"All the World's a Stage"

Sherri Weiler

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The inspiration for this article came from my inimitable predecessor and creator of "The Song File," Carol Kimball. My recent purchase of her 2013 book, *Art Song: Linking Poetry and Music*, led to many pleasant hours perusing some fabulous and oft forgotten poetic/recital programming ideas.[1] One in particular appealed to me greatly, and the more I read and researched, the more fascinated I became with why the early 16th century *commedia dell'arte* had such farflung influence on Western culture, especially on 19th century French Symbolist poets. Professor Kimball included a wonderful table of some eight or so songs composed on the characters of the *commedia* in both the book and her article in the January/February 2010 issue of *Journal of Singing*, which may be easily downloaded through the NATS website.[2] My aim here is to further expound on the ideas promulgated by this masked theatrical art form and briefly trace its influence on vocal music in France and beyond in order to inspire us to involve both ourselves and our students more intimately in the imagery of these beautiful and descriptive songs.

HISTORY OF THE *COMMEDIA*

The *commedia* was originally called *commedia all' improvvisa,* or "comedy of improvisation," to distinguish it from *commedia erudita*, or "learned comedy," which was written by *literati* and performed by amateurs. In 16th century Italy, *arte* meant something closer to "that which is made by artisans," and the term *dell'arte* was later added to denote that these were professional actors. The theatrical form employed stock themes, stock characters, and stock pranks or jokes (*lazzi*), and while there were some authored plays, many of the scenes were loosely interpreted and the actual performance was highly improvisatory. As early as the 1520s, early performers of the *zanni* character type were entertaining audiences in a manner much like the later *commedia* of 1750, when the style actually received its name from Carlo Goldoni in his play, *Il teatro comico*. Although Goldoni used it as a term of disparagement, the name stuck and became a source of pride among 18th century practitioners who saw their tradition as thoroughly professional.[3] In fact, theater historians believe the legacy of *commedia* (the term I will henceforth use to refer to the *commedia dell'arte all'improvvisa*) was the first truly professional theater company; more notable is the fact that it was also the first tradition in Europe in which women played the roles of female characters on stage.[4]

The *commedia* probably sprang up as a result of several disparate elements. Its roots may be traced back to the ancient Roman comedies of Titus Plautus

(c. 254–184 BCE), who wrote some 130 Latin farces, and whose plays had undergone a rediscovery during the Renaissance; to the Venetian *Carnevale*, which originated in 1162 and where elaborate masks were (and still are) the custom; to the mime theater practice of the Byzantine world; to the *jongleurs* of medieval Europe and the market culture of popular entertainment in the piazza. There is even a theory that the *commedia* was a response to the political and economic crises of the 16th century that caused actors to band together and form an early sort of "union." It is probably best to sum it up by saying the *commedia* was the result of the right ingredients coming together at the right place in the right time, as most truly creative endeavors seem to do.

Whatever its origins, what is certain is that the masks worn at *Carnevale* came in several distinct types, which were often associated with different occupations and character traits. Table 1 is a very brief summary of the major masks and sub-masks and some of the associated names of these stock characters. It would be impossible to include the variants of each name in every language, but the main theme should be readily apparent and easily related to your own knowledge of song literature and opera. I have placed in upper case the main type each character inhabits.

According to Antonio Fava, one of the world's leading maestros of *commedia dell'arte* and maker of traditional *commedia* masks, there are only four basic characters: *vecchi* (old men), *capitani* (captains, or military/authority figures), *innamorati* (lovers), and *zanni* (servants, from which the English word "zany" is descended).[5] All subcharacters are derived, or hybridized, from these. For instance, the *vecchi* include both the wealthy older man of commerce and the *dottore*, or notary figure. The *innamorati* are both male and female, and the reader will recognize many common names used as stock *commedia* characters in 17th and 18th century European art song: Florinda, Silvia, Lidia, Isabella, and male counterparts Flavio, Silvio, Vittorio, and Lindoro.

Micke Klingvall, a Swedish actor, director, and teacher, suggested in a speech to the Royale Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm that the stereotypes comprising the *commedia* masks could be found in real life, on the street, during these early days of the genre. The homeless people and country bumpkins that were mocked and teased represented the *zanni*; real life soldiers became *capitani*; the *vecchi* (Pantalone and Dottore) were those who demanded total control, unable to accept anything less; the *innamorati* are recognizable anywhere as the totally self-absorbed young lovers.[6] I believe these characters are still to be found today in our own time and culture, which explains their continuing appeal.

The first three stock characters identified above are basically "flat," or static: they have a distinct role to play that only rarely varies. The *vecchi* and *capitani* are almost always the butt of the joke, providing humor because we so easily recognize these stereotypical personalities that transcend time and place. Who doesn't roll his eyes and laugh at the stodginess of Archie Bunker, or the studied, stilted erudition of Dr. Frasier Crane? The inability of the *innamorati* to see beyond their own desires provokes the humorous actions of the others who surround them. Think *When Harry Met Sally*, *The Pirates of Penzance*, and countless other plotlines in opera and romantic comedies; in fact, the *commedia* set the stage for today's entire romantic comedy genre. The *capitani* are the braggadocios of society: the stalwart military man who boasts of his prowess in battle, but squeals when he sees a mouse in the room; or cares only about chasing women, not enemies. Perhaps Belcore in *L'elisir d'amore* and Col. Klink from *Hogan's Heroes* both fit this category in different ways. These three types almost always serve as comic foils, the "straight man," even though they can be funny in helping to set up the "joke."

The *zanni* are marvelously dynamic, inventive, and versatile characters. If the action develops around the *innamorati*, the *zanni* perpetuate it. They constitute the largest group of subcharacters, and though they are still considered stock figures in *commedia*, they are nonetheless imbued with a sense of emotional energy that is only rivaled by their onstage physical pranks and antics. This category ranges in 20th century popular culture from the exaggerated, unscrupulous cartoon villain Wile E. Coyote to the sad, melancholic clown of Red Skelton (a Pierrot if there ever was one). The *zanni* represent the common man, and are not only the down-and-out denizens and local yokels of 16th century Italy, but in today's adaptable society have evolved to shopkeepers, waitresses, and politicians. Julia Louis-Dreyfuss's current character in *Veep* is an ideal model, as is Susanna in *Le nozze di Figaro*. These character types almost always "work for" the *vecchi* and *innamorati* of their world, even though

TABLE 1.

Character	Costume/Mask	Personality
Pantalone (Magnifico) VECCHI	Hooked nose, wrinkled face, and bushy, prominent eyebrows; baggy red pants.	Venetian merchant, rich, greedy, naïve, always fears theft of his gold, always loses against wit/improvisation. Always about to lose his young wife or adventurous daughter. Old but athletic, ideal counterpart of Arlecchino (who never has money), the Zanni, Brighella. Caricature of merchant.
Il Dottore (Balanzone) VECCHI	Huge black suit, often with a ruff and notary's beret or doctor's cap. Half mask that highlights his bulbous nose, chubby cheeks, often a mustache.	Pretends to have total knowledge supported by science; arrogant despite ignorance; always dressed in black, well groomed, rich looking, talks ad infinitum, ostentatious. Serves to put break in the action with empty, prefabricated, supposedly erudite monologues. Quotes Latin or Greek, never correctly. On stage usually impersonates a Lawyer, Judge, Notary Public—rarely medical doctor. Caricature of learning, from Bologna.
Il Capitano CAPITANI	Long pointy (handlebar) mustache, wide eyes, huge sword never used. Dressed in colorful, exaggerated uniform: suit with multicolored stripes and gilt buttons, feathered cap.	Vainglorious, deceitful. Very brave in words, but runs off stage when Arlecchino appears with a short wooden club. Boasting but fraudulent war hero. Usually has bombastic name: Capitano Spavento della Valle Inferno (created by Isabella Andreini's husband Francesco). Spanish character. Captain disappeared from the *commedia*'s usual cast beginning of 18th century.
Scaramouche CAPITANI	Always dressed in black and carrying a pointed sword; Robin Hood of his day.	Began as Il Capitano, by 1680 had become Scaramouche. Means "small, fast fray," a soldier who doesn't involve himself too much in battle; more of a woman hunter than a soldier, great friend of Pulcinella, less boasting than Il Capitano and more adroit and clever. Lucky in love, always finds a way to reverse the consequences on someone else. Strong, agile, graceful, sings with good voice and plays lute/guitar.
Pulcinella (Polichinelle, Pierrot) ZANNI	White, simple, poor costume. Dwarfish humpback, crooked or beaked nose.	Philosophic, eternally melancholy, dreamer. Approach to life allows him to float through problems, situations, adventures simply getting out of everything exactly as he got involved. Positive approach to life.
Brighella (Briga=quarrel, trouble) Buffet, Flautino, Bagatino, Gandolino, Mezzettino, Fenocchio, Scapino ZANNI	Costume of a servant, but with several short green stripes on a white background. Sometimes cloak and cap with green stripes.	Choleric, violent, exaggerated behavior, womanizer. Liar and persuader in love events, always ready for intrigue, in search of next fight. Arrogant, not well respected. Arlecchino's crony, roguish and sophisticated, cowardly villain who would do anything for money.

(Continued next page)

TABLE 1. (continued)

Character	Costume/Mask	Personality
Arlecchino (Harlequin) ZANNI	Cat-like mask, short nose, motley colored clothing, tight fitting pants and tunic, white felt hat with rabbit or fox tail, carried wooden bat. Mask has piggish nose, sometimes a bump on the forehead, with devilish and feline features.	Acrobatic, witty, childlike, and amorous. Character traced back to 1593. Role of faithful valet or servant, but also the clown. Absurd actions and words alternate between flashes of brilliance and idiocy. Absentminded.
ZANNI (means Giovanni in Bergamo dialect)	Original mask was full face with a long nose, but developed into a half mask with an extended, long nose. The longer the nose, the more stupid the character.	Servants; represents emigrant populations that must survive in hostile environment. Poor, desperate, ignorant but street smart. From Bergamo. Constantly hungry, constantly exploited. Friend/antagonist of Arlecchino.
Female: Isabella, Colombina, Aurelia, Lucrezia, Flaminia, Celia, Lidia, Valeria, Florinda, Clarice, Angela, Graziosa, Diana, Silvia, Corallina *Male:* Lelio, Flavio, Orazio, Silvio, Leandro, Vittorio, Orazio, Fulvio, Ottavio, Aurelio, Lindoro INNAMORATI	Dress simple, no mask (as with all female characters). Low cut maid's uniform, representing what maids wore at the time. Colombina sometimes wore colorful patches like Arlecchino, set off by small white cuff and apron.	Always bring a touch of the soap opera to the *commedia*; other action develops around these two. Elegantly dressed, but flat personalities; they help public to identify with and sink deeply into the story. Create situations of contrasted love, envy, gossip. Simple at heart, witty, vain, chatty, somewhat clumsy, always counterpoint to the more defined and cherished characters (Arlecchino, Pantalone). Very often are the son and daughter of two Vecchi (Pantalone or Dottore).

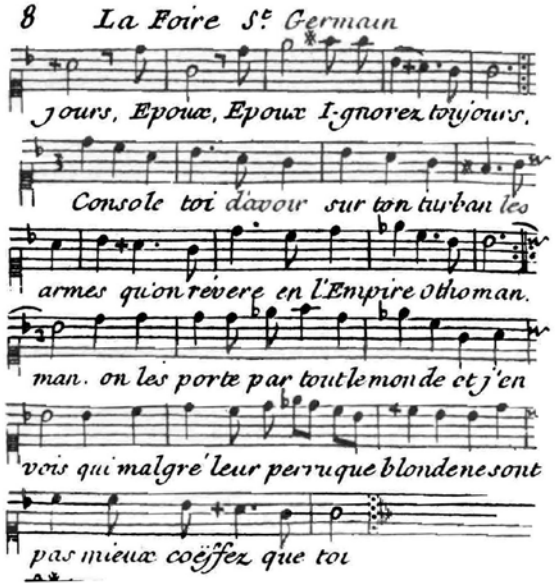
Figure 1. Isabella Andreini (1562–1604), the first "Isabella."

they may not be true servants. However one finds them, their principal function is to entertain by whatever means at their disposal.

One of the earliest principal icons of the *commedia* was an onstage tree filled with musical instruments, and the climax of a production was often a musical performance.[7] In fact, the traveling troupe were frequently "virtuosic singers;" *commedia* leading lady Virginia Ramponi-Andreini (1583–1630), daughter-in-law of Isabella Andreini (Figure 1), created the title role in Monteverdi's 1608 *L'Arianna* at the last minute. Some actual printed music from the *commedia* survives in early 17th century song anthologies,[8] and readers are no doubt familiar with many character names, such as Pergolesi's "Nina," Scarlatti's "Se Florindo è fedele," and Parisotti's "Se tu m'ami," which includes "Bella rosa porporina/Oggi *Silvia* sceglierà" in the B section. Example 1 shows an example of a printed song from the Dufresy and Regnard drama *La Foire Saint-Germain*, which was premiered by the King's Italian Players in the Hôtel de Bourgogne, Paris, on December 26, 1695.

THE *COMMEDIA* IN FRANCE, OR *THÉÂTRE ITALIENNE*

The *commedia* was brought to France by King Henry II (1519–1559), who was married to Catherine de' Medici, a member of the ruling family of Florence. Henry went to Venice sometime in the middle of the 16th century, saw a *commedia dell'arte* performance, and invited the



Example 1.

group (named I Gelosi) to come to Paris. Originally performed in the French capital in Italian, and known as the Théâtre Italienne, over the course of a century or more the scenes of the *commedia* were transmogrified, resulting in a process of "Frenchifying Italian words or Italianizing French words,"[9] giving rise as well to a different physical stage language for the stunts and dances. By 1716 Italian troupes visiting Paris nearly always performed in French, providing a path for the development of plays written entirely in French, such as the 1695 *La Foire Saint-Germain*, an early example noted above. The advent of the Age of Enlightenment rendered the "grotesque style . . . unfashionable" by 1780; however, Harlequin and Pierrot did not totally disappear, remaining popular with the lower classes in pantomimes and farces.[10]

From there the *commedia* spread all over Europe, where various cultures, including those of England and Germany, marked it with their own imprimatur for at least the next two centuries. Examples include Shakespeare (*The Tempest* and *Much Ado About Nothing*) and, nearly three centuries later, E. T. A. Hoffmann (*The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr*, written 1819–21, from which Offenbach's opera was eventually patterned after he saw Barbier and Carré's 1851 play *Les contes fantastiques d'Hoffmann*).[11]

In art, literature, and music, the chief ambassador of *commedia* influence is found in the tragic clown figure of Pierrot, and in particular his association with the moon. Even the iconic David Bowie appeared as Pierrot in his 1980 video *Ashes to Ashes*. Much has been written concerning this character, and I will not go into depth here except to describe Pierrot's impact on early 19th century Paris. Jean-Gaspard Deburau, a Bohemian mime, began appearing at the Théâtre des Funambules around 1819 under the stage name "Baptiste." This theater, which was demolished during Haussmann's rebuilding of Paris in the 1860s, specialized in hosting acrobats and mimes, and Deburau took the part of Pierrot as a young man. He excelled in the role, continually expanding and deepening his Pierrot until he died in 1846. His interpretation of the role leaned towards a restrained and nuanced acting style, replacing the original *commedia's* bold and brash comedy. Several mimes continued successfully as Pierrot after Deburau's death, including his son Jean-Charles, but it was the elder Deburau who "enshrined Pierrot within French culture, and established the sense of Pierrot as a sensitive and anguished artist."[12] Deburau's Pierrot became further entrenched with the French *literati* when Théophile Gautier compared the mime's work to the works of Shakespeare in an 1842 fictionalized review, "Shakespeare at the Funambules."

THE FRENCH SYMBOLIST POETS

The French Symbolist movement in literature had its beginnings with Charles Baudelaire's 1857 publication *Les fleurs du mal*. Baudelaire was significantly influenced by Edgar Allan Poe's morbidly melancholic and often tawdry style, and through his French translations of five volumes of Poe's poetry, Baudelaire helped feed the mid 19th century French literary fascination with the "Watteauesque[13] artifice and *commedia dell'arte* disguise, a mask of sophistication that half-conceals deeper emotions."[14] This thoroughly French attitude resulted directly from the deflowering of pure Romanticism by the Parnassians, headed by Leconte de L'Isle and, for a time, Baudelaire. Baudelaire was also attracted to the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, who claimed that the world is driven by a constantly dissatisfied will, which continuously yet unsuccessfully seeks satisfaction.

The July 1830 political uprising in Paris served as "an intense disillusionment to many young Romantics,"[15] including Théophile Gautier (1811–1872), whose writings took on a pessimistic, Schopenhaueresque tone from this time forward. Gautier's 1838 *La comédie de la mort* included 57 poems loosely based on the premise that spiritual death is far worse than physical death, and that art is the only refuge available from the hostile vagaries of life.[16] This so strongly influenced the then 17 year old Baudelaire (1821–1867) that twenty years later he dedicated his first major publication, the 1857 *Les fleurs du mal*, to Gautier. Both of these publications were extremely important in the history of art song: Gautier's *La comédie de la mort* was the textual basis for Hector Berlioz's *Les nuits d'été*, and Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* served as rich poetic fodder for numerous French composers, including Debussy, Charpentier, Chausson, Fauré, Henri Duparc, André Caplet, Jean Chatillon, Marcel Bertrand, Jean Cras, Louis Vierne, and D'Indy.

For Théophile Gautier, *commedia's* stereotypical Pierrot was no simple fool, but rather the epitome of post-Revolutionary French society, an archetype of those who were, sometimes tragically, seeking to find their place in a new, bourgeois world. Pierrot is creative and solitary; he is autonomous, often ironic, and endlessly imaginative. He makes people laugh as he bumbles his way through life, accepting blame for wrongs he has not committed, and he quickly became acknowledged as the paradigm of post-Romantic 19th century French poets, who themselves felt victimized, at odds with society as a whole, lived tragic lives, and often exhibited self-destructive tendencies.

Paul Verlaine (1844–1896) was the Symbolist movement's poster child, and much of his poetry is biographic. Arthur Graham writes that Verlaine's life involved "an overprotective mother, alcoholism, bisexuality, a broken marriage, a lifetime without seeing his son, a religious conversion, drugs, degradation, and finally recognition . . . as a leading Symbolist poet."[17] Verlaine became the "father" of Symbolist poetry with his 1884 publication *Les poètes maudits*, in which he interwove his own prose with poems by some of the poets he felt were similarly "cursed" by their obscurity and odd sense of spiritual extremity, simultaneously "hell-bent" and "heaven-storming."[18] The first line of Verlaine's "Art poétique" (*Jadis et naguère*, 1884) announced the principle that underlies most of Verlaine's poetry: "De la musique avant toute chose" (Music before anything else).[19] Verlaine brought musical elements back to French poetry that had by and large been missing since the Renaissance: euphony, elegance, meter, and formal perfection. He also drew much of his imagery from music, especially in *Fêtes galantes*.[20]

By their very temperament, the Symbolists were attracted to *commedia* characters, whose own natures were masked both figuratively and literally. Masks allowed the actors to become caricatures, and no longer completely open to the pains and misfortunes of fate. The stylized masks simultaneously symbolized and veiled artistic ferment, and served to distinguish the creative artist from the man behind the mask.[21] In the Symbolist world, the masks became aspects of an inner life, representing personal conflict; all the masks together therefore contain aspects not only of one's private life, but of all humanity. *Commedia* always tells the same tale: death and resurrection in a festive context.[22]

Much that the *commedia* accomplished through physical pranks, costuming, masks, and somewhat vulgar gags, the Symbolists accomplished through finessing life's ambiguities. To the Symbolists, symbols were not merely allegories, intended to represent; instead, they were meant to evoke particular states of mind. This is what is most apparent to me in the French *mélodies* that many of us (and our students) sing. In Verlaine's poem "Mandoline" (most famously set by both Debussy and Fauré), a picture is painted, a mood set; the companions Tircis, Aminte, Clitandre, and Damis—*commedia* figures all—show us their personalities by their actions, not their words, for they have none. We know how they are dressed, where they are, that one has written verses, that one is strumming the mandolin—but that is all we know of them. A picture of desultory amusement is painted, but nothing more. Similarly, Henri Duparc set Charles Baudelaire's "La vie antérieure" (*Les fleurs du mal*), in which Baudelaire vividly describes the immense columns and porticos, the rolling waves making mystic music, and the nude slaves imbued with fragrance who refreshed his brow with palm leaves. But this powerful portrait merely serves to defend the Symbolist manifesto, that art's purpose was to provide a temporary refuge from the strife of the will and the world, with these final two lines of the poem: "Et don't l'unique soin

était d'approfondir/Le secret douloureux qui me faisait languir" (And whose sole purpose was to understand in depth/The sorrowful secret that made me suffer). None of this is real outside of his mind, but even if it were, his sole purpose in being there is to understand his own suffering. Schopenhauer's philosophy of pessimism, to be sure!

My goal in writing this article is to inspire you to continue this research wherever you are in your musical journey. There is much still to be mined from the *commedia dell'arte* and its influence on French Symbolist poetry; there is perhaps a doctoral dissertation to be written on how that poetry affected not only contemporary French composers, but other musicians across Western culture—Schoenberg, Honegger, Milhaud, Hindemith, Berg, Widor, Britten, Vaughan Williams, Zemlinsky, Ned Rorem, even the Russians Gretchaninov and Taneyev, all wrote art songs composed to the poetry of the French Symbolists. Let this small contribution be a starting point for continued exploration, inspiring you to breathe vitality and creativity into your own performances through deeper knowledge, while understanding yourself as a singer to be a small part of the wider world of art: timeless, immortal, and always newly formed.

Plaudite, amici, commedia finita est.[23]

NOTES

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2. Carol Kimball, "A Smorgasbord of Song Groups," *Journal of Singing* 66, no. 3 (January/February 2010): 349.
3. Matthew R. Wilson, A History of Commedia dell'Arte; http://www.factionoffools.org/history (accessed November 11, 2014).
4. Ibid.
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6. Micke Klingvall, Commedia dell'Arte and its former significance; http://commedia.klingvall.com/commedia-dell-arte-and-its-former-significance-the-royal-dramatic-theatre-speech-part-5/ (accessed November 12, 2014).
7. Anne MacNeil, "Commedia dell'arte," *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press; http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com (accessed November 13, 2014).
8. Sarah Hibberd, "Commedia dell'arte," *The Oxford Companion to Music. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press; http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com (accessed November 13, 2014).
9. David Trott, *Commedia del-Arte* in France from 1660–1760; http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~trott/courses/dra3011s/frenchif.html.
10. Alice M. Phillips, "Mirrors of Harlequin: Romanticism and the Artist as Tragic Performer," *Montage* 4 (2010): 11.
11. Ibid., 10.
12. Christopher Laws, Pierrot Through the Arts: Deburau, Laforgue, Schoenberg and on; http://www.culturedallroundman.com/2013/03/07/pierrot/ (accessed November 11, 2014).
13. The French painter Jean Antoine Watteau (1684–1721) originated a style known as *Fête galantes* which helped imprint the *commedia dell'arte* in visual form upon the Gallic imagination before both Romanticism and Symbolism in poetry. His paintings were highly stylized, depicting figures at elegant festivals or gallant parties, sometimes wearing masks, à la the *commedia*.
14. Paul Griffiths, "Verlaine, Paul," *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press; http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com (accessed November 13, 2014).
15. Sherri Weiler, "Hector Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'été*," *Journal of Singing* 61, no. 4 (March/April 2005): 360.
16. Ibid.
17. Arthur Graham, "A Short and Pragmatic Approach to Poetry for Singers," *Journal of Singing* 54, no. 4 (March/April 1998): 19.
18. Algis Valiunas, The Cursed Poets and their Gods; http://www.firstthings.com/article/2012/02/the-cursed-poets-and-their-gods (accessed December 27, 2014). NB: The "cursed" poets were Tristan Corbière, Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, Villers de L'Isle-Adam, and Pauvre Lelian (an anagram of Paul Verlaine).
19. Griffiths.
20. Ibid.
21. Susan Youens, "Excavating an Allegory: The Text of Pierrot Lunaire," *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute* 8 (1984): 94–115.
22. Klingvall.
23. "Applaud, friends, the comedy is finished," the phrase traditionally spoken at the play's end.