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Downing A. Thomas

Excerpt

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## Introduction

“Thus true philosophers go about their lives trying not to be taken in by what they see and attempting to guess at that which they cannot see . . . On this topic, I always imagine nature as a grand spectacle which resembles the opera. From where you are seated at the opera you do not see the stage exactly as it is: the decor and the machinery have been set up in order to produce a nice effect when seen from afar; and the pulleys and counterweights that produce all the scene changes have been shielded from view . . . But what complicates things for philosophers is that the cogs of the machines that nature presents to us are perfectly hidden.”

Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle<sup>1</sup>

Fontenelle’s image of opera as a world and the world as opera serves as an inviting and appropriate opening to this study, given the culture in which early-modern French opera developed and flourished. First of all, there is the flirtatious setting, not unlike that of the eighteenth-century opera house, in which the marquise and her male interlocutor stroll beneath the evening sky as they discuss the universe which spreads out before them. The image aestheticizes the natural world, transforming it into a grand spectacle which is available for our contemplation and admiration, though

not always for our close scrutiny. At the same time it urges us to consider the opera as a form of spectacle resulting from mechanisms existing behind or beyond that stage – a figure for the natural forces that ebb and flow beyond human control and even sometimes beyond perception, and of the possible connections between that world and the realm of the spectator’s thoughts, desires, and passions. Within the context of the dialogues that make up the *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes*, opera serves as an apt metaphor for nature and for the power it wields across the boundaries that separate (and join) the natural and the human worlds.

The thematics of loss and recovery that shaped the very first operas derive their impact from the foundational quality, within early-modern

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culture, of these boundaries and connections. Loss and recovery figure prominently in the plots of many early operas; and, as a meta-narrative, they reflect the widespread conviction at the time that opera had reclaimed from antiquity a lost mode of representation. Alessandro Striggio's and Claudio Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, for example, places the story of Orpheus and Euridice within a self-reflexive frame, staging the renaissance and apotheosis of *la musica* as part and parcel of the presentation of their *favola in musica* and, by extension, of the emergence of the form itself around 1600. Euridice, bitten by a snake, is first lost to Hades, then brought back by Orpheus, whose voice has the power to move Proserpine to solicit her release. No sooner has she been liberated than Euridice disappears once more when Orpheus attempts to catch a glimpse of her as they return to the world of the living. With Apollo's intervention, however, Euridice does return, but only as a figure – a substitute for the original – in the sky. In the end, Orpheus can once again sing to Euridice who has been transfigured, transported to the heavens. *Orfeo* thus reflects upon its own coming-into-being as marking a dramatic and musical renaissance through the story of Euridice's passage from the underworld and of her transformation: like opera itself, Euridice is lost, then reborn. Moreover, music is presented as a form of mourning and as a “magical” commemoration, since it brings about the rebirth of this story and by extension that of a particular kind of dramatic representation, previously known only to ancient Greece. Music is shown to exert a special force over inanimate objects, and over mortal and immortal beings; and Striggio's story and Monteverdi's music have the power to evoke Euridice's presence once again just as they re-animate a lost form. If Fontenelle set nature in relation to the human through the image of a grand spectacle, similarly *Orfeo* articulated a connection between the human realm and the world beyond that realm through the powers of *favola in musica*. The issues of loss and of power and powerlessness, and the musico-dramatic articulation of human feeling and cosmic forces, structure not only those operas based on the Orpheus myth such as Francesco Buti's and Luigi Rossi's *Orfeo* (1647) – among the first operas performed in France, to be discussed in chapter 1 – but also Jean-Baptiste Lully's foundational

*tragédies en musique*, many of the stage works that took Lully's creations as models, and the eighteenth-century operatic works that otherwise self-consciously set themselves apart from that tradition.

Complex links between opera and power, or powerlessness, were discerned by early-modern spectators and commentators, and represented or enacted on stage in performance. Early opera depicted natural, political, and human forces on stage; it was understood to exert a powerful influence on the listener-spectator; and its musical, textual, and theatrical dimensions represented and enacted relationships between gods and mortals, kings and subjects, and individuals and social groups. Much of opera's identity in this respect can be understood to derive from the particular virtues that were associated with the singing voice. The *seconda pratica* of the opera composers and their predecessors was intended to foreground the words uttered by the voice and to restore ancient Greek forms and the values associated with them. Though late Renaissance theorists such as Girolamo Mei and Vincenzo Galilei argued that the music of ancient tragedy was exclusively monodic, and based their sense of the power of ancient music on this assumption, the emphasis placed on the singular line of the voice carried over into discussions of opera. Furthermore, the Florentine Camarata's formal innovations, and in particular the notion of *recitar cantando*, were understood to constitute in some measure a resuscitation of ancient practices. For the very reason that the first operas adopted loss and recovery as the basis for the stories they told, they also gave the impression that they constituted a revival of ancient drama and therefore possessed a certain power over loss. Renaissance theorists had recreated or recovered a lost form; and they hoped to regain the magical power of this lost form. Later, in the very different cultural context of the French eighteenth century, the fascination with aboriginal speech as undifferentiated voice tended to frame opera as a phantasmatic version of an original human lyricism. In both instances, opera was associated with the origins of humanity and of human expression. Because early opera is in this sense about the invention or recovery of an imaginary object, its performance is also touched by this recovery and by its presumed fundamental or primordial calling.

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If opera deals with the loss of objects and the phantasmatic erasure of that loss, it also necessarily invokes at some level a loss on the part of the spectator, notably a loss of self – a moment in which the spectator is made to lose his or her usual bearings, is moved, troubled, estranged, or exposed.<sup>2</sup> At once derived from its Italian predecessors and native to French soil, the *tragédie en musique* carried with it many of these meanings and functions as it evolved in the particular cultural climate of late seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century France. By taking early French opera as my focus, I hope to elucidate the historical and cultural specificity of these circumstances at a time when a unified “Europe” did not truly exist as such and when individual national traditions were being defined in relation to and against each other.

My study, a cultural history of French opera up to the Revolution, rests on two basic assumptions. First, that individual operas not only display traces of the aesthetic and ideological circumstances of their creation, but that they also engage productively in those circumstances. Second, that opera came to serve as a touchstone in the eighteenth century for understanding the mechanisms behind human feeling and for reflecting upon how emotion impacts social relations. Because opera found itself out of sync within the aesthetic discourses of early-modern France, a number of incongruities resulted, both ideological and aesthetic. At its inception, *tragédie en musique* served to showcase the glory of the monarch; yet at the same time, as individual operas, it often tends to undermine the supposed self-sufficiency and integrity of the hero and of his theatrical genre (tragedy). In so doing, opera reveals problems inherent in the representation of the king on the lyric stage. Another disparity involves the relationship of music to words. Though libretti clearly must remain central to any consideration of opera, music nonetheless comes to be foregrounded to an unprecedented degree in a genre that was initially centered on the absolute primacy of the word. One could say that *tragédie en musique*, as tragedy in music, was reshaped in profound ways through the very process in which it emerged and developed in France through the eighteenth century. Opera in general and individual works in particular

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functioned as lightning rods for the heated debate on music and shaped that debate in important ways. Insofar as opera gave increasing attention to feeling, it prompted discussion and reconsideration of French culture's foremost values, insofar as they were embodied in the theater.

If I had to identify the fault line or epicenter of this project, it would be the abbé Jean Terrasson's prescient claim, made in 1715, that the dramatic elements of opera functioned as backdrop for the presentation of music. Terrasson asserted, contrary to all accepted views of opera at the time, that the music, which was understood at the time as entirely secondary to the moral framework of the art, was its central feature. This remarkable assertion signals a significant change. In proposing to examine French opera and reflections on opera from 1647 to 1785, I will give attention to the ways in which individual works can be understood to participate in a shift in the status of opera within French culture, from an uneasy absolutist vehicle and foil to spoken tragedy in the late seventeenth century, to a spectacle that had turned away from the moral aims of tragedy to embrace new concerns with sensibility and feeling. Whereas recent scholarship has examined the larger cultural and political significance of later opera in France, these dimensions of the earlier periods remain underexplored.<sup>3</sup> In a rich, exceptionally useful and well-documented study, Catherine Kintzler has reconstructed the literary foundations – the “poetics” – that sustained early French opera.<sup>4</sup> Kintzler's study is based on the hypothesis that opera in France from the 1670s through the mid-eighteenth century is a product of the neoclassical aesthetic (“*l'esthétique classique*”) which shaped the works of dramatists such as Pierre Corneille; and her arguments are admirably and exhaustively made.<sup>5</sup> However, in part because the object of her study is to reconstruct with full historical hindsight a poetics of opera which was never fully articulated at the time, Kintzler does not sufficiently address the many ways in which the operatic works themselves take their distance from the values that are embedded in those literary foundations.

Other scholars have sought to link opera to the rise of aesthetics in the eighteenth century. Peter Kivy, for example, has argued that

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eighteenth-century opera was shaped by a conflict between purely musical concerns and the contemporaneous urge to understand theater as a representation, as mimetic.<sup>6</sup> Up to a certain point, my argument runs parallel to that of Kivy; for I see the emergent aesthetics of the eighteenth century as a rich ground for understanding the contemporaneous musical culture. In ways similar to Kivy, taking a certain distance from Kintzler's approach, I argue that opera is non-coincident with the poetic models with which contemporary commentators sought to explain it; yet, differing in this respect from Kivy, I do not claim that music is entirely incompatible with them. Instead of looking at the rise of instrumental music as evidence of a radical shift to a non-mimetic theory of the arts, I propose to examine the development of opera as coincidental with, even implicated in, the development of an aesthetic discourse that is, on the contrary, thoroughly invested in a certain understanding of mimesis. My larger claim, then, is that the urge to see opera as upholding literary and moral values was increasingly undermined by the fact that these meanings were often framed as secondary (as Terrasson argued), or bypassed, ignored, or consumed by the music. It is not that music somehow moves "beyond" narrative, linguistic, or moral frames, or is always in opposition to them; but rather that in opera music puts a particular spin on those structures and values, alters, or transforms them. By examining a handful of significant seventeenth- and eighteenth-century operatic works, in tandem with the theoretical, political, cultural, and aesthetic contexts of their creation, I propose a brief cultural history of opera in early-modern France constructed through specific flashpoints and issues explored in detail rather than through a comprehensive survey. My study therefore combines close readings of specific operas, circumstantial writings and theoretical works on theater and opera, together with a measure of reception history. Where the documentation was available, and where they were pertinent to my arguments, I have also discussed variants in order to be able to understand the ways in which works were adapted to new circumstances and how audiences reacted to the changes. Given that complete recordings of many operas of this period have only recently become available, it is

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an apt time to consider in more depth the ways in which they fit into their historical and cultural contexts.

The first part examines French opera in the shadow of seventeenth-century spoken tragedy – identified at the time as unparalleled, the pinnacle of theatrical history – and of the dramatic theory that underlay tragedy. I trace the development of opera from its earliest days in France to 1733 in order to reveal the ways in which the new genre transformed conceptions of tragedy and of its effects on the spectator. The first chapter outlines the emergence of opera in seventeenth-century France and the issues that it raised for spectators and commentators. From its beginnings in the early 1670s with the works of Jean-Baptiste Lully and Philippe Quinault, French opera (termed *tragédie en musique*) was modeled on contemporary spoken tragedy. The literary credentials that this model provided, however, worked both in favor of *tragédie en musique* and against it. Some sensed the mythical presence of ancient Greek theater in opera; yet, because it incorporated the supposedly vacuous pleasures of music and spectacle, opera was also attacked as a moral danger and as having precipitated the demise of tragedy. In chapter 1, through an analysis of Buti's and Rossi's *Orfeo*, I return to the inaugural moment of opera in France to examine the ways in which the Italian import tested the limits of contemporary aesthetic assumptions from its very first appearance on French soil. I analyze the ways in which *Orfeo* frames song as performance not only by examining the important difference between speech and song, but also by revealing how the opera problematizes the distinction between story and performance – a distinction that was crucial to seventeenth-century views of tragedy, such as those of the influential abbé d'Aubignac, and which was designed to erect a firewall between the moral values conveyed by the story and the questionable pleasures of the spectacle. At a time when music was understood to be secondary to the mimetic and moral concerns of theater, opera tended to dismantle the distinction between music as diegetic (story-telling) and music as extradiegetic (decoration, arabesque). The first theorist to recognize and embrace this tendency in opera was the abbé Terrasson. Pointing away from the

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usual concerns with opera as a form of tragedy, Terrasson questioned the traditional hierarchy of genres, thereby revealing their ultimate relativity, and drew attention to the music and the spectacle that provided enjoyment for all kinds of spectators.

Chapter 2 explores the political dimensions of early French opera by examining the strategies developed by Louis XIV's ministers to represent the king through allegory. After reviewing the various ways in which the king was represented allegorically (as Apollo, for example, or as a Roman hero), I examine the opera prologue as a representation of the king. Given the difficulties that Louis XIV's advisors saw in other forms of representation (architectural monuments, painting, history, epic), the explicit references to and praise of the king in the opera prologue can be understood as fulfilling a political need by portraying him to the court and to the nation. The mythical relationship between opera and the Greek models it supposedly embodied, and the political image of the monarch as consummate ruler, go hand in hand. Yet, when one moves beyond the prologue into the body of the opera, a noticeable gap appears between the unsurpassed hero depicted in the prologue and the dubious heroic figures represented in the opera. This gap, I argue, is indicative of the precarious position that opera occupied in early-modern French culture.

Each of the three subsequent chapters of this section focuses on individual operas in order to explore the ways in which particular composers and librettists engaged, through their works, the cultural meanings and aesthetic debates surrounding opera. Early French opera placed more emphasis on spectacle than any other dramatic idiom of the time. This emphasis was criticized as appealing exclusively to the senses, drawing spectators away from the attention spoken theater gave to catharsis and moral redemption. In Quinault's and Lully's *Armide* (1686), the focus of chapter 3, we witness an effort to define early French *tragédie en musique* as a viable alternative to its spoken counterpart. A detailed reading suggests that by directing attention away from the hero, Renaud, and toward the music and its ability to evoke Armide's passion, librettist and composer sought to carve out a distinct space for opera within the literary culture of late seventeenth-century France.



By focusing attention on the sublime effects of music and the voice, *Armide* put into question the critical standards by which opera was judged at the same time that it suggested how opera might live up to its name as tragedy.

If *Armide* can be understood as an attempt to reinstate opera as a viable parallel to spoken theater, Thomas Corneille's and Marc-Antoine Charpentier's *Médée* (1693) blatantly embodied the foreignness of the lyric theater in relation to seventeenth-century tragedy. Chapter 4 centers on this work which highlights the gap separating tragedy and *tragédie en musique* while at the same time framing the conflictual relationship between French *tragédie en musique* in the Lullian model and Italian musical influences, whether real or perceived. Charpentier emphasized this second conflict by making the music Medea sings alien to the French vocal tradition. By producing a discrepancy within the musical fabric itself through his use of dissonance and by opposing the French and Italian styles, Charpentier's compositional practice rehearses an aesthetic departure in which opera would no longer be merely tragedy set to music. Charpentier frames the musical voice of Medea as excessive, even for opera, as a series of utterances that undermine any possible reconciliation between opera and spoken tragedy. I argue that *Médée* presents and embodies this conflict through the way in which Medea's voice is treated in a field of other incongruous and irreconcilable musical utterances.

Chapter 5, the final chapter of the first part, focuses on *Hippolyte et Aricie* (1733) by the abbé Simon Joseph Pellegrin and Jean-Philippe Rameau. Seen as an audacious rewriting of Jean Racine's by-then canonical tragedy, *Phèdre* (1677), *Hippolyte et Aricie* pushes opera's relation to so-called "regular" tragedy even further than the two previously examined works. As Rameau's first opera, *Hippolyte et Aricie* can be read as a response to Racine and a commentary on the situation of the lyric theater after Racine, framing opera as the ruin or reincarnation of a moribund genre. I argue that Rameau's work could only succeed by simultaneously embodying and erasing *Phèdre*. In his commentaries on *Hippolyte et Aricie*, Rameau described the effects he sought to provoke in the listener-spectator by using particularly unusual musical resources

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(such as the enharmonic genre). By proposing “horror” instead of “terror” – two highly coded words in early-modern poetic theory – Rameau forced the issue of the spectator’s physical presence in a way music had never explicitly done before in opera, moving away from the Aristotelian framework of catharsis that defined the purpose of tragedy. In this way, *Hippolyte et Aricie* can be seen as fulfilling Terrasson’s visionary remarks. Opera, it turned out, was not tragedy in music at all, but rather a new genre based on a new aesthetic whose foundation was music.

As the cultural issues surrounding opera shifted during the course of the eighteenth century, the question of opera’s relationship to the spoken genres came to be seen in a substantially different light, illuminated by questions that were central to the *philosophes* and their contemporaries. In contrast with the first part of this book, though it does include analyses of individual operas, the second part explores the operatic work often indirectly through writings as diverse as theories of musical affect, architectural projects, and the operatic fantasies of a naturalist. Here, I will examine opera as a barometer of Enlightenment by exploring the interface between the culture of opera in the eighteenth century and the then burning question of the existence of a common moral fabric of humanity. If music was at the center of operatic experience (as many argued, following Terrasson’s lead), and if music had at best questionable mimetic capabilities (one of the key objections of opera’s detractors all along, mimesis being the traditional moral measure of artistic value), on what moral compass could opera rely? Taking enduring notions of music’s relationship to forms of passion and ecstasy as points of departure, chapter 6 reinterprets the question of mimesis by arguing that longstanding beliefs in the magical powers of music were transformed in the early eighteenth century by a newly formed sensationist discourse. In the view of many commentators of the period, the common ground of operatic representation was not merely the *muthos*, or story, that it conveyed; more importantly, what was shared in the lyric theater was the experience of being touched or “transported” by music, which, as I argue, may be understood as a form of mimesis. Whereas Renaissance theoreticians believed that music had occult properties