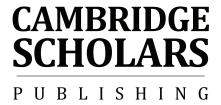
Daniel-François-Esprit Auber: *Zanetta*

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Edited and Introduced by

Robert Ignatius Letellier



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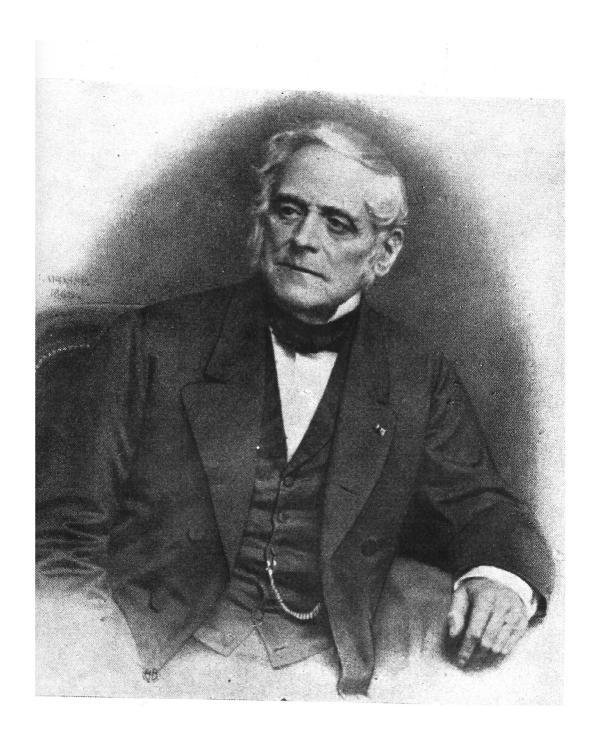
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D.F.E. Auber (1845). Lithograph by Lafosse

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INTRODUCTION

Zanetta, an opéra-comique in three acts with libretto by Eugène Scribe and Jules Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges, was first performed at the Opéra-Comique (Deuxième Salle Favart) on 18 May 1840. It is set in Naples in the early 1740s, and is the second of Auber's three Sicilian operas, along with *Actéon* and *Zerline*. The original subtitle 'ou [il ne faut pas] jouer avec le feu' was suppressed after several performances.

As act 1 opens King Charles VI is thinking that his favourite, the German nobleman Rodolphe, is too attentive to his sister Nisida. Nisida, in order to allay her brother's suspicions, conceives a plan in which Rodolphe will openly court Zanetta, the daughter of the royal gardener. The unsophisticated girl readily responds to Rodolphe's advances.

In act 2 Nisida becomes jealous of Zanetta and tries to hurt her by showing her one of Rodolphe's love letters. The simple girl cannot read German, and thinks it is his fulfilment of a promise to bring her father to the King's attention. Zanetta shows it to Baron Mathanasius, a councillor to the Elector of Bavaria, who immediately recognizes it as confirmation of a tryst scheduled for that evening. He orders an ambush to be laid for Rodolphe, when he comes to see Nisida. On his way to her, Rodolphe encounters the affectionate Zanetta and cruelly rebuffs her when she delays him.

In act 3 Rodolphe evades the guards by arriving for his rendezvous with Nisida by an unexpected route. Zanetta learns that Rodolphe has duped her, and her entrance, with her demonstration of love, convinces him that he has acted wrongly. The King and Mathanasius then confess that they had planned for Nisida to marry the Elector of Bavaria; this pleases her far more than a match with Rodolphe.

The libretto is confusing; instead of concentrating interest in two characters, the authors multiplied the number of intrigues. The music of this pleasant work is notable for the amount of vocal display (created for Mme Cinti-Damoreau) and the recurrent use of the waltz rhythm which dominates the finales of the first and third acts (cf *Fiorella* and *Haydée* as earlier and later works respectively with a similar emphasis; *La Sirène*, *Zerline* and *Rêve d'amour* also have good examples of choral waltzes).

The overture is very attractive, with its mysterious opening of descending triplets, and dancing common-time theme punctuated by overlapping downward spiralling woodwind figures. Auber, like so many 19th-century composers, had a particular love of the waltz, with *Zanetta* singled out as the work in which this rhythm predominates. Act 1 contains a lovely *sicilienne* for Nisida ("Plus doucement l'onde fuit"), and a trio for Rodolphe, the King and Nisida ("Oui, si vous daignez m'approuver"). The song about the gardner demonstrates how Auber's melody often oscillates around the tonic of the tonality ("Voici la jardinère" act 1), and also provides an extreme instance of the chromatic seasoning Auber employed in many of his conjunct melodies.

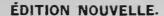
Mmes Damoreau and Rossi were applauded for the duet in act 2 ("Contre l'hymen qu'ordonne"), which is followed by the 6/8 ballade "Sur les rivages de Catane". The galop "L'on me trompe, l'on m'abuse" shows Offenbach's debt to Auber in the development of the can-can. Act 3 has a cavatina for the Princess ("Pendant toute la nuit"), and the remarkable moment of reflection for Zanetta ("Adieu mes fleurs

chéries"). All three duets are very expressive.

The original cast consisted of: Joseph-Antoine-Charles Couderc (Rodolphe); Laure Cinti-Damoreau (Zanetta); Mme Rossi (Nisida); Ernest Mocker (Charles VI); Honoré Grignon (Baron Mathanasius); Charles-Louis Sainte-Foy and Emon (Dionigi and Ruggieri, gentlemen of the court); and Haussard (chamberlain to the baron). The work was in the repertoire 1840-41, with a total of 35 performances. It was translated into German and Danish, and produced in Amsterdam, Prague, Hamburg, Copenhagen, Brussels and London. Richard Wagner arranged the piano reduction of the score during his youthful sojourn in Paris.



Zanetta carrying her basket of flowers. Woodcut from Scribe's Works





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