

Gilbert Bécaud's *L'Opéra d'Aran* (1962) – A Rapprochement

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Read at the 10th Annual Conference of the Association of Franco-Irish Studies (AFIS), Dublin, National Concert Hall, 23 May 2014.

Introduction

Usually the subjects of my research are little known or unknown persons of Irish musical history – or more recently *Franco*-Irish musical history. For a change, therefore, it is my great pleasure to speak to you today about a real celebrity, the popular French singer and composer Gilbert Bécaud. Of course, I am not a Bécaud-specialist, and apart from what, I think, every radio listener in Europe knows about French *chansons*, I don't know more than you about this area at all.

I wouldn't dare standing in front of you today, however, if I hadn't found something of Irish interest that was worth having a closer look at. Some years ago, when I spent an idle hour on eBay looking for things Irish in a very accidental manner, I came across this three-LP set of the early 1960s called *L'Opéra d'Aran*. First I didn't even make the connection to the Aran Islands, so alien was the idea that there should be an opera, in French, of the 1960s, and by Gilbert Bécaud, that had anything to do with Irish cultural history from a French perspective! But, as Albert Einstein said, "Curiosity has its own reason for existing", and I am glad that I didn't stop there but bought the record and revived my record player. That was more than ten years ago.

Structure of presentation

1. Gilbert Bécaud: short biography
2. *L'Opéra d'Aran*: plot, music, source
3. Performances, critical reception
4. Bécaud's Irish connection

1. Gilbert Bécaud: short biography

For those among you to whom the name of Gilbert Bécaud may not be so familiar, let me provide you with a very short biographical sketch. He was born as Gilbert François Léopold Silly in October 1927 in the Mediterranean coastal town of Toulon. You will understand immediately why he needed a stage name for his international career. The first, from about 1942, was 'François Gilbert'; 'Gilbert Bécaud' followed in 1952, as a belated

official acknowledgement of his true father's name.¹ Unlike most other 20th-century performers of French *chansons*, Bécaud did enjoy a 'classical' musical education, and what you can read about it in his biographies is that this was at the *Conservatoire de Nice*. There he studied piano and composition with a certain Tadlevsky, allegedly a pupil of Paderevsky.² But if one looks at the years in question, he was "around 12" when he started there³ and dropped out in 1942, allegedly in order to join the *Résistance*. That means his education was between 1939 or '40 to 1942, and he was 12 to 15 years of age. And the "Conservatory" was still nothing but a simple '*École Municipale de Musique*', not being upgraded to '*Conservatoire*' before 1968, twenty years after Bécaud had left.⁴ Sometimes, some very simple examination shows how much we have to be aware of the dangers of creating legends.

Bécaud started songwriting in 1948, and within five years he worked for stars like Edith Piaf and Yves Montand. It was not before 1953 that he performed his music himself, early hits being *Je t'appartiens* of 1955 and *Le Jour où la pluie viendra* of 1957, which were covered as *Let It Be Me* and *The Day the Rains Came Down* by several American singers including Bob Dylan, the Everly Brothers, Elvis Presley and Frank Sinatra. Another important song in his early career was *Et maintenant* of 1961, made famous in the English-speaking world as *What Now My Love* by a similarly illustrious range of singers.

I am cutting short Bécaud's biography here, because we have reached the point in the chronology of the main subject of my presentation. What I tried to show is that he was already a very popular singer-songwriter in France by 1962, and someone who successfully bridged the gap from *chanson* to pop music. His energetic stage presence made him known as 'Mister 100,000 Volts'. His most popular hits included *Nathalie* (1964), *Quand il est mort le poète* (1965), *L'Important c'est la rose* (1967), *Un peu d'amour et d'amitié* (1972), and many others, particularly during the 1960s and '70s. He died at age 74 in December 2001 on his houseboat on the river Seine in Paris.

2. *L'Opéra d'Aran*: plot, music, source

Incidentally, that houseboat's name was 'Aran', and it is proof to the extraordinary role this opera played in Gilbert Bécaud's life. If his claim is correct that he worked on *L'Opéra d'Aran* on and off for five years, he must have started work on it in 1957. There are, in fact, some indications that in his early years he kept a lively interest in art music; he later claimed he had "a trunkful of sonatas, concertos and other things".⁵ The success of his Christmas cantata called *L'Enfant à l'étoile*, performed to great acclaim in 1960,

¹ http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilbert_B%C3%A9caud#cite_note-1, last visited 11 May 2014.

² Paul-Xavier Giannoli: *Gilbert Bécaud – Seul sur son étoile* (in the series *Vedettes à la une*) (Paris: Librairie Saint-Germain-des-Prés, 1970), p. 17.

³ "*Vers 12 ans, ...*", see fn. 2.

⁴ <http://www.crr-nice.org/index.php?rubrique=conservatoire&page=historique>, last visited on 11 May 2014.

⁵ George Langelaan: 'Mister Hundred Thousand Volts Writes An Irish Opera', in: *The Irish Times*, 23 April 1962, p. 8.

encouraged him to quickly finalise the score and look for performance opportunities. That in itself is a long story, which I must brush over here for lack of time. Suffice to say that the opera was put on at the *Théâtre des Champs-Élysées* in Paris on 25 October 1962, where it ran without interruption for one hundred performances until early January 1963.

L'Opéra d'Aran became Bécaud's largest and most controversial achievement, a work that is mostly passed over by his biographers, who tended to describe the public phenomenon and stage presence that he embodied rather than devoting any space to his compositional talent.

Let me quickly make you familiar with the work's plot and structure. Formally, we are dealing with a full-scale opera in two acts and seven scenes, encompassing 30 musical numbers, many of which follow each other without a break. The three-LP record set, performed by the original cast of the first production, has a duration of 110 minutes altogether. There is no spoken dialogue. Act 1 with scenes 1 to 4, has 19 musical numbers, act 2 the remaining items. In the table below you not only see that the first act is longer than the second, which is usual practice, but also that within the acts, the first scenes are significantly longer and more varied than the following ones, although, of course, the single numbers are not of equal length either.

Table: Formal Structure of *L'Opéra d'Aran*

Act	Scene	Numbers
1	1	1-7
	2	8-14
	3	15-16
	4	17-19
2	5	20-25
	6	26-28
	7	29-30

The introduction starts with a fanfare and a chorus describing the isolated situation of the Aran Islands. Let's hear it so that you get a taste of what the opera sounds like.

CD 1, track 1, 2'30 of Introduction (alternatively, fanfare only: 1'10)⁶

Scene 1 shows the fisherman Mickey burst into a pub exclaiming he had found the half-drowned body of a man in his nets, his colleagues bring him in. He is young, handsome, a Mediterranean type, and immediately admired by a “chorus of women” standing outside at the door. Mickey brings him back to life with artificial respiration. Within but a short time the islanders get the impression that a Mediterranean sun is rising over Aran, because of the sunny nature of their guest. While the Aran girls all take an interest in the man, Mickey tells them that Angelo, the stranger, has eyes for Maureen only. Maureen, however, is betrothed to Seán, who has left the island long ago, and nobody believes that he is either still alive or would come back. Furthermore, Maureen is looking after Mara, Sean’s mother, who she is living with. It all seems to rule out any possibility that Angelo and Maureen could come together, despite their mutual feelings.

Scene 2 sees Angelo well integrated in the daily life of the fishermen of Aran. He is entertaining them with songs and stories, but doesn’t seem to have much talent as a fisherman himself. The old people of the island turn against him as they think Angelo is spoiling the other men. Angelo himself is longing for the day a ship comes to take him away from the island, claiming he was prince in his home country and not made for the simple life of a fisherman. But the others, particularly Mickey, want him to stay for ever. Let’s hear another minute from the opera, in which Angelo sings of his country, and the islanders begging him to stay and share his kingdom with them on Aran.

CD 1, track 12, from 1'55 to 2'52

In scene 3 during a terrible thunderstorm Mara dies and Maureen senses that there is now nothing that would hold her on the island anymore. Angelo comes in, beseeching her to leave with him as soon as possible.

CD 1, track 16, first 30 seconds

Finally, a steamer arrives and Angelo thanks his hosts and intends to say good-bye. Maureen is joining him, and the whole village accompanies them to the pier as the ship arrives. But the first person to leave the gangway is Seán, the long-missed, who was no longer expected to return. This is the end of the first act.

⁶ The music examples were taken from a 2013 CD re-issue of the original 1962 LP-set (in this case the 1963 international edition on EMI): Private CD Edition Legacy of Aran 1001-2.

In act 2, the drama takes its course. Seán learns that his mother died and that Maureen was just about to leave the island with another man. Seán explains that he couldn't come earlier because in a fight he had killed a man and spent several years in prison. He also says he doesn't intend to lose her a second time and that he will now go and fight Angelo. Although Mickey offers his boat to Angelo and Maureen so that they can leave the island, Maureen, God-fearing that she is, now wants to stay with Seán.

Scene 6 sees the conflict between Seán and Angelo develop, with Angelo, for instance, saying that he may have Maureen's lips but he will not have her dreams. Such provocations, of course, lead to a fight with the whole village looking on. As it becomes more violent, Seán snatches a steel line that is used to tie up boats and uses it as a whip towards Angelo. But Maureen throws herself between the two and is hit by the steel line across her eyes. As she falls down, bleeding and blinded, she confesses her love to Angelo.

The opera ends with another storm building up on the horizon. Mickey wants to join the couple, but now Angelo explains that all the stories he had told them about him being a prince in his native land had been lies and that in reality he is even poorer than the islanders. The situation is now extremely messy and desperate, so that Seán tells Maureen and Angelo to take his boat and leave, despite the storm that is heading towards the islands. As Maureen and Angelo are rowing away in the boat, all the villagers know that they will not be able to make it to the mainland. That is the final scene, with Mickey shouting to Angelo in the boat to come back.

CD 2, track 11, 5'20 to 6'40 (or longer: end at 7'24)

There is no recognisable source for the plot of this opera. Unlike other contemporary operas that have the Aran Islands as a *sujet*, the plays by Synge or Yeats don't seem to have been used here. There are very vague allusions to Robert Flaherty's 1934 fictional documentary film *Man of Aran* as a source for this plot, but they are indeed so vague that they are not worth quoting. Three French writers were involved in the creation of the libretto, but to me it remains totally unclear who was responsible for what. The "*livret*" is by Jacques Emmanuel and the "*textes*" by Louis Amade and Pierre Delanoe – but what is the difference between "*livret*" and "*textes*", I wonder.

3. Performances, critical reception

Bécaud had organised three parallel casts so that the performances could run without interruption for ten weeks during the first run of performances in Paris in 1962. Quite well-known opera stars sang in the performance such as Rosanna Carteri from *La Scala* in Milan who sang Maureen, Peter Gottlieb as Mickey, Frank Schooten as Seán and Alvin Misiano as Angelo, with no one less than Georges Prêtre as conductor. There

was a huge media attention accompanying the performances, with newspapers, popular magazines and specialised music journals covering both the performance and the recording. Excerpts were shown on television.

The opera can still be seen occasionally. There were stagings in Montreal in 1965, Liège in 1966, Luxembourg in 1980, Vienna in 1994 and more recently at provincial summer opera festivals such as Montmorillon in 2000 and Lamalou-les-Bains in 2003.

The opera strongly divided public opinion in France. There was a large group of media and the public who took on, with fascination, everything Bécaud would deliver them. Bécaud's opera was on the title pages of magazines, and popular weeklies such as *Paris Match* devoted space to the debate, asking, for instance, "Bécaud – is he serious?", implying, 'is he a serious composer?'. *Paris Match* went as far as asking three music critics and the composer Francis Poulenc to write their verdict of the work. The music critic of *Le Figaro*, Bernard Gavoty, thought it was "*un peu rudimentaire mais émouvant*". The radio journalist Jean Witold thought he had made the acquaintance with a real musician. There is not the time today to quote from the reviews as much would be desirable, but in general the serious music critics rejected the work quite directly, sometimes on the brink of polemics, while the more general media applauded the work as a milestone in modern opera. Poulenc's comment was that "*Les protestataires nous endormiraient*" ("The protesters make us fall asleep.").

It is probably true that this work drew a kind of audience to the opera that would otherwise never enter an opera house. I personally share the opinion of many concertgoers at the time that the work is full of genuine emotion and drama. But the fact remains, too, that the score is totally anachronistic, consciously ignoring the stylistic development of twentieth-century art music, by deploying a musical language mixed of 19th-century romantic opera and mid-20th-century *chanson*, somehow pointing in the direction of an American musical.

4. Bécaud's Irish connection

The most disturbing aspect for me in reviewing the media attention to the opera was, however, that in France nobody ever asked Bécaud what made him choose an Irish subject. Why Ireland? Why the Aran Islands? What is the connection between Bécaud and Ireland? Not one of the books,⁷ articles and interviews ever touched this question – which is, certainly for an Irish audience, one of the obvious questions to address. In France, nobody seemed to be interested. I went as far as asking, for today's presentation, Bécaud's widow. And I received a reply: Kitty Bécaud doesn't know either.⁸

Then, finally, I came across an interview in the *Irish Times*, published six months before the first performance, on 23 April 1962, headed 'Mister Hundred Thousand Volts Writes

⁷ Including the most recent by Kitty Bécaud and Laurent Balandras: *Bécaud – La Première Idole* (Paris: Éditions Didier Carpentier, 2011).

⁸ E-mail dated 7 April 2014 from Laurent Balandras on Kitty Bécaud's behalf.

an Irish Opera'. Here, after Bécaud admitted that he had never seen the Aran Islands, the second question by the interviewer was:

"How many acts, and why Aran, if you have never been there?"

"We needed an island, an island within touch of our so-called civilisation, yet away from it all ... An island where people have remained pure and God-fearing, people who really believe in beauty and kindness, people who still have a heart."

"And you think Aran ...?"

"The Aran Islands are probably the only islands in the world that fit. Also, the Irish love singing and music that moves the heart. People shout, whistle and clap, stamp their feet and go wild sometimes when I sing, but people no longer cry. It is only in Ireland that a song or music will bring tears into pretty eyes. Do you understand?"

"Gilbert, how do you know, since you have never been to Ireland?"

"I know some Irish people and I know their songs!"⁹

That's it, there you are! *L'Opéra d'Aran* is a work of creative phantasy, in all shades of meaning of that term.

Thank you very much.

⁹ Langelaan (1962), see fn. 5.