

Zola's works for the musical stage

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Zola met the composer Alfred Bruneau in 1888, and this meeting marked the beginning of a long and close friendship as well as a creative collaboration between the two. Studies of the works of Alfred Bruneau generally deal only with his operas written during Zola's lifetime and in close association with him, a period which was indeed the most productive and the richest in bold in-novation. But lyric naturalism, although it originated at that time, did not end with the death of the writer in 1902.

Bruneau suffered profound grief at the loss of his friend, even thinking of abandoning his career. However, he got through this difficult time, and after composing the music of *Lazare*, he decided to continue to seek his musical inspiration in the works of Zola. Three lyrical dramas, *Naïs Micoulin*, *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret* and *Les Quatre Journées*, emerged in Monte Carlo at the Odéon and the Opéra-Comique between 1907 and 1916. They were followed by other subjects, which did not get beyond the libretto stage: *Miette et Silvère* and *La Fête à Coqueville*.

With these new lyric dramas, Alfred Bruneau became his own librettist, thus fulfilling a desire that Zola had expressed some years earlier, to have one person as both librettist and musician. Lyric naturalism was thus able to continue after the death of one of its creators, and even to reach a sort of apotheosis in *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret*, produced in the *Théâtre-Libre* by André Antoine, who established the credentials of Naturalist drama. This was the beginning of a new era for Bruneau. Close study of this period shows how lyric naturalism was able to survive and evolve at the beginning of the twentieth century, and sheds light on some little-known texts and musical scores, giving new life to a musical practice that disappeared in the ruins of the First World War.

Bruneau had barely finished writing *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret* when he had a new idea for an opera. He decided to set to music *Une page d'amour*, the eighth volume of the *Rougon-Macquart* series. This novel had already been adapted for the stage, so the rights associated with the subject needed careful attention. The project was re-launched by an American actress, Miss Nethersole, who was eager to take it on, but first the copyright issues had to be explained to Madame Zola, and her permission obtained. The prospect of conquering America, after reaching across Europe and into Russia, opened up new perspectives for Bruneau. Full of enthusiasm, he re-read Zola's novel: 'I spent all Sunday reading the book [...]. It is prodigiously splendid and has a penetrating and haunting sadness about it. How the devil did an American actress come to fall in love with such a subject?'¹ However, the composer immediately saw difficulties ahead, like how to get the child, an absolutely essential character, on to the stage, and also the tableaux of Paris scattered through the book: 'How difficult this is to put on in the theatre! There is a

tremendous child role. Where will we find someone to act the part?' In the end the plan would not come to fruition, but it clearly shows how Bruneau still remained just as enthusiastic and open to all suggestions in order to continue his work in homage to Emile Zola.

***Lazare*, the vicissitudes of a creation (1902-1986)**

Pedro Gailhard advised Bruneau to produce *Lazare* for concert performance, leaving open the possibility of a later staging. But that was not what Bruneau had in mind. Soon after Zola's death, when he returned to the composition of the score, he imagined a grandiose production in an opera worthy of the importance of the subject. A first notion was to propose *Lazare* for the Munich Opera House. Bruneau was in fact in that city in the early part of 1903, putting on *Messidor*. Rehearsals went very well indeed; the orchestra was excellent and the resources put into the production were simply enormous, so he mentioned the idea to Zumpe, the conductor of the Orchestra of the Munich Opera, to whom he outlined the story of *Lazare*, suggesting that he might put it on at the Munich Opera House. However, Bruneau wrote in January 1903:

[..] unfortunately there is a law in Germany against presenting Jesus in the theatre. But he [Zumpe] was staggered at the magnificence of the subject. He kept throwing himself back in his chair, shouting 'Colossal! Colossal! A huge success!' All of this, anyway, is merely hypothetical for now, but it augurs well for the future. (Ph, Jan. 15, 1903)

The project did not materialize, perhaps because of that German ban on the presentation of Jesus on stage. *Lazare* turned up again a few months later, when the orchestral score was finished, in a conversation with Madame Zola mentioned by Bruneau in a letter in July: 'I spoke to her [Madame Zola] about *Lazare*, since Bourgeau had told me it was rumoured that I'd be performed next year at Béziers.' This idea — of a performance in the ancient theatre of Béziers — was another that would never see the light of day, but one that came very close to one long dreamed of by Zola and Bruneau — to have a performance in such a place.

The *Lazare* project was still waiting its turn when the decision was taken to transfer Zola's ashes to the Panthéon. It had been talked about since 1906, and it was Philippine Bruneau who suggested a new idea, swiftly taken up by Bruneau, of having *Lazare* performed at the Panthéon. What better homage could there be, indeed, than to present this drama, this ultimate gesture to Zola from Bruneau, in a ceremony celebrating the man of letters and his political commitment to the defence of truth and justice? But once again the plan would not succeed. The work would certainly have been considered too long for such a ceremony, but Bruneau would still appear on the programme since the symphonic *entracte* from *Messidor* would be played.

The most serious plan for a production of *Lazare* began at last to appear in the summer of 1908. In a letter of May 23, 1908, Antony Réal, the co-director (with Ange Chambon) of the ancient theatre of Orange, wrote to confirm a visit to Alfred Bruneau in the company of the mayor of the city, Auguste Lacour. They wished to discuss the possibility of producing *Lazare* in that city where there had been a music festival since 1869 — one which still exists today in the form of the 'Chorégies' of Orange. Nothing certain or definitive emerged from this first meeting on August 24, but we can

follow step by step the vicissitudes of the project thanks to the correspondence between Réal, Lacour and Bruneau, preserved in the Puaux-Bruneau archives.

It turned out to be a financial problem that stood in the way of the production of *Lazare*. The work requires choirs and soloists as well as the orchestra, and it seemed very expensive to bring together so many people for a work that lasts barely half-an-hour. Such an addition to the programme would add considerably to the expense of the evening. A possible solution was suggested to Bruneau by the Mayor of Orange. Eager to support the project, and recalling the success of an international choral competition held at Orange some years before, he suggested organising a similar competition for the following year, under the direction of Bruneau, whose lyric composition could then receive its first performance.

For Bruneau, however, this was a rather poor suggestion; it was not the sort of solution he envisaged. He had nothing against such popular events for amateur music societies (he made frequent contributions himself to the conferences of the North Pas-de-Calais Music Federation), but he was hoping for serious recognition of this work which was one of the last remaining testimonies to his friendship with Zola. So he refused the offer, and asked La-cour to keep his promise.

A whole series of fruitless moves attended these negotiations, with, on the one hand, festival directors with little experience of musical productions, and on the other, an Alfred Bruneau eager to protect his own interests and those of the family of Emile Zola. The whole affair, already quite complex enough, became further complicated by a political row. On December 5th 1909, Alfred Bruneau came upon a staggering item in the gossip columns of *Gil Blas*:

The ancient theatre of Orange and the Artillery barracks —

The Official Newspaper has latterly forgotten the list of towns to be endowed with artillery barracks to house the new contingents expected as a result of recent staff increases. Among the favoured cities, Orange, famous for its ancient theatre, figures prominently. In fact, the artillery barracks in Orange have not yet been built, but they already have a history. When the government decided to apply to the two Chambers for the increase in manpower for the artillery, the councils of the cities with no garrison were upset and made a fuss. The mayor of Orange took care not to neglect the interests of his city and came to Paris where he made manifold appeals and applications. He obtained the support of all the politicians of his department, and soon every section of the Ministry of War had become acquainted with the Mayor of Orange. But at that time General Picquart was the Minister of War, and the offices of the Ministry were leaving no stone unturned in their efforts to woo the Minister. They recalled that there was a famous theatre in Orange which every year attracts thousands and thousands of spectators, and they told the Mayor: 'Sir, you can have your artillery barracks, but on one condition — that the ancient theatre of Orange will produce and perform next year an opera by Bruneau, with a libretto by Emile Zola. The Mayor of Orange could scarcely believe his ears. However, it was evidently really happening, it was not a joke. The Mayor went off to find M. Antony Réal, the managing director of productions at the ancient theatre of Orange, who has a contract with the city, and related his woes: 'An opera and an artillery garrison, or no opera and no garrison?!... That is the question!' Antony Réal is a sav-vy Provençal, and everyone knows that one savvy Provençal is worth at least six Parisians. We do not know what sort of scheme Antony Réal hit upon, but we have noted that Orange is going to

get its artillerymen. And shall we have a new opera by Zola and Bruneau on the stage of the ancient theatre? That is the question!²

Alfred Bruneau was really shocked by this rumour in the newspapers, which seemed to place him at the centre of an odious piece of blackmail. He wrote to Lacour on the subject, commenting: 'I have been involved in the theatre for more than twenty years, and never have I seen, in the artistic career I have faithfully pursued, anything so sickening, so base and so vile' (PB, Dec. 6, 1909). The Mayor of Orange was equally 'sickened' by these insinuations and suspected it was the work of a local 'Action Française' group. In this affair, Picquart, as an intimate friend of Bruneau's ever since Zola's intervention in the Dreyfus Case, cannot be suspected of having set up such a deal. All the letters exchanged from the beginning of 1909, as well as the denials of Bruneau and Lacour, contradict this article. On the other hand, it must be admitted that Bruneau, having become a friend of the Mayor of Orange, and wanting to be agreeable, did strongly support the Mayor's successful application to the Ministry for War and Lacour did not fail to write to Bruneau to thank him for the part he had played in the matter and for his 'personal intervention' (PB, Nov. 20, 1909). This matter has also been discussed by a woman student of musicology who discovered these letters, and drew some over-hasty conclusions, getting an article published in a local paper.³ According to this version, it was Mme Zola who put pressure on Picquart to bring about the production of *Lazare*. All these versions seem totally imaginary and all one can see in fact is a bit of help given by Bruneau to a friend, with no expectation of return, though it was bound to confirm Lacour's desire to be agreeable to Bruneau, and to bring about their common project.⁴

The rumour turned up again in the Press early in 1910, especially in newspapers of acknowledged anti-semitic views, like the Orange newspaper, *La Ruche*, which saw in it a victory for the traitors to France, who, fifteen years before, had supported the Jew, Dreyfus. Clearly there were still people who had not accepted the fact that Picquart had become Minister for War. At last, Paul Mariétan, who had been kept out of the Orange festival by Réal and Chambon, seems to have offered to take on himself the deficit of 5,000 Francs owed to Bruneau by the theatre of Orange, for not having kept its promise to perform *Lazare*, thus bringing a definitive conclusion to the whole affair...

It was only on the twentieth anniversary of Bruneau's death, June 20 1954, that *Lazare* was broadcast by the ORTF, an event which did not fail to interest members of the music world like Georges Auric, who wrote to Suzanne Puaux-Bruneaux: 'I am delighted since this will allow me to hear [...] your father's *Lazare* performed by the French Broadcasting Symphony Orchestra. I am grateful to you for letting me know about the first broadcast of a work of this importance...' (PB, June 16, 1954). After the performance, a re-cording was made, thus allowing everyone to hear this music written fifty years earlier.

However, it was not until 1986 that *Lazare* was performed in a concert version in Washington, in the context of a conference on Zola and the arts, organised by Jean-Max Guieu. A fully staged and grandiose version such as Bruneau and Zola had imagined, is yet to see the light of day, and awaits a really bold theatre director. In 1994, Jacques Mercier took up *Lazare* again, recording it with the National Orchestra of Ile-de-France, along with Bruneau's *Requiem* — a wise choice that brings together two works of homage, one to Zola and the other to the composer's mother. This recording, republished in 2000, has been well received by music critics.

Such then was the unexpected destiny of *Lazare*, which remains the most atypical work in Bruneau's music, and the most daring of Zola's libretti. Perhaps it was the boldness of the subject, and the originality of its treatment, that led to its tormented fortunes. It remains nevertheless true that *Lazare* is the perfect representative of an ideal collaboration between Alfred Bruneau and Emile Zola. As Bruneau himself asked: 'Where will *Lazare* ever be performed? I don't know, I can only hope that an impartial public may one day find in it the most vibrant testimony to my affection for Emile Zola.'⁵

Alfred Bruneau, librettist

In his essay on 'Le drame lyrique', Zola had written:

The music is no longer separate, it enfolds the action, and is at one with the characters. Henceforth it seems impossible for action and characters to emerge on one side, while their life and character develop on the other. There is such intimacy, and the organism so tightly linked in all its parts, that it is vital to have but one father. If I tried to imagine the genesis of a lyric drama, I would see the people and their actions emerging musically out of each other, carrying the symphony, as if it were the air they breathe, and developing the vocal phrase in the voice which is their own. To have two fathers for this infant, who needs but one heart and one head, seems to me extremely awkward.⁶

Bruneau seems to have remembered these words when he set about creating new operas. Indeed he no longer looked for a librettist, deciding to write himself the texts he would set to music. Of course this was really no more than a work of adaptation, since he was dealing with works already written by Zola. So, *Naïs Micoulin*, *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret* and *Les Quatre Journées* would have but one father, to use Zola's expression, and they would reveal in Bruneau a literary sensitivity, already observable in his music reviews, which would now have more scope to express itself.

Naïs Micoulin offers an interesting example of Bruneau's methods in the writing of his libretti, as this was the first project completed by the musician. He opts for dramatizing one particular episode of the story, the love of the young bourgeois Frédéric for the beautiful Naïs, a peasant girl in the service of his parents. *Naïs Micoulin* was an immediate and unexpected consequence of the Dreyfus Affair. Picquart had developed a close relationship with Prince Albert I of Monaco, who was a keen dreyfusard, and he suggested that the prince should approach Alfred Bruneau for a play. The Monaco theatre was a special place for French musicians, and most commissions went to them, especially to Massenet and Saint-Saëns.

From 1906 on, Alfred Bruneau was supervising mock-ups of stage settings for *Naïs Micoulin* with Raoul Gunsbourg, the director of the theatre of Monte-Carlo, and Choudens. The performance was scheduled for February 1907, and the musician had no qualms about sending many of the settings back for modification. As ever, he meticulously supervised the preparations, a supervision all the more difficult for having to be done from afar. Bruneau arrived in Monte-Carlo on January 22 1907, to work with the orchestra and singers. He was delighted with the welcome he received, especially as he knew the artists with whom he was going to work. The conductor was Léon Jehin, who had conducted Bruneau's first operas in London. Toine was to be played by Maurice Renaud, who had played the Shepherd in *Messidor* at the

Opéra; Hector Dufranne, Gervais in *l'Ouragan*, had the role of Micoulin; Salé-ra was Frédéric; and Louise Grandjean had the part of Naïs.

First contacts with the artists were cordial and the musician expressed his feelings about this in a letter to his wife in January 1907:

Hardly had I arrived here, after a good journey, than I attended a performance of my entire score. Jehin has prepared it wonderfully. You can't imagine how good he has been to me. The musicians have given me the warmest welcome I have ever received. You can guess just how pleased as punch I am. This morning we rehearsed the four pre-ludes of *l'Ouragan* which will be performed tomorrow at the 'Concerts Classiques', 'as a welcome for me' and the orchestra will shortly be rehearsing *Naïs*.⁷

It was all the more comforting for Bruneau in that ever since the death of Zola, he had had so much trouble getting any adequate performances. He knew that in the principality of Monaco, ruled by an enlightened and generous prince, he would be able to display all the attractive features of his art. His joy was redoubled when his family and Alexandrine Zola arrived to stay at the Palace of Monaco, invited by the prince. Prince Albert was the dominant figure of this visit. He took his guests to visit the recent Oceanographic Museum, and opened up his gardens to them, so they had the pleasure of sitting in the warmth of the sun in the morning, and conversation flowed freely.

The Bruneaus' stay in the South of France was also the occasion for a number of different visits. Suzanne and Philippine did not miss the opportunity to go and greet the painter Auguste Renoir, who had retired to his Domaine des Collettes at Cagnes-sur-mer. They even contemplated buying a property in the area, but prices were prohibitive. In the end, with the money given by Monaco for the creation of *Naïs Micoulin*, the Bruneaus were able to buy a property at Villers-sur-Mer, which they named 'Le Paradou'. The stay in Monaco was a total success, and the musician always kept a very warm memory of the Prince. When he died (in 1922), Bruneau made the traditional death-visit to the prince's Parisian apartments. He found the Prince lying on his deathbed, utterly alone, as his family had not even bothered to keep vigil, preoccupied as they were with the matter of the succession. Bruneau could only regret the passing of this humanist whose noble character did not seem to be perpetuated in his descendants.

On the occasion of the production, the Press praised the dynamism of the theatre of Monte-Carlo, which commissioned so many works from French musicians. The journal 'Musica' was one of the most enthusiastic, with this, from the pen of Maurice Lefèvre :

Naïs Micoulin, like everything that comes from the pen of that vigorous musician, Alfred Bruneau, has a singularly dramatic ferocity, but which does not exclude an infinite tenderness in the love passages, for the author hides a gentle soul beneath a deliberately rather rough exterior. In this he is the worthy collaborator of Zola, his illustrious master and friend.⁸

After the production of *Naïs Micoulin* in Monaco, the drama was taken up again by various French theatres, but the interpretations generally followed the model of the Nantes production, to the distress of the musician, as he shows in a letter: 'The actors of *Naïs* are decidedly detestable, even worse than anything I've generally met

in the provinces (Ph, 13 November 1908). As the performance seemed ill-omened, Bruneau dissuaded Alexandrine from making the trip she had intended, and the work ended up falling irretrievably into oblivion.

Leaving aside for the moment *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret*, which is not, properly speaking, a lyric drama, I shall now consider the last of Alfred Bruneau's works based on a Zola text: *Les Quatre Journées*. It was in 1866 that Zola published in *L'illustration* the novella which follows the cycle of the seasons, *Les Quatre Journées de Jean Gourdon*. Ever since 1907 the composer had been thinking of a drama based on this text, hesitating between this novella and *La Fête à Coqueville*. On this, Alexandrine Zola offered a view, in a letter to Bruneau:

I have a soft spot for *La Fête à Coqueville*, for this reason: with this, you would be able to show a certain gaiety quite different from all you have done up until now, and I think this would be just the thing to try at the moment, to annoy your adversaries; and I believe the public would find it easier to catch on to its lightheartedness than it would to the more solemn side of the *Quatre Journées* (PB, Sept. 1907).

In the end, Bruneau chose the traditional drama. The text and the score were completed by 1911. (The first corrected proofs of the score for voice and piano, published by Choudens, bear this date.) The work was announced by Albert Carré by the end of 1910, but it was only in 1916 that the work was performed in the Opéra-Comique. From the start, and for practical reasons, the musician wanted to stage four days in the life of Jean Gourdon, without the narrative passages in which Zola provided the connections between the four days. Moreover, the title chosen for this lyric tale emphasised this aspect, to the great displeasure of Alexandrine Zola who, in a letter to Bruneau in October 1910, described the title as 'idiotic'.

This libretto brings together many themes dear to Zola's heart. In his choice of a text, Bruneau had noted that this story was a genuine reflection of the writer's lyrical work in his novels, and, in his desire to pay homage to his dear departed friend, it seemed important to bring this text to the lyric scene rather than the *Fête à Coqueville* which does not demonstrate the range of Zola's work. Bruneau shows himself to be a skilful librettist, able to use the elements brought in by Zola, while at the same time supplementing them to reinforce the dramatic elements essential to a staged work. His only fault is that of over-emphasizing the reflective elements of his libretto, and a lack of subtlety in the speeches of the characters. In spite of that, Bruneau offers a sensitive reading of Zola's work. Also the work expresses Bruneau's hatred of war, and his support for the soldiers in the trenches. Thinking of the musicians dying in combat, he was bearing witness to their suffering, as he also did in a letter to Nadia Boulanger, addressed to all the young musicians serving in the war:

My dear friends,

Never have I better understood the sovereign beauty of youth than when thinking of you. Youth, your youth, ah ! how I envy it at this prodigious and touching time, and how irritated I feel at being already too old to be able to share your emotions, your enthusiasms and your glory! As men, you are accomplishing the most noble of tasks; you are restoring to France, to her allies and her valiant sisters, the supreme good of nations — Liberty, without which no country can be happy, great or prosperous. As artists, you are preparing the most splendid works, because it is from life, its passions and

dramas and conflicts, that you will always draw what little you need to feed your genius, and you are now sublime actors in a tragedy quite unique in the history of the world (PB. Nov. 27,1916).

With *Les Quatre Journées*, Alfred Bruneau made his return to the Opéra-Comique, where he had not produced any lyric drama since 1905. As few sources are available for the study of this production, it is useful here to turn to the recollections of Pierre-Baptistin Gheusi, director of the Opéra-Comique in 1916, who received the work of Bruneau. Gheusi was an unusual man, a figure from the literary world until he found his place as a director in the Parisian musical theatre. From his first directorship of the Opéra-Comique in 1908, he had been planning to take on Bruneau as music director. Then in 1913 he once again suggested the musician should participate in the direction of the Opéra-Comique. In the end, Bruneau would not accept such responsibilities, though he had been preferred to the Isola brothers and Paul Vidal for the post of director of music. But he had at least the assurance of being performed very soon at the Opéra-Comique.

When Bruneau suggested the performance of *Les Quatre Journées*, Gheusi was already well-acquainted with Zola's work. Relations between the two men were always somewhat ambiguous and not always cordial. Gheusi often speaks rather condescendingly of the musician, and does not spare him the occasional barb. The portrait of him traced in his *Memoirs* reflects this complex relationship, a mixture of admiration and reproach. The first reproach was that Bruneau had attached himself irrevocably to Zola :

In an unparalleled mimeticism, he was suffragan, acolyte, disciple, and even, jealous rivals said, Zola's 'parrot'. Zola, completely closed to music, even verbal music, adopted Bruneau from the moment his father - always in top hat and grey gloves - brought him to see him a few times. He [Zola] kept finding his own favourite formulae on the lips of the young virtuoso cellist, to such an extent that he crowned him a prince of lyric genius, and sincerely considered him the only great musician of the young school. The success, more literary than musical, of the young composer [...] right from his debut with *Le Rêve*, quite welded him to Zola. The die was cast. Bruneau would be a musician.⁹

He further reproached him for being too kind, even verging on obsequious, and disapproved of his activity as a music critic, an occupation he deemed unsuitable for a composer, since it sometimes led to a clash between his personal agreeableness and his printed comments. Fundamentally it was his position as an established and celebrated musician, friend of politicians and properly valued by them, that Gheusi could not bear. He made of Bruneau a State musician, closely linked to the powers-that-be, particularly on the eve of the First World War :

In music, the favourite of the régime was already Alfred Bruneau. He was recognised as the musical accompaniment of Zola, although, in his popular imitations of the *Rougon-Macquart*, he had at first preferred *Le Rêve* to *L'Ouragan*. Bruneau, the great composer of the Republic, although he had never written a ritual cantata in its honour, was gradually moved further down in the preferences of the catalogued elite...¹⁰

In spite of snide allusions and this clear attack, Gheusi ends his portrait of Bruneau with an admiring address:

If I had been in control of the scissors of the Fates, you would still be surviving amongst us old rheumatically pursuers of the same dreams, [...] whilst I would have let the nest of vipers, the envious, the sterile, the pretentious ones, slide down to Erebus without a protest. Your magnificent work, so obstinate and courageous, is far above them.¹¹

From within this complex relationship, Bruneau's new work was received at the Opéra-Comique, to be performed in 1916 in the midst of world war. That was the first problem hanging over its production. In a different historical context, the play would have posed no problem, but the brief tirade against war in the second act was ill-timed, and risked upsetting people after ten months of bloody fighting at Verdun. Gheusi expressed his disquiet to the musician and asked him to make some changes, but Bruneau regretfully re-fused:

It has been printed and orchestrated. I pointed out that it might be possible, perhaps, to denounce a war of aggression such as the present one, and continue to present the Barbarians as invaders. The lyrical violence of his score could then keep its vehemence. A fortnight later, the author of the *Rêve* and of *Messidor* brought me his work, scarcely changed at all. All the essential pages were still there, intact. So I shall perform the *Quatre Journées*.¹²

This incident demonstrates the intransigence of Bruneau, who was very disinclined to heed the counsels of a Gheusi whose character and talent he did not much esteem. No concession was to be made, and the director would just have to get on with it. As for the stage-sets, Gheusi was bold enough to call on Henri Martin, who had never created stage sets for opera. After considerable hesitation, he finally accepted and delivered four sketches that served as a basis for Bailly's four canvases for the four different acts. These stage-sets, Gheusi tells, were enthusiastically received, from the first night :

When the curtain rose for the spring of the first act, showing the verdant village garden of the Master in the Lot, the whole audience broke out in applause. In the ground floor box where the great man from Toulouse was hiding, he heard a hundred voices cry out, in delighted astonishment and enthusiasm: 'An "Henri Martin"!'¹³ Everything is there, he acknowledged, my Gascon house with its stream and its fruit-trees in bloom. But the atmosphere, the Midi light, with its golden glitter, how the devil did you manage that? 'Easy', I said, 'with some yellow lamps, two projectors on ladders, and a rehearsal with the lighting man, we succeeded in creating the inimitable'.¹⁴

Studies of the work had been carried out by the music director of the Opéra-Comique, Paul Vidal, it was, however, Bruneau who conducted the performances, creating, in so doing, trouble between Gheusi and Vidal.

In the end, Bruneau himself conducted the ten performances, leaving Vidal full of rancour towards Gheusi. The theatre director, certainly still upset by this misadventure, was harsh in his judgement of these performances. 'It was an artistic

success', he said, 'but not a public success'. He even recalled with satisfaction the nickname, 'Flop-on-flop', that Renaud had given the musician. Despite this bitterness, Gheusi comments on the striking effect of the problematic second act that he had been fearful of seeing performed:

I had not hesitated, even during the war, to show, in the second act, a soldier trampled by the crowd, a wounded Boche, disturbing in the realism of his *feldgrau*. When he stood up, crying out with thirst, in front of the kindly Frenchman, as soon as he appeared, deformed, covered with mud, and shaped like a barrel in his prisoner uniform, and everyone saw the hated greatcoat and the sallow, swollen face, a shudder ran through the audience. If the fleshy performer of the role had delayed his confession that he was really an unfortunate Alsatian who had been forced into the German ranks, he would have been savagely 'rearranged' by the entire audience.¹⁵

The last of Bruneau's works to be inspired by Zola did not find a public. This was to be the last appearance of lyric naturalism, though many pages are moving and well written. The difficulties of relations with Bruneau did not fail to damage this long-awaited creation, and Gheusi could not conceal his dis-appointment at having collaborated in this relative failure, and his regret at not having been able to present Bruneau's real masterpiece, *Lazare*.

La Faute de l'abbé Mouret

In June 1903 during a holiday in Piriac, Bruneau began work on the first of his plans to set *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret* to music. This novel, given to Massenet, and asked for by so many other musicians, had still not appeared on the music stage, and in June, surrounded by the bounties of Nature, the musician re-read Zola's novel to try to establish a first scenario, and write the poetic libretto, which he read to Madame Zola on July 16th 1903. In July Bruneau wrote that this was not going to be a lyric drama:

As for *abbé Mouret*, it has been decided that I would make of it a play with overture, entr'actes, and stage music, and that in October I should take this play to Sarah Bernhardt, *without a word to anyone at all*, and more especially than anyone, not to Charpentier. We all agreed that the role of Albine might well tempt Sarah and that we must make the attempt (PH, July 26, 1903).

The decision not to compose a lyric drama rested largely on a remark from Zola himself, who had his own ideas about the musical adaptation of this novel :

In the course of our long conversations, Zola and I had frequently spoken of the *abbé Mouret*. Zola thought the usual form of Opera or Lyric drama would not suit the character. He saw it rather in terms of a theatrical work along the lines of *L'Arlésienne*. I did not fail to recall this when Madame Zola did me the great and touching honour of giving me *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret*.¹⁶

Bruneau worked on the text of the play right through the summer, and by September was offering a second version to Alexandrine Zola. It was then that he had the idea of suggesting it to André Antoine for his Odéon theatre. But the musician was still

uncertain which libretto he would set to music, hesitating between *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret* and *Paris en amour*, the last poem left by Zola. In the end he decided on his own libretto, and started work on the score. To accompany the four acts and fourteen tableaux (only the cemetery scene was not kept by Bruneau), the musician composed a stage music whose main purpose was to link the tableaux together and replace the descriptions in the novel.

The reception of *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret* by André Antoine, then director of the Odéon theatre and founder of the Théâtre-Libre, marks a turning point in the history of Naturalist lyric theatre. And yet this fabulous conjunction of writer and musician with a producer imbued with naturalist theories is too often forgotten. In September 1903, Bruneau decided to read his play to André Antoine, and he dreamed of having Sarah Bernhardt and Coquelin in his cast. The producer quickly agreed to produce the play in spite of the difficulties he would face finding musicians and a conductor, and the first rehearsals began in summer 1906. The musician was soon experiencing the fervour and forthright manner of Antoine, and he was charmed by the verve with which he directed the work. Edouard Colonne was chosen to conduct the orchestra, and young Sylvie to play Albine. The first rehearsal attended by Bruneau is reported in words of total enthusiasm in a letter from the musician to his wife :

About nine o'clock yesterday I went to the Odéon, expecting just to talk with Antoine. I was surprised to find him in the middle of a rehearsal of *l'abbé Mouret*. [...] Antoine is delighted: 'Great heavens, this really works, it really works. I was worried about the first act and now I am reassured. It is marvellously alive. Ah! My word, that will surely shut them up for good, all those who have been bugging me, saying it was impossible to get a play out of *l'abbé Mouret*. A play! A play! !.. I don't need it to be a play in their sense of the word, if it pleases me and moves me. Yes, yes, I am happy now, and I think I shall be even happier a month from now' (Ph, Aug. 1906).

If the rehearsals with the actors were going well, there remained the problem of the music. Antoine was not accustomed to this type of work, and had never directed a lyric performance. He relied heavily on the experience of Bruneau to support him. Antoine had already faced heavy demands from Colonne and did not want to find himself overwhelmed by the celebrated conductor, so he did not hesitate to put him in his place. He let Bruneau know about it, asking him to remain in control so far as the music was concerned. Bruneau was really charmed by André Antoine and was conscious of enjoying with him a unique theatrical experience. He understood why Zola had made friends with the man who became the defender of naturalist theatre. He felt he was learning a real lesson in theatre:

Yesterday we rehearsed only the first act [of the *Faute de l'abbé Mouret*] which is beginning to take shape and will, I think, be very amusing. Antoine is pushing it as hard as he can towards gaiety, to make a huge contrast with the following act which he'll present in all its poetry. This chap is definitely a prodigious man. [...] He doesn't invent anything without asking me if I approve. And he is so lively, and enthusiastic. He can't keep still, shouting as if he were deaf, and smoking endless cigarettes. He really is totally in love with his work (Ph, Aug.12, 1906).

Antoine believed in being as realist as possible, bringing the life created by Zola in his novel on to the stage of the Odéon, and paying attention to the slightest details which could help to attain that naturalist ideal. For Désirée's farmyard he tries to find living animals :

Today, at noon, we shall start again on the first act, and shall perhaps do the second if we have time. He is already bothered about the little chicks Désirée will have in her apron. Little chicks are not that easy to find in October.¹⁷ (PH, Aug. 1906).

These details delighted Bruneau who dreamt of giving the public, for once, a play that would amuse as well as touch them. This concern for the animal details gave rise to some comic scenes that Bruneau enjoyed relating:

In the first act, a cock was to crow in the wings, the cock who was king of Désirée's hen-house. 'Who is going to do that for us?' Antoine grumpily asked Tisserand, his loyal stage-manager. 'I know a chap from Montparnasse who does good cockerel imitations', Tisserand hesitantly replied. 'Bring him to me tomorrow at noon', said Antoine. The next day, indeed, a stalwart chap, in his Sunday best, and with tremendous stage fright [...] walked on to the stage, waiting for Antoine. Antoine arrived, in a hurry, jostling the actors, impatient to start work. 'What is this man doing here?' he asked. Tisserand rushed up to remind him of the appointment. 'Good !' said Antoine. After a gesture from the 'boss', the chap adopts an attractive pose, coughs, then solemnly, without the ghost of a smile, lets out his 'Cock-a-doodle-doo!' in a squeaky voice. 'That's supposed to be the cock crowing? ... Go on... just clear off, you've no idea how to do it', roared Antoine.¹⁸

It was indeed in conditions like these that the naturalist lyric theatre seems to have reached its apogee, with all the best elements brought together. Bruneau would never again find these ideal conditions in any other Parisian theatre, and he made the most of what he experienced at that time.

Bruneau was also pleased to have in the cast some young actors who would make their début in his play, actors like Mlle Barjac, first prize in tragedy in 1906, who was playing Rosalie. Antoine was more concerned with getting actors who matched the physique of the character they were to present. Perrin, for instance, as Archangias, did not please the musician, but the producer kept him on since he matched the character so well. In rehearsal after rehearsal, Antoine grew ever more passionate about the play, seeing its topicality in the aftermath of the law of Separation of Church and State, and not worried about being met with noisy demonstrations at the presentation of a priest succumbing to carnal sin:

'Ah well, what about my scene in the fifth?', shouts Desfontaines, playing Jeanbernat, 'don't you think it's magnificent? Heavens! What a success I'll have when I tell Archangias: "There's nothing, nothing, do you hear? God does not exist!" "Yes, yes", added Antoine, "we'll have demonstrations, and great ones, that's for sure"' (Ph, Aug.18, 1906).

On this point Bruneau did not feel as bold as the producer. He was not keen on shocking or provoking the public, and that is why he wanted to end the play with the death of Albine, and not with the cemetery scene.

These rehearsals brought a great deal of pleasure to Bruneau, who had suffered so much in recent years, and though he was not foolishly optimistic about the success of his play, he at least greatly enjoyed the marvellous moments he was experiencing: 'There's no doubt about it, Antoine is extraordinary. We understand each other perfectly, he and I, and I think that delights him' (Ph, Sept.18). But, in spite of the rehearsals going so well, the play was not ready for performance in the autumn, and it was put off to March 1907, just after the production of *Naïs Micoulin* in Monte-Carlo. It was on March 1, 1907 that *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret* saw its first performance. The stage-sets of Paquereau were strikingly realistic, and a number of accessories were used to supplement the performance of the actors.

On the evening of the dress rehearsal, Bruneau was most disappointed by the orchestra. Edouard Colonne, despite being a great conductor, was lacking in firmness with the musicians. They were constantly having to be replaced, thus preventing steady and progressive work. In fact Bruneau thought the dress rehearsal was scarcely any better than a mere practice, with new and often mediocre musicians: he showed himself to be legitimately dissatisfied, and let Colonne know it. Colonne could only agree. Much later, the composer would regret that moment of bad temper, as he admits in his book:

In front of Antoine, when the audience had gone, just between the three of us, I spoke somewhat violently to Colonne, though the problem was not his talent, it was his lack of energy, his apparent indifference that irritated me. How distant all that now seems, and how I reproach myself for having hurt a great and much loved conductor, and one so worthy of veneration! (After this production, the box-office takings for the various evening performances would never be as high as those of the discounted ones, so Antoine decided to discontinue the performances (28 in number), and did not propose a further season.¹⁹

This momentary disagreement did not impair the friendship which united the two, nor the respect they felt for each other, but it was in very regrettable circumstances that the play met the same fate as *Naïs Micoulin* in never being performed again. Bruneau hoped that Antoine would give a few performances at the time of the transfer of Zola's ashes to the Panthéon, but the producer always refused these projects on financial grounds, and they would never see the light of day.

In spite of all that, the production of *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret* re-mains the ultimate experience of the Naturalist lyric theatre, and counts as the most daring project of the work of Alfred Bruneau, by its subject as much as by its style and staging. Despite all the problems that accompanied Bruneau's work, Zola's novels, which were the point of departure for Bruneau, have continued to provide inspiration for composers ever since, not only in the 20th century, but also in the 21st century, right up to our own times.²⁰

Notes

¹ Undated letter. This and later quotations from Bruneau's letters to Philippine are given as 'Ph' with the date in the text. All the letters are from the Puaux-Bruneau collection, indicated in text by 'PB'.

² Jules Rateau is thought to have been the author of this article.

³ Article by Philippe Chabro in *Le Dauphiné-Libéré*, 19 Jan. 1993.

⁴ The Orange barracks, built between 1910 and 1912, and named after General Deloye, in charge of the Artillery at the time of the Dreyfus case, would house the 55th artillery regiment.

⁵ Alfred Bruneau, *À l'ombre d'un grand cœur*, Paris, Charpentier, 1931 [re-issued by Slatkine, Geneva, 1980], p. 202

⁶ Émile Zola, 'Le drame lyrique', in *Œuvres Complètes*, (ed.) Henri Mitterand, Paris, Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1963-1969, vol. 13, p. 831.

⁷ Alfred Bruneau, 1931, pp. 213-14.

⁸ *Musica*, n° 56, May 1907. Document kindly lent to me by Jean-François Ballèvre.

⁹ P.-B. Gheusi, *Cinquante Ans de Paris. La Danse sur le Volcan*. Paris, Plon, 1941, p. 152.

¹⁰ P.-B. Gheusi, *Cinquante Ans de Paris. Revivre*, Paris, Plon, 1942, p. 248.

¹¹ *ibid.* p.155.

¹² Gheusi, 1939, pp. 357-358.

¹³ Henri Martin (1860-1943), a painter from Toulouse, a pupil of Puvis de Chavannes and Georges Seurat, who moved into symbolism and divisionism.

¹⁴ Gheusi, 1939, pp. 358-59.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 360

¹⁶ Bruneau, 1931, p. 215.

¹⁷ Antoine's plan was to have the play performed at the start of the new theatre season in the autumn of 1906.

¹⁸ Bruneau, 1931, p. 217.

¹⁹ Bruneau, 1931, p. 218.

²⁰ Later compositions based on Zola's works are to be discussed in my 'Note on Zola on the musical stage from the 20th to the 21st century' to appear in the next number of this *Bulletin*.



Alfred Bruneau



Émile Zola