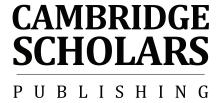
## Daniel-François-Esprit Auber: La Circassienne

# Daniel-François-Esprit Auber: *La Circassienne*

Edited and Introduced by

Robert Ignatius Letellier



## ${\it Daniel-François-Esprit\ Auber:} \\ {\it La\ Circassienne,} \\ {\it Edited\ and\ Introduced\ by\ Robert\ Ignatius\ Letellier} \\$

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D.F.E. Auber (late 1860s). Steel engraving after a portrait by H. Gramm

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

La Circassienne, an opéra-comique in three acts, with libretto by Eugène Scribe, was first performed at the Opéra-Comique (Deuxième Salle Favart), on 2 February 1861.

The story is based on the novel *Les Amours du chevalier de Faulas* (1787-90) by Jean-Baptiste Louvet de Couvray. The locale is the Caucasus and Moscow, around 1840. A group of bored Russian officers, snowed in inside their fort in the Caucasus, plan to put on Dalayrac's *Adolphe et Clara*. Alexis, who has just related an anecdote of how he disguised himself in women's clothes to carry out an errand, is chosen for the female role and dressed à *la Circassienne* since no other costume is available. The new commandant, General Orsakoff, storms in and threatens to have everyone shot because no guard was on duty, but sees Alexis in female garb and falls in love with "Prascovia". The Circassians attack by surprise and carry off "Prascovia" and Orsakoff's niece and ward Olga.

In act 2 the sultan, Aboul Kasim, chooses Olga for himself and assigns "Prascovia" to be her maid. Lanskoi, Alexis' friend, arrives under a flag of truce to ransom "Prascovia"; Orsakoff must have "her" back, even at the cost of leaving his niece behind. The other ladies of the harem, trying to dispose of their rivals, enable the Russians to escape.

Act 3 opens back in Moscow, where Lanskoi tries to dissuade Orsakoff from finding "Prascovia" by announcing that she has entered a convent. Alexis, in full uniform, comes to Orsakoff to ask his permission to marry Olga. The general notices a surprising resemblance between Alexis and "Prascovia" and, on learning that he is "her" brother, promotes him to colonel and finally gives his consent to the wedding if Alexis in his turn will give consent to Orsakoff's betrothal to "Prascovia". After the wedding of Olga and Alexis, Lanskoi brings Orsakoff a note informing him that "Prascovia" has committed suicide.

The overture captures something of the pert and satirical aspects of the potentially louche plot, reflecting an appropriate tone for the subtle inversions of expectations and values endemic to this storyline. It unfolds the central themes of the opera, nearly all of them taken from the extended act 2 finale—the Harem Scene, where Alexis and the young Olga have been confined. It opens with the beautiful *andante* that is later revealed as the odaliques' invitation to voluptuousness ("Doux avenir, joie et plaisir"), but is dominated by the redowa—a teasing, even saucy motif ("Ah! à nous les délices de cieux") also devoted to sensual pleasure. Reference to the love duet for Olga and Alexis in act 3 ("Mon coeur revait toujours à vous") forms a lyrical interlude, and the final *mouvement de marche*, returning to the act 2 finale ("Mais je serais vangé"), reinforces the military theme that is the other thematic pole of the opera.

In act 1 Alexis' romance "Vous rappelez à l'instant même" is very distinguished, having been written for a very high *tessitura* appropriate to the abilities of Montaubry who created the role. Chromatic chords now add seasoning to the sound texture which develops into passages of harmonic richness ("Ô ma maîtresse"). The chorus "Bravo! Bravo!" is very striking, especially in Auber's witty citation of the air from *Adolphe et Clara* "Jeunes filles qu'on marie". Later developments in Auber's style employ a modal ambiguity, rather apposite to the moral vagueness of the plot and the befuddling of the senses (as in this B-flat drinking chorus with Alexis, Lanskoi, Perod

and Soltikoff), achieved by a temporary uncertainty as to the mode of both the tonic and subdominant (with its flattened D's and flattened sixths), although the effect is not sustained, and the vagueness passes quickly.

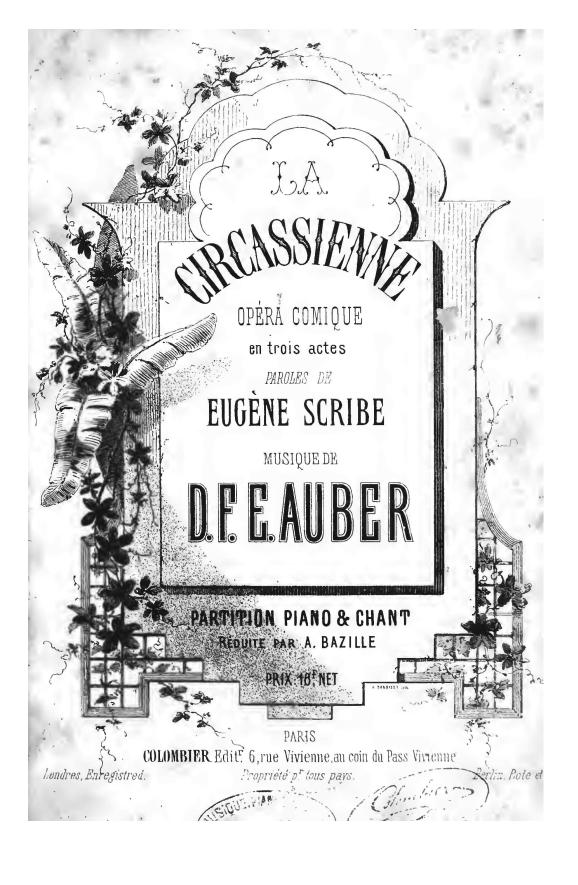
In act 2 the chorus of odalisques is delightful: the composer had never written anything more vaporous and ethereal. Indeed, *La Circassienne* provides a mixture of some fine late harmonic thoughtfulness, and also some routine application, as in the repetitions of rhythmic patterns that can seem a weakness ("Si son oeil reconnaît sous ce voile", act 2). In act 3 the couplets for the painter Lanskoi ("Il aime trop") are written with malicious finesse, and were encored.

The orchestration is a constant feast for the ear, coupled as it is with a most original and penetrating harmony. This sense of heightened expression is part of the slightly extended or Mannerist tendency discernible in this work. It is nowhere better illustrated than in the vocal writing for the two principal roles.

The part of Alexis with its ambiguous transvestism finds a vocal correlative in its very high tessitura, with an almost exaggerated extension in alt. For example, in the act 1 quartet the tenor is required to produce high A's, B's and C's consistently with a demand for high D and E-flat in the cadenza. Montaubry excelled in creating the unusual role of Alexis, thanks to his slight physique and head notes. Few tenors could have tackled this as victoriously as he did.

The role of Olga is also extremely demanding. In her act 3 duet with Alexis ("Dieu daigne m'entendre") she is asked often to reach high C and even D. And in both No. 14 (Choeur et Air) and No. 16 (Air—"Triste destinée") Auber has written a very florid line with 30 concluding bars of pure *vocalise*.

The original cast was: Achille-Félix Montaubry (Alexis); Mlle Monrose (Olga); Barielle (Orsakoff); Joseph-Antoine-Charles Couderc (Lanskoi); Eugène-Louis Troy (Aboul Kasim); Charles-Francois Duvernoy (Soltikoff, a Russian captain); Ambroise (Perod, a Russian brigadier); Davoust (Irak, one of his officers); Paul-Pierre Laget (Boudour, a eunuch); and Mlles Prost and Bousquet (Zoloé and Neïla, wives of Aboul Kasim). The work was in the repertoire for the year of 1861 only, achieving a total of 49 performances. Perhaps because of its rather ambiguous subject matter, the opera did not enjoy further productions outside Paris. An English vocal score (translated by T. Oliphant) was published in 1861. But for all its risqué implications, this libretto was set with great success by Franz von Suppé for Vienna in 1876, under the title of *Fatinitza*. The situation became the subject of litigation on the part of the widowed Mme Scribe.



# LA CIRCASSIENNE

Musique de D. F. E. AUBER.

PERSONNAGES.	A	CTEURS.
LE PRINCE ORSAKOFF, général russe	M <sup>f</sup>	BARDELLE.
OLGA, sa pupille	$\mathbf{M}_{\mathbf{m}\alpha}$	MONROSE.
ALEXIS ZOUBOFF, sous Lientenand	MM	MONTAURRY.
SOLTIKOFF, capitaine		DUYERNOY
LANSKOI, peinfre de la cour		COUDERC.
PÉROD, brigadier russe		AMBROISE.
ABOUL-KAZIM, chef circassien		TROY.
YRAK, officier circassien		DAVIST.
PAULAND 4er		LAGLT
Z0L0É) (	Allez	BOUSQUET.
ZOLOÉ } femmes d'Aboul-kazim		PROST.
Officiers et soldets russes et Circassiens.		

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## LA CIRCASSIENNE

Opéra Comique en 3 Actes.

Musique de D. F. E. AUBER.



























N° 1.







