

CAPRICCIO

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Part I: The birthday of the young, widowed Countess, Madeleine, is to be celebrated. Flamand, a composer, and Olivier, a poet, are listening to the rehearsal of Flamand's sextet, written for the occasion, while a theater director, La Roche, is asleep. While listening, Flamand and Olivier discover that they are both in love with the Countess. What will impress her more -- Flamand's music or Olivier's poetry? *Prima la musica, dopo le parole, or prima le parole, dopo la musica?* They agree to let the Countess decide. La Roche awakens and joins the argument. Neither poetry nor music, he says, is the greatest of the arts. His own, the art of theatrical production, overshadows them both and uses them as its servants. He believes in entertainment -- splendid decor, top notes, beautiful women, such as the actress Clairon, who had recently had an affair with Olivier. La Roche reveals that she is on her way to the château to play opposite the Count in Olivier's play. Flamand, Olivier and La Roche leave to prepare for the rehearsal in the theater, and the Count and Countess enter. They engage in a discussion about the relative merits of music and poetry. The Count admits that music leaves him cold, that words will always be superior to music. He teases his sister about her interest in the composer Flamand. She, in turn, brings up the name of Clairon. He admits he is interested in the actress, but praises a life of quickly-won, quickly-lost attachments. The Countess longs for lasting love. La Roche and his protégés return. Clairon arrives for the rehearsal. She and the Count read a scene from Olivier's play which ends with the Count's declamation of a passionate sonnet. He is congratulated, and La Roche leads them both off to rehearsal, leaving Flamand and Olivier alone with the Countess. Olivier remarks that the Count addressed the sonnet to the wrong person, it was written for the Countess, and he recites it again to her. Flamand rushes off to set it to music. In his absence, Olivier declares his love. Flamand returns to sing the sonnet he has just set. Olivier and Flamand quarrel about the true authorship of the sonnet, but the Countess decides the issue: it is now hers! La Roche takes Olivier away to rehearsal, and Flamand in his turn is able to declare his love to the Countess. He asks her to decide: music or poetry, Flamand or Olivier? The Countess promises that he shall have the answer the next morning at eleven o'clock. Flamand rushes out in great excitement, leaving the Countess alone with her thoughts and the sounds of the rehearsal next door. She orders refreshments for the company.

Part II: The rehearsal over, the participants return. The Count and his sister discuss the progress of their love affairs. While refreshments are served, La Roche introduces some dancers who perform for the company. Flamand and Olivier resume their argument of words versus music. The others join in. The Count ridicules opera -- all opera! La Roche introduces a pair of Italian singers who perform a duet. Then he tells of the spectacle he has planned for the Count's birthday -- "The Birth of Pallas Athene" and "The Fall of Carthage." The company make cruel fun of his grandiose and traditional ideas, while the Italian singers worry whether they will be paid and stuff themselves with food. La Roche finally gets a chance to speak for himself and bitterly attacks his attackers, expressing his intense faith in the theater. He wants drama to show human beings in all their aspects as creatures of flesh and blood, and orders Flamand and Olivier to create good new works that speak for their time. His listeners are deeply moved and, as a sign of their reconciliation, Olivier and Flamand agree to write an opera. The Count has a very original idea: write an opera on the events of that very day at the château, depicting the company as its characters. The suggestion is accepted by everyone, and the company breaks up. Eight servants enter and tidy up the now deserted room, commenting on the events of the afternoon from their point of view -- "backstage" as they put it -- for isn't the whole world playing at theater? The major domo gives them the night off. Then appears Monsieur Taupe, the prompter, who had fallen

asleep during the rehearsal. He tells the major domo that, in fact, he is the most important person in the theater because without him the show couldn't go on. But now he has been left behind. The major domo offers to help in his predicament. The Countess enters followed by the major domo who gives her two messages: that her brother will not be at home for dinner that evening, and that Olivier will call the next morning at eleven to hear from her the ending of the opera. The Countess exclaims that since the sonnet, the composer and the poet are fated to be inseparable - now they will both wait on her tomorrow at the same time! She sings two verses of the sonnet to herself. Which of the two men does she love? After an agony of indecision and self searching, she gazes at herself in the mirror and comes to realize that she cannot make the choice which would give the opera an ending. The major domo solves the problem by announcing that dinner is served.