PART I

Princely theatre

1 | Palaces and patronage: *Le Devin* and the 1754 *Alceste*

> [One goes on] *Tuesday* morning, which is the public Day that Ambassadors and Foreigners of Distinction go to pay their Compliments to the King . . . The King and the Queen often eat together, and the Dauphin as well as the People in general are very fond of her; she hath a very grave and well looking Court, or Set of Attendants, and I dare say is an exceedingly good Woman, and is almost the only one of her Sex that you'll see at Versailles *unpainted* . . . You'll find the same people [at Fontainebleau] that you inn'd with at Versailles moved thither; for they and many other Trades-People from Versailles follow the Court, as Suttlers or Higglers do an Army, shifting Camps.[1]

Traditional opera in France is best understood as 'princely' or 'courtly', a quality hardly apparent in the vulgarised term, 'Paris Opéra'. The official press constantly uses the phrase *le public* in reference to the generality of its attendees. But this 'public' was selective, indeed partly selected – by 1750, 227 persons enjoyed free entry to the Opéra.[2] However, not all spectators were courtiers, and in 1749 the king gave the City of Paris responsibility for nominating its *directeur*. Operatic activities involved a 'nexus' linking performers, producers and audiences who favoured a slowly evolving repertory in three favourite forms: tragedy, pastoral and opéra-ballet.

Another 'nexus' linked the three royal theatre companies (Opéra, Comédie-Française, Comédie-Italienne): these amounted to the monarch's personal property, for their legal status presumed that they existed to entertain his family and guests in the first instance, and anyone else on an incidental and contingent basis. Casanova maintained that because employees of the Opéra were, in effect, members of the royal household, French nobles were 'eager' to seduce them, because of the snobbish thrill of *lèse-majesté*.[3] Although the Opéra operated via systems that will be seen in Chapter 3, these could at any moment be countermanded by royal authority, whether personal or assigned. Lagrave's account of life in the royal troupes suggests the flavour of existence under an absolutist system:

> At any given moment the authorities intervened in the theatres' activities, sometimes to a pernickety degree; this constant surveillance translated into numerous orders and counter-commands, resulting in very narrow regulation . . . Every breach of the rules was

[1] A. Z. [William Lucas], *A Five Weeks Tour to Paris, Versailles, Marli etc.*, 3rd edn (London: T. Waller, 1754), 26, 34.
[2] GiulianiP, 177. The Opéra was properly entitled 'Académie Royale de Musique'.
[3] CasanovaM, III, 194. His visit to Fontainebleau: *ibid.*, 153–60.

> punished; the regulations provided for a sanction for every fault, notably through various fines. However, the conditions of employment were reasonable, and pensions were also provided.[4]

Rules and fines existed likewise at the Opéra, albeit the larger size of the company might have diffused some of the feeling of direct intervention. All three troupes performed in court service, especially during autumn and winter.[5] Thus sometimes the show could not go on in Paris; losses might be reimbursed by royal subvention, but command performances caused grievous operational problems. A typical pattern in the court's main annual theatre seasons is that for 1737–8: *Fontainebleau*, 30 September to 14 November, Comédie-Italienne: five evenings; Comédie-Française: fourteen evenings; *Versailles*, 26 November to 20 March: Comédie-Italienne: twelve evenings; Comédie-Française: twenty-six evenings.[6] *Voyages* with music but without stage performances to Marly in May and Compiègne in July were also normal.

The Académie Royale de Musique, founded by Louis XIV, was a conceptual hybrid: something between a learned foundation and an institution for performance, accessible to the public. Its nature as a business was devolved by the king as the concern of its licence-holder, or *directeur* (see Table 3.1). Paradoxically, it had 'no lucrative function', or at least no shareholders.[7] As with other functional offices of state, the Opéra, a monopoly, was to be exploited by its *directeur*. Its debts mounted inexorably and were passed on when the *privilège* changed hands, reaching 500,000 *livres* in 1749 (£20,833: 3 million pounds in recent values).[8] Pensions for ex-employees represented a perennial drain. Suppliers tended not to get paid, and certainly not on time: one group started legal action.[9]

'The court! In that word is all the evil', wrote the liberal-aristocratic René-Louis d'Argenson: it prevents reform, it corrupts the armed forces by favouritism, it short-circuits merit, authority and experience in ministers, and 'It prevents the king from ruling and relocating in himself the virtues that he has'.[10] Conscious in his retirement of the widening gap between rich and poor, he noted: 'The French people is ... aroused against royalty', partly thanks to the intellectuals and wits, partly thanks to 'this wind of anti-monarchism and anti-religion blown across from England'.[11] By June

[4] LagraveTP, 27. [5] RicePA is very useful, but not the whole picture.
[6] LagraveTP, 168–9. Commands in spring 1742 caused CI cancellations in Paris: RicePA, 164; BrennerTI, 131.
[7] LagraveTP, 30: 'aucun but lucratif'. See JohnsonBR, Ch. 5, for a detailed scrutiny of the way in which Louis XIV moved from an academy model proposed by Pierre Perrin in 1666 to a performance model enshrined in the 1669 *lettres patentes*.
[8] According to www.measuringworth.com, viewed 21 Sept. 2010: inflation of pound sterling since 1750 by a factor of 144 (Retail Price Index data at 2008).
[9] AmelotMS, para. 354. [10] D'ArgensonJ, VI, 321 (27 Dec. 1750).
[11] *Ibid.*, VII, 51 (18 Dec. 1751).

1754 he recorded that 'Opinions concerning "the nation" are prevalent and might take us a long way. Never before have the nouns "nation" and "state" been so much spoken: these two words were never uttered under Louis XIV.'[12] It was only after this challenging period that French governments, regarding theatre, 'understood it was their duty to contribute to the public's pleasure'.[13]

The king's family hardly ever saw their players in action at Paris: performances in their own palaces sufficed. Louis' visits to the Opéra can be numbered on one hand.[14] His 1744 visit 'shocked' Parisians for reasons of simple moral scruple (the verb is that of Luynes): his daughters, the eldest being only sixteen, sat in the royal box; but the royal mistress, Mme de Châteauroux, was displayed in the adjoining one. This misadventure occurred on the feast of Saint Geneviève, who was particularly venerated.[15]

At the heart of the 'plutocratic kernel' were 'those who lived at Court, held office and lodged there, and only lived for and through it . . . Courtiers brought together numerous sources of wealth: income from their estates, Court offices, pensions, part of the income of the clergy, high commands, provincial governorships, ministries and diplomatic postings.'[16]

Courtly ambience was a main point of definition at the Paris Opéra, which performed within the Palais-Royal, opposite the Tuileries. This housed the ducs d'Orléans (Louis, d.1752, then Louis-Philippe), under whose control it had been since 1692, 'a move which kept the theatre locked in a conservative court administration'; a corridor linked their palace to the Orléans' family box over the orchestra.[17] Considering the cost of gaining entrance, the general amenities were poor: space was cramped and ceilings were low; improvements were not forthcoming from either branch of the royal family. Those standing on crowded nights were allowed only 'a little over one square foot per person', according to Lagrave, who also 'estimates the [maximum] spectator capacity at 1,300: 600 standing and 700 seated . . . Patrons stood in the *parterre*, which measured about 7.5 by 13 metres . . . [M]any seats still enjoyed only partial visibility.'[18]

Ticket prices were twice as high as those for other royal theatres: 10 *livres* (about £60 now) to sit in one of the twenty superior boxes, 7 *livres* and 10 *sols* in one of the

[12] *Ibid.*, VIII, 315 (26 June 1754). [13] LagraveTP, 45.
[14] 1729, *Tancrède*; 1730, *Phaëton*; 1739, *Atys*; 1744, *Roland*: LagraveTP, 210–11. But Louis and his son were pictured at *Armide* (1747) by Saint-Aubin: RosowLA, 367.
[15] Luynes, *Journal*, V, 88 (7 Jan. 1744) cited in LagraveTP, 211 n. 19.
[16] Chaussinand-Nogaret, 53.
[17] Barbara Coeyman, 'Walking through Lully's opera theatre in the Palais Royal', in John Hajdu Heyer (ed.), *Lully Studies* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 216–42 [219, 232].
[18] Barbara Coeyman, 'Theatres for opera and ballet during the reigns of Louis XIV and Louis XV', *Early Music* 18/1 (1990), 22–37 [34].

eighteen *premières loges*, or the *amphithéâtre* (the nine benches at the back of the stalls); the thirty upper-level boxes were available at 4 *livres*, and the topmost area at 2 *livres* (£12), the same price men paid to stand at the front of the stalls in the *parterre*.[19] An analysis of subscription lists reveals a galaxy of peers, ministers, financiers and *parlementaires*. Paying more for a box, the less well you might see, but the better could you be seen.[20] However, in 1758 the *parterre* provably contained (at least) one master confectioner and one tradesman-goldsmith.[21] The Opéra's main entrance and box-office, in a *cul-de-sac* off the rue St-Honoré, emphasised the privateness of the place. Meeting areas were limited to the single basement café, whose date of installation is still unknown.[22]

The alternatives to such discomforts were widely discussed. Nine projects for a new Opéra were developed between 1729 and 1759; and the 1748 design competition for the Place Louis XV saw *eighteen* separate projects for a new Opéra, to be built near Bouchardon's forthcoming equestrian statue.[23] None was realised, though vast sums were expended on the site. After the Opéra burned in April 1763 activity moved to the cavernous Salle des Machines in the Tuileries Palace (see Chapter 12), itself destroyed after 1871. From 1764 an improved theatre was constructed on the Palais-Royal site and opened in January 1770 but it too burned down, in June 1781. The Opéra at this point received a new building at the Porte Saint-Martin, next to the still-surviving Théâtre de la Renaissance.[24]

VERSAILLES

Parisian conditions were strongly echoed at Louis XV's main palaces. His youthful preferences (hunting and conviviality, not theatre) and the prudent reign of Cardinal Fleury as First Minister from 1726 denied development at Versailles and Fontainebleau. At Versailles the only theatre Louis inherited (the 1685 Salle de la Comédie) was of small dimensions, reckoned in total at 12 × 18.5 metres in area, with at most

[19] LagraveTP, 47 (1749 source); GiulianiP, 170 (1758 source). But this calculation relates simply to relative retail price value increase, not purchasing power as related to earnings: see n. 8.

[20] Coeyman, 'Walking', 230; Neal Zaslaw, 'Observations at the Paris Opéra in 1747', *Early Music* 11/4 (1983), 514–16 [515].

[21] RavelCP, 17, 233. This fact is consonant with knowledge regarding wages and expenditures at the time: Daniel Roche, *A History of Everyday Things: The Birth of Consumption in France, 1600–1800* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 67.

[22] Coeyman, 'Walking', 228. Lease renewed on 25 Mar. 1754: F-Po, Arch. 18 (25), 58.

[23] The City of Paris initiated these plans following the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle. The Place opened in 1765; its statue was destroyed in 1792. Daniel Rabreau, 'Un contrepoint aux théâtres de la Cour: l'Opéra de Paris au XVIIIe siècle', in Vincent Droguet and Marc-Henri Jordan (eds.), *Théâtre de Cour. Les Spectacles à Fontainebleau au XVIIIe siècle* (exhibition catalogue, Paris: RMN, 2005), 52–3.

[24] GourretH.

7 metres of height, and housing only up to 300 persons within low boxes and a *parterre*.[25] The orchestra area measured only 1.25 × 6.5 metres and, even after later changes, Metoyen's 1773 plan shows merely twenty-five players, including nine squeezed round the sides.[26] No special effects were possible, yet at least some ballets were seen here, for example Lalande's *Ballet de la jeunesse* (1686), and Rameau's *La Guirlande*.[27] However, it was ample for the repertory of the Comédie-Italienne, which utilised a limited quantity of music.

When Fleury died in 1743, Louis took up the reins. His interventions in opera began:

> His Majesty, in considering that the surest means of sustaining this company is to provide rewards for those soloists who most distinguish themselves by their assiduity, talents and good conduct, has ordered that an annual sum of 6000 *livres* be distributed . . . each year at the closure of the theatre.[28]

Early in 1745 his son married the Spanish Infanta, when something like a policy for the arts was announced:

> The King has wished to present a Festivity to Mme la Dauphine which was not simply like those feasts for the eyes such as any nation might put on, which are over straight away and leave no trace behind: he ordered an Entertainment which could simultaneously amuse the Court and serve as an encouragement to the Fine Arts, knowing that their cultivation adds to the glory of his Kingdom . . . He has had a theatre built in the great riding-school [Grande Ecurie] at Versailles measuring 56 feet deep.[29]

The Versailles riding-school had been converted in style (Figure 1.1), with outbuildings for the actors and others, its area of 25 × 62 metres comprising a stage with over 21 metres of depth, and pit space for up to sixty musicians.[30] It was a masterpiece of Rococo decoration constituting 'a [new] phase in French theatre architecture'[31] and accommodating some 580 spectators in open-plan configuration. Even 'a fairy palace in a tale would give you only a slight idea of it'.[32] In this theatre a full complement of Opéra performers gave both new and revived works, at least up to 1748.[33] (See Table 0.1) Lois Rosow has shown that *Armide*'s production was shared between Versailles and Paris in winters 1745–6 and 1746–7, and even after.[34]

[25] Coeyman, 'Theatres for opera', 29; statistical differences in LagraveTP, 132–5, Fig. 22.
[26] BoucherRT; La GorceJPR, Figs. 68, 72b. [27] BoucherRT, 569.
[28] Arrêt du Conseil du Roi, 18 Mar. 1744, AN E.2226, doc. 108, f° [4].
[29] *Mercure*, Feb./2 1745, 84ff, from the 'Avertissement' to *La Princesse de Navarre*.
[30] BoucherRT, 566–7. [31] SouchalS, 458–62. [32] FavartM, III, 28.
[33] Using secondary sources, BoucherRT, 569, considers that performances stopped by 1749 owing to financial constraints following the War of Austrian Succession. Unfortunately, *registres* for the Menus are lacking for this period (AN, O[1] 2865=1744, O[1] 2866=1758). Invoices are likewise lacking between 1741 and 1749 (O[1] 2986).
[34] RosowLA, 364–6.

Figure 1.1 Salle du Manège, Versailles (1745)

The Infanta's untimely death in 1746 was followed by the Dauphin's marriage to Maria-Josepha of Saxony in 1747; again, the Grande Ecurie served for celebration. Maria-Josepha's music master had been Hasse, but her musical activities in the French court remained within the private sphere. Hasse himself visited, not only to accompany Faustina Bordoni in 1750 but also to direct *Didone abbandonata* for Maria-Josepha on 13 October 1753. Two hundred copies of the libretto were delivered to Versailles: *opera seria* was thus witnessed by unknown courtiers (though not the king) near the apogee of enthusiasm for *opera buffa* and *intermezzi* as given by Bambini's troupe at the Opéra.[35]

Plans to construct a permanent court theatre took shape in 1748 but shortage of funds confined the ideas to paper; the final Versailles theatre was developed between 1763 and 1770.[36] A fire on 13 September 1751 destroyed part of the Grande Ecurie: its structure was demolished early in 1752.[37] When Bambini's troupe came to Versailles at the end of that year they acted in the 1685 theatre before some 300 courtiers only, as part of the usual winter season referred to earlier.[38]

FONTAINEBLEAU, MARLY, COMPIÈGNE, CHOISY

At Fontainebleau no custom-built opera theatre existed. Performances had taken place occasionally in a Renaissance hall whose 'belle cheminée' (fine mantelpiece) was removed in 1724 to make space for a very ornate theatre when Louis XV married Marie Leszczyńska. Of medium size, it had two complete rows of boxes (five per side), small grilled boxes over the orchestra and an upper-level gallery; the royal box opposite the stage was over 20 metres from the footlights. The sightlines were problematic owing to its elongated U-shape.[39]

> [T]he new stage area consisted of two sections: a playing stage of approximately 6.09 metres at the front by 5.84 metres (19.98 by 19.16 feet), and a perspective stage of 4.4 metres by 4.79 metres (14.44 by 15.72 feet). On such a small perspective stage there was room for only four pairs of stage shutters, with a resultant loss in the ability to produce convincing perspectives and scenes requiring *merveilleux* from that of the 1682 stage configuration.[40]

[35] 1750 visit: DufourcqL, 140–1. Librettos: AN, O^{I} 2994, 'Memoire Des Livrets fournis par Ballard . . . pour les Concerts De la Reine et de Madame la Dauphine . . . 1753' (small 4^{o} bifolium). Louis and some members of the family had left for Fontainebleau on the 12th. *Didone abbandonata* and France: see HeartzMEC, 334–5.

[36] Pierre Verlet, 'L'Opéra de Versailles', *RHT* 9/3 (1957), 133–54. See Figure 3.1.

[37] 1748 plans: SouchalS, 463. Demolition: AN, O^{I} 2991: 'Bref et Etat de la Demolition'.

[38] AN, O^{I} 2991: 'Comédie Italienne / Etat des frais . . . Le samedy 25. 9bre 1752'; AN, O^{I} 2991: 'Grattifications accordés . . . les Intermedes Bouffons'.

[39] LagraveTP, 136. Fontainebleau is not discussed in Coeyman, 'Theatres for opera'.

[40] RiceF, 9.

Opera had profited from a certain amount of stage machinery.[41] The pit was a reasonable size: in 1773, Metoyen's plan indicated the presence of thirty-nine musicians.[42] Recent estimates of audience capacity are of 700–800, although 900 librettos were delivered for each opera given in the 1753 season.[43] Nonetheless, up to 1752, it was a theatre normally limited to spoken plays and *divertissements*.

In 1752–4 there was a spectacular break with tradition when the court mounted various operas during a hugely costly initiative ended only by the approach of war. In 1749 the crown was already buying property in order to construct workshops, storage and rehearsal space, forming an 'hôtel des Menus-Plaisirs'.[44] A rehearsal-stage followed in 1752, furnished with seven rows of shutters, and another house was acquired.[45] During 1753 and 1754 stage machinery was added and the boxes reconfigured to improve sightlines. The stage was slightly widened and rearranged, taking away 3.2 metres from the front stage in order to award 3.5 metres to the perspective stage, which now contained six double sets of shutters.[46]

The court also spent time and heard music and opera in concert at Marly and at Compiègne. Marly was a gorgeous and compact Louis XIV palace (now demolished) that had always hosted music and other entertainment. Its focal point was the 'Salon', an octagonal space at the heart of a square composition measuring almost 15 metres across and 16 metres high. Its surfaces were of wood and stucco, the floor of marble.[47] Regarding Compiègne, Lagrave describes a private theatre and its troupe nearby, backing onto the ramparts, with dimensions of 102 feet × 33 feet. Performances were attended by the monarch several times: significantly, its players favoured the Comédie-Italienne's type of repertory, including pantomime.[48]

Choisy's *château* was near where the king hunted in the Sénart forest and his family walked. Its theatre was almost ready by 1760, the war effort delaying final stages of decoration and fitting-out. Plays were given from May 1761, but for opera it took until December 1762 for full inauguration with festivities and operas.[49]

[41] BoucherRT, 573. [42] BoucherRT, Fig. 72.
[43] AN, O^{1} 2993: 'Mémoire des Impressions . . . fêtes de Fontainebleau'. GreenR, 11, 778 reckons that 100 gilt-edged copies were held back for binding in the collected edition for the season; see RiceF, 46 n. 9.
[44] AN, O^{1} 2813A, cited in Marc-Henri Jordan, 'Les Menus-Plaisirs du roi et les spectacles bellifontains, 1750–1786', in Droguet and Jordan (eds.), *Théâtre de Cour*, 34.
[45] AN, O^{1} 2998: 'Menus. 1755'. Acquired by 'Le S^{r} et D^{e} L'Evêque', sold on to Louis Bay de Cury, and then to the king on 21 June 1756.
[46] RiceF, 10, with plans in RicePA, 24 and 26; also LagraveTP, 138 and 140; colour images of several plans are in the catalogue cited in n. 23, above.
[47] Vincent Maroteau, *Marly, l'Autre palais du Soleil* (Geneva: Media V, 2002), 82–4.
[48] LagraveTP, 163–7. [49] P. de Lacroix, *Le Château de Choisy* (Paris, 1867), 53–4.