

Abstract. In nineteenth-century France, Pierrot journeyed through Romantic, Decadent and Symbolist literature in the traditional medium of the pantomime with musical accompaniment. Prestigious patrons such as Huysmans and Paul Margueritte provided the age-old character with fresh costumes and makeup. Towards the end of the century, composers developed more sophisticated techniques to integrate wordless actions with appropriate music. Two pantomimes, *L'Enfant Prodigue* with music by André Wormser and *L'Histoire d'un Pierrot* set by Mario Costa, were particularly successful in Europe and even reached the United States. In the early twentieth century, they were turned into silent films with synchronized musical accompaniment and again reached American audiences at a time of growing interest in the dawning art of moving pictures.

A minor genre of musical theatre developed in France in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century as a consequence of renewed interest in Parisian pantomimes centred on the mask of Pierrot. The revival of what had once been a popular form of entertainment was promoted by a large group of major literary figures, musicians and journalists such as Jean Richepin, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Paul Margueritte, Arthur Pougin, Jules Lemaître, Jules Massenet, Francis Thomé. In 1888, they founded the Cercle Funambulesque, stating their aim in the very name they adopted: reviving the “classical pantomime” as performed at the old Théâtre des Funambules. One of the founding members, Paul Hugounet, who would also be the historian of the Cercle, listed as the second point in their programme “the promotion of the modern pantomime, by providing authors and composers with the opportunity to produce in public their works in this genre, whatever the artistic tendencies of those works may be.”<sup>[1]</sup> Special attention was to be given to the musical accompaniment of the new pieces. Composers were to write original music as a running commentary and synchronized support to the action. It was a radically different approach from the old routine of anonymous medleys of popular strains played by few instrumentalists.

Until the early 1860s, wordless shows with mimed action, dance and musical accompaniment had attracted large crowds to small theatres such as the Théâtre des Funambules on the Boulevard du Temple. Established in 1816, that theatre originally offered performances of rope-dancers, acrobats, trained dogs; it then shifted to pantomimes featuring traditional masks such as Harlequin, Columbine, Polichenelle, Pierrot. The last character gained special prominence and popular favour thanks to the charisma of a legendary mime, Jean-Gaspard Debureau (1796-1846), also known as Baptiste, whose career started in 1819 when the Director of the Funambules, Nicolas-Michel Bertrand, cast him as Pierrot in *Arlequin Médecin*, an acrobatic *pantomime-arlequinade*. Debureau performed at the Funambules until his death. His lean, agile figure appeared on stage in a personalized costume: a white blouse with long, wide sleeves and no ruff, wide-legged pantaloons, a

black skullcap which enhanced the pallor and expressiveness of his whitened face. He became the very embodiment of the *pantomime blanche* which was later to acquire dark, sinister traits turning into *pantomime noire*.<sup>[21]</sup> In the course of his long career, he created his own multifaceted Pierrot with some disturbing traits that foreshadowed the later evolution of the mask.<sup>[31]</sup> Deburau's legacy was taken on by his son Charles and other remarkable mimes such as Paul Legrand and Alexandre Guyon, though none of them could match his incomparable talent.

The demolition of the whole Boulevard du Temple in 1862, dictated by the city's new master plan, dispersed talents and audiences, but the popular appeal of Pierrot pantomimes had begun to wane with Deburau's death in 1846, long before the disappearance of the theatre. As the historian Louis Péricaud put it: "Le Théâtre des Funambules c'était Deburau".<sup>[41]</sup> No other mime could attract crowds of devotees to that cramped venue since "le panache blanc du grand Deburau" was no longer there.<sup>[51]</sup> The chronicler of the Cercle Funambulesque, Hugounet, much regretted the destruction of the Boulevard du Temple with its small theatres which had become "le quartier général du divertissement à bon marché."<sup>[61]</sup> The popular tradition of Pierrot pantomimes survived in Bordeaux and Marseille (with the mime Louis Rouffe) while Parisian audiences moved on to fashionable theatres and *café-concerts* which offered different forms of entertainment such as vaudevilles, comic operas, and pantomimes with literary pretensions.

## 1. Pierrot's career from Italian immigrant to national myth

*"l'étonnante, la merveilleuse, la miraculeuse fortune de Pierrot, le blême compagnon aimé de la Lune; [...] la légende du moderne Endymion est bel et bien un mythe, le dernier mythe qu'ait conçu l'humanité."*

Paul Guigou<sup>[71]</sup>

Who was Pierrot, and where did he come from? Like most other masks, he came from the Italian *Commedia dell'arte*, and was



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Pedrolino, Piero, Pierrot is the same personage who appeared on the Italian stage as early as 1547 in a comedy of Cristoforo Castelletti, under the designation of *Pierro valet*; [...] Pedrolino is a very complex type, who, as a character, has the greatest resemblance to our modern French Pierrot; his special characteristic is his honesty. In the fifty scenarios of Flaminio Scala he is almost always the preferred lover of the soubrette Franceschina, who, nonetheless, receives the homage of Pantaloon without prejudice to that of Arlecchino and Burattino.<sup>[8]</sup>

In the long chapter on Pierrot, Sand surveyed some of Scala's scenarios featuring Pedrolino in various situations, and concluded: "He also appears in the *ballets féeriques*. There is one where he pretends to be dumb and plays in pantomime. Such is the role of Pedrolino in the collection of Flaminio Scala. It should therefore be quite wrong that, in recent times, they were to attribute to the type of Pierrot a modern and entirely French origin."<sup>[9]</sup> In their heyday, Pierrot pantomimes were not just cheap entertainment for the masses - "le théâtre à quatre sous" in Jules Janin's definition<sup>[10]</sup> - but they attracted the attention and aroused the admiration of intellectuals and writers like Charles Nodier, Gérard de Nerval, Théodore de Banville, George Sand, Théophile Gautier, Champfleury. Some of them occasionally contributed scenarios to be performed at the Théâtre des Funambules to a cultured audience. Nodier, in his position as Director of the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, would not be openly credited with the authorship of a pantomime. In 1828, he wrote the scenario of *Le Songe*

*d'Or ou Arlequin et l'Avare*, and offered it to the manager of the Funambules on condition that the author's identity should not be disclosed. The pantomime was performed with great success (the cast included Deburau as Pierrot), but the scenario was only published in 1897 by Louis Péricaud who gave full credit to its author and reported an enthusiastic comment by Gautier. In the latter's opinion, *Le Songe d'Or* was "the wonder of the most wonderful pantomimes that the human brain ever generated". He added, with a touch of irony: "Charles Nodier's adorable imagination created it [...]. And the ungrateful man disowns such a daughter."<sup>[11]</sup> The pantomime featured the five most popular masks on stage at the Funambules in Deburau's years. A contemporary engraving (Fig. 2) shows from left to right: Arlequin, Léandre, Deburau's Pierrot, Cassandre and Colombine. In the foreground, three musicians are playing their instruments (horn, violin, double-bass).



Fig. 2

In the months following Deburau's death, his working-class, popular Pierrot underwent a sort of intellectual restyling as the scenarios were no longer devised by the mime himself or by some obscure script-writer but were elaborated by a literary figure such as Champfleury (pseudonym of Jules-François-Félix Husson, 1821-1889), a friend of Henri Murger, Balzac and Baudelaire. His first pantomime - *Pierrot, valet de la Mort* - appeared at the Funambules on 19 September 1846, only three months after Deburau's death, with Paul Legrand in the title role, and met with a lukewarm response. Péricaud noted: "We have arrived at an epoch of positive transition in the pantomime. Champfleury gives it some wings, Icarus's wings, maybe; but he blows some powder, he attaches some thought to it, he makes it literary."<sup>[12]</sup> This "literary" pantomime, Péricaud remarked, exemplified a new trend, "le réalisme", championed by Champfleury and young artists like the painter Gustave Courbet.

A few weeks after the first *Pierrot*, Legrand premiered a new scenario by Champfleury, *Pierrot Pendu*, which proved more successful. Both pantomimes presented a violent character. In the former, Pierrot negotiates with Death his return to life; in the second, he is a thief and murderer eventually hanged and plunged into Hell until a Fairy awakens him from what was just a bad dream. A revival of *Pierrot Pendu* in January 1847 prompted a long, enthusiastic review by Théophile Gautier which Champfleury later reprinted in his *Souvenirs des Funambules*. It contains the most remarkable statement about the world of pantomimic masks:

The pantomime is the true *comédie humaine*, and although it does not employ two thousand characters like that of Balzac, it is no less complete. With four or five types it suffices for everything. Cassandre represents the family; Leandre, the stupid and wealthy fop, favoured by parents; Columbine, the ideal, Beatrix, the dream pursued, the flower of youth and beauty; Harlequin, with the face of a monkey and the sting of a serpent, with his black mask, his many-coloured lozenges, his shower of spangles, represents love, wit, mobility, audacity, all the showy vices and qualities; Pierrot, pallid, slender, dressed in sad colours, always hungry and always beaten, is the ancient slave, the modern proletarian, the pariah, the passive and disinherited being, who, glum and sly, witnesses the orgies and the follies of his masters. Isn't there, allowing for the necessary nuances that each type involves, a complete microcosm and one that covers all the evolutions of the mind?<sup>[13]</sup>

Gautier credited Champfleury with a mission: the renewal of the pantomime and the revaluation of several important figures like Polichenelle and Harlequin, overshadowed by Deburau's superior Pierrot who "had taken over the whole piece", betraying his origin. Gautier paid homage to the great

mime as “the most perfect actor who ever existed”.<sup>[14]</sup> He also revealed his own concept of pantomime when he concluded his long review expressing the wish that the great success of *Pierrot Pendu* might put the Funambules back on the right way of a “traditional, instructive and philosophical spectacle, worthy all the interest of serious people”.<sup>[15]</sup> Pierrot’s connotative traits, summed up by Gautier in 1847, would disappear in the *fin-de-siècle* revival. The age-old, *commedia*-type character was being turned into a literary metaphor; his mask became pliable material to be modelled into a striking icon of the latest trends by poets, novelists, musicians, cartoonists, especially young ones, like the twenty-four-year-old Paul Verlaine. His sonnet *Pierrot* (1868) presented the old mask as a moonstruck, nightmarish ghost, anticipating a “decadent” mood:

Ce n’est plus le rêveur lunaire du vieil air  
Qui riait aux aïeux dans les dessus de porte;  
Sa gaïté, comme sa chandelle, hélas! Est morte,  
Et son spectre aujourd’hui nous hante, mince et clair.

[. . . .]

Avec le bruit d’un vol d’oiseaux de nuit qui passe,  
Ses manches blanches font vaguement par l’espace  
Des signes fous auxquels personne ne répond.

Ses yeux sont deux grands trous où rampe du phosphore  
Et la farine rend plus effroyable encore  
Sa face exsangue au nez pointu de moribond.

(This is no longer the lunar dreamer of the old song/ Who laughed at his ancestors at the top of the door;/ His gaiety, like his candle, alas! is dead/ And his spectre haunts us today, thin and luminous./

[...] With the sound of a passing flock of night-birds,/ His white sleeves make vaguely through the space/ Mad signs to which no one responds./ His eyes are two great holes where phosphorous creeps,/ And his flour renders more frightening still/ His bloodless face with its pinched nose of one near death.)<sup>[16]</sup>

A shadow of regret is cast on the “lunar dreamer” with the allusion to the “vieil air” (line 1), the old song, that is “Au clair de la lune”, a sort of musical tag which traditionally identified the old-time Pierrot.<sup>[17]</sup> The poet’s regret is confirmed in line 3: “sa chandelle, hélas! Est morte”, which echoes the innocuous “ma chandelle est morte” of the air (Ex. 1).

**Au clair de la Lune**

Jean-Baptiste Lully ?

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1. Au clair de la Lu-ne mon a-mi Pierrot prè-te moi ta plume pour é - crire un mot  
2. Au clair de la Lu-ne Pierrot ré-pon-dit je n'ai pas de plume je suis dans mon lit

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Ex. 1

This sonnet was only published in 1882. Verlaine would not include it in his *Fêtes Galantes* (1869) because such a disheartening portrait was not consistent with the delineation of the *commedia*-type Pierrot, the old-time “rêveur lunaire”, of the collection.<sup>[18]</sup> Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé inspired most of the earliest essays in vocal music by the twenty-year-old Claude Debussy, and were later to become his favourite poets. In 1882, he set Mallarmé’s *Apparition* and the first two poems of *Fêtes Galantes*: *Clair de lune* and the miniature *Pantomime* which presented dear old Pierrot, Cassandre, Harlequin and Columbine. Debussy also set Théodore de Banville’s *Pierrot*, a tender vignette of the old mask on the Boulevard du Temple in the moonlight.<sup>[19]</sup> In perfect accord with the image of “le bon Pierrot, que la foule contemple”, the young composer borrowed the old air “Au clair de la lune” and used it as an evocative echo throughout his piece (Ex. 2). In a humorous mood, voice and piano conjure up the atmosphere of the Boulevard, and close with the “blanche Lune” that beams down on “son ami Jean Gaspard Deburau”, the legendary Pierrot of the Funambules.



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The pantomime (Fig. 4) featured a sadistic Pierrot, full of fear and malaise, who kills his unfaithful Columbine tickling the soles of her feet.<sup>[20]</sup> Many years later, Margueritte admitted that he owed his “satanic, ultra-romantic and therefore very modern conception” to a novel by Henri Rivière (*Pierrot*, 1860) and to two lines from Théophile Gautier’s one-act play *Pierrot Posthume* (1847):

L’histoire d’un mari qui chatouilla sa femme  
Et lui fit de la sorte, en riant, rendre l’âme.

(The story of a husband who tickled his wife/ And made her, laughing, breathe her last.)





PIERROT ASSASSIN DE SA FEMME

Voir, dans la *Revue Illustrée* de cette semaine, la charmante musique de VIDAL et les dessins de WILLETTE accompagnant cette tragique et belle pantomime, qui fut mimée au Théâtre-Libre par l'auteur, PAUL MARGUERITTE

Fig. 4



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This remarkable horror gallery was further enriched by the moonstruck Pierrot of the young painter, cartoonist and engraver Adolphe Willette (1857-1926) who created *Pauvre Pierrot* (1885), a set of 41 *poèmes en images*, drawings with explanatory text. Hugounet reported a telling definition by Paul Arène, himself an author of pantomime scenarios, who prefaced Willette's work together with Théodore de Banville (Fig. 6):

Pierrot has become pessimistic and macabre. Pierrot instead of plundering Cassandre's cellar, prefers, no less than a naturalistic novelist, to drink the bitter philosophical wine that Schopenhauer pours for

him, and when he looks at the moon, this moon, under the shadow of a passing cloud, takes on the aspect of an enormous skull rolling in the void of the skies.<sup>[22]</sup>

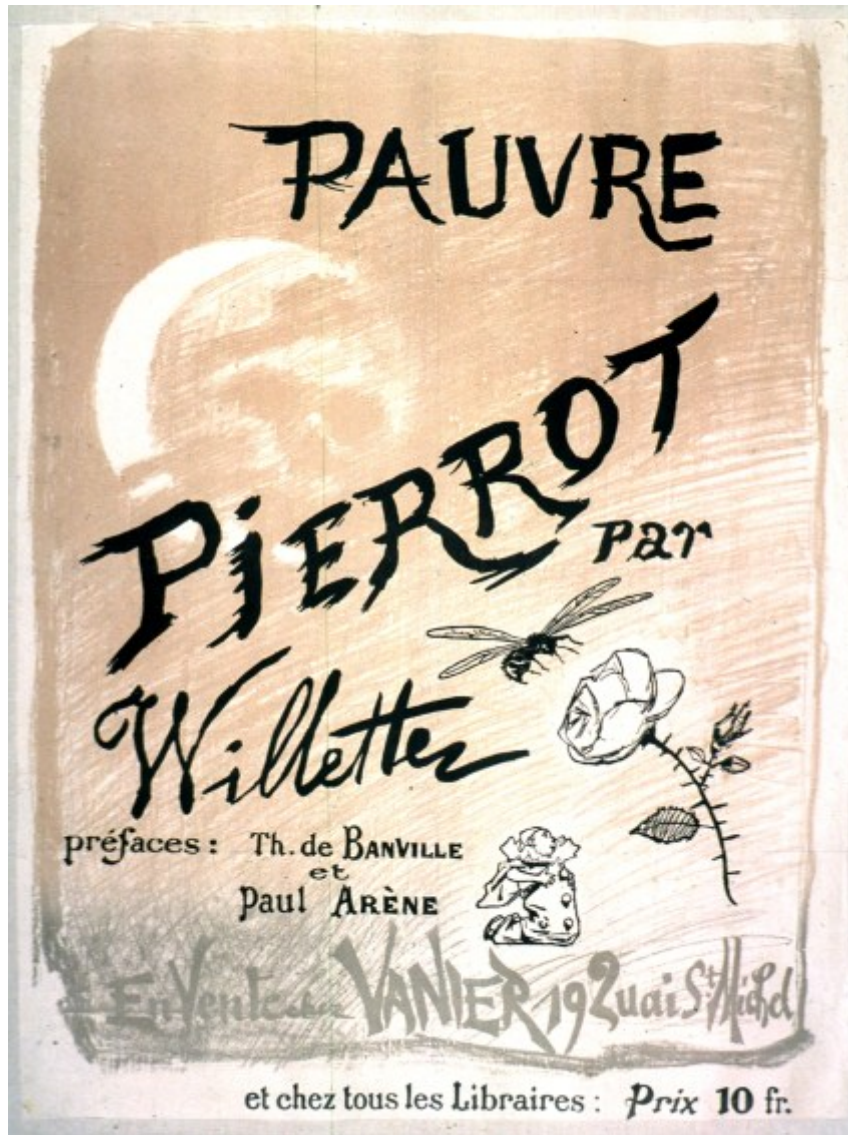


Fig. 6

Not surprisingly, in the years running up to the foundation of the Cercle Funambulesque, the fashion of pessimistic and sinister Pierrots won proselites outside France. In Belgium, the symbolist poet Albert Giraud wrote *Pierrot Lunaire* (1884), a collection of fifty poems from which Arnold Schoenberg, in 1912, would select twenty-one texts to compose his groundbreaking expressionist song cycle for Sprechstimme and instruments. A Belgian poet, again, Théodore Hannon, together



with Joseph Hansen, wrote the scenario of *Pierrot Macabre* (1886), a one-act *ballet-pantomime* with music for a 34-part orchestra by the Italian composer Pietro Lanciani. His score opened with a citation of Pierrot’s old air “Au clair de la lune” which recurred in various harmonizations including an offstage *a cappella* chorus (Ex. 3).

The image shows a musical score for a choir of crows. The title is "Choeur de couillisses sans accompagnement. (♩ = 52)". The score is in 2/4 time and consists of two systems of music. The first system is marked "ppp" and the second system is marked "cresc." and "rall. molto". The lyrics are: "Au clair de la lune Mon ami Pierrot Prête moi ta plume Pour écrire un mot ma chandelle est morte Je n'ai plus de feu - - Ouvre moi ta porte Pour l'amour de".

Ex. 3

During the ten years of its existence, the Cercle produced only one “classical” pantomime (J.-G. Deburau’s *Pierrot Coiffeur*) and one *parade*, *Léandre Ambassadeur*. The ambitious programme outlined by Hugounet was largely ignored as members followed their own inclinations and concentrated on the creation of new scenarios featuring the imperishable white mask from divergent perspectives. Pierrot was a true mirror of their society to the point that Paul Guigou could sum up the general feeling about the mask writing that: “Nowadays he seems potentially to contain all our dreams. He is the universal actor of our passions, of our devious ways to approach life and move from ironic detachment to the frenzy of desires, sublime puppet of the modern soul”.<sup>[23]</sup>

## 2. From pantomime to silent film

*Surtout si vient la pantomime  
S'ébattre en jeux concomitants,  
Jeux de silence et de mystère  
Que la musique rend déjà  
Plus muets [...]*

Paul Verlaine<sup>[24]</sup>

The most significant achievement of the Cercle Funambulesque was perhaps the revaluation of music as a fundamental component of pantomimes with the consequent involvement of distinguished composers in the creation of works which were not necessarily comic or lightweight. A pantomime with first-rate music could deal most effectively with tragic historical characters and tug at the heartstrings of thousands of people assembled in a huge venue. One such event was the premiere of *Jeanne d'Arc* at the Paris Hippodrome on 25 June 1890. This grand pageant by Auguste Dorchain with music by Charles-Marie Widor, defined as *Légende mimée en 4 tableaux*, was performed by an orchestra of one hundred musicians and a 200-strong chorus.<sup>[25]</sup> It made a tremendous impression, and music critics responded with enthusiastic reviews. René de Récy, in particular, after praising the composer, the orchestra and chorus, went so far as to write: "What is important is the revelation of the power of music, the affirmation of its independence. [...] Indeed, the pantomime should be the musical drama of the future."<sup>[26]</sup> Such a remarkable assertion was taken on by Paul Hugounet in his book *La Pantomime et la Musique* (1892) to support the Cercle's action for radical innovation in the composition of music for pantomimes. One can appreciate the enormous difference between the Cercle's position and the Funambules' "système du *pot pourri*" (Hugounet's definition) by simply considering the ideas of an earlier "reformer", Champfleury. No matter how badly assorted the Funambules' orchestra might be, wrote Champfleury, "it often plunged me into ecstasies that the Conservatoire orchestra would not give me". He continued:

Three violins, a viola, a clarinet, a horn and a double-bass start playing, without knowing it, some Mozart, some Gluck [...] No brass instruments! Those are good to accompany singers; but with mimes, a sweet music is needed, at one moment lively and at the next melancholy, that does not upset

this  
world so full of calm. It is important that one does not look for other composers than those of  
the  
eighteenth century and that one stops at Grétry. The instrumentation of this composer is simple  
and  
naive.<sup>[27]</sup>

Champfleury argued that the *chef d'orchestre*, if he wanted, had a goldmine to browse through in German and Italian repertoires from past centuries. He saw no need for new, original music. At the opposite extreme of such ideas, Hugounet advocated “the Wagnerian tradition”, by which he meant the adoption of the *Leitmotiv* as the most effective technique to underscore gestures, to focus attention on specific moods and weave a narrative thread on a mimed action. He argued that they had to “create a close alliance between the musician and the comedian”, in order to establish “music as the language of the pantomime”.<sup>[28]</sup> The instrumentation might vary from the solo piano to a chamber ensemble or a symphony orchestra, brass instruments included! It all depended on the size of the venue, the length of the show, and, above all, on a perfect understanding between author and composer.

A large part of Hugounet’s book consisted of interviews with composers of music for pantomimes, and the main question they were asked concerned their response to the use of *Leitmotive*. Answers ranged from the scepticism of Georges Pfeiffer - who dismissed the issue as “C’est bien grosse chose pour sujet menu”<sup>[29]</sup> - to the wholehearted consent of the Prix de Rome André Wormser who claimed: “I believe it [the *Leitmotiv*] is more useful and still better in its place in the music of pantomimes than anywhere else since it is necessary to arrive at the maximum not only of expression but of significance”.<sup>[30]</sup> Wormser added that a *motiv* could be modified according to “l’état d’âme du personnage”, and stated emphatically:

The symphonic pantomime exists and has established itself: the orchestra becomes the actor’s voice,  
it underscores, develops, comments; it is no longer the slave to the libretto, it is its equal.<sup>[31]</sup>

It became clear that the members of the Cercle had each their own ideas, and music would be coordinated with a scenario according to personal tastes. Pfeiffer was absolutely clear in his interview: “No preconceived ideas in music. Complete freedom, absolute.”<sup>[32]</sup>

In 1887, Paul Margueritte presented his *Pierrot Assassin de Sa Femme* in its definitive form, with

piano music by Paul Vidal, Debussy's friend and former classmate at the Paris Conservatoire. Music and action grew together in rehearsals with the author/mime. Vidal then worked closely on the production as well as playing his score during the performance. His music accompanied and commented on the facial expressions, the attitudes, the gestures of the neurotic Pierrot/Margueritte. Vidal himself, interviewed by Hugounet, explained the difficulty he had encountered in devising the right rhythm to accompany Pierrot's tickling of Columbine's feet. Eventually he decided for a *Tarantella* and it proved most effective.<sup>[33]</sup> Margueritte persuaded the director of the avant-garde *Théâtre-Libre*, André Antoine, to try his hand at the new art. So, for once, the Théâtre Montparnasse, the home of naturalistic drama, staged a pantomime and, on 15 February 1888, Margueritte had his greatest public triumph before a packed house. Antoine was not only the *metteur en scène* but he also played the role of the Undertaker's Man next to Margueritte's Pierrot. Yet again, the age-old air "Au clair de la lune" emerged at the outset of a pantomime as Vidal quoted it in an ominous C minor to accompany the first entrance of Pierrot and the Undertaker's Man (Ex.4).

## Scène 1

### Pierrot et le Croque-mort

Moderato (♩=96)

The musical score is written for piano and consists of two systems. The first system begins with a treble clef and a bass clef. The tempo is marked 'Moderato' with a quarter note equal to 96 beats per minute. The key signature is C minor. The music features a mix of melodic lines and rhythmic patterns, with dynamic markings such as *p* (piano) and accents. The second system continues the piece with more complex textures in both hands.

Ex. 4

While music took on a major role in fin-de-siècle pantomimes, the character of Pierrot was stripped of decadent and symbolic



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Three years later, a former member of the Cercle, Fernand Beissier, wrote one more scenario featuring a *petit bourgeois* Pierrot, and offered it to a young Italian composer, Pasquale Mario Costa (1858-1933), who had just settled in Paris to try his luck in the competitive world of opera. Born in Taranto but educated in Naples at the Conservatorio S. Pietro a Majella, Costa came from a family of musicians. His uncle, Sir Michael Costa, spent most of his life in Britain earning general consensus as an outstanding conductor. Mario was already well known in England and France for his Neapolitan songs and his settings of English and French poems (by Alfred de Musset, in particular). He had just contacted Victorien Sardou for the rights to turn *La Tosca* into an opera libretto to no avail. At first, the offer of a pantomime scenario met with a lukewarm response from Costa, but it was his only chance; moreover, Beissier promised a small theatre where they would stage the new work as soon as it was finished. In ten days Costa composed the music for the three-act scenario, scoring it for string quartet, two flutes, oboe, harp, mandoline and piano. On 4 January 1893 *L'Histoire d'un Pierrot* was premiered at the Théâtre Déjazet with Costa himself at the piano and the actress Léonie Laporte in the title role. It earned an enthusiastic success. Like the earlier *Enfant Prodigue*, the pantomime soon became an international hit.



Fig.8

The use of the indefinite article in the title of a Pierrot pantomime was unprecedented: it stressed the down-to-earth setting of the



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Pierrot's charming serenade on the mandoline below Louise's window or the *Tarantella* under scoring the tense card game

during which he Pierrot gambles away all of Louise's savings.

After the successful Paris debut, *L'Histoire d'un Pierrot* was staged in major Italian cities, reached Vienna, Berlin, London, crossed the Atlantic and landed in South America. Eventually it moved on to New York. Over the years, Costa composed operettas and more songs, but never lost touch with his *Pierrot*. He supervised every new production, rearranged the original ensemble and scored it for a chamber orchestra. By 1910, he claimed that his pantomime had totalled some ten thousand performances all over the world! If we were to question the author's word, a look at the «New York Times» would dispel all doubts. The paper announced and reviewed all performances of *L'Histoire d'un Pierrot* staged by the Metropolitan Opera Company at the New Theatre. An unsigned review of 29 December 1909, reports on its debut and informs readers on the fortune of the pantomime in South America:

PANTOMIME AT NEW THEATRE

“Histoire d'un Pierrot” is Diverting and Acted with Skill

[...]

The Metropolitan Opera Company took a dip into a new form of entertainment at The New Theatre last evening, presenting Mario Costa's pantomime, “Histoire d'un Pierrot”, for what was said to be the first time in America. Entertainments of this sort in the past, even when they have

been pantomime ballets –and there is very little dancing in the present pantomime – have seldom succeeded in arousing any great amount of attention in New York. However, “Histoire d’un Pierrot” is very diverting. It has a record of countless performances in other large cities of the globe. There is a run of twenty-eight consecutive months in Buenos Ayres attributed to it. It was presented last evening with very tasteful stage decorations, and the principal characters were enacted with skill, and the audience seemed to greet it with favour. [...] The music for the pantomime is written in a light vein, familiar enough in Europe, where pantomimes and pantomime ballets are frequent. It never attains the heights of grace or the definite melodic contours of scores like “Coppelia” or “Casse-Noisette”, but it is very pretty and not at all banale. [...] “Histoire d’un Pierrot” was preceded by a performance of “Cavalleria Rusticana”, [...] Mr. Podesti conducted both the opera and the pantomime.

The pairing of a pantomime with a one-act opera was a unique choice of the Metropolitan, and might be explained with the management’s intention of attracting an audience to an alien form of musical entertainment offering it in a double bill with a widely popular work. An earlier announcement in the «New York Times» specified that *L’Histoire d’un Pierrot* lasted one hour and forty minutes and anticipated the pairing with *Cavalleria*.<sup>[35]</sup> One month later (23 January 1910), the paper announced a fresh run of the pantomime at the New Theatre in a double bill with a more appropriate work: Leoncavallo’s *Pagliacci*, the *verismo* opera featuring as its central piece a *Commedia dell’arte* play with Harlequin, Columbine and Pagliaccio, the Italian equivalent of Pierrot.

But the most extraordinary achievement of Costa’s pantomime came with its remake as a silent film. The structural affinity between the two art forms was self-evident. Silent cinema would borrow ideas and techniques from dumb shows with synchronized musical accompaniment. In 1907 Michel Carré *films* became the first author to direct a celluloid pantomime. His *L’Enfant Prodigue*, became the first European full-length film. Costa’s pantomime was directed by Baldassarre Negroni who hired one of the first divas of silent cinema, 21-year-old Francesca Bertini, as Pierrot. On 11 February 1914, the Teatro Argentina in Rome screened the new feature film (1200 metres) with the synchronized accompaniment of the Accademia di Santa Cecilia Orchestra conducted by Mario Costa. Beside reworking the instrumentation to adapt it to the prestigious 80-member orchestra, the composer had to shorten his music to about one hour’s length, time it and note down metronome indications on the score so that the screening on stage and the performance in the pit could move along like a perfect clockwork. Obviously, contrary to what happened with the coordination of live music and mimed action in a pantomimic show, no flexibility was possible with recorded images being projected by a machine onto a screen. The orchestra conductor had only to stick to a cued score with rigid,



prearranged tempos.

Costa's highly demanding work of adjustment and synchronization of his orchestral score set an example for future composers of film music. He had actually produced one of the earliest soundtracks. Commenting on the special skill required by the new format, a French reviewer pointed out that in Costa's score "the synchronization is taken care of in the most minute details", and concluded: "M. Costa nous a donné une véritable symphonie cinématographique."<sup>[36]</sup> Translated as *Pierrot, the Prodigal*, Costa's filmed pantomime reached New York in June 1914, imported by George Kleine, a distributor of European films, who had just presented Gabriele d'Annunzio's highly successful *Cabiria* at the Knickerbocker Theatre on Broadway. Kleine leased a brand new theatre, the Candler, to present *Pierrot*, starring Francesca Bertini, together with another Italian silent film, *La donna nuda* (translated as *The Naked Truth*) starring Lyda Borelli. Two Italian divas in two strikingly different films, both accompanied by a 40-piece orchestra. A review in the «New York Tribune» could not avoid comparisons:

Happenings in the Motion Picture World

*The double bill, consisting of "The Naked Truth" and "Pierrot the Prodigal", continues at the Candler Theatre this week. A special orchestra under the direction of Modest Altschuler, has been rendering a particularly fine musical accompaniment during the last week, and will do so throughout the run of the films. "Pierrot the Prodigal" is an unusual picture in many ways. It is an adaptation of an opera, and an opera spirit it has retained to a surprising extent. This is accomplished in part by the entire absence of any explanatory subtitles, the story telling itself by a combination of the pantomime with the music played by the orchestra. The general result is quite different from anything yet seen in motion pictures and is quite pleasing.*

*"The Naked Truth" is not so satisfactory a production. It is excellently staged and acted, [...] but it is too extreme a melodrama. Lyda Borelli, the star, handles a part which is almost violently emotional with much skill.*<sup>[37]</sup>

Under the same heading, the paper provided a brief update on *Cabiria*, premiered on June 1: "*Cabiria* [...] begins its third week at the Knickerbocker Theatre to-morrow. [...] The accompanying musical score adds another attractive feature to the production of the picture." Very recently, American musicologist Gillian Anderson compared the synchronization of *L'Histoire d'un Pierrot* with that of one major feature film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) by David W. Griffith with music by

Joseph Carl Breil, in an effort to identify possible models for Griffith's synchronization practices. Anderson shows how Griffith's publicity for his film tended to echo that of *L'Histoire d'un Pierrot* as he "considered his motion picture to be a subset of the highly synchronized pantomime."<sup>[38]</sup>

In the last years of the nineteenth century, European mimed shows with musical accompaniment like *L'Enfant Prodigue* and *L'Histoire d'un Pierrot*, imported to New York only a year or two after their premieres, established a prestigious, artistic reputation for pantomimes. By 1914, their reappearance as silent films with live music could only confirm that prestige and stimulate interest in film-makers and composers. There was certainly interest in the specialized press of the time. Days before the debut of *Pierrot, the Prodigal*, the «Motion Picture World» highlighted the novelty of the work, misnaming Costa's pantomime as an "opera":

George Kleine announces that he will present in the near future "Pierrot, the Prodigal", a photodrama based on the opera of the same name. Mario Costa, the composer of the opera, arranged the accompanying music for the subject while it was being produced, thus fitting the tempo of the score to the movement of the photoplayers and the action generally. This is the perfect type of music for pictures and, doubtless, the practice of having a composer or arranger present during the production of feature subjects will be widely followed in the future. "Pierrot, the Prodigal" is a little over three reels and will be a novelty, in that it will have no subtitles [...].<sup>[39]</sup>

So, there was something to be learned from those foreign products. Among several relevant comments, Anderson quotes one by George Kleine: "By watching the silent pictures, particularly those made by foreign actors, we are learning to understand pantomime as never before in the history of the world. That is a good thing, it seems to me, for pantomime is one of the highest forms of dramatic art".<sup>[40]</sup>

Today it is possible to watch the 1914 silent film of *L'Histoire d'un Pierrot* with Costa's music thanks to the scholarly work of Swiss musicologist Carlo Piccardi who edited the score. In 1986 it was performed by the Orchestra of the Radiotelevisione della Svizzera Italiana conducted by Marc Andreae. A videotape of that performance is available online:

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1. HUGOUNET, PAUL, *Mimes et Pierrots: Notes et Documents pour Servir à l'Histoire de la*

- Pantomime*, Paris, Librairie Fischbacher, 1889, p. 238. The programme outlined by Hugounet included the revival of the *parades* of the Boulevard and the farces of the *Foires* (the popular fairs of Saint-Germain and Saint-Laurent); the production of pieces from the *Commedia dell'arte* and from the French *Comédie Italienne*. [↑](#)
2. See BONNET, GILLES, *La pantomime noire (1836-1896)*, Paris, Éditions Hermann, 2014, In ch. 1, “La pantomime blanche”, Bonnet discusses its strict connection with J.-G. Deburau. [↑](#)
  3. See STOREY, ROBERT F., *Pierrot: A Critical History of a Mask*, Princeton University Press, 1978, p. 94: “This actor has often and justly been acknowledged as the godparent of the multifarious, moonstruck Pierrots who gradually found their way into Romantic, Decadent, and Symbolist literature; but Deburau’s real role in the transmission of the type from the popular to the literary world - and its transformation from *naïf* to neurasthenic pariah - has been only imperfectly understood, when it has been understood at all.” See also DESPOT, ADRIANE, “Jean-Gaspard Deburau and the Pantomime at the Théâtre des Funambules”, «Educational Theatre Journal», vol. 27, No. 3, October 1975, pp. 364-376. [↑](#)
  4. PÉRICAUD, LOUIS, *Le Théâtre des Funambules, ses mimes, ses acteurs et ses pantomimes*, Paris, Léon Sapin, 1897, p. 3. [↑](#)
  5. *Ibid.*, p. 5. [↑](#)
  6. HUGOUNET, *Mimes et Pierrots*, p. 67. [↑](#)
  7. “The astonishing, wonderful, miraculous fortune of Pierrot, the wan, beloved companion of the Moon; [...] the legend of the modern Endymion is indeed a myth, the last myth mankind conceived”. GUIGOU, PAUL, “Le Mythe de Pierrot”, «La Revue Hebdomadaire», II/xviii, Novembre 1893, pp. 129-130. All translations in this essay are mine unless otherwise stated. [↑](#)
  8. SAND, MAURICE, *Masques et Bouffons (Comédie Italienne)*, Paris, Michel Lévi Frères, 1860, vol. 1, pp. 257-8. Many years later, Hugounet defined Pierrot’s origin in identical terms: “To tell the truth, since 1547, the Italians had called Pedrolino, Piero (little Pierre) the honest valet, but a jester, a braggart, arrogant, but cowardly at the slightest danger. This Piero coupled with Harlequin made up what were called the *Zanni* in the *Gelosi* troupe [...]” HUGOUNET, *Mimes et Pierrots*, p. 47. [↑](#)
  9. SAND, *Masques et Bouffons*, p. 262. See also STOREY, *Pierrot*, pp. 15-20. [↑](#)
  10. JANIN, JULES, *Deburau, Histoire du Théâtre à quatre sous, pour faire suite à l’Histoire du Théâtre François*, Paris, C. Gosselin, 2 vols., 1832. [↑](#)
  11. PÉRICAUD, *Le Théâtre des Funambules*, p. 80. Péricaud noted: “The success of the *Songe d’Or* was immense. Deburau’s one was triumphal. It was talked about in the so-called literary salons; in learned gatherings. They pronounced in a low voice the name of the author who was obsessed

- with that disrespectful offspring. One went so far as to rush to the Funambules. But no newspaper let one line of praise, let alone of encouragement, leak out." *Ibid.*, p. 87. [↑](#)
12. *Ibid.*, p. 297. [↑](#)
13. CHAMPFLEURY, *Souvenirs des Funambules*, Paris, Michel Lévy Frères, 1859, pp. 62-63. Gautier's review was first published in the journal «La Presse» on 25 January 1847. [↑](#)
14. *Ibid.*, p. 63. [↑](#)
15. *Ibid.*, p. 72. [↑](#)
16. Quoted and translated in STOREY, ROBERT F., *Pierrots on the Stage of Desire: Nineteenth-Century French Literary Artists and the Comic Pantomime*, Princeton University Press, 1985, pp. 237- 238. [↑](#)
17. Paul Guigou remarked about "Au clair de la lune" that "the famous arietta we attribute to Lully" could be heard everywhere, and testified to the undying popularity of the white mask . He added: "Two centuries before Richard Wagner, Pierrot had his own *leit-motiv*." GUIGOU, "Le Mythe de Pierrot", p. 134. [↑](#)
18. Storey argues that Verlaine's scruple was "as much a psychological as a formal and aesthetic one." *Ibid.*, p. 237. [↑](#)
19. The song is dedicated to Madame Marie-Blanche Vasnier, a married woman Debussy was in love with. Benjamin Lassauzet demonstrates how the composer identified with Pierrot whose heartache as the victim of a love triangle with Columbine and Harlequin resembled his own. LASSAUZET, B., "Debus-si e(s)t Pierrot: rire pour ne pas pleurer", «Revue Musicale OICRM», Vol. 2, No. 2, Mai 2015, pp. 159-182. [↑](#)
20. For more details on Valvins, Margueritte and Mallarmé, see GEROULD, DANIEL, "Paul Margueritte and *Pierrot Assassin of His Wife*", «The Drama Review», Vol. 23. No. 1 (March 1979), pp. 103-112. [↑](#)
21. MARGUERITTE, PAUL , *Nos Tréteaux*, Paris, Les Bibliophiles Fantaisistes, 1910, pp. 15-16. [↑](#)
22. HUGOUNET, *Mimes et Pierrots*, p. 213. [↑](#)
23. GUIGOU, "Le Mythe de Pierrot", p. 140. [↑](#)
24. "Above all if the pantomime comes/ To amuse itself with attendant antics, / Antics of silence and mystery / That music is already rendering / More mute [...]", from VERLAINE, "Mon âge mûr, qui ne grommelle" (1894), *Oeuvres Complètes*, Vol. III, Paris, Léon Vanier, 1908, p. 233. [↑](#)
25. See "*Jeanne d'Arc à l'Hippodrome*", «L'Écho de Paris», 14 Juin 1890. [↑](#)
26. RÉCY, RENÉ DE, "*Jeanne d'Arc à l'Hippodrome*", «Revue Bleu», XLVI, 5 Juillet 1890, p. 25. [↑](#)
27. CHAMPFLEURY, *Souvenirs des Funambules*, pp. 216-217. [↑](#)
28. HUGOUNET, PAUL, *La Musique et la Pantomime*, Paris, Ernest Kolb, n.d.[1892], pp. 15-16. [↑](#)

29. *Ibid.*, p. 51. [↑](#)
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70. [↑](#)
31. *Ibid.*, p. 72. [↑](#)
32. *Ibid.*, p. 52. [↑](#)
33. *Ibid.*, p. 38. [↑](#)
34. SÉVERIN, *L'Homme Blanc. Souvenirs d'un Pierrot*, Paris, Librairie Plon, 1929, p. 169. [↑](#)
35. "New Theatre's Pantomime", «The New York Times», Dec. 22, 1909. [↑](#)
36. Quoted in PICCARDI, CARLO, "Pierrot al cinema. Il denominatore musicale dalla pantomima al film," «Civiltà musicale», XIX, 51/52, (January/August 2004), p. 100. Piccardi discusses at length the alterations Wormser and Costa had to introduce into their scores of *L'Enfant Prodigue* and *L'Histoire d'un Pierrot* in view of the filmed transposition of the pantomimes. [↑](#)
37. «New York Tribune», June 14, 1914, p. 7. [↑](#)
38. ANDERSON, B. GILLIAN, "Synchronized Music: The Influence of Pantomime on Moving Pictures", «Music and the Moving Image», Vol. 8, No. 3 (Fall 2015), p. 7. [↑](#)
39. «Moving Picture World», 20 (April-June 1914), p. 1241. Anderson explains the misnomer "opera", adopted here and in the «New York Tribune» review, arguing that American critics were impressed by the "expressive sumptuousness" of Costa's score, that is its grand, *operatic* sound. The expression is borrowed from Carlo Piccardi's discussion of the Rome premiere of the filmed *Histoire* accompanied by the S. Cecilia Orchestra. Anderson translated Piccardi's long essay and published it in three issues of «Music and the Moving Image»: vol. 1, no.2 (Summer 2008), vol. 2. No. 2 (Summer 2009), vol. 6, no. 1 (Spring 2013). [↑](#)
40. ANDERSON, p. 19. [↑](#)

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## Matteo Sansone

Matteo Sansone studied piano and composition at the Conservatorio S. Pietro a Majella, Naples, and graduated in English Language and Literature from the Istituto Universitario Orientale. He received his PhD from Edinburgh University where he also taught for many years. He taught Italian at the University of Malta and at St. Andrews University. His main research areas are late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Italian opera with a focus on Verismo, and the relationship between opera and literature. His essays have appeared in *Italian Studies*, *Music & Letters*, *California Italian Studies*, *Civiltà Musical*, and *Early Music*. He has co-authored a book on Italian and Maltese Music (Malta, 2001) and has written entries for *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, *International Dictionary of Opera*, *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*. He is the Florence correspondent for the London monthly *Opera*. He has been teaching “Italian Opera” at NYU Florence since 2001.