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DANCING INTO THE SPOTLIGHT: LOUISE BERTIN AND *LA ESMERALDA*

Juliana Starr

The field of musicology lags far behind literature and the visual arts in the study of its women practitioners. Indeed, it has been nearly forty years since art historian Linda Nochlin published her ground-breaking study, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" with its remarkable parallel implications for women composers. My essay attempts to address this question by studying the life and work of Louise Angélique Bertin, the only composer to collaborate directly with Victor Hugo on an opera, the earliest French composer to write an opera based on Goethe's *Faust*, the composer of the first opera to represent the criminal and asocial quarter of a large city, a composer greatly admired by Berlioz, Liszt and Meyerbeer (the latter tried to promote one of her operas in Germany), and an artist in the middle of the biggest political and aesthetic controversies of her time. In short, she would warrant study even without reference to the question of her gender (Boneau 1-2; Gerhard 227).

I situate my comments in the context of early nineteenth-century Paris, a time when oppressive Napoleonic gender ideology discouraged women from competing with men in public life and when, not surprisingly, the rapid growth of female-authored operas decreased vis-à-vis the late eighteenth century. In this sense, I paint Bertin, whose four operas were performed between 1825 and 1836, as a telling example of the fate of the nineteenth-century woman composer. The target of misogyny, Hugophobia, conformism, politics, accusations of amateurism, and extraordinarily harsh criticism in the press, she stopped composing after her collaboration with Hugo on *La Esmeralda* (1836), her masterwork that closed after only six performances, and spent the last forty-one years of her life in relative isolation (Letzter and Adelson 47). Sadly, the long-term consequences of this cynical manipulation were the loss of someone who could have been a major composer. However, given a series of recent revivals of *La Esmeralda*, there is a ray of hope that Bertin will eventually get the recognition she deserves.

Born at Les Roches, southwest of Paris, Louise Bertin (1805-1877) was unique among her fellow women composers in aspiring exclusively to the operatic stage.[1] Of her four operas, three were performed in the leading theatres in Paris and also published. One of the rare women to have her operas staged at major theatres, she was only the second nineteenth-century woman composer to have a work performed at the Opéra (Boneau 14-15).[2] Her first work, *Guy Mannering*, one of the earliest operas based on a Walter Scott novel, was written to her own libretto and performed privately in 1825, when she was just twenty years old. It was later accepted for performance at the Théâtre de l'Odéon, but the theatre failed in June 1828, before the work could be staged there (Boneau 101-02). *Le Loup-garou*, with a libretto by Eugène Scribe and Edouard Mazères, was produced at the Théâtre Feydeau in 1827 and saw a quite respectable twenty-six performances (Boneau 190).

Fausto, with an Italian libretto (by an unknown librettist) after Goethe, was mounted at the Théâtre-Italien in 1831. This was the first setting in Italian, and probably the only one ever written by a woman. By far, her largest and most controversial work was *La Esmeralda*, an opera for which Hugo himself adapted his novel, *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831).[3] After a relatively successful première at the Opéra, it suddenly experienced a failure, complete with shouts and catcalls from the audience, which seemed like a replay of the recent *Bataille d'Hernani*. There was undoubtedly a political motivation for this reaction, which came both from the enemies of the librettist and from the enemies of the composer's family (Flore 32).

Indeed, what most sets Bertin apart from other composers of the time, male or female, is her membership in a special family that occupied a unique place in Parisian cultural, political and artistic life, especially in the 1820s and 1830s (Boneau 4). It is likely that she began her music studies in childhood, with piano lessons from her musician mother, Geneviève-Victoire-Aimée Boutard. Her father was Louis-François Bertin, (known as Bertin l'aîné), who with Louise's brother, Armand, ran the *Journal des débats*, the most influential Paris daily newspaper, which, after the Revolution of 1830, supported the reign and "centrist" philosophy of Louis-Philippe (Flore 32-33). Her family regularly entertained numerous literary and political luminaries, especially those of the Romantic movement, including, most notably, Hugo and his family, Chateaubriand, Delacroix, Ingres, Louis Boulanger, Rossini, and Berlioz, who once remarked that Bertin was the most brilliant woman of her time, and served as the music critic for her father's paper for most of his career, from 1835 to 1863 (Flore 38).[4] As we shall see, throughout all the uproar over *Esmeralda* there was a sense of resentment of power and privilege that this opera production represented to those in positions of lesser power than the Bertin family, the *Journal des débats*, and the Romantics (Boneau 591).

Deprived of his newspaper when Napoleon closed it, Louis Bertin, (later immortalized in Ingres's famous portrait), struggled to support his family by translating English gothic novels into French. Given that those novels were important harbingers of Romanticism, this shows Bertin's sensitivity to changing literary tastes.[5] For Louise, these difficult financial circumstances may have ironically had some great benefit. They meant that for much of her childhood, her brilliant, intellectual father was at home, in a forced retirement, not idle, but certainly with more time to devote to her upbringing than he would have had, if the political situation in Paris had been different. And during much

of this time, her two older brothers were away at school (Boneau 63-64). Surely Louise's ambition and acute sense of self-worth were due in large part to her remarkable father, who gave her an education worthy of that of any man.

François-Joseph Fétis and Antoine Reicha, her two composition teachers from the Conservatoire (and representatives of rival compositional schools), were considered among the best in Paris in the early part of the century. Fétis, a representative of the Italian style, was also her singing teacher. In his review of her *Loup-garou*, he notes her romantic tendency, especially manifested in her proclivity for serious, melancholy music, and at the same time her originality, as shown in her unusual forms, her singular harmonies, the eccentricity of her accompaniments, and her pensive melodies (Fétis 144-46).[6] Reicha, a representative of the German school and a friend of Beethoven and Haydn, also taught composition to Berlioz and Gounod. Reicha was the more influential teacher of the two, and Bertin's music shows the influence of his teaching in many of the same ways that Berlioz's does: "rhythmic flexibility and syncopation, irregular phrase lengths, emphasis on wind instruments and brass" (Boneau 78). Reicha's influence was also manifested by what people at the time called the "German" nature of Bertin's music: a perceived heavier reliance on "harmony' than 'melody" (Boneau 78).

Bertin had a strong and pleasant contralto voice, and was a talented pianist, painter and poet: after the failure of *Esmeralda*, she published two volumes of poetry, *Les Glanes* (1842) and *Nouvelles glanes* (1876), while her smaller works, such as chamber cantatas, continued to be performed privately. Since approximately half of her body was paralyzed from a childhood disease (no sources name the exact malady) she walked with difficulty, using two crutches. But this did not seem to hinder her. On the contrary, her disability may have given her more freedom to compose and lead an artistic life, as it was undoubtedly felt that because of her handicap, marriage would not be guaranteed (Flore 39). She was twenty-six years old in 1831, when Hugo's novel was published, and during that same month, her *Fausto* debuted at the Théâtre-Italien.[7]

The history of their collaboration on *La Esmeralda*—a history that can be traced through their correspondence—lasted more than five years, during which time Hugo wrote, among other works, *Lucrèce Borgia*, *Marie Tudor*, *Claude Gueux*, and *Le Roi s'amuse*, the latter being the basis of the Verdi opera, *Rigoletto*.[8] For the most part, they discussed their opera in person. Out of respect, Bertin preferred not to write to Hugo directly, and when she needed some alterations or new lines, she wrote to Léopoldine (Didine), his oldest child, who was between seven and twelve years of age during the five years they worked on the opera (Gasiglia-Laster, *Hugo librettiste*, 67). Their working method was complex and time-consuming, but it insured equal input by both, creating a system of checks and balances.

At first, they relied on the novel for background, and more specifically on the scenario sketched out by Hugo for the Opéra administration. Before writing a section of text, Hugo consulted Bertin on the types of moods and emotions she wanted to convey in a given part. Likewise, Bertin made demands of Hugo concerning the type of piece she felt was required by convention or by audience taste. If Bertin had specific musical ideas that required specific rhythms, rhymes or verse lengths, she would indicate to him what she required. Indeed, his letters occasionally refer to "monstres," that is to say, dummy lines of poetry given by the composer to the librettist to indicate the required rhythm and vowel sounds for a particular section of text (Boneau 435-44). In a letter (dated December 5, 1833) to Bertin, Hugo made it clear that, in his mind, his primary job was not to shine as a poet, but rather to serve the composer and the needs of the music: "Votre sens musical doit être, après tout, souverain, et mes rimes sont les très humbles servantes de vos notes" (143). However, when Hugo did not agree with Bertin, he did not hesitate to keep it his way, proving that his role in the process was not passive (Boneau 439-40).

La Esmeralda debuted on November 14, 1836, at the Opéra. Although it was a large-scale four-act work, it necessarily eliminated many characters and episodes from the opera, including such central figures as Pierre Gringoire, Jehan, and Louis XI and his judges. Perhaps the largest change in character occurred with Phoebus. A fop in the novel, here he was transformed into a more idealized, sympathetic, and handsome "jeune premier" (Tillard 22). Berlioz directed the rehearsals, due to Bertin's handicap (though she was generally present). The production was visually impressive. The stage design, by Philastre and Cambon, was praised by many, and showed seven large scenic tableaux, three of which included some recognizable part of Notre-Dame cathedral. The corps de ballet took part also, mostly during the choruses. The young romantic painter and friend of both Bertin and Hugo, Louis Boulanger, designed the costumes. However, because only one scene involved characters of the upper class, they were found to be disappointing; the majority of them, being clothing for beggars, street people, and the general populace, were less appreciated (Boneau 594).

According to the opera critic for the *Journal des débats*, Jules Janin, *La Esmeralda* was well received on opening night.[9] There was, however, a regrettable incident that has caused the work's reputation to suffer ever since, and one that testifies to the long-standing prejudice against creative women. The "hit" of the show was undoubtedly Quasimodo's aria, the "Bell Song" in Act 4. Even in rehearsals, the song had been praised. Berlioz had, a few weeks before the première, announced his plans to include it on the program of an upcoming concert. The composer of the *Symphonie Fantastique* told the story of the controversy in a letter (dated December 22, 1836) to his sister Adèle:

> Ce morceau est vraiment une *invention* musicale des plus remarquables, il eut les honneurs du *bis* aux première, deuxième, et troisième représentations, et, à la première, Alexandre Dumas, qui n'aime pas les Bertin, se mit à crier de toute la force de ses poumons mulâtres: "C'est de

Berlioz, c'est de Berlioz!" Voilà la justice! Si j'ai contribué à l'effet de cet air, c'est pour bien peu de chose ; il est réellement bien de mademoiselle Bertin, mais (entre nous) il finissait mal, c'est-à-dire il finissait de manière à empêcher l'effet des belles choses qu'il contient ; ma collaboration s'est bornée à indiquer à l'auteur une péroraison plus digne de l'exorde; c'est tout, et je ne l'ai jamais avoué à personne. (*Années Romantiques* 322-23)

Though the aria was encored, nevertheless, from that moment on, confusion and controversy have reigned to the present day. After such a scandalous outburst, it was difficult to squelch the rumors that Berlioz, who directed the rehearsals, had also written some of the music. At least one of the reviews also echoed this belief. It was so difficult for people to concede that a woman could compose music of such dramatic power that they were willing to attribute it to Berlioz, a composer not usually praised at the time (Boneau 617).[10] In his *Mémoires*, Berlioz again adamantly denied having given Bertin any assistance on the "Bell Song" or on any other part of the music: "J'y suis pourtant complètement étranger, comme à tout le reste de la partition, et je jure sur l'honneur que je n'en ai pas écrit une note" (24, vol. 2).[11] Still, even the fifth edition of the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* states, "It is not known how much of her work may have been touched up by Berlioz" (687). And as recently as 1980, Bea Friedland reiterated this idea, while promoting an image of Bertin as an amateur dabbler and child of privilege and falsely claiming that *Esmeralda* was "hooted off the stage on opening night" (27).

Of course, Hugo's reputation was to blame as well for the failure of the work. After 1834, he began campaigning openly to become a member of the Académie française, and so much overt ambition did not gain much sympathy for a man already the object of envy and hatred (Boneau 592-93). In addition, as part of a general tendency toward appealing to the tastes of a rising middle class, the subjects with which Hugo and his followers dealt—the exotic, the medieval—were not those of the works of Racine and Corneille. Those with strong antipathies toward the Romantics found Hugo and his followers immoral and vulgar. The controversy became a struggle between the supporters of the July Revolution and the Louis-Philippards, represented by the *Journal des débats*, and their opponents, represented foremost by the *Gazette de France* (Flore 47-49). In a subsequent article, Janin attempted to defend the work against its detractors by comparing it, quite validly, to Meyerbeer's more successful *Les Huguenots*. As he pointed out, *Les Huguenots* resembles *Esmeralda* in that it deals with a religion-related subject and contains scenes in a church, though *Les Huguenots* is not entirely centered around the church building. Both stories reflect the general tendency of the nineteenth century to look back to the Middle Ages. The difference was that Scribe and Meyerbeer were simply not as controversial as were Hugo and the Bertins. Eventually, Janin had to report the bad news of *La Esmeralda*'s defeat. At the sixth performance, on December 16, when the opera was already reduced to three acts, a cabal had been organized. The whistling and hooting became so disruptive that Mademoiselle Falcon ran from the stage and the curtain had to be lowered.[12]

Recent revivals of *La Esmeralda* have helped to spotlight what might possibly be a feminist element in the libretto: the choice of Esmeralda as protagonist. The manner in which Esmeralda is introduced onto the stage is unusual, since, rather than "announcing" her heroine in Wagnerian fashion, with strongly characterized music, Bertin "discovers" her "in response to crowd calls and leaves the characterization to her looks, her dancing and some light decorative vocalizations" (Bennett 6).

Another factor bearing on the characterization of the title character is the modification of the concept of ANAGKH, central to the novel's message. This word, first seen as graffiti in the cathedral, is linked with the word "Anagneia." The two words mean roughly "oppressive fate" and "tainting impurity," but both are in danger of being over-simplified by operatic treatment. Deprived of the capacity for verbal debate and its analysis of concepts, the opera focuses solely on simplified "fate," leaving the counter-running theme of demeaning temptation to the effect created by Esmeralda's dancing and its impact on the various male characters. The libretto does leave in the notion of Esmeralda's redeeming purity, but that element is less emphasized than in the novel and it totally disappeared in one production where it was decided to omit from Act 2 the scene of Quasimodo in the stocks and the drink of water that Esmeralda gives him. Indeed, with that important scene omitted, one might think that Quasimodo loves her due only to her physical beauty.

Interestingly, the fact that Esmeralda is perceived as a seductive dancer recalls Carmen, another extraordinarily beautiful gypsy and street dancer. The parallel must not be taken too far, since, as Gasiglia-Laster notes, Carmen is a liberated woman, intentional in her provocation and seduction, whereas Esmeralda is more unknowing, naïve, and child-like. However, Tillard argues that Hugo himself changed the character of Esmeralda in his libretto, by making her considerably less naïve and more overtly seductive than in his novel. Indeed, due to the transformation of Phoebus from fop into a more sexually appealing character, Esmeralda had to be changed accordingly, she says. Gasiglia-Laster agrees to a point, and finds some echoes of Bizet in Bertin's music, but still considers Esmeralda too flirtatious (3-4). The link between these two operatic femmes fatales may not be a coincidence. As Laster notes, Bizet composed an (unfinished) *Esmeralda* before *Carmen*, "[...]et à l'écoute de la dernière scène de l'acte, on se prend à penser que ce ne fut pas un hasard si Bizet entreprit de composer une *Esmeralda* avant *Carmen*" (2-3).

It can be argued that in future staged versions, where the corps de ballet, a convention of nineteenth-century French grand opera, will likely be absent, the heroine's dancing will feature even more prominently. But one can only speculate as to her future identity: will she be represented as innocent gypsy girl, sassy street urchin, or feral wild child? Will she accommodate the logic of the

male gaze, a logic that sees art and femininity as visual representations of male genius and male sexual desire? Or will she somehow defy it and dance outside of it? Indeed, will her body become a transfixing tool, thus enabling the audience to be transfixed by her song, as opposed to merely an object of male voyeurism? Of course, much of this will depend on who interprets the role. One of the major challenges for the artists associated with future productions will thus be how to maintain the freshness and innocence of the character while still addressing the fact that Esmeralda does, after all, dance at least in part for the enjoyment of others.

In the meantime, we can only encourage the study and promotion of this fascinating composer. Her work clearly stands apart from the tuneful, regular music of her more famous contemporaries, while her position as a member of a highly visible, politically influential newspaper family is arguably as important to her identity as is her gender. She should be of interest to anyone studying the relationship of art, politics and journalism in 1820s and 1830s Paris, Victor Hugo's early career, the beginnings of Romanticism in France, the genre of French grand opera, and the cultural milieu in which Meyerbeer, Rossini, and Berlioz, among others, worked (Boneau 2-3). As we have seen, history has tried to deny her authorship of her best-loved aria, while dismissing her masterpiece, *La Esmeralda,* as evidence of political privilege. All the more reason, then, for the work to be revived and performed today. If nothing else, it deserves to be judged on its musical and artistic merits. Only then can we hope to consider it as one of the jewels of the opera repertoire.

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Notes

[1] As Denise Boneau astutely points out, "By being neither a man nor a typical woman achiever (not even a typical woman opera composer), we [sic] find Louise Bertin in neither the male world nor the women's sphere. We obviously cannot judge her as a man; neither can we judge her as a typical woman" (9).

[2] The first was Jeanne-Hippolyte Devimes, whose opera *Praxitèle, ou la ceinture* was mounted at the Opéra in 1800, and saw a respectable sixteen performances. It was probably no coincidence that her husband was director of the Opéra at the time (Letzter and Adelson 36).

[3] While four libraries worldwide own Liszt's piano reduction, only two contain the full score: the Bibliothèque Nationale and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

[4] The exact remark, from Berlioz's *Mémoires*: "Mlle Bertin est l'une des têtes de femmes les plus fortes de notre temps" (23, vol. 2).

[5] In tracing the change in literary taste in France from the English gothic novel and its many French imitators to Walter Scott's historical novels, it is interesting to note how closely connected the Bertin family was to both genres. In November 1817, Charles Nodier, literary critic for the *Journal des débats*, published a review of Scott's *Puritains*, and from there, in a relatively short time, Scott's renown in France began to grow and then sky-rocketed. It is not surprising, then, that Louise Bertin was one of the first to write an opera based on a Walter Scott work (Boneau 166-68).

[6] Fétis's exact remarks: "La qualité dominante qui a été remarquée dans la musique est une indépendance de manière qui, au premier abord, paraît plus étrange que séduisante ; mais, sous ses formes inusitées, sous cette harmonie singulièrement attachée, sous ces accompagnements empreints d'un peu de bizarrerie, on découvre bientôt une vigueur qui ne semble pas appartenir au sexe de l'auteur : des idées originales, une manière de sentir particulière, vive et profonde, c'est quelque chose enfin qui ne ressemble point à ce qu'on a fait jusqu'ici, et c'est beaucoup" (144-45).

[7] According to Boneau, not only did Hugo write to Bertin extensively and dedicate several poems to her, but: "There is great evidence that Hugo wrote the novel [*Notre-Dame de Paris*] and libretto for Bertin simultaneously, and that Bertin was in fact the spiritual dedicatee of the novel" (39).

[8] According to Françoise Tillard, both Rossini and Meyerbeer asked Hugo for a libretto of *Notre-Dame*, in hopes of composing the opera. Hugo preferred to work with his friend Louise Bertin, whom he respected and who he thought would not overshadow him (20).

[9] Janin's remarks: "Le succès du nouvel opéra a dépassé toutes nos espérances : non seulement il a été applaudi, mais encore il a été écouté avec une émotion toujours croissante" (*Journal des débats*, 17 novembre 1836).

[10] Sadly, the notion that Berlioz was the true composer of her music persists even after the 2008 Montpellier performance. Shortly after the concert, Pierre-René Serna published an article on the *Site Hector Berlioz* claiming that Berlioz played a large role in the composition. However, he names various other composers whose work *Esmeralda* resembles, thus negating his initial claim. Indeed, if it sounds like several other contemporary composers, (Boieldieu, Auber and Meyerbeer), could *they* not just as easily have composed it? Serna further states that Bertin may have plagiarized certain passages of Berlioz's *Benvenuto Cellini*. But here, his chronology is off, considering that Bertin composed her opera from 1831to1836, and Berlioz his from 1836 to1838. She could not have plagiarized an opera that was composed and performed after hers. See Arnaud Laster's and Danièle Gasiglia-Laster's response to Serna on the *Site Hector Berlioz*.

[11] Berlioz stated yet a third time that he played no part in writing the "Bell Song" or any of the music of *La Esmeralda*. In a footnote to his positive review of the work, he stated, "On a fait à l'auteur de cet article l'honneur de lui attribuer la composition, ou, tout au moins, l'instrumentation de ce morceau. Un tel honneur, qu'il s'estimerait heureux de mériter, il le rend tout entier à mademoiselle Bertin, en protestant de la façon la plus formelle que pour ce bel air, comme pour tout le reste, elle seule l'a conçu, écrit et instrumenté" (410).

[12] Janin's remarks: "Toutes nos craintes ont été dépassées ; mais, ô ciel qui pouvait prévoir tant de fureurs ? Nous savions bien quelles haines terribles et cachées devaient accueillir ce bel ouvrage ; mais pourtant il nous était impossible de prévoir que cette

haine impitoyable imposerait silence à toute une assemblée qui écoutait et qui applaudissait en toute conscience" (*Journal des débats*, 19 décembre 1836).

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