

Adolphe Adam,  
Master of the Opéra-  
Comique, 1824-1856



# Adolphe Adam, Master of the Opéra- Comique, 1824-1856

By

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Frontispiece: Adolphe-Charles Adam, seated. Lithograph



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    11. [Brenna], (d'après l'Orgueil), Mlle L. Marquet
    12. Le dieu Loki
    13. Islandaise, Mlle Laurent. Manteau islandais
    14. Tambour magique des prêtres de Loki
    15. Walkyries. Nornes. [Casque]
    16. Mlle Caroline - lithographe Alexandre Lacauchie
    17. Mlle Cerrito - lithographe Alexandre Lacauchie
    18. Habitante du cratère (d'après la Luxure)
    19. Odin
    20. *Orfa* Scènes principales du ballet - Édouard Riou and Jahyer
- 
37. *Le Corsaire*
    1. *Le Corsaire* Affiche - lithographe Henri Emy
    2. Segarelli, rôle de Conrad - lithographe Alexandre Lacauchie
    3. Segarelli, rôle de Conrad - lithographe Alexandre Lacauchie 2
    4. Mme Rosati, rôle de Médora - lithographe Alexandre Lacauchie
    5. Carolina Rosati 2
    6. Mlle Legrain, acte 1er - lithographe Alexandre Lacauchie
    7. Acte I, t 1 - esquisse de décor - Hugues Martin
    8. Acte I, t 2 - 2
    9. Acte I, t 2 - esquisse de décor - Hugues Martin
    10. Acte II - palais du Pacha dans l'île de Cos - bains de femmes au milieu de magnifiques jardins - maquette de décor en volume - Edouard Despléchin 11
    11. Acte III, t 1 - esquisse de décor - Charles Cambon
    12. Estampe 1
    13. Estampe 2

14. Maquette de costume - Alfred Albert - Pacha
15. Almées
16. Espagnole
17. Algérienne
18. Danseuse persane
19. Bayadère de Chemakha (Caucase)
20. Nègre, suite du pacha
21. Quelques croquis sur *Le Corsaire* à l'Opéra - estampe Félix Y. 1867
22. Acte II - maquette de décor en volume - Edouard Despléchin
23. Acte II - maquette de décor en volume - Edouard Despléchin
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26. Adam *Le Corsaire* Valse
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## INTRODUCTION

This book is devoted to the heritage of Adolphe-Charles Adam (1803-1856), the composer of the ever-popular *Giselle* and the moving Christmas anthem “Minuit chrétiens”. He also wrote some overtures that are still played, especially the beautiful *Si j’etai roi*. But these are only pinnacles in musical life rich in achievement for the stage, both lyric and danced. With Adrien Boieldieu, Ferdinand Hérold and Daniel-Francois-Esprit Auber, Adam was the most successful representative of the second Golden Age of the French *opéra-comique* (1810-1860) and the greatest exponent of the French Romantic Ballet (1830-1870). His musical heritage contains immense unfathomed riches of operatic and balletic art, waiting for rediscovery and reassessment. In France his work was much loved into the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when tastes changed so much in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Apart from *Giselle* still integral to all balletic repertoires, for the French it was the opera *Le Chalet* (1831) that became almost part of the national consciousness (with some 1500 performances until 1950). For the wider world, especially in Germany, the work that keeps his memory evergreen is the totally delightful *Le Postillon de Lonjumeau* with its extraordinary vocal apprehension, bounty of affecting melody and splendid orchestral writing. It is a work with an incredibly rich association with the tenor voice (especially for artists like Nicolai Gedda, John Aler and Michael Spyres in own days).

Adam’s fourteen ballets are filled with musical riches, boundless melodic imagination, dramatic power and the most extraordinary orchestral facility. The late 1820s saw a renaissance of the ballet in Paris, especially with Hérold’s three works *La Somnambule* (1827), *La Fille mal gardée* (1828) and *La Belle au bois dormant* (1829). The Taglionis father and daughter (Filippo and Marie) had also arrived in Paris. The scene was set for great developments with the birth of the white Romantic ballet in Meyerbeer’s *Robert le Diable* (1831) and Schneitzhoeffler’s *La Sylphide* (1832). *La Fille du Danube* (1836) for Marie Taglioni saw the beginning of Adam’s unique contribution to the development of the genre with the masterpiece of this type *Giselle* (1841). Adam’s other works make a varied and splendid contribution. They will one day form a unique collection on their own. The great conductor Richard Bonyge made recordings of the original score of *Giselle*, also of the comic *Le Diable à quatre* and the

sweepingly sublime *Le Corsaire*; Andrew Mongrelia committed *La Jolie Fille de Gand* and *Les Filleule des fées* to disc. Now Dario Salvi is working on restoring more of this barely known side of Adam's entrancing art. Adam wrote at the aegis of the Romantic ballet, and with the cooperation of some of the greatest legends of ballet history: the choreographer Joseph Mazillier (3 works), and dancers like Marie Taglioni (3 works), Carlotta Grisi (5 works) and Lucien Petipa (7 works).

But it is particularly his 42 *opéras-comiques* that made Adam's musical reputation and secure his place in operatic history. As with Auber and Meyerbeer, to know Adam's operas is to enter the world of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century theatre Paris with its magnificent houses representing such great traditions, and its countless theatres devoted to dramatic art of all kinds. From the very beginning of his career, Adam was part of the very lifeblood of the stage, both in Paris (the Théâtre des Nouveautés) and for a while in London (the King's Theatre) before the doors of the Opéra-Comique opened to him and the succession of precise and accomplished operas he wrote for this house and its venerable traditions. Adam's work in ballet meant that he was also integral to the great Romantic traditions of the Opéra in the period 1830-1860. The freshness and clarity of Adam's musical imagination in his best works, his control of form and powerful sense of orchestration, brought him great success. It is difficult to understand the judgment of one of his contemporaries:

*M. Adam n'est pas l'artiste à la recherche des choses curieuses, intéressantes, que vous fait trouver l'étude du contre-point; c'est le compositeur des idées reçues, adoptées; c'est l'homme de la mesure bourgeoise: sa partition a obtenu du succès dans cette forme d'idées.*

Mr. Adam is not the artist looking for those curious, interesting things that the study of counterpoint generates for us; he represents the composer of preconceived, adopted ideas; he is a man of bourgeois measure: his scores have achieved success through this form of ideas.

Adam's best works call this reductive opinion into powerful question.

Adam also knew instinctively how to write for the voice, and fully in the traditions of the lyric stage of his time. Adam's teacher was the famed Adrien Boieldieu. He was, moreover, friends of Hérold (before the latter's untimely death), with Auber and Halévy, and also with the great librettists of the day: St Georges (5 texts for Adam), de Leuven & Brunswick (9 texts), and the great Scribe (10 libretti).



It was the illustrious librettist Eugene Scribe who fixed the formula for the second great flowering of the *opéra-comique* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in two seminal works in 1825: *La Dame blanche* and *Le Maçon*. Many of the traditions of the former era were continued: spoken dialogue alternating with specially composed music pieces; a fairly light, often overtly comic plot, with a happy ending. The music was invariably composed with two principal characters in mind: the soprano (*première chanteuse de roulades*); and the light tenor (*tenor léger*). The genre was devised essentially as an entertainment for the petit bourgeois. Major characters were immediately identifiable as types, with psychological development invariably limited by this generic insistence. All important plot climaxes and turning points were always set to music. The four great representatives of this type—Boieldieu, Hérold, Auber and Adam—all wrote in this specialized form of music required by the drama. A major external influence came in the person of Gioacchino Rossini who arrived in Paris in 1824. He produced his first adaptation from the Italian in *Le Siège de Corinthe* in 1826, and wrote an *opéra-comique* *Le Comte Ory* (1828) based on the occasional piece he had composed for the coronation of Charles X (*Il viaggio a Reims*, 1825). Rossini's importation of the severe and subtle demands of *bel canto* singing confronted French singers with vocal style that required almost a re-training on the part of many. This resulted in a much needed improvement in the vocal standards of the Opéra (and other theatres) where a troupe of brilliantly talented vocal artists now in their turn established a style and accomplishment that was the inspiration to the composers who followed.

Rossini's profound belief in and love of the human voice was passed on to the composer's of *opéra-comique*. Auber in his early *Le Concert à la cour* (1823) had already demonstrated his involvement with the refined and virtuoso style of singing for the soprano. Concern with the voice now became a feature of the composers who wrote for *opéra-comique*. The principal characteristic distinguishing this genre from the derivative form of *opérette* and *opéra-bouffe* was is the demanding nature of the music written for highly talented singers. The lead soprano is invariably required to be the said *première chanteuse de roulades*, a coloratura soprano. The leading male singer was invariably the said *tenor léger* whose abilities were also derived from the early *bel canto* tradition. This had been fostered by the example of the castrati who had also served widely as vocal teachers. Tenors schooled in this tradition learned to use the head voice and falsetto in a vocal mixture (*voix mixte*) that enabled the most talented to employ embellishment, cadences, *portamento*, roulades, trills and turns that had characterized the singing of the castrati. The growing

importance of dramatic singing for the tenor (as with Domenico Donzelli in Italy and Adolphe Nourrit in France) also marked the beginnings of a changing style. The production of the light head voice was shattered by Gilbert-Louis Duprez who was the first to sing high C (C6) from the chest. The principal *tenor léger* during the high period of the *opéra-comique* was Jean-Baptist Chollet (1798-1892) who was able to produce extremely high notes in the light head voice with great ease, a facility which made him great favourite with the public, and saw some of the most famous roles of the genre written for him: Auber's *Fra Diavolo*, Hérold's *Zampa* and Adam's *Chappelou*—the Postillion of *Lonjumeau*.

In the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century *opéra-comique* was caught in the middle between serious opera (with the emergent influence of Wagnerian music drama), and the growing popularity of *opérette* / *opéra-bouffe* developed by Jacques Offenbach (with satirization of the musical and dramatic conventions of both serious and comic genres). The move to a more earnest subject matter and corresponding adjustment of form is exemplified in two of the most famous of all French operas, Gounod's *Faust* (based on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1859) and Bizet's *Carmen* (derived from Prosper Mérimée, 1875). Both works started life as *opéras-comiques* with spoken dialogue, but both were rapidly transformed into serious operas with recitatives: *Faust*, premiered at the Théâtre-Lyrique, was provided with recitatives within the year; *Carmen*, with its naturalistic challenges to the conventions of the Opéra-Comique, was after the composer's death reworked as a grand opera with recitatives by Ernest Guiraud.

Changes in musical and literary style and taste in France underscore the perception of vocal production and voice types. A social phenomenon saw the best of the *opéras-comiques* by Boieldieu, Hérold, Auber and Adam travel to Germany where they achieved great popularity—sustained into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The tradition of the *Singspiel*, from Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (1785) through to Lortzing and Nicolai, remained a deeply popular tradition into which the *opéra-comique* could naturally and effortlessly fit. The enduring vogue for *Der Postillon von Lonjumeau* can in part be attributed to the celebrated tenor Theodor Wächel (1823-1893), who fortuitously started life as a stable-boy before becoming famous as a singer, and sang the role more than a thousand times in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Adam died at the early age of 53. His life had its share of stress and disappointment. His childhood and adolescence were marked by the fierce

opposition of his parents to musical career for their son. His schooling was personally traumatic; his early career interrupted by the 1830 Revolution and refuge in England with his brother-in-law. His first marriage to Sara Lescot (1829-1851), a member of the chorus at the Théâtre des Nouveautés, was unwise and deeply unhappy. An honorific invitation to visit Russia was overshadowed by potentially fatal illness. Eventually opposition from the management of the Opéra-Comique led him to found his own theatre the Opéra National which was reduced to financial ruin by the 1848 Revolution. Adam's last years, despite his happy, second marriage to Louise Chérie Couraud (n.d.), were very stressful as he worked to pay off the vast debt of his bankruptcy. His abilities as a writer emerged from this trauma: he turned most successfully to musical criticism in his travails to generate an income. He did enjoy great artistic recognition throughout his career, however, and especially in his last year before his premature demise—no doubt brought on by years of emotional stress and exhausting labours, including the suicide of his son Louis. He emerges as a gentle figure, always kind and longsuffering. His friendship with Donizetti in the latter's last years in Paris is most touching. Adam, like Donizetti, lived only for his art that continues to delight, the legacy of which is always revealing new treasures.



## ADOLPHE ADAM

Adolphe Adam was born in Paris on 24 July 1803. His name survives today through several works and for some people is immediately associated with a church canticle, the celebrated “Minuit, chrétiens”. For others it evokes the renowned Romantic ballet *Giselle*; while for the admirers of *opéra-comique*, *Le Chalet* is considered a small masterpiece; and *Si j’étais roi* and *Le Postillon de Lonjumeau* are always heard with pleasure. A contemporary of Auber and Hérold,<sup>1</sup> Adam did not tackle serious opera, which was not really made for him, but flourished in the lighter genre out of which operetta was born.

His father, Jean-Louis Adam (1758-1848), of Alsatian origin, was the founder of the French School of piano playing.

After a reversal of fortunes in his family, the young Adam worked to pay for a course in music, first as triangle-player, then as timpanist, and later as a chorus director, while selling some romances for four *sous* to some small publications. Admitted to the Conservatoire in 1817, he worked rather negligently until Boïeldieu took him into his class and taught him to write music that was clear, lively, and gracious.

As he wanted to follow a career in the theatre, Adam arranged to work in the orchestra of the Gymnase, where he was able to learn the functioning of his craft: musical writing, orchestra, singers, and public reaction.

Adam became known through a serious piece, *Pierre et Catherine*, which had 36 performances at the Opéra-Comique. The success of this Russian subject suggested a second Russian theme in three acts, *Danilowa*, whose success was interrupted by the Revolution of 1830. During this troubled period, Adam wrote half a dozen more small works before seeking refuge in England with his brother-in-law, the director of the Covent Garden Theatre. He composed two operas for Covent Garden and the French Theatre in London: *His First Campaign* was a success, but *The Dark Diamond* had only three performances. He also produced his second ballet, *Faust*, at the King’s Theatre (his first, *La Chatte blanche*, was given at the Nouveautés in 1832).

Adam's first great success, and his most enduring, was an *opéra-comique* in one act, *Le Chalet*, composed to a libretto by Eugène Scribe. The first performance was at the Opéra-Comique on 25 September 1834.

The success of this work was almost surpassed by that of *Le Postillon de Lonjumeau*, *opéra-comique* in three acts, given two years later at the same theatre. This work has more or less remained in the repertoire, and was received with even greater success abroad. In 1839, Adam travelled to St Petersburg at the invitation of Tsar Nicholas I, who wanted to hear *Le Brasseur de Preston*, and also because of the famous Marie Taglioni, for whom Adam had composed the ballet *La Fille du Danube*, which the dancer wanted to perform in Russia. Adam wished to provide them with an original work and composed *Morskoi Rasbonik (L'Écumeur de mer)*, which had a great success. On his return home he stopped in Berlin, where he triumphed in a new opera-ballet, *Die Hamadryaden*, composed, rehearsed, and performed in three weeks. His return to Paris was marked by some setbacks with *La Rose de Péronne* and *La Main de fer*, but success soon returned with the triumphs at the Opéra of the ballets *Giselle* (1841), danced by Carlotta Grisi, who also starred in *La Jolie Fille de Gand* (1842), and the celebrated comic *Le Diable à quatre* (1845). There was more success at the Opéra-Comique with *Le Roi d'Yvetôt* (1842) and *Cagliostro* (1844).

After a quarrel with the director of the Opéra-Comique, Adam established his own theatre, but it disappeared after a few months of existence. In 1847, he bought the Cirque du boulevard du Temple, and opened a new theatre, the Opéra National. Unfortunately, the Revolution of 1848 resulted in the closure of the theatres and the composer's ruin. In order to settle the enormous debt he had contracted, Adam sold his furniture and silver, had recourse to the Mont-de-Piété (the public pawnbroker's office), abandoned his author rights, and relinquished his membership of the Institut. To supplement his revenues, he began writing musical columns in various revues and composing extensively. General Cavaignac (nominated to the head of executive power in the Second Republic) helped Adam by creating a new class of composition at the Conservatoire.

Several of Adam's succeeding works obtained great success.

*Le Toréador* (1849), a charming and very funny *opera-bouffe*, marked his brilliant return to the Opéra-Comique. This work was followed in the same year by the creation of a new grand ballet at the Opéra, *La Filleule des fées*, and in the following year by the triumph of *Giralda*, in three acts, for