

André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry - L'épreuve villageoise (2015)

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1. Act I: Ouverture 2. Act I Scene 1: Couplet I: J' n'avions pas encore quatorze ans - Couplet II: Vous n'savez pas qu'il est jaloux (Denise) 3. Act I Scene 2: Duo: Bonjour Monsieur (Madame Hubert, La France) 4. Act I Scene 3: Duo: J'ai fait un bouquet (André, Denise) 5. Act I Scene 4: Ariette: J' commence à voir que dans la vie (Denise) 6. Act I Scene 6: Finale: André, tu me l'payras j'en jure - Scene 7: Eh bien Denise, mon billet - Scene 8: Ah venez ma mère et soyez juge (Denise, André, La France, Madame Hubert, Chorus) 7. Entr'acte 8. Act II Scene 1: Couplet I: Bon Dieu com 'à c'te fête - Couplet II: Queu danseux que c'monsieur d'la France - Couplet III: J'peux choisir au moins parmi douze (Denise) 9. Act II Scene 3: Ariette: Adieu, Marton, adieu, Lisette (La France, Denise) 10. Act II Scene 4: Trio: Je vous revois (La France, Denise, André) 11. Act II Scene 5: Duo: Viens mon André (Denise, André) 12. Act II Scene 6: Finale: Allons tous rendre hommage (La France, Chorus, Denise, André, Madame Hubert) 13. Act II Scene 6: Ballet: Allegretto 14. Act II Scene 6: Ballet 15. Act II Scene 6: Contredanse
Denise – Sophie Junker Madame Hubert – Talise Trevigne La France – Thomas Dolié André – Francisco Fernandez-Rueda Opera Lafayette Conductor – Ryan Brown Rec.: Dekelbourn Hall, The Clarice, University of Maryland, USA, 25-26.I.2015.

L'épreuve villageoise was the only collaboration of André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry (1741–1813), leading composer of eighteenth-century opéra comique, and Pierre-Jean-Baptiste Choudard (1746–1806; known as Desforges), a Parisian-born actor and dramatist. The pair likely met through their mutual association with the Comédie Italienne, the theatrical company which produced the majority of Grétry's works and at which both Desforges and his wife were sporadically employed. (Madame Desforges would go on to play the wealthy fermière Madame Hubert during the opening run of the comic opera.)

L'épreuve villageoise was first performed under an alternate title (Théodore et Paulin) and in markedly different form—in three acts rather than two, and with a larger and more socially diverse cast. The opéra comique received only mixed reviews when it premiered before the French court at Versailles in March of 1784. The esteemed audience—which included Queen

Marie Antoinette—appeared utterly indifferent to the principal plotline featuring noble characters, all the while delighting in the intrigues of rustic secondary figures. As the critic of the *Mercure de France*, a leading literary gazette, described it, the comic relief had completely overshadowed the main thrust of the drama (“l’accessoire a écrasé le principal”). In response, Grétry and his librettist undertook a drastic revision of their work, excising much of the serious material from the original and elevating the lighter-weight subplot into primary action. The result is a crisp and lively farce, centring on the clever farmer’s daughter Denise and her two competing suitors—the ambitious valet La France and the jealous, if otherwise well-intentioned, André. In this altered form, *L’épreuve villageoise* was promptly returned to the stage, appearing at the Comédie Italienne from June of 1784 onwards, and warmly embraced by Parisian audiences and critics alike.

The reworking of *Théodore et Paulin* into *L’épreuve villageoise*—and the elevation of the rustic topos inherent in this process—attests to the vivid appeal of *paysannerie* in the music, art, and literature of the late ancien régime. Grétry’s *opéra comique* is one of numerous contemporaneous examples of the genre engaging with a Rousseau-inspired validation of natural simplicity and the moral superiority of country life. It is hardly coincidental that the height of the work’s success at the French court corresponded with the construction of Marie Antoinette’s “hamlet” at the Petit Trianon, a pseudo-Norman village replete with a mill, a “pleasure” dairy, and a fully functioning farm. While the peasant Denise does not possess a formal education (when she receives a love letter from La France, for example, it is clear that she is unable to read it), she is nonetheless able to outwit her worldlier would-be suitor; in this case, common sense and country gumption prevail over the pretensions of the aspiring beau monde. And, throughout, La France is made an object of gentle ridicule for his insistence on the pleasures of the urban sphere. He adores fashionable theatre, concerts, and the brilliant splendours of court—which the villagers insist must pale in comparison to their own analogous entertainments: the beauty of nature, the warbling of birds, and the rising of the sun, respectively. Though, of course, there is a fair measure of irony here, given the dramatic medium through which this moral is communicated and the Parisian and courtly audiences to which it was originally addressed.

L’épreuve villageoise was one of Grétry’s most popular works, maintaining a presence on Parisian stages for more than a century after its première. In addition to hundreds of performances in the French capital, the opera was extensively disseminated elsewhere in Europe and in the New World, with documented productions in Amsterdam, Bern, Brussels, Cologne, Moscow, St Petersburg, New York, Cap Français, and Port-au-Prince, to name just a few. The extraordinary reach of *L’épreuve villageoise* is indicative of the international success attained by *opéra comique*, more broadly, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Over and above the more prestigious *tragédie lyrique*, comic opera came to define French music outside of France because it was readily transportable—generally modest in scale and economically efficient to reproduce. Moreover, because it contained spoken dialogue rather than recitative, the genre was relatively straightforward to translate, further contributing to its

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exportability. Indeed, L'épreuve villageoise was eventually published in both Dutch and German in addition to the original French. Opéra comique had from its very start been defined by a spirit of adaptability, even beyond the professional stage. The greatest musical “hits” of L'épreuve villageoise were spun off in low-cost commercial prints, made widely available in chamber music arrangements for domestic use. And in his memoirs, Grétry himself suggested changes to the opera that an amateur troupe might make to render it easier to perform. Despite its fashionable status at the Bourbon court, then, this was a work—and an art form—tailored for flexibility, accessibility, and broad popular appeal.

Opera Lafayette's production of L'épreuve villageoise draws upon this rich history of adaptation and cultural transfer, situating Grétry's comedy on the outskirts of the operatic capital of the antebellum United States: New Orleans. New Orleans was the first city in North America to host a permanent opera troupe. And by the opening decade of the nineteenth century, remarkably, it boasted not one but two lyric companies to serve its population of roughly 12,000 residents, the competing theatres of the Rue St Philippe and the Rue St Pierre. Opéra comique, in general, and the compositions of Grétry, in particular, dominated the repertoires of these rival institutions during this period. Grétry's Silvain is the first opera known to have been presented in the city (at the St Pierre in 1796); and in the next fifteen years New Orleans would be treated to a further 79 performances of twelve different works from his oeuvre. It is only fitting that Opera Lafayette—an American company at the vanguard of the modern revival of French comic opera—should return L'épreuve villageoise to this site of its first “homegrown” efflorescence.

---Julia Doe, naxos.com

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