

Popular Opera in Eighteenth-Century France

Music and Entertainment before the Revolution

This is the first book for a century to explore the development of French opera with spoken dialogue from its beginnings. Musical comedy in this form came in different styles and formed a distinct genre of opera, whose history has been obscured by neglect. Its songs were performed in private homes, where operas themselves were also given. The subject-matter was far wider in scope than is normally thought, with news stories and political themes finding their way onto the popular stage. In this book, David Charlton describes the comedic and musical nature of eighteenth-century popular French opera, considering topics such as Gherardi's theatre, Fair Theatre and the 'musico-dramatic art' created in the mid-eighteenth century. Performance practices, singers, audience experiences and theatre staging are included, as well as a pioneering account of the formation of a core of 'canonical' popular works.

David Charlton is Emeritus Professor of Music History at Royal Holloway, University of London. He has published on topics in opera between Bizet and Purcell. He is author of *Grétry and the Growth of Opera-Comique* (Cambridge University Press, 1986) and *Opera in the Age of Rousseau* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), and editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera* (Cambridge University Press, 2003) and also of *The Music of Simon Holt* (The Boydell Press, 2017).

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Music and Entertainment before the Revolution

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*To
Patricia*

One of the most intriguing and least understood aspects of the history of communication involves the power of melody.

Robert Darnton, *Poetry and the Police* (2010), 169

Imagine judging the Broadway revue of today on the basis solely of the printed dialogue! And what a task for the brow-beaten scholar of the twenty-second century to clarify for his breathless reader the countless topical or political allusions!

Edmond McAdoo Gagey, *Ballad Opera* (1937), 10

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Preface

I never met the great democratiser of opera Edward J. Dent, but I wish that I had. For a ‘long period’, he wrote, ‘there were two sorts of opera in existence, the formal ceremonious opera of the court, and [...] the comic opera of the people’.¹ Only the second category is covered in this book: opera and music theatre given in medium-sized venues. I will follow a roughly chronological path with themed chapters about the period between Jean-Baptiste Molière and André Grétry (dubbed the ‘Molière of French music’²), whose career began twenty years before the Revolution. This book is introductory in two ways: first, it asks straightforward questions, and second, the subject it defines is in great need of wider introduction. Topics covered include staging, singing, storylines, performance patterns and making theatre at home. How might this music have sounded? How did the spoken dialogue fit with the music?

Music frequently plays a role in Molière’s comedies; comedy and music together were the ingredients of popular opera. By avoiding all-sung works, this book fills in numerous gaps in the history of opera, building on others’ research as well as my own.³ It considers that popular operas belong on the historical map. Rejecting the ‘skewed historical picture’ offered by Charles Burney, Michael Burden observed that ‘for the majority of English theatre-goers, “real opera” had spoken dialogue, and was a genre they preferred’.⁴ The same sort of preference in France caused a crisis in the 1750s. It followed eighteen months of performances by the Bouffons at the Paris Opéra, familiarising the public with *intermezzi* and adaptations of Italian comic operas.

‘Opéra-comique’ was the common term for French popular opera, liked by all classes and sometimes performed in London. This book’s many connections across the Channel start with Richard Baxter, famous as

¹ Edward Dent, *Opera* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1940), 32–3.

² J.-N. Bouilly, cited in Arnold, *Grétry’s Operas*, 170.

³ See Bibliography for studies by Thomas Betzwieser, Julia Doe, Michael Fend, Erica Levenson, Nathalie Rizzoni, Vanessa Rogers, Herbert Schneider, Jama Stilwell, Downing A. Thomas and others.

⁴ Burden, ‘The lure of aria’, 385, citing Charles Burney, *A General History of Music*, IV (1789).

Arlequin in Paris, and end with an opera adapted from a Drury Lane play. Instead of speculating about the unknowable feelings and frameworks through which people enjoyed these works, I have proposed the idea of a ‘binary identity’: popular opera as both public and private, made at home everywhere in France. My own observations about specific performances appear in Chapters 2 and 5.

After falling out of the international repertory, pre-Revolution popular opera was discovered by a young Thomas Beecham in 1904: ‘One evening I went to hear Grétry’s *Richard Cœur de lion* at the Opéra Comique, and, at once attracted by this delicate and delightful music, set out to acquire all I could of the composer’s work as well as that of his contemporaries.’ Beecham’s next remarks are significant: he detected no Italian influence, even though Italian music helped to form this style. In its last three chapters, therefore, this book explains the formation and uniqueness of the new operatic medium:

This music is markedly individual in that it owes little or nothing to any ancestry but that of the popular song of old France, which in turn took its character from the idiom and accent of the language. [...] Having plenty of time on my hands, I spent some of it in the Bibliothèque Nationale, transcribing those works.⁵

Before the arrival of the Bouffons in 1752, opéra-comique thrived at seasonal performances at the Paris Fairs. One of this book’s tasks is to show how these unexplored decades fit together with the better-researched post-Bouffon years, namely the three decades preceding the Revolution. Music at the ‘Fair theatres’ (usually just outside the actual Fairs) was as varied as the vast range of subject matter in popular opera. Jama Stilwell has discussed the *merveilleux* (supernatural) and the influence of *commedia dell’arte*,⁶ but the tradition of Molière’s comedy was also basic, rooted in the critique of society. For this book, *parodies* (popular take-offs of serious operas) are not ‘the heart of the enterprise’;⁷ its aim is to discover popular opera’s independent identity and development.

Scott McMillin wrote that even if ‘most musicals [...] are not overtly political’, their aesthetic ‘looks towards the political, not with the direct glare of Brecht [...] but with full regard for the principles of difference that we have been finding at the heart of the genre’.⁸ That goes too for the repertories in this book. Even ‘abduction’ operas might contain ‘correctives

⁵ Sir Thomas Beecham, *A Mingled Chime. Leaves from an Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 1944), 52–3.

⁶ Stilwell, ‘A New View’, 55–6. ⁷ Harris-Warrick, *Dance and Drama*, 256.

⁸ McMillin, *The Musical as Drama*, 199–200.

for vice and licentiousness' or 'veiled (or not so veiled) critiques' of French 'political and social structures'.⁹

In some ways there are similarities between early popular opera and musicals. The use of pre-existing melodies in earlier popular opera (including the type of song called *vaudeville*) anticipates the idea of *Mamma Mia!*¹⁰ But if complete source materials are missing, what are the best ways of discussing musical theatre of the past? Much further enquiry is needed into what earlier opéra-comique was like, musically and dramatically. The enormous potential for this was summarised by Erica Levenson: the 'dizzying challenge' of tracking down popular tunes; the provision of editions and recordings to repair our common neglect of 'popular entertainments unattached to a canonic musical figure'. At the same time, popular music and its theatre attract by 'their engagement with the social and political issues of a particular moment in history'.¹¹

Some theory is found scattered about this book, yet a near absence of contemporary discourse about popular theatre was the unfortunate rule for France. *Philosophes* and journalists made up for lost time in the late 1750s (still disparaging *vaudevilles*), and Chapter 12 addresses some of their observations. The method of working from first principles allows one to gradually re-enact the pieces, albeit without understanding all their jokes or knowing how coarse or subtle their acting was. The legacy of Alain-René Lesage and Jacques-Philippe d'Orneval, *Le Théâtre de la Foire*, preserves only the cleaned-up face of popular opera. Yet Lesage was a genius and his dedication to this medium urgently requires discussion.¹²

*

English translations of titles of stage works are given on their first appearance in a chapter and are also found in the complete list of stage works on pages 321–9. There are descriptions of *Le Théâtre italien de Gherardi* in Chapter 3 and *Le Théâtre de la Foire* in Chapter 9. Various online resources for this book are listed in the Notes on the Text, and Chapter 10 is linked to a new edition of the 1729 *parodie*, *Le Joueur*, which is accessed similarly from www.cambridge.org/9781316515846. Original French texts of quotations translated in this book are available here too.

Popular Opera complements two books forming part of the same project: the *catalogue raisonné* of musical stage works at the Opéra Comique;¹³ and my

⁹ Stilwell, 'A New View', 81. ¹⁰ See 'Jukebox musical' in *Wikipedia* (29 Nov. 2019).

¹¹ Levenson, 'Traveling Tunes', 11–12. ¹² Striker, 'Theatre of Lesage' dates from 1968.

¹³ Between 1762 and 1972: WildTOC.

Opera in the Age of Rousseau, abbreviated as OAR. The project continues with a planned open-access database of popular opera and its performances to be available from ObTIC (*Observatoire des textes, des idées et des corpus*) edited by Martin Wählberg (University of Trondheim) at <https://obtic.sorbonne-universite.fr/projet/revolutionary-opera-comique>.

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[I am] firmly persuaded that every time a man smiles, – but much more so, when he laughs, that it adds something to this Fragment of Life.

Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*

Notes on the Text

‘Opéra-comique’ denotes the genre and ‘Opéra Comique’ denotes the company.

Primary sources, print and manuscript, are given in relevant footnotes.

Many are available in digital collections such as *Gallica* (Bibliothèque nationale de France: gallica.bnf.fr) or *Internet Archive* (archive.org).

Pre-1800 publications cited in footnotes are given date(s) in parentheses.

Authors, composers and translated titles of stage works mentioned in the book are found in the list of Stage Works Cited, pp. 321–9. The general index includes only their title.

The *Théâtre italien de Gherardi* (abbreviated *TIG*) is referenced exclusively to Gherardi’s six-volume edition of 1700, issued under his control. Available on *Gallica*.

Text or music in *Le Théâtre de la Foire* (abbreviated *TF*) is referenced first to the ten-volume issue of 1737 and then to its reprint edition (Geneva: Slatkine, 1968). Each volume concluded with a separately paginated ‘*Table des airs*’. Thus, *TF* VI, *Table*, 2 (R/II/134) means that an *air* is on page 2 of the *Table* in volume VI of the 1737 issue, corresponding to page 134 of vol. II of the reprint edition.

The online depository for this book is www.cambridge.org/9781316515846.

It contains the first modern edition of *Le Joueur* (1729), with an introduction; Table 9.1 (a handlist of new music in popular operas in *Le Théâtre de la Foire*); Table 10.1 (a list of Mouret’s arias and duets in Italian for the Comédie-Italienne); an annotated list of the contents of *Le Théâtre de la Foire*; and French-language texts whose translations appear in the book.

Principal online sources consulted:

Burney Collection Newspapers: <http://find.galegroup.com/bncn/retrieve>.

CESAR: *Calendrier électronique des spectacles sous l’ancien régime et sous la révolution*: cesar.huma-num.fr/cesar2/home.php?lang=french (<https://cesar.huma-num.fr>).

De Luca, Emanuele, *Il repertorio della Comédie-Italienne di Parigi (1716–1762)*. *Le répertoire de la Comédie-Italienne de Paris (1716–1762)* (Les

savoirs des acteurs italiens, Digital Collection, ed. Andrea Fabiano) (Paris: IRPMF, 2011). <https://hal.inria.fr/IRPMF>

Dictionnaires d'autrefois. French Dictionaries of the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th Centuries: <https://artfl-project.uchicago.edu>.

Diderot, Denis and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, eds, *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 17 vols. (Paris: 1751–72) ed. Robert Morrissey as *ARTFL Encyclopédie* (<https://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu>).

Le Gazetier universel: French eighteenth-century periodicals are gathered at <http://gazetier-universel.gazettes18e.fr/periodiques>. The *Mercur de France* is also found on gallica.bnf.fr.

Grove Music Online: oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic.

Opéra Baroque: <https://operabaroque.fr>

RISM (Répertoire International des Sources Musicales): opac.rism.info.

Sgard, Jean, ed., *Dictionnaire des journalistes*, rev. ed.: Voltaire Foundation <http://dictionnaire-journalistes.gazettes18e.fr/> Copyright © 2015–2019 IHRIM UMR 5317 / MSH-LSE USR 2005.

Le Théâtre de la Foire à Paris. Textes et documents established by Barry Russell © 1996–2000 www.theatrales.uqam.ca/foires.

Theaville: Database of *vaudevilles* founded by Françoise Rubellin, published by the Centre d'étude des théâtres de la Foire et de la Comédie-Italienne (CETHEFI): www.theaville.org.

Online audiovisual source used in Chapter 10:

Antonio Palomba, Pietro Auletta, *Il maestro di musica*, 1954 television performance in German with Graziella Sciutti, Fritz Wunderlich and Walter Berry conducted by Hans Swarovsky: www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6IdzyVPRB4.

Abbreviations

Note: Books are more fully described in the Bibliography.

ABDA:	Philip H. Highfill Jr. and others: <i>A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers and Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660–1800</i> (1973–93).
AL:	[Élie-Catherine Fréron], <i>L'Année littéraire</i> (1754 etc.).
AN:	Paris, Archives Nationales.
BCN:	Burney Collection Newspapers.
BNF:	Bibliothèque Nationale de France.
CESAR:	<i>Calendrier électronique des spectacles sous l'ancien régime et sous la révolution</i> (https://cesar.huma-num.fr).
CF:	Comédie-Française.
CI:	Comédie-Italienne.
COJ:	<i>Cambridge Opera Journal</i> .
Corr. litt.:	F. M. Grimm <i>et al.</i> , <i>Correspondance littéraire</i> .
DOP:	S. Bouissou, P. Denécheau and F. Marchal-Ninosque, <i>Dictionnaire de l'Opéra de Paris sous l'Ancien Régime</i> , 4 vols. (2019–20).
F-LYm:	Lyon, Bibliothèque municipale.
F-Pn (Mus):	Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Département de la musique.
F-Po:	Paris, Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra.
F-Po, Registres:	<i>Registres de l'Opéra Comique</i> , also on <i>Gallica</i> .
F-V:	Versailles, Bibliothèque municipale.
FSG:	Foire Saint-Germain.
FSL:	Foire Saint-Laurent.
GB-Lbl:	London, British Library.
Grove:	Grove Music Online (www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic).
JAMS:	<i>Journal of the American Musicological Society</i> .
Mémoires secrets:	Christophe Cave and Suzanne Cornand, eds., <i>Mémoires secrets pour servir à l'histoire de la</i>

	<i>République des Lettres en France</i> (2009 etc., in progress).
<i>Mercure</i> :	<i>Mercure de France</i> .
<i>MGG</i> :	Ludwig Finscher, ed., <i>Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart</i> (Second edition, 2002).
<i>NG/2</i> :	Stanley Sadie, ed., <i>The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians</i> (Second edition, 2001).
<i>NGO</i> :	Stanley Sadie, ed., <i>The New Grove Dictionary of Opera</i> , 4 vols. (1992).
<i>NOHM</i> :	Egon Wellesz, Frederick Sternfeld, eds, <i>The New Oxford History of Music</i> , VII (1973).
<i>OAR</i> :	David Charlton, <i>Opera in the Age of Rousseau</i> (2013).
<i>OC</i> :	Opéra Comique
<i>PNTI</i> :	<i>Parodies du Nouveau Théâtre Italien</i> : First edition (3 vols., 1731) and Second edition (4 vols., 1738).
<i>RISM</i> :	<i>Répertoire international des Sources Musicales</i> .
<i>RMFC</i> :	<i>Recherches sur la Musique française classique (La vie musicale en France sous les rois bourbons, 2^e série)</i> (Paris: Picard, 1960–).
<i>TF</i> :	Alain-René Lesage and Jacques-Philippe d'Orneval, eds., <i>Le Théâtre de la Foire</i> , 10 vols. (Paris: Gandouin, 1737). Reprint references (e.g. R/I/7) are to the two-volume edition (Geneva: Slatkine, 1968) containing this ten-volume edition. More detailed information is in the Bibliography and Cordier, <i>Essai bibliographique</i> .
<i>TIG</i> :	<i>Le Théâtre Italien de Gherardi</i> , 6 vols. (Paris: Jean-Baptiste Cusson and Pierre Witte, 1700).
<i>TP</i> :	Title page.
<i>WildTOC</i> :	Nicole Wild and David Charlton, <i>Théâtre de l'Opéra-Comique, Paris: Répertoire musical 1762–1972</i> .