

A controversial new work

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When Antonio Sacchini arrived in Paris in 1781, his stay there had been on the cards for quite some time. The Opéra – Académie Royale de Musique – had already approached him in 1775, but he had preferred to remain in London, basking in the fame he had been enjoying there in recent years. Some time later, however, deeply in debt and under fire for his dissolute ways, he had begun seriously to think about leaving the country. So the renewed invitation from the directors of the Opéra in the early 1780s proved timely.

At that time Gluck had recently left Paris, leaving Piccinni, who had moved to France in 1776, with no great rival in the operatic field. The directors of the Académie Royale were in urgent need of someone with a strong personality who would be able to hold his own against Piccinni on their stage. So in 1781 they resumed the negotiations begun in 1775 with Sacchini. The composer made a first trip to Paris, but since no satisfactory agreement was reached with the administration of the Opéra, matters were then taken to the highest level, and after discussions with Sacchini, the minister (the royal minister in charge of the Académie Royale de Musique and entertainments in Paris) announced to the queen in the autumn of that year that the composer had agreed to produce three operas, for each of which he was to be paid ten thousand *livres tournois* (the French currency in use under the Ancien Régime).

After much deliberation, it was decided that a work entitled *Renaud* would be presented, which meant being able to rely at least partly on a

score Sacchini had written earlier for performance in London: that of the *opera seria*, *Rinaldo*. He had originally wished to produce a completely new work in the purest French spirit, but time was too short. No doubt under Sacchini's guidance, the libretto was put together by Nicolas-Étienne Framery, who translated the passages from *Rinaldo* that were to be used in the new work, and Jean-Joseph Le Bœuf, who compiled excerpts from Simon-Joseph Pellegrin's *Renaud, ou la Suite d'Armide* (a libretto that had already been set by Henry Desmarest in 1722). In the 1720s, Pellegrin had written what he described as a sequel to Lully's opera *Armide*, which, as he explains in the preface, follows the heroine from where Quinault's libretto left off; he took inspiration from Cantos XVII and XX of Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*:

In the seventeenth [canto], Armide, at the head of her troops, comes to the Sudanese army, seeking revenge against Renaud; she promises her hand to whoever brings her his head. In the twentieth [canto], she is about to kill herself when Renaud arrives and prevents her from doing so, following which they are reconciled. That is the entire subject of my play.

That ambitious project had had rather a poor reception at the time. So why revive even part of the libretto sixty years later? The answer lies in the vogue at that time, under Louis XVI, for the revival of earlier librettos – those of Quinault, Houdar de La Motte, Danchet, Pellegrin and others – which were then set to new music. The works of Philippe Quinault were particularly prized; they returned to the stage with music by composers such as Gluck (*Armide*, 1777), Piccinni (*Roland*, 1778; *Atys*, 1780), Johann Christian Bach (*Amadis de Gaule*, 1779), Philidor (*Persée*, 1781) and Gossec (*Thésée*, 1782).

Renaud was no small undertaking, and since it involved considerable expenditure the Académie Royale had to make sure the new libretto was worth all the effort. A committee was duly convened to read the work. The first results were not conclusive and it was even suggested that *Renaud* should be abandoned in favour of *La Clémence de Titus*, using a French translation by Morel de Chédeville of Metastasio's libretto. But

Framery and Le Bœuf worked so hard to get their libretto accepted that in the end it came into the hands of Suard, the *censeur des theatres* (the man in charge of passing the final judgement on plays and opera librettos), who summed up his verdict with the witticism: 'Abbé Pellegrin is to his copyist, as Racine is to Abbé Pellegrin'. In the end, Le Bœuf revised the libretto and it was accepted.

The chroniclers, in their subsequent analyses, proved unable to put things into perspective; above all, they compared the new libretto with the old one without making any comment whatsoever on the borrowings from the London opera *Rinaldo*. Although the first judgements were severe, some of the later ones showed more indulgence. The article in *L'Esprit des journaux français et étrangers*, for instance, included the following comments:

Although M. Le Bœuf has by and large followed the plan of Pellegrin's libretto, he has made considerable changes, some of which are quite advantageous. The pace is faster, and the scene divisions are more in keeping with the means of modern music.

Indeed, the new version of *Renaud* had the not insignificant merit of being very concise and centred throughout on the main character, Armide. Though ever-present, the political and martial issues form merely a backdrop against which the complex and ambiguous figure of the heroine, with her various different statuses, as princess, sorceress and lover, stands out clearly. Thus, the desolate battlefield at the beginning of the third act proves to be a very successful allegorical representation of the heroine's inward distress.

The first performance of *Renaud*, on 28 February 1783, was eagerly awaited, especially since it had been delayed for several weeks by various intrigues, from which Sacchini had emerged victorious but weary. The presence of the queen and several other members of the royal family brought a solemnity to the occasion that made it even more trying for the composer. The rehearsals of the work had been as stormy as those of *Iphigénie en Aulide* and *Roland*, for, like Gluck and Piccinni, Sacchini had had to

overcome prejudice. The supporters of Gluck, in particular, were so influential that they succeeded in getting the directors of the Opéra to offer Sacchini ten thousand francs for the opera not to be performed! Furthermore, aware that he was causing much anger, the composer very nearly accepted! *Renaud* could quite easily have never been completed.

But it *was* completed, and the audience of the Académie Royale de Musique was at last able to hear the work that some had tried to keep from the stage. *Renaud* was applauded on the whole for 'its pleasing, elegant and sensitive melodies; its perfectly rounded arias, with themes that can be followed without effort, are developed without padding and are skillfully supported and embellished by the accompaniment; [...] a pure, bright harmony, which is rich without any confusion, clear without any monotony, with the finest casting of the parts and the most effective use of the various instruments'. (*L'Esprit des journaux français et étrangers*.) Armide's expressive arias in particular became instantly famous – especially 'Barbare amour, tyran des cœurs' (Act II, Scene 8). Critics also noted the presence of 'variety, which is always necessary in dramatic music, and is obtained only with difficulty' (*Journal de Paris*). The *Mercur de France*, committed to the cause of Gluck, recognised Sacchini's ability 'to be softer than the German musician, and as pure and melodious as Piccinni, but with greater energy, and without ever becoming monotonous and soporific like the latter'. The redoubtable Baron Friedrich Melchior von Grimm decided that 'it [was] impossible not to recognise in the work of M. Sacchini the hand of a great master', while nevertheless detecting in the work 'a kind of uneasiness that, for all his skill, he was unable to conceal'. (Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire*, March 1783, p. 159.) Jean-François de La Harpe (*op. cit.*, XII, p. 92) was of the opinion that 'with the exception of two or three pieces that show the character of a great master, the music seemed weak and full of features that are all too commonplace'. All in all, however, *Renaud* was a success.



As a major new work, the opera brought together the finest artists of the time, all of them leading singers or principal dancers of the Paris Opéra. The ballets, choreographed by Maximilien Gardel, were relatively few, but they were impressive: very appropriate and fitting neatly into the dramatic fabric of the work. The dancers, each excelling in his or her role, included Marie-Madeleine Guimard, Anne-Marguerite Dorival and Marguerite-Angelique Peslin, Auguste Vestris, Maximilien Gardel and Louis-Marie Nivelon. But, of course, the dance, merely a decorative element, was of secondary importance, and attention was focused above all on the singers. And how could it have been otherwise? For the leading roles were taken by Rosalie Levasseur (*Armide*) and Joseph Legros (*Renaud*), both of whom were to be taking their final bows at the Opéra in the course of that run of performances.

Rosalie Levasseur, exhausted by the successive operas by Gluck that she had premièred – *Orphée & Eurydice* (1775, the part of Amour), *Alceste* (1776, title role), *Armide* (1777, title role) and *Iphigénie en Tauride* (1779, title role) – was at the end of her career. During the performances of *Iphigénie en Tauride* she had already caused her admirers to fear the worst when she had stayed in bed on the days when she was not appearing on stage. She recovered briefly, however, but by 1783 she could no longer hide the fact that her voice was in a poor condition. By scheming she nevertheless managed to stay in the running, obtaining the role of *Armide*. She was furthermore to some extent responsible for obtaining Marie-Antoinette's support for Sacchini. Indeed, the queen was put under pressure not only by the Austrian ambassador, Florimond de Mercy-Argenteau, who was anxious to please his emperor, but also – even more – by his mistress, Rosalie Levasseur. She was nevertheless obliged to withdraw after a few performances, leaving the role to the promising young Antoinette Cécile Saint-Huberty, who triumphed in Sacchini's opera, as she was to triumph a few months later in his *Chimène* and in Piccinni's *Didon*. But Mademoiselle Saint-Huberty did not remain unrivalled for long: she was soon overshadowed by Mesdemoiselles Maillard and Dozon.

As for the tenor Joseph Legros, he had already been asking to retire for several months, not because his voice had suffered the ravages of time, but because his huge bulk made it difficult for him to move and therefore act on stage, which undermined his credibility in the leading roles to which his voice was suited. Furthermore, since his appointment as director of the Concert Spirituel, he had other business to see to. So the singer who had made his *début* at the Académie Royale de Musique as Renaud in the revival of Lully's *Armide* in 1761 (and had continued to perform that role until 1764) also made his final bow as Renaud, but in Sacchini's opera. In both roles he showed the same fine vocal qualities and the same awkwardness on stage. Clad in helmet and armour, he never proved convincing, but as soon as the *airs brillants* and sentimental duos began, he received all the audience's attention and admiration. That may explain why the character created by Sacchini and his librettist, far from being brave, as one would expect, is in his element when it comes to gentleness and expression that is more elegiac than bellicose.

The other artists taking part in the first performance of *Renaud* included all the members of the new French school, then in its infancy: the *basse-taille* (low tenor) François Laÿs (Larrivée's successor) took the part of Armide's father, Hidraot; the bass Augustin-Athanase Chéron was Adraste (Adrastus), King of India; the still very young Maria-Teresa Maillard took the small part of Antiope, Queen of the Amazons; finally, the librettist's own daughter, Mademoiselle Le Bœuf, acquitted herself with honour as the Coryphée in the difficult aria that concludes the work on very high notes and vocalises.



The reviews of the work, whether good or bad, need to be taken in their context, at a time when various quarrels were rife. For us, more than two centuries later, it is clear that *Renaud* has many very real qualities, stemming primarily from a perfect understanding of the rules of French opera, particularly those relating to the spectacular element, both visual (sets,

machinery, crowd scenes, and so on) and musical (ballets, large choruses, duos, trios, ensemble pieces, accompanied recitative). Moreover, Sacchini succeeds in combining very well the dramatic intensity of Gluck and the lyricism of Piccinni, while adding his own personal touch in the orchestral scoring, which is particularly energetic and finely wrought, recalling in that respect Mozart. With the possible exception of *Arvire & Évelina*, which was left unfinished, none of the composer's subsequent works was to find that same judicious combination of dramatic grandeur, expressive singing and lively music. In that sense, *Renaud* deserves a place alongside the greatest masterpieces of that time: Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride*, Johann Christian Bach's *Amadis de Gaule*, Grétry's *Andromaque*, and Gossec's *Thésée*.

Although Sacchini's supporters eagerly applauded each new work in turn, neither *Chimène* nor *Dardanus*, presented the following year, really added to the composer's reputation. Furthermore, *Renaud* was subsequently to reveal beauties that had not been clearly perceived at the time of its première. Thus, between 1783 and 1815, it received a total of over a hundred and fifty performances at the Opéra. The première was immediately followed by sixty performances (thirty-nine in 1783, eleven in 1784, and ten in 1785). Momentarily eclipsed between 1786 and 1788 by Sacchini's two posthumous operas, *Œdipe à Colone* and *Arvire & Évelina*, *Renaud* reappeared on the bill in 1788 and remained in the repertoire until 1799, with performances every year (five in 1788, four in 1789, five in 1790, two in 1791, eleven in 1792, twelve in 1793, eight in 1794, seventeen in 1795, fourteen in 1796, nine in 1797, two in 1798, and two again in 1799). It was also performed abroad – in Liège, for example, in 1784, and in Copenhagen in 1786.

Some of the arias from *Renaud* were still in the repertoire of French divas at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and the idea of staging the work once again may have been prompted by concert performances. In 1814, after the famous soprano Caroline Branchu had been heard in the cavatina 'Barbare amour, tyran des cœurs', an article in the *Journal des débats* (23 July 1814) declared:

Renaud is an opera worthy of the author of *Œdipe à Colone*. It has long been banished from the operatic stage; it is hard to understand why. The Opéra's repertoire contains very few good works: five operas by Gluck, Sacchini's *Œdipe* and Piccinni's *Didon* are, along with a few unattractive new works, the only *tragédies lyriques* it comprises. *Renaud* would by no means be out of place in the list of works I have just mentioned, and there is reason to believe that both the audience and the administration would also do well out of it.

That advice was heeded and a few months later *Renaud* was back on the bill. But it received only four performances in 1815. Despite the presence of Caroline Branchu, then at the height of her career after the premières of Spontini's *La Vestale* and *Fernand Cortez*, the work did not have the expected impact and it was soon abandoned. *Renaud* experienced that sad epilogue partly because of the poor conditions for its performance at that time, but also because the musical style then in vogue was very different: the thundering Romanticism of composers such as Méhul, Cherubini, Catel, Kreutzer and Spontini had taken over.

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FMP
SACC
RENA

RENAUD

Tragedie Lyrique

En trois Actes

*Représentée pour la première fois par l'Académie
de Musique, le Mardi 25 Fevrier 1783.*

Mis en Musique

PAR SACCHINI

Prix 30th

a Paris

*Chez LE DUC, au Magasin de Musique et d'Instruments, Rue neuve
des Petits champs, vis-à-vis la Trésorerie.
Et Rue du Boule, à la Croix d'Or, N.º 290.*

Scrit par Ribiere

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Title page of Sacchini's *Renaud*, published in Paris.
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