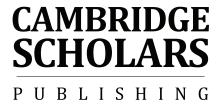
Daniel-François-Esprit Auber: *Le Philtre*

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Edited and Introduced by

Robert Ignatius Letellier



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Daniel-François-Esprit Auber (lithograph c 1830)

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INTRODUCTION

Le Philtre, an opera in two acts with libretto by Eugène Scribe, was premiered at the Académie Royale de Musique (Salle de la rue Le Peletier) on 20 June 1831. The work was an immediate success and remained in the repertoire of the Opéra until 1862. Scribe's libretto was based on an Italian story, Silvio Malaperta's *II Filtro*, published in a French adaptation in the *Revue de Paris* by Stendhal in 1830.

The story is set in Mauléon, in the eighteenth century. Guillaume, a young farmhand, is in love with Thérèsine, the beautiful but aloof lady of the manor. He and his rival, the swaggering Sergeant Jolicoeur, both try in vain to persuade Thérèsine to marry them. In despair, Guillaume buys what he thinks is a love potion from Doctor Fontanarose, a travelling vendor of patent medicines, and a charlatan. The potion he sells to Guillaume is in fact a bottle of wine. Fontanarose tells the young man that it will not take effect for twenty-four hours—so giving the doctor enough time to leave town. As Guillaume drinks the wine he starts to feel more confident—so much so that he appears almost indifferent to Thérèsine, who is infuriated at this change in her formerly doting young lover. Hoping to make him jealous, she agrees to marry Jolicoeur. Still Guillaume seems untroubled, for he is certain Thérèsine will be in love with him at the end of twenty-four hours.

Act 2 takes place some hours later. The villagers are celebrating the approaching marriage of Thérèsine and Jolicoeur. Thérèsine, however, is unhappy that Guillaume is not there, since her revenge will have no effect if he does not see it. Guillaume asks Fontanarose for a love potion that will work at once. In order to pay for it, he has to join Jolicoeur's regiment, for which he receives twenty *écus*. Meanwhile the villagers find out that Guillaume's uncle has died and left the young man all his money. Guillaume becomes instantly popular with all the girls, and is convinced that the potion is working. Thérèsine then discovers Guillaume has enlisted in order to gain enough money to buy a love potion. She realizes how much he must love her and buys back his enlistment papers. When Jolicoeur returns, Thérèsine explains to him that she is going to marry Guillaume. Thérèsine and Guillaume then learn that the latter is rich. As the couple rejoice over their good fortune, Fontanarose leaves town with honour and gratitude from all sides.

This is a light canvas, and hardly offered situations worthy of the grand lyric resources of the Opéra. The deployment of the chorus and more substantial orchestra of the big theatre really demanded a stronger plotline. Many critics considered the work to be little more than an *opéra-comique* in which recitative replaced the usual spoken dialogue, although the transference of Scribe's *opéra-comique* techniques to the comic opera genre is not that simple. There is less action and a simpler plot than in most of the *opéras-comiques* despite a similarity of structural elements. Hence there is less need for recitative, with more of the action incorporated into the musical numbers which are in turn able to unfold at a more leisurely pace. This situation is underlined by the prevalence of arioso writing in the course of these longer musical numbers. These necessitate more complex musical forms. While none of these would be out of place in an *opéra-comique*, there are fewer strophic forms, less couplets, more arias and ensembles, and ensembles involving the chorus.

Both librettist and composer have subtly but formally demonstrated their

awareness of generic distinction: they are promoting the same message, but this time as a comic opera not an *opéra-comique*.

In matters of overall dramatic structure and musical style, *Le Philtre* is similar to Scribe-Auber *opéras-comiques*. The work is constructed along the same general lines. The music has distinguishing qualities. The overture focuses on the love triangle at the centre of the story, with themes from the act 1 trio for Thérèsine, Jolicoeur and Guillaume predominating: Jolicoeur's strutting military dotted rhythms, Guillaume's assertion of his faith in the efficacy of the philtre with its characteristic leaping fifths, the conclusion of the trio in thirds—a proleptic suggestion of the union of Thérèsine and Guillaume.

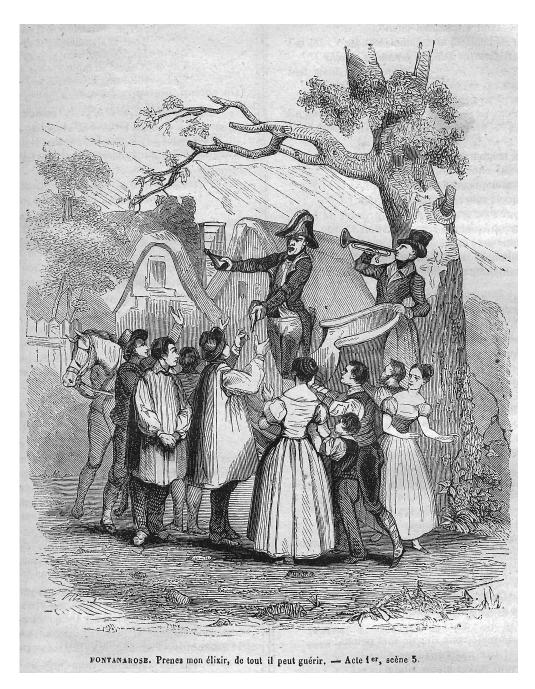
The pastoral atmosphere is developed and sustained from the very beginning, with the gentle 12/8 opening chorus with its chiming bell over the rich string writing, which returns to frame the first scene. The melodies are graceful and fresh, none more so than those written for the star tenor. Adolphe Nourrit played the role of the naive villager with a perfect naturalness, appearing in the smock of the farm boy Guillaume. His aria "Philtre divin" has a pathetic charm and diffident but serene character all its own—perfectly captured by the ritornello, with its four-part harmony for two flutes and two oboes, and the mysterious, recurring music of the philtre and its ingestion—a pedal note in octaves of E-flat, sustaining a rising sequence of chromatic triads in first inversion over eight bars.

Julie Dorus-Gras and Laure Cinti-Damoreau took turns in playing the role of Thérèsine, singing of the loves of "la belle Yseult aux blanches mains". The proud and successful Thérèsine also has a *grand air* ("La coquetterie fait mon bonheur"), her independence and wilfulness illustrated with well-crafted coloratura. Other striking pieces are Jolicoeur's *couplets militaires* "Je suis sergent"; Doctor Fontanarose's *rondo-boniment* "Vous me connaissez"; the finale of act 1; the barcarolle for two voices ("Je suis riche, vous êtes belle") both graceful and original; and the ensemble of the second act where the village girls press Guillaume to dance with them. Fontanarose is a particularly amusing comic creation, and his irresistible vending *couplets burlesques* a comic tour de force.

The original cast was: Adolphe Nourrit (Guillaume); Julie Dorus-Gras and Laure Cinti-Damoreau (Thérésine); Henri-Bernard Dabadie (Jolicoeur); Nicholas Prosper Levasseur (Fontanarose); Elie (Fontanarose's valet); and Constance Jaruwek (Jeannette, a villager). The décor by Pierre-Luc-Charles Cicéri was much applauded. Had the work been transported to the Opéra-Comique, it would probably have had a longer career. It nonetheless enjoyed great success, and was given uninterruptedly from 1831 until 1849, with two further revivals, in 1852-59 and 1861-62. There were 243 performances altogether.

The opera was translated into German, Danish, English and Italian, and produced in Berlin, Brussels, Vienna, Copenhagen, Brünn, London, Amsterdam, Graz, Milan and New York. The subject became the basis of Felice Romani's libretto for Gaetano Donizetti, resulting in one of his best scores, *L'Elisire d'amore* (1832). After the latter became very popular, music from the two operas was mixed in a *pasticcio* which was sung in German at St. Petersburg in 1836.

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Le Philtre act 1 scene 5: Dr Fontanarose vends his elixir of love

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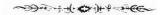


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