



Salon Savvy: The Chamber Operas of Pauline Viardot as a Vehicle for Performance and Pedagogy

Lydia Bechtel, DMA

Guten Morgen Freunde der Vokalmusik und vielen Dank. Today we will be exploring the Salon Savvy of Pauline Viardot and her use of chamber operas as a vehicle for performance and pedagogy.

If a composer writes a piece of music and no one else hears it, are they still a composer? This question may have challenged the career aspirations of a number of female composers in the nineteenth century who struggled to have their works publicly performed. However, through innovative performance contexts, composers like Pauline Viardot (1821-1910) were able to have their works performed. While Viardot's mezzo-soprano voice gave life to the works of Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791-1864) and Charles Gounod (1818-1893) at the Paris Opéra; her gender prohibited her from having her own compositions heard on the same stage. Thus, she focused her compositional efforts on smaller chamber operas that could be performed by developing singers in the successful salon that she operated. This paper will explore how Viardot utilized her salon as a vehicle for performance of her chamber operas *Le dernier sorcier* (1867) in Baden-Baden and *Cendrillon* (1904) in Paris. Additionally, it will highlight the pedagogical purposes of these works, as Viardot recognized the practicality of composing for her own students.

Historically, French salons empowered women to facilitate political, literary, and artistic discourse, and throughout Pauline Viardot's performance career, she attended and performed in salons throughout France, Germany, and Russia, so she understood the power that they could yield under proper leadership.¹ Thus, it was not surprising when she (semi) retired from the stage in 1863, that she turned her attention towards composition, teaching, and operating her own salon. After Viardot left the stage, her family, along with Ivan Turgenev, moved to Baden-Baden. In part they sought to escape political turmoil in France, but they also knew that the city hosted a vibrant performance season from April to September—the perfect location for Viardot's next ventures.² While Viardot hosted salons in Paris as early as 1842, it was in Baden-Baden that she made her Sunday matinées the must-attend event of the week.³ Hosting the likes of: Clara Schumann, Johannes Brahms, Gustave Doré, Anton Rubinstein, and King Wilhelm and Queen Augusta of Prussia.⁴

It is also during this time that Viardot turned her focus towards teaching, and found that she could use her talents as a composer to write chamber operas that highlighted the talents of her students, provided them with pedagogical tools, and gave them performance opportunities in front of a musically and socially esteemed public in the salon.⁵ Thus, her chamber operas were born.

Le dernier sorcier

Viardot and Turgenev discussed collaborating on operas for years, and on September 20, 1867 their opera *Le dernier sorcier* was first performed in Villa Turgenev at Baden-Baden. The premiere primarily featured Viardot's children, but she wrote the lead soprano role of Stella to be performed by her student Marie Hasselmans, about whom the artist and writer Ludwig Pietsch wrote, "with what amusing naïveté, with what a ringing, lark-like soprano, with what impudent verve, with what a genuine French accent does she bemoan her little anxieties, does she apprise the trees of her dreams and desires, does she proclaim with joy the sweet hopes that the fairy has encouraged."⁶ Other attendees voiced their praise of the work and performers as well, including Queen Augusta who stated, "the King must see this when he comes."⁷ News of *Le dernier sorcier*'s charming music and story quickly spread throughout Europe in a number of periodicals and a performance at the Weimar Royal Court as Viardot continued to mount productions for student performances in her salon for years to come.⁸

Now, let us explore the opera itself in more detail to determine what pedagogical purposes *Le dernier sorcier* offered and still offers to young singers. The opera focuses on the old sorcerer Krakamiche (played by a bass-baritone) who the treble voiced fairies of the forest pester constantly. The Queen of the fairies (who could be played by a lyric soprano or young dramatic mezzo) gives Prince Lelio (a mezzo en travesti) a magic flower that makes him invisible to Krakamiche, so that he can finally have a moment alone with Stella (a coloratura soprano) to confess his love. In the end, all ends happily with Krakamiche repenting for his past wrongs towards the fairies and allowing Stella and Lelio to marry.

When considering the usefulness of programming this opera for university students there are many obvious factors to address. First, it is only two short acts that total around 90 minutes, this makes it a great first experience with opera for young singers that are not vocally prepared to sing a three-hour Mozart opera, and may have limited previous experiences on stage. Within those two acts, all the action occurs in the same place, Krakamiche's hut, so money can be saved on set design. Second, it only requires piano accompaniment, although an orchestral version was made for the 1869 Weimar production.⁹ For many universities this provides more flexibility in production if the orchestra does not have to be involved, and some programs may not have an ensemble with which to collaborate. The opera also relies on spoken dialogue, rather than recitative. For young singers the nuance of appropriately stylized recitative can take years to master, and for non-native French speakers the language itself is very difficult to execute accurately. Thus, utilizing a spoken dialogue can help young singers develop their French skills in a less intimidating setting than recitative, and help with their dialogue skills—an ever more necessary skill for crossover artists of opera and musical theater. Finally, the size of the cast and necessary voice types aligns well with the needs of most university settings, which tend to have larger numbers of treble voices in their departments. Along with the lead roles, the fairy chorus provides many opportunities for a department with a large pool of talented treble voices.

While all of the roles in *Le dernier sorcier* provide singers with opportunities for vocal growth, Stella, Lelio, and Krakamiche most clearly prepare singers for future roles in larger productions.

In Krakamiche’s aria, “Ah, la sottexistence” the key of C minor and rhythmic intensity immediately recall Mèphistophélès’s aria “Le veau d’or” from Charles Gounod’s *Faust*, which premiered nearly ten years earlier in 1859. However, unlike Gounod’s aria, “Ah, la sottexistence” does not maintain the same high tessitura throughout the aria, a useful feature for a young bass-baritone still working on their high voice. It encourages a more gradual approach into the high voice through stepwise motion, while often leaping quickly into the low for dramatic effect, which is an easier vocal gesture for a young singer. In the sighing “ah” section, Viardot utilizes rests and the open [a] vowel as an exercise in balanced/coordinated onsets, or what she described in her exercise book as the “free and pure attack of the note emitted” which insure a singer’s success in their vocal development (Figure 1).¹⁰ Ultimately, the aria and role of Krakamiche make what Viardot might have envisioned as a pedagogical stepping stone toward Mèphisto.

Krakamiche

27

Ah la sot-te e - xi - stence ah le tri - ste mè - tier Que ce - lui d'un sor -

28

cier Quand il a per - du sa puis - san - ce. Ah

p

Figure 1. *Le dernier sorcier*, “Ah, la sottise existence,” mm. 21–46 (DMA Diss. University of Alabama, 2018), 94–5.

The role of Lelio represents preparation for two Gounod roles en travesti, Siebel in *Faust* (1859) and Stéphano in *Roméo et Juliette* (1867). The range of the entire role spans from B3 to F5, and the tessitura is centered in the singer’s chest and mix. Thus, the role makes a great exercise for the young mezzo in unifying their registers. The aria, “Dans le bois frais et sombre” begins with Lelio lower in their voice and in the middle of the aria the singer is required to slowly move through their chest and mixed registers until they leap up to sustain an F5. This initial gradual approach into the higher register, before leaping to sustain the F, allows the singer to have a more comfortable approach into their high to successfully perform the leap and sustaining figure that follows (Figure 2). For a mezzo-soprano who might eventually tackle “Que fais-tu blanche tourterelle” this will help with the leaps followed by descending stepwise motion back into the low that the role requires, and in “Faites-lui mes aveux” they will be ready for the sustained Gs at the end of the aria (Figures 3 & 4).

Mon chien jo - yeux s'è - lan - ce En a - bo - yant sur lui, Et
Hé - las! la lutte est en vai - ne Com - me le cerf bles - sé Je

32 *f*
moi je ris d'a - van - ce En bran - dis - sant ma lan - ce, ma lan - ce, ma
sens ta - rir ma vei - ne. Je veux fuir et - je trai - ne, je trai - ne, je

colla parte

37 *rit.* *f*
lan - ce, Qui n'a ja - mais fa - ille. Hon - neur Au va - leu -
trai - ne Le trait qui m'a per - cé! Hon - neur Au mal - heur

rit. *mf*

42 *p* *f*
reux chas-seur! La la la la La la la la La la la la la. Hon -
eux chas-seur! Mal-

pp *mf*

Figure 2. *Le dernier sorcier*, “Dans le bois frais et sombre,” mm. 26–46 (DMA Diss. University of Alabama, 2018), 83–4.

Gar - dez bien ta - bel - le!
Guard ye well he - dwell - ing,

Qui vi - vra ve - dra! Vo - tre - tour - te -
They who live shall see! For your - dain - ty

rel - le Vous é - chap - pe - ra,
dar - lin! May one - day go free,

Vo - tre - tour - te - rel - le Vous é - chap - pe -
For - your - dain - ty - dar - lin! May - one - day - go

Stepwise motion back into the low

Figure 3. *Roméo et Juliette*, “Que fais-tu blanche tourterelle,” mm. 32-42 (New York: G. Schirmer, 1897), 137–8.

Figure 4. *Faust*, “Faites lui mes aveux,” mm. 83–95 (New York: G. Schirmer, 1902), 108.

Finally, we come to the role of Stella, originally sung by Viardot’s student Marie Hasselmans who went on to sing roles like Oscar in Verdi’s *Un ballo in maschera* (1859) and Juliette in Gounod’s *Roméo et Juliette*.¹¹ While the role itself only contains a single aria which requires both sustained lyricism and coloratura, it is clear in the opera’s later duets that Viardot viewed Stella as a character study for her young singers in bel canto (both the operatic period and school of vocal pedagogy).¹² In the aria, Viardot combines leaping dotted eighth note figures with arpeggiated sixteenths to avoid, “a vocalization which is uneven, hard, either jerky through aspirates, or tame and vacillating through lack of accentuation.” (Figure 5)¹³ In combination with the corresponding exercises she might have provided to Marie Hasselmans, it is likely the aria helped her to achieve a “vocalization which is even and well-proportioned to all the degrees of velocity” as Viardot desired (Figures 6 & 7).¹⁴

11

Cou - lez, cou - lez gout - tes fin - es Le long

12

des col - lin - es En pe - tits ruis - seaux. Cou -

13

lez, cou - lez sur la mou - se, Ver - doy -

14

ante et dou - ce, Bai - gnez les ra - meaux. Cou -

15

lez, gout - tes fin - es Le long des col - lin - es. Cou -

16

lez, cou - lez cou - lez cou -

Figure 5 shows three systems of musical notation for the piece "Le dernier sorcier". Each system consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The first system (measures 51-52) has a vocal line with the syllable "lez" and a piano accompaniment. The second system (measures 53-54) has a vocal line with "Ah" and "cou" and a piano accompaniment. The third system (measures 55-57) has a vocal line with "lez" and a piano accompaniment marked "p".

Figure 5. *Le dernier sorcier*, “Coulez, coulez, gouttes fines,” mm. 51–78 (DMA Diss. University of Alabama, 2018), 116–19.

Figure 6 shows a musical score for "An Hour of Study: Exercises for the Voice, Book II, Leap Exercise". The score is in 2/4 time and features a vocal line with a melodic exercise and a piano accompaniment. The exercise is marked "mf" and labeled "A".

Figure 6. *An Hour of Study: Exercises for the Voice*, Book II, Leap Exercise, (New York: Kalmus Classic Edition, n.d.), 61. Corresponding to measures 51–6 of “Coulez, coulez.”



Figure 7. *An Hour of Study: Exercises for the Voice*, Book II, Arpeggio Exercise, (New York: Kalmus Classic Edition, n.d.), 60. Corresponding to measures 58–65 of “Coulez, coulez.”

Cendrillon

After the success of *Le dernier sorcier* (which was composed around the same time as *Trop de femmes* and *L’ogre*), it was over ten years before she wrote her next chamber opera, *Le cont de fées*, and at the age of 83 in 1904 she wrote the chamber opera *Cendrillon* to her own libretto.¹⁵ The opera premiered in Paris at the salon of her former student Mathilde Nogueiras on April 23rd, who played Cendrillon in a later performance of the opera.¹⁶ In the premiere several of the female roles were performed by singers who might have been Viardot’s students as she dedicated works to them.¹⁷

Much like *Le dernier sorcier*, *Cendrillon* boasts many of the same advantages for performances by young singers at university programs: small cast, piano accompaniment, spoken dialogue, and only about an hour-long run-time. Plus, this opera features a plot sure to be familiar to singers and audiences alike, a bonus for increased ticket sales. It recounts the traditional Cinderella tale, but instead of an evil stepmother, it is her father’s cruelty which keeps Cinderella from finding joy in life.¹⁸ The variety of voice types and prominence of treble voice characters, again makes this an ideal work for developing singers. In *Cendrillon*, the roles of La Fée, Cendrillon, and Barigoule prove particularly beneficial to the pedagogical development of the singer.

Let us start with Count Barigoule, who might seem like an odd choice over Prince Charmant, but he sings significantly more in the opera, as the Prince only sings in a duet in the second tableau and in a few of the ensembles.¹⁹ To open the second tableau, Barigoule sings a spirited aria about how exciting it will be for him to play prince for a day as he and Charmant changed roles to test the constancy of the prince’s potential suitors at the ball. The aria begins with one of the few true recitatives in Viardot’s chamber operas, that culminates in an exhilarating cadenza before the start of the aria proper (Figure 8).

Figure 8. *Cendrillon*, “Puisque me voilà Prince,” mm. 13–18 (Paris: G. Miran, 1904), 34.

The challenge of this aria is that it moves through several different tempi and stylistic qualities, which makes it a great learning experience for a less experienced singer. It moves from the opening recitative into a dancing allegro that requires vocal flexibility through short fioratura, and consistency through registration as the voice frequently leaps from D-G. This gives way to a brief andantino that shifts into a recitative and the aria’s main theme repeats with even more embellishments (Figure 9). In this aria and throughout the opera, Barigoule serves as an excellent preparatory study for the young tenor leggero or even a budding character tenor.

(il manque de tomber)

ce! Ho ho tout beau! Ba-ri-goule,

le P. *tr* **All^o**

Ça, c'est le pas de la Bour-bou - le!... Mais

All^o vivace.

le P. *f*

bah! au jour-d'hui je suis Prin - ce, Vo - yez quelle chance est la

f **Cad.** * **Cad.**

mien - ne! De quel que co - té que l'le vien - ne, Je vais _____
 _____ con - qué - rir tous les cœurs Je n'ai pas be -
 - soin de pa - ru - - re Je n'ai qu'à mon - trer ma fi - gu -
 re, Je n'ai pas be - soin de pa - ru - - re. Je n'ai pas be -

f
tr
p
f
Rit. *Rit.*
Suivez. *Suivez.*
A tempo. *Accel.*
tr

Figure 9. *Cendrillon*, “Puisque me voilà Prince,” mm. 116–55 (Paris: G. Miran, 1904), 38–9.

The role of Cendrillon largely seeks to reinforce concepts of breath management, legato, and unification of registers through her gentle lyricism in arias, duets, and trios. There is also one key technical achievement Viardot desired the singer to master in this role, and it comes at the beginning of the opera in the form of an a cappella aria reminiscent of a folk song. In her exercise books for her students Viardot advocated for young singers to acquire an “exactness of intonation.”²⁰ Thus, it is not surprising that she might challenge a student’s skill by asking them to sing an unaccompanied aria. What is particularly challenging about Cendrillon’s aria, is that she also speaks between vocal phrases, forcing her pitch memory to be as precise as possible (Figure 10). This mix of singing and spoken dialogue poses a dramatic challenge for a young singer who must accomplish pedagogical feats while seamlessly moving from speaking to singing and maintaining the dramatic integrity of the scene.

2^e *Avec décision.* (PARLÉ) Quelle drôle d'idée! pourquoi fallait-il
 Il vou - lait u - ne prin - ces - se - quelle fut princesse, puisqu'elle le de -
 -viendrait en l'épousant?
 (continuant) (se levant) Ah! ah! voilà pourquoi! quand
 qui fut ri - che com - me lui! on est riche on a des bijoux des den -
 telles toutes sortes de choses qui
 vous embellissent, de belles
 robes avec de longues longues queues! comme mes sœurs, tandis que... (elle regarde sa robe, elle réfléchit)
 C'est donc pour la longueur de votre robe que l'on vous aime!.. Alors, ma pauvre Cendrillon, tu
 n'auras jamais la chance d'être aimée, car tu ne seras jamais une femme... à queue... Bah! tant pis!
 cela ne fera jamais de mal qu'à moi! (pliant les épaules) donc...!

3^e (Avec indifférence en soufflant le feu)
 Il é - tait grin - cheux, co - lè - re, Et quel - que peu con - tre -
 - fait _____ Ah! le pauvre homme! _____ Ou - tre
 ça gout - teux, ma chè - re, Et de lui l'a - mour fuy - ait!

Figure 10. *Cendrillon*, “Il était jadis un Prince,” mm. 16–28 (Paris: G. Miran, 1904), 3–4.

In the character of La Fée, Viardot presents her most vocally challenging role yet in the opera, in a role that requires “quiet steadiness” in the sustained opening and brilliant dexterity at the end of the opera.²¹ This mimics her teaching, as she endorsed pupils to “begin [their] daily practice with sustained tones, followed by some exercises in graduated velocity.”²² The exercise shown provides excellent preparation for La Fée’s opening aria which maintains a high tessitura that barely rises above a mezzo-forte dynamic (Figures 11 & 12).

Tu vas re - naître à l'es - pé - ran - ce

Ped.

L'en - fant ai - lé d'un doux sou - ri - - -

Ped.

- re vien - dra cal - mer - - - ton pau - vre cœur.

* Ped. * Ped. * Ped.

Dim.
 Ce pe-tit cœur qui tant sou-
Dim.
 - pi - - - re bien-tôt con-naî-tra le bon-
mf
 - heur
Accel.
Red.

Figure 11. *Cendrillon*, “Je viens te rendre à l’espérance,” mm. 12–23 (Paris: G. Miran, 1904), 27–8.



Figure 12. *An Hour of Study: Exercises for the Voice*, Book II, Exercise for sustaining high voice, (New York: Kalmus Classic Edition, n.d.), 102.

Later in the opera, the singer could use the exercise that follows to prepare for the cadenza before the final scene; ultimately leading La Fée to execute the cadenza “with the full natural voice; without effort” as Viardot desired of all singers (Figures 13 & 14).²³ Through these roles and operas, Viardot insured that singers today continue to maintain the principles of vocal pedagogy laid out by her and her brother’s teachings.



Figure 13. *Cendrillon*, La Fée’s final entrance, (Paris: G. Miran, 1904), 79.



Figure 14. *An Hour of Study: Exercises for the Voice*, Book II, Agility Exercise, (New York: Kalmus Classic Edition, n.d.), 102.

Of Viardot's chamber operas, *Cendrillon* specifically has seen a resurgence in productions in university and young artist programs across the U.S. and Europe, and professional productions all over the world from Wexford, Ireland to New Delhi.²⁴ This is due to the accessibility of the opera, the growing understanding of the usefulness of the work as a pedagogical tool for young singers, and the renewed recognition of what critic René Lara wrote in *Le Figaro* in 1904: "This *Cinderella* score, so mischievous and so cheerful, denotes a liveliness of imagination and an ease of expression that more than one musician could envy. We sometimes look for a salon operetta, easy to interpret: it is now all found..."²⁵

The chamber operas of Pauline Viardot demonstrate not only her compositional abilities, but her savvy navigation of the male dominated worlds of composition and vocal pedagogy in the nineteenth century. Recognizing the context in which she created these works helps to better understand her role as a composer and salon hostess in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, it reveals the usefulness of programming these works for young singers in the twenty-first century to continue their role as pedagogical operas for the developing singer.

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¹ Steven Kale, *French Salons: High Society and Political Sociability from the Old Regime to the Revolution of 1848* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 3.

² Nicholas Žekulin, *The Story of an Operetta Le dernier sorcier by Pauline Viardot and Ivan Turgenev Vol. 1.* (Munich: Verlag Otto Sagner, 1989), 9.

³ Melinda Anna-Regina Johnson, *The Creative Spirit, A Study of Pauline Viardot-Garcia's Salons* (DMA Diss. Indiana University, 2004), 46. This would have been after she and Louis married in 1840 and the couple was living at the *Rue St. Lazare*.

⁴ Louise Héritte-Viardot, *Memories and Adventures*, translated by E.S. Buchheim (New York: Da Capo Press, 1978), 109-110.

⁵ Žekulin also notes the pedagogical role of her chamber operas. A number of terms are used to describe these short operas by Viardot: salon operas, chamber operas, and opérettes. All of which seem appropriate to this author given the nature of their performance purpose and conditions under which they were composed. *Story of an Operetta*, 10, 15.

⁶ Žekulin, *The Story of an Operetta*, 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁸ For more information on the periodicals which reviewed the work see, Žekulin, *The Story of an Operetta*, 19-22.

⁹ The 1869 Weimar orchestration was completed by Eduard Lassen and Franz Liszt. Žekulin, *The Story of an Operetta*, 33.

¹⁰ Pauline Viardot, *An Hour of Study: Exercises for the Voice*, Book I (New York: Kalmus Classic Edition, n.d.), 1.

¹¹ "Mlle Hasselmans," *L'abeille*, November 24, 1877.

¹² The duet with Krakamiche features a cabaletta-like finale for Stella, with impassioned ascending phrases, and the duet with Lelio provides an opportunity for working on more complicated turns. See Viardot, *Le dernier sorcier*, "Si tu ne sais pas" and "Quand vient la saison fleurie."

¹³ Viardot, *An Hour of Study: Book II*, 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁵ The three early operas all had libretti by Turgenev, but she wrote the libretti for *Le cont de fees*. Both Louis Viardot and Turgenev died in 1883.

¹⁶ The Viardots returned to Paris in 1871 after a brief stay in London.

¹⁷ According to Patrick Waddington and Nicholas Žekulin's *The Musical Works of Pauline Viardot-Garcia (1821-1910): A chronological catalogue, with an index of titles and a list of writers set, composers arranged, & translators and arrangers; together with the musical incipits of works and a discography*, La fée's aria was dedicated to Borello D'Artaux, who likely played the role in the premiere. Viardot's song "Poursuite" was dedicated to Dal Piaz who also performed in the first production. Lydia Lewis likely sang Marie in the production as Viardot

wrote to critic Henri de Curzon that he should come to see a performance and write about the young artist to help her career. See Beatrix Borchard, *Pauline Viardot-Garcia: Fülle Des Lebens* (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2016), 259.

¹⁸ For more on how Viardot's plot choices "subvert patriarchal overtones" see Rebecca Fairbank, *Devastating Diva: Pauline Viardot and Rewriting the Image of Women in Nineteenth-Century French Opera Culture* (Master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 2013), 150-155.

¹⁹ The Prince would be a lesson in legato and breath support for a young singer, but Barigoule requires more attention to character and vocal agility.

²⁰ Viardot, *An Hour of Study: Book II*, 1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

²² *Ibid.*, 1.

²³ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁴ Wexford Festival Opera in Ireland performed *Cendrillon* in October 2019 and the Neemrana Music Foundation in New Delhi, India performed and recorded the opera in March 2019.

²⁵ René Lara, "Notre Page Musicale," *Le Figaro*, May 28, 1904.