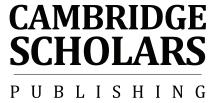
Daniel-François-Esprit Auber: *La Barcarolle*

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Edited and Introduced by

Robert Ignatius Letellier



Daniel-François-Esprit Auber: *La Barcarolle*, Edited by Robert Ignatius Letellier

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D.F.E. Auber. Portrait by Eugène Félix (Late 1840s)

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Introduction

La Barcarolle, an opéra-comique in three acts, with libretto by Eugène Scribe, was premiered at the Opéra-Comique (Deuxième Salle Favart) on 22 April 1845.

It is set in Parma in the eighteenth century or, alternatively, at the time of the Restoration. As act 1 opens the Count de Fiesque gives his half-brother, the composer Fabio, the poem to a barcarolle which Fabio is to set to music, and thus bring his work to the attention of the Grand Duke. The Kapellmeister Cafarini and the Marquis de Felino, who are seeking advancement at court themselves, secretly copy the poem and set it to the music they overhear Fabio singing. The joint effort of Cafarini and the Marquis is concealed in a basket of fruit which is sent to the Grand Duchess.

As act 2 opens the Grand Duke has found the barcarolle and is consumed with jealous suspicions about his wife. The Marquis traps Fabio into singing the song and admitting that he composed the music to the Count's words. The Count is arrested. Fabio learns through Cafarini's niece Gina of the Kapellmeister's part in the plot. Cafarini then blackmails the Marquis, because he holds the copy of the poem in Fiesque's handwriting. In act 3 Fabio, having been forbidden entry to the Duke's concert, disguises himself as a member of the orchestra and places the parts to his barcarolle on the music stands. The Marquis stops the performance. Fabio offers to exchange the incriminating copy that the Marquis made of the poem for the Count's liberty. Gina saves Fabio from arrest by producing the music in Cafarini's handwriting; the Kapellmeister disentangles himself by identifying the Marquis's draft. The Duke pardons everyone.

La Barcarolle would seem to have been produced on the stage in different versions. Scribe, in collaboration with Varner, brought out a vaudeville called Chanson ou l'Interieur d'un bureau with a subject identical to that of the opera on 25 February 1823. The libretto to Auber's opéra-comique is simply structured, but the action moves forward most skilfully. Traces of topical humour characteristic of the original comédie-vaudeville have been retained in the dialogue, even though these elements were fundamentally toned down in the libretto. This creates an unconscious and slightly discordant duality between the spoken and musical numbers. The Marquis is not altogether convincing as a villain, and his intrigues to imprison the Count and exile Fabio seem exaggerated and out of context.

Auber's music is elegant, pliable and distinguished, like all his work. Many motifs recall memories from earlier works, and the composer appears at times to have borrowed from himself. The first movement of the overture is distinguished by mysterious effects *con sordine*, and sounds like a Classical string quartet. The two soprano arias, and a *duo bouffe*, were much applauded. The soprano air for Gina in act 1 ("Personne en ces lieux ne m'a vue") and the comic duet for two basses ("Viens, que par toi nos muses") offer good musical declamation. The touching act 1 duet for Fabio and the Count, in which they celebrate their kinship, is sustained in its unison cabaletta ("Nous sommes fils tous deux du même mère") by rich triadic treble chords and a dominant bass pedal throughout, as if to stress the depth of their blood tie.

The tarantella, the chorus "Le maestro Cafarini", the quintet, and the finale of act 2, are well imagined. One of the rare instances of a polka in Auber's music is found in the act 3 duet for Cafarini and the Marquis ("Cette place...Laquelle?"). The Barcarolle

itself serves as a Leitmotif, presented imaginatively in various forms throughout the work—solo, duet, quintet, sextet, and finally quartet at the end of the opera. Of the sixteen numbers in the score, eight are duets, six of them for male voices, including two for the two basses. The score also tunes into a tradition of satire—both of musicians and artists, and of musical styles. The most famous French example was the enduringly popular *Le Maître de chapelle* (1821) by Ferdinando Paër, while Donizetti had done the same in *Le convenienze ed inconvenienze teatrali* (1827).

The original cast were: Gustave-Hippolyte Roger (Fabio); Chaix (Felino); Léonard Hermann-Léon (Cafarini); Edouard Gassier (Count de Fiesque); Mlle Anoinette-Jeanne-Hermance Révilly (Clélia, daughter of the marquis); and Mlle Octavie Delille (Gina, niece of Cafarini). The work did not last beyond the year of its premiere, 1845. There were 27 performances. *La Barcarolle* was translated into German, English and Portuguese, and produced in Vienna (Theater an der Wien, 5 September 1846 and Kärntnertor, 9 August 1849); Berlin; London (Princess's Theatre 5 April 1847) and Lisbon (1847 and July 1850).

The relative lack of success of the opera lies with a combination of factors involving librettist, composer and extraneous factors. The libretto has too much topicality from its first incarnation and is lacking in clarity as an operatic text. There is an overall musical monotony with some ideas carried to extremes (like the recurring barcarolle theme), and use of old-fashioned styles and devices dulling something of its appeal. Further, the years preceding the 1848 Revolution were socially troubled, with an economic slump beginning in 1845. Frivolous tales found little public response, and may well have turned normally receptive listeners away from this work in which the collaboration between Scribe and Auber is subtle but essentially most effective.



Fabio sings his barcarolle (act 2 scene 4). Engraving from Scribe's Works (1853-5)

BARCAROLLE,

Opéra comique en trois actes,

Paroles de

M.C. Scribe,

MESIQUE DE

D.F.E.AUBER,

de l'Institut

PARTITION PIMO ET CHANT
PRIX 125 VII.

PARIS, RRANDUS et C. Educurs, 103, Rue Richelieu

	PERSON	NAGES.			
Soprani.	Tino	rs.	Basses.		
GINA.	FAB	10.	LE COMTE DE FIESQUE,		
CLÉLIA.	***	•	CAFARINI.		
******	,,,,	•	LE MARQUIS DE FELIO.		
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5, DUO	Calarini L. Marquisson	Viens que par	tog man in a second grand of		
G. DUO FINALE	Fabric Cafacina,	Ah ma batma	; [·		
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ENTR ACTE				1 +.	
. 7. CAVATINE .	Gma	La Signora dit	on pres de moi va se tendre	1.4.	
N. S. QUINTETTE	Cafarini La Morquis		r me bat	-+	
V. 9. DUO.	Offia Le Comb :	Je recors a Lins	tant sans pouvoir le comprendre.	1/5.	
(, 10. AIR	Falue	Asile on regne	le silence	97,	
\. 11. DUO	Gin Fahm	Per mor co he	dans cette humble retrate	102.	
1.12. FINALE	(Guir Cl'ha Edin b Cenb † Caturm La Marquis,	Beau Fabro ve	itre fortune est Life	149.	
	ACTE	111.			
ENTR ACTE				158.	
V. 15. TRIO .	Gina Lahio Calarini	Le matin jy rê	are jy rêve le soir	179,	
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C. I's he, AIR DE DANSE .	******			166.	
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