustling of the eraser, the tiny black dots that transform themselves into rhythms and sounds. And so, with pleasure and obstinance – and against all logic –, I compose operas.<sup>5</sup>  
- Isabelle Aboulker

Isabelle Aboulker is a living composer of French and Algerian descent. Born in the Parisian suburb of Boulogne-Sur-Mer in October of 1938,<sup>6</sup> she benefited at an early age from a family with strong roots in music and the arts. Her father, Marcel Aboulker, was a film director and writer.<sup>7</sup> Inspired in part by his career, Isabelle Aboulker's first compositional aspirations were as a film score composer.<sup>8</sup> Her uncle was the concert pianist Jacques Février.<sup>9</sup> Her maternal grandfather was the fairly well-known French composer Henry Février.<sup>10</sup> Henry Février studied at the Paris *Conservatoire* under Massenet and Fauré and worked privately with Messager whose biography he later authored. H. Février's compositional focus was largely opera, with some forays into instrumental music including the composition of several scores for silent films.<sup>11</sup> Aboulker's early interest in film music might therefore also have owed something to her grandfather's work. Though she herself admits he was in the throes of what might have been called Alzheimer's by the time she knew him, she recalls a sense of connection to Février. This connection is expressed

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<sup>5</sup>"J'aime le théâtre, le verbe, et j'aime aussi le bruit du crayon sur mon papier à musique, le bruissement de la gomme, les petits points noirs qui se transforment en rythmes et en sons. Alors, avec plaisir et obstination – et contre toute logique –, je compose des opéras." Isabelle Aboulker – Official Website, accessed November 2, 2013, <http://www.isabelle-aboulker.com>.

<sup>6</sup> Marie-Claude Tanguy, "Isabelle Aboulker," in *Compositrices Françaises au XXème siècle*, ed. Jean Roy (Le Vallier, France: Editions Delatour, 2007), 27.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>11</sup> John Wagstaff and Richard Langham Smith, "Février, Henry," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, accessed August 8, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/09572>.

tangibly in the small round erasers he kept all over his office, the same type which she now uses regularly to correct manuscripts as she composes.<sup>12</sup> In terms of Aboulker's eventual focus on the vocal and operatic genres, there are clear parallels in style and tone with Février's work, which was comedic and tended toward a mix of styles approaching pastiche.<sup>13</sup>

Aboulker spent the first seven years of her life living in Algeria with both her parents. In a brief biographical essay, Tanguy suggests that a tumultuous home life including a strained relationship between her parents may have contributed to Aboulker finding refuge in music.<sup>14</sup> In 1945 she returned to France to live with her father after her parents divorced. She soon began to write music in a free, improvisational manner without having studied composition.<sup>15</sup> In the early stages of her musical exploration, Aboulker describes herself as largely self-taught. In a question and answer session for a group of French elementary school students she relayed the story of her earliest compositional efforts. Around the age of twelve or thirteen she would sit at the piano in her home and improvise accompaniments for melodies she heard on the radio. From that foundation she then began to compose her own short songs.<sup>16</sup> Before ever having set foot in a classroom to study music, Aboulker was already receiving commissions to write music for television and other forms of publicity, which she filled with ease using her natural facility for improvisation.<sup>17</sup> It wasn't until the death of her father in 1952 that she was guided by her aunt

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<sup>12</sup> Isabelle Aboulker and Pierre Letessier, "Écrire pour le plaisir: Isabelle Aboulker, le parcours d'une hédoniste," in *L'opéra thérapeutique, livret et ante-livret: À propos de l'Opéra thérapeutique*, ed. Isabelle Aboulker and Pierre Letessier (Paris: Éditions 1200 tours/min., 2007), 22.

<sup>13</sup> Wagstaff and Smith, "Février, Henry."

<sup>14</sup> Tanguy, "Isabelle Aboulker," 27.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>16</sup> Romain Mavet, "film isabelle aboulker," You Tube, Flash video file, accessed August 1, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73a8TStaflg>.

<sup>17</sup> Tanguy, "Isabelle Aboulker," 28.

to begin formal musical studies.<sup>18</sup> At that point, however, she was fifteen and too old to enroll at the *Conservatoire* as a new piano student. She chose instead to take courses in solfège and harmony. She studied briefly under Duruflé,<sup>19</sup> but left his course on harmony before completing it. She was enormously frustrated by the didactic methods, which required work on paper instead of her accustomed hands-on technique at a piano.<sup>20</sup> She later reentered the *Conservatoire* as a student of accompaniment in the studio of Henriette Puig-Roget. She completed that degree in two years as the first prize winner in her discipline and was immediately hired at the *Conservatoire* as accompanist and assistant in the singing courses of Jeanine Micheau and Xavier Depraz.<sup>21</sup> She went on to become a professor of accompaniment and singing at the *Conservatoire* for 20 years from 1983 until her retirement in 2003.<sup>22</sup> She is the author of three educational texts on music, two of which were published during her tenure at the *Conservatoire: Voix et Rythme* (2000), *Les Intervalles* (2001), and *Musique, Mode d'Emploi* (2010). Her time as an accompanist and a vocal teacher helped to develop her love for the voice and its expressive capabilities. Largely as a result of this experience, her compositional output turned almost exclusively to vocal music.<sup>23</sup>

As a composer, Isabelle Aboulker has gained significant recognition in France. She is a recipient of the *Prix de l'Académie de Beaux-Arts* (1999),<sup>24</sup> the *Prix Musique* from the *Société des*

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Aboulker, "Ecrire pour le plaisir...", 20.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>22</sup> Isabelle Aboulker – Official Website.

<sup>23</sup> Tanguy, 29.

<sup>24</sup> Isabelle Aboulker – Official Website.

*Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques* (2000),<sup>25</sup> and the *Prix Maurice Yvain* (2010).<sup>26</sup> She has published over 35 vocal compositions including nineteen operas, a secular oratorio, several choral works, three song cycles and a variety of individual *mélodies*.<sup>27</sup>

Isabelle Aboulker's career as an operatic composer began with the 1978 composition of the chamber opera *La Lacune*.<sup>28</sup> To date she has published nineteen works classified as operas with subcategories such as "*opéra de chambre*,"<sup>29</sup> "*opéra pour enfants*"<sup>30</sup> and "*conte musicale en forme d'opéra*,"<sup>31</sup> to name a few. Her operas are brief as a rule, ranging in performance length from thirty minutes to an hour and a half, with only two breaking the hour mark. A wry, quintessentially French sense of humor permeates her work. The tone of her composition is refreshing in many ways, not least of all in that it never takes itself too seriously.

Aboulker's work is unabashedly tonal, a quality that has gained her no great respect from some official organizations. Her first opera, *La Lacune*, written as a commission from the national public radio channel France Culture, was to be premiered as a live radio broadcast. When Aboulker took her score to the director of France Culture for final approval, however, it was refused outright and the broadcast was cancelled because the music was deemed "too tonal."<sup>32</sup> The work was eventually produced in Compègne and was well-received but it was never

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> "Isabelle Aboulker lauréate du Prix Maurice-Yvain 2010," Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques, accessed August 14, 2014, <http://www.sacd.fr/Isabelle-Aboulker-laureate-du-Prix-Maurice-Yvain-2010.2248.0.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Isabelle Aboulker – Official Website.

<sup>28</sup> The biographical article by Tanguy lists 1978 as the compositional date for *La Lacune*, the score itself is marked "Amiens, 1978" and the first performance was given March 13, 1978, as listed on the website of the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*, accessed August 13, 2014, ([http://data.bnf.fr/14822653/isabelle\\_aboulker\\_la\\_lacune/](http://data.bnf.fr/14822653/isabelle_aboulker_la_lacune/)). Oddly, the brief biography on the composer's own website lists the composition date of *La Lacune* as 1993.

<sup>29</sup> "chamber opera."

<sup>30</sup> "opera for children."

<sup>31</sup> "musical story in the form of an opera."

<sup>32</sup> Aboulker, "Écrire pour le plaisir..." 24.

broadcast on the radio.<sup>33</sup> Her first official recognition came in the form of a review filling two full columns in *Le Monde* written by the esteemed critic Jacques Lonchamp in praise of her second opera *Les Surprises de l'Enfer*.<sup>34</sup> In Lonchamp's words: "...the music gallops, spontaneous and lively, flies over styles, approaches Ravel, Kurt Weill, le Boeuf sur le toit, Poulenc or even Verdi and Bizet without ever falling into pastiche, with a sort of robust, bawdy spirit that belongs to the buffoonery of Chabrier rather than Offenbach."<sup>35</sup> It was after this review that Aboulker's career as an opera composer began to gain traction. She herself says that she did not yet feel like a real composer, but that the sterling review of one of Paris's most respected critics gave her some much needed confidence.<sup>36</sup>

In contrast to some composers who slave over every note and agonize over revisions for years, Aboulker always speaks of her own compositional process as though it were the most natural thing in the world. "I'm a hedonist," Aboulker avows, "I like to please myself and I like to please others as well. When I create music it is to give pleasure."<sup>37</sup> She insists that she merely uses her own innate sense to create and that "the notes place themselves autonomously on the words... once I had a text, the music came."<sup>38</sup> Her position in the words versus music debate is very clear. In an interview published in a small volume accompanying the libretto to her work

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>35</sup> "...la musique galope, spontanée et vive, survole les styles, frise Ravel, Kurt Weill, le Bœuf sur le toit, Poulenc ou même Verdi et Bizet sans jamais tomber dans le pastiche, avec une sorte de sève robuste et gaillarde qui l'apparenterait à la bouffonnerie de Chabrier plutôt que d'Offenbach." Jacques Lonchamp, "Les Surprises de l'Enfer à Caen: La sève gaillard d'Isabelle Aboulker," *Le Monde*, January 16, 1981, accessed September 2, 2014, [http://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1981/01/16/les-surprises-de-l-enfer-a-caen-la-seve-gaillarde-d-isabelle-aboulker\\_3041298\\_1819218.html?xtmc=aboulker\\_isabelle&xtcr=19](http://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1981/01/16/les-surprises-de-l-enfer-a-caen-la-seve-gaillarde-d-isabelle-aboulker_3041298_1819218.html?xtmc=aboulker_isabelle&xtcr=19).

<sup>36</sup> Aboulker, "Écrire pour le plaisir..." 25.

<sup>37</sup> "Je suis hédoniste. J'aime vraiment me faire plaisir, et faire plaisir aux autres aussi. Quand j'apporte une musique, c'est pour faire plaisir." Ibid., 32.

<sup>38</sup> "Je me suis aperçue que quand je prenais un texte, le notes se posaient toutes seules sur les mots!... Dès que j'avais un texte, la musique venait." Ibid., 24.



*L'Opéra thérapeutique* she affirms: "...it's as though you have a lovely girl, you make a dress and it suits her well. That's really what it is. The music is after the text. It does not take the place of the text, it sheds light on it, it puts it in context. But it is after."<sup>39</sup> Perhaps it is this innate respect for the text that makes her such a successful musical dramatist.

Since Lonchamp's first glowing report in *Le Monde*, many critics have expressed their appreciation for Aboulker's dramatic sense. René Quinon praised her "dramatic and melodic" efficacy and her "intelligence for the theater" in a 1999 review of her oratorio *L'Homme qui titubait dans la guerre* published in *La Lettre du Musicien*.<sup>40</sup> In a 1999 review of *Monsieur de Balzac fait son Théâtre* for *Le Figaro*, Jacques Doucelin said Aboulker "belongs to the small number of musicians who have a sense of the theater."<sup>41</sup> In a 2002 review of Aboulker's *Douce et Barbe Bleu* for *La Lettre du Musicien*, Isabelle Mili praised the composer's "remarkable dramaturgic efficacy."<sup>42</sup> Despite detractors who might think her music too tonal and too tuneful, Aboulker has made an impression on both music critics and audiences alike, and she has the reviews, awards and commissions to prove it.

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<sup>39</sup> "...c'est comme si tu as une jolie fille, tu fais la robe, et la robe lui va bien. C'est vraiment ça. La musique est derrière le texte. Elle ne prend pas la place du texte, elle le met en lumière et en situation. Mais elle est derrière." Ibid., 31.

<sup>40</sup> "...son efficacité (dramatique et mélodique) pour tout dire par son intelligence du théâtre et de la voix." Isabelle Aboulker – Official Website.

<sup>41</sup> "Mme Aboulker appartient au petit nombre des musiciens qui ont le sens du théâtre..." Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> "...remarkable efficacité dramaturgique." Ibid.

## CHAPTER 3

### SELECTING REPERTOIRE FOR THE UNIVERSITY OPERA STUDIO

The pedagogical goal of a university opera program is to nurture and develop young talent by providing meaningful and educational performance opportunities. To this end, the repertoire should excite and challenge the students in equal measure without over-taxing their developing voices or their capacity for dramatic expression. There are many factors which go into the process of selecting repertoire for presentation in the university opera studio setting. Central to these factors are the students themselves, namely their vocal and dramatic capabilities and their development as musicians and artists. Secondary factors include instrumental and scenic requirements which might tax the resources of a smaller program. The selection of repertoire is a “time-consuming task”<sup>43</sup> and must be undertaken with a secure knowledge of the forces at the program’s disposal in order to ensure the best outcome for the student performers.

It is vital that repertoire be chosen and assigned based on the vocal and dramatic capacities of each student participant. As Berton Coffin so wisely asserts, “it is well known to all teachers that a matching of song traits to the strengths and limitations of any singing personality will assure the individual’s best success.”<sup>44</sup> This does not mean that a student should not be challenged musically, vocally and dramatically, but rather that rising to these challenges should be within the capacity of the student. Giving a student singer material that completely overwhelms their current developmental level is counter-productive and can lead to “frustration

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<sup>43</sup> Wallace, *Opera Scenes...*, vii.

<sup>44</sup> Berton Coffin, *Singer's Repertoire*, 1st ed. (New York: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1956), 6.

and feelings of inadequacy”<sup>45</sup> that can hinder learning and vocal development and may even result in damage to the vocal instrument.

The capabilities of each singer in a university opera program are unique and very much dependent on innate talent as well as degree and kind of training. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to what type of repertoire will best suit a young voice. There are, however, some basic considerations that apply to any voice when choosing repertoire which should be carefully reviewed when dealing with inexperienced student singers. Four basic areas of consideration which must be addressed when exploring possible repertoire for a student are as follows: Range, tessitura, length and dramatic demands. The first three elements seem obvious, as they directly impinge on the vocal capacities of a student singer. It is reasonable that all three of these aspects of a role work together to determine its difficulty and the type of voice most suited to its performance. Consideration of the effect of the dramatic demands of a role on the singer may not be as obviously necessary, but it is certainly an important factor in the successful performance of operatic repertoire. As Clifton Ware states it, “One of the singing teacher’s most important responsibilities is selecting repertoire that facilitates healthy vocalism and communicative artistry.”<sup>46</sup> In the context of a university program, the faculty of an opera program becomes by extension a part of the teaching team responsible for the safe growth and development of the students it serves.

Where range, tessitura, length and dramatic content are concerned, moderation is the best policy for the comfort and safety of the student’s voice. With that said, there must always

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<sup>45</sup> Clifton Ware, *Basics of Vocal Pedagogy: the foundations and process of singing* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1998), 229.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

be the “willingness to take some calculated risks”<sup>47</sup> to stretch the student beyond their current capacity sufficiently to encourage musical and technical growth. The degree to which an individual singer is ready to be stretched will vary, and the determination of this readiness relies on the wisdom and experience of the program directors and the student’s vocal teacher.

Range, tessitura and length are all explicit features of a role in that they are clearly visible upon examination of a score. These factors will be the first considered in determining the kind or technical level of voice for which the role is suitable. It is especially important not to over-tax a singer during their early years of study and development as this can lead to discouragement, frustration and even permanent vocal damage. This passage from Jung’s “Young Singers and the Repertoire” sums up the concerns nicely:

The danger of nodes is especially acute for the young singer, according to Doscher, because, "If the young singer (under 30) sings at an extremely high tessitura, particularly too loudly and for too long he/she risks permanent damage. When the 'bloom' of a voice is destroyed, it almost never comes back." The dangers to the young voice, then, arise chiefly from pushing the voice out of its natural range, and singing in a forceful and loud fashion that exceeds both the maturity of the voice and its development through training.<sup>48</sup>

The length of a role is also a matter for careful consideration. Barbara Doscher points out that one of the primary weaknesses of the young voice is its “limited endurance.”<sup>49</sup> The muscles which facilitate proper breathing and natural, free vocalization are still developing in a young singer. Because of this, a younger voice should not be asked to sing too much at a time, as this can result in vocal fatigue and eventual damage.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>48</sup> Joo-Young Jung, “Young Singers and the Repertoire,” 4.

<sup>49</sup> Barbara M. Doscher, *The Functional Unity of the Singing Voice* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1994), 241.

It seems natural to consider the explicit vocal demands of a given role when considering it for a particular singer, but there are subtler challenges for a singer than the notes on the page. In particular, the dramatic demands of a role can make an otherwise straightforward and reasonable role a struggle for a beginning singer. In her book *The Vocal Instrument*, Sharon Radianoff warns readers about the potential risks involved in expressive singing, noting that “if the technique is not at the level of the emotion or essence, then one will try to exert force for singing to occur.”<sup>50</sup> Sergius Kagen also relates the story of watching a young woman singing Tosca who became so caught up in the emotions of her aria that she was no longer able to sing it at all.<sup>51</sup> The dramatic content of a role must therefore be considered a factor in the overall difficulty of its performance for any given student.

From these various observations and pedagogical concerns we can gather a list of criteria which make a role more suitable for a younger singer:

1. Range should be comfortable for the singer at his or her present level of development with little exception. In general this will be a more limited range for a younger singer, though this is not always the case.

2. Tessitura should be comfortable for each voice. The range of two roles might be the same but their tessitura will be the true deciding factor in assigning them to students.

3. Length should not be excessive, since younger singers are not as developed physically and must build stamina slowly to sustain long stretches of continuous singing. Also, small bad habits which may not present themselves in the course of moderate use of the voice might

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<sup>50</sup> Sharon L. Radianoff, *The Vocal Instrument* (San Diego and Oxford: Plural Publishing, Inc., 2008), 34.

<sup>51</sup> Sergius Kagen, *On Studying Singing* (New York: J. J. Little & Ives Inc., 1950), 113.

present as real vocal difficulties if the singer attempts too much singing at one time before technical flaws are remedied.

4. Whenever possible, the dramatic demands of the role must be within the technical capabilities of the student while maintaining proper vocal technique.

Once the students' capacities are determined, there remain several practical concerns which shape the selection of repertoire for a university program. Chief among these are the availability of scores, the instrumental forces necessary and the scenic requirements. In order for a work to be performed, scores must be available, necessary instrumental forces must be marshalled and any scenic concerns such as how many different settings are required in the libretto must be sorted out and perhaps streamlined. In some cases a school must perform with piano only. In other schools there are limited orchestral forces available but their skill level might not be high enough for some of the more difficult works. These concerns, though secondary to the capacities of the student singers, can be the deciding factor in whether a work is performed or not.

Since the focus of this dissertation is on French language repertoire, a mention must be made here that there is some concern that younger singers will have a great deal of difficulty with the French language in particular. In response to this concern, I simply quote Thomas Grubb, an experienced teacher of vocal diction:

...English-speaking singers are sometimes reluctant to attempt their [French vocal repertoire] interpretation because of ideas they may have about the difficulties of singing in the French language. Again, I can take advantage of my long experience in teaching it [French diction] to English and American singers to assure them that they can sing in

French as well and as comfortably as in any other language, if they are taught the proper basis.<sup>52</sup>

With the concerns of student vocal and dramatic ability as well as institutional resources and score accessibility already discussed, there is one more aspect of repertoire selection that enters the discussion, especially in terms of this dissertation. That aspect is the issue of “new” music. The value and viability of the study of new music in addition to or in place of established repertoire must be considered in terms of the benefit to the students. To a certain extent some of the knee-jerk reactions triggered by the phrase “new music” are resolved by the earlier exploration of Aboulker’s music as fundamentally tonal. Much of the concern over the inclusion of “new” music in university opera programs comes from the idea that it will be too technically and vocally challenging for the students to sing their best. With that issue overcome, there still remains the need to establish a clear benefit to the students which is derived from the study of repertoire outside the standard canon. In fact, the advantages of doing new repertoire are real and very applicable to the modern world into which university students will emerge, hopefully as well-educated and well-prepared singers.

The history of previous performances that exists for the bulk of the standard repertoire can present an additional burden to a student who is attempting to prepare a role. There have been so many Mimis and so many Rodolfos and everyone has their favorite singer or singers for each role. Modern technology places a lot of pressure on younger singers through comparison with readily available audio and video recordings of professionals. There is also the issue of a new singer’s temptation to copy more established performers, possibly resulting in bad technical

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<sup>52</sup> Thomas Grubb, *Singing in French: A Manual of French Diction and French Vocal Repertoire* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1979), xiii.

choices as they try to “sound like” their favorite interpreter of a role. With a new, relatively unknown opera there is much less pressure of performance history with which to contend, and far less temptation to copy another artist’s interpretation and technique. In this sense, the preparation of new repertoire is an unburdening of the process, providing students with a sort of *tabula rasa* on which to make their own artistic mark.

There is further value in exposing students to the challenge of learning music they have never heard before, as this is a part of the professional world they will enter if they are successful in launching an operatic career.<sup>53</sup> Both major opera houses and medium-sized or smaller opera companies are including more and more new works in their seasons. Washington National Opera is the home of the American Opera Initiative, a program designed to commission, promote and perform new American operas which is now in its third season.<sup>54</sup> Companies like Houston Grand Opera and San Francisco Opera have well-established histories of regularly including 20th and 21st century works in their seasons, including many world premieres. This season San Francisco Opera hosts the world premiere of Marco Tutino’s *Two Women*<sup>55</sup> and Houston Grand Opera will present the newly commissioned *El Pasado Nunca Se Termina*, a so-called “mariachi-opera” with music by José “Pepe” Martinez.<sup>56</sup> Chicago Lyric Opera will also present two world premieres this season as a part of its Lyric Unlimited initiative to bring accessible new operatic works to its

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<sup>53</sup> Richard Repass, “Opera Workshops in the United States,” *Tempo* 27 (Spring 1953), 12.

<sup>54</sup> “American Opera Initiative,” Washington National Opera, accessed September 20, 2014, <http://www.kennedy-center.org/events/?event=OPOMB>.

<sup>55</sup> “San Francisco Opera Performance Archive,” San Francisco Opera, accessed September 2, 2014, <http://archive.sfopera.com/qry1operalist.asp>.

<sup>56</sup> “About HGO: Premieres,” Houston Grand Opera, accessed September 21, 2014, [https://www.houstongrandopera.org/HGO\\_Premieres.aspx](https://www.houstongrandopera.org/HGO_Premieres.aspx).



audience.<sup>57</sup> Among mid-size opera companies, Fort Worth Opera has presented at least one 20th or 21st century opera as a part of its festival season for many years now, most recently the professional premiere of Daniel Crozier's *With Blood, With Ink*.<sup>58</sup>

Small, relatively new opera companies are perhaps even more likely to explore new repertoire. Their smaller overhead allows for less reliance on large-scale donors whose preferences might interfere with free choice of repertoire. In addition, their smaller budget and new-minted reputation allow them to take more programming risks without fear of alienating established audiences. Berkley California's West Edge Opera is a small, innovative company whose 2014 festival included works by Glass and Heggie.<sup>59</sup> Some smaller opera companies specialize exclusively in the performance of new works. Guerilla Opera is a Boston chamber opera company where, in their own words, "every production is a new work."<sup>60</sup> Clearly experience preparing and performing new or lesser-known repertoire is an asset to the student planning to start a career in opera in a market so full of similar opportunities.

The precedent for performing new works at the university level is also strong in recent years, perhaps in part as a response to the need to prepare young singers for today's operatic market. The Moore's School of Music in Houston has consistently performed at least one contemporary work each season for the past five seasons. Seven out of their last twenty productions have been of works composed after 1980.<sup>61</sup> The Manhattan School of Music, though

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<sup>57</sup> John von Rhein, "Lyric adds two world-premiere operas for 2015," *Chicago Tribune* (June 12, 2014), accessed September 20, 2014, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2014-06-12/entertainment/chi-lyric-opera-the-property-second-nature-20140612\\_1\\_lyric-opera-lyric-unlimited-civic-opera-house](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2014-06-12/entertainment/chi-lyric-opera-the-property-second-nature-20140612_1_lyric-opera-lyric-unlimited-civic-opera-house).

<sup>58</sup> "Our Story," Fort Worth Opera, accessed September 21, 2014, <http://www.fwopera.org/About-Us/Our-Story/>.

<sup>59</sup> West Edge Opera, accessed September 21, 2014, <http://westedgeopera.org>.

<sup>60</sup> Guerrilla Opera, accessed September 21, 2014, <http://guerillaopera.com/#sthash.dZDYQmf7.dpbs>.

<sup>61</sup> "History," Moore's School of Music, accessed December 20, 2013, <http://www.uh.edu/class/music/opera/about-us/history/index.php>.

it produces fewer operas over all, has a similar record. Two out of their last ten productions have been of works composed since 1990.<sup>62</sup> This year, Indiana University produced the world premiere of a new opera composed by one of their faculty members, *The Tale of Lady Thi Kimh*.<sup>63</sup> The Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music has also begun a partnership with Cincinnati Opera called “Opera Fusion” dedicated to promoting the composition and performance of new operatic works.<sup>64</sup> The drive to refresh the repertoire is real, and Aboulker’s works provide that option for opera workshop programs, especially those whose budgets will not allow for the commissioning of new works or whose students might not be ready for the musical challenges associated with many 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century operatic compositions.

Aboulker’s operatic works present an opportunity for opera workshop programs in the United States to perform contemporary operatic works in a foreign language, revitalizing the operatic repertoire and giving students the opportunity to prepare and perform roles without the weight and influence of significant performance history. Aboulker’s style, which has been called “effectively simple,”<sup>65</sup> allows developing students to work on new French language repertoire without the burden of excessively difficult or atonal vocal lines. Aboulker’s works are tuneful and humorous and her longest operatic work lasts a mere hour and a half.<sup>66</sup> These qualities also serve to mitigate the challenge presented to the student by the French language. Many of Aboulker’s works are conceived specifically to be performed with piano only, or have

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<sup>62</sup> “Opera Studies,” Manhattan School of Music, accessed December 20, 2013, <http://www.msmnyc.edu/Instruction-Faculty/Academic-Departments/Opera-Studies>.

<sup>63</sup> “Lady Thi Kinh,” Indiana University Jacobs School of Music, accessed December 20, 2013, <http://music.indiana.edu/operaballet/ladythikingh>.

<sup>64</sup> “Opera Fusion,” Cincinnati College-Conservatory, accessed December 20, 2013, <http://ccm.uc.edu/theatre/opera/OperaFusion.html>.

<sup>65</sup> “...l’efficace simplicité de son style,” Pierrette Germain, “Avec Isabelle Aboulker,” *L’éducation musicale* 507/508 (2003), 38.

<sup>66</sup> Isabelle Aboulker – Official Website.

already been published in piano reduction. Most of her operatic works are very short or divide easily into scenes that could be performed separately where the performance of a longer work is either not feasible or not desired. All of these characteristics combine to make the operas of Isabelle Aboulker a viable repertoire option for the university opera studio.

## CHAPTER 4

### INTRODUCTION TO ANALYSIS OF SELECTED OPERATIC WORKS

The following represents a detailed analysis of nine works selected from Aboulker's larger body of work: *Cendrillon*, *Jérémy Fisher*, *La Lacune*, *Leçons de Français aux étudiants américains*, *Monsieur de Balzac fait son Théâtre*, *Petit opéra thérapeutique*, *Le petit Poucet*, *Un Renard à l'Opéra*, and *Les Surprises de l'Enfer*. Works are presented in alphabetical order. A plot synopsis is provided for each opera and a detailed description of each role is given, including voice type, range, tessitura and any special technical or dramatic demands posed by the role. Pitch indications are based on C4=Middle C.

## CHAPTER 5

### *CENDRILLON (CINDERELLA)*

#### Plot Synopsis

This opera is a fairly traditional, humorous retelling of the familiar Charles Perrault Cinderella story.<sup>67</sup> A narrator sets the stage for us, telling the story of the father's second marriage and the two daughters brought by his new wife into the family in contrast to the sweetness of the young Cendrillon. Cendrillon herself then speaks of her lowly place in the family (*Chanson de Cendrillon*). The narrator is careful to tell us Cendrillon never complains, in humorous contrast to the score indication that Cendrillon is in fact pouting. The announcement comes for the Prince's ball and Cendrillon's two stepsisters make a fuss over getting ready, asking her opinion on their dresses and for her help with their hair (*Où l'on se prepare pour le bal*). Our narrator lets us know that while Cendrillon could have taken this chance to make her step-sisters look like fools, she does not and instead does a lovely job of helping them dress and do their hair.

As soon as the sisters have left for the ball, Cendrillon begins to cry. Her Fairy Godmother is there right away (*Chanson de la fée*) and soon a pumpkin is a carriage, four mice are horses, a fat rat is a coachman, six lizards are well-dressed attendants and Cendrillon's rags are a golden ball gown, all thanks to a magic wand (*Où intervient la baguette magique*). The Fairy Godmother is careful to warn Cendrillon that she must leave before midnight, when the spell will be broken and all the transformed things will be as they were before. Cendrillon agrees. She attends the ball and dances with the Prince, being careful to take her leave before midnight (*"Au palais du*

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<sup>67</sup> Charles Perrault, "Cendrillon ou la petite pantoufle de vair," in *Les Contes de Perrault* (Paris: J. Hetzel Libraire-Éditeur, 1867. Pdf ebook.), 23-28.

*Roi!*”). When she returns home, she rhapsodizes about how wonderful it was and begs her Fairy Godmother to let her go to the ball again the next night (*Prière de Cendrillon*). When the two step-sisters return home, they tell her how interesting the ball was. They describe a mysterious princess who entranced the Prince, spoke to them and even shared with them gifts given her by the Prince (*Si tu étais venue au bal...*).

The next night, Cendrillon returns to the ball with the Fairy Godmother’s help and dances with the Prince again (*De retour au bal*). This time, however, she loses track of the hour and barely makes it out of the castle before the magic spell is broken. In her haste, she leaves behind one glass slipper, the second remaining unchanged on her foot even when the spell breaks. The Prince interrogates his guardsman, but the poor man reports that the only person he saw leave was a young peasant woman, very badly dressed (*Chanson du garde de palais*). This time her step-sisters are full of the story of how the mysterious woman fled and left the Prince holding and caressing her lost shoe during the whole rest of the ball (*Imagine-toi, Cendrillon...*).

Soon the Prince issues a proclamation that he will marry the woman whose foot fits the lost slipper (*Où l’on essaie la pantoufle de verre*). After trying the slipper on every other female foot in the kingdom, they arrive at the home of Cendrillon to try the slipper on her two step-sisters. Of course the slipper does not fit, and her step-sisters joke about how funny it would be if the slipper were to fit little Cendrillon (*Moqueries des deux soeurs*). The Prince’s employee insists he must try the slipper on every girl, and so he tries it on Cendrillon. Her step-sisters are astonished when not only does the slipper fit, but Cendrillon produces the matching slipper from her pocket. The Fairy Godmother transforms Cendrillon’s rags into a gown and she is carried off

to the castle. Being as kind as she is beautiful, Cendrillon moves her step-sisters into the palace with her and has them married to two wealthy court gentlemen (*Une fin heureuse*).

Three narrator-like figures then argue about whether the story has a moral, and they finally proclaim it as such: While she was beautiful and kind, it was because Cendrillon's feet were tiny enough that she was able to marry the Prince (*Final*).

#### Duration

30 minutes (composer's website)

#### Orchestration

Piano only

#### Score Availability

The score is available for purchase from the publisher, Éditions Alphonse Leduc (formerly Notissimo).<sup>68</sup>

#### Roles

The composer's website lists the voice types needed for this opera, but does not assign them to particular roles. Voice type determinations have been made using the composer's list based on the vocal ranges of each role and the author's discretion.

#### *La Première Conteuse/ 1re Voix (First Storyteller/First Voice)*

Voice Type: Soprano

Range: C4 – F#5

Tessitura: D4 – E5

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<sup>68</sup> Isabelle Aboulker, *Cendrillon: Conte musicale en forme d'Opéra d'après Charles Perrault* (Paris: Notissimo, 2002).

Description: This is one of the medium length roles in the opera, with 68 sung measures and some brief spoken dialogue. The first of the “Trois Soprani,” this character is the first to sing, opening the opera with a brief account of the life of Cendrillon so far. This character also appears briefly at the ball and again at the end of the opera to provide a moral for the story. In the few passages of two and three part harmony, this character sings the top line. Any young soprano (or even mezzo-soprano) should be capable of this brief, medium tessitura role.

*Le Récitant (The Narrator)*

Voice Type: N/A

Range: N/A

Tessitura: N/A

Description: This role is entirely spoken. As the name indicates, this character serves as narrator throughout the opera. These spoken lines could be given to one person, or easily broken up among the three sopranos (Première Conteuse, Seconde Conteuse, 3ème voix) who sing portions of narration throughout the opera.

*Cendrillon*

Voice Type: Soprano or mezzo-soprano

Range: C4 – E5

Tessitura: E4 – D5

Description: This is the title role, but does not demand very much singing. This character has 57 sung measures and some short sections of spoken dialogue. As the classic story goes, Cendrillon is a young woman whose mother has died and who has been placed in servitude in her own home. She functions as a servant to her two step-sisters, but dreams of more. She is



described in the libretto as kind-hearted and extremely beautiful with golden hair, rosy lips, clear blue eyes and, most importantly, tiny feet. The limited range and tessitura make this role accessible to either a soprano or mezzo-soprano.

*L'Ainée (The older sister)*

Voice Type: mezzo-soprano/contralto

Range: B3 – E5

Tessitura: D4 – C5

Description: This role is the second longest in the opera with 131 sung measures and some spoken dialogue. There are brief solo passages, but usually this character sings the lower line in two part harmony with the other step-sister. Most of the music is very speech-like with step-wise melodic motion. This character is described in the libretto as being meaner to Cendrillon than her younger sister is. Cendrillon is described as 100 times more beautiful than the two step-sisters but they are not described as ugly. The tessitura is fairly low, so a contralto or mezzo-soprano with a secure lower register would feel most comfortable in this role.

*La Cadette (The younger sister)*

Voice Type: Soprano

Range: D4 – G5

Tessitura: G4 – E5

Description: This character has the most music in the opera, though not by much. There are 139 sung measures and several brief spoken lines. Like the older step-sister, she has brief solo lines but sings mainly as the top voice in two-part harmony with l'Ainée. She is described in the libretto as being kinder than the older step-sister. Though she is not as beautiful as Cendrillon,

she is not described as ugly. Any young soprano or light mezzo-soprano should find this role quite accessible. Because she is the younger sister, and the upper voice in duets, a singer with a lighter vocal weight and color than l’Ainée seems advisable.

*La Fée (The Fairy Godmother)*

Voice Type: Soprano/mezzo-soprano

Range: D4 – E5

Tessitura: E4 – E5

Description: This very brief role consists of only 10 sung measures and one spoken line. The scene where she works her magic is mainly described by the narrator rather than being sung by the character. Her brief music is full of staccato markings. It begins with angular leaps (mainly 6ths) and then calms down to extended stepwise motion with a lightly chromatic flavor. Because of the extensive use of staccato, a lighter voice, either soprano or mezzo-soprano, would be more comfortable in this role.

*Seconde Conteuse/Soprano 2 (Second Storyteller/ Second Soprano)*

Voice Type: Soprano

Range: C4 – F5

Tessitura: F4 – F5

Description: The second of the ‘Trois Soprani’ is one of the medium-length roles in the opera, with 56 sung measures and some spoken dialogue. This character has some brief solo lines and sings as the lower voice in two part harmony with the Première Conteuse and as the middle voice when all three of the “Trois Soprani” sing together. Her music is, like most of the opera, made up of short phrases, syllabic text-setting and mainly step-wise melodic motion. She sings

some of the narration and appears at the ball and in the final scene where the moral of the story is discussed. This short role should be easily approached by any young soprano.

### *Le Prince (The Prince)*

Voice Type: Baritone

Range: Eb3 – D4

Tessitura: Eb3 – Db4

Description: The Prince sings only 18 measures and has no spoken lines. His music is legato and melodically simple with short phrases and mostly step-wise motion. There is no detailed description given in the libretto. We only know that he is the son of the king and that he falls almost instantly in love with Cendrillon. Because of the limited range, this role could be sung by a baritone or a tenor, though the composer's website indicates there are only baritone roles in the opera.

### *3ème Voix (The third voice)*

Voice Type: Mezzo-soprano

Range: B3 – G4

Tessitura: B3 – G4

Description: The third of the "Trois Soprani," this is the smallest role in the opera. This character has 4 sung measures as the lowest voice in the trio of sopranos during the first ball and a few spoken lines in the final scene where the moral of the story is discussed. A voice with a strong lower register is recommended to balance the other two voices in the trio. If the Récitant role is given to one person, they could easily perform both that role and the 3ème Voix. L'Ainée could sing the lower voice with the Première Conteuse and Seconde Conteuse in the first ball

scene, eliminating the need for the 3ème Voix. The spoken lines in the final scene could easily be taken by one of the other voices in the scene.

*Le Garde (The guard)*

Voice Type: Baritone

Range: E3 – E4

Tessitura: E3 – B3

Description: This is a small role, with 15 sung measures and two brief spoken lines. Though it is the same voice type as the Prince, it is not possible to combine the two roles because they appear on stage together according to the libretto. The Prince asks him if he has seen the mysterious princess leaving the first ball. The guard's brief 15 measure solo describes seeing a badly dressed young woman leaving the palace, but no princess at all. As with the Prince, while a baritone is indicated, a tenor might also be able to sing this role.

Suitability for Full Production

This opera is brief and calls for piano, one spoken role and at most nine sung roles. Some of these sung roles could be combined to require fewer singers. For example, in addition to suggestions made in the role descriptions above, La Fée could also sing the role of Première Conteuse or 3ème Voix, with a simple costume change if desired. There is no musical need for a chorus, though it may be dramatically appropriate to have supernumeraries on stage for the ball scenes.

Suitability for Scenes Programs

This score is divided into fifteen separate scenes, some containing only piano and spoken dialogue. Because these sections are separated by double bar lines in the music and often by

spoken dialogue, it would be both musically and dramatically simple to perform one or a group of these scenes as a part of an opera scenes program.

## CHAPTER 6

### *JÉRÉMY FISHER*

#### Plot Synopsis

The libretto for this opera is drawn from Mohamed Rouabhi's play of the same title.<sup>69</sup> The opera is presented as a story being told after the fact by the title character Jérémy Fisher. It is published in a bilingual format with both a French and English libretto. Jérémy serves as narrator as the strange story of his life is told. We begin when Jérémy is still unborn. The father, Tom Fisher, comes home from a long day out working as a fisherman and tells his wife the story of how one of their men named Foster died that day on the sea. A small white whale was caught in their nets and when Foster went to set it free it bit him, leaving teeth marks and a badly bleeding wound on his arm. Foster then shot the whale and both he and the dead animal were swept suddenly out to sea by a massive wave, lost in the ocean. Tom's wife Jody tells him it was a tragedy and that he probably would have done the same to the whale if it had bitten him. Besides, she says, the whale was clearly abnormal, since whales should not have teeth. Jody then shares the news that she is pregnant.

In the next scene, the couple is at the doctor's to have their first ultrasound. Everything is going well until the doctor notices a slight abnormality in the fetus – it has what looks like fins or webbing between its fingers. Tom and Jody are terrified for their child's future, and the doctor tries half-heartedly to console them. Unfortunately for the young expectant parents, this doctor chooses to sell the pictures and the story of the baby to the media for his own gain. Jody and Tom and their neighbors and friends are hounded by the media throughout the pregnancy. An

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<sup>69</sup> Mohamed Rouabhi, *Jérémy Fisher* (Paris: Actes Sud Junior, 2007).

aquarium salesman even offers them a great deal on a giant fish tank to keep their son in once he is born. Insulted, Tom kicks the man out.

Jérémy as the narrator goes on to describe his early life as a human. He says that his eyesight and hearing were exceptional, that he could see everything in the dark and hear a fly crawling on the window sill. He tells stories of remaining underwater for hours, and loving to swim, though being a bit bored down there by himself. The local pool director offers Jérémy a chance to get rich by performing in an aquatic act, promising him lots of money and that he will never have to go to school again. Jérémy's mother tells him no.

The next scene is Jérémy's nightmare. In this nightmare, his parents Tom and Jodi appear as Mulder and Scully from the X-Files coming to investigate the strange child. He tries to speak to them but they cannot understand him. Jérémy goes to his mother and tries to embrace her but they perceive it as an attack and Tom (as Mulder) shoots Jérémy. Jérémy wakes from the nightmare to find both his parents by his side, but when they turn on his bedroom light they discover he has begun to transform into a fish. Jérémy narrates the progress of his transformation, the doctors, the specialists and his parents who can seem to do nothing to halt the metamorphosis.

Eventually his parents take him to their tiny fishing cabin on the sea. On the way Jérémy describes his changing senses: he can barely see or hear at all anymore and he is beginning to have serious trouble breathing. When they arrive at the cabin Tom opens a trap door in the floor that leads directly into the water. Tom and Jodi say a sad farewell to their son and he slips into the water to begin his new life as a fish.

## Duration

1 hour 15 minutes (Score)

## Orchestration

String Quartet or Piano: String quartet parts are presented together on two staves and could be played by a piano if necessary.

## Score Availability

The score is available for purchase from the publisher, Gérard Billaudot.<sup>70</sup>

## Roles

Voice types are indicated in the score.

### *Jérémy Fisher*

Voice Type: Soprano/mezzo-soprano (pants role)

Range: C4 – G5 (w/one optional A5)

Tessitura: E4 – E5

Description: This role is indicated in the score as a children's chorus. There is one instance of two part harmony (two measures long) which is sacrificed in the assigning of this role to one singer. However, the notes are played by the string quartet or piano, whichever is in use, and so the harmony is still heard. This is the largest role in the opera, functioning both as a character in the drama and the narrator of the story. There are 288 sung measures as well as considerable spoken dialogue. The music is tonally simple, often step-wise and in a fairly contained range, as befits the composer's original intent that it should be sung by a children's chorus. It is unclear exactly how old Jérémy Fisher is, though we are told he was already more than old enough for

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<sup>70</sup> Isabelle Aboulker, *Jérémy Fisher* (Paris: Gérard Billaudot, 2011).



school when his transformation into a fish occurred. Evidence in the libretto would suggest a boy of approximately 6-8 years old. A soprano or a high mezzo-soprano should find this role accessible. Its length demands a certain degree of stamina. Most of the sung sections are around 20 measures long, and there is time to rest between longer sung passages. By far the longest sung passage occurs in the middle of the work consisting of 82 measures.

### *Jody*

Voice Type: Soprano

Range: D4 – A5

Tessitura: E4 – E5

Description: This role contains 85 sung measures and considerable spoken dialogue. Her music is usually speech-like with few large leaps and a few moments of chromaticism. As Jérémy's mother, this character is described as strong, intelligent and supportive of her son despite his differences. Her age is not specified, though a starting age of anywhere from early 20s to mid-30s seems reasonable. In Jérémy's dream sequence Jody also plays the role of Scully from the X-Files T.V. show. Dramatically, it would be helpful if the singer were taller than the soprano or mezzo-soprano playing Jérémy. Almost any soprano should find this role accessible, and some higher mezzo-sopranos might as well.

### *Tom*

Voice Type: Baritone

Range: B2 – E4

Tessitura: D4 – B4

Description: This role has only 59 sung measures, but considerable spoken dialogue. His music is speech-like and only explores the higher end of the range in emotionally charged moments, such as when he describes the death of his fellow fisherman in the first scene. He is a fisherman by trade, and based on the libretto, a fairly experienced one. He is supportive of his son and defensive of his family's privacy when the press comes to call. During Jérémy's dream sequence, Tom also plays the role of Mulder from the X-Files T.V. show. The moderate range and tessitura and short length make this role approachable for a young baritone.

*Le médecin (The Doctor)*

Voice Type: Bass-Baritone

Range: C3 – E4

Tessitura: C3 – C4

Description: This role contains 84 sung measures and a few lines of spoken dialogue. The doctor only appears in Scene 2 where Jody visits him for her first ultrasound. His music is entirely declamatory in style, with short phrases. He is not so good at hiding his surprise when the abnormalities are discovered in little Jérémy, nor is he particularly good at comforting the worried mother. When Jody faints, he runs to get Tom exclaiming about how exciting the discovery about their son is. According to the narration, he is also quick to sell the story to the press for his own gain. The designation as bass-baritone is mainly a choice of vocal color, as the range should be accessible to a baritone or bass-baritone alike.

*Le représentant (The Salesman)*

Voice Type: Baritone

Range: D3 – C4

Tessitura: D3 – C4

Description: This role has only 21 sung measures, but a relatively large section of spoken dialogue compared to the length of the role. The sung section contains several extended passages on a single note, with short note values making it very much like speech. In addition, there are a couple of sections of rhythmically spoken text over music. He only appears in one scene, where he tries to convince the Fisher family that they should buy a giant aquarium from his company to accommodate their child when he is born. He is very upbeat and talkative but is quickly backed down and kicked out by Tom Fisher. This role could easily be sung by the same singer who sings *Le médecin* with a simple costume change. This role could also conceivably be sung by a character tenor.

#### Suitability for Full Production

This opera is longer than some of Aboulker's works, but at an hour and fifteen minutes, it is still a manageable length. Simple sets and basic props could be used to create the three different settings called for in the libretto – the Fisher home, a doctor's office and the little cabin on the ocean. The length of this work makes it a better stand-alone performance than some of the shorter works, while still being short enough to be enjoyed by younger children with short attention spans. It is family friendly and fairy-tale like. The libretto is presented in English and in French, though some editing of the English libretto is necessary to make it entirely coherent.

#### Suitability for Scenes Programs

This work is based on a pre-existing play and is divided into the scenes as they appeared in the source work. The score lets us know that one scene from the play was omitted with the permission of the play's author. There are 7 scenes in the opera, each marked with an

approximate duration in the score of between 4 and 8 minutes. It would be easy to incorporate one or several of these in an evening of opera scenes. The narration which connects the scenes makes it convenient to explain the story and setting within the context of the score. The libretto is presented in English and in French, though some editing of the English libretto is necessary to make it entirely coherent.

## CHAPTER 7

### *LA LACUNE* (THE DEFICIENCY)

#### Plot Synopsis

This libretto is based on the play by Eugène Ionesco of the same title.<sup>71</sup> A lauded academician has discovered that his '*licence*' (the equivalent of an American Bachelor's Degree) is not valid because he never took the second half of his college entrance exam. Largely as a matter of pride, he has taken the exam to fill the gap in his accreditation and to obtain a copy of his diploma. Unfortunately he has failed the exam rather miserably. We enter the story the morning after the results have been publicly posted.

The opera itself consists of the academician's friend (L'ami) telling the wife (La femme) of the academician (L'académicien) that her husband has failed the exam. They then notify the academician and we witness his disbelief, rationalizations and outrage and his wife's anger and embarrassment. Meanwhile the friend attempts to be something of a placating, calm voice of reason. The opera ends with a comic punchline as the academician, in his authority as President of the Baccalaureate Commission of the Ministry of Education, calls the President of France to demand that his failing test score be thrown out. The President refuses speak to the academician anymore. His reason? His mother has forbidden him to associate with students at the bottom of the class rankings.

#### Duration

30-35 minutes (listed in the score and on the composer's website)

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<sup>71</sup> Eugène Ionesco, "La Lacune," in *Théâtre, tome IV: Le Roi se Meurt, La Soif et la Faim, La Lacune, Le Salon de l'Automobile, L'Œuf Dur, Pour Préparer un Œuf Dur, Le Jeune Homme à Marier, Apprendre à Marcher* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

## Orchestration

Piano only

## Score Availability

The score is available for purchase from the publisher, Gérard Billaudot.<sup>72</sup>

## Roles

Voice types are indicated in the score.

### *L'ami (The friend)*

Voice Type: Tenor

Range: C3 – A4

Tessitura: F3 - E4

Description: The role is fairly brief, containing 195 measures of sung music and a few lines of spoken dialogue. The music contains mostly step-wise melodic motion and syllabic text setting. This role should be easily attainable by a young lyric or light lyric tenor with a secure A4. This character is the emotionally stable one in the opera, which is reflected in his much calmer vocal lines and limited use of the extremes of the range.

### *La femme (The wife):*

Voice Type: Lyric Soprano

Range: G3 – C6

Tessitura: F4 – F5

Description: This role is the second longest in the opera, consisting of 233 sung measures and no spoken dialogue. The heightened emotional state of the character is reflected in the

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<sup>72</sup> Isabelle Aboulker, *La Lacune: Opéra de chambre* (Paris: Gérard Billaudot, 2001).

music, which is angular with wide leaps and a very wide range. Over all the tessitura is reasonable, but the extremes of the range are used regularly. The score calls for both piano and forte dynamic at both extremes of the range, though most higher pitches are marked forte. This might prove a useful role for a younger lyric or dramatic soprano with a secure top. It is similar to Mozart's Fiordiligi in range and in the demand for large emotional gestures, but it contains no coloratura passages. This role calls for a voice able to surmount the vocal challenges while projecting the comedic emotional swings of the character.

*La bonne (The maid):*

Voice Type: Soprano

Range: E4 – G5

Tessitura: E4 – G5

Description: This role is the shortest in the opera, containing only 15 measures of sung music. This character is the Spanish maid of the academician. She makes a very brief appearance at the beginning of the opera and is not seen again. The role is indicated in the score as soprano, but because of the limited range and short duration it could easily be sung by a mezzo-soprano. The G5 is only sung once, and it is inside an ornamental 16<sup>th</sup> note figure rather than being sustained. This role would be appropriate for a young, inexperienced undergraduate singer.

*L'académicien (The academician):*

Voice Type: Bass-Baritone

Range: A2-F#4

Tessitura: C3 - B3

Description: This role is the longest in the opera, containing 274 measures of sung material and several spoken lines. The designation of this role as bass-baritone seems to have more to do with the desired color of the voice than with the range or tessitura. A young baritone should not have too much trouble with the role, though there are two instances of sustained singing on B2 and A#2 which might prove challenging for a higher voice. The F#4 only occurs once, and there are two instances of the note F4. The writing is highly syllabic, with extensive speech-like sections of recitation on a repeated pitch. The demand for an extensive range within a single passage is very limited, with the two most exaggerated examples found predictably in moments of emotional agitation. Of all the characters, the academician has the longest solo sections, particularly when he tells the story of having discovered that he never passed part of his entrance exams.

#### Suitability for Full Production

This opera's short length and limited forces make it a manageable choice for a full production. There is no need for extensive sets or costumes. The only scenic or costume elements mentioned in the libretto are a set of medals worn by the academician, which could in a pinch be made of paper. There is no chorus and there are very limited instances of two voices singing together, mostly in a canon-like manner, and one instance of three voices together forming a chord. Even with very limited rehearsal time as a cast, this opera could be successfully produced.

#### Suitability for Scenes Programs

While a full performance of this opera could easily be included in a longer evening of performances, it does not lend itself well to being partitioned into scenes. It is in essence, one long scene which takes place in real time.



## CHAPTER 8

### *LEÇONS DE FRANÇAIS AUX ÉTUDIANTS AMÉRICAINS*

#### (FRENCH LESSONS FOR AMERICAN STUDENTS)

##### Plot Synopsis

This work is essentially a series of vignettes, like the literary source “Exercices de Diction et de Conversation pour les Étudiants Américains” from which it is derived.<sup>73</sup> The original Eugène Ionesco play was intended by its absurdist author to demonstrate and find humor in many of the difficulties of grammar and vocabulary faced by American students attempting to learn the French language. This adaptation serves the same function. There is no discernible plot which runs through the opera. Instead each scene stands on its own, in some cases with no real connection at all to the scenes which precede or follow. Owing to shared characters, scenes 1-3 will be analyzed together, while scenes 4-8 will be approached separately. Durations will be provided for each scene separately inside the individual plot synopses.

Voice types are indicated in the score.

##### Duration

30 minutes (total of scene lengths) 40 minutes (composer’s website)

##### Orchestration

Piano only

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<sup>73</sup> Eugène Ionesco, “Exercices de Conversation et de Diction Française pour Étudiants Américains,” in *Théâtre, tome V: Jeux de Massacre, Macbett, La Vase, Exercices de Conversation et de Diction Françaises pour Étudiants Américains* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974).

## Score Availability

The score is available for purchase from the publisher, Gérard Billaudot.<sup>74</sup>

Scenes 1-3: (Jean-Marie/Marie-Jeanne, L'appel, Le plus et le moins)

### *Plot Synopses*

1. Jean-Marie/Marie-Jeanne (2 minutes): Jean-Marie and Marie-Jeanne are on their way to class. On the way they see a third student, but he is in a hurry and does not respond to their greeting. They argue about whether they are early or late. Marie-Jeanne asks how long it will take to get the French language in her head and Jean-Marie teases her, saying it would take twenty years to get it into a head like hers.

2. L'appel (Roll call) (2 ½ minutes): The professor waits in the classroom for his students. Impatient for their arrival, and in true Ionesco absurdist style, he attempts to get the students to respond to his greetings before they have even entered the room. Soon Jean-Marie and Marie-Jeanne arrive and enter. The professor calls role. Jean-Marie is called first, then Marie-Jeanne. The professor asks each student their name. Jean-Marie states his name confidently. Confused, Marie-Jeanne responds to the question "What is your name" the same way she has just heard Jean-Marie respond – by calling herself Jean-Marie. Upset, the professor repeats the question and she gets it right the second time. The professor then dismisses them to go to lunch.

3. Le plus et le moins (More and Less) (4 minutes) At lunch, Marie-Jeanne, another student named Thomas and the professor are sitting together. Thomas and the professor have a ridiculous conversation about whether their family members are bigger or smaller than the Eiffel

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<sup>74</sup> Isabelle Aboulker, *Leçons de français aux étudiants américains: Opéra de chambre pour voix et piano* (Paris: Gérard Billaudot, 1992).

Tower and if they have more or fewer windows. Marie-Jeanne calls the professor a liar when he says that his family is both as big as and as small as the Eiffel tower. Thomas insists the professor cannot be wrong because he is the professor and he has a head. Marie-Jeanne says he could be wrong if he didn't have a head, for example if they cut off his head. The professor insists he still has his head, and that he would surely have noticed if he did not. He then asks the two students to verify they still have theirs. They finish their bizarre conversation by concluding that one must not eat with one's hands, but instead should use a knife and fork.

*Duration*

8 ½ minutes

*Roles*

Jean-Marie

Voice Type: Tenor

Range: F3 – F4

Tessitura: F3 – F4

Description: This role only contains 2 measures of sung music. Most of this role consists of rhythmically spoken text, which makes up the entirety of the first scene. Any young tenor or high baritone could easily handle this role. In the context of the larger work, it would be easy to have the tenor who sings Jean-Marie sing the other tenor roles as well. Within the first 3 scenes, the roles of Jean-Marie and Thomas could easily be combined.

Marie-Jeanne

Voice Type: Soprano

Range: D4 – A5

Tessitura: F4 – F5

Description: This role contains 36 sung measures as well as extensive rhythmically spoken text. Any young soprano should be able to approach this role with relative ease. There is only one instance of the A5 and the overall tessitura is medium. In the context of the larger work, this role and the soprano roles in the other scenes could easily be assigned to a single singer if necessary.

Le professeur (The professor)

Voice Type: Baritone

Range: G2 – Ab4

Tessitura: C3 – E4

Description: This role is the longest in this 3 scene set with 104 sung measures and limited spoken dialogue. The music is syllabic and speech-like with brief moments of lyricism and short phrases. The Ab4 is only approached twice, once clearly marked falsetto and the second marked as a “*cri*” which could easily result in it being semi-spoken. The G2 is only sung once in a descending arpeggiated figure. No significant low range is needed, so a young, higher baritone should find this role approachable. It would be simple to have one singer perform this role and the baritone roles in the other scenes if needed.

Thomas

Voice Type: Tenor

Range: Db3 – Bb4

Tessitura: F3 – F4

Description: This role consists of 35 sung measures. The music is syllabic and largely speech-like with brief moments of lyricism and short phrases. The higher end of the range is used

sparingly and always on brief note values, often marked staccato. The lower end of the range is also rarely approached. As noted above, this role could easily be combined with that of Marie-Jean and this singer could also be assigned the tenor roles in the subsequent scenes.

#### Scene 4: La classe (The class)

##### *Plot Synopsis*

This short scene consists entirely of a mezzo-soprano aria which plays with inappropriate word order to utter such nonsense phrases as “the desk is in the notebook” and “the clock has three schools.”

##### *Duration*

1 minute

##### *Roles*

L'Étudiante (The Student)

Voice Type: Mezzo-soprano

Range: C4 – G5

Tessitura: C4 – C5

Description: This role consists of one aria with 23 sung measures and one spoken line. The music follows the rhythm of the language quite well, but to a student unfamiliar with the cadence of the French language, the constantly shifting time signature could be daunting. The time signature is alternately 5/8, 5/4, 3/4, 4/4, and 7/8. This piece is written with no key signature but many accidentals, which causes it to look more difficult on the page than it actually is in performance. The aural effect is quite tonally predictable, and the piano very supportive, but the notation might seem complicated to a young singer. The entire aria is marked “*non legato*,”

suggesting the emphasis should be on declaiming the text rather than creating long musical lines. Most of the music is stepwise in running 16<sup>th</sup> note figures. The moderate tessitura should make this piece more of a musical challenge than a vocal/technical one.

#### Scene 5: Agence de voyages (Travel Agency)

Plot Synopsis: This vignette presents a French couple trying to buy tickets for a trip to Nice at a travel agency. Continuing in the vein of the absurd, every possible obstacle is put in their way including all the trains being booked, all driver's licenses being suspended (to prevent road congestion), no planes available (and no horses either!) and just when they decide to walk to Nice, a massive earthquake opens the earth between them and their destination and the ocean floods in to fill it. The travel agent, being a shrewd businessman, promptly offers them the first tickets in history for a voyage across the country by boat to Nice.

#### *Duration*

6 minutes

#### *Roles*

Le mari (The Husband)

Voice Type: Baritone

Range: B2 – A4

Tessitura: E3 – E4

Description: This role is the second longest in the scene, with 68 sung measures. The music ranges from speech-like to extremely legato as the emotions of the scene fluctuate. In view of the circumstances, this character seems to show a good deal of restraint, but there is plenty of room for confusion, and a certain amount of bluster and blow in frustration in the general

comedic spirit of the scene. There is one high A4, marked to be sung in falsetto and one Ab4 to be sung staccato. There is an F#4 held for 7 beats, but it is also marked piano, and could be sung in falsetto if necessary. Apart from these instances, the role has a reasonable tessitura for a younger baritone.

La femme (The Wife)

Voice Type: Soprano

Range: D4 – B5

Tessitura: G4 – E5

Description: This is the smallest role in the scene, with only 16 sung measures. The range and tessitura are reasonable and the short length of the role makes it accessible to a beginning soprano. One possible vocal challenge is a B5 which is held for six and a half beats marked to be sung piano. A young light soprano should find this easier than a heavier voice. Her music is all indicated to be sung legato. This character, though largely silent, should be able to contribute greatly to the scene by way of her reactions to the other two characters and the absurdity of the situation. She is characterized in the score as a bit of a silly creature – her first sung lines are simply short trills on ‘Ah’, marked to be sung “stupidly” and she seems to offer no objection when her husband suggests they should buy tickets to walk to Nice.

L’employé (The Employee)

Voice Type: Tenor

Range: C3 – A4

Tessitura: F3 – F4

Description: This is the largest role in the scene, with 81 sung measures. Even though it is the longest role in the scene, it is still fairly brief and quite accessible. The music is mostly speech-like with short, stepwise phrases with the occasional legato moment, such as his smooth, long phrase at the end selling the couple the idea of tickets on the first boat to Nice. The Employee is officious and a bit snide. He subtly insults the husband by telling him things are different than when the husband was young – 20 or 30 years ago. The capacity for rapid text declamation is also important to the dramatic function of this character.

### Scene 6: Le futur (The Future)

#### *Plot Synopsis*

A young woman has brought her friend along with her to approach a man about buying a face. The young woman interacts with the man, specifying the parts of the face she will need or want, how many eyes, noses and mouths she should purchase and what good they will do her if she does. She then asks the man if this face will allow her to get married. The man tells her not quite - she will also need a chin, in order to lie to her husband.

#### *Duration*

7 minutes

#### *Roles*

La jeune fille (The Young Woman)

Voice Type: Soprano

Range: D4 – C6

Tessitura: G4 – F5



Description: This character has 70 sung measures, making it the second longest role in the scene. There is also a short rhythmically spoken section. At the start of the scene, the score indicates she is timid about approaching the man. The whole scene must be taken with an irreverent, silly spirit as its subject is quite absurd. The young woman, for example, expresses her concern over having two eyes – she is worried she might confuse one for the other. The music is mostly speech-like with short phrases and mostly step-wise or arpeggiated motion. There are some brief chromatic and coloratura-like passages that might prove a challenge. The range and tessitura would best suit a higher soprano.

Le monsieur (The Gentleman)

Voice Type: Baritone

Range: Bb2 – Ab5

Tessitura: C3 – D4

Description: Containing 107 sung measures, this role is the longest in the scene. The vocal lines vary from rapid-fire and speech-like to longer legato passages. The character is a consummate salesman, highlighting the benefits and necessities of each part of the face and making recommendations to increase his customer's purchase, varying his technique (and consequently his vocal style) in response to his customer's questions and reactions. With a medium range and tessitura, this role should be accessible to most young light baritones and perhaps to character tenors as well. There is a sustained Ab5 (2 beats under a fermata) with an implied forte dynamic (based on a crescendo leading up to the measure). There is one Bb2 marked forte but staccato, allowing for it to be spoken. Later, the Bb2 is held for two beats. A solid C3 is necessary, as this pitch is repeated often.

L'amie (The Friend)

Voice Type: Mezzo-soprano

Range: Bb3 – F5

Tessitura: D4 – D5

Description: This role is the smallest in the scene, with only 25 sung measures. Musically, this character serves as the third voice in the final trio. This is the only place she sings. Her musical lines are primarily arpeggiated and leap around quite a bit within the range. This role is short and could be sung either by a lyric mezzo-soprano or a soprano with a fairly strong middle and low voice. The short duration makes it accessible to a younger singer. As far as the story goes, this character is tasked with reacting rather than being active. Her participation in the ending trio could be interpreted dramatically in several ways, but the certain thing is that she is mostly an observer.

Scene 7: Le grand siècle ou les grands airs (The great century or grandiose airs)

### *Plot Synopsis*

This scene consists entirely of an aria for soprano which plays with words that have similar or identical sounds, but different meanings. In the aria, La Marquise describes looking out the window over her bed several mornings in a row to see her horse-drawn carriage upside down in the middle of the street. Each day it would be righted, and then the following morning it would be upside down again. She describes the midnight vigil of her staff waiting for the culprit to appear again and how they finally catch him.

### *Duration*

4 minutes

## *Roles*

La marquise (The Marchioness)

Voice Type: Light Soprano

Range: C4 – C6

Tessitura: G4 – G5

Description: Containing 79 sung measures and a brief spoken section, this aria is best suited to a light soprano voice that can move fairly easily. There is no extensive coloratura, but the text is often rapidly declaimed and there are several trills and rapid turns indicated in the score. The phrases are short and the vocal lines are often angular with frequent arpeggiation. This role frequently calls for the use of a large portion of its range within individual phrases and the overall tessitura is fairly high. This role might be better suited to a more advanced singer.

## Scene 8: Aphorismes (Aphorisms)

### *Plot Synopsis*

This final ensemble plays with the idea of how to say something is better or worse or more or less than something else – again, the libretto is playing with the basic building blocks of the language. In this quintet, they express basic things such as “good is better than the worst” and have a brief argument about whether it is possible for one man to be more alive than another or for one man to be more dead than another. They digress to a discussion about how people are generally more in love in the spring because there is better weather and people work less – after all, says the tenor, people are more dead than alive when they work. But the mezzo-soprano disagrees, since dead people cannot work at all. The baritone and tenor scold her, saying she doesn’t know any better than them. The soprano and mezzo-soprano insist “If I am normal it is

because I am not like the others.” The tenor and bass keep up the insistence that the women don’t know any better than them and they aren’t any wiser or better informed.

*Duration*

4 minutes

*Roles*

1er étudiant (1<sup>st</sup> Student)

Voice Type: Soprano

Range: D4 – A5

Tessitura: E4 – E5

Description: This role consists of 42 sung measures with one brief solo line. The tessitura is medium and the extremes of the range are rarely used. The phrases are short and the music is syllabic and speech-like. The harmonies are simple and tonal. Any young soprano should find this role approachable.

2e étudiant (2<sup>nd</sup> Student)

Voice Type: Mezzo-soprano

Range: G3 – G5

Tessitura: D4 – D5

Description: This role consists of 89 sung measures with several brief solo lines. The tessitura is medium and the extremes of the range are rarely used. The phrases are short and the music is syllabic and speech-like. The harmonies are simple and tonal. A young mezzo-soprano with a secure low register should find this role approachable.

3ème étudiant (3<sup>rd</sup> Student)

Voice Type: Tenor

Range: B2 – A4

Tessitura: E3 – E4

Description: This role consists of 42 sung measures and two sections of rhythmically spoken text with several brief solo lines. The tessitura is medium and the extremes of the range are rarely used. The phrases are short and the music is syllabic and speech-like. The harmonies are simple and tonal. A young tenor with a comfortable upper register should find this role approachable.

4ème étudiant (4<sup>th</sup> Student)

Voice Type: Baritone

Range: A2 - G#4

Tessitura: C3 – C4

Description: This role consists of 42 sung measures and one section of rhythmically spoken text with two brief solo lines. The tessitura is medium and the extremes of the range are rarely used. The phrases are short and the music is syllabic and speech-like. The harmonies are simple and tonal. A young baritone with a comfortable upper register should find this role approachable.

5ème étudiant (5<sup>th</sup> student)

Voice Type: Bass (The score also indicates this role may be replaced by the piano)

Range: G2 – A3

Tessitura: G2 – A3

Description: This role consists of 16 sung measures and one section of rhythmically spoken text with no solo lines. The tessitura is medium, the phrases are short and the text setting is syllabic and the music speech-like. The harmonies are simple and tonal. A young bass or bass-baritone should find this role approachable.

#### Suitability for Full Production

This brief opera could easily be produced in its entirety, either with four to five singers (one to a voice part) or with many singers, each taking a role in one or two scenes to provide smaller performance opportunities for many students. Scenic considerations are minor. All the settings are easily accomplished with a few chairs and perhaps a table or some desks, items generally available in a university setting. There is no need for any unusual props.

#### Suitability for Scenes Programs

This work is already divided into 8 individual scenes. Each scene, or several scenes could be easily incorporated into an opera scenes program in any order since there is no necessary plot connection between them.

## CHAPTER 9

### *MONSIEUR DE BALZAC FAIT SON THÉÂTRE* (MR. BALZAC CREATES HIS THEATER)

#### Plot Synopsis

The characters in this story are based on real historical figures and the story is an embellished account of the conception, writing, single performance and ultimate banning of Honoré de Balzac's play *Vautrin*.<sup>75</sup> The opera opens outside the house Balzac has had built in Sèvres, close to Paris. The year is 1839. Friends of Balzac are arriving at his home for an outdoor dinner party. The land surrounding the house is steeply sloped and a joke is made out of the difficulty the guests have ascending the hill. Balzac weights his feet down with rocks while his secretary Lassailly slips and slides down the stage to where the arriving guests stand, almost falling into the orchestra pit. During the first ensemble (*Balzac a bâti sa maison*) Balzac throws a rope to the guests so they can pull themselves up the hill with its help. Balzac shares his scheme to become rich growing and selling bananas (Aria: *Ananas à vendre*) just before two creditors show up demanding payment of outstanding debts (Duet: *Duo des créanciers*). Balzac has everyone hide and go silent as the creditors bang on the garden wall. Eventually they give up and leave. Unfazed, Balzac continues the dinner party (Ensemble: *Le table de Balzac*) and comes up with a new scheme to make money. He decides in a short aria that he will write a play and it will make him rich enough to pay off all his debts (*Le théâtre seul peut me tirer du trou*). The whole table agrees (Ensemble: *M. de Balzac fait son théâtre*) with his friends committing to write one act each and the scene ends with a reprise of the ensemble "*La table de Balzac.*"

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<sup>75</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *Vautrin* (Paris: Jeune Parque, 1947).

After a brief instrumental section, the second act begins with the mysterious police sergeant Vidocq appearing to Balzac in his study to tell the tale of how he rescued an orphan, made himself into the fictional General Crustamente and got the orphan boy married off to the daughter of a French duke before being forgotten by his protégé and left alone and ignored by society (Aria: *L'enfant trouvé*). When Vidocq has left, Balzac notices the time and calls for Lassailly who has promised him a subject for the play by midnight. Lassailly arrives, half asleep, and admits he has been sleeping and not thinking. Balzac sends him away to think something up. The next visitor to the study is the Comtesse Visconti. She is Balzac's mistress and they share a love duet (*Grand Duo*). The countess offers Balzac her jewels to help him with his debts. He refuses and she urges him to go to Paris and hide at the house of his tailor, Buisson to avoid being thrown in debtor's prison, promising to follow him there. Lassailly returns, but without so much as a title. Ashamed that he has not even come up with a title, Lassailly runs off into the night (Aria: *Aïe! Aïe! Aïe!*). Suddenly inspired, Balzac plunges his pen into the ink and begins to write.

Act 3 begins in the back room of Buisson's boutique in Paris. Sand, la Comtesse, Gautier, Laurent-Jan and the famous actor Frédérick Lemaître are gathered at Balzac's invitation. The opening of the act is Lemaître's self-agrandizing aria (*Le public m'adore*) in which he expounds upon the subject of his own talents and how much everyone loves him. This is soon followed by the tailor Buisson, who addresses his clients with a self-promotional aria (*Un habit fait par Buisson*) declaring that all it takes to make a man a king is a suit made by Buisson. We learn that Balzac owes Buisson quite a lot of money but that the tailor demands no payment – only that he be made into characters in Balzac's novels. Balzac arrives and announces there is still no story for the play, which is supposed to be read the next day at noon by the cast at the theater. Fed up,



Gautier launches into a sarcastic aria about Balzac's vision for the theater of the future – formless and nothing (*L'informe seul est beau*) before storming off. Gozlan laments that they've lost an act of the play with Gautier gone. Sand pipes up and says she cannot stay away from home and her lover Chopin for so long (Aria: *Je me dois à Chopin*). Lemaître offers to take her home and they both leave. Gozlan laments again, a second act is gone. A visitor arrives and talks his way past Buisson, only to announce that Balzac is under arrest for unpaid debts. The countess steps in and offers her jewels directly to the visitor in exchange for Balzac's freedom (Aria: *Non, vous n'irez pas à Clichy*). Satisfied, the man leaves. In a feverish duet with Laurent-Jan (*Vautrin*), Balzac suddenly comes up with the idea for the play (which is actually the story Vidocq told him the night before in his study). He and Laurent-Jan set about writing the play together.

In the fourth act, we are backstage during the opening night of Balzac's play, which he has called *Vautrin*. Harel, the theater manager is thrilled that the audience seems to really love the play and he has already offered Balzac several advances on expected receipts. The assembled friends express their happiness in an ensemble (*C'est le grand soir*). As the next scene approaches, Harel brags about his great idea to put the character of King Louis-Phillipe in a wig shaped like a giant pear. When the wig is seen however, the theater erupts in pandemonium (Ensemble: *L'explosion du théâtre*). Suddenly the Duc d'Orléans arrives, announcing that because of the insult to his father Louis-Phillipe, the play is banned and the theater is to be closed (Duo/Aria: *Demain la pièce sera interdite*). Harel loses his senses entirely and begins to laugh insanely. What follows is essentially a curtain call set to music (*Défile et Tutti Final*). All the major characters are introduced in turn by another member of the ensemble and in the end they all decide to run away to escape the creditors.

### Duration

1 hour 30 minutes (composer's website)

### Orchestration

Flutes (2), oboe, Bb clarinet (2), bassoon, horns (2), trumpet, trombone, percussion, piano, violins (2), viola, cello, bass viol

### Score Availability

The conductor's Full Score (Voice and Orchestra) is available for purchase from the publisher Éditions Alphonse Leduc (formerly Notissimo).<sup>76</sup> A piano reduction has never been published.

### Roles

The composer's website lists the voice types needed for this opera, but does not assign them to particular roles. The score makes no mention of voice types. Voice Type assignments have been made from the composer's list based on the vocal ranges of each role and the author's discretion.

#### *Honoré de Balzac*

Voice Type: Lyric Baritone

Range: B2 – A4

Tessitura: C3 – E4

Description: Based on the 19<sup>th</sup> century French novelist, playwright and apparently incompetent businessman. At the time of this opera, he is 40 years old.<sup>77</sup> With either 440 or 471

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<sup>76</sup> Isabelle Aboulker, *Monsieur de Balzac fait son Théâtre: Opéra Comique* (Paris: Notissimo, 1999).

<sup>77</sup> "Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850)," Bibliothèque national de France (BnF), accessed September 27, 2014, [http://data.bnf.fr/11890041/honore\\_de\\_balzac/](http://data.bnf.fr/11890041/honore_de_balzac/).

sung measures (depending on whether Balzac sings or remains catatonic during the “*L’explosion du théâtre*” section), this is the largest role in the opera. There is also considerable spoken dialogue. The singer must have a fairly secure upper range to sing this role. In addition to several ensembles, Balzac has 2 arias in Act I (*Ananas à vendre* and *Le théâtre seul peut me tirer du trou*), 2 duets (*Grand duo* [Act II] with La Comtesse and *Vautrin* [Act III] with Laurent-Jan) and appears in most scenes, often singing with the ensemble of characters. The musical style ranges from speech-like in the ensembles to extremely lyrical in the duet with the Countess. Given the overall comedic bent of the opera, this should be a singing actor comfortable with comedy and with the charisma to carry a large portion of the show. The range of this role is on the high side for a baritone, and might also be approachable by a heavier tenor voice or a character tenor with a decent lower range. The size and importance of this role make it better suited to a more experienced singer.

### *Charles Lassailly*

Voice Type: Tenor

Range: D3 – B4

Tessitura: G3 – G4

Description: Based on the French romantic novelist who was briefly secretary to Balzac (as he is in this opera). At the time of this opera he is 33 years old.<sup>78</sup> He sings only 217 measures and has some spoken dialogue, making this one of the smaller roles in the opera. Most of his singing is within a larger ensemble, generally in unison, with brief instances of three or four part

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<sup>78</sup> “Charles Lassailly (1806-1843),” Bibliothèque national de France (BnF), accessed September 27, 2014, [http://data.bnf.fr/fr/12352027/charles\\_lassailly/](http://data.bnf.fr/fr/12352027/charles_lassailly/).

harmony. He has one brief aria (*Aïe! Aïe! Aïe!*) wherein he laments his failure to come up with a title for Balzac's play and then flees into the night. The character is a bit of a gourmand from his behavior at in the opening dinner scene. A tenor with a comfortable B4 should be able to take this short role on quite successfully. If needed, this role could be combined with the role of Buisson, requiring some sort of adjustment in the ending section. An easily distinguished costume piece that could be quickly put on and removed would allow the singer to represent each character in turn as they are announced in the finale, which is the only time the two characters appear together. Because of the range, a singer with more advanced technique is needed for this role.

### *George Sand*

Voice Type: Mezzo-soprano

Range: Ab3 – G5

Tessitura: F4 – F5

Description: Based on the infamous female novelist who wore men's clothing and engaged in a long-term affair with the pianist/composer Chopin (among many others). At the time of this opera she is 35 years old.<sup>79</sup> With 370 sung measures and some spoken dialogue, this is one of the larger roles in the opera. Sand often sings with a chorus of mostly men, where the music is quite speech-like. She has two brief solo sections which could be called arias, "*Le table de Balzac*" in Act I and "*Je me dois à Chopin*" in Act III. Sand is the top voice in male ensembles and the alto line in ensembles where the countess sings. Most of Sand's music is melodically

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<sup>79</sup> "George Sand (1804-1876)," Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), accessed September 27, 2014, [http://data.bnf.fr/fr/11923601/george\\_sand/](http://data.bnf.fr/fr/11923601/george_sand/).

simple and speech-like, though *“Je me dois à Chopin”* is much more lyrical. The range and tessitura are quite reasonable for a young mezzo-soprano. Though the role is performed in men’s clothing, there is no need for the singer to be convincingly male. George Sand wore men’s clothing for comfort and because its camouflage gave her access to venues ordinarily denied to women, not because she actually pretended to be a man.

### *Théophile Gautier*

Voice Type: Baritone

Range: E2 – G#4 (see note in description)

Tessitura: C3 – C4

Description: Based on the esteemed French poet, playwright, novelist, journalist and literary critic. At the time of this opera he is 28 years old.<sup>80</sup> With 361 sung measures and some spoken dialogue, this is one of the larger roles in the opera. Gautier sings in most of the ensembles as the highest baritone part when there is harmony. He has one aria *“L’informe seul est beau”* (Act III) in which he sarcastically praises Balzac for his ingenuity in coming up with a ‘new’ theatrical genre – a play with no story at all. Except for his aria, Gautier’s music is stepwise lines or arpeggiated chords with syllabic text setting and a medium tessitura. The aria presents some musical challenges. Because it is emotionally charged, the aria’s tessitura is a little wider than most of the role (both extremes of the range are used) and the music is somewhat chromatic with widely varying articulation. The highest note in this role which is to be sung full voice is an

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<sup>80</sup> “Théophile Gautier (1811-1872),” Bibliothèque national de France (BnF), accessed September 27, 2014, [http://data.bnf.fr/fr/11904435/theophile\\_gautier/](http://data.bnf.fr/fr/11904435/theophile_gautier/).

F4. The single G#4 is indicated in the score to be sung in falsetto. This role would be challenging but approachable for a young baritone, and would be best given to a more advanced singer.

*Léon Gozlan*

Voice Type: Tenor

Range: C3 – G4

Tessitura: G3 – G4

Description: Based on the prolific French Jewish novelist and playwright. At the time of this opera he is 36 years old.<sup>81</sup> With 357 sung measures and spoken dialogue this is one of the larger roles in the opera. This character has no arias or duets, but does have a few solo lines scattered throughout the work. He sings in most of the ensembles, many of which are in unison. When there is harmony, he sings either as the only tenor or in unison with Lassailly or Buisson if they are present. There are two brief splits within the tenor line in the ensembles, but there is no clear indication of which character should take which part. Because the range and tessitura are both rather limited and there is no extensive solo singing, this role would be ideal for a younger or less experienced tenor.

*Laurent-Jan*

Voice Type: Baritone

Range: G2 – E4

Tessitura: A2 – A3

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<sup>81</sup> "Léon Gozlan (1803-1866)," Bibliothèque national de France (BnF), accessed September 27, 2014, [http://data.bnf.fr/fr/11905626/leon\\_gozlan/](http://data.bnf.fr/fr/11905626/leon_gozlan/).

Description: Based on the 19<sup>th</sup> century writer and critic of art and literature. Laurent-Jan was a pseudonym for Alphonse-Jean Laurent. At the time of the opera he is 31 years old.<sup>82</sup> This is one of the larger roles, containing 315 sung measures and some spoken dialogue. Laurent-Jan sings as the middle baritone voice in large ensembles. Most of his music is in the rather speech-like ensembles. He has one duet with Balzac (*Vautrin*, Act III), which is not particularly lyrical, and no arias. The range and tessitura of this role make it easily accessible to a young baritone.

*Première Créancier (First Creditor)*

Voice Type: Tenor or Soprano

Range: G3-G4 (G4-G5)

Tessitura: C4 –G4 (C5- G5)

Description: With 35 sung measures and some brief spoken dialogue this is one of the smallest roles in the opera. This character appears in only one scene (*Duo des créanciers*) in Act I where he sings a duet with the second creditor. The role could be sung by a tenor or by a soprano as a pants role. Along with the duet partner, this character's goal is to find Balzac and get him to pay his debts. The aspect is more comedic than menacing and when faced with silence from Balzac and his guests, they give up quickly despite all their bluster. The music is patter-like and peppered with staccatos to indicate the aggressive nature of their demands. The limited range and tessitura as well as the brevity of the role make it ideal for a young, less experienced tenor or soprano.

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<sup>82</sup> "Laurent-Jan (1808-1877): pseudonyme individuel," Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), accessed September 27, 2014, <http://data.bnf.fr/fr/14651528/laurent-jan/>.

### *Deuxième Créancier (Second Creditor)*

Voice Type: Tenor or Soprano/Mezzo-Soprano

Range: F3 – F4 (F4 – F5)

Tessitura: Ab3 – E4 (Ab4 – E5)

Description: With 33 sung measures and some brief spoken dialogue this is the smallest role in the opera. This character appears in only one scene (*Duo des créanciers*) in Act I where he sings a duet with the first creditor. The role could be sung by a tenor or by a soprano/mezzo-soprano as a pants role. Along with the duet partner, this character's goal is to find Balzac and get him to pay his debts. The aspect is more comedic than menacing and when faced with silence from Balzac and his guests, they give up quickly despite all their bluster. The music is patter-like and peppered with staccatos to indicate the aggressive nature of their demands. The limited range and tessitura as well as the brevity of the role make it ideal for a young, less experienced tenor, soprano or mezzo-soprano.

### *Comtesse Sara Visconti*

Voice Type: Light Lyric/Coloratura Soprano

Range: C4 – C6

Tessitura: G4 – G5

Description: Based on the historical figure Countess Frances-Sarah Guidoboni-Visconti, an English woman of noble birth who married an Italian count. She was Balzac's mistress for many years and lent him money when he was in great need. At the time of the opera she is 35 years



old.<sup>83</sup> With 365 sung measures and some spoken dialogue, this is one of the larger roles in the opera. She has one love duet with Balzac in Act II (*Grand Duo*) and an aria in Act III (*Non, vous n'irez pas à Clichy*) where she saves Balzac from being taken off to debtor's prison by offering her jewels as payment for his debts. She also sings in many of the ensembles. While there is no extended coloratura in this role the voice must be agile with easy access to the C6 and be comfortable declaiming text toward the top of the treble staff. The tessitura is on the high side, but not extremely so with little call for the lower part of the voice. The range is fairly standard for a soprano. The countess's music is some of the most lyrical in the opera, though she too has moments of patter-like music, especially in the ensembles. The character seems quite sincere though the emotions she expresses are limited to love and concern for Balzac. There is no real need for fear even when she speaks of his being taken away to prison, since she knows from the outset she can buy him out of his debts. A more advanced soprano with an easy upper register should find this role approachable.

#### *Comte Visconti*

Voice Type: N/A (spoken role)

Range: N/A

Tessitura: N/A

Description: Based on the historical Milanese nobleman, husband of Comtesse Sarah Visconti. At the time of the opera he is 42 years old.<sup>84</sup> He appears in only one scene at the start

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<sup>83</sup> Charles Spoelberch de Lovenjoul, *Histoire des oeuvres de H. de Balzac*, 1888 (Reprint, Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1968), 496.

<sup>84</sup> This detail and age was determined using genealogical information derived from an individual's online family genealogy. The author was unable to further verify the information. "Emilio Guidoboni-Visconti," Geni, accessed September 30, 2014, <http://www.geni.com/people/Emilio-Guidoboni-Visconti/6000000017864341039>.

of the opera in which he has one spoken line. The Count and Countess arrive together at Balzac's home. The Count says that he has forgotten his flask and must return home to retrieve it. He never comes back, which is not surprising considering his wife is Balzac's mistress. The role is so brief it could easily be taken by one of the singers whose character appears later in the opera (Vidocq, Lemaitre, Buisson, Harel, Le Duc d'Orleans) or by the same actor who takes the spoken role of the officer who comes to arrest Balzac in the third act, so long as there is a costume change which makes it clear they are different men.

### *Henri Heine*

Voice Type: Baritone/Bass-Baritone

Range: E2 – G4

Tessitura: A2 – A3

Description: Based on the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century German poet Heinrich Heine. At the time of the opera he is 42 years old.<sup>85</sup> This role is a little smaller than most of the roles in the opera, with 297 sung measures and a little spoken dialogue. The score indicates that this role is to be performed with a fairly heavy German accent. This element could be confined to the brief German exclamations written into the role to eliminate the attempt to sing in French with a German accent which might prove daunting and counter-productive for a student still learning proper foreign language pronunciation. This role has a few brief solo lines, no arias or duets, and sings as the lowest voice when there is harmony in the ensembles. The music is typical of Aboulker's speech-like treatment of text. There is not much character definition in the score, so a student could use historical writings about the actual man to determine characterization. The

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<sup>85</sup> Michael Monahan, *Heinrich Heine: Romance and tragedy of the poet's life* (New York: N.L. Brown, 1924), 15.

range is wide, but the upper portion is rarely used, and when it is, it is in unison with others. If necessary, high-lying passages could easily be transposed down the octave. The role contains very little solo singing and the tessitura should be comfortable for any young baritone or bass-baritone.

### *Vidocq*

Voice Type: Baritone

Range: B2 – F4

Tessitura: D3 – C4

Description: Based on Eugène François Vidocq, the 18/19<sup>th</sup> century criminal turned private detective and founder of the French Sûreté National crime detection agency whose life story inspired many writers of the day. At the time of the opera he is 64 years old.<sup>86</sup> With only 66 sung measures and no spoken dialogue, this is one of the shortest roles in the opera. This character only sings in one scene in Act II when he visits Balzac's study and tells a story supposedly about his past which later inspires Balzac's new play. This story is told in an aria (*L'enfant trouvé*) before Vidocq disappears back into the night. The character does make a second appearance at the very end of the opera during the final roll call, but he does not stay to sing the final chorus. He is described as very mysterious and secretive, as befits a former criminal and private detective. The aria is lyrical with a lot of step-wise motion and few large leaps. Any young baritone should find this short role approachable, though of course it would be ideal to have an older singer for

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<sup>86</sup> Mike Ashley, "The Great Detectives: Vidocq," *Strand Magazine*, accessed September 28, 2014, <http://www.strandmag.com/vidocq.htm>.

the role since this character is the oldest in the opera by far. It could be a good learning opportunity for students to test out more extensive age make-up as well.

*Frédéric Lemaître*

Voice Type: Baritone

Range: Bb2 – A4

Tessitura: D3- E4

Description: Based on the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century actor of the same name. His age at the time of the opera is 39.<sup>87</sup> With 215 sung measures and some brief spoken dialogue, this is one of the medium-sized roles in the opera. All of his singing occurs in Act III, beginning with his self-agrandizing aria (*Le public m'adore*). Le Maître's aria is the longest solo section in the opera, consisting of 123 sung measures – more than half of the entire role. The character is presented as rather self-important and he is gravely offended when he is not well-received later on in the presentation of Balzac's play. The range is wide and though it occasionally dips rather low, the general tessitura is on the high side, with many high notes marked with fermatas. The aria, which contains most of the singing done by the character varies widely in articulation and style as he describes several of the famous characters he has portrayed in his career. The single high A4 is the penultimate note of the aria, written as a dotted half-note in three-four time with a fermata. Though it is not specifically marked, the ascending nature of the phrase and the dynamic level of the final chord of the aria both suggest a forte dynamic for the held high note. The ensemble sections are, like most of the opera, largely speech-like. The role is notated in the bass clef and from the breakdown on the composer's website we can gather it was intended for a baritone,

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<sup>87</sup> Louis-Henry Lecomte, *Frédérique Lemaître: étude biographique* (Paris: G. Towne, 1865. Pdf ebook.), 8.

but it might also be approachable for a tenor with a strong middle and low voice. Though the role is not long, it is rangy and has the longest exposed solo passage in the work. A confident, experienced singer with a secure high range is needed to approach this role.

### *Buisson*

Voice Type: Tenor

Range: F#3 – C5

Tessitura: D3 – E4

Description: Based on the historical figure Nicolas de Buisson, a famous tailor in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris who served as inspiration for several characters in Balzac's works.<sup>88</sup> The score indicates it was believed Buisson often accepted these literary tributes in lieu of payment from Balzac. The exact age of the character is unknown but it seems likely due to his well-established clientele that he is a man of middle age at the least. This is one of the smallest roles in the opera, with only 88 sung measures. In fact, Buisson only appears twice, the first time in his own shop where he sings nearly 2/3 of his role in the form of an aria (*Un habit fait par Buisson*). He is very proud of his work as a tailor, though much of the over-the-top self-promotion in his aria can be attributed to his being a good salesman. Buisson appears again in the final role call and sings in the final chorus. This role is quite short, mostly patter with some lyrical sections. It calls for both a B4 and a C5 marked with fermatas during the aria. There is no dynamic marking directly connected to either of these notes but there is no reason to assume they should not be sung full

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<sup>88</sup> Henri Forges de Montagnac, "Honoré de Balzac: Notes biographiques – Son séjour à Passy," *Bulletin de la Société historique d'Auteuil et de Passy*, 1er Trimestre (1898): 157.

voice unless that is not a possibility for the singer. Ideally this role should be sung by a higher-voiced tenor with a secure C5.

*Le recors (The Officer of the Law)*

Voice Type: N/A (spoken role)

Range: N/A

Tessitura: N/A

Description: This character appears only once in Act III when he attempts to arrest Balzac for unpaid debts. He is quickly satisfied and leaves immediately when the Countess offers her jewels in payment. As noted earlier, this spoken role could be combined with the role of the Count so long as sufficient costume change occurs to present him as a different character. This role could also be taken by one of the two creditors or by the singer of Lassailly, so long as the costume change was quick enough to allow him to appear again as Lassailly in the final chorus.

*Harel*

Voice Type: Baritone

Range: A2 – F4

Tessitura: D3 – E4

Description: Based on the 19<sup>th</sup> century theater director and playwright François-Antoine Harel (also known as Charles Jean Harel). His age at the time of the opera is 49.<sup>89</sup> This is one of the smaller roles in the opera consisting of either 119 or 144 sung measures, depending on whether the character is included in the ensemble "*C'est le grand soir.*" There is some indication

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<sup>89</sup> Théodore Eloi Lebreton, *Biographie normande: recueil de notices biographiques et bibliographiques sur les personnages célèbres nés en Normandie* ( Rouen: A. Le Brument Éditeur, 1858. Pdf ebook.), 228.

in the score that he might not be included, but it is not clearly marked. Harel is the director of the theater of Porte-Saint-Martin where Balzac's new play *Vautrin* is premiered. His emotions swing wildly from excitement that the show seems to be going over well to a full-on nervous break-down when the Duc d'Orléans arrives to ban the play and close the theater. There is one comparatively extensive section consisting of 43 measures sung by Harel. It is in part a brief duet with the duke and in part Harel's nervous breakdown afterwards. The music is largely speech-like with a few wide swings during the breakdown section. This role should be sung by a performer with good comedic sense, but is vocally not particularly challenging. Any young baritone with a clean upper register should find the music approachable. It might also be possible for this role to be sung by a character tenor with some minor adjustment to avoid the low A2 if necessary.

#### *Le Duc d'Orléans*

Voice Type: Tenor

Range: F3 – A4

Tessitura: G3 – F4

Description: This character is based on the 19<sup>th</sup> century French nobleman Ferdinand-Philippe d'Orléans, whose father Louis-Philippe was King of France from 1830 to 1848.<sup>90</sup> At the time of the opera he is 29 years old.<sup>91</sup> With only 36 sung measures and some very brief spoken dialogue, this is one of the smallest roles in the opera. The duke appears in only one brief scene, arriving during the play to express his outrage at the pear-shaped wig worn by the actor

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<sup>90</sup> Jerry Weiner, Mark Wilmer and George A. Hero, "The July Monarchy" in *Global History Volume 2: The Industrial Revolution to the Age of Globalization*, ed. Bonnie-Anne Briggs (New York: Barron's, 2007), 77-78.

<sup>91</sup> M.C. Mullié, *Biographie des célébrités militaires des armées de terre et de mer de 1789 à 1850*, Vol. 2 (Paris: Poignavant et Compie., Éditeurs, 1851. Pdf ebook.), 395.

portraying his father in the show. In a brief duet with Harel (*Demain la pièce sera interdite*) he proclaims that the show will be officially banned the next day and the theater closed because of the insult to the king. His music is strident and not particularly lyrical with much of it marked with accents over each note. None of his high notes are sustained, though the overall tessitura is somewhat high, reflecting the anger of the character. Due to the short length of this role and the choppy nature of the phrases there is no need for much legato or breath control. This role could be sung by almost any tenor since it is so brief and the high A4 is never sustained but always marked as more of a quick exclamation than a sung note.

#### Suitability for Full Production

This piece is perhaps the most demanding of the operas this analysis explores. It is Aboulker's longest opera, running an hour and a half in its entirety. In the world of opera this is not particularly long, which works to the advantage of young singers whose vocal and dramatic stamina might not be very developed. The score has only been published in a full-score conductor's format, so a performance with piano alone would require some adjustment by a talented pianist. The story is engaging and is actually based on real historical events,<sup>92</sup> which adds a bit of a history lesson to the process. Singers can research their characters easily since they are on the whole well-known figures of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Scenic concerns are minimal. There are four different settings which correspond to the four acts: The garden outside Balzac's home, Balzac's study, Buisson's shop and backstage at the theater of Porte-Saint-Martin. Specific scenery might include some sort of greenery to suggest the garden, a desk and chair for the study and perhaps some dress forms or mannequins to outfit Buisson's shop which could be re-purposed to help

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<sup>92</sup> John McCormick, *Popular Theaters of 19th Century France* (London: Routledge, 1993), 107-108.



decorate the back-stage area of the theater. There is quite an extensive cast with fifteen sung roles and two spoken roles with very limited possibility for one singer to take on multiple roles.

#### Suitability for Scenes Programs

Depending on the size of the program, this opera might be better suited to scenes programs than full productions. The score is divided into 21 numbers, three of them purely instrumental. It would be rather simple to extract a section from the larger opera using one or several of these numbered scenes. There is great variety to be found among the scenes. For example, the opening scene is quite amusing and would allow for a large number of participants, while the love duet between the Countess and Balzac requires only two singers and is more sentimental and intimate.

## CHAPTER 10

### *PETIT OPÉRA THÉRAPEUTIQUE* (LITTLE THERAPEUTIC OPERA)

#### Plot Synopsis

The unconventional libretto for this opera is drawn from the writings of an eighteenth century doctor, Félix Vicq d’Azyr, founder of the Royal Society of Medicine of Paris (1776). The text comes from a public placard which was posted on the walls of the city of Rouen in 1777, consisting of advice for the care of drowned, suffocated or hypothermic persons and infants who appear dead at birth.<sup>93</sup> It offers such sage advice as being sure not to hang the patient by their feet or roll them around in a barrel, and touts the benefits of pumping tobacco smoke into the patient by way of the rear end. The story line and comedy of the piece rely greatly on the staging as a showcase for some of the more ridiculous recommendations of the antiquated medical text. There are three sung roles, and though the score does not call for it, a supernumerary could easily be used to embody the patient.

#### Duration

22 min. (recording provided by publisher)

#### Orchestration

Piano only

#### Score Availability

The score is available for purchase both in PDF and hardcopy format from the publisher, Éditions Delatour.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Isabelle Aboulker, *Petit opera thérapeutique: Fantaisie Lyrique pour 3 chanteurs et piano* (Le Vallier: Éditions Delatour France, 2013), ii.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

## Roles

Voice types are listed in the score.

### *Le professeur (The professor)*

Voice Type: Baritone

Range: Bb2 – G4

Tessitura: E3 – E4

Description: This role consists of 268 sung measures and sections of spoken dialogue, including a long passage of rapid, rhythmically spoken text. The music is syllabic and speech-like with mostly stepwise motion and short phrases. There are occasional lyrical passages, but they are the exception. This role lies quite high and would be suitable for a young high baritone or a character tenor. The greatest challenge of this role lies not in its music, but in the speed with which the text must be delivered. A singer with a more advanced command of the French language and of pater technique is needed for this role.

### *L'infirmière chef (Chief Nurse)*

Voice Type: Light/Coloratura Soprano (See note in description)

Range: Bb3 – Bb5

Tessitura: G4 – G5

Description: This role is the shortest in the opera, with 265 sung measures and sections of spoken dialogue, including a long passage of rapid, rhythmically spoken text. The music ranges from speech-like to very lyrical with extensive use of staccato. As in the role of the professor, quick delivery of text is essential. In duet and ensemble passages, this role functions as the top of the chord. Most young light sopranos should find this role accessible. In the score this role is

indicated as simply “soprano” while the other female role is listed as “light soprano.” Study of the score clearly indicates these two designations should be reversed.

*L'infermière stagiaire (Nurse-in-training)*

Voice Type: Soprano (See note in description)

Range: F#3 – A#5

Tessitura: D4 – E5

Description: This role is the longest in the opera, with 315 sung measures and spoken dialogue including an extensive passage of rapid, rhythmically recited text. Speech-like passages alternate with slower lyric passages. The only aria-like section in the work is given to this character at the start of the section about reviving infants who seem dead at birth. This fragment is a single 15 measure melody made up of entirely stepwise motion with accompanying text, which is then repeated on a hum while spoken text is read over the music. There is a need for strength and comfort in the middle and lower registers as there are several extended passages of long lyric phrases with a tessitura of D4 – A4 while the other two voices sing short ornamental phrases both above and below. This voice serves as the bottom voice in duets with the other soprano and the middle voice in ensemble passages. Because of the low tessitura, a lyric soprano or mezzo-soprano should be equally capable of performing this role. In the score this role is indicated as “light soprano” while the other female role is listed simply as “soprano.” Study of the score clearly indicates these two designations should be reversed.

Suitability for Full Production

This work is brief, calls for only three voices, no chorus, and a piano and could easily be accomplished with very few scenic and prop requirements.

### Suitability for Scenes Programs

Because of the short length, the entire work could easily be included in an evening of scenes. This opera also divides fairly easily into three sections, separated by brief spoken dialogue. The harmonic structure of the work allows these sections to stand on their own without any alteration necessary.

## CHAPTER 11

### *LE PETIT POU CET (TOM THUMB)*

#### Plot Synopsis

This is a retelling of the classic Charles Perrault fairytale of the tiny boy Tom Thumb.<sup>95</sup> There are published versions of the score with librettos in French, English and German. Most of the story is told by the Narrator, with four characters given solo sung lines: the Father, the Mother, the Ogre's Wife and the Ogre. There are several lines that could be sung by Tom Thumb, since they are his words, but they are not directly assigned to the character and are instead sung by the narrator.

The story goes as follows: The mother and father of Tom Thumb and his regular sized siblings do not have enough money to continue to feed their children. Instead of watching them starve to death, the parents agree to take their sons out into the woods and lose them. Tom Thumb, being tiny and harder to spot, is hiding and listening when they decide this. He sneaks outside in the night and collects white stones which he uses to mark their path the next day when the parents take their children deep into the woods. Following the white stones, the brothers are able to find home again. They overhear their mother and father arguing about having left the children (Duet: *Duo des parents*). They burst into the cabin and announce their presence. Their mother is overjoyed to have them back, but overnight the father convinces her again that they should take the children into the woods and lose them a second time.

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<sup>95</sup> Charles Perrault, "Le Petit Poucet," in *Les Contes de Perrault* (Paris: J. Hetzel Libraire-Éditeur, 1867. Pdf ebook.), 4-12.

This time, they agree they will take the children much farther to be sure they cannot find their way back. Tom Thumb is listening this time too, but when he tries to sneak outside to gather more white stones he finds the door bolted shut. He decides that he will leave a trail of bread for them to follow home instead. He sneaks a hunk of bread from the kitchen and carries it with him the next morning.

When the parents have left their sons in the woods again, Tom Thumb tries to lead his siblings home but the trail of bread has been eaten by birds and they are lost. As night falls, Tom climbs to the top of a tree to look for anything useful as a landmark. He spots a light in the distance and he and his brothers go in search of the source. It turns out to be a cottage where a nice-looking woman answers the door. The brothers ask for a place to stay and a bit of food but she warns them away, saying this is the home of an ogre who eats little children. They persuade her to let them in for a little while, since her husband the Ogre is not home. She agrees, thinking it will be some time before her husband returns.

Suddenly the Ogre appears and the Ogre's wife hides the children under the bed. The Ogre, however, smells the children and threatens to eat them right away. The wife persuades him to let her fatten them up first so they will be tastier. Appeased for the moment, the Ogre indulges in his dinner of an entire goat and far too much wine. The wife tucks the boys into a bed and puts wool caps on their heads to keep them warm. In the next bed sleep her seven daughters, each with a crown of gold. Tom Thumb is afraid the Ogre will come in the night and kill them anyway so he waits until she is gone and switches the wool caps for the crowns.

The Ogre does indeed come in the night and in a drunken rage slits the throats of all the sleeping children wearing wool caps, thinking he is killing the human children. As soon as he is

gone, Tom and his brothers escape the house and run away as fast as they can. The next morning, the Ogre wakes and sees what he has done to his own children. Enraged, he puts on his magic boots, which allow him to travel several miles in a step, and goes after the escaped boys. The magic boots apparently take a lot of energy from the wearer and soon the Ogre is too tired to continue. He finally sits down to rest on the very rock behind which Tom and his brothers are hiding.

As soon as the Ogre is asleep and snoring, Tom steals his magic boots (which will fit anyone's feet perfectly) and goes back to the Ogre's house. He tells the Ogre's wife that her husband is being held captive by bandits and that they are demanding all his riches in return for his freedom. As evidence of how serious the situation really is, Tom shows her that the Ogre has even given him the magic boots so that Tom could get to her faster. The Ogre's wife loads Tom up with all the gold and jewels the ogre possesses and sends him back to save her husband. Tom's brothers are able to find their way back home using the white stones from the first day and Tom meets them there with the magic boots and all the Ogre's wealth.

The final scene shows the brothers rejoicing in Tom's great ideas, especially the idea of leaving the white stones to follow home. Just then, they hear the Ogre crashing through the trees toward their home. He has found his way there by following the white stones!

#### Duration

30 minutes (composer's website)

#### Orchestration

Flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoons (2), trumpet, horn, trombone, tuba, piano, xylophone, percussion, violins (2), viola, cello, bass; piano only



## Score Availability

The piano/vocal score is available for purchase in French,<sup>96</sup> German<sup>97</sup> and English<sup>98</sup> versions from the publisher, Éditions Alphonse Leduc (formerly Notissimo). There are 2 published Full Score orchestral versions (French only).<sup>99</sup> Both are available for purchase from the publisher, Éditions Alphonse Leduc (formerly Notissimo).

## Roles

Voice Types are not listed in the score and were determined using range and tessitura.

### *Le Grand (The Eldest)*

Voice Type: Baritone or Tenor

Range: B2 – Gb4

Tessitura: E3 – C4

Description: This role is very small with only 12 sung measures specifically assigned to him. The role could expand to include the 29 measure finale sung down an octave which would give the role a total of 41 sung measures. This character is meant to be the oldest in a chorus of children who sing as narrators throughout the opera. For the purposes of this analysis, this character is listed separately. In the opening scene he is part of the beginning narration and at the end he could join in the chorus of children bringing the story to its end. He and the other children could easily be portrayed as the children in the story, serving to pantomime the action

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<sup>96</sup> Isabelle Aboulker, *Le petit Poucet: Conte musicale d'après l'oeuvre de Charles Perrault* (Paris: Notissimo, 1998).

<sup>97</sup> Isabelle Aboulker, *Der Däumling: Ein musikalisches Märchen nach Charles Perrault*, trans. Volker Haller (Lyon: Notissimo, 2000).

<sup>98</sup> Isabelle Aboulker, *Little Thummie: Musical tale after Charles Perrault's work*, trans. Malcolm Walker (Paris: Notissimo, 2000).

<sup>99</sup> Isabelle Aboulker, *Le petit Poucet: Conte musicale d'après l'oeuvre de Charles Perrault*, première version orchestrale (Lyon: Notissimo, 2001) and Isabelle Aboulker, *Le petit Poucet: Conte musicale d'après l'oeuvre de Charles Perrault*, deuxième version orchestrale (Lyon: Notissimo, 2004).

while the narrator spins the tale. The voice type designation was determined by the use of the bass clef, but the role might also be sung by a tenor. There are no sustained high passages or long high notes. The single E4 and Gb4 notes occur in a passage describing how incredibly tiny Tom Thumb was. These notes could easily be sung falsetto if needed. At the lower end of the tessitura, the single B2 is a staccato eighth note which could easily be spoken by a tenor taking the role if the note proved too low. There is so little to sing that almost any young male voice could sing this role.

*Les petits (The Little Ones)*

Voice Type: Soprano/Mezzo-soprano

Range: E4 – E5

Tessitura: G4 – C5

Description: This group has only 45 sung measures directly attributed to it. Originally the chorus was to be made up of children and much of the narration was to be sung by this chorus. For the purposes of this analysis, I have limited the role of this chorus to sections specifically labeled for either “*les petits*” or “*tous les enfants*.” Because this was intended for children to sing, the range and tessitura are both limited, the text setting is syllabic, the melody and harmony are simple and the rhythms are very easy. These children could easily be used to act out the parts of Tom Thumb’s brothers in the drama, providing a pantomime of the action and perhaps taking a line or two from the narration as well. Any soprano or mezzo-soprano should find this music very approachable.

### *Le Récitant (The Narrator)*

Voice Type: Soprano/Mezzo-soprano

Range: C4 – F#5

Tessitura: F4 – E5

Description: This character does most of the singing and talking in the opera with 194 sung measures and 3 passages of rhythmically recited text as well as spoken lines. Originally designed as either a chorus of children or as a line to be sung by a soloist, this analysis treats it as a solo role. This character could be purely a narrator, or could also play the part of Tom Thumb in the action depending on the director's wishes. The music is largely stepwise, speech-like and melodically and harmonically simple with straight-forward rhythms. The range and tessitura are not too taxing and could be easily approached by either a soprano or a mezzo-soprano. A tenor could also sing this role, though the score specifically calls for a soprano if the role is to be sung by a soloist. This role could also be broken up among several singers over the course of the opera as it has no defined character beyond functioning as a narrator for the story.

### *La mère (The Mother)*

Voice Type: Soprano/Mezzo-soprano

Range: F4 - G5

Tessitura: G4 – E5

Description: This is a very small role, with only 32 sung measures. She is the mother of Tom Thumb and his brothers. Her only singing is done toward the beginning of the opera, where she laments the loss of her children in a duet with her husband after the first time they have led their children into the woods to lose them. She is either insincere or she is simply weak willed or

brow-beaten, because she is quickly convinced by her husband to take the children out and lose them again the very next day. Her music consists largely of sighing figures with both chromatic and arpeggiated motion, expressing her grief at the loss of her children. The length, range and tessitura of the role make it approachable for either a soprano or a mezzo-soprano.

*Le père (The Father)*

Voice Type: Baritone or Tenor

Range: C3- D4

Tessitura: E3 – B4

Description: This is a very short role, with only 19 sung measures. This is the father of Tom Thumb and his brothers, who convinces his wife not once but twice to take their children into the woods and lose them in order to avoid watching them starve to death. He is completely intolerant of his wife's sorrow over the loss of the children, even threatening to beat her if she does not stop whining about the boys. His music is full of repeated notes, stepwise motion, and simple rhythms and harmonies. This role was designated for baritone because of the use of bass clef but a tenor could easily sing this role as well.

*La femme de l'ogre (The Ogre's Wife)*

Voice Type: Soprano/Mezzo-soprano

Range: G4 – Gb5

Tessitura: A4 – E5

Description: This character has only 13 sung measures, making it one of the smallest roles. The wife of the Ogre takes pity on Tom Thumb and his brothers, offering them shelter and trying to protect them from being eaten by her husband. She has a good heart and does not want the

children to be harmed, even though we can assume she is an ogre herself. She appears again a little later in the story when she gives Tom Thumb all her husband's wealth supposedly to save him from bandits holding him for ransom. All her singing occurs in her first scene. While there are some leaps in her vocal line, over all her music follows the pattern of most of the opera in being stepwise melodically and rhythmically simple. Any female voice should be able to approach this role without trouble.

*Un enfant soliste (A Child Soloist)*

Voice Type: Soprano/Mezzo-soprano or Tenor

Range: C4 – F5 (C3 – F4)

Tessitura: Gb4 – Eb5

Description: This character has a brief solo passage of 25 measures. The solo describes how Tom Thumb convinced the Ogre's wife to let him and his brothers in, if only for a short time so they can warm up and perhaps have a bite to eat. Presumably drawn from the larger chorus of children, this could be sung by any female voice, or by a tenor voice down the octave.

*L'ogre (The Ogre)*

Voice Type: Baritone or Tenor

Range: B2 – Ab5

Tessitura: E3 – E4

Description: This character has only 65 sung measures, but in an opera full of tiny roles it is one of the larger parts. This is the evil ogre who tries to murder and eat Tom Thumb and his brothers but ends up killing his own children instead and losing his magic shoes and his fortune to Tom Thumb's clever trickery. The end of the opera suggests he may well have found his way

to Tom Thumb's home to take his revenge by way of the guiding white stones. The role is notated in the bass clef and the color of a baritone voice might best suit the role of an ogre. The range and tessitura are both quite high and there are several extended passages above the staff which might make this uncomfortable for a younger baritone. There is only one instance of the Ab5 and it is short, but the overall tessitura might be better suited to a tenor.

*Le chef d'orchestre (The Conductor)*

Voice Type: N/A (spoken role)

Range: N/A

Tessitura: N/A

Description: There is one brief section where the conductor is asked in the score to give a verbal count off to start the final scene of the opera. This could of course either be omitted or reassigned to the narrator or any other singer or supernumerary.

Suitability for Full Production

This entire opera runs only half an hour and requires limited scene changes and singers making it an easy option for a full production. Three settings are needed: Tom Thumb's cottage, the Ogre's house and a spot in the woods with a big rock for the ogre to sit on. The total number of singers can be as few as five soloists plus a chorus of children, who could of course be played by college students as well. The combination of the roles of La mère and La femme de l'ogre as well as Le père and L'ogre would be simple provided adequate costume changes were made.

Suitability for Scenes Programs

This entire opera is only thirty minutes long, and as such does not lend itself terribly well to being broken up and performed in a scenes program. It would be possible, but any scene pulled

out of the opera would either be an extended section including a large role for the narrator or an extremely short section such as the duet between the mother and father which lasts no more than a minute to a minute and a half. The entire opera could also be incorporated into an evening of scenes.

## CHAPTER 12

### *UN RENARD À L'OPÉRA* (A FOX AT THE OPERA)

#### Plot Synopsis

As the opera begins, Mark and Peter arrive at their friend Andrew's Oxfordshire cottage to celebrate his recent engagement. Andrew tells them almost immediately about a strange fox he found that morning. When they ask what is so strange about the fox, Andrew explains the story of how he found the fox in an aria (*La chasse au renard*). He describes the sound of a hunter's horn and the galloping of horses. The fox, running for its life, darted under his garden wall for safety, huddled at his feet crying and suddenly turned into a woman. Mark and Peter scold him for his ridiculous story and warn him not to say a word of it to his fiancée Peggy and Andrew's Aunt Flossie who have just arrived.

Flossie enters with Peggy and asks Andrew to take her hat and stole (which is of course a fox) and get her a drink. Andrew is so nervous taking the fox stole that he drops it and it slips under a nearby bush, causing Peggy to ask him what that matter is. Andrew begins to stammer about the fox and his friends Mark and Peter swoop in with boisterous congratulations about the engagement. Aunt Flossie is offended that Andrew seems more interested in staring at her fox stole than greeting his fiancée. Mark and Peter attempt to explain it away by reinforcing how very moved Andrew is by the whole event, which of course explains his strange behavior. Suddenly they are all very much shocked to see a young woman's leg sticking out from under the bush.

They help the young woman up and decide they must name her and civilize her. They decide Peggy is just the one to start the job and she is left alone with the young woman, formerly



a fox, who is now named Sylvie. Peggy has a lovely aria here (*Le rêve d'Andrew*) exploring Andrew's fantasy fox-woman and what it means to their relationship. She then wrangles the reluctant Sylvie into coming with her to take a bath. In the series of vignettes that follow Sylvie is taught to speak, dance and sing.

Peggy is heartbroken over Andrew's fascination with Sylvie, believing he no longer loves her. She confides in Peter, who asks her to leave the ungrateful Andrew and run away with him. Peggy declines, saying she still loves Andrew even if he is wrapped up in this strange woman Sylvie. There is a short wedding march during which Andrew and Sylvie are married. Aunt Flossie has a brief aria here (*Un toast contradictoire*) in which she bitterly and quite sarcastically wishes the couple well and laughs at the audience who will witness Sylvie's upcoming debut as an opera singer. Sylvie enters now, and sings her aria (*Quatre pattes qui trottent*) which leads into a brief duet section for Mark and Sylvie about art, music and liberty.

Suddenly Sylvie disappears and Andrew leans down to retrieve Aunt Flossie's fox stole from underneath the bush. As if waking from a strange dream, Andrew and Peggy reconcile and everyone sings happily about their engagement. The celebration is interrupted unexpectedly by Peggy's cry of surprise. She hears hunting horns, the clatter of horses' hooves and barking dogs. It is a fox hunt, just like the one Andrew described at the start of the opera. Andrew hurries to climb a nearby tree to see over the garden wall...

#### Duration

90 minutes (composer's website)

#### Orchestration

Flute, oboe, 2 clarinets in Bb, bassoon, piano; piano only

## Score Availability

Instrumental parts<sup>100</sup> and piano/vocal score<sup>101</sup> are available for purchase from the publisher, Éditions Alphonse Leduc (formerly Notissimo).

## Roles

The composer's website lists the voice types needed for this opera, but does not assign them to particular roles. The score makes no mention of voice types. Voice Type assignments have been made from the composer's list based on the vocal ranges of each role and the author's discretion.

### *Andrew Higgeldy*

Voice Type: Lyric Baritone

Range: E2 – A4

Tessitura: E3 - E4

Description: The role of Andrew is the longest in this opera, with 201 sung measures and brief spoken passages. Though it contains both lyric and speech-like passages it is essentially syllabic and only briefly explores the extremes of the listed range. The high A4 only occurs once, and it is marked piano, allowing the use of falsetto if necessary. The lowest written note is an E2 which is marked staccato. The second lowest note in the role is a G2, which is doubled by another character, and thus requires no great vocal strength. The role includes one aria, "*La chasse au renard*," in which Andrew details his meeting with the fox/Sylvie.

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<sup>100</sup> Isabelle Aboulker, *Un Renard à l'Opéra*, partition d'orchestre (Lyon: Notissimo, 2004).

<sup>101</sup> Isabelle Aboulker, *Un Renard à l'Opéra* (Paris: Notissimo, 2004).

## *Mark*

Voice Type: Bass/Bass-Baritone

Range: G2 – D4

Tessitura: A2 - A3

Description: Mark is the third largest role, after Andrew and Peggy, with 159 sung measures and brief spoken passages. In the libretto, Andrew calls Mark a musician and he is the character who conducts Sylvie's singing lesson. He has one brief aria toward the very end of the opera, "*Mes bons amis, buvons,*" celebrating anew the engagement of Andrew and Peggy. As with most of the music, his text is mainly syllabically set with a few lyrical moments, few large leaps and primarily stepwise or arpeggiated motion. Because the lower end of the range is fairly limited and the higher end is rarely used, a young bass or bass-baritone should be able to approach this role with little difficulty.

## *Peter*

Voice Type: Lyric Tenor

Range: Db3 – C5

Tessitura: G3 – G4

Description: Peter's role consists of 148 sung measures and spoken dialogue. The only smaller role is that of Sylvie. In the libretto, Andrew calls Peter a poet. Peter has no real aria, but his romantic duet with Peggy contains extended lyric passages. While including some of the speech-like style that characterizes Aboulker's works, Peter's music is on the whole more lyrical, with longer phrases and more sweeping lines. The tessitura is fairly high, and the singer must have a secure high A4 and B4. The high C5 is only sung twice and is marked piano both times.

This either requires a high level of technical development, or the judicious use of falsetto. In the context of this role, either should suffice.

*Tante Flossie (Aunt Flossie)*

Voice Type: Mezzo-soprano/lyric soprano

Range: Db4 – A5

Tessitura: F4-F5

Description: Containing 153 sung measures and spoken dialogue, this role is basically equivalent in length to the roles of Mark and Peter. Flossie is Andrew's aunt and the Godmother of his fiancée Peggy. Her text is syllabically set and her music is largely speech-like with very few longer phrases. The extremes of the range are rarely used, and the higher notes are all short and/or staccato. The list on the composer's website includes a mezzo-soprano role in this opera, and this is the only role which could fit into that category. Because of the limited range and medium tessitura, it could also easily be sung by a soprano. Flossie has one short aria, "*Un toast contradictoire*," in which she sarcastically celebrates the wedding of Andrew and the mysterious fox-woman Sylvie.

*Peggy*

Voice Type: Light/Coloratura Soprano

Range: C4 – E6 (See option in description)

Tessitura: G4 – A5

Description: This role includes 175 sung measures and some brief spoken passages, making it the second longest role after Andrew. Peggy is Andrew's fiancée, and perhaps the only character in the opera who really has any melancholy emotions. Her sadness is, however, rather

resigned and not at all desperate. The written role includes extensive use of the upper range. Selective octave displacement could fairly easily lower the top of the role to a C6, if a soprano with a secure E6 was not available. Even with those minor changes, however, the singer must have a free upper register and be comfortable with extended high-lying passages. The music is more lyrical than the average for this work, especially when it uses the upper register. Some use of staccato is called for and this role includes the largest leaps and the largest ranges within single phrases by far of any of the characters. Peggy has one aria, "*Le reve d'Andrew*," in which she explores the idea of the fox-woman Sylvie as the embodiment of Andrew's dreams of liberty. A more technically advanced singer is advised for this role.

### *Sylvie*

Voice Type: Soprano/Light Soprano

Range: C4 – C6

Tessitura: G4-G5

Description: The mysterious fox-woman Sylvie has the shortest role in the opera with 126 sung measures and no spoken dialogue. Her music is lyrical, largely speech-like (when there is text), and uses the upper portion of the range more often than the lower. A singer must have a secure high C6, though it is not used extensively. There is a scene in which Sylvie is being given a voice lesson consisting entirely of vocalizes on "Ah" which is aria-like except for brief two and three note interjections by Mark who is teaching. In addition, Sylvie has a brief aria-like section toward the end of the opera, "*Quatre pattes qui trottent*," in which she connects the ideas of nature, poetry, liberty and dreams just before vanishing entirely.

### Suitability for Full Production

The opera's brief duration makes it manageable for a full production with young singers. The piano/vocal score is easily available and provides a simpler and more economical option by eliminating the need to rent instrumental parts and find suitable instrumentalists. The story is light and fairy-tale like, offering many opportunities for humor and little dramatic challenge. There is no chorus, and the ensemble sections are simple both rhythmically and harmonically. A unit set should be easily adaptable to the two basic settings – the garden and the music room.

### Suitability for Scenes Programs

The score itself is pre-divided into seventeen scenes which are each quite brief. Some of these stand better on their own than others, but with explanation, a single scene or a group of scenes from this work could easily be included in an opera scenes program.

## CHAPTER 13

### *LES SURPRISES DE L'ENFER* (THE SURPRISES OF HELL)

#### Plot synopsis

Above all this is a comedy – a satire about society's morals and the idea that one can be damned forever. The opera opens in Hell with Méphisto (Satan) as our main protagonist. He has decided that he is done with being evil and mean and that from now on he will be kind, gentle and good. Immediately after he has expressed this sentiment in an aria-like opening section (*Pas besoin de faire un annonce*) a new soul arrives looking for the way to Hell and Satan. La Damnée explains in an introductory aria (*J'étais un démon lubrique*) that she has been more than bad, having murdered both her husband and her lover and thrown them in the Seine river. She declares herself in love with Satan and asks where she can find him and why he is hiding from her. Méphisto tries to tell her he is the one she is looking for but she won't believe him because he looks too nice. They argue in a duet (*Méphisto, Vous! C'est impossible.*) wherein she berates him for being nice, polite and not at all violent. She is quite disappointed, in fact and she insists that he let her pass so she can find Hell and the real Satan. Méphisto takes a moment to regret what he might have enjoyed with her if he were still being his old self, but recommits quickly to his new path of kindness and goodness.

Next La Féministe Athée (Atheist Feminist) arrives, quite shocked to find there is another inhabitant of the nothingness she expected after death. When Méphisto tries to be gracious to her she reacts very badly, accusing him of trying to seduce her and threatening him with violence if he continues. She explains in an aria (*Taisez-vous*) that she committed suicide by overdosing on heroin and expresses how happy she is to be free of her former human life and in the eternal

nothingness. Méphisto politely informs her that she is not in nothingness, but in fact on her way to Hell where she will burn because that is the fate of all suicides. He offers her the possibility of redemption if she will only choose goodness now. She turns him down flat, insisting that she hates all men and will not listen to one try to tell her what to do. She insists on going to Hell. When he tells her he is Satan she exclaims that if he is Satan then she is the Virgin Mary and then mutters under her breath as she leaves about the megalomaniacal fool who thinks he's Satan.

When she is gone, Méphisto launches into a prayer, pledging his loyalty to God and promising to be good and true for all eternity in a brief aria (*Ah! Prendrai'j'un jour*). Suddenly an angel appears (*La Séraphine*) and begins to sing. The two sing together for quite a while without interacting before they begin to sing to each other in a love duet. Having grown tired of all the celestial flowers, she is searching for St. John's Wart, a plant that does not grow in Heaven. Méphisto is entranced by her beauty and goodness. When she despairs of finding the plant she seeks she begins to sob and Méphisto does his best to comfort her. She asks him why he does not live in Heaven, since he is so good and kind and handsome. She promises to speak to St. Peter for him and says it will be as easy as anything to get him in. They decide they are in love and they plan to marry and spend their eternity in Heaven together. She leaves to speak on his behalf and he is left elated, convinced that love has transformed him back into the angel he once was.

The two women who went by him into Hell earlier re-approach him, still looking for Satan. This time, however, he is so transfigured by his love that they recognize him immediately as the most beautiful fallen angel. *La Damnée* and *La Féministe Athée* say they too have been transformed by love, singing a lovely duet (*Nuit et jour*) about how they have found eternal happiness even in Hell in loving each other. Méphisto, convinced now that love is the salvation



of all, tells them they can accompany him to Heaven to live out eternity in love. When he tries to lead them upward, however, he doubles over in pain, unable to move at all. He realizes there is no way he can go to Heaven because his sin was too great.

The two damned women vow to be happy together forever even if they have to stay in Hell (Duet: *Dehors, Prêtresses de Lesbos*). Méphisto comes to the conclusion that he was made for being evil. Séraphine returns with the sad news that she is not allowed to marry – only the love of God is permitted to her. The three women and Méphisto then sing a final quartet (*C'est très dommage*), each resigning themselves to their fates and declaring a moral to the story: One must abandon oneself to the fate to which one was born.

#### Duration

45 minutes (score), 35 minutes (composer's website)

#### Orchestration

Flute, Bb clarinet, trombone, piano and percussion; piano only

#### Score Availability

The piano/vocal reduction is available for sale from the publisher, Éditions Billaudot.<sup>102</sup> Though the composer's website mentions an instrumental ensemble, neither an orchestral version nor instrumental parts are available in the publisher's catalogue.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Isabelle Aboulker, *Les surprises de l'enfer: Réduction pour voix et piano* (Paris: Gérard Billaudot, 2006).

<sup>103</sup> "Catalogue," Gérard Billaudot, accessed October 1, 2014, <http://www.billaudot.com/fr/catalog.php#haut>.

## Roles

The composer's website lists voice types for this piece but does not assign them to roles.

Voice Type determination was made using the composer's indications and the range and tessitura of each role.

### *Méphisto*

Voice Type: Baritone

Range: A2 – A5

Tessitura: E3 – F#4

Description: This is by far the largest role in the opera with 514 sung measures and some scattered, brief spoken dialogue. This poor character is Satan himself, but he really wants to stop being bad and live happily ever after with his Séraphine. Unfortunately, his fate is sealed. Though this role sits on the high side, the composer's website calls for a baritone and the nature of the character would seem congruent with that voice type. This is a challenging role, best given to a more experienced singer. The single A5 is marked pianissimo and could easily be sung in falsetto but the singer must have a solid F# as this note is used repeatedly. The music for this character is extremely diverse including many styles, articulations, dynamics and harmonic colors. There are lyrical moments and speech-like moments, step-wise melodic passages and large arching arpeggiations and leaps as well. This role is best reserved for a graduate student or perhaps an advanced senior. In addition to surmounting the vocal challenges, this singer must be charismatic enough to carry the bulk of the story while maintaining the good humor and high energy that will allow the comedy to read to the audience.

*La Damnée (The Damned Woman)*

Voice Type: Lyric Soprano

Range: G3 – B5

Tessitura: F4 – F5

Description: This character sings 255 measures, making it the distant second largest role in the opera. This character has a variety of articulations and styles to portray. Her music reflects her different moods, from eager to angry to very much in love utilizing a wide variety of musical gestures. She does have what could be called an aria (*J'étais un démon lubrique*) when she introduces herself to us for the first time. She also shares some duet moments with La Féministe Athée as the top voice and sings in a trio and in the final quartet as the middle female voice. This character has lived her life breaking all the rules and arrives in Hell eager to meet Satan and continue her bad girl ways. She softens when she falls in love with the La Féministe Athée who arrives in Hell shortly after her. All this must still be taken in the way it was intended – as a satire and a comedy. This role has a wide range, but a reasonable tessitura. The extremes of the range are rarely approached (both the G3 and the B5 occur only once) and the length of the role makes it more approachable. This role would be best suited to an upperclassman or a graduate student.

*La Féministe Athée (The Feminist Atheist)*

Voice Type: Mezzo-soprano

Range: Bb3 – A5

Tessitura: D4 – E5

Description: This is the smallest role in the opera with 217 sung measures. This character hates men and thinks there is no afterlife until she comes smack up against it. She refuses to be

told anything by Méphisto and finds a kindred spirit and a lover in her fellow newcomer La Damnée. This is another strong female character, but it should be remembered that the comedy is served by her embodying what could be considered a stereotype. There is a reason these characters are given labels and not names. Musically this role has lyrical sections as well as speech-like passages with expressive variations in articulation and dynamic. The tessitura is wide but not too high for a younger mezzo-soprano. The extremes of the range are rarely approached and the overall length of the role makes it manageable.

*La Séraphine (The Seraph)*

Voice Type: Light/Coloratura Soprano

Range: D4 – D6

Tessitura: G4 – G5

Description: This is the second to smallest role in the opera with 218 sung measures. Séraphine is an angel who has strayed close to Hell in an innocent and oblivious search for the plant St. John's Wort. When she comes upon Méphisto they fall in love instantly and she vows to speak to St. Peter about letting Méphisto into Heaven so they can marry and live happily ever after. It seems, however, that she is just as trapped by her fate as the others. She finds out she is forbidden ever to marry and that Méphisto can never return to Heaven. This is a role for a soprano with a secure top and a flexible voice capable of executing rapid high-lying coloratura passages. This character has several vocalize-like passages of coloratura that decorate her otherwise sweeping melodic lines. Her music reflects the beauty of her spirit and the naiveté of her love for the doomed Méphisto. She is described in the score as behaving in a little too naïve a manner. Again, this is a stereotype supporting the comedy and the social critique that this piece

provides. A young coloratura soprano should be able to execute this role without too much difficulty because it is fairly brief and does not contain excessive fioritura. The character has only simple feelings of sadness, love and resignation to express.

#### Suitability for Full Production

With a running time of 35-45 minutes, this opera is a manageable length for full production. There are only four characters and there is only one setting called for: the entrance to Hell. It would support the plot if Séraphine had a few prop flowers gathered in a basket, but even that could be mimed in the absence of resources. This is arguably Aboulker's most controversial work, as it includes themes of Hell, damnation, drug use, suicide, murder and lesbianism. If we examine standard operatic repertoire in detail however, this opera begins to look rather tame. The subject matter might dissuade some programs, but it is all meant in the spirit of comedy and social commentary.

#### Suitability for Scenes Programs

This opera is so short it could easily be included in an evening of scenes. There are some short scenes that could be drawn out, such as the final quartet, but careful attention must be paid to giving the audience context or the humor could be lost.

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