

NICOLÒ ISOUARD'S LAST YEARS IN PARIS:
TWO NEW DOCUMENTARY SOURCES¹

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The University Library of Amsterdam houses various collections of manuscripts. Amongst these, one finds the *Diederichs Collection*. The collection belonged to Pieter Arnold Diederichs (1804-1874), who gathered together around 35,000 pieces dating from the 16th to the 19th Centuries and coming from different countries, including England, France, Germany and Italy. This collection, which is mostly made up of letters, poems and official documents, was donated to the University Library in 1875 by W. G. A. Diederichs, Pieter Arnold's son (Defraipont 1983: 59-60).

Amongst the letters contained in the Diederichs Collection, one finds two which are related to Nicolò Isouard (1773?-1818),² the celebrated Maltese composer who spent a good part of his life in Paris. Though the dates on both letters are missing, the first one reproduced hereunder could not have been written earlier than the year 1814, and certainly not later than 1816, even though the most probable date should be somewhere around September-October 1814. This letter, which is catalogued as nr. 46 Cg, was sent to Nicolò Isouard by the French opera singer Jean Baptiste Sauveur Gavaudan, who was born in Salon on the 8th August 1772 and died in Paris on the 18th May 1840.

As can be gathered from the contents of the letter, Gavaudan, who was a tenor who had made his debut on the Parisian scene in 1791 in the *Théâtre du Monsieur*, was preparing for the production of Isouard's *Jeannot et Colin*, an "opéra comique" in three acts, which was premiered at the *Opéra-Comique* on 17th October 1814 (Azzopardi 1991: 85). Gavaudan had become a member of the *Opéra-Comique* in 1794 and he was to go through quite a successful period as a singer and actor in this theatre. This fruitful period basically came to an end in 1816, when Gavaudan left Paris for some

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eight years later, in May 1824, that he reappeared on the Parisian scenes, at the *Opéra Comique*. However, his star was on the wane and he retired definitely from the scene in 1828 (*Nouvelle Biographie General*, Tome XIX-XX: 738-739).

The letter to Nicolò Isouard is addressed:

A Monsieur
Monsieur³ Nicolo
rendu fille d'Thomas

and the full text in French goes:

Monsieur Nicolo, je suis toujours très enrhumé, je crains de ne pouvoir reprendre les répétitions de ton ouvrage avant Lundi, mais je ne perds point de temps, je travaille à force et ne retarderai pas d'un jour Jeannot et Colin. Je te prie d'en taire par à Etienne, et de persuader les camarades qui se donnent la peine de répéter en mon absence, que je serai prêt aussi qu'eux. Mme. Gavaudan va mieux, et pourroit jouer son rôle dans deux jours si elle étoit en état de rentrer à présent.

Bien le bon jour, ton ami
Gavaudan

[To Monsieur Nicolo sent through Thomas's daughter

Monsieur Nicolo, I have still got this very persistent cold and thus I believe that I cannot resume with the rehearsals of your work before Monday; however I am not wasting any time, I am endeavouring to work hard and I will not delay by a single day Jeannot et Colin. I beg you not to mention anything to Etienne, and to persuade my colleagues, who are taking the trouble to continue rehearsals in my absence, that I shall be prepared as well as them. Mme. Gavaudan is better, and she should be able to play her part in two days' time if she will be in a state to recover.

I wish you a good day, your friend
Gavaudan]

In this letter, although he signs himself as "your friend" and makes use of the familiar form "tu", one can sense Gavaudan's feeling of insecurity. The impression he gives is that he feels threatened, because of his persistent cold, that he might lose his part in Isouard's comic opera, which, by the way, was written as a fruit of the rivalry that existed between Isouard and François-Adrien Boïeldieu, who in 1812 had returned to Paris, after an eight year stay in Russia (*Nouvelle Biographie Général*, Tome XXXVIII: 8). Gavaudan's insistent plea to Isouard not to reveal anything to the author of

the libretto, Charles Guillaume Etienne (1778-1845), and to persuade the other members of the troupe to carry on with rehearsals in his absence is, I would believe, not only indicative of his eagerness to be part of the cast of *Jeannot et Colin*, but also of his lack of self confidence in a period of his life when the climax of his career had already been reached.

Gavaudan also mentions his wife in this letter. It seems she was also sick at the time of writing but was on her way to a full recovery. Actually, both Gavaudan and his wife acted and sang regularly in Isouard's works at the *Opéra-Comique* (*Nouvelle Biographie Général*, Tome XXXVIII: 8). Alexandrine Marie Agathe Gavaudan was born in Paris on 15th September 1781 and died in Passy on 24th June 1850. She made her debut in 1798 at the *Théâtre Favart* and was considered to be amongst the best comediennes of the *Opéra-Comique*. She retired in 1822. She was mainly renowned for the part of Colette in Isouard's *Jeannot et Colin*, together with that of Margot in *Diable à quatre* by Jean-Pierre Solié and Euphrosine, Rose d'amour in Boïeldieu's *Petit chapeau rouge* (*Nouvelle Biographie Général*, Tome XXXVIII: 8)

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The second letter, reproduced hereunder, was written by Isouard himself and is catalogued as letter nr. 53y in the Diederichs Collection. Even here, although Isouard is so meticulous as to highlight the fact that he is writing on the 2nd of May at 8 o'clock in the morning, the year is not specified! Internal evidence, however, definitely restricts the dating to between 1814 and 1818.

The full text of this letter, whose addressee remains unknown, goes:

Je suis au désespoir mon cher confrère que vous vous soyez donné la peine de venir chez moi. Je comptais avoir le plaisir de vous voir ce soir à la réunion; en vous ayant pas vu vous pouviez croire que le tout étoit arrangé, car je ne vous aurais pas laissé dans l'embarras puisque vous et moi sommes les directeurs des concerts de notre société. Tulou viendra et jouera un Andante suivi de Variations sur la flûte avec accompagnement de Piano. Mr. Seinitchoëffer tiendra le Piano. Voici ce qu'il faut pour le programme et je désire que cela suffise pour m'excuser auprès de vous.

Mille amitiés,

Nicolo

le 2 May, à 8 heures du matin

p. annoncer voici les titres

M. Tulou première flute de l'Accademie Royale de Musique executera un Andante suivi de variations de la Composition (avec accompagnement de Piano).

Mr. Seinitchoëffer, Artiste de l'Accademie Royale de Musique tiendra le Piáno.

[I am desperate, my dear colleague, that you have had to bother to come to my house. I was counting on having the pleasure of seeing you this evening at the meeting; not having seen you, you could have well imagined that everything had been fixed, because I would not have left you in an embarrassing situation since both you and I are the conductors of the concerts of our Society. Tulou will come and play an Andante followed by Variations on his flute, accompanied by piano. Mr. Seinitchoëffer will play the piano. Here is what is needed for the programme and I trust that that's enough to excuse me with you.

A thousand friendships,
Nicolo
the 2nd of May, at 8
in the morning

In order to be able to announce them, here are the titles

M. Tulou, first flute at the Accademie Royale de Musique, will play an Andante followed by variations on this composition (accompanied by a piano).

Mr. Seinitchoëffer, an artist at the Accademie Royale de Musique, will play the piano.]

In this letter, Isouard is writing about the organization of a concert for "notre societé" to another person who must have been joint conductor with him of these concerts. It would be quite interesting to try and discover who this other music conductor was. What seems quite clear is that this person is not a very close friend since Isouard utilizes the formal "vous" when addressing his "cher confrere". As for the unspecified "notre societé", I would be led to believe that this had to do with Isouard's involvement with the *Opéra-Comique*. This seems to be confirmed by Isouard's references to artists from the *Académie Royale de Musique*, considering that such *Académie*

was in fact attached to the Opera theatre.

The reference to the *Académie Royale de Musique* is also important since it gives us a decisive clue as regards the dating of the letter. In fact, this "principal opera company of Paris underwent several changes of title as the result of political events". From 1791, it was called *Théâtre de l'Opera*; in 1794 it changed its name to *Théâtre des Arts*; in 1804 it became the *Académie Impériale de Musique* and, finally, from 1814 onwards, barring a very short parenthesis, it was called *Académie Royale de Musique* (*The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Vol. 14: 211). It is obvious, therefore, that Isouard must have written this letter after the change of name of the Academy from *Académie Impériale* to *Académie Royale*, in 1814, and before 1818, the year of his death.

These were the years when the renowned flutist Jean-Louis Tulou, who is mentioned in the letter, was in strong competition with his rival Louis Drouet (1792-1873). The two flutists divided the opinions of the Parisians, but eventually Tulou got the upper hand. Tulou, who was born in Paris in 1786 and died in Nantes in 1865 was, at the age of 15, already considered by many in France as the major flutist of the country. In 1804, at the age of 18, he held the first of his professional appointments. In his letter, Isouard refers to him as the "première flute" of the *Académie Royale*. Which goes on to confirm that he was still at the apex of his career in the period around 1814-1815 and still very active as a performing artist. It was only later, in 1829, that "Tulou received the long-desired chair at the Conservatoire which he held till his retirement in 1856" (*The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Vol. 19: 251).

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From this short letter, one can note Isouard's concern for his colleague, who had bothered to visit the Maltese composer at his home. Whether it was sincere concern or not, is still to be ascertained. It would seem that Isouard had not completed the preparations for the planned concert, according to the deadline that had been fixed by the two of them. And this is what had made Isouard's colleague go and visit him at home. Our composer seems to come up with the excuse that he had been expecting to refer everything to his colleague on that same evening at a meeting which both were supposed to attend and he stresses the fact that he would certainly not

have left his friend in an embarrassing situation. There would seem to be a feeling of uneasiness on Isouard's part in this letter, and a certain sense of guilt. That is why he may be so eager to stress that the programme had been taken care of by him.

The tone of justification of this letter could be reflecting Isouard's sense of guilt at not having done his duty properly with respect to the organization of the concert, but it could also be something more. One must keep in mind that Isouard was extremely disappointed and angered at the nomination (at his expense!) of his rival Boiëldieu as a member of the *Institut de France* in 1817. Slightly later sources, such as F. Fetis in his 1840 article on Isouard in the *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris* (as quoted by *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Vol. 9: 355) and the 1862 *Nouvelle Biographie Général*, Tome XXXVIII: 8, clearly state that during the last years of his life Isouard let himself go to the "abus de plaisir", the dissipation of his wealth and the total abandonment of his work and other duties.

Now, if Isouard was spending the last years of his life in a dissolute and reckless way, it was only natural that his frame of mind was not the right one and that he could have felt a certain amount of remorse for his irresponsible behaviour! Remorse which can hardly be hidden in this letter and which would, therefore, restrict the dating to the years 1817-1818, as from the date of Boiëldieu's appointment until Isouard's death.

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Apart from their intrinsic historical value, I find the two letters interesting for another much simpler reason: they highlight the inner feelings of two well known figures in moments of weakness. It is quite a sad sensation for all us human beings to feel neglected by others during certain periods of our life-time. I believe, however, that this feeling is perceived rather more tragically by public figures and other celebrities, who spend most of their lives being in the limelight, praised, adulated ... and envied by their contemporaries, only to find themselves one day no longer the centre of attraction. The psychological impact of such a new reality must certainly be a devastating one.

In these two letters, the famous singer Gavaudan and the renowned composer Nicolò de Malte stand out as two personalities who have passed

the peak of their professional life and who, in their subconscious, are desperately fighting against the oblivion that is normally reserved for people who have lost the fame, power and glory of their better days once and for all.

This pitiful battle against the merciless flow of time is inevitably destined to be a losing one. Being doomed to succumb to the tyranny of time, the simplest but most consistent of the rules of life, Gavaudan and Isouard in their letters indicate that, apart from having been great artists during their life-time, they were also normal human beings like all of us, with their fleeting moments of joy and, alas, much more persistent periods of depression.

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NOTES

¹ I would like to thank my colleague of the Department of French, Carmen Depasquale, for having revised my English translation of the letters.

² Nicolò Isouard was a famous Maltese composer. Despite being oriented by his parents towards commercial activity, his love and predisposition for music immediately stood out. His first work, *Avviso ai Maritati*, was premiered in Florence in 1794. In 1795 he wrote *Artaserce*, which was premiered in Livorno. His success earned him the protection of Grand Master of the Order of St. John, De Rohan, who nominated him organist of St. John's Co-Cathedral in Malta. When Napoleon conquered Malta in 1798, Isouard lost his job. The French governor of Malta, General Vaubois, took Isouard to Paris with him in 1799, as his secretary. Here, he became one of the most famous opera writers of the period. Amongst his best known works one finds *Cendrillon* (1810), *Le Billet de loterie* (1811), *Joconde* (1814) and *Jeannot et Colin* (1814).

³ This second *Monsieur* is obviously repeated by mistake.