

Hervé (pen name of Florimond Roger, 1825-1892): Overview of his Writings

Hervé wrote the libretti of his works as much out of necessity as in a spirit of independence. Among his approximately one-hundred works (the exact number varies according to the author), about a quarter have a libretto written by the composer himself, from *Les gardes-françaises* (1848), among his earliest attempts, to the resounding flop of *Alice de Nevers* in 1875, the year in which he seems to have abandoned the practice. During that period, he also had two of his greatest successes, *L'Œil crevé* (1867) and *Chilpéric* (1868). According to his collaborators, Hervé actively participated in the writing of his texts even when he was not officially cited as the librettist, notably for *Le petit Faust* (1869). Hervé literally puts himself on stage in two of his works written at the beginning and end of his career. First, in *Le Compositeur toqué* ("the crazy composer," 1854), for which Hervé wrote the words and music as well as playing the title role; the title of this lively sketch became the Hervé's official nickname, one which is still used today. Later, in *Mam'zelle Nitouche*, for which he did not write the libretto, but which is based on events in Hervé's youth when he worked as the organist at Saint-Eustache during the day and sang in minor theaters in the evenings. In some of his wildest libretti, such as *Le Hussard persécuté* and *L'Œil crevé*, autobiography is less defined but remains undeniably present.

The Fonds Hervé of the Bibliothèque-musée de l'Opéra de Paris contains unpublished libretti in which the composer seems to comment on the operatic world of his time through an intermediary character. This is the case in *Agamemnon ou le chameau à deux bosses*, a "tragédie étrange" in which the librettist-composer ironically comments, through the mouths of his characters, on the constraints imposed on his theater by the legislation then in effect. Certain libretti are unfinished; in *L'Arène de sabbat*, a festival of characters and humor, Hervé, addressing the public through a colleague, allows himself to offer comic criticism of Gounod's recently premiered *La Reine de Saba* (1862).

In addition to writing words and music, acting, singing, directing, and staging his works, Hervé was his own impresario. In this role, he had to write an extremely large number of letters over the course of his life. Those held in the Bibliothèque nationale de France are fascinating, and it is regrettable that they are so few in number. Among the most interesting, are a half-dozen letters addressed between 1848 and 1868 to the all-powerful director of the Opéra-Comique, Émile Perrin. Long held in the Fonds Émile Perrin of the Archives nationales, some of these were moved to the Fonds Hervé of the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra in the mid-1990s, but too late for the biographers of the 1990s to have had access to them. Three others were found in a pile of letters that Perrin received from countless applicants, composers, or librettists, and to which he apparently never replied. Hervé's dream of being

performed at the Opéra-Comique is briefly mentioned by his first biographer, Louis Schneider, and later by Dominique Ghesquière and Jacques Rouchouse, but none of these authors imagined the intensity of this desire, a veritable Grail for the composer who begs, harasses, and pleads with Perrin, sharply counteracting his image as a happy and self-satisfied eccentric.

Hervé's other privileged correspondent was Eugène Bertrand, director of the Théâtre des Variétés from 1869 to 1892. The first of these sixty letters dates to Bertrand's accession to the direction of that important theater in the history of operetta, one which Hervé dreamed of conquering. The last letter to Bertrand was written practically on the eve of Hervé's death. These letters contain informative and amusing, savory snapshots of Hervé's life, of the efforts it took to get his music played, but also of his creative process.

Hervé never worked as a music critic, but he often wrote open letters to *Le Figaro*. A complete overview has not yet been made, but he can be read seeking publicity for his works and justifying himself against certain attacks. In 1868 he reacted to the bad turn done to him by Émile Perrin who ridiculed him by making public a private message he had received from Hervé; in 1875 he defended his opéra-bouffe *Alice de Nevers* against a journalist who had torn the work apart; in 1892, a few days before his death, he cancelled his subscription, again unhappy about an unjust review of his most recent work, *Bacchanale*. At the time of *Les Turcs*, in 1869, Hervé had an acrimonious exchange of letters that follow his serious disagreements with Moreau-Sainti, the unlikeable director of the Théâtre des Folies-Dramatiques.

One could almost place among his letters the twenty-two-page document that Hervé somewhat pompously titled, *Notes pour servir à l'histoire de l'opérette*, given that it is addressed to Francisque Sarcey, a journalist and theater critic for *Le Temps*. In his column of [18 July 1881](#), Sarcey undertook a study of the origins of theatrical genres, a study in which operetta served as his first example. Sarcey poses the question of the paternity of operetta, which many then attributed to Offenbach (who had died a few months earlier), and asked Hervé to give his version of the events. Sarcey would publish fragments of Hervé's response in which the composer tells about his life, especially his beginnings, in great detail. These *Notes* are an important first-hand source offering access to Hervé's vision of the birth of operetta and the rest of his career. Along the way, he also took the opportunity to proclaim that he was indeed the father of operetta.

Hervé had already begun to spin the legend of his life more than two decades earlier, in an anonymous twelve-page prospectus published by the Théâtre des Folies-Nouvelles, that is found in the Rondel Collection (Ro 3434 9). Although written in third person, it is probably the work of Hervé himself. This account of the musician's early years goes back to his adolescence and contains anecdotes that would be later found in all of the "lives of Hervé."

Nobody, in reading his libretti, would deny that Hervé was a great humorist. Further proof is found in the humorous piece he wrote in 1869 for the *Le Moniteur des Théâtres et des Plaisirs*. This very successful sketch titled, "L'invention du trombone" has a phlegm and fantasy that inevitably reminds one of Alphonse Allais.

The same can be said for the [preface to *Chilpéric*](#) (1868) which is often cited in biographies, and which forms a stark contrast with the desperate letters that the composer wrote to Émile Perrin during the same period.

A strange document closes this list, a memoir that Hervé wrote to prepare himself for a trial (which seems to have not taken place). In London, in 1886, he put on *Frivoli*, a large opéra-comique he wanted to take to Paris. He listed his disappointments and quarrels with the directors of the Théâtre du Châtelet who abandoned the new work after having first accepted to premier it. This document captures the “crazy composer’s” state of mind at the end of his career: constantly worried, sometimes paranoid, but always creative and enterprising.

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Further reading:

Hervé par lui-même. Ecrits du père de l'opérette présentés par Pascal Blanchet, Arles, Actes Sud / Palazzetto Bru Zane, 2015.

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