

CHAPTER XVIII.

FRENCH OPERA.

MOZART and his mother left Mannheim on March 14, and arrived in Paris on the 23rd, after a journey of nine days and a-half. "We thought we should never get through it," writes Wolfgang (March 24, 1778),¹ "and I never in my life was so tired. You can imagine what it was to leave Mannheim and all our dear, good friends there, and to be obliged to exist for ten days without a single soul even to speak to. God be praised, however, we are now at our journey's end. I am in hopes that, with His help, all will go well. To-day we mean to take a fiacre and go to call on Grimm and Wendling. Early to-morrow I shall go to the Electoral Minister Herr von Sickingen, who is a great connoisseur and lover of music, and to whom I have letters of introduction from Herr von Gemmingen and Herr Cannabich." L. Mozart was full of hope concerning this visit to Paris, and believed that Wolfgang could not fail to gain fame and, as a consequence, money in the French capital. He remembered the brilliant reception which had been given to him and his children fourteen years before, and he was convinced that a like support would be accorded to the youth who had fulfilled his early promise to a degree that to an intelligent observer must appear even more wonderful than his precocious performances as a child. He counted upon the support and assistance of many distinguished and influential persons, whose favour they had already experienced, and more especially on the tried friendship of Grimm, who had formerly given them the benefit of all his knowledge and power, and with whom they had continued in connection ever since. Grimm had lately passed through Salzburg with two

¹ Ed. Fournier, *Mozart à Paris* (Revue Franç., 1856, II., t. 7, p. 28 .

friends, and was pleased to hear his "Amadeo," as he called Wolfgang. He chanced to arrive at Augsburg on the evening of Wolfgang's concert there, and was present at it without making himself known, since he was in haste, and had heard that Wolfgang was on his way to Paris. L. Mozart, who placed great confidence in Grimm's friendship and experience, had made no secret to him of his precarious position in Salzburg, and of how greatly Wolfgang was in need of support; he commended his son entirely to Grimm's favour (April 6, 1778):—

I recommend you most emphatically to endeavour by childlike confidence to merit, or rather to preserve, the favour, love, and friendship of the Baron von Grimm; to take counsel with him on every point, and to do nothing hastily or from impulse; in all things be careful of your own interests, which are those of us all. Life in Paris is very different from life in Germany, and the French ways of expressing oneself politely, of introducing oneself, of craving patronage, &c., are quite peculiar; so much so, that Baron von Grimm used always to instruct me as to what I should say, and how I should express myself. Be sure you tell him, with my best compliments, that I have reminded you of this, and he will tell you that I am right.

But, clever as he was, L. Mozart had miscalculated on several points. He did not reflect that Grimm had grown older, more indolent, and more stately, and that even formerly a tact and obsequiousness had been required in order to turn the great man's friendship to account, which, natural as they were to himself, his son never did and never would acquire. He had not sufficiently realised that the attention of the public is far more easily attracted by what is strange and wonderful, than by the greatest intellectual and artistic endowments. This was peculiarly the case in Paris, where interest in musical performances only mounted to enthusiasm when some unusual circumstance accompanied them. True, such enthusiasm was at its height at the time of Mozart's visit, but his father could not see that this very fact was against a young man who had so little of the art of ingratiating himself with others. To us it must ever appear as an extraordinary coincidence that Mozart, fresh from Mannheim, and the efforts there being made for the establishment of a national German opera, should have come to Paris at

LULLY, 1652-1687.

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the very height of the struggle between Italian opera and the French opera, as reformed by Gluck, a struggle which appeared to be on the point of being fought out. In neither case did his strong feelings on the subject tempt him to take an active part; he maintained the attitude of a neutral observer, in preparation for the tasks to which he might be appointed.

If we are clearly to apprehend the musical situation, we must remind ourselves in order of the circumstances which had brought it about.

Jean Baptiste de Lully (1633—1687), a native of Florence, had gained such distinction by his violin-playing and ballet music, that in 1652 he was appointed kapellmeister by Louis XIV., and in 1672 he received full power to establish and direct the Académie Royale de Musique. Not only was he the founder of this still existing institution,² but he established by its means the grand opera in France. Faithful to the traditions of his birthplace, Florence, he kept in view the first attempts which had been made in Italy to revive ancient tragedy in opera (Vol. I., p. 154 et seq.). As in Italy, so in Paris, operatic performances were originally designed for court festivals; Lully's privilege consisted in his being allowed to give public representations of operas, "even of those which had been produced at court" ("même celles qui auront été représentés devant Nous"). They were preceded by ballets, in which the connection of the action was indicated by vocal scenes; but the singing was quite subordinate to the long succession of dances, in which the distinguished part of the audience, and even the king himself, took part. Dances, therefore, became an essential ingredient of the opera, and it was the task of the poet and the composers to give them appropriate connection with the plot; to this day, as is well known, the ballet is the special prerogative of the Grand-Opéra at Paris. It was not less important to maintain the reputation of the most brilliant court in the

² Cf. [Noinville] *Histoire du Théâtre de l'Opéra en France* (Paris, 1753; 2nd Edit. 1757). Castil-Blaze, *L'Académie Imp. de Musique de 1645 à 1855* (Paris, 1855, I., II.).

world by means of variety and magnificence of scenery, costumes, machinery, &c. ; in this respect, also, the Grand-Opéra has kept true to its traditions.

But whilst in Italy the musical, and especially the vocal, element of the opera had always the upper hand, in Paris the dramatic element held its ground with good success. It was the easier for Lully to found a national opera in Paris, since he found a poet ready to hand in Quinault, who had the genius to clothe his mythological subjects in the dramatic and poetical dress of his own day. To us, indeed, his productions seem far apart from the spirit of ancient tragedy, and more rhetorical and epigrammatic than poetical in their conception. But his operas (or rather tragedies) expressed truly the spirit of the age, and they became more distinctively national in proportion as the reign of Louis XIV. came to be considered as the golden age of France. It was Lully's task to give musical expression to the national spirit, and in this he succeeded to the admiration of his contemporaries and of posterity. His music is closely connected with those first attempts in Italy. We find none of the set forms of the later opera seria, no regular arie, no duets, no ensembles. The words are for the most part simply rendered in recitative. There is sometimes a figured bass accompaniment ; but even then it is not the free movement of Italian recitative, but is much more precisely apportioned, and the harmonies of the accompaniment change more frequently. When the sentiment becomes rather more elevated, a sort of compromise is effected between recitative and song. The words are rendered with a declamatory spoken accent ; and not only are they strictly in time, but the harmonies are so arranged that a full orchestral chord is given to every note of the song. The melodies are therefore limited in every respect ; the phrases are generally too small in compass to be well carried out, and hang loosely together without any proper design ; it was difficult to develop an elaborate musical form out of such elements as these. Independent songs occur seldom, and then only in the most precise of forms, tending generally to dance melodies (airs). When several voices unite they alternate with each other ; or if they

sing together note follows note, with only exceptionally real ensemble passages. The choruses are formed by a simple harmony in several parts, the soprano not being always appointed to give the melody. The orchestra, except in the dance music, has seldom any independent significance, but simply gives the full harmony to every note of the bass. Instrumental effect is seldom aimed at, and the different instruments are only occasionally employed singly. Lully's merit chiefly consists in his having accentuated his music in a manner which suited the French language, and also in his having succeeded in throwing a certain amount of characteristic pathos into some of his passages. It is comprehensible that at first, musical cultivation being in its infancy, this quality should be most readily felt and acknowledged; but in every art, and especially in music, it is the fate of individual characteristics to become the soonest incomprehensible, and, therefore, unpleasing. For this reason, the reaction against Lully's music attacked just this mode of treating the text. It was considered monotonous, tiresome, and heavy; and the isolated significant phrases having lost their power to please, were compared with the plain-song (plain-chant) of church psalmody.³

The delivery of the vocalists, male and female, is described as dreadful; monotonous droning alternating with violent shrieks and exaggerated accent (*urlo francese*).⁴

Notwithstanding all this, Lully's operas held undisputed possession of the stage during his life,⁵ and even after his death, a sure proof that his success was not merely the result of the favour personally accorded to him. The composers whose operas found favour after his (such as Campra, Colasse, Desmarests, Blamont, and Mouret) are of less im-

³ Grimm, *Corr. inéd.*, p. 222; cf. *Corr. Litt.*, I., p. 93. The following is not bad (*Corr. Litt.*, II., p. 205): "M. Hasse, qui avait entendu parler de la légèreté et de la pétulance françaises, ne se lassait point, lorsqu'il fut en ce pays-ci, d'admirer la patience avec laquelle on écoutait à l'Opéra une musique lourde et monotone." Goldoni amusingly describes the impression made upon him by the French opera (*Mém.*, II., p. 182).

⁴ Grimm, *Corr. Litt.*, XV., p. 283; cf. IV., p. 165. Grétry gives more particular instances of the faults of the old style (*Mém.*, I., p. 301).

⁵ The last performance of one of Lully's operas ("Thésée") was in 1778.

portance historically, because they all copied his manner. Any part of their works which pointed to the influence of the opera seria, as it was being formed in the Neapolitan school, was rejected by the national vanity.⁶

Jean Phil. Rameau (1683-1764) came to Paris from the provinces as an established musician in 1721. He succeeded by his force of character, and the powerful protection of the Farmer-General, La Popelinière, in placing his operas on a level with those of Lully in the public estimation. When he produced his "Hippolyte et Aricie" in 1732, he was met by the most determined opposition on the part of Lully's supporters; but the very decided success of his acknowledged masterpiece, "Castor et Pollux," in 1737,⁷ placed him, if not above Lully, certainly on an equality with him during the remainder of his career. His opponents became gradually reconciled to his supremacy, and acknowledged that French music had not been essentially altered by Rameau, only developed and perfected.⁸ And there can be no question that this was the case. Before Rameau had produced any operas he had made his reputation as an organist and instrumental composer, and more especially as the founder of a theory of harmony. On this latter point his operas also show considerable progress—the harmonic treatment is rich and varied, though sometimes the straining after novelty and effect

⁶ Ragueneau, *Parallèle des Italiens et François en ce qui regarde la Musique et les Opéras* (Paris, 1702), translated into German, with notes, and the rejoinder of Freneuse de la Vieuville (Bonnet, *Histoire de la Musique*, p. 425; Bourdelot, *Hist. de la Mus.*, I., p. 291), in Mattheson's *Critica Musica* (Hamburg, 1712), I., p. 91, and in Marpurge's *Krit. Briefen*, I., pp. 65, 89, 113, 398. Freneuse, *Comparaison de la Mus. Ital. et de la Mus. Franç.* Brussels, 1705 (in Bourdelot's *Hist. de la Mus.*, 1725 and 1743, II.-IV.). Ragueneau, *Défense du Parallèle* (Paris, 1705).

⁷ *La Harpe*, *Corresp. Litt.*, II., p. 302.

⁸ When Grimm first came to Paris he wrote to Gottsched: "M. Rameau is rightly considered by all connoisseurs to be the greatest musician who has ever lived" (Danzel Gottsched, p. 349). His opinion soon changed, but the account he afterwards gives of Rameau (*Corr. Litt.*, IV., p. 80), prejudiced as it is, recognises Rameau's merits, though without giving him the credit of them. In his *Lettre sur "Omphale"* (1752, *Corr. Litt.*, XV., p. 281), Grimm gave a detailed criticism in a very moderate tone. A good account of him may be found in Ad. Adam's *Derniers Souvenirs d'un Musicien*, p. 39.

leads to affectation and over-elaboration. Rameau's accompaniments are free and independent; the orchestra is used with striking effect by means of variety of tone-colouring in the instruments as well as of independent subjects, which serve to accent the details. Rameau's employment of the orchestra shows a marked improvement, not only on Lully, but even on Italian opera as then existing. In the same way we find the choruses released from the fetters of strict thorough-bass, and the parts moving freely and expressively. In the lyrical portions of the opera, much is evidently due to the advance in the art of solo singing, both rhythm and melody move more freely, and embellishment is not wholly wanting. But Rameau has not avowedly adopted the Italian style, although he spent a short part of his youth in Italy. The accepted forms of Italian opera are entirely disregarded, both in the choruses and solos. The slow, uniform progress of Lully's operas becomes freer and more animated in Rameau's, the dramatic expression has more energy and life, and the music has more of individual colouring; but the foundation remains. The same is the case with the treatment of the dialogue. It is still severe, stately, recitative-like singing in varied measure, but Rameau's harmonic art is displayed in his incomparably greater power of expression. Rameau's opera, notwithstanding its independent invention and advance in artistic feeling, is the natural development of Lully's principles, not a revolution against them. It was debated at the time with much warmth whether Rameau's peculiarities were to be accepted as improvements, or to be looked upon as injudicious attempts at novelty. The points which then excited the liveliest interest now seem to us most trivial. But the main fact is not to be denied, that Rameau, by the efforts of his own genius, constructed a national French opera upon the foundations laid by Lully, and that the further development of the grand opera proceeded along the lines laid down by him. Not only can the framework and design of these early operas be recognised in the grand opera of the present day, but French dramatic music, spite of many transformations, betrays its relationship with the early masters in many

peculiarities of melody, rhythm and harmony; a sure proof that national feeling lies at the root of the traditions.

The well-wishers of the national French opera were right in settling their disputes about Lully and Rameau by the recognition of them both; for both alike were threatened by a formidable irruption of Italian taste, which now so completely governed the remainder of Europe that France could not fail to be in some measure affected by it. In August, 1752, a company of Italian singers came to Paris under the direction of a certain Bambini, and having received permission to represent comic operas (*intermezzi*) in the hall of the Grand Opéra, were called "Les Bouffons."⁹ Their first representation of Pergolese's "Serva Padrona" was a failure, but subsequently it was applauded with enthusiasm. The chief singers of the company, Manelli and Anna Tonelli, were highly esteemed both for their singing and acting, although they did not reach to the highest level of Italian opera; the others were indifferent.¹⁰ But they were Italian throats, Italian ways of singing and acting which lent all their powers to the interpretation of opera buffa, with its polished, pleasing form, simply and easily grasped harmonies, and sustained melodies. They found in Paris an appreciative audience, and very soon even the Parisian orchestra, where the conductor beat time audibly,¹¹ while the Italian conductor only directed from the clavier, was described, in comparison to the Italian, as a company of uneducated musicians whose great aim was to make as much noise as possible. The supporters of the national school of music naturally took up arms against the

⁹ Hiller, *Wöch. Nachr.*, 1770, p. 331. Schelle, *N. Ztschr. f. Mus.*, LVII., p. 211; LVIII., p. 119.

¹⁰ According to Castil-Blaze (*L'Opéra Italien*, p. 144), the operas produced by the Bouffons were, "La Serva Padrona," by Pergolese; "Il Giocatore," by Orlandini; "Il Maestro di Musica," by Al. Scarlatti; "La Finta Cameriera," by Atella; "La Donna Superba," by Rinaldo da Capua; "La Scaltra Governatrice," by Cocchi; "Il Cinese Rimpatriato," by Selletti; "La Zingara," by Rinaldo da Capua; "Gli Artigiani Arricchiti," by Latilla; "Il Paratajo," by Jomelli; "Bertoldo in Corte," by Ciampi; "I Viaggiatori," by Leo.

¹¹ The Italian opera was conducted from the pianoforte only, while in the French opera time was beaten audibly with a stick. Cf. Grétry, *Mém.*, I., p. 39.

Italian enthusiasts, and so arose the well-known struggle between the "coin du roi" (nationalists) and the "coin de la reine" (Italians).¹²

Grimm, who always manifested great interest in musical matters, had become acquainted with Italian opera in Germany, and afterwards in Paris, where he took up his abode in 1749; his intercourse with Rousseau and other sympathetic friends increased his partiality for it. His burlesque of "Le Petit Prophète de Boehmischbroda" (1753), which foretold in the biblical prophetic style the downfall of good taste if Paris were not converted to Italian music,¹³ proved a powerful ally to Italian music; he was joined by Diderot, who, like all the encyclopedists, was personally antagonistic to Rameau on account of his attack on the "Encyclopédie."¹⁴ Jean Jacques Rousseau, who in his "Devin du Village" had shown the delighted public how far the treasures of the Italian opera could be turned to good account in the French (Vol. I., p. 87 et seq.), threw all the weight of his influence into the scale of the Bouffonists; not content with mercilessly exposing the shortcomings of the French opera, he undertook to prove that the French language was unfitted for composition, and French music altogether an impossibility.¹⁵ The enraged musicians threatened to punish this daring outrage on the nation¹⁶ with horsewhipping, assassination, or even the Bastille; but a flood of angry discussion was all that actually resulted.¹⁷ Those, however, whose interests were

¹² The heads of the parties had their regular places below the box of the King and Queen.

¹³ It was republished (Corr. Litt., XV., p. 315,) and translated into German (N. Ztschr. f. Mus., IV., p. 63, where it is wrongly ascribed to Rousseau). Grimm speaks of its extraordinary success to Gottsched, and Frau Gottsched speaks of an imitation of it directed against Weiss's operetta, "Der Teufel ist los" (Danzel Gottsched, p. 350).

¹⁴ The account which he gives to Rameau's nephew of his uncle and Italian music is graphic enough (Goethe, XXIII., p. 208).

¹⁵ This was in the well-known *Lettre sur la Musique Française* (1753), to which the *Lettre d'un symphoniste de l'Académie Royale de Musique à ses camarades de l'orchestre* (1753) was a witty after-piece.

¹⁶ Gretry, *Mém.*, I., p. 279.

¹⁷ Rousseau, *Confessions* I., VIII. Grimm, *Corr. Litt.*, I., p. 92. Fétis, *Curios. Hist. de la Mus.*, p. 107.

attacked, especially the proprietors and singers of the opera-house, took such measures as obliged the Italian singers to quit Paris in March, 1754.¹⁸

It may well be wondered at that men like Rousseau¹⁹ and Diderot,²⁰ who upheld simplicity and nature as the true canons of art, should have evinced a preference for Italian music. For though doubtless the Italian style was grounded originally on the nature of music, it had already become conventional, and far removed from what the philosophers called natural. At the same time it must be remembered that their partiality always turned in the direction of opera buffa, which sought from its commencement to free itself from the conventional restraint of opera seria (Vol. I., p. 203). Then, too, the musical element, as distinguished from the poetical or dramatic, had always been the foundation of Italian opera, and an opposition directed against the French opera, with its poetical and dramatic proclivities, would be sure to uphold the purely musical development of the Italians, even though the exaggerations into which it was carried might be displeasing to the philosophers.

The influence of the Bouffons survived their departure. The Comédie Italienne (aux Italiens) produced Italian comedies in masquerade, French comedies, and parodies of operas, the charm of which consisted mainly in their vocal parts, on which account they were called opéras comiques.²¹ A dangerous rival to the Comédie Italienne was the Théâtre de la Foire, whose representations took place originally on

¹⁸ Grimm, *Corr. Litt.*, I., p. 114.

¹⁹ Rousseau had apparently a natural musical talent, which was quickened by Italian music; his logical reflections sometimes led him into error, but he remained accessible to new musical impressions, even when they contradicted his expressed opinions.

²⁰ Diderot appears to have had some musical taste, but not much cultivation, and in this respect Grimm had some influence upon his opinions, as he certainly had upon Grimm's in more important matters. The article "Poème lyrique" in the *Encyclopédie* (publ. *Corr. Litt.*, XV., p. 349), is a curious mixture of Italian taste, and of reflections after Diderot's manner: the views it upholds are often warped and superficial.

²¹ Grimm, *Corr. Litt.*, VI., p. 229. The parodies are collected in *Les Parodies du Nouveau Théâtre Italien* (Paris, 1738, I. IV.). *Supplément aux Parodies* (Paris, 1763, I. III.).