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David Vaughan on Emmanuel Chabrier

Cover: Marie-Jeanne in *Ballet Imperial*,
courtesy of Dwight Godwin.

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Cover: Marie-Jeanne in *Ballet Imperial*, courtesy of Dwight Godwin.

Emmanuel Chabrier et Moi

David Vaughan

Some people who know me well are aware that I adore the music of Emmanuel Chabrier. Like someone in love, I try to introduce his name into conversation whenever I can. I have what is probably one of the largest collections of records of his music in the United States, including a dozen different performances of his piano music and three different versions each of his operas *L'Étoile* and *Une Éducation Manquée*. I go everywhere to see his operas: I happened to be at the Edinburgh Festival with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company in 1994 and stayed on for two Opera North productions, *L'Étoile* and *Le Roi Malgré Lui*. I once took a train across France to catch a production in Strasbourg of *Une Éducation Manquée* (it was terrible). I went from London to Paris in 1984 to see *L'Étoile* at the Opéra-Comique. In 2001 going to the Glimmerglass Opera, also for *L'Étoile*, a shared production with New York City Opera, was nothing.

So when I arrived in Paris, again with MCDC, on December 1, 2007, and found that there was to be a new production of this *opéra bouffe*, again at the Opéra-Comique, my appetite was whetted. But I soon learned that it was to open on the day we were due to leave, the 13th. Then I found out more: there was to be almost a little Chabrier festival around this production, with an exhibition, recitals of other music, readings, and a concert performance of two other short operettas. There was nothing for it – I had to come back, at Christmas but not for Christmas, for Chabrier.

Why this strange, inordinate passion, amounting almost to an obsession, for a nineteenth-century composer of what is often considered mere light music? Not by everybody:

he is thought by many to be the link between eighteenth-century French composers such as Rameau and Couperin, and later ones like Debussy and Ravel, both of whom revered his music, as did Erik Satie, Reynaldo Hahn, and Francis Poulenc (who wrote a book about him).¹ The English composer Constant Lambert, in his “study of music in decline,” *Music Ho!*, wrote “As an harmonic innovator, his influence . . . is no less far reaching than that of Glinka. . . . Above all, Chabrier holds one’s affection as the most genuinely French of all composers. . . . He was the first important composer since Mozart to show that seriousness is not the same as solemnity, that profundity is not dependent upon length, that wit is not always the same as buffoonery, and that frivolity and beauty are not necessarily enemies.”²

“Affection,” that is an important word. “Musique adorable” are the first words in Chabrier’s sublime choral work *Ode à la Musique*, and Graham Johnson, in his *A French Song Companion*, calls him “this adorable man,” a short, jovial, rather tubby fellow of provincial origins with a Rabelaisian sense of humor – passing the asparagus to the Princesse de Polignac at a dinner party, he warned her of the effect it would have on her urine.³

A devoted husband and father, he was also very much involved in the cultural life of his time, the friend not only of other composers, but also of poets such as Paul Verlaine and painters such as Edouard Manet – Chabrier owned his great *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère* (of which more later), now in the Courtauld Institute in London; his portrait of Chabrier is in the Fogg Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Chabrier can be seen among the group of *flâneurs* in his *Masked Ball at the Opera* in the National Gallery in Washington. (Chabrier is also seen at the piano in Fantin-Latour’s *Autour du Piano*, in the Musée du Jeu de Paume in Paris, and peering over the edge of a box at the dancers



onstage in Degas' painting of the orchestra at the Paris Opera, in the Musée d'Orsay.)⁴ Among my own treasured possessions is a lithograph by the poster artist Jules Chéret, a music cover for Emil Waldteufel's *España, Suite de Valses*, based on themes from Chabrier's rhapsody of that name – but also, oddly enough, from *Une Éducation Manquée*. (This was given to me by James Waring.)

And, of course, there is the music itself. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* speaks of the combination of “verve and tenderness” in his music, but there is also an undercurrent of melancholy, even of *lachrymae rerum* in his sudden surprising modulations, which Ravel captured so truly in his homage *À la Manière de . . . Chabrier*. His music can be sensual, too, almost erotic, as in the Barcarolle “O Venise la Blonde” in *Le Roi Malgré Lui*, with its positively coital sighs, or the “Quatuor des Baisers” (“Quartet of Kisses”) in *L'Étoile*. Or it can be funny, as in the *Joyeuse Marche*, which made the musicians in the first orchestra to play it laugh out loud, or in *Souvenirs de Munich*, the Quadrille on themes from, of all operas, *Tristan und Isolde*. When Chabrier first heard it, he experienced an epiphany, but it is significant that the most Chabrieresque of his compositions inspired by it is not the quasi-Wagnerian opera *Gwendoline* but the hilarious Quadrille.

Then there are the songs, such as the farmyard melodies, celebrating little ducks, fat turkeys, pink pigs, and especially the delicious “Les Cigales,” with its accompaniment imitating the continuous chirrup of the cicadas in summer in the south of France.

A fantastic pianist, when Chabrier played his *Bourrée Fantasque* or just improvised, he slammed his fist or his elbow or his forearm on the keys, almost destroying the piano, like a forerunner of John Cage, David Tudor, or even Nam June Paik.

He was, incidentally, the exact contemporary of Tchaikovsky: they were born and died in the same year. I can't help wondering if they ever heard any of each other's music.

★

Chabrier himself never composed a ballet, unlike his contemporaries Delibes, Lalo, Massenet, Messager, and Saint-Saëns, but there was a dance connection in his background: he was born in the region of the Auvergne, “a part of France,” according to his biographer Rollo Myers, “in which the dance has always been cultivated . . . and its traditional features jealously preserved,” especially the “Bourrée d'Auvergne” itself, the inspiration for the *Bourrée Fantasque*.⁵ Also the rhapsody *España*, his first big success, was informed by his intensive study of flamenco on a trip to Spain. The second act of *Le Roi Malgré Lui*, of course, opens with the big waltz-mazurka *Fête Polonaise*, and there are balletic titles among the piano pieces, “Air de Ballet” and “Ballabile.” (Another excerpt from *Le Roi*, played under the title *Danse Russe*, is not in fact a dance number in the opera.)

As early as 1911 a Chabrier ballet, *España*, to the rhapsody of that name and probably other pieces, was given at the Paris Opera half a dozen times, with Carlotta Zambelli in the leading role. The libretto, a complicated story to judge by the names of the characters, was by Jane Catulle-Mendès, presumably a relative of the poet responsible for the lugubrious libretto of *Gwendoline* (see below), and the choreography a joint effort by the Spanish ballerina Rosita Mauri and the ever-intriguing Léo Staats.

More promising, perhaps, was the idea proposed to Diaghilev by Erik Satie and Georges Braque, a ballet to be called *Quadrille*, to the *Souvenirs de Munich* and the similar work that Gabriel Fauré and André Messager, not to be outdone, concocted on themes from *The Ring*, *Souvenirs de Bayreuth* (not quite as funny). Unfortunately, Diaghilev didn't pick it up.⁶ He did commission Ravel's orchestration of Chabrier's “Menuet pompeux” for a ballet to be called *Les Jardins d'Aranjuez*, in 1918, to a strange pot-pourri of music (the other pieces were Fauré's *Pavane* and Ravel's own *Alborada del Gracioso*). This ballet appears not to have materialized, although the Ravel scholar Arbie Orenstein categorically states the date of its

first performance, July 18, 1919, at the Alhambra Theatre in London. Perhaps it was a *pièce d'occasion*?⁷

I think my first exposure to Chabrier's music was in a ballet that I saw in May 1939, two weeks after my fifteenth birthday, when I went for the first time to see Ballet Rambert in the little Mercury Theatre in Notting Hill Gate: Ninette de Valois' *Bar aux Folies-Bergère* (her only ballet for Rambert). The music was a selection from the *Dix Pièces Pittoresques* for piano, chosen by Lambert, who would have played the piano in early performances.

The ballet opened with a *tableau vivant* of Manet's painting, with Elisabeth Schooling (when I saw it), a dead ringer for his Barmaid, bored, polishing a glass, to the "Mélancolie." The can-can dancers arrived, coming through the audience at the Mercury, more Toulouse-Lautrec than Manet. (I painted a picture of this at school, which won a prize – I asked

for Arnold Haskell's *Ballet Panorama*.) Originally Frederick Ashton was the waiter, Valentin; probably Walter Gore when I saw it. The can-can dancers performed to the "Menuet Pompeux," led by La Goulue, originally Alicia Markova, Maude Lloyd when I first saw it. In the middle section she danced a solo in which she nodded to right and left to two notes at the end of a phrase. My memory of the ballet is tied to the music.⁸

Balanchine's legendary *Cotillon* (1932) was danced to some of the same music, orchestrated – unseen by me, but imagined, thanks to A. V. Coton's evocative phrase "the sense of sweet sin, the aura of the fatal ballroom." (The attempted reconstruction by the Joffrey Ballet failed to recapture its decadent perfume. A staging of the "Hand of Fate" pas de deux, to the "Idylle," by Tulsa Ballet Theatre, came closer.) Balanchine, of course, returned to the composer in *Bourrée Fantasque* (1949),



Cotillon: Lubov Rostova and David Lichine. (Photo: Dance Division, NYPL)

which Lincoln Kirstein told me was “about New York nightclubs.” The first movement, to the eponymous *Bourrée*, featured the sublime clowning of Tanaquil Le Clercq and Jerome Robbins as her undersized partner (a joke that has been overworked since then, as in MacMillan’s *Elite Syncopations*). The second, to the prelude to act 2 of *Gwendoline*, was perhaps the first, certainly the best, of Balanchine’s treatments of the theme boy meets girl/boy is prevented from reaching girl by the corps de ballet/boy loses girl. Some of that evanescent perfume was there, particularly when danced by Maria Tallchief and Nicholas Magallanes (with others, the number sometimes got laughs). Third and last, the *Fête Polonaise*, from *Le Roi*, was one of the most ingenious examples of Balanchine’s “organized chaos” finales, or, as he himself said, “applause machines.” In 1976 Balanchine staged the whole opera at Juilliard, conducted by the great Manuel Rosenthal, but the staging was generally feeble, and the *Fête Polonaise*, danced by students from the School of American Ballet, was just plain chaos.

Balanchine had tried again with Chabrier when he choreographed all three of the *Trois Valses Romantiques* (the third was part of the score for *Cotillon*) in 1967, a minor work that didn’t last very long in the repertory of New York City Ballet. There have been others, even more minor, by Gerald Arpino and Eliot Feld. I even made a Chabrier ballet myself in 1955, mostly to piano pieces nobody else had used, danced by people who were then fellow students at the School of American Ballet, including Francia Russell, Anne Boley, and Anthony Blum. Jimmy Waring dyed (as exquisitely as only he could) the girls’ costumes, based on the one worn by Degas’ little danseuse.

Constant Lambert always wanted a Chabrier ballet for the Sadler’s Wells Ballet; it was one of his suggestions when funds from the defunct Camargo Society were donated to the Wells for a new ballet. It would have been nice if Ashton had made such a piece, but in



Bourrée Fantasque: Tanaquil Le Clercq and Jerome Robbins. (Photo: George Platt Lynes, courtesy of the estate of the photographer)

the event the new ballet was one to music by another of Lambert’s (and his own) favorites, Liszt: *Apparitions*. Lambert got his wish finally in 1950, when Roland Petit as a guest choreographer made *Ballabile*, to piano pieces orchestrated by Lambert himself, as well as *España*, if I remember correctly – another ballet that didn’t last very long, undone by Petit’s typically overly schematic choreography.

*

But it was as a composer of operas that Chabrier really sought fame. The dispute over the

relative importance of words and music that is the subject of Richard Strauss's *Capriccio* is won hands down by the music in Chabrier's operas. *L'Étoile*, the first to be completed, had a more or less typical *opéra bouffe* libretto by Eugène Leterrier and Albert Vanloo, who had worked successfully with Charles Lecocq on two of his operettas. Even so, it is not exactly easy to follow.

The principal characters are the Ubuesque King Ouf the First and a peddler (don't ask) named Lazouli, the latter a trouser role for a soprano. One of the numbers was adapted from one of Chabrier's early attempts, the unfinished *Fisch-Ton-Kan*, with words by Verlaine: the "Couplets du Pal" (impalement), which in Verlaine's version seems to extol the pleasures of anal penetration. Leterrier and Vanloo cleaned it up a bit, but it's still rather curious. Be that as it may, *L'Étoile* was a hit in 1877 – but then it was withdrawn after forty-eight performances for no good reason.

It was not revived until 1941, in celebration of Chabrier's centenary, at the Opéra-Comique, when it must have cheered Parisians then living under the German occupation. Some of this performance was recorded; even better was a radio performance in Geneva in the same year, under Ernest Ansermet, with two great singers, Ninon Vallin, then fifty-five, as Lazouli, and Hugues Cuenod as Ouf. This, luckily, was recorded and is available on CD. *L'Étoile* is now the most frequently revived of Chabrier's stage works. Some of the music is ravishing, such as the duet for soprano and mezzo-soprano trying to awaken the sleeping Lazouli by tickling him, "Il faut le chatouiller."

The same writers supplied the libretto for the one-act *Une Éducation Manquée* in 1879, the most nearly perfect of Chabrier's lyric works, a little naughty but not indelicate: a young couple on their wedding night are hoping for instruction in the facts of life, which is not forthcoming; the problem is solved when a sudden thunderstorm frightens the bride and drives her into her husband's arms, and they find themselves "doing what comes natural-

ly." Again the role of the husband is sung by a woman, a mezzo-soprano this time. Diaghilev presented *Une Éducation Manquée* in Monte Carlo in 1924, in a season of short operas, this one staged by Alexandre Benois and designed by Juan Gris. (The overture was later included among the "Symphonic Interludes" played at intermissions of the Ballets Russes.) Darius Milhaud set the spoken dialogue to music and interpolated an aria for the bride, but Milhaud, unfortunately, was no Chabrier.

Next came *Gwendoline*, as I have said the product of Chabrier's enthusiasm for the music of Wagner, which he hoped would be performed at the Paris Opera, but which had its premiere at the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels in 1886. It was well received, and was subsequently performed with success in various cities in Germany, who no doubt responded positively to its Wagnerian character.

The following year *Le Roi Malgré Lui* was performed for the first time at the Opéra-Comique, getting a little closer, but again the run was cut short, when the theater burned down. Musically it is a masterpiece, but the libretto is incomprehensible; for the Opera North production in 1994 Jeremy Sams, whose English translation of *L'Étoile* is frequently used, wrote a completely new libretto – not just new lyrics, but a whole new story, a brave attempt, not entirely successful. The best solution no doubt is a concert performance such as Leon Botstein conducted with the American Symphony Orchestra in 2005, when you don't have to worry about the plot.

*

L'Étoile in December 2007 was staged by Jérôme Deschamps, newly appointed director of the Opéra-Comique, together with his usual collaborator Macha Makeïeff, who also designed the pretty decors and costumes, and conducted by John Eliot Gardiner, a Chabrier specialist – he conducted the 1984 production. This latter is available on both CD and DVD; his recording of orchestral and vocal works is one of the best versions of Chabrier's music on disc. For this new production

the orchestra was Gardiner's Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique, with his Monteverdi Choir as the chorus. (Deschamps' poli-

cy is to bring in orchestras, conductors, and soloists rather than having a resident company: a forthcoming production of Hérold's



L'Etoile. (Photo: Eric Mahoudeau, Opéra-Comique)

Zampa will be performed by Les Arts Florissants under William Christie, no less.) To tell the truth, Chabrier's ravishing orchestrations

sounded a little thin at times as played by "original" instruments, whatever they are in this case. No doubt this performance will



soon be available on disc – it was broadcast live during the run.

Deschamps is one of the most innovative theater directors in France today, known for his wordless spectacles. (Not for nothing is he the nephew of Jacques Tati.) He is to be congratulated for respecting the traditions of *opéra bouffe* in this staging; in the original libretto the setting is vaguely oriental – here the costumes were more or less contemporary, as usual today, but the action was still set in an imaginary kingdom, not in a shopping mall or something. He also resisted the temptation to stage a dumb show to the overture, as so often is done nowadays, although there was some very funny pantomime replacing the dialogue of the Chief of Police. (I could have done without the mime who followed the King around.)

There is, of course, no ballet as such in the piece, but there was a group of five danseuses, led by their choreographer, Alice Crousset, threading their way through the action. This was unobjectionable, in fact I loved the moment when they formed a star configuration reminiscent of Balanchine's sunburst in *Apollo*. Stéphanie d'Oustrac, as Lazouli, at one point proved to be an accomplished juggler.

In general the production was far better than in 1984. Perhaps d'Oustrac and Jean-Luc Viala, the King Ouf, were not the equals of Vallin and Cuenod, or of Michel Sénéchal, the Ouf in a 1981 private recording, but they were as good as you can find nowadays. It was astonishing to read a review in *Le Monde* that found the music itself inferior to that in similar works by Offenbach, Messager, Hahn (who was among those who called *L'Étoile* a masterpiece), and Louis Beydts, whoever that might be (he doesn't rate an entry in *Grove*) – astonishing to think that in 2008 one has to defend Chabrier against the kind of criticism he sometimes received in his lifetime.⁹

Admittedly, as in all his lyric works, the libretto has problems, but the glory is in the melodies, the exquisite orchestrations, the wit and beauty of the vocal settings (especially for women's voices) – he has a way of chop-

ping up words, as in “chartreus' ver [pause] te.” Had the writer forgotten that Chabrier was admired by all his contemporaries, and by those who came after him? Debussy loved to play the piano score of *L'Étoile*, singing all the parts. Many people have pointed out that “the unrelated and unresolved chords of the seventh and the ninth” in the opening bars of *Le Roi* were echoed soon afterward in Satie's *Sarabande*. Even Stravinsky, it has been said, was influenced by the clangorous beginning of the first of the *Valses Romantiques* in that of *Les Noces*.

The Opéra-Comique/Salle Favart, itself, by the way, has been beautifully renovated, a jewel of the Second Empire, with lovely murals, ceilings, sculptures, even tiled floors. The exhibition of “Chabrier et la Vie Parisienne,” such as it was, consisted of framed displays with reproductions of relevant paintings; one of the best things about it was that in order to see it one had to explore various levels of the building. Some concerts took place in a small salon, the Salle Bizet, on a lower level: an excellent recital of music for two pianos or piano duet by the sisters Lidija and Sanja Bizjak included the *Trois Valses Romantiques* and the *Souvenirs de Munich* (as well as those of *Bayreuth*). Strangely, few of the audience seemed to get the joke in the latter work, judging by their unsmiling faces. They certainly laughed in a reading of Chabrier's letters; here of course the wit was verbal, although with amusing interventions by the *artiste lyrique* Nicole Monestier, including a rousing performance of the vocal version of *España* as the finale.¹⁰

I had to miss a concert of his songs, which happened before I got to Paris, and an orchestral concert in which in fact none of Chabrier's music was played – it included two ballet scores, Debussy's *Jeux* and Ravel's *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales* (orchestrated for a ballet). Another ballet score that was played, on the afternoon of Christmas Day chiefly as an event for children, was Debussy's *La Boîte à Joujoux* (1913), arranged for wind quintet and harp, with a narration spoken by the captivating Metropolitan Opera star Natalie Dessay.

The connection to Chabrier here seemed remote – as far as I know, the ballet was not produced until Jean Borlin choreographed it for the Ballets Suédois in 1919.

The other event on Christmas Day was a concert performance of the enchanting *saynète* (playlet) *Une Éducation Manquée*, including the above-mentioned interpolation by Milhaud. The innocent newlyweds were delightfully sung by Olivia Deray as the bride and Jennifer Tani as the groom. It was preceded by an arrangement of the early operetta *Fisch-Ton-Kan* (minus the more scabrous lyrics by Verlaine), which exists only in fragments but in this version proved to be a viable work, and by a new orchestration of the *Bourrée Fantasque*

by Thibault Perrine, based on sketches by the composer, lighter in texture than the standard orchestration by Felix Mottl. (It was repeated as an encore.) This concert, enthusiastically conducted by the young Benjamin Levy, was a tremendously enjoyable conclusion to the mini-festival.

Chabrier's wish to see one of his operas at the Paris Opera was finally fulfilled when *Gwendoline* was produced there in December 1893. But by then he was too ill to recognize his own music. He died in September 1894 of complications from syphilis, then incurable. He was fifty-four. The lesson of his life and his music is that happiness is fleeting, so catch it while you may.

NOTES

1. Francis Poulenc, *Emmanuel Chabrier*, trans. Cynthia Jolly (London: Dobson, 1981).

2. Constant Lambert, *Music Ho! A Study of Music in Decline* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), pp. 194-95.

3. Graham Johnson and Richard Stokes, *A French Song Companion* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 62ff.

4. See Roger Delage, ed., *Chabrier: Livre Bilingue* (Geneva: Minkoff, 1982).

5. Rollo Myers, *Emmanuel Chabrier and His Circle* (London: Dent, 1969), p. x.

6. Erik Satie, *Correspondance Presque Complète*,

ed. Ornella Volta (Paris: Fayard, 2000), p. 705.

7. Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel, Man and Musician* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), and *A Ravel Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 191.

8. See Beth Genné, *The Making of a Choreographer: Ninette de Valois and Bar aux Folies-Bergère*, *Studies in Dance History*, No. 12, 1996.

9. Renaud Marchart, *Pâle 'Etoile' à l'Opéra-Comique*, *Le Monde*, December 15, 2007.

10. Chabrier's letters have been published in French: *Correspondance* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1995).