Introduction

"Opera is a spectacle made as much for the eyes as for the ears."

Durey de Noinville, *Histoire du Théâtre de l'Opéra en France* (Paris, 1753), I, 6.

Since its inception, French opera has embraced dance – a reality that operatic historiography has not yet fully fathomed. Up until the eve of the Revolution, dance figured in every act of every opera, yet all too often operatic dancing is treated as if it were merely decorative. The few music historians who recognize that dance matters to French opera have tended to endorse such a view implicitly, studying the music in isolation using formalist tools (dance types, rhythmic profiles, key structures, and so forth). Dance historians, on the other hand, are obliged to locate the roots of ballet in its operatic history, but tell the story as a struggle for ballet to free itself from opera's shackles. The viewpoints of the two disciplines may differ, but the result is the same: few music or dance historians have taken an interest in how dance participates dramatically within operatic works. Now that opera studies have broadened to acknowledge that opera incorporates multiple discourses and multiple systems of meaning, the time seems ripe for an integrative model for French opera that includes the dancing instead of marginalizing it.

My premise that dance matters deeply to the operas created at the Paris Opéra during its first 80 years has grown out of the process of taking individual works and investigating what dance is doing inside each of them. My research thus rests on librettos, scores, and – where they exist – choreographic notations, more than on theoretical writings, past or present. The single most important lesson that emerges from such a work-centered approach is that dance is so thoroughly woven into the fabric of the opera that it cannot be considered in isolation. The so-called "divertissement," the part of every act in which crowds of singing and dancing characters flood the stage, must be understood as a unit, and because every divertissement is so substantial, its function within the act and the opera also begs for interpretation. Every moment of dancing thus has a double frame: the immediate surroundings and the larger dramatic context. The framing of divertissements has generated a modest amount of scholarly attention, but most writers operate from a narrow perspective: they assume that librettists and composers were obliged to work divertissements into every act, whether they wanted to or not, and that success is measured by how well librettists managed to concoct rationales for their inclusion. By this standard, the village wedding in the fourth act of Lully's *Roland* is much admired because it sets off, by way of contrast, the hero's misery and impending madness. But, by this point of view, the

choices made within a divertissement are insignificant – any reasonably appropriate music and text could serve the purpose.

Such a perspective – based on twin assumptions that divertissements are, with few exceptions, parenthetical, and that what happens within them rarely matters – has had the unfortunate effect of deflecting attention away from what is often some of the most beautiful music in an opera. In Lully's day, the lushest and most expansive music occurs in the divertissements; in the next century Rameau raised dance music to new expressive heights. Clearly more is at stake in these scenes than choreographed display alone. The Italians loved ballet as well, but since they usually relegated it to entr'acte entertainment, its existence does not impinge on our conception of the operatic object. In French opera, however, dancing occurs within the acts and is interwoven with vocal music. Such an aesthetic choice cries out for investigation.

This book covers the period from the birth of the Académie Royale de Musique until 1735; a second book will start from the ground-breaking works of Jean-Philippe Rameau. I have based this study on the works performed at the Opéra's public theater, although I have sometimes looked to court performances when they supply evidence otherwise lacking. I have also taken into account performances at other public theaters in Paris, since the Opéra did not function in isolation. My study starts not in 1669, the date enshrined above the proscenium of the Palais Garnier, but in 1672, when Jean-Baptiste Lully wrested the *privilège* for composing opera in French from Pierre Perrin and began writing the works that defined the new genre. The institution Lully founded incorporated the first permanent, professional dance troupe – one that exists to this day. This integrated institutional structure was of a piece with an integrated artistic vision that allowed ballet to flourish and develop; within the framework of opera as a genre and the Opéra as an institution, dance achieved a prominence and an artistic range that set the standard for all of Europe. Even when free-standing ballets came into existence, the old ties between the arts were not severed and reciprocities between the two genres continued to shape them both.

As a more ephemeral art than poetry or music, dance is notoriously difficult to recapture. However, thanks to Louis XIV's desire to include dance in his artistic legacy, he ordered his court choreographer, Pierre Beauchamps, to develop a system of dance notation; as a result we know more about the dance of this era than of most periods before or after. But the notation only transmits individual dances, not entire works, and, like all systems of notation, is incomplete. Even so, its existence has enabled dancers to recover hundreds of choreographies and give today's audiences glimpses of what made French dancing so enthralling in its own time. Moreover, the fact that a number of the choreographies originated on the stage of the Académie Royale de Musique, where they were performed by specific members of the troupe, provides crucial information about the dancing itself that also helps interpret other primary sources. I have sought to give readers a sense of what the dances might have looked

like, and to contextualize these movements as they were used on stage. This book is not, however, about dance technique in the baroque era; rather, it aims to put what can be learned from choreographies in the service of broader questions regarding the styles of dancing at the Opéra and operatic dramaturgy. Since moving dancers around the stage makes it necessary to ask what the other people sharing the space with them were doing, I have attempted in a limited way to deal with questions of staging.

Part I starts of necessity with Jean-Baptiste Lully, whose operas gave dance a dramatic centrality that set the pattern for many generations to come. It does not, however, limit itself to the *tragédie en musique*, as do most studies, since Lully himself composed other types of opera that shaped, and were shaped by, dance in ways other than in the *tragédies*. Of the six chapters devoted to Lully, the first provides brief divertissement-centric readings of three of his best-known *tragédies*, by way of illustrating what can be learned when the divertissements are accorded full dramatic standing. Chapter 2 lays out the conventions that Lully and his main librettist, Philippe Quinault, established for operatic divertissements, and then moves from mechanics to broader questions of dramaturgy. Chapter 3 surveys the basic principles of baroque dance and provides information about Lully's dance troupe. Chapter 4 focuses on the staging and styles of operatic dancing, including musical characterization. Chapters 5 and 6 turn to less familiar portions of Lully's operatic output – prologues and works with comic elements – where dance functions differently from the *tragédies*. These works, too, produced offspring; Lully's example remained powerful even when he was composing in less lofty styles.

Part II is devoted to the 46-year period between the death of Lully and the arrival of Rameau, when the proportion of operas that were not *tragédies* began to grow. Works set not in mythological realms but in contemporary locations broadened the styles of dancing and singing, while competition from the fair theaters and the Théâtre Italien even induced the Opéra to borrow from its rivals. The jockeying for position implicit in the variety of works performed at the Académie Royale de Musique becomes explicit in prologues that stage competitions for ascendancy among the Muses, and I have appropriated the librettists' conceit as a structure for the second part of this book. Chapters 8 through 10 cover the works governed by Thalie, Muse of comedy, who was first allowed onto the stage of the Académie Royale de Musique in an Italian guise. But as Chapters 11 and 12 show, her sister Melpomène, Muse of tragedy, remained a powerful rival, even as the divertissements in *tragédies en musique* began to show the impact of practices developed within the lighter genres. When operas were revived, the divertissements, more than any other part of the opera, became the site of revisions and updatings. Terpsichore, Muse of the dance, had an ever-increasing influence that is discussed in Chapters 13 and 14; her power may be seen in alterations to divertissement architecture, the growing roster of dancers in the troupe, and the emergence of star dancers, around whom entire scenes were composed. This is also the period for which

47 choreographies from the stage of the Opéra survive, and during which an increased interest in pantomime led to the introduction of innovative danced sequences to the Opéra, both within and as appendages to full-length works. The varied – or even contradictory – tendencies that the divertissements of this era exhibit do not support a tidy teleology for either dance or music; the variety is refreshing, and many worthwhile operas are now emerging from the general obscurity in which this period of operatic history used to languish.

The impetus for this book has grown out of my experiences in playing, dancing, researching, and editing French music of this period, coupled with a lifelong love for opera. Learning about French dance through my own body was transformative, and as a baroque flutist I also had the valuable experience of accompanying dancers. The artists with whom I have worked or whom I have watched instilled in me both a love of the art and a desire to advance the collective knowledge about it. The historian in me was curious about what such beautiful dances meant to their original audiences, while my editorial work gave me the tools essential for grappling with the complex primary materials. Over the long gestation of this book it has been gratifying to hear so much music that used to be imprisoned in scores transformed into sound, and even into performances on stage, as more and more performers have brought portions of this repertoire back to life. I hope to participate in this continuing revival by offering the fruits of my labor to performers, scholars, and opera lovers alike.