

François-Adrien  
Boieldieu and the  
Romantic *Opéra-  
Comique*



# François-Adrien Boieldieu and the Romantic *Opéra- Comique*

By

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and Nicholas Lester Fuller

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Boieldieu. Lithograph by Auguste Lemonnier after Henri-François Riesener.

*Do you regret the time when our old romances  
Spread their golden wings towards their enchanted world?*

The year 1825 is forever memorable in the history of French music.  
The appearance of *La Dame blanche* was a national event. Never  
did a work of art arouse such vivid emotions.  
Romanticism was born, and *La Dame blanche* is the first opéra-  
comique it completely inspired.  
(Camille Bellaigue)

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## INTRODUCTION

Although not entirely forgotten, François-Adrien Boieldieu (1775-1834) has been, until comparatively recently, a much neglected composer. A renewal of interest began with the publication some 70 years ago of a comprehensive study of his life and works by George Favre (*Boieldieu*, in two volumes, 1944-1945). There are still few opportunities to hear Boieldieu's music; a revival of *La Dame blanche* or *Les Voitures versées* is a rare event. The record industry, with its great potential in reaching a very large public, could help to put the proper light on this composer who was admired by such eminent figures as Weber, Wagner, Schumann, Berlioz, and later Chabrier and Debussy.

In the course of his lifetime (1755-1834), Boieldieu saw a complete revolution in musical taste. In his youth, the Ancien Régime was still dominant. His first lyric work, produced in Rouen (his birthplace) in 1793, belonged, as its title *La Fille coupable* suggests, to the *comédie larmoyante* type of sentimental drama first made popular by Nivelle de la Chaussée. Technically it is related to the *opéras-comiques* of Monsigny, Dalayrac and Grétry.

*La Famille suisse*, a sombre drama in much the same vein, was Boieldieu's first opera outside Rouen. It was produced in Paris in 1797 with such success that the composer wrote more of the same kind—*Zoraïme et Zulnar*, *La Dot de Suzette* and *Beniowski* (1800). For all these pieces the designation 'opéra-comique' would seem highly inappropriate, but in any event they were successful, as Boieldieu had a sense of theatre and a marked gift of expression.

Boieldieu's temperament, however, inclined him more towards *opéra-comique* in its literal sense. It is liberal enough to admit a serious plot lightened by amusing episodes, as well as the unalloyed comedy which later became known as operetta. It also inclined him towards works of less definite character—fantasies for example, as, for instance, the very entertaining *Le Calife de Bagdad*, a kind of fairy tale adapted from the *Thousand and One Nights*. This brought Boieldieu his first decisive success in 1800. From account books found among the composer's papers

by George Favre, it seems that the *Calife* was performed 175 times in Paris between 1802 and 1812.

Boieldieu's second success, a triumphant one if the contemporary biographer Quatremère de Quincy is to be believed, was *Ma Tante Aurore*. The triumph was not immediate, however. The audience at the première (Opéra-Comique, 13 January 1803) may even have had the impression that it was a failure. The German composer J. F. Reichardt, who was present at this remarkable performance, tells in a letter of his arrival at the theatre where, as the auditorium was full, he went to stand in the wings. "I warned the actors that they would have to deal with a cabal. I had heard at dinner that it had been decided in the coffee houses to hiss the piece."

Reichardt goes on to describe the riotous audience, and tells how the friends of the composer who were in the majority, managed somehow to allow the first two acts to be heard (the original version had three acts). By the third act, however, the uproar had grown to such proportions that Reichardt was able to walk out onto the stage with his friends "to observe the tumult" unnoticed by the audience. The actors did not lose their heads; they held out, and succeeded in singing the finale in spite of all the shouts and hisses. After this, in just two days, Boieldieu and his librettist, Charles Longchamps, made a thorough revision of their work, reducing it to two acts, and changing the ending. At the close of the performance on 15 January, the composer was called onto the stage to receive an ovation from the audience.

In June of that same year 1803, Boieldieu went to St. Petersburg to become conductor of the Imperial Opera. He remained in Russia until 1811, and during this time produced nine operas, among them *Aline, reine de Golconde*, and *Les Voitures versées* (The Overturned Carriages). On his return to Paris, his last Russian work, *Rien de trop, ou les Deux Paravents* (Nothing Excessive, or The Two Screens) was successfully performed. Soon afterwards (1812) came *Jean de Paris*. With this work Boieldieu regained his former public, which, with few exceptions, remained faithful to him until the end of his career.

The crowning event of his final years was the production on 10 December 1825 of *La Dame blanche*. This opera represents the culmination of his life's work, both for the quality of the writing, and the spontaneous enthusiasm with which it was received. It is the last but one of his 38 signed scores (his contribution to *La Marquise de Brinvilliers* consisted of a single ballad), and constitutes the sum of his experience gained in 30

years of lyric production. During the years he had in Russia and in Paris he become thoroughly acquainted with the new Italian opera. He had modernized his harmony, and enriched his understanding of the orchestra. Essentially however, he had not changed, and even in as early a work as *Ma Tante Aurore* it is not difficult to trace all the features of his admirable musical personality.

## THE LIFE OF BOIELDIEU

François-Adrien Boieldieu (b. Rouen, 16 December 1775; d. Jarcy, near Grosbois, 8 October 1834). His father Jean-François-Adrien was a functionary who at one time serves as secretary to Archbishop Larochevoucauld; his mother owned a millinery shop. The family was fairly prosperous until the Revolution. The parents were divorced in 1794. Through his father's association with the Cathedral, young Boieldieu received excellent instruction from Charles Broche, organist and pupil of Padre Martini. Stories of Broche's brutality and of Boieldieu's flight to Paris are not supported by any evidence.

At the age of 15 Boieldieu became assistant organist to Broche at the Church of St André in Rouen. He began to compose piano pieces and songs. He was only 17 when his first opera *La Fille coupable* (to his father's libretto) was successfully produced at the Théâtre des Arts in Rouen (2 November 1793). The boy adapted himself to the revolutionary conditions, and composed patriotic works which were then in demand. His *Chant populaire pour la fête de la Raison* for chorus and orchestra was presented at the Temple of Reason (formerly the Cathedral) in Rouen on 30 November 1793. His second opera *Rosalie et Myrza* (also Boieldieu père) was produced in Rouen on 28 October 1795.

In August 1796 Boieldieu set out for Paris where he was befriended by the composer Louis Jadin, and after working as a piano-tuner, was accepted in the salon of the piano manufacturer Erard. He now met Cherubini and Méhul. With the tenor Garat he made a tour of Normandy, revisiting Rouen. The material success of this tour was so satisfactory that Boieldieu was able to pay off all his debts. In Paris he found a publisher who printed some of his songs (e.g. 'Le Ménestrel', 'Si' est il vrai que d'être doux') and piano sonatas (a complete edition of these sonatas was republished by G. Favre in 2 albums in 1944-45). Boieldieu now produced several operas at the Paris Opéra-Comique:

- *La Famille suisse* 1 act (C. de Saint-Just; 11 February 1797)
- *L'heureuse nouvelle* 1 act (Saint-Just & C de Longchamps, 7 November 1797) lost

- *Le Pari, ou Mombreuil et Merville* 1 act (Longchamps, 15 December 1797) lost
- *Zoraïme et Zulnar* 3 acts (C. de Saint-Just; 10 May 1798)
- *La Dot de Suzette* 1act (J. Dejaure after Fiévée; 5 September 1798)
- *Les Méprises espagnols* 1 act (Saint-Just; 18 April 1799) lost
- *Emma, ou La Prisonnière* 1 act (V. de Jouy, Saint-Just & Longchamps, Th. Montansier, 12 September 1799), in collaboration with Cherubini.
- *Beniowski, ou Les Exilées du Kamchatka* 3 acts (A. Duval, after Kotzebue; 8 June 1800)
- *Le Caliph de Bagdad* 1 act (Saint-Just, after an Oriental tale; 18 September 1801)

As sign of his growing recognition Boieldieu was appointed professor of piano at the Paris Conservatoire in 1798. His opera *Beniowski* (8 June 1800) was produced with moderate success. But *Le Caliph de Bagdad* (18 September 1801) received tremendous acclaim, and became one of Boieldieu's most enduring successes. When asked by Cherubini if he was not ashamed of such undeserved success, he enrolled as a pupil of the severe pedagogue. On 19 March 1800 he married the dancer Clothilde Mafleurai ('Mlle Clothilde'), but her dissolute character made the marriage a failure. His opera *Ma Tante Aurore* (2 acts, Longchamps) was produced on 3 January 1803.

In the meantime, Boieldieu received an invitation from Russia and left in October 1803 for St Petersburg, his wife remaining in Paris. His contract as Court composer to Tsar Alexander I guaranteed him a handsome salary of 4000 roubles annually, his duties being to write operas for the Imperial theatres and to supervise music at the Court. He made his Russian debut with *Aline, reine de Golconde* (St Petersburg, 5/17 March 1804). The work was well received. It featured Jeannette Philis (the sister of Boieldieu's second wife and one of his favourite interpreters).

The quality of his eight comic operas written during his sojourn in Russia was of variable quality. The opera *La Jeune Femme colère* (18/30 Apr.1805) was the most successful. A vaudeville *Les Voitures versées* (4/16 Apr.1808) was revised and produced in Paris (19 April 1820) as a comic opera with considerable success. The works staged in St Petersburg were:

- *Aline, reine de Golconde* 3 acts (J. Vial & E. Favières; St Petersburg, 5/17 March 1804) (set by H.-M. Berton a year before)

- *La Jeune Femme colère* 1 act (Claparède; St Petersburg, 18/30 April 1805)
- *Abderkan* 1 act (Déligny; Peterhof Palace, 28 July/7 August 1805)
- *Un tour de soubrette* 1 act (N. Gersin; St Petersburg, 16/28 April 1806)
- *Télémaque dans l'isle de Calypso* 3 acts (P. Dercy; St Petersburg, 16/18 December 1806)
- *Amour et Mystère, ou Le quel est mon cousin?* 1 act (J. Pain; St Petersburg, 1807) lost
- *Les Voitures versées* 2 acts (E. Dupaty; St Petersburg, 4/16 Apr. 1808)
- *Athalie*, music for Racine's play (1808)
- *Rien de trop ou Les deux paravants* 1 act (Pain; St Petersburg 25 Dec./6 January 1811)

In 1811 Boieldieu asked the Russian government to release him from further employment (despite a raise in his salary to 5000 roubles) and he returned to Paris on leave. But because of the deteriorating political situation between France and Russia, he never returned. His health had been badly affected by his stay in Russia. His first act was to petition for a divorce which was, however, rejected by the authorities. His estranged wife died in 1826. A few weeks later Boieldieu married the singer Jenny Philis whom he had known in Russia.

Boieldieu spent the rest of his comparatively short career in Paris. Once back, Boieldieu arranged a revival of *Ma Tante Aurore* and the first Paris production of *Rien de trop* (19 April 1811). He regained the favour of the public with *Jean de Paris* (4 April 1812) which achieved instant and great popularity, his most successful opera to date. His next operas were:

- *Jean de Paris* 2 acts (Saint-Just; 4 April 1812)
- *Le Nouveau Seigneur du village* 1 act (A. F. Creuzé de Lesser & J. F. Favières: 1813)
- *La Fête du village voisin* 3 acts (Sewrin; 5 March 1816)
- *Le Petit Chaperon rouge* 3 acts (Théaulon de Lambert; 30 June 1818), highly successful.
- *La France et l'Espagne* scène lyrique (R. A. P. Chazet: Paris Hôtel deVille, 11 December 1823) lost
- *La Dame blanche* 3 acts (Scribe, after Sir Walter Scott; 29 December 1825)
- *Les Deux Nuits* 3 acts (Scribe after J. N. Bouilly; 29 May 1829)



In 1817 he was appointed professor of composition at the Paris Conservatory, a post he resigned in 1826. He continued to compose for the Opéra-Comique, on his own or in collaboration with other musicians (Cherubini, Hérold, Berton, Auber, Catel), and for the Opéra (Kreutzer, Paer, Cherubini). Boieldieu had contributed to *Blanche de Provence* (1821) a *pièce d'occasion* commissioned by the Opéra to celebrate the birth of the Duc de Bordeaux, posthumous son of the murdered Duc de Berri. For his contribution Boieldieu was created Chevalier of the Legion of Honour and attached to the household of the Duchesse de Berri as honorary composer.

The culmination of his highly successful career was reached with the production of his great masterpiece *La Dame blanche* (10 December 1825). This was hailed by the public and the press as the French answer and challenge to Rossini's rising fame in the operatic field. *La Dame blanche* became one of the most famous French operas ever written. It had 1000 performances in Paris alone from 1825 to 1862, and nearly 1700 performances before 1914. It also had numerous productions all over the world.

At the height of his success, Boieldieu developed the first serious signs of the lung disease he had contracted in Russia. His health deteriorated. A trip to Italy (1832) brought no improvement. His pecuniary circumstances were badly affected. Although he was offered his old position at the Conservatory, he could not teach because of his loss of voice. In 1833 he received a grant of 6000 francs from the government of Louis Philippe, and retired to his country house in Jarcy where he died.

During the last years of his life, he became interested in painting. His works show his considerable talents as a landscape artist and are preserved in the municipal museum at Rouen. Among his pupils were Fétis, Adam and Zimmermann.

The historical situation of Boieldieu is of great importance. He was one of the creators of French comic opera in its second phase. He possessed melodic inventiveness and harmonic grace. In addition to facility in composition, he largely succeeded in attaining perfection of form and fine dramatic balance. Adopting the best devices of Italian operatic art, he nevertheless cultivated the French style which laid the foundations of the brilliant progress of French opera during the 19<sup>th</sup> c. Boieldieu wrote 40 operas in all, of which 8 are lost.

Boieldieu also collaborated extensively with:

- Cherubini in *La Prisonnière* 1 act (Jouy, Saint-Just & Longchamps; Th. Montansier, 12 September 1799)
- Méhul, Kreutzer and others in *Le Baiser and la quittance* 3 acts (Picard, Dieulafoy & Longchamps; Opéra-Comique, 18 June 1803)
- Cherubini, Catel and Isouard in *Bayard à Mézières* 1 act (Allisan de Chazet & Dupaty; 1814)
- Kreutzer in *Les Béarnais ou Henry IV en voyage* 1 acts (C. Sewrin; Opéra-Comique, 21 May 1814) lost
- Mme Gail, a pupil of Fétis, in *Angéla, ou L'Atelier de Jean Cousin* 1 act (Moncloux d'Épinay; Opéra-Comique, 11 June 1814)
- Hérold in *Charles de France, ou Amour et Gloire* 2 act (Théaulon de Lambert & D'Artois; Opéra-Comique, 18 June 1816)
- Cherubini, Berton and others in *Blanche de Provence, ou La Cour des Fées* 1 act (Théaulon de Lambert and De Rancé; Tuileries, 1 May 1821)
- Berton in *Les Arts rivaux*, scène lyrique (R. A. P. Chazet: Paris Hôtel de Ville, 11 December 1823) lost
- Auber in *Les Trois Genres* (Scribe, Dupaty & M. Pichat; Odéon, 27 April 1824)
- Berton and Kreutzer in *Pharamond* opera 3 acts (Ancelot, Guiraud, Soumet; Opéra, 19 June 1825)
- Auber, Batton, Berton, Blagini, Carafa, Cherubini, Hérold & Paer in *La Marquise de Brinvilliers* 3 acts (Scribe & Castil-Blaze; Opéra-Comique 31 October 1831)

Boieldieu had a natural son **Adrien-Louis-Victor** (b. Paris, 3 November 1813; d. Paris, 9 July 1883). His mother was Thérèse Regnault, a singer. He was also a composer, and wrote 2 operas: *Marguerite* (sketched out but left incomplete by his father) and *L'Aïeule*.

# PERSPECTIVES ON BOIELDIEU AND THE RISE OF THE ROMANTIC *OPERA-COMIQUE*

## 1. Adolphe Adam<sup>1</sup>

**Adolphe Adam, *Le Constitutionnel*, 8 July 1848**

We are not making music, let us talk about it, and in the absence of pleasures we are deprived of, let us recall, through memory, the joy we experienced, from its first appearance, one of the masterpieces that honours the French school.

*La Dame blanche* was Boieldieu's penultimate work. I had the good fortune to be a pupil of this eminent man whom all my readers have admired, whom all would have loved if they could have seen him up close, and recognized that in him talent was, so to speak, merely the translation of personal qualities. I witnessed the beginning and the completion of the work that is one of Boieldieu's most powerful claims to fame; I was very young then, not yet twenty, but the memory of the labours of my illustrious master is as present to my thoughts as his memory is dear to my heart. And perhaps it will not be without interest to learn some quite intimate details that, consequently, must have escaped all biographers.

Boieldieu began very young in Rouen, his hometown, with a small opera whose title itself has not come down to us. His teacher, M. Broche, the organist of the cathedral, encouraged him to go to Paris. This was in 1795; people were starting to breathe a little from the reign of terror; music was very much in vogue; because, in the first revolution, if there were many ruined, there were many enriched as well, and pleasures never lacked in the capital. Four eminent composers of the time: Cherubini, Méhul, Kreutzer, and Jadin used to meet every *décade* (10 days) for a friendly dinner, where they forgot, in sweet exchanges and fraternal conversation, the preoccupations that then, as today, besieged all minds. Boieldieu obtained the favour of being admitted to this dinner of musical celebrities; he had been recommended as a young musician from the provinces, announcing great talent, and having already achieved success in the theatre: hence he had been invited to submit his score to the illustrious assembly. The poor young man advanced trembling among these guests

whose name and reputation terrified him, and initially gave a very poor idea of his wit during the meal, not daring to open his mouth and responding only with monosyllables to the advances made by his neighbour: it was Kreutzer who took pity on the poor novice. However, he eventually gathered courage, and by the end of the meal, he and Kreutzer were the best of friends. Once dinner was over, Kreutzer wanted to showcase his young protégé; he cordially introduced him to Méhul and Cherubini, who began to warm to him a little: meanwhile, Jadin perused his handwritten score, which Boieldieu had left on the piano upon entering. The ice was broken; goodwill seemed to replace coldness, and Kreutzer, seeing his colleagues in such good spirits, suggested to the young musician to sit at the piano to let them hear his opera. Boieldieu was an excellent pianist and sang very pleasantly; but his judges were not people to be dazzled by the charm of execution, and the poor composer occasionally saw a finger pointing out a passage on his score that he saw as entirely innocent, but which certainly concealed some gross harmony error, for that finger belonged to Cherubini; and Cherubini never let any musical solecism pass. Boieldieu had learned from his teacher, M. Broche, all that the poor organist knew, which was very little, and he did not even have the awareness of the mistakes that were pointed out to him; however, he suspected very well that the dreaded finger did not signal these passages as excellent, and it was with terror that he saw it almost every measure fall on each staff of his score. He sweated blood and water and suffered martyrdom; however, he did not lose heart and continued to perform his opera; the pieces followed one another, and hope began to return to his soul, for the finger no longer came between the performer and the music placed before him. "Come on," he said to himself, "it seems that the middle of my opera is better than the beginning; I hope the end will crown the work." And he kept going. Just as he had finished one of the pieces that had been most successful in Rouen, and which, according to him, should have won the approval of his judges, he stopped as if to ask for their opinion; hearing nothing, he turned around, and then what shame he felt, and what a tightening of the heart he experienced! He saw himself alone... his listeners had left, no doubt judging from the unworthiness of the work that their advice was superfluous, and wanting to spare themselves the pain of making bad compliments they would not have been able to refrain from making. Tears choked the poor Boieldieu; he brought his hands to his face and was about to give in to despair, when a voice was heard; one of the judges had stayed, the youngest among them had taken pity on the beginner, and perhaps he was charged by his colleagues to soften the bitterness of this ordeal. Only he could tell us, for he is the sole

survivor of the five actors in this scene: Jadin, it was he, approached Boieldieu. "My young friend," he said to him, "do not distress yourself; wrongly, you were made to believe that you were a composer. I do not want to assess the more or less talent you may have; but before practicing an art, one must learn it, and you do not even possess the first elements of composition. But one can be a very skilled and highly esteemed musician without being able to write an opera. You are a good pianist, you have a lovely voice, you can make your way with this double resource; give lessons and compose romances; then, if you want to work for the theatre, learn composition, and try again; but I warn you, and I know from experience, it is a very difficult career, and the successes one dreams of rarely materialize." The advice was easier to give than to follow. To give lessons, one must have a clientèle, and Boieldieu, cast into Paris without support or protection, was initially reduced to tuning pianos to make a living; but when he had tuned a piano, he could not resist the pleasure of improvising on the instrument he had just put in order. His performance was noticed; let us add that his person was no less so; young, elegant, witty, endowed with one of the most agreeable faces, he could not fail to succeed. In a short time, he acquired an excellent clientèle, composed some romances that had a prodigious and deserved success; in short, he became the fashionable man in every way, and fortune never stopped smiling at him. He was appointed piano teacher at the Conservatoire, and with the idea of the theatre always haunting him, he wanted to try his hand even before learning what he had been reproached for not knowing, and he believed he could make up through good taste and hearing the masterpieces what he lacked in study. It is in these conditions that he successively presented, *La Dot de Suzette*, *Zoraïme et Gulnar* [sic], *La Famille Suisse*, *Montbreuil et Verville*, *Les Méprises Espagnoles*, *Beniowsky*, and *Le Calife de Bagdad*. But he then realized that natural qualities could not suffice if art did not come to their aid, and he had the courage (perhaps a unique example!) to study with the perseverance of a student the principles he lacked to become one of the leaders of our school. The scene of the audition of his first opera had long been forgotten, and Cherubini had become and remained until his death his most intimate friend; it was he whom he chose as a teacher, and one could certainly not have addressed oneself to a better. It is to the union of Cherubini's purity and elegance with Boieldieu's charm and grace that we owe these masterpieces, the first specimen of which was *Ma Tante Aurore*, a score written as purely as the preceding ones had been carelessly.

I will not attempt to provide a biography of Boieldieu here, and I will not follow him on his journey to Russia in 1803 or his return to France in

1812. The works he produced during this period are too well known to require citation, and I hasten to come to *La Dame blanche*, from which I may have strayed a bit. I have shown you the poor little piano tuner in 1795; now let's get to know the member of the Institute, Chevalier of the Légion-d'Honneur, and professor of composition in 1820. I was one of the first students admitted to the founding of Boieldieu's class. My classmates included Boily, the son of the famous portrait painter, who won the grand composition prize of the Institute and composed a small opera for the Opéra-Comique – a fine fellow who always doubted himself and avoided, rather than sought out, opportunities to prove his real talent. Then there was Théodore Labarre, the skilled harpist, author of *Les Deux Familles*, *La Révolte au Sérail*, and *Le Ménétrier*, now the conductor at the Opéra-Comique. — The Conservatoire was a peculiar thing at the time I mentioned; it was dominated by extreme classicism, and melodists proper were looked upon as rather poor fellows. Rossini was ridiculed, and the professors, it must be said, were not innocent of the disdain openly expressed by the students: M. Lesueur called Rossini's operas *turlututus*, and M. Berton wrote a verse epistle on "mechanical" music, thus characterizing that of the modern school. Yet M. Catel had declared, much to the astonishment of his students, that there were beautiful things in a trio from *Otello*. Chérubini said nothing, but he listened to all these remarks with a mocking laugh that was peculiar to him, seemingly foreseeing the volte-faces his colleagues would perform a few years later, bowing before the sublime genius they still disdained. It is not easy to express how the news of the creation of a composition class directed by Boieldieu was received, and what jeers were aimed at the students admitted to it. It got even worse when we told our classmates how this class was conducted. The scores of the first operas by Rossini were published by our teacher's brother, Boieldieu the younger, whose music shop was on Rue de Richelieu. As soon as a score of these works, not yet performed in Paris, was about to be released, a proof was sent to us; Labarre, an excellent reader, sat at the piano, then Mme Boieldieu, who was a very great singer, Boieldieu, and ourselves, sang the opera from beginning to end; and often the class, which was supposed to last only two hours, lasted all day. That is how we became acquainted, the first ones, with *Mosè*, *La Donna del Lago*, *Semiramide*, and twenty other masterpieces whose beauty was not revealed to the public until several years later. Boieldieu had no trouble pointing out to us the negligence and flaws found in some of Rossini's operas, but it was more difficult for him to convince us of the superiority of the work he was analysing for us; we had all more or less absorbed the Conservatoire's influence, and we did not easily

abandon our prejudices. For my part, I was one of the most resistant. — One can imagine what our Conservatoire classmates thought of us when they learned that the object of their ridicule was being held up as a model for us. But everything eventually wears out, even contempt for masterpieces, and genius always triumphs over cliques. The only unrecognized geniuses I know are those who achieve great success; they are unrecognized by all those who envy them. As for the so-called geniuses who take refuge in their inability to acknowledge their contemporaries' ill will, I believe that it is only their own incapacity that they fail to recognize.

Boieldieu gave us lessons at his home in Paris during the winter and in summer at his country house in Villeneuve-Saint-Georges. For us, these weekly countryside trips were great celebrations. We would return in the evening by carriage, which dropped us off at the Bastille, and then we would finish our evening at the Funambules. Debureau had not yet achieved his fame; Janin and Nodier only invented it a few years later. But we had discovered him, and, without guessing his future celebrity, we already knew how to appreciate him. We did not even know his name, which did not even appear on the poster; to us, he was simply the Pierrot of the Funambules, but we knew how much he surpassed his neighbour, Mme Saqui's Pierrot. An unknown Pierrot, who faded away in 1830, when the vaudeville, which invaded everything, established itself victoriously over the ruins of the tightrope dance and pantomime, which were the only performances staged at those two theatres at the time.

Boieldieu had long been working on *Les Deux Nuits*, M. Bouilly's favourite poem: this author wanted to create a companion piece to *Les Deux Journées*, which, with Chérubini's help, had brought him such great success some thirty years earlier. The music was almost halfway done when Martin retired: since the main role was destined for him, it was impossible to replace him, and Boieldieu momentarily gave up pursuing his work to undertake *La Dame blanche*, which had just been entrusted to him by Scribe, who had only just begun his series of successes with Auber, a source of fortune for the Opéra-Comique for over twenty-five years. Boieldieu, imprisoned for over a year by Bouilly's laborious and unmusical rhymes, immediately felt much more comfortable with Scribe's collaboration, who understood the demands of musicians like musicians themselves and cut the pieces so skilfully that we judged them complete when he read us the lyrics: thus music was never composed so effortlessly. Labarre, having made several trips to England as a harpist, provided Boieldieu with all the Scottish themes that can be heard in *La Dame blanche*, such as the air from the third act, the motifs from 'Chez les

montagnards écossaise', 'Vous le verrez le verre en main', etc., etc. Boïeldieu was very worried about this third act; he could not find a situation, and one day I went to see him and found him working in his bed, which he hardly left for three or four hours a day, deeply preoccupied with this third act.

"Do you understand," he said to me, "that after two acts so full of music, I have nothing in the third act but a woman's aria, a little unimportant chorus, a little duet between women, and a finale without development? I need a big effect there, and I only have a small village chorus: 'Vive, vive monseigneur!' Scribe wrote me a note: peasants throwing their hats in the air, proof that it must be an animated and short piece; they cannot throw their hats in the air for fifteen minutes. Yet an idea came to me last night that might be good. I was reading in Walter Scott that someone returning to his country recognizes a tune he heard in his childhood. If, instead of a chorus of *vivat*, the vassals sang to Georges an old Scottish ballad, which he would remember enough to continue himself, do you not think that would be a musical situation?" "Certainly," I replied, "it would be charming and would perfectly fill your third act." "Yes," he replied, "but I have no lyrics for that." "M. Scribe is very close by." "I cannot go, sick as I am." "But I am perfectly well, and I'll be there in five minutes." And, without waiting for his answer, I ran to Scribe's, who indeed lived just steps from Boulevard Montmartre, on Rue Bergère. Scribe welcomed the idea even more than I had. "Go back to Boïeldieu," he said to me, "tell him it is excellent; that there is a great success there; that the third act is saved, and that he will have his lyrics in fifteen minutes." I ran to deliver the news to Boïeldieu, and the next day he let me hear this delightful piece in its entirety, which did not make the success of *La Dame blanche*, but which increased and brought to its peak the success that the first two acts had achieved.

I have mentioned how easily the entire work was composed; only one piece was entirely redone, here are the circumstances. One evening I went to see Boïeldieu, we were alone and he wanted to let me hear some couplets he had composed the day before: they did not seem to me up to the standard of the work; and although I did not dare to express my opinion, however, my demeanour was cold enough for Boïeldieu to eagerly seize this opportunity to show dissatisfaction with himself, and before I could add a word, he had torn up and thrown his couplets into the trash. At my exclamations of this vivacity, Mme Boïeldieu rushed in, and it was against her that Boïeldieu's anger turned. "There, you see," he said to her, "here is one who is honest; he finds the couplets you wanted me to



keep detestable, he did not hide it from me; so I just tore them up and I will make others.” No matter how much I protested that I had said nothing, I could not convince the husband who accused his wife of a weakness for his works, nor calm her down, who reproached me for not sparing my master who was killing himself working, for being too picky, and for lacking taste and friendship. To escape this storm, I found no better course than to run away, and the next day, when I had to come back for the lesson, I admit that I was not too reassured. I rang the bell very timidly, afraid of meeting some irritated faces; but the first person I saw was Mme Boieldieu, her face radiant: “Oh! come in, my poor Adam,” she exclaimed, “how right you were to have him redo his couplets! After you left, he found others: they are the prettiest he has ever done.” And she dragged me to the piano, where Boieldieu was already singing to the good old mother Desbrosses, who had been brought there expressly, these touching and colourful couplets ‘Tournez, fuse aux légères’. Boieldieu wanted Mme Desbrosses to sing them to him right away; but the poor old lady was crying with emotion and pleasure, and so were we!!! Ten years later, this tune still brought tears to our eyes, this time very cruel ones, for it was this tune that was played at Père-Lachaise, as we lowered into the grave our master and our friend!

The rehearsals for *La Dame blanche* were done with unheard-of promptness; the work was staged in three weeks. At one of the final rehearsals, I was in the pit with Boieldieu. Pixérécourt was in the left balcony. After the duet of fear, he calls out to Boieldieu: “That duet is too long, there is too much music in this act.” “Certainly,” Boieldieu replies, “I do not care for it at all, let us cut it.” “But we care a lot about it,” Ponchard and Mme Boulanger reply together; and it is upon their insistence that this little gem was preserved. The rehearsal had seemed so satisfactory that Pixérécourt decided it would be the second-to-last one, and that the play would be performed the day after tomorrow. “But that is impossible,” exclaimed Boieldieu, “I have not even started my overture, and I will never have time to finish it so quickly.” “That is not my concern,” Pixérécourt replied, “we can do without an overture if necessary; but the piece is ready, and the contract is formal, *La Dame Blanche* will be performed the day after tomorrow.” “Ah, my children,” Boieldieu said to Labarre and me, “do not leave me, I am a lost man, I can not leave such an important work without an overture, and without you I will never finish it.” We followed Boieldieu to his home; he had already tested us, Labarre and me, in some tasks he had entrusted to us; thus the entire final ritornello of the trio from the first act had been written entirely by Labarre, and I had been tasked with the instrumentation of the

beginning of the finale of the second act. Boïeldieu could therefore count on us to a certain extent, but he wanted to review our work, and although he was satisfied with it, his confidence was not great enough to give us unsupervised responsibility for his overture. Here is how the task was divided: he took the introduction for himself, then the three of us outlined the *allegro*. We first chose the motifs. Labarre proposed and had adopted as the first theme one of the English [Scottish] airs he had given, which was already used in the first chorus; I proposed for the second theme to take the *andante* motif of the *trio* ‘Je n’y puis rien comprendre’ and a little crescendo that was not very favourably received as being too Rossinian; for the final coda, Boïeldieu indicated one of his operas written in Russia, *Télémaque*, from which we were to find the elements for the peroration. The rôles were thus distributed so that Labarre was to write the entire first part and I the second, where there was the return of the motifs, and consequently less work. We wrote at the same table. At eleven o’clock, Boïeldieu had almost finished his introduction: I do not know what kind of business Labarre could have had at such an hour, but what is certain is that he pushed me and said softly, “Do not say anything, but I absolutely have to leave; you will finish my work.” After a quarter of an hour, Boïeldieu, not seeing him return, said to me, “Where is Labarre?” “But, Sir,” I replied, “he has gone, he will not be back.” “Ah, it is over,” he exclaimed, “my overture will not be done and Formageat (the copyist) is supposed to come at six in the morning to pick up the copy! Half of it will not be done... I am going to bed, I cannot go on, keep working, but above all, do not give Formageat anything other than what you have shown me, and wake me up before he arrives.” At four in the morning, I had finished the overture, I placed the copy conspicuously in the dining room so that it could be easily taken, and I refrained from waking Boïeldieu, very happy with the idea that I would finally hear music written by me alone without it being reviewed or corrected, then I went to sleep on the sofa in the living room. At ten o’clock, I was awakened by Boïeldieu’s voice, calling from his room, “Well, where are you with it?” “Oh, Sir, I finished a long time ago.” “Well, you will show me.” “Impossible, Sir, Formageat took everything away.” “What, you wretch, you gave the copy without showing it to me; but with a draft like yours, it must be full of mistakes: hurry to the theatre and bring back everything that is not copied.” I admit that I did not carry out the commission; I pretended to return to the theatre, where I had not set foot, and I said that the sheets had been distributed to so many copyists that it was impossible to get even one back. In the evening, at the rehearsal, I hid in a small corner to listen to my part of the overture. Everything was going well until suddenly, in a *forte*, an awful cacophony

erupted: I had transposed the horn and trumpet parts, which were not in the same key. Everyone stopped: Frédéric Kreubé, the conductor, consulted the score: "What on earth did you put there?" he said to Boieldieu, who was as confused as I was; "but this is not your handwriting." "Oh, I will explain," he replied, "last night, I was very tired, and I was dictating to Adam, who probably was not very awake and must have made a mistake."

My blunder was quickly rectified, and the rehearsal continued smoothly. After the success of *La Dame blanche*, Boieldieu wanted to remake the overture, which, indeed, is not the best piece of the work; but the advantage of preceding a masterpiece and reproducing some motifs from it serves as other merits, and I have sometimes heard it cited as one of Boieldieu's best.

When the score was published, I received a beautiful copy, which I keep religiously, and on which were written these words: "As a student, you applauded my successes; as a friend, I will applaud yours."

I will not speak to you about the immense success of *La Dame blanche*, nor of *Les Deux Nuits*, performed only five years later, which was the last work of my illustrious and respectable master. If I have allowed myself to perhaps tell you a little too extensively the preceding details, it is because in looking back twenty-four years in my life, I felt as happy as in a dream! May happiness and this dream have interested you for a moment, for if it is good sometimes to know how to forget, it is often very sweet to know how to remember!

## ***SOUVENIRS D'UN MUSICIEN***

### **BOÏELDIEU**

Hardly had the tomb closed over Hérold's ashes when it half-opened to swallow up the leader of our school, that Boieldieu whose masterpieces everyone knows, whose immense talent everyone has been able to appreciate. Certainly, the loss is great for art, but how much greater is it for friendship! The illness that Boieldieu has just succumbed to had made him give up composition for a few years, and there was little hope that his health would recover enough to allow him to resume work whose difficulty and fatigue can only be understood by composers; but if his talents were lost to the public, his numerous friends, his family, of whom he was the idol, could still hope to enjoy his company for a long time, his so gentle spirit, so fine, so delicate, his endearing conversation, his inexhaustible kindness that extended to all those he knew; for in the high

position of artist to which his talent had raised him, Boïeldieu unfortunately encountered more than one envious person, but never an enemy; one could indeed be envious of his talent, never of his person.

Boïeldieu's artistic career was marked by few incidents, it was a continuity of successes that gradually brought him to the forefront: thus his biography will be very short, and will offer, so to speak, only the dates of his numerous works; but having been fortunate enough to be his student, then his protégé and friend, I can provide some details about his private character that are dear to those who knew him, and precious to those who did not have that happiness.

Adrien Boïeldieu was born in Rouen in 1775. He received his first music lessons from an organist in that city named Broche. M. Boïeldieu retained great respect for the memory of his first teacher, and never spoke of him except with veneration. However, I am inclined to believe that gratitude sealed his lips on more than one detail unfavourable to the old organist: he generally passed for a brutal man, a rather mediocre musician, but on the other hand a very illustrious drinker; he generally mistreated his students, and in particular poor Boïeldieu, in whom he had not noticed any musical talent, but on the contrary showed a rather pronounced aversion to alcohol. Now, as in the ideas of Father Broche, one did not go without the other, he drew a quite natural conclusion from it: that a man who did not know how to drink could never compose; so he did not have great hopes for his student.

Boïeldieu did not however become discouraged, and barely at the age of eighteen, he tried to compose a little opera for which a fellow countryman had written the words. The work was performed in Rouen with such success that from all sides, and Father Broche the first, people advised young Boïeldieu to present his work in Paris. Our young musician therefore set off, light on money, rich in hope, with a small suitcase where his wardrobe took up less space than his score, thin as it was.

There was then a kind of musical revolution in Paris. The dark genre was in fashion; Méhul and Cherubini were at the head of this new school, and the harmonic beauties that shone in their works seemed to have more value with the public than the simple and naive melodies to which Grétry and Dalayrac had accustomed it. Also, these last two seemed to make it their task to darken their genre in order to match the works in fashion at the time, and Grétry only wrote his *Pierre le Grand* and his *Guillaume Tell*, and Dalayrac his *Camille* and his *Montenaro*, to compete with Cherubini's

*Elisa* and *Lodoïska*, Méhul's *Euphrosyne* and *Stratonice*, Lesueur's *Caverne*, Berton's *Rigueurs du Cloître*, and some other works of the same kind by less famous authors.

This reaction towards severe and scientific music was hardly favourable to the poor young man, who was almost ignorant of the first rules of harmony and had only a few happy ideas, but poorly written and diluted in a meagre orchestration. Fifteen years earlier, his work would have been in fashion in Paris, as it had been in Rouen; but at that time scores did not circulate around France as quickly as they do now, and provincial theatre companies, which performed the uncomplicated works of Grétry and Monsigny very well, were hardly in a position to serve as interpreters for the masculine accents of Méhul and Cherubini.

So the young man from Rouen had to give himself a new musical education. But where to take it, where to find it? The Conservatoire did not exist at that time; and besides, above all, one had to live. Boieldieu began to use the most mediocre resource that a musician could employ: he resigned himself to tuning pianos; and if, on his meagre salary, he could save a thirty-sou piece, he hurried to take it to the theatre to hear these masterpieces that he would one day equal, but where he then despaired of ever being able to reach.

However, his handsome face, this air of good fellowship that he always possessed, had made him noticed. The Erard house was then the meeting place for all the distinguished artists in Paris, and Boieldieu managed to gain access there, despite his unfavourable position. He found some romance lyrics, and the delightful music he adapted to them earned him great success in society: it was no longer as a piano tuner, but rather as a piano teacher that he gained entry to the best houses; his romances were followed by piano and harp duets, which were no less successful; then finally, he was entrusted with a poem: it was *Zoraïme et Zulnar*. The music for it was composed in a short time; but no consideration could persuade either of the two lyric theatres of that time to put into rehearsal an opera in three acts by a young unknown. He had to first try his hand at one-act works, and his first performed opera was *La Famille Suisse*; *Zoraïme et Zulnar* came next; then *Montbreuil et Nerville*, *La Dot de Suzette*, *Les Méprises espagnoles*, *Beniowski*, where one notices choruses of a vigour and energy that one would not have believed him capable of until then; and *Le Calife*, this work of such rich inspiration, of original melodies, of graceful motifs. This opera was composed in a singular manner.

Boïeldieu had been appointed piano teacher at the Conservatory; it was while he was giving his lessons, surrounded by students studying their pieces, that on a corner of the instrument he conceived and wrote his graceful airs which, all of them, became popular, and which thirty years later (and that is more than a century in music) have not aged. The immense success of *Le Calife* was far from producing in Boïeldieu the effect that any less conscientious artist would have experienced. It was then that he felt all that was still lacking in his talent; he understood that, no matter the gifts that nature had bestowed upon you, there are still resources in science that genius must take advantage of: he persuaded the skilled theorist Cherubini to give him lessons, and no example of modesty can be more effectively proposed to young artists, whose blind self-esteem too often clouds their judgment, than that of the author of *Le Calife* and *Beniowski* admitting his ignorance to the author of *Les Deux Journées* and submitting in his presence to the apprenticeship of a student.

The fruit of these precious lessons was not long in coming: the first work that Boïeldieu gave after receiving them was *Ma Tante Aurore*. He had taken a huge step forward in the art of orchestrating and arranging harmony; proof of this can be found in the sweet introduction of the overture, where the cellos are so skilfully arranged; in the design of the accompaniments of the first duet, in the harmonious instrumentation of the couplets: 'Non, ma nièce, vous n'aimez pas', etc.

No quality was lacking in Boïeldieu's talent at that time: perhaps less profound than some of his rivals, he was just as dramatic and often more graceful. It was then that he was offered the position of court composer to the Emperor of Russia. The advantages attached to this position were too great not to seduce Boïeldieu, who, though shining at the forefront in Paris, found formidable competitors in colleagues such as Grétry, Dalayrac, Berton, Méhul, Cherubini, Kreutzer, etc. Domestic troubles also contributed to his decision to undertake this journey, and until 1811 when he returned to Paris, he remained in Saint Petersburg, honoured with the admiration and even the friendship of the entire imperial family. He composed the music for several operas there, including *Télémaque* and *Aline, Reine de Golconde*. These two works, performed in Paris with music by MM. Lesueur and Berton, have not been entirely lost to us; Boïeldieu often drew pieces from them that he interpolated into the works he gave after his return to France. The first two he had performed were *Rien de trop* and *La Jeune Femme colère*, both composed in Russia; they were soon followed by *Jean de Paris*, *La Fête du village voisin*, *Le Nouveau Seigneur*, *Charles de France* (on the occasion of the marriage of