

1778-1779:

The Académie Royale in turmoil

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Anne-Pierre-Jacques Devisme du Valgay's term of office as director of the Académie Royale de Musique from 1777 to 1779 proved to be one of the stormiest of the eighteenth century, but also one of the most fruitful. His appointment, in winter 1777, marked a new development in the institution's then complex history. But he had to contend first of all with the opposition of his predecessor (1775-1777) and also successor (1779-1780), Pierre-Montan Berton. Much displeased by Devisme's appointment, the latter decided to resign from the Opéra, rather than 'allow himself to be degraded' by his successor. Indeed, one of the first measures Devisme took as director of the Opéra was to share out responsibilities by creating new positions, with 'a *maître* in charge of each discipline: singing, dance, the orchestra, and so on' (*Mémoires secrets*, 15 December 1777). A little earlier (letter to Papillon de La Ferté, 6 December 1777) Devisme had written ironically: 'It may be that M. Berton finds it hard to envisage his new position, and that his amour-propre quite rightly makes him feel the difference between governing as director and being a subordinate.' Regardless of Berton's opinion, the appointment of a newcomer with such an atypical profile was a source of enthusiasm in Paris. As the *Journal de Paris* of 23 April 1778 pointed out, 'All eyes are expected to be on the Opéra, either because of its new administration, or because of the new programmes that are eagerly awaited there.'

Devisme's arrival was seen as a minor event, but it represented in fact a major upheaval at the Opéra! He immediately applied drastic administrative reforms, while following an extremely committed artistic policy. Two months before he took office, new regulations – forty-nine articles – were drawn up, 'both to make known the extent of M. Devisme's rights as licensee and entrepreneur, and to remind the different *sujets* of the Opéra [as the artists were known] of the duties required of them and the rules of subordination from which they were expected not to deviate' (*Arrêt du Conseil d'État du Roi, contenant le Règlement pour l'Académie Royale de Musique*, 27 February 1778). That set the tone. For if Devisme was certainly not lacking in ideas, he was undoubtedly lacking in flexibility and diplomacy, a fact that soon began to inspire hostility among his staff and some members of the public. Conspiracies, scandals, open letters and arrests punctuated his term of office and were widely talked about: 'It is unimaginable how overheated this dispute has become in the city and at the royal court. Princes, ministers, duchesses... everyone is interested in it and taking sides; one is not allowed to remain indifferent.' (*Mémoires secrets*, 15 March 1779.) Thus, on 23 January 1780, Devisme gave up a position that had become too restricting, and handed in his resignation, which was accepted on 19 February. He nevertheless stayed on for one more season at the Opéra, as manager on behalf of the City of Paris, which bitterly regretted having taken on the responsibility of running such a cumbersome machine. The general opinion, however, was that 'the Opéra had never seen such a rich variety of new works' as during the month of January 1779. Indeed, Devisme had achieved the unprecedented feat of having twelve different works staged in that one month, and Paris was surprised to discover that 'serious' operas could be switched as easily as *opéras-comiques*.

The director's main concern had been to present a varied repertoire that would appeal to different types of audiences and thus bring as many people as possible to the theatre. Contemporary testimonies unanimously pay tribute to the intelligence of that policy. And indeed, within a few months, Devisme had achieved his aim (La Borde, *Essai sur la musique*

ancienne et moderne, p. 403). One of the spearheads of his policy was the revival of older works, which he presented simultaneously with the most recent pieces. 'I intended to compare the most chronologically disparate works and thereby give the public at large an opportunity to compare and judge more precisely the progress that this art has made and give each individual the right to enjoy the type he prefers' (*Journal de Paris*, 15 February 1779). The revival of older works was intended to cater to the tastes of one particular section of the theatre-going public, while the creation of new operatic and choreographic works targeted another group. Only three new works had been staged in 1777-78, but in his very first season Devisme proposed about fifteen, including small-scale works, several *ballets-pantomimes* and many Italian *opere buffe*. Where larger-scale projects were concerned, however, he encountered difficulties and in that first season only one new *tragédie lyrique* was given, *Hellé* by Étienne-Joseph Floquet, and it was not a great success. Devisme had had the very attractive idea of bringing together for comparison two versions of the same work, *Iphigénie en Tauride*, one by Gluck, the other by Piccinni. But only Gluck's setting was given in 1779; the Académie Royale did not present the rival version until 1781. *Écho & Narcisse* was also performed, and it brought Gluck's Parisian career to a rather sad end. Several works commissioned from famous foreign composers, such as Johann Christian Bach, Gossec, Philidor and Piccinni, renewed the institution's repertoire for a time. From the moment he took up office in April 1778 until his departure in March 1780, Devisme pursued one of the boldest and most modern policies the Opéra had ever experienced before or was to experience afterwards. It cost him his position, with his departure announcing yet another new administration.



The last great new work Devisme was able to attend was Bach's *Amadis de Gaule* in December 1779. The work had been commissioned several months previously, when Devisme had asked some of the finest composers

of the time to set revised versions of librettos by Quinault: Gossec was commissioned to compose *Thésée*, Philidor *Persée*, Piccinni *Atys*, and so on. But unlike those composers, Johann Christian Bach was not well known in Paris, especially as a composer of operas. The only works he had written that were known there were the few pieces that had been successfully performed at the Concert Spirituel in the 1760s and 1770s. He had never set foot in France. So the commission for *Amadis* was truly an event, especially since the choice of a composer who was British by adoption – he was known as the ‘London Bach’ – provided an alternative in the quarrel between the supporters of German music and those of Italian music. Bach represented perhaps a third possibility, between Gluck and Piccinni.

Johann Christian Bach (1735-1782), the youngest son of the great Johann Sebastian, was aged forty-four at that time. Born in Leipzig, he received his first instruction in music from his father, before moving to Berlin after the latter’s death to live and work with his brother Carl Philipp Emanuel. From 1754 to 1760 he was in charge of the orchestra of Count Agostino Litta in Milan, before becoming organist of Milan Cathedral. During his stay in Italy he learned the art of composing operas in *opera seria* form, and he excelled at the genre, as is evidenced by the success of his *Temistocle*, for example, which was particularly famous in its time. In 1762 he moved to England, where he became music master to Queen Charlotte. And shortly after his arrival there he founded several public concert societies. In 1764, when the Mozart family was in England, he showed the young Wolfgang such warmth and kindness that the latter was to have a lifelong affection and admiration for him. Johann Christian Bach wrote symphonies, operas, concertos and many diverse chamber compositions. By the time he died (1 January 1782) he was famous all over Europe. *Amadis* is his last operatic work. Like many other foreign composers (Lully, Gluck, Sacchini, Piccinni, Cherubini, Rossini and Donizetti spring to mind), Johann Christian Bach wrote his final masterpiece for the French stage.

We learn about the early preparations for *Amadis* from Mozart, who was staying in Paris in 1778. In a letter dated 9 July, he told his father,

‘Capellmeister Bach will also soon be here; I believe he is writing an opera,’ adding, probably with a twinkle in his eye, ‘the French are, and always will be, asses, they can do nothing themselves, but are obliged to have recourse to foreigners’. On 27 August he confirmed that ‘Herr Bach, from London, has been here for the last fortnight. He is going to write a French opera, and is only come for the purpose of hearing the singers; then he will go back to London to write the opera, and return here to put it on the stage.’ After several discussions with the management of the Académie Royale (discussions that remained secret) and the usual auditions, the composer returned to London with the libretto of *Amadis*, a ‘poem’ by Quinault, reworked by Alphonse Devisme (brother of the director of the Paris Opéra). And so *Amadis* was written in London, but not before Johann Christian Bach had spent a good deal of time consulting the scores of Gluck and several French composers in order to familiarise himself with the style that was then appreciated at the Académie Royale de Musique. More than a year passed – months that were fertile for the composer, more turbulent for the director – before performances of the work were on the agenda. Back in Paris in November 1779, Johann Christian Bach was obliged to witness the fate of *Amadis de Gaule*, powerless to do anything about it.



Grétry also contributed to the revival of Gluckist operas with a splendid *Andromaque* in 1781. Collection of the Geneva Conservatoire.

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