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French Opera at the Italian Theater (1762-1793):
Nationalism, Genre, and *Opéra-Comique*

Debates over the relative merits of French and Italian music dominated the aesthetic discourse of eighteenth-century Paris. From the publication of Raguenet's *Paralèle des italiens et des François* in 1702, through the *Querelle des Bouffons* at mid-century, and the pamphlet wars of the Gluckistes and Piccinistes in the 1770s, the question of national style in opera remained at the forefront of musical, literary, and philosophical concern. Although there is no shortage of scholarly work addressing these controversies and their broader ramifications,[1] previous studies have largely centered on the most prestigious of Paris's theatrical venues—the Académie Royale de Musique, or Opéra. The Opéra, home to the eminent, and eminently French, *tragédie en musique* since its inception under Louis XIV, certainly merits attention as a locus of national pride and debate. However, this singular focus has tended to overshadow a second site of contest, one where the French-Italian disputes arguably exerted a greater practical impact. The Comédie-Italienne, alternately known as the Théâtre Italien or Opéra-Comique,[2] held a royal privilege for the performance of opera with spoken dialogue (*opéra-comique*) from 1762 onwards, and its unique organization—as well as the hybrid nature of the spectacles it produced—fostered an environment in which the two predominant operatic cultures of Europe were destined to clash.

The Comédie-Italienne of the later eighteenth century was no longer, as its name would imply, a troupe of Italian comedians but rather a mixed collection of French and Italian players.

[1] These include Georgia Cowart, *The Origins of Modern Musical Criticism: French and Italian Music, 1600-1750* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1981); Catherine Kintzler, *Théâtre et opéra à l'âge classique: une familière étrangeté* (Paris: Fayard, 2004); and Cynthia Verba, *Music and the French Enlightenment: Reconstruction of a Dialogue, 1750-1764* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).
[2] Housed at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, and from 1783 onwards at the first Salle Favart.

The company, beset by financial difficulties in the early 1760s, was forced to accept a merger with the unofficial comic opera of the Parisian *foires* and in the process inherited the actors, license, and repertory of its erstwhile French rival. As of February 3, 1762, the date of the first performance of the newly enlarged troupe, and the starting point of this dissertation, the management of the Comédie-Italienne was faced with the task of integrating two distinct musical traditions—within its larger body of repertory, and occasionally, even within individual works. Indeed, *opéra-comique* served as a prime testing ground for the future course of national opera on a number of fronts, with its unusual mixtures of French and Italian music, of tragic and comic elements, and of spoken dialogue and song. The operas staged at the Comédie-Italienne were in this regard, as numerous critics protested, the "deformed offspring" of other theatrical genres.[3] But it was precisely this ambiguous and malleable identity that made *opéra-comique*, and the Comédie-Italienne in turn, so crucial to the contemporaneous discourse surrounding operatic reform.[4]

If we are to counter the traditionally Opéra-centric view of the music of late eighteenth-century France, however, it is not sufficient to provide a separate and parallel survey of the development of the Comédie-Italienne during this period. A principal goal of my dissertation, rather, is to demonstrate the intense degree of interaction between the key players at the serious and comic theaters of Paris and to underscore the intersections between audiences of the *tragédie en musique* and the *opéra-comique* in the years before the revolution. The *tragédie en musique* was defined not only against the imported Italian *opera buffa*, as is commonly assumed, but also

[3] For a useful overview of these criticisms see David Charlton, *Grétry and the Growth of Opéra-Comique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 8.
[4] A brief, but thorough, introduction to the Comédie-Italienne and its administration may be found in Charlton, *Grétry*, 7-19. For more extensive background information, see Philippe Vendrix, ed., *L'Opéra-comique en France au XVIII^e siècle* (Liège: Mardaga, 1992).

against the upstart *opéra-comique* of the Comédie-Italienne, and this latter genre played a pivotal role in the discussion and development of French opera. Tensions between the various national and generic factions grew particularly acute with the arrival of Christoph Willibald Gluck in Paris in 1773. That Gluck, a Bohemian-born, Italian-schooled, Austrian citizen, was now charged with the task of rejuvenating the native *tragédie en musique* made many Parisian critics uneasy and offered proponents of *opéra-comique* the opportunity to assert their own roles as ambassadors of a new national genre.

My dissertation will examine the strategies employed by the composers, librettists, and administrators of the Comédie-Italienne as they asserted themselves against their more esteemed competitors at the Opéra. I will place particular emphasis on the efforts of André-Ernest-Modest Grétry, leading composer of *opéra-comique* in the 1770s and 1780s and chief rival of Gluck in the comic realm. *Opéra-comique* rose rapidly to prominence in the final decades of the *ancien régime*, and this development was in large part precipitated by the advancements of Grétry's works. Grétry's most successful operas for the Comédie-Italienne, including *Zémire et Azor* (1771) and *Richard Coeur-de-Lion* (1784), challenged the supremacy of the *tragédie en musique* in dramatic weight and musical complexity, broadening the scope of what might be included under the rubric of *opéra-comique* in the future. But the critical reappraisal of comic opera in the late eighteenth century was not purely the result of changes in dramatic or musical style. I will also consider how Grétry and his librettists exploited nationalist rhetoric to bolster the status of the genre in which they worked and how this rhetoric resonated with the broader democratizing impulses of the pre-revolutionary era. In short, I will describe the circumstances that culminated in the rechristening of Paris's Italian theater by the early years of the revolution. On March 17, 1793, three decades after the initial merger of French and Italian troupes, the Comédie-Italienne

was officially renamed the Théâtre de l'Opéra-Comique National, symbolically affirming the status of *opéra-comique* as a genre capable of representing the nation on both domestic and international stages. This reappropriation of a popular theatrical tradition has important cultural and political implications in a period of profound social change.

The connection between culture broadly conceived and national politics in France has been the subject of intense interest among historians, particularly in the years since 1989. The bicentennial of the revolution witnessed a flurry of important publications in the discipline of cultural history, including Roger Chartier's *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*[5] and the belated English translation of Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.[6] Habermas's widely influential 'public-sphere' theory describes how the growth of literacy and the explosion of printed material in the late eighteenth century created radical new forums for discourse for an emerging, bourgeois public. While Habermas's formulation has been criticized, both for its restricted scope and for its over-emphasis on the bourgeoisie, it remains a near-obligatory point of departure for scholars considering other new venues for political engagement, from the artistic *salon* to the operatic *parterre*.[7] Art historians have underscored the importance of images, not just as passive reflections of broader trends but as active agents in the

[5] Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 1991). This appeared the previous year as *Les Origines Culturelles de la Révolution française* (Paris: Seuil 1990).

[6] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989). While the original version of this work appeared decades earlier in 1962, its full impact was not felt in Anglophone scholarship until the English translation was published.

[7] An excellent discussion of Habermas's theory and its influence may be found in T.C.W. Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture: Old Regime Europe 1660-1789* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), especially 5-25. Jeffrey Ravel's study of audiences at the Opéra is also highly indebted to "public-sphere" theory. See *The Contested Parterre: Public Theater and French Political Culture, 1680-1791* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999). For a more critical appraisal, see Joan B. Landes, *Visualizing the Nation: Gender, Representation, and Revolution in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001).

propagation of new social and political ideals. Mark Ledbury, for instance, has shown how developments in genre painting—notably, the processes of "idealization" (the projection of future hopes for society) and "desacralization" (the breakdown of traditional ways of depicting monarchical institutions)—served to criticize elite culture and reshape public perceptions of the *Nation* at the end of the *ancien régime*.[8]

The relation of the arts and national identity has also been a central question in studies of opera of the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries. Georgia Cowart and Robert Isherwood have underscored the clear association between the *tragédie en musique* and the monarch during the reign of Louis XIV, while Jane Fulcher has aptly shown how grand opera served as a symbol of the more abstract nation-state during the romantic period.[9] Yet the function of opera in the pivotal age of transition—as the once inviolable "l'état c'est moi" ceased to be an adequate representation of the nation—remains largely underdeveloped, as *opéra-comique,* one of the most successful theatrical genres of this period, has only rarely attracted the attention of musicologists. Throughout much of the twentieth century, scholarship on *opéra-comique* was predominantly limited to general histories of the Comédie-Italienne and the fair theaters, catalogues of archival holdings, and a few life-and-works style biographies of leading composers. If *opéra-comique* was granted a role beyond this limited framework, it was not a flattering one: as a frivolous stepping-stone on a teleological path towards German romantic opera, rather than an artistic entity worthy of study in its own right.[10] It is my intention neither

[8] See Mark Ledbury, "The Contested Image: Stage, Canvas, and the Origins of the French Revolution" in *The Origins of the French Revolution*, ed. Peter R. Campbell (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 191-218; and *Sedaine, Greuze and the Boundaries of Genre* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2000).
[9] See Georgia Cowart, *The Triumph of Pleasure: Louis XIV and the Politics of Spectacle* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Robert Isherwood, *Music in the Service of the King: France in the Seventeenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973); and Jane F. Fulcher, *The Nation's Image: French Grand Opera as Politics and Politicized Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
[10] A textbook case of this sort of assessment may be found in Edward J. Dent, *The Rise of Romantic Opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

to discount the substantial influence of French comic opera on Mozart, Beethoven, and Weber nor to rehabilitate a host of forgotten *opéras-comiques*. But there is much to be gained by considering the genre in its own place and time—as it shaped the course of the French operatic tradition, and as it functioned in its immediate social and political contexts.

My investigation of these issues will be indebted to the archival research of Elizabeth Bartlet[11] and the study of Grétry by David Charlton, the first large-scale monograph on the composer to appear in more than a century.[12] This scholarship has led to a resurgence of interest in *opéra-comique* over the past two decades, and has opened up the field to new and promising areas of study, including work on previously overlooked composers and librettists;[13] on the theoretical underpinnings of the comic genre;[14] on sets and staging;[15] and on the circulation of *opéra-comique* outside of France.[16] Music historians have also, crucially, begun to explore the evolution of *opéra-comique* as a genre in the final decades of the *ancien régime*. Of great interest is the new catalogue of the complete repertory of the Comédie-Italienne (later Opéra-Comique) between 1762 and 1927, published by David Charlton and Nicole Wild in 2005 with the express

[11] See M.E.C. Bartlet, *Etienne-Nicholas Méhul and Opera: Source and Archival Studies of Lyric Theatre During the French Revolution, Consulate and Empire*, 2 vols., (Heilbronn: Musik-Edition Lucie Galland, 1999) and "Archival Sources for the Opéra-Comique and its 'Registres' at the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra," *19th-Century Music* 7 (1983): 119-129.
[12] Charlton, *Grétry*. The last substantial study being Michel Brenet's *Grétry, sa vie et ses œuvres* (Paris, 1884).
[13] Of particular interest here is the recent collection of essays on Jean-Michel Sedaine: David Charlton and Mark Ledbury, eds., *Michel-Jean Sedaine (1719-1797): Theatre, Opera and Art* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000). We might also cite Ronald Lessens' *André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry ou Le Triomphe de l'Opéra-Comique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007), though this latter work does not break much new ground.
[14] Manuel Couvreur and Philippe Vendrix, "Les enjeux théoriques de l'Opéra-Comique" in *L'Opéra-Comique en France au XVIIIe siècle*, ed. Philippe Vendrix (Lièges: Mardaga, 1992), 213-282.
[15] Especially Raphaëlle LeGrand, "La scène et le public de l'Opéra-Comique de 1762 à 1789," in *L'Opéra-Comique en France au XVIIIe siècle*, ed. Philippe Vendrix (Lièges: Mardaga, 1992), 179-212.
[16] See Bruce Alan Brown, *Gluck and the French Theatre in Vienna* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); and Thomas Betzwieser, "Grétrys Richard Coeur de Lion in Deutschland: die Opéra-comique auf dem Weg zur 'Grossen Oper', in *Grétry et l'Europe de l'opéra-comique*, ed. Philippe Vendrix (Liège: Mardaga, 1992), 331-354.

purpose of furthering future research on trends in performance.[17] James Butler Kopp has examined the aesthetic and literary trends that contributed to *opéra-comique*'s rise, and Charlton discusses the development of the genre elsewhere in his work on Grétry.[18] The relation of these shifts to concurrent changes in the *tragédie lyrique*, however, and to the larger discussions of national opera, remains essentially unexplored. My dissertation will aim to enrich the perspective offered by previous scholarship in the field, shedding light on the ways in which the leading figures of the Comédie-Italienne influenced the debates on national style and unsettled the traditional hierarchy of the Parisian theaters. The works produced at the Comédie-Italienne at the end of the *ancien régime* had a tremendous impact on the development of opera in France during the revolutionary years and into the nineteenth century. Of the generation of composers that succeeded Gluck and Grétry, only Spontini was exclusively associated with the Opéra. The most prominent operatic composers in Paris, including Méhul, Cherubini, and Le Sueur, now composed mainly for popular theaters such as the Opéra-Comique or the recently founded Théâtre de Feydeau.[19] The musical and dramatic innovations of Grétry and his contemporaries, coupled with the strong anti-aristocratic currents developing in the years before the revolution, led to a near total dissolution of the stigma attached to the "popular" art of *opéra-comique* over the course of a turbulent three-decade period.

[17] Nicole Wild and David Charlton, *Théâtre de l'Opéra-Comique Paris: Répertoire 1762-1927* (Sprimont: Mardaga, 2005).
[18] James Butler Kopp, "The Drame-Lyrique: a Study in the Esthetics of Opéra-Comique, 1762-1791" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1982).
[19] The Feydeau opened in 1791 as a competitor to the Comédie-Italienne, but was merged with the latter company (now called the Opéra-Comique) in 1801. The premiere performance venues of the works of these composers may be found in Wild and Charlton, *Théâtre de l'Opéra-Comique Paris*. For a standard account of opera in France during the Revolution, Consulate, and Empire see Donald J. Grout and Hermine Weigel Williams, *A Short History of Opera*, 4th ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 335-348.

A number of different kinds of primary sources document the production and reception of *opéra-comique* in the late eighteenth century. First, my dissertation will draw extensively upon archival records detailing the administration of the Comédie-Italienne between 1762 and 1793. The most important of these sources is the set of record books, or *registres*, of the governing council of the theater, currently housed in the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra in Paris and available in microfilm copy at the Library of Congress in Washington DC.[20] The *registres* contain valuable information regarding the day-to-day organization of the Comédie-Italienne, detailing the programming of repertoire and salaries of the actors and also provide record of the attendance of the theater, listing box office receipts, subscribers to the boxes, and any exceptional conditions that might have had an impact on the success of a particular performance.[21] Since the theater received additional income from its royal patrons, further documentation of expenses may be found in the accounts of the royal household, now catalogued in the series *AJ*^{13} in the Archives Nationales, in Paris.[22] Bartlet's work on Méhul provides an indispensible introduction to the archival sources available for the study of *opéra-comique* and may serve as a general model of scholarship here. Much work remains, however, to expand the scope of this documentary study beyond the immediate areas of Bartlet's focus (the Revolution, Consulate, and Empire), as many volumes of records from earlier periods have been only cursorily examined. The information contained within the *registres* and the royal household accounts should provide an important

[20] For more immediate use, excerpts of these *registres* are reproduced in many of the early histories of the Comédie-Italienne. These include Emile Campardon, *Les comédiens du Roi de la troupe italienne pendant les deux derniers siècles: documents inédits recueillis aux Archives Nationales*, 2 vols. (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1880); Arthur Pougin, *L'Opéra-Comique pendant la Révolution de 1788-1801 d'après des documents inédits et les sources les plus authentiques* (Paris: Albert Savine, 1891); and Georges Cucuel, "Sources et documents pour servir à l'histoire de l'Opéra-Comique en France," *L'année musicale* 3 (1913) : 247-282. Daily performances, receipts, and attendance for the years between 1716 and 1793 are transcribed in Clarence D. Brenner, *The Theatre Italien: its repertory, 1716-1793* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961).

[21] Particular care is taken, for instance, to note when the king or queen is in attendance at a performance.

[22] An inventory of these holdings has been published by Brigitte Labat-Poussin, *Archives du Théâtre National de l'Opéra (AJ*^{13} *1 à 1466)* (Paris: Archives Nationales, 1977).

record of the tensions between the two national camps within the Comédie-Italienne and of the evolving tastes of their Parisian audiences.

Second, I will examine primary materials documenting the aesthetic aims of the producers of *opéra-comique,* as they strove to situate themselves within the broader musical and literary discourse of late *ancien-régime* Paris. Aesthetic statements by the composers and librettists of the Comédie-Italienne may be found in a variety of sources, including libretto prefaces (by Michel-Jean Sedaine[23] and Antoine-François Quétant,[24] among others), letters, and memoirs. Grétry, in particular, was a prolific writer, and I will make extensive reference to his collected correspondence[25] and theoretical writings, including the *Mémoirs, ou Essai sur la musique* (1789) and the *Réflexions d'un solitaire* (1801-1813), copies of which are in the collection of Yale's Beinecke library. I will also consult eighteenth-century encyclopedias, theatrical histories, and dramatic treatises, which frequently describe *opéra-comique* in comparison with other genres. Useful examples from the period in question include Chastellux's *Essai sur l'union de la poésie et de la musique* (1765); Garcin's *Traité du melo-drame* (1772); Mercier's *Du Théâtre, ou nouvel essai sur l'art dramatique* (1773); Rozoi's *Dissertation sur le drame lyrique* (1775); Apligny's *Traité sur la musique* (1779); and La Cépède's *La poëtique de la musique* (1785).[26] I will consider related documentation of the critical reception of *opéra-comique,* examining such periodicals as the *Journal de Paris*; the *Journal des sciences et beaux-arts;* the *Journal de littérature, des sciences et des arts*; the *Journal de musique*; the *Spectacles de Paris*; the *Correspondence littéraire*; and the *Mercure de France.*

[23] To *Rose et Colas* (1764) and *Le Magnifique* (1773).
[24] *Le Serrurier* (1765).
[25] G. de Froidcourt, ed., *La correspondance générale de Grétry* (Brussels: Brepols, 1962).
[26] I have access to all the sources I list here, either at the Beinecke, in reprint, or via inter-library loan. An excellent overview of the theoretical stakes of *opéra-comique* may be found in Couvreur and Vendrix, "Les enjeux théoriques de l'Opéra-Comique."

Finally, this study will draw extensively upon the libretti and musical scores of individual works. The libretti of *opéras-comiques* produced at the Comédie-Italienne enjoyed a wide circulation as literature and have a generally high rate of survival.[27] A printed libretto, however, might not always precisely reflect the spoken dialogue of a performance. Where they are extant, it will be beneficial to consult manuscript libretti—prepared by librettists as they submitted their works to the theater, or prepared for prompters to aid the actors in rehearsal—to obtain a more accurate view of texts as they were received by composers and as they were performed.[28] Because the Comédie-Italienne did not employ a copyist to produce scores for its performances,[29] the availability of manuscript scores of *opéras-comiques* varies according to the initiative of various composers. In the case of Grétry, a reasonable number of musical sources do survive. In addition to the considerable autograph holdings of the Musée Grétry de Liège and the Bibliothèque Royale Albert I^{er},[30] Grétry's output is preserved in several manuscript scores in the collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France; in early Houbaut prints (authorized by the composer);[31] in numerous aria collections published during his lifetime;[32] and in a complete works edition dating from the late nineteenth century.[33]

[27] The availability of libretti depends on both the success of the work in question and the site of its premiere. In keeping with court tradition, the libretto of an *opéra-comique* first staged at Versailles or Fontainebleau would be printed prior to performance. The libretto of a work first staged at the Comédie-Italienne, by contrast, would only be printed after the opera had achieved enough success to make the endeavor profitable. See Bartlet, *Méhul*, 59-60. These general rules were subject to some variation according to time period, librettist, and composer.

[28] These are held at the Archives Nationales in Paris. For further information on manuscript libretti, see Bartlet, *Méhul*, 74-82.

[29] Ibid., 86-87.

[30] The holdings of the Musée Grétry have unfortunately not been catalogued systematically. Other holdings are described in Yves Lenoir, *Documents Grétry dans les collections de la Bibliothèque royale Albert I^{er}* (Brussels: Bibliothèque Albert I^{er}, 1989) and Philippe Vendrix,"Manuscrits d'opéras et d'opéras-comiques: le cas Grétry," in *Chantiers révolutionnaires: science, musique, architecture*, ed. B. Didier and J. Neefs, 125-143 (Saint-Denis: Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 1992).

[31] The Beinecke library owns three of these Houbaut prints: *Le Magnifique* (1773), *La Rosière de Salenci* (1774), and *L'Épreuve villageoise* (1784*).* Other stateside exemplars are housed at Harvard University's Houghton Library and the Sibley Music Library at the Eastman School of Music.

Chapter Outlines

Introduction

The introduction will provide a brief overview of the origins of comic opera in Paris and will describe the current state of sources related to the early history of the genre. I will situate my own work within the contemporary secondary literature on *opéra-comique* and within the broader discourse on opera and nationalism. I will argue for the necessity of an approach that emphasizes both the formative role played by the comic genre in eighteenth-century discussions of national opera and the interaction between the Comédie-Italienne and the Opéra in the final decades of the *ancien régime*.

Chapter 1: La Nouvelle Troupe: Conflict within the Comédie-Italienne after 1762

This chapter will draw upon the rich archival resources documenting the administration of the Comédie-Italienne to illuminate the ways in which debates over national style were played out within the comic troupe after it absorbed five actors from the old fair theaters in February of 1762. Here, I will move beyond the traditional scholarly focus on the relatively abstract discourse of critics and composers to examine the practical, economic realities that influenced the development of *opéra-comique* during this transitional period. The administrative and programming decisions of the newly enlarged company—which was to present *vaudeville* productions and *opéras-comiques*, alongside spoken plays in Italian and French—were fiercely contested, reflecting emerging tensions between the theater's two national factions. I will also discuss the enduring impact of the *Querelle des Bouffons* on the musical style of works produced

[32] Again, the Beinecke owns such compilations from four Grétry operas, as part of a larger collection of aria sets.
[33] The Gilmore Music Library at Yale is fortunate to own a complete set of this edition, though the accuracy of these volumes can vary.

at the Comédie-Italienne in the first decade after the merger, as the older, French vaudeville was gradually discarded in favor of the more modern, Italianate ariette in the *opéras-comiques* of Grétry's predecessors, including Egidio Duni, Pierre-Alexandre Monsigny, and François-André Danican Philidor.

Chapter 2: Gluckistes, Piccinnistes, Monsignistes?: *Opéra-Comique* and the Parisian Pamphlet Wars of the 1770s

The arrival of Christoph Willibald Gluck in Paris in the fall of 1773 reignited the clamor over national styles of opera in the French capital. The stakes and terms of these debates—which pit partisans of Gluck against advocates of an imported Italian rival, Niccolò Piccinni—are less clear than those that governed the better known *Querelle des Bouffons* two decades earlier. Julian Rushton has aptly demonstrated the complexities of the quarrel, emphasizing that, contrary to any strict claims of partisanship, Gluck and Piccinni were both interested in synthesizing aspects of French and Italian music, albeit through different means.[34] The press war ignited by Gluck's Parisian *tragédies* often had more to do with nationalist sentiment, class politics, and the power struggles between theaters than with the actual musical content of the works under discussion. To limit study of the aesthetic debates of the 1770s to the Opéra, then, is to overlook a large part of this story. At a time when the Comédie-Italienne strove to assert itself against its rivals—and France "clamored for a national genre"[35]—the advent of Gluck and Piccinni in Paris had profound consequences for composers and librettists of *opéra-comique*.

[34] See Julian Rushton, "The Theory and Practice of Piccinisme," *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 98 (1971 – 1972): 31-46. Another useful discussion of the quarrel may be found in Patricia Howard, *Gluck: an Eighteenth-Century Portrait in Letters and Documents* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 164-174.
[35] See Barnabé Farmian de Rozoi, *Dissertation sur le drame lyrique* (La Haye and Paris: Duchesne, 1775), 27.

This chapter will focus on the ways in which supporters of the Comédie-Italienne were involved in the Gluck-Piccinni debates, exploring the interactions between theatrical companies, and, in turn, shedding light on the complex dynamics of social class and cultural politics at play in 1770s Paris. There was a greater degree of exchange between the various theatrical venues in the French capital than is generally acknowledged in the scholarly literature—key players in the controversies moved between the Opéra and the Comédie-Italienne, and crucially, the audiences of the two theaters frequently overlapped. Preliminary examination of documentary sources from this period (including literary and musical periodicals,[36] as well as the correspondence of leading composers and librettists) reveals both fluid boundaries between the serious and the popular genres, and intense competition between their proponents. Gluck, of course, had established himself prior to the well-known reform operas as a composer of *opéra-comique* in Vienna, setting librettos imported from France.[37] Moreover, the chief advocate of the Italian faction in the press, Jean-François Marmontel, was not only a keen supporter of Piccinni at the Opéra but also the leading librettist of the Comédie-Italienne. Marmontel's aggressive attacks against Gluck's *tragédies* were no doubt at least partially motivated by the desire to prop up the Italian theater against its more prestigious adversary. The existing scholarship on Gluck's Parisian works essentially ignores the contemporary influence of the Comédie-Italienne. The divide between the Opéra and its popular competitor was more symbolic and political than it was stylistic; a thorough examination of the Parisian theatrical scene of the 1770s must account for the interactions between these two operatic venues.

[36] Including the *Journal des sciences et beaux-arts*, the *Journal de littérature, des sciences et des arts*, the *Journal de musique*, and the *Mercure de France*. Several of the most well known pamphlets of the quarrel are compiled in François Lesure, ed., *Querelle des Gluckistes et des Piccinnistes: textes des pamphlets avec introduction, commentaires et index par François Lesure* (Geneva: Minkoff Reprints, 1984).
[37] This important stage in Gluck's career is fastidiously documented in Brown, *French Theatre.*

Composers working for the Comédie-Italienne during this period were also vocal in their disapproval of the simplistic binary terms of the Gluck-Piccinni debates. Grétry, in particular, seems to have felt slighted at being overlooked in the controversy. He condemned the state of affairs in the months following the premiere of Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* in a letter to his former teacher, Giovanni Battista Martini:

> The friends of Glouk [sic] claim that Piccinni is washed up and that he writes nothing but reminiscences of *la bonne fille*. The friends of Piccinni claim that Glouck [sic] is a harsh barbarian with bad taste, who knows his harmony well enough but still knows nothing about singing. A third party believes that the first two parties are correct.[38]

Grétry's reference to a 'third party' in the quarrel was not an isolated observation. Several critics expressed similar concerns, displaying palpable discomfort that neither of the composers involved in the heated debate over the future of French music was actually French. A popular opinion, it seems, was that composers long associated with *opéra-comique*, such as Monsigny, Philidor, and Grétry, might be more appropriate ambassadors of an emerging national style.

Chapter 3: Vaudeville Parodies of Gluck and Piccinni at the Comédie-Italienne

The next, related chapter will move beyond the rhetoric of the critical debates to explore the tangible musical evidence of interaction between the Opéra and the Comédie-Italienne in the midst of the quarrel. Of particular interest are the vaudeville parodies of operas by Gluck and Piccinni that appeared to general acclaim at the Comédie-Italienne in the late 1770s. These works include *La Bonne femme ou la Phénix*,[39] a satire of Gluck's *Alceste*, which premiered on 7

[38] "Les amis de Glouk disent que Piccini est usé et qu'il ne fait plus que des réminiscences de *la bonne fille*. Les amis de Piccinni disent que Glouck est un barbare toujours dur et de mauvais goût, qui connait assez bien l'harmonie mais qui ne sait jamais chanter. Un troisième parti dit que les deux premiers ont raison" (my translation). André- Ernest-Modeste Grétry, Letter of 1 October 1779, in *La Correspondance Générale de Grétry*, ed. Georges de Froidcourt (Brussels: Éditions Brepols, 1962), 104.

[39] Libretto by Pierre-Yvon Barré, Pierre-Antoine-Augustin de Piis, Jean-Baptiste-Denis Désprés and Louis-Pierre-Pantaléon Resnier. Vaudevilles arranged by Jean-Baptiste Moulinghen.

July 1776; *Le Rage d'amour*,[40] a send-up of Piccinni's *Roland*, dating from 19 March 1778; and *Les Rêveries renouvelées des Grecs*,[41] a mixed parody of Gluck's two *Iphigénie* tragedies, first staged on 26 June 1779 and periodically revived until the revolution.[42] (I will likely narrow my focus to a single of these works, but my decision will depend on the quality of the source materials for each, which I have not yet been fully able to determine). On the one hand, these parodies poked fun at their more esteemed models in the decidedly lowbrow musical language of the vaudeville, with satirical verse set to pre-existent tunes from the repertory of the *opéra-comique*. But, tellingly, the humor of these works also depended upon a spectator's detailed familiarity with the tragedies being satirized. The demands placed upon the audiences of these parodies—sophisticated knowledge of both the timbres drawn from *opéras-comiques* and the musical numbers, plots, and reputations of the works on offer at the Opéra—imply a high degree of mobility among theater-goers. These intersections between the serious and comic reflect important shifts in the traditional hierarchies of Paris's operatic institutions and may even signal the beginnings of a dissolution of the accepted associations between operatic genres and the social classes of their intended audiences.

This chapter may also briefly address *opéras-comiques* that satirize the general conventions of competing genres, rather than specific works. Chief among these are Grétry's *Le Jugement de Midas* (1778) and *Les Évenémens imprévus* (1779), which appeared at the height of the Gluck-Piccinni controversies and which offer harsh critiques of *tragédie lyrique* and *opera*

[40] Libretto by Dorvigny, music in vaudevilles.
[41] Libretto by Charles-Simon Favart, Claude-Henri Fusée de Voisenon et Jean-Nicolas Guérin de Frémicourt. Music in vaudevilles, with additional accompaniment by Félix-Jean Prot.
[42] Bruce Alan Brown has analyzed a manuscript copy of this latter parody currently housed at the University of California, Berkeley. See Brown, "Les Rêveries renouvelées des Grecs: Facture, function and performance practice in a vaudeville parody of Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* (1779)," in *Timbre und Vaudeville: zur Geschichte und Problematik einer populären Gattung im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert*, ed. Herbert Schneider (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1999), 306-343.

buffa, respectively.[43] These works serve as persuasive evidence of the "third-party" role played by the comic genre in the Parisian operatic scene of the 1770s, as composers of the Comédie-Italienne aimed to insert themselves into the critical debates surrounding the more elite theaters.

Chapter 4: 'Tragédie, moins favorable pour la musique que le comique'

In the same decades in which proponents of *opéra-comique* were arguing for a stake in the critical dialogue that surrounded the more prestigious *tragédie lyrique*, the composers, librettists, and administrators of the Comédie-Italienne were also actively working to elevate the musical and poetic content of their genre to better compete with the productions staged at the Opéra. The fourth and fifth chapters of my dissertation will examine the specific ways in which Grétry attempted to align his work with the French operatic tradition, as exemplified by two of his most popular works. I will first discuss the fairy-tale opera *Zémire et Azor* (1771), before turning to the chivalric *Richard Coeur-de-Lion* (1784) in my final chapter.

Zémire et Azor, on a libretto by Marmontel, was staged for the royal wedding of the Dauphin, Louis-Auguste, and Marie Antoinette at Fontainebleau on 9 November 1771; a premiere at the Comédie-Italienne followed three weeks later on 16 December 1771. *Zémire et Azor* quickly established itself as one of Grétry's most popular operas. By the turn of the century, it had been performed 271 times and had reached Vienna (Mozart owned a copy of the score), London, Moscow, and Philadelphia.[44] While the magical plot of *Zémire et Azor*, based on a fashionable retelling of the Beauty and the Beast story by J.M. le Prince de Beaumont, was typical of recent *opéras-comiques*,[45] Grétry's work challenged the conventions of the Comédie-

[43] Again, I will likely need to limit myself to one of these works, once I am able to assess the state of the sources for each.
[44] See Charlton, *Grétry*, 98-108. Performance statistics at the Comédie-Italienne can be confirmed in Brenner.
[45] Notably, Favart and Duni's *La Fée Urgèle* (1765).

Italienne's customary fare on a number of fronts. With four acts, it is long for an *opéra-comique*, and its ensemble and dance passages are unusually prominent and extended. Most importantly, *Zémire et Azor* is, with a single exception,[46] the only opera in the Comédie-Italienne's repertory to bear the generic description "comédie-ballet," a label that carried rich associations dating back to the collaboration of Lully and Molière in the seventeenth century and that undoubtedly reflected the ceremonial nature of the work's premiere. The first section of this chapter will draw upon primary source materials (including scenic designs, letters, expense books of the royal household and periodical accounts) to demonstrate how the specific circumstances of the royal wedding incited Grétry and Marmontel to create a comic opera of unprecedented spectacle and grandeur, broadening the scope of the kinds of works that might be associated with the Comédie-Italienne in the future. I will also consider how Grétry and Marmontel exploited the comédie-ballet label, and the emphasis on dance, to position *Zémire et Azor* within a refined, and distinctly French, tradition. By evoking Lully's *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* and Rameau's *Platée*, Grétry and Marmontel coopted France's noble operatic past, and the esteemed comedic writing of Molière, to increase the status of their own work.

The second portion of this chapter will consider Grétry's theoretical writings, in which the composer defends comedy as a legitimate and respectable theatrical art. In his memoirs, which function more as an extended exposition of his own aesthetic ideals than as a true autobiography, Grétry argues that comedy is better suited to musical setting than tragedy because it allows for a greater variety of characters from different social classes, and consequently, a greater range of high and low musical forms. Tragedy, by contrast, may only depict noble

[46] The single exception being a little known work entitled *La Matrone chinoise ou L'Épreuve ridicule*, with poetry by Pierre-René Lemonnier set to anonymous music. The opera had just two performances at the Hôtel de Bourgogne after its premiere on 2 January 1765.

characters and is thus unnaturally restricted in its serious musical language.[47] My analysis of the music of *Zémire et Azor* will demonstrate how Grétry uses a wide range of musical styles and formal types to depict characters of differing social ranks, creating a work to showcase his theoretical argument on the strengths of the comic genre. I will also examine, however, the rare moments in which Grétry departs from his own theoretical model—allowing lower-class characters to sing in elevated musical styles. Intriguingly, though the merchant-class Zémire and her prince Azor are clearly of distinct social status, they are bound by their purity of character and, ultimately, by their similarly complex music. Here, Grétry's musical emphasis on a hierarchy of character over a hierarchy of class has subtly subversive undercurrents. The multivalent potential of *Zémire et Azor* likely enabled it to fulfill two separate functions for two distinct audiences: as impressive court spectacle for Marie Antoinette at Fontainebleau, and as trenchant social commentary for a restless bourgeois public in Paris.[48]

Chapter 5: Enlightenment Medievalism and *Richard Cœur-de-Lion*

In addition to his efforts to legitimize the comic genre, Grétry was also a key player in a movement to stage increasingly serious works at the Comédie-Italienne in the decades before the revolution. This chapter will explore the vogue for medieval subjects in *opéra-comique* in the 1770s and 1780s and will demonstrate how composers at the Comédie-Italienne used the *chevaleresque* to appeal to nationalist sensibilities and to challenge the supremacy of the Opéra.[49] In *Richard Coeur-de-Lion*, Grétry and his librettist Michel-Jean Sedaine adapted the

[47] Grétry, *Mémoires ou Essai sur la Musique* (Paris: Prault, 1789), 135.
[48] This would seem to create another interesting, though inadvertent, parallel with the work of Lully and Molière. As Cowart has shown, *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* was likely written to be interpreted differently for its distinct courtly and public audiences. See Cowart, *Triumph of Pleasure*, 84-119.
[49] Roland Mortier describes the literary vogue for the *chevaleresque*, contending that it was fueled in part by patriotic fervor in the wake of the Seven Years' War, in "Aspects du rêve chevaleresque, de La Curne de

tale of Richard I, his imprisonment in Austria, and his ultimate rescue by the courageous Blondel. I will show how the chivalric myth—and Grétry's emphasis on "musique à l'ancienne"— played into contemporary disputes over France's literary past and over the appropriate subject matter for popular opera.

During this period, critics of *opéra-comique* contended that it would be inappropriate to stage historical works at the Comédie-Italienne. That is, it would be indecent for the noble figures of history to declaim in the popular tones of the comic genre—an act akin to singing "l'histoire en madrigaux."[50] This accusation was meant to be doubly insulting. The musical language of *opéra-comique*, these critics implied, was not only too frivolous, but also too Italian to be suited to the serious matter of relating the history of the nation. *Richard Coeur-de-Lion,* Grétry's most popular opera of the 1780s,[51] may be interpreted as a forceful response to the charge of the "histoire en madrigaux." Here, Grétry and Sedaine attempted to translate the recent craze for historicism to *opéra-comique* and to distance the genre from its traditional associations with the Italian style.

A central figure in the Richard Coeur-de-Lion tale was the trouvère Blondel de Nesle (c. 1180-1200), a detail that, however tenuously based in fact, gave Grétry the license to draw inspiration from music of the French medieval period. In so doing, the composer aligned himself

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Sainte-Palaye à Mme de Staël" in *Le Coeur et la Raison: Recueil d'études sur le dix-huitième siècle* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1990), 469-491. Other *opéras-comiques* to take advantage of this trend include *Aucassin et Nicolette* (1779) of Grétry and Sedaine, and *Rosanie* (1780) with libretto by A.D.M. de Vismes and music by Henri-Joseph Rigel. See Charlton, *Grétry*, 230.

[50] For instance, the librettist Rozoi defends *opéra-comique* against this charge in his *Dissertation sur le drame-lyrique* of 1775. Staunch Gluckiste Jean-Baptiste Suard, writing under the pseudonym 'L'anonyme de Vaugirard', discusses it again in the *Journal de Paris* in October of 1777. The attitude of these two particular authors towards the 'histoire en madrigaux' strongly suggests that the issue was a commonly debated one.

[51] The work was performed, in various versions, at the Comédie-Italienne an impressive 126 times in the first five years after its premiere. Interpretation of the work as sympathetic to royalist causes led it to be banished from the stage in 1791, as David Charlton has noted. Charlton provides an excellent overview of the music of the opera and its early reception in Charlton, *Grétry*, 226-251.

with the "French" side of yet another nationally tinged debate over the country's artistic and literary heritage in the early 1780s. In the so-called "querelle des trouvères et troubadours," Parisian critics insisted that the works of the northern and "French" trouvères, which were just beginning to be canonized as the foundations of the French poetic tradition, were far superior to those of the southern, and thus Italianate, troubadours.[52] I will describe the function of the most famous number in Grétry's opera—Blondel's recurring romance "Une fièvre brûlante"—within this highly charged context. The composer took great pride in having created a trouvère song strictly based on archaic models,[53] a gesture that must have been calculated to elicit national sentiment and, in turn, to elevate the status of the fledgling genre in which Grétry worked.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this dissertation will serve as an epilogue, tracing the impact of the developments in production and reception of pre-revolutionary *opéra-comique* into the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This will involve the examination of one or more of several potential issues. First, I may address the spread of *opéra-comique* outside of France during this period. Grétry's operas, in particular, were extraordinarily popular in Austria, Germany, Italy, and England,[54] and their status as France's chief operatic export likely necessitated a critical reappraisal of *opéra-comique* relative to the larger body of French operatic repertory. In effect, as *opéra-comique* enjoyed such spectacular success abroad, the genre might

[52] This debate is described in John Haines, Eight *Centuries of Troubadours and Trouvères: The Changing Identity of Medieval Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 95-97. See also Geoffrey Wilson, *A Medievalist in the Eighteenth Century: Le Grand d'Aussy and the Fabliaux ou Contes* (Martinus Nijhoff: The Hague, 1975), 12-15.
[53] Charlton, *Grétry*, 237-240.
[54] For information on the reception of opéra-comique outside of France in the eighteenth century, see Bruce Alan Brown, "La diffusion et l'influence de l'opéra-comique en Europe au XVIII^{e} siècle" in Vendrix, ed., *Opéra Comique*, 283-343; and Thomas Betzwieser, "Richard Coeur de Lion."

usefully be exploited as evidence of France's continued artistic importance, and it needed to be reclaimed as part of the national patrimony. I may also consider the impact of Grétry and his colleagues on the succeeding generation of composers in France. The leading figures of national opera during the revolution, especially Méhul and Cherubini, composed mainly for the popular theaters, as any negative stigma associated with art for the *peuple* dissipated in the democratic fervor of the 1790s. Moreover, the traditional topical and generic distinctions between works of the serious and comic theaters—with the exception of the continued split between recitative and spoken dialogue—all but disintegrated as a result of the musical innovations introduced by composers of *opéra-comique*. Finally, I may turn to the influence of Germanic instrumental music in Paris at the end of the eighteenth century. Preliminary research suggests that, throughout the 1780s, composers of *opéra-comique* grew increasingly interested in Haydn's symphonies and began to theorize ways in which his music might be used as a model in the future development of operatic style.[55] Ironically, a contentious chapter in the history of the French-Italian debates seems to have drawn to a close as the operatic composers of France turned away from their traditional Italian rivals and began to position themselves against, and draw inspiration from, an emerging, Germanic adversary.

[55] Grétry, in particular, seems to have held Haydn in the highest regard—placing him above his idols Gluck and Pergolesi as a primary stylistic influence in the *Mémoires*, see for example, pp. 414-416.

Musical Works List (Provisional)

Favart, Charles-Simon, Claude-Henri Fusée de Voisenon, and Jean-Nicolas Guérin de Frémicourt: *Les Rêveries renouvelées des Grecs* (1779)

Grétry: *Zémire et Azor* (1771)

LeJjugement de Midas (1778)

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