

# The Stuff of Legend

ROLAND GELATT

**A**MONG the legion of accomplished musicians are a happy few who have been able to create an indelible interpretive style of their own. They are the prime movers, the re-creative fountainheads, the originals to whom we constantly make reference when attempting to place and fix a new talent. Thus, harpsichordists the world over labor in the imposing shadow cast by Wanda Landowska, executants of unaccompanied Bach aspire to the standard of Casals and piano virtuosos to that of Vladimir Horowitz, while bassos with aspirations toward Russian opera must reckon with the tradition established by Chaliapin.

The French baritone Pierre Bernac belongs to this select company of style setters. If he is less celebrated than the other musicians I have mentioned, it is because he has tilled a lesser field. French art songs do not attract a large and clamorous public. But in that particular domain to which he directed his talents, Bernac has left an ineradicable imprint, and it is heartening to know that his most successful recordings are at last back in circulation as part of a new budget-price series published by Columbia Records (Odyssey 32 26 0009; two discs, mono only). Supplementing this album is another welcome Bernac reissue composed of material recorded in Paris just before the war and in London just after (Pathé FALP 50036; mono only).

Perhaps a few biographical details are in order. Bernac was born in 1899 and came to prominence in the mid-thirties when he began appearing in joint recitals with the composer Francis Poulenc, a sensitive and facile accompanist. For twenty-five years the two musicians toured together in many parts of the world (the Odyssey discs date from a 1950 visit to America). Eight years ago, after a farewell recital in Paris celebrating a quarter century of collaboration with Poulenc, Bernac retired from the concert stage and has since then devoted himself to teaching. Almost anyone you name who now sings twentieth-century French rep-

ertoire has been at one time or another a Bernac pupil.

As a style setter, Bernac enjoyed one inestimable advantage denied to the likes of Landowska and Casals: a considerable body of music created specially for him. Poulenc's songs after 1934 were composed always with Bernac in view as their first and preferred exponent. And since Poulenc is generally regarded as the most important song composer since Hugo Wolf, Bernac did indeed hold a formidable privilege. It is impossible to hear a Poulenc song today without hearing Bernac, no matter who the interpreter may be. He had the first and last word on how this magnificent music should go.

**B**UT EVEN without his close ties to Poulenc, Bernac would surely have made a substantial impact on the musical life of our time, for he is a true original, an artist capable of creating a musical tradition all his own. To begin with, the voice itself is extraordinary. Inasmuch as the recordings are now readily available for sampling, no point would be served here in literary descriptions of its quality. Suffice it to say that Bernac's voice relates to the mellifluous satin of a Leonard Warren or a Fischer-Dieskau as does a Modigliani portrait to a Titian. Its acerb timbre is not to everyone's liking. But nobody could deny that it has character, nor could anyone minimize the remarkable uses to which Bernac put it. He was a master of the long legato line, joining note to note and consonant to consonant as if pouring honey from a spoon. (Gounod's *Sérénade* and Fauré's *Jardin Nocturne* on the Pathé disc offer elegant examples of Bernac's ability to perform a song in, seemingly, one sustained exhalation.) He was a master too of rhythmic acuity and of nimble articulation, never losing the forward thrust of a song or short-changing the sense and sound of its words.

But first and foremost, Bernac was a superbly accomplished vocal actor. His every inflection, his myriad shad-

ings of color, his slurs and snaps of phrase all carry meaning, though not in the heavy-handed, obvious way of some recitalists. Like all great actors, Bernac knew how to underplay. You will find his powers of characterization persuasively displayed in the *Histoires Naturelles* of Ravel, a series of animal vignettes to texts of Jules Renard included in the Odyssey collection. These witty, luscious songs find Bernac at the peak of his form as he limns the majestic self-assurance of the peacock, the meticulous prudence of the cricket, the hushed awe of the fisherman who sees a kingfisher alight at the end of his rod. To get a further taste of the singer's expressive range, listen to the snarling bitterness of "Le Mendiant," the dreamy languor of "Hôtel," the choked despair of "Sanglots," three of the many Poulenc songs in the same Odyssey set.

Unfortunately, neither the Pathé nor the Odyssey reissues include texts, and this is a grave defect. These are, as the Odyssey album proclaims, "legendary performances"—but to make the most of the legend, the listener should know the words. Odyssey's anonymous annotator attempts to get off the hook by stating that "the texts [of *Banalités* and *Chansons Villageoises*] are surrealist in style and do not translate at all well into English," but that just won't do. Most of the poems translate quite acceptably; and even for those which don't, the French words by themselves would be a decided help to most listeners. Odyssey ought to make amends by printing the texts in a separate booklet and sending them to deprived customers on request.

**S**OME important Bernac recordings still remain out of print—the Poulenc cycles *Le Bestiaire au Cortège D'Orfée* and *Tel Jour Telle Nuit*, for example, and the Ravel *Don Quichotte à Dulcinée*—and these too should be restored to the catalogue, as well as the solo album that Poulenc recorded for Columbia, half devoted to Erik Satie and half to his own compositions. But what we have now is a magnificent first installment. Anyone at all receptive to the subtle beauty of French song will find much to savor in these long-awaited resuscitations.



## The Fault Is in the Stars

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IN THE DAYS of Louis XIV, the maître d'hôtel whose name has become synonymous in French for culinary prowess gave up his life for his professional honor. When the fresh seafood failed to arrive in time for a Chantilly dinner party to which the King was invited, Vatel skewered himself on his own sword. In the days of de Gaulle, history repeated itself in the person of the chef of Paris's best bouillabaisse restaurant, the Relais des Porquerolles: he shot himself when he learned that his establishment had lost its two-star standing in the *Guide Michelin*.

Every year in the spring, thousands of innkeepers await with trepidation the appearance of the latest edition of the red-covered arbiter of gastronomic excellence, the bible of French hostelry that keeps going up in price in proportion to the cost of eating out in France. (This year the *Michelin* costs thirteen francs.) And every year the book has a few surprises. The big news in 1967 is the fall from grace of the famous Hôtel de la Poste at Avallon, whose long-brilliant third star has faded from Michelin's firmament. It must have been a hard blow for the manager of that house, who was already looking on while the Autoroute that is forever being constructed between Paris and the Riviera began to funnel tourists past his once traffic-clogged little town.

Speculation abounds as to why the Poste has been demoted. Did one of *Michelin's* anonymous inspectors find a fat Burgundian fly in his *timbale gourmande*? What offending

hair was plucked from the *écrevisses aux aromates* just in time, before it reached the incorruptible palate? A better guess might be that the guidebook's editors have been plagued by letters from readers voicing the complaint so often heard about the three-star places: too much of a good thing. The average tourist, whether linguistically uninitiated, geographically entranced, or just plain bashful, plunges into the menu at random without bothering to ask just what it is he is ordering, and regrets his rashness a few hours later. Perhaps the Poste did not beware of the lady who reaches for her Alka-Seltzer before the *dolce Borghese* has been served, and later writes letters to the guidebooks in her room upstairs. After all, a good maître d'hôtel should warn his clients away from too many rich sauces one on top of the other, but that is a warning seldom heard in the gastronomic temples of France.

BUT for every star that sets, another one rises. This time the newcomer to the top is the Ill, on the Ill river at Illhäusern, near Colmar in Alsace. The name alone should give pause to those critics of the *Guide Michelin* who say it aims primarily at Anglo-Saxon tourists who like to gorge themselves: a place called the Ill can hardly be banking on a sudden influx of Englishmen and Americans. And the appearance of Illhäusern on the gastronomic map of France shows that the middle ages of *la bonne chère*

are at an end. Purist Gallic noses used to turn up at the thought of what Alsations do to food; a Parisian brasserie serving sauerkraut simmered in champagne would have had no hope of earning a star or two in the process.

The annexation of Alsace by culinary France is an indication of changing attitudes. Even the purists will now have to admit that there is some excellent eating on the other side of the border. The growing popularity of Paris's little Belgian restaurant, Chez Beulemans on the Boulevard Saint-Germain, is a case in point. It has no star in Michelin's guide, but it has more customers daily and nightly than many places that do, and it is now going through a face-lifting, with a modern glass-enclosed terrace from which to watch the beautiful people emerging from Pierre Cardin's new boutique across the street. Another instance is the current outcropping of *les Wimpy* all over the capital. Apparently the Anglo-Saxons have convinced the Parisians that what they needed all along was a few good hamburger stands. The Wimpies are crowded these days, while many of the older places, though starred, are barely half full. There is a limit to the amount of *quenelles de brochet* and *côte de veau normande* that anybody can stand, particularly at lunchtime.

If so many people are failing to follow the stars, the star system itself may be at fault. For at least a year at a time, the constellations are fixed; the conditions of creative cuisine are constantly changing. No good cook does the same thing twice in a row. To expect a versatile chef to repeat in the same manner an item advertised as a specialty year after year, and publicized by the guidebooks, is like asking Rubinstein to play the same Chopin nocturne at every concert and time his tenutos with a stopwatch. Surely the reason why Georges Garin, the best chef in Paris in the opinion of many, never won his third star is that he is too unpredictable, too much of an artist. Through the glass partition that separates the dining room from the kitchen, you can observe his every perspiring flourish; you can see when he is moved by whim, by the inspiration of a passing moment, and the results are hard to classify