



Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848): La Favorite Original French Version 1912

LINER NOTES

Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848): La Favorite
Opera in four acts

Recorded in the Original French Version 1912. Recorded in forty-two parts

Libretto by Alphonse Royer, Gustave Vaëz & Eugène Scribe
Based on the drama Le Comte de Comminges by Baculard d'Arnaud

Balthazar	Robert Marvini
Fernand	Robert Lassalle
Alphonse XI	Henri Albers
Don Gaspard	Georges de Poumayrac
Léonor de Guzman	Ketty Lapeyrette
Inès	Marie Gantéri

OPÉRA-COMIQUE, chorus and orchestra, François Ruhlmann, conductor

THE PATHÉ OPERA SERIES

The French Pathé Company undertook the prodigious task of recording a series of eleven complete operas and two complete plays in French, which was collectively entitled "Le théâtre chez soi" (Your Theater at Home). The enterprise began in 1911 and by the end of 1913 nine operas and two plays were on disc. In 1922 and 1923 two additional operas were added to complete the collection. Although the Pathé opera project turned out to be a commercial failure, it is impossible to overestimate the historic and musical significance of the Pathé series. These recordings transport us back to an era when the lost art of French singing still flourished in Paris.

Listening to any of the operas in this series gives one the palpable impression of an actual live performance although the sound on the original discs is primitive. This is in large part due to a rudimentary recording method which Pathé employed. Each master recording was originally made on a large wax cylinder. The next step in the process involved playing the cylinder back and transferring the sound to a wax disc which became the master for the issued record. This was accomplished by means of an acoustical connection between the diaphragm of the cylinder reproducer and the diaphragm of the disc recorder, much like two tin cans at either end of a taut piece of string. All Pathé discs are, therefore, one generation removed from the original master, and consequently, the sonic quality of each disc hinged upon exactly how well the cylinder-to-disc transfer was made. Unfortunately, Pathé seemed to have no concept of quality control, and their issued discs ranged from surprisingly vivid to dreadfully anemic. Not surprisingly, transferring the original discs to the digital domain presents a great challenge. Every effort has been made to keep the pitch constant, to join the sides according to the score and to provide the best quality possible.

Ward Marston

This reissue of Pathé's acoustic recording of Donizetti's *La Favorite* in its original French form, as the composer intended it, is a cause for celebration. And not just because this is the year of the Donizetti bicentennial. This is a reissue of historic significance because this work has in the last century been most often performed in an Italian version in which the composer had no hand and, further, in a translation which frequently distorts his original intentions.

The Italian premiere of *La Favorita* took place at Padua in June 1842 at a time when Donizetti was in Vienna, having just assumed the prestigious position of Hofkapellmeister to the Hapsburg court, as he had just brought out his *Linda di Chamounix* at Vienna's Kärntnertheater the previous month. The plot of *La Favorite* with its mixture of sex (a king and his mistress) and religion (a novice leaves and returns to the monastery at Compostela) provided ample grounds to offend the exceedingly tender susceptibilities of the various groups of censors active in pre-united Italy. Soon several Italian translations were in circulation, none truly faithful, some wild indeed, that transferred the action to non-Christian climes and others disguised the work under such aliases as *Elda* and *Riccardo e Matilda*. In other Italian efforts to redeem the scandalous plot, the relationships of the characters were altered. In the least plausible of these, Balthazar is presented as the father of Alphonse's queen and Fernand is the son, a shift that transforms him into Alphonse's brother-in-law, all of which makes his ignorance of Léonor's identity and position seem dim-witted indeed. No wonder Donizetti, whose career was then divided between Paris and Vienna, held himself aloof from such distortions.

In its original French form, *La Favorite* was, according to my count, the composer's 57th stage work. It received its first performance at the Paris Opéra on 2 December 1840. In June of that same year he had come from France to Milan to modify the French score of the opéra comique *La Fille du régiment* for its introduction to Italy at La Scala as an Italian opera buffa, *La figlia del reggimento* first performed on 30 October. Nearly two months before *Figlia* was staged, however, the composer received an urgent message from the Paris Opéra. Someone had renounced his "turn" to put on a new opera—such "turns" came round usually at three-month intervals. The reluctant composer who passed up his "turn" may well have been Meyerbeer, who kept delaying the introduction of *Le Prophète* for nearly a decade until he could have the singers that pleased him. To fill that "turn," Léon Pillet, by then the director of the Opéra, asked Donizetti, eager to make his mark in Paris, to accept the upcoming blank in the Opéra's schedule.

Back in Paris by September, Donizetti happened to have on his hands the completed score of his French opera *semiseria*, *L'Ange de Nisida*, which in 1839 had been commissioned by Théâtre de la Renaissance as a successor to his French version of *Lucia*, introduced at the Renaissance the previous August. *L'Ange*, however, although completed in December 1839 and the score ready to be delivered, remained unperformed as the manager of that establishment, one Antenor Joly, went into bankruptcy and ceased operations. Further, the composer was ready to salvage this work, as in its original form—its plot dealing with a mistress of a Neapolitan king—it stood no chance of surviving the attentions of the Italian censors. In the crisis at the Opéra in the fall of 1840, it was agreed to upgrade and modify the plot of *L'Ange* so that it would deal with a medieval King of Castille and his mistress and provide a cue for an extensive ballet divertissement. Pillet and the composer turned to the ever-resourceful librettist hands of Eugène Scribe to adapt the text of *L'Ange*, which had been written by Alphonse Royer and Gustave Vaéz.

A crucial factor in the creation of this quasi-new opera was the mezzo-soprano Rosine Stoltz, who happened to be Léon Pillet's mistress, a diva who brooked no rivals. As the daughter of the woman who oversaw the stage door at the Opéra-Comique, little Rosine had learned at her mother's breast the ways to advance in the world. A woman of unbridled ambition, endowed with a not inconsiderable vocal talent, la Stoltz took full advantage of her position to ensure that any major new production had an imposing role for her, one that would be mentioned in the title of the work. On those grounds and because of its (to her way of thinking) unsuitable title, she rejected Donizetti's half-completed *Le Duc d'Albe*, for which the leading female role, Hélène, had been originally designed for Stoltz's detested rival, the soprano Julie Dorus-Gras.

It was under these hurried circumstances—the premiere already set for early December—that *La Favorite* was put together. What few could have been aware of was that behind a number of the passages that came from *L'Ange de Nisida* stood the shadow of an earlier uncompleted Donizetti score that dated from 1834, the little-known and never-produced *Adelaide*. Further, the discovery not long ago of the autograph of *Maria Stuarda*, a score also from 1834, revealed that two episodes from it had wound up in *La Favorite*. Considering its composite nature, *La Favorite* is unassailable evidence of the innate coherence of Donizetti's style.

As above all a practical composer, Donizetti knew well that the success of a work largely depended upon a score containing effective solos from the principal singers. He knew that his cast would include, besides Stoltz as the prima donna, his old friend the tenor Gilbert Duprez; these romantic leads would be supported by the baritone Paul Barroilhet as the king and the famous deep bass Nicolas Levasseur as the abbot.

The parts of *La Favorite* that have no previous sources are the opening chorus that sets an ascending and descending C major scale, the duet for Fernand and Balthazar, Fernand's martial air at the end of Act 1, Alphonse's double aria at the beginning of Act 2, the ballet, and the king's "Pour tant d'amour" and Léonor's double aria, "O mon Fernand," that follows directly after it. The last act comes from a combination of earlier scores: "Ange si pur" (known in Italian as "Spirito gentil") comes from *Le Duc d'Albe*, whose tenor roles had been designed for Duprez; the great duo at the end stems from *L'Ange*. The finales of Acts 2 and 3 come mostly from *Adelaide, via L'Ange* but one episode, a solo passage for Léonor, was added for Stoltz, while the opera was in rehearsal. From the original *Stuarda* came Inès's air with chorus, "Rayons dorés," and a section of the Act 3 finale. However familiar one might be with *La Favorita*, one cannot grasp the true dimensions of the work, the innate gravitas of its powerful situations, until one knows the original French *La Favorite*.

The singers gathered by Pathé Frères in late 1912 to participate in *La Favorite*, as the sixth entry in their ongoing series of "complete" operas (which they referred to as "Le Théâtre chez soi"), were all established members of either the Opéra or the Opéra-Comique. Ketty (Catherine) Lapeyrette (1880-1960) (Léonor) had made her debut at the Opera in 1908 as Dalila and continued to appear there as a singer of character roles until 1940. She had not yet been cast as Léonor there in 1912, but she had probably sung the role in the provinces, and she would sing it at the Opéra in 1918. That year saw the work's last performance at the Opéra where it had been performed 692 times. Lapeyrette's voice is a large, even mezzo-soprano with a contralto-rich lower register, but she does not always seem favorably placed in relation to the recording mechanism. The tenor Robert Lassalle is the son of the famous baritone Jean Lassalle, who had appeared at the Met for three seasons during the 1890s. Robert Lassalle recorded Fernand just a year after his debut as Le Duc in the French version of *Rigoletto* at the Opéra, a role he would also record "complete" for the Pathé series in 1912. His career was cut short by World War I.

The star of this performance is the Dutch baritone Henri Albers (1866-1926). The role of King Alphonse was created by Barroilhet, who made his Opéra debut in the part, following some years of association with Donizetti at the Naples San Carlo. Albers's cultivated performance brings us in touch with what we read of Barroilhet's Alphonse. The Dutch baritone makes a truly majestic impression as the hedonistic King of Castille, executing all the traditional variants, including an immaculate trill, as well as demonstrating his beautiful mezza voce. With the exception of Lapeyrette's 1909 engagement at La Scala, the other members of the cast made their careers in French-language theaters, but Albers had come to the Met in the 1898-99 season, where among his various roles he made a single appearance as Alphonse (in Italian). Following this American season, his principal center of activity was the Opéra-Comique. Not quite so imposing as Albers is the bass Robert Marvini, who tackles the role of the monk Balthazar, but he makes a decidedly favorable impression with his rather dry but efficient bass. One can imagine a more awesome delivery of the Papal Anathema than Marvini manages, but his Act 4 prayer, "Les Cieux s'emplissent d'étincelles," conveys something very much like fervor. Marvini was a regular at the Monte Carlo opera, still appearing there as late as 1938. The others in the cast, Georges de Poumayrac (Don Gaspard) and Marie Ganteri (Inès) had appeared at the Comique and with other Parisian companies, but their careers are difficult to trace. The conductor François Ruhlmann (1868-1948) was associated with the Opéra-Comique for more than a decade, much of it as principal conductor. In 1919 he transferred to the Opéra, where he remained until 1938. He conducted many important premieres in both theaters, among them the first performances of Dukas's *Ariane et Barbe-bleue*, Ravel's *L'Heure espagnole*, and Falla's *La Vida Breve*. He was long associated with Pathé, conducting for that house an astronomical number of recordings, including six in the "complete" series of operas.

La Favorite had been for almost sixty years a staple of the French repertory, both in Paris and in the provinces. Louise Homer, for instance, had first trod an opera stage as Léonor at Vichy in 1898. It formed part of the curriculum in the vocal classes in the various French conservatoires. During the twentieth century, *La Favorite*'s performance history at the Opéra is not impressive in spite of stellar casting. At Paris's "alternative" opera venue, the Théâtre de la Gaîté, however, *La Favorite* was performed 74 times between 1909 and 1913. This recording, therefore, touches base with what was then very much a living tradition. Indeed, we may count ourselves fortunate to have access

to it in a conscientious reproduction that overcomes, as far as possible, its sonic limitations.

[Since the plot of La Favorite differs in significant details from the usual Italian version, it seems advisable to offer a rather copious summary of the original French libretto here.]

Place: The Kingdom of Castille

Time: 1340

Act 1: Scene 1: At the sanctuary at Saint James of Compostela, the members of the order affirm their faith (Chorus: "Pieux monastère"). The Superior of the order, Balthazar, notices that the novice Fernand does not join in the affirmation. When queried why, the naïve young man explains that he is unable to, because he has fallen in love with a woman he has seen but knows nothing about (Aria: Un ange, une femme inconnue"). She had come to the chapel to pray with such intensity that he was moved by her, and then his hand touched hers when he offered her holy water. Balthazar, who had hoped that Fernand would succeed him, remonstrates with the young idealist, who can only repeat that he loves this mysterious lady (Duo: Sais-tu que devant la tiare"). Angry, the old monk dismisses the youth.

Scene 2: At a garden retreat on the island of St. Leon, Inès and the other ladies describe the fascination of the place on a lovely day (Inès and chorus: "Rayons dorés"). Then Fernand arrives in a boat to be greeted by the sirens ashore (Inès and chorus: "Doux zéphyr, sois-lui fidèle"). Enjoying the sport of courtly love, the ladies place a blindfold on his eyes. When he asks for details of their mistress's name and rank, they refuse to give him that information. Now, Léonor appears and greets him affectionately (Duo: "Mon idole!"). He tells her that he has abandoned the religious life; in return, she assures him that she will further his career, but she hopes she will not place him in danger. He asks her how could that be, but she remains evasive. Impulsively, he asks her to marry him, but she informs him that would be impossible and dismisses him. He becomes more insistent ("Toi, ma seule amie"), but she tells him that, although it pains her to send him off, she must. Inès interrupts to inform Léonor that the king wishes to see her, whereupon she thrusts a paper in Fernand's hand and tells him to avoid her. Alone, Fernand thinks ruefully of the social distance that separates a lady of the court from an ex-novice without prospects of advancement. When he looks at the paper she had given him, he is delighted to discover it to be a commission as captain in the army, and he is eager to seize this chance for fame and glory (Air: "Oui, ta voix m'inspire"). (The truth of the matter is that, all unaware, he has fallen hopelessly in love with Léonor de Guzman, the mistress of King Alphonse XI of Castille.)

Act 2: The hedonistic Alphonse revels in the sensuous beauty of his palace gardens (Recit: "Jardins de l'Alcazar"). The courtier Don Gaspard informs him that the palace, recently captured from the Moors, is a lucky symbol, and hails the king as hero. Alphonse corrects him, saying that the major part of the glory is deserved by young Fernand, whom he has invited to his court at Séville. Don Gaspard then mentions that a message has come from Rome. He leaves, and the King ironically comments on how his courtiers conspire against him because he has put his queen aside and installed Léonor in her place. He will support her, swearing that she deserves the crown (Air: "Léonor, viens"). He will confront the whole universe so great is his love for her (Cabaletta: "Léonor, mon amour brave l'univers et Dieu pour toi"). The king is planning a great celebration in her honor. In a brief interchange, Léonor learns from Inès that Fernand was the hero of the day. His the glory, she says, mine the shame. The King asks her why she lowers her eyes so sorrowfully. She tells him that she came to court thinking she would find a husband, but the king himself betrayed her (Duo: "Dans ce palais"). She longs to escape, but he insists on the primacy of his love for her. To

cheer her up, he orders the dancing to begin (Ballet Divertissement). At its conclusion, Don Gaspard approaches the king to inform him that he has intercepted an unsigned love letter addressed to Léonor. Furious, betrayed, the King demands to know the identity of the letter writer, but Léonor would rather die than name him. This disagreement is interrupted by the arrival of a furious Balthazar, bearing a Papal Bull, demanding that the king banish Léonor and restore his legitimate wife to her rightful position (Finale: "Redoutez la fureur d'un Dieu terrible et sage"). If he fails to do so, he and his party will all be subject to an anathema. All are horrified at this prospect.

Act 3: Alphonse has ordered Fernand to come to Séville to receive merited recognition, but Fernand can think only of the prospect of seeing Léonor again. Preoccupied, Alphonse summons Léonor and orders that Inès be placed under surveillance. When the King asks Fernand what reward he would desire for his military victories, the young man, seeing Léonor approach, asks for her hand in marriage (Trio: "Fernand, devant lui

paraître infâme”). Jealous but appreciative of the irony of this situation, Alphonse informs Léonor of Fernand’s request and his consent to it. They may leave the following day. The heart of this trio is Alphonse’s cynical but suave observation (Aria: “Pour tant d’amour ne soyez pas ingrate”). He orders them to appear at the altar an hour hence. Alone, Léonor is torn by conflicting emotions (Recit: “Ai-je bien entendu?”). Her dowry, disclosing her compromised position, would be his dishonor, although she loves him with all her heart (Air: “O mon Fernand”). Heaven forbids her even to consider doing harm to Fernand’s honor (Cabaletta: “Mon arrêt descend du ciel”). Resolved to tell Fernand the truth, she entrusts a letter to Inès, but the attendant is arrested before it can be delivered. Therefore, Léonor believes that she has cleared her conscience to approach Fernand as a bride, but he, it turns out, is as uninformed as ever.

The courtiers gather outside the chapel. The king has lavished titles on Fernand; he is now Count of Badajou and Marquis of Montréal. From this promotion, they assume that Léonor as a safely married woman would continue her relationship with the king, even in spite of the Papal Bull (Chorus: “Déjà dans la chapelle”). Léonor arrives, unsure as to how Fernand might have interpreted her (undelivered) letter, but she is reassured by Fernand’s warmth. They enter the chapel. Meanwhile, the outraged courtiers denounce him as an unscrupulous opportunist (Chorus: “Quel marché de bassesse!”). When Fernand re-enters from the chapel, expecting their congratulations, they turn their back upon him. Furious, he prizes his honor more than love and demands vengeance upon them. Balthazar appears, and when Don Gaspard informs him of Fernand’s marriage to Léonor, his horrified reaction prompts Fernand to ask what is wrong. On learning that he has married Alphonse’s mistress, Fernand confronts the king, tears off his medals, renounces his title, breaks his sword and hurls it at the king’s feet. In spite of himself, the King feels ashamed (Finale: “O ciel, de son âme la noble fierté”). Balthazar and Fernand leave.

Act 4: Back at the sanctuary of St. James, the monks are digging their own graves (Chorus: “Frères, creusons l’asile”). Balthazar leads them in a fervent prayer (“Les cieus s’emplissent d’étincelles”). The abbot encourages Fernand, who is about to make his vows as a fully fledged monk and leaves to greet a recently arrived novice. Alone, Fernand takes leave of the heavenly illusion Léonor had brought him (Air: “Ange si pur que dans un songe”). He goes into the chapel to join the brotherhood.

The new novice enters. It is Léonor, disguised and fatally ill, come for his forgiveness. She hears the service of Fernand’s admission (Chorus: “Que du Très-Haut”), and she feels she should leave at once, but her strength fails her. Exiting from the chapel, Fernand confesses his unease, even though his vows have been made. Léonor approaches, in agony. Fernand is eager to succor this newcomer, but when her familiar voice begs him not to curse her, he starts to order her away. She tells him of her condition and begs for mercy (Air: “Fernand, imite la clémence du ciel”). Her pleas move him deeply, and he now suggests they escape together to find the joy that heretofore eluded them (Duo: “Viens, viens, je cède éperdu”). Overcome by weakness, she tells him that her death spares him an act of sacrilege, and giving him her blessing, she dies. Broken-hearted, he throws himself upon her corpse. Seeing Balthazar and the brothers enter from the chapel, he tells them who it is. Balthazar orders the monks to pray for her. Fernand informs them that his own body will need their prayers the following day. Curtain.

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TRACK LISTING

CD 1 (69:45)

ACT I (36:07)

1. Ouverture *Orchestra* 5:10
(*La Favorite 1/2*)
2. Pieux monastère *Balthazar; Fernand; chorus* 3:50
(*La Favorite 3*)
3. Un ange, une femme inconnue *Fernand; Balthazar* 3:12
(*La Favorite 4*)
4. Toi, mon fils, ma seule espérance... Sais-tu que devant la tiare *Fernand; Balthazar* 3:44
(*La Favorite 5*)
5. La trahison, la perfidie *Fernand; Balthazar* 2:54
(*La Favorite 6*)
6. Rayons dorés, tiède zéphyr *Inès; chorus* 3:55
(*La Favorite 7*)
7. Doux zéphyr, sois-lui fidèle *Inès; Balthazar; chorus* 3:21
(*La Favorite 8*)
8. Mon idole! Dieu t'envoie *Léonor; Fernand* 3:25
(*La Favorite 9*)
9. Toi, ma seule amie *Léonor; Inès; Fernand* 3:51
(*La Favorite 10*)
10. Celui que vient la chercher... Oui, ta voix m'inspire *Inès; Fernand* 2:45
(*La Favorite 11*)

ACT II (33:32)

11. Jardins de l'Alcazar *Alphonse; Don Gaspard* 4:21
(*La Favorite 12*)
12. Léonor, viens... Léonor, mon amour brave *Alphonse* 4:28
(*La Favorite 13*)
13. Pour la fête, prévien toute ma cour *Alphonse; Léonor; Inès* 2:32
(*La Favorite 14*)
14. Dans ce palais règnent *Léonor; Alphonse* 4:53
(*La Favorite 15*)
15. Ballet *Orchestra* 6:35
(*La Favorite 16/17*)
16. Ah, Sire! vous refusez de croire *Léonor; Alphonse; Don Gaspard; Balthazar* 4:05
(*La Favorite 18*)
17. Redoutez la fureur *Léonor; Alphonse; Don Gaspard; Balthazar* 2:58
(*La Favorite 19*)
18. Vous tous qui m'écoutez *Léonor; Inès; Alphonse; Don Gaspard; Balthazar* 3:40
(*La Favorite 20*)

CD 2 (71:52)

ACT III (38:57)

1. Me voici donc près d'elle *Fernand* 1:57
(*La Favorite 21*)
2. De son sort avez-vous décidé?... Fernand, devant lui paraître infâme *Léonor; Fernand; Alphonse; Don Gaspard* 3:39
(*La Favorite 22*)
3. Pour tant d'amour... Ai-je bien entendu *Léonor; Fernand; Alphonse* 6:48
(*La Favorite 23/24*)
4. O mon Fernand, tous les biens de la terre *Léonor* 3:29
(*La Favorite 25*)
5. Venez, cruels!... Mon arrêt descend du ciel *Léonor* 1:48
(*La Favorite 26*)
6. Inès, viens... Déjà dans *Léonor; Inès; Don Gaspard* 3:01
(*La Favorite 27*)
7. Ah! de tant de bonheur *Léonor; Balthazar; Alphonse; Don Gaspard* 3:42
(*La Favorite 28*)
8. Quel marché de bassesse! *Don Gaspard* 3:34
(*La Favorite 29*)

9. Pour moi du ciel la faveur se déploie *Léonor; Fernand; Alphonse; Balthazar; Don Gaspard* 3:43
(*La Favorite* 30)
10. Sire, je vous dois tout... O ciel *Léonor; Fernand; Alphonse; Balthazar; Don Gaspard* 4:42
(*La Favorite* 31)
11. Ecoutez-moi, Fernand *Léonor; Fernand; Alphonse; Balthazar; Don Gaspard* 2:34
(*La Favorite* 32)

ACT IV (32:48)

12. Frères, creusons l'asile *chorus* 2:26
(*La Favorite* 33)
13. Les cieux s'emplissent d'étincelles *Balthazar; chorus* 3:04
(*La Favorite* 34)
14. Dans un instant, mon frère *Balthazar; Fernand* 2:30
(*La Favorite* 35)
15. La maîtresse du roi... Ange si pur *Fernand* 3:11
(*La Favorite* 36)
16. Es-tu prêt? viens *Léonor; Balthazar; Fernand* 3:23
(*La Favorite* 37)
17. Que du Très-Haut *Léonor; Fernand; chorus* 2:15
(*La Favorite* 38)
18. Fuyons ce monastère *Léonor; Fernand* 3:20
(*La Favorite* 39)
19. En priant, j'ai marché... Fernand, imite la clémence du ciel *Léonor; Fernand* 4:21
(*La Favorite* 40)
20. Adieu, je dois vous fuir... Viens, viens, je cède éperdu *Léonor; Fernand* 3:29
(*La Favorite* 41)
21. Que du Très-Haut *Léonor; Fernand; Balthazar; chorus* 3:49
(*La Favorite* 42)

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