

Sparkle remains behind the mask

Jessica Duchen

NOBODY carries off wit, sparkle and sheer naughtiness quite as stylishly as the French. The musical comedy *L'Amour Masqué*, which the Opéra de Tours is bringing to the Edinburgh Festival this week, could not come from anywhere else, or any era other than the 1920s. Its text by Sacha Guitry balances deliciously on the brink of farce and its music by André Messager has the lightness, delicacy and precision of spun sugar from the finest Parisian pâtissier.

Yet this staging, directed by Bernard Pisani and conducted by Jean-Yves Ossonce, is the work's first since the 1960s.

French light opera is rarely staged in Britain - or in France, for that matter - and as the Edinburgh Festival's artistic director Brian McMaster points out: "It's not the sort of thing you expect to hear in a major international festival." What made him bring it to Edinburgh?

"Years ago I went to hear Messager's opera *Véronique* in Paris, and it was bliss," McMaster enthuses. "It's in a style and idiom that scarcely exist now: you feel as if you have one foot off the chair.

What first attracted me to *L'Amour Masqué* was its text by Sacha Guitry. He's a fascinating playwright, so witty and slick that he's been called the French Noel Coward. The text is incredibly sophisticated, full of puns and rhymes that make it quite difficult to surtitle in English. Still, there's depth behind the wit, a quality that the finest comedies share."

The story's heroine is a young woman known merely as She, who is 20, wealthy and has two lovers. She says it's boring to have only one. She doesn't love either of hers, however, and becomes fascinated with a photograph of a young man - not realising it was taken two decades earlier. The man (He), now not so young, courts her at a masked ball and captures her heart and body for the night; but in the morning he has to find the courage to reveal that he's a little longer in the tooth than she had believed. In the end, she reconciles her new amour with her personal philosophy of maintaining two lovers. He will be two people: the young man of the photograph and the older man he has become, rolled into one.

What of the music? André Messager, who worked with Guitry on a number of musical comedies, is not a widely familiar name today, though ballet fans may know his exquisite score for *Les Deux Pigeons*. Composers of light music all too often vanish from the limelight because of critical disapproval or changing

fashions; in his time, though, Messenger was hugely respected, not only as a composer but as a conductor and opera house director.

He wielded the baton for the world premiere of Debussy's opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 1902, as well as the first UK performance of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*; and in London he served as manager of the Grand Opera Syndicate at Covent Garden from 1901 to 1907.

As a young man in Paris, Messenger shared a flat with a former school friend, the composer Gabriel Fauré. After the two visited the Wagner Festival at Bayreuth, they together transformed some of the Ring Cycle's most famous themes into a set of dances for piano duet, *Souvenirs de Bayreuth*, one of the funniest, most satirical pieces of 'classical' music ever written, although they both revered Wagner's original. Wit, irony and lightness were always balanced, for Messenger, by genuine affection and warmth.

Spearheading *L'Amour Masqué's* resurrection is the conductor Jean-Yves Ossonce, whose interest in unusual French music has led him to seek the revival of this long-forgotten style.

"It's an aesthetic that completely broke down in France after the Second World War," he explains, "because we had no continuing tradition comparable with Gilbert and Sullivan in Britain, and because musical theatre was then taken over by some very bad composers and librettists who did terrible things to the repertory."

It needs to be handled with care, Ossonce adds: "The music is fragile. It's easy to listen to, but difficult to perform with the right balance, sound and atmosphere. It's soft but colourful, precise, direct and full of modern rhythms for its time - including the tango, which was new to Paris then - and although it's light and humorous, it must also be sincere. We're helped now by a new generation of young singers who haven't been influenced by the old post-war traditions and can come to this music with an open mind."

Will Festival audiences bring an open mind too? McMaster thinks so: "When I went to see it in Tours, they had to encore the last number five times!"

- *L'Amour Masqué*, Edinburgh Festival Theatre (0131-473 2000), Thursday until Saturday, 7.15pm