

## Débuting *Silvain*

*Gilbert Estrada*

“A soprano to be cherished.”

“An angel’s voice in our times.”

“France’s gift to opera.”

These were a few of the many quotes from the Paris journal reviews of Madame Louise Lacombe’s operatic début as a diva in 1782, when she was a mere twenty-two years old. Time and experience had taken their toll over the past fourteen years: The Revolution, *la Terreur*, ensuing flight for life to Saint-Domingue, more revolution, then wandering among theatres and performance halls amidst the isles of the Antilles, giving performances with this troop or that troop, singing a sprightly operatic **duet** in Havana one week; two weeks later, part of a duo in a musical **interlude** in a groggery or tavern in Fort-de-France. Now at six-and-thirty years, she found herself making another début in another town, New Orleans, with an old opera, *Silvain*, in a mediocre, backwoods theatre, le Théâtre St. Pierre.

This engagement had been Tabary’s arrangement. Louise Lacombe had known Louis Tabary since Saint-Domingue, and several times he provided work and shelter—for a price. This venue, known by ribald French locals as *le spectacle de la rue St. Pierre*, was his theatrical scheme in this backwater of Spanish *Luisiana*.

Like her, many in the audience were also French émigrés in this Iberian outpost, and from her candelabra lit dressing room she could hear impromptu songs recounting *la Terreur*, coming from the mouths of the slightly rowdy, inebriated group in the hazy theatre, with several French-speaking Spanish troops within

earshot to make sure no ill-natured **improvisation** was uttered regarding the Spanish Crown.

A letter from Tabary and the **finale** of a moderately successful run in Havana had brought her to this building in the *Calle de San Pedro*. Tabary asked her to début *Silvain* in the rôle of Hélène, Silvain's wife. She knew the opera from her younger days, playing the rôle of Pauline, one of the daughters. Performing a seventeen-year-old opera did not thrill her, but the brief, pleasant **harmony** of her life in Cuba was coming to a close and a new port-of-call was a dire, urgent requirement.

The hot, close atmosphere of mid May—actually 22<sup>nd</sup> May, 1796—was oppressive compared to the sea breezes of Havana and at other cities; New Orleans was further inland from *le Golfe du Mexique* and seemed unnaturally still and humid that evening. Louise had already experienced several devastating hurricanes during her wanderings and wondered if this city would be a safe port during such a calamity due to its inland location. Hot or otherwise, she dressed for her performance with the aid of a wardrobe matron. It was bitter irony that her simple farmer's wife's costume for the one act opera was in better shape than her threadbare street clothes. *I must have new clothes after this theatrical run ends*, she told herself.

The others in the cast were also preparing but in shared dressing rooms, as Louise was promised the only single dressing room in the building. She knew several in the cast: her old comrade Joseph de Beaupré as Silvain, Antoine Pigot as the younger son, and the Cuban Esteban Rodriguez as Bazile. The matron helped her with her blonde wig and red cap and closed the door behind her. As the **rhythm**

of a bass drum beating in the front of the theatre announced the soon-to-take-place performance, Louise applied her stark, white makeup (dim lighting on stage demanded such harsh subterfuge). Preparing in front of the mirror, something in the glow of the candlelight caught her off guard. She looked at herself closely through the dim light and frowned, bursting into tears: *How could my life come to this? What is to become of me? How can I perform in a comedy when I feel like tragedy?* She cried harder, her shoulders heaving. Finally, the storm of tears receded; she regained control of her emotions, her strength. Within a few minutes, Louise looked again at her reflection in the mirror and wrung out a shrug and a sigh, fixing her distorted face paint. Glancing again in the mirror, she gave herself a huge, unnatural smile, hoping to remove the sadness from her appearance and from the upcoming performance.

A knock at the door: "TIME!" was shouted and each player in the cast was on alert. The small orchestra's instruments could be heard tuning up: The meager **brass** section played a slight fanfare; then a flourish emanated from the string section. The conductor brought the musicians in **unison**, cuing them with a triple tap of his baton. While far from a majestic **symphony**, the overture commenced and a **tempo** for the evening was established. Members of the audience shushed each other.

Our performers have taken their places in front of the weak stage lights and chandeliers. The curtains open and the *début* begins.