

# Foreigners at the Académie Royale de Musique (1774-1789)

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*Why is a grand opéra never entrusted to a Frenchman?*

*Why does it always have to be foreigners?*

(Mozart, letter to his father, 31 July 1778)

These words may come as a surprise. Could the Académie Royale de Musique, the Paris Opéra, claimed to be such a bastion of French culture, really have fallen into the hands of foreigners at that time? Before the reign of King Louis XVI and Queen Marie-Antoinette, opera in France had been characterised by a prevailing ultra-nationalism: with the exception of two or three isolated experiments in the early years of the eighteenth century (notably, *Scylla* by the composer Teobaldo di Gatti), no works by foreign composers were performed there. An ironical situation, considering that it was an Italian, Giambattista Lulli, who had not only ‘invented’ French opera in 1673, but had also taken the Académie Royale de Musique to the heights of perfection that made it a strong contender for the prime position among Europe’s opera stages. But he had taken French nationality, changed the spelling of his name, and received ennoblement from Louis XIV, thus ruling over French opera as Jean-Baptiste de Lully, without any suspicion of disloyalty towards the kingdom of France.

The fact that hardly any foreign composers, even among those who had been in the capital for many years, had written a *tragédie lyrique*, a *pastorale* or a ballet for the Académie Royale de Musique may have been merely a coincidence, rather than a rule imposed by the Opéra. Nationality

does not appear to have impeded those composers' careers. It was just that Pietro Lorenzani, Antonia Bembo, Antonio Guido, Michele Mascitti and others preferred on the whole to write sonatas, cantatas and motets, rather than operas.

In the eighteenth century, however, a radical change came about, and by the eve of the Revolution the Académie Royale found itself spoiled for choice, with composers from all over Europe submitting works to its reading committee. In August 1787 its director, Antoine Dauvergne, informed the minister in charge 'that *Théodore* [Paisiello], would be followed immediately by *Pénélope* [Piccinni], then by *Évelina* [Sacchini]; that M. Marmontel had received the promise that he would hear his opera *Démophon*, set to music by M. Cherubini; that there was another *Démophon*, to a text by M. Desriaux and music by M. Vogel.' (Archives nationales, O1 619 No. 292.) Then the scores awaiting the minister's final decision in July 1789 were '*Clytemnestre*, to music by M. Piccinni; *Antigone*, music by M. Zingarelli; *Palestris*, music by M. Tomeoni, and *Proserpine*, music by M. Wanach [*sic*].' (Archives nationales, O1 619 no. 501.)

But, contrary to the impression we may have now, several centuries later, Paris was not suddenly swarming with foreign artists who had arrived there in a sort of massive, disorganised and opportunistic invasion. They arrived in fact in several successive waves, with the Académie Royale de Musique cleverly orchestrating their acclimatisation and the scheduling of their works through the philosophical, literary and musical exchanges that were to intrigue, then fascinate the public\*, with the result that the institution's revenue from ticket sales was to reach a record high. Gluck, Piccinni and Sacchini headed the bill, with Salieri, Vogel, Cherubini and Paisiello playing smaller, but by no means insignificant, roles. But new contenders for the prime position were constantly clamouring at the Opéra's doors: not only the majority of French composers, who were

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\* The 'philosophical, literary and musical exchanges' were exemplified by the *Correspondances littéraires* of Grimm and La Harpe, favouring, respectively, the Germans (i.e. the Gluckists) and the Italians (i.e. the Piccinnists).

temporarily pushed out of the limelight, but also other foreign musicians, whose works were purely and simply refused.



The French monopoly of opera at the Académie Royale de Musique had ended abruptly in 1774, with the performance of *Iphigénie en Aulide* by the Austrian composer Christoph Willibald Ritter von Gluck, who had received the support of the former archduchess of Austria, now Dauphine of France, Marie-Antoinette – she had been his pupil in Vienna. Immediately the work was hailed as revolutionary by a whole section of the public, fired with enthusiasm by a new type of opera that seemed capable of sweeping aside the old French style inherited from Lully. Even before the first performance, nobody doubted that *Iphigénie en Aulide* would ‘make its mark in the history of French music’ (*Mémoires secrets*, 10 April 1774, the day of the dress rehearsal). And Voltaire saw the importance of Gluck’s reform as going well beyond the field of music: ‘It seems to me that [between them] Louis XVI and M. Gluck are going to create a new epoch.’ (Letter to François Marin, 16 August 1774.)

Contrary to the belief of most nineteenth- and twentieth-century commentators, the directors of the Académie Royale had no fear of the radical change of style that was in the offing. Indeed, it mattered little to them that Gluck’s music was so very different from that of Rameau. What they did fear, however was that in killing off the old repertoire his work would be the cause of an unprecedentedly complex crisis at the Opéra. The reading committee never doubted the quality of Gluck’s score for *Iphigénie*. Nevertheless the director, Antoine Dauvergne, ended his report on the work prophetically with the comment:

If M. Gluck is prepared to produce at least six such operas for us, I will be the first to be interested in presenting his *Iphigénie*. But otherwise, no; for such an opera will bring about the demise of all those that have preceded it.  
(Anton Schmid, *Christoph Willibald Ritter von Gluck*, 1854, p. 480.)

Dauvergne and his associates – unlike Marie-Antoinette, who insisted that the institution open its doors to Gluck without any more ado – foresaw the dire consequences for the Opéra that loomed ahead.

The Opéra's fears were immediately confirmed. *Iphigénie* sounded the death knell for all the earlier works in its repertoire, of which there were no further revivals after 1774. A revised version by Antoine Dauvergne of *Callirhoé* by André Cardinal Destouches was one of the last, in November 1773. It was taken off after just one performance, having been booed from beginning to end. Opera in Paris suddenly found itself in an extremely uncomfortable situation, the outcome of which was uncertain. The *Mémoires secrets* of 23 September 1776 summed this up perfectly:

At this time we must be more difficult to please in music than we have ever been: we have not yet entirely abandoned our old prejudices, yet we show distaste for anything that complies with them. Nor are we accustomed to the genre that is now trying to establish itself amongst us, and we do not yet appreciate it as much as we may do some day. This means that we react very coolly to the music presented to us; neither the old nor the new arouses any enthusiasm, and since we are no longer informed one way or the other, this clash of ideas [...] is likely to give rise to a genre between the two that is probably the truly good genre, the one that will appeal to all nations.

A few die-hard conservatives voiced their criticism, but the prevailing enthusiasm for *Iphigénie* soon gained the upper hand. Papillon de La Ferté was able to conclude that 'tastes are now firmly set in favour of M. Gluck's works' (Archives nationales, O1 617 no. 42), and the Académie found itself unable to restage anything from its earlier repertoire without running the risk of its being a dismal failure. *Iphigénie en Aulide* had become the only work it could turn to!

Thus, another foreigner, Austrian this time, had succeeded, even better than the Italians had done twenty years earlier with the Querelle des

Bouffons, in dividing Parisian intellectual circles on matters of aesthetics, while furthermore bringing about a financial crisis at the Opéra. As Papillon de La Ferté pointed out:

A single work had completely changed the course of opera in France, thereby putting the Académie Royale in the position of subsequently being obliged to present only operas belonging to that new genre, especially since the most zealous supporters of the old style of music have now changed their minds and wholeheartedly approve of the current style. [...] If M. Gluck's works have succeeded in bringing about such a change in them, what effect will they have on all those young people who have known no other style of music? Therefore, what is to be expected of attempts to revive older works, other than the certainty of the money risked in such a venture being completely lost? [...] M. Gluck may further enrich the Opéra with several works that are bound to be a success, but we have no others with which to alternate them. Can new productions be counted on after this unfortunate experience? Can we turn to old works, when those that have been revived have had such little success? [...] We can only reasonably pin our hopes on works yet to be written in the new genre; but they will not be appearing immediately, for assuming that Messrs Piccinni, Sacchini, Traetta and other skilful composers are prepared to undertake such compositions, they will need time to get to know French tastes and choose the appropriate librettos from those submitted to them. Hence we may conclude that there is hope for the not too distant future, but there will be nothing for next year.

(Denis-Pierre-Jean Papillon de La Ferté, *Journal*; Archives nationales, O1 617 no. 42.)

Jean-François Marmontel, meanwhile, was convinced that the road ahead was not going to be easy:

A few attempts, a few brief successes will not be sufficient to stabilise French tastes; it will take a whole series of attempts and many lasting successes to

do that. Every musician in Europe will be in the running, and far from discouraging them, we shall be sending for them; they will feel that there is something missing from their fame if they have not shown their worth on stage in a city where the arts are so flourishing; each in turn will come and show how brilliantly he is able to set the works of our poets.

(Marmontel, *Œuvres complètes*, 1819, vol. x, p. 425.)

Clearly something had to be done – and soon! All sorts of unlikely expedients were thought up to remedy the present lack of works in the performable repertoire. And gradually a brave new policy began to emerge. Voltaire was right: Gluck was indeed about to create a new epoch – that of Romanticism, which was to be placed under the aegis of various national schools of composition, with Paris as its capital, and with the likes of Cherubini, Spontini, Rossini and Donizetti crossing the paths there of the likes of Meyerbeer, Wagner, Liszt and Chopin. Paris was playing that pivotal role in the world of music well before the 1830s. In 1780, one thing was certain: it was in France that European composers had confirmed their reputations and obtained their consecration. There had of course been some friction, but by the time of the Revolution the Académie Royale was able to pride itself on an artistic approach that for the past fifteen years had shown true originality.

Between 1774 (the first performance of *Iphigénie en Aulide*) and 1790 (the end of the Ancien Régime), the institution presented eighty-eight new works (operas and ballets), thirty-two of which – over a third – were the work of foreign musicians who had been drawn to the French capital by its reputation. The Italians Piccinni, Sacchini, Salieri, Cambini, Cherubini, Paisiello and Anfossi led the field with nineteen compositions, followed by the Germanic composers, Gluck, Vogel, Starzer, Mayer and Mozart, with eleven. Britain had two representatives, Johann Christian Bach ('the English Bach') and Philip James Meyer, who produced one opera each. Not all of those works had been successful, however. On the contrary: never had the Paris Opéra seen so many failures in succession. In 1789 Papillon de La Ferté painted a bleak picture of the situation:

We must note that the radical change in musical style that had come about ten years previously made all the earlier operas completely irrelevant, so that only those written in the new style could be performed. Of the few works that were offered to the Académie, several appear to have been unworthy of public representation. Several of those that were accepted and performed were not successful, so that the Opéra's repertoire that can really be counted on is very small.

(Papillon de La Ferté, *Précis sur l'Opéra et son administration*, 1789, p. 31.)

We learn furthermore from Papillon de La Ferté (*Observations sur l'Académie royale de musique, et sur les ouvrages qui forment son répertoire actuel*, p. 77) that there were forty-one operas in the repertoire at that time, works by Gluck, Piccinni, Sacchini, Philidor, Gossec, Grétry, Salieri, Cherubini, Lemoyne and Rameau; no other works from the old repertoire were still presented. He points out twenty-three works that, in his opinion, would really have been able to hold their own had they been revived, but even some of those, he felt, had become 'stale' by then, 'with only the works of MM. Piccinni, Sacchini, Salieri and Grétry having been [...] a conclusive success since 1774, when Ritter von Gluck gave his first operas'. Indeed, Piccinni, Sacchini, Salieri and Grétry headed the list, with their works alone representing all but four of the works in the corpus, those four being by Lemoyne (*Phèdre*), Cherubini (*Démophon*) and Salieri (*Les Danaïdes* and *Tarare*). Seventeen operas – almost three-quarters of those twenty-three pillars of the repertoire – were therefore the work of foreign composers. Summoning so many foreign musicians to the capital not only enabled the Opéra to renew the works on offer in response to the wishes of the public, but it also dealt a fatal blow to the supremacy of a national art that had been France's pride and joy since the time of Louis XIV. Was such a situation so easy to accept?

The presence of so many foreign musicians in the capital gave Parisian artistic life fresh impetus and generated positive emulation, but it also led to many quarrels, some of them smouldering beneath the surface, but

others blazing openly. Most of those quarrels were initiated by the administration of the Opéra itself, with the aim of creating a buzz and thereby attracting audiences to the productions of the artists concerned, but also for political purposes: by setting musicians against one another or constantly calling new personalities to the capital, the Opéra prevented the most famous composers from being in a situation of monopoly that would have enabled them to demand excessively high fees.

The French school suffered badly as a result of this 'importation' of foreign musicians. Many French composers were left on the sidelines, and to add insult to injury the public showed less interest in them. According to Papillon de La Ferté (*Précis sur l'Opéra et son administration*, 1789, p. 77), only the few French composers who attempted to imitate Gluck, Sacchini, Piccinni and Salieri, and were thus carried along in their wake, had some taste of success. There was certainly good reason either to curse those foreigners or to emulate them!

Although efforts were made to curb that trend, imitating German or Italian models did indeed seem the easiest way to obtain recognition. Jean-Benjamin de La Borde wrote:

Let us no longer be unjust in deprecating the true merit of our compatriots, while exalting the sometimes dubious merits of these foreigners, who have no superiority over our own composers other than their greater ability to scheme for success, and possibly a larger amount of self-esteem enabling them to feel they deserve it. [...] Far be it from us to express contempt for the acclaim received by the foreign composers who in recent years have graced our operatic stage with masterpieces of a genre that indeed has its beauties; but it is our belief that they should not be acclaimed exclusively, at the expense of the few good French composers who have proved their worth [...]. We must encourage the ones without discouraging the others.

(La Borde, *Essai sur la musique ancienne et moderne*, 1780, vol. III, pp. 429-430.)



Even the tragic genre at which Gluck, Piccinni and Sacchini excelled had some fine exponents in France. The playwright and librettist Rochon de Chabannes wrote:

With pleasure I pay those two illustrious foreigners [Gluck and Piccinni] the rightful tribute of admiration that I owe to them; but without underestimating the merit of Messieurs Gossec, Philidor and Gretri [*sic*]: *Sabinus*, *Ernelinde* and *Andromaque* are full of beauties of the highest order, worthy of the greatest masters in Europe. [...] Our musicians must be encouraged on stage at the Académie Royale de Musique, as they were at the [Théâtre des] Italiens, then we shall see how far they can go: the French are capable of everything; and they have always perfected what they themselves have not invented.

(Marc-Antoine-Jacques Rochon de Chabannes, in the preface to his libretto, *Le Seigneur bienfaisant*, pp. 6-7.)



However, a few minor composers, paying more heed to fashion than to their own inspiration, did not hesitate to imitate those whose works met with great success. Thus, Marmontel wrote of Lefèvre's composition for *Pizarre*: 'There are in the music two or three pieces that are quite well suited to the situations, but the rest is of a genre imitated and copied from everything the Italian composers put into their operas, except that M. Lefèvre has distorted the things he wished to imitate to the point of making them bad and ineffective.' (Jean-François Marmontel, *Correspondance*, 17 September 1788; Archives nationales, O1 619 no. 400.) *Pizarre* was not performed, but *Électre* by Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne was staged at great expense in 1782. According to Grimm, the music, which nevertheless followed the precepts of Gluck, was 'so terribly dramatic that one can hardly reproach him for any more than three or four melodic phrases. [...] The music of M. Le Moine [*sic*], whom Ritter von Gluck now refuses to recognise as his pupil, is merely an exaggeration of that illustrious com-

poser's principles, and the clumsiest exaggeration there could possibly be.' (*Correspondance littéraire*, July 1782, vol. III, pp. 190, 191.)

For his second opera, *Phèdre*, therefore, Lemoyné made an about-turn. The resulting work was praised for its more acceptable, lyrical style, but this time the composer was criticised for over-borrowing from the Italian manner. Grimm wrote: 'As for the music, it is the most striking abjuration of the anti-musical system which M. Lemoine [*sic*] had adopted in his opera *Électre*; this musician, in the latter, his first composition, seemed to have gone out of his way to exaggerate Gluck's style, and strip a work intended to be sung of anything that might resemble singing. He has sought to compose *Phèdre* in the style of which *Chimène* and *Didon* offered us the most accomplished examples.' (Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire*, December 1786, vol. IV, p. 114.) But the copying was too obvious: 'M. Lemoyné [...] will never achieve anything, because he follows the wrong models. His *Phèdre* is modelled on M. Piccini's *Didon*.' (*La Lanterne magique ou Chronique scandaleuse des spectacles de Paris*, 1793, p. 54.) With *Nephté* of 1789, he therefore returned to his earlier style. But the score appeared 'harsh and loud, with the exception of a few pieces, as one would expect of a disciple of Gluck'. (La Harpe, *Correspondance littéraire*, 1804, vol. V, p. 352.) Supporters of Pierre-Joseph Candeille were convinced that his name would be 'forever respected by French, German and Italian composers, because his music is that of all nations'. (*La Lanterne magique*, 1793, p. 54.) But his detractors, who were in the majority, saw him rather as a plunderer with no imagination of his own.

Étienne-Joseph Floquet too soon forgot the French tradition, traces of which had nevertheless subsisted in his early works. His tragedy *Hellé* was booed in 1778, despite his having introduced 'in the music [...] a multitude of very successful reminiscences [of Italian composers and even] a duo in which every melodic phrase recalls somehow the fine duo from *Roland* by M. Piccini [*sic*].' (Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire*, January 1778, vol. IV, p. 156.) Nicolas-Jean Lefroid de Méreaux also tried hard to confer Italian charms on his opera *Alexandre aux Indes*, but his efforts were in vain. La Harpe ruled: 'M. Méreaux [...] is no Piccini [*sic*].' (*Correspondance*

*littéraire*, 1804, vol. IV, p. 159.) The music was lacking in relief and appeared to have been borrowed too directly from the composers in vogue at that time. Grimm punned: ‘The libretto was from *India* and the music from *Macedonia*.’ (*Correspondance littéraire*, August 1783, vol. II, p. 249.)

Retaining one’s personality under such circumstances was no easy matter, especially for a French composer. Indeed only two succeeded, and both of them were musicians with a firm technique and a reputation that was already well established: François-Joseph Gossec, whose ‘music is imitated by no master, Italian or German’, and André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry, among whose merits were those of ‘never having repeated himself and never having copied anyone’ (La Borde, *Essai sur la musique ancienne et moderne*, 1780, III, pp. 429 and 435 respectively). On the one hand, therefore, there were those who resisted, and on the other those who imitated. And there was also a third possibility: to give up writing operas altogether. Among the composers who took that option was Antoine Légar de Furcy:

Uncertainty as to the style one is expected to adopt; the intrigues and cabals, the insincerity of the judges and the caprices of the singers, decided M. Légar to renounce such a stormy career, in which there was now but little glory to be acquired; since what is truly beautiful is not recognised, successes are not lasting, and what one faction considers admirable is deemed detestable by the others.

(La Borde, *op. cit.*, p. 443.)



The underground activities of the administration of the Académie Royale de Musique at the end of the eighteenth century are hard for us today to imagine. The excesses and abuses, the internal conflicts, the artists’ claims, an economic model generally showing a deficit, plus a fragile repertoire – all these were as many constraints for the Opéra’s successive directors, whose mission was nevertheless to balance the budget in order to ease the

burden on the royal or public purse. Gluck's arrival in Paris in 1774 shook the institution a little more, opening a breach in the convictions hitherto upheld, not only from a philosophical, aesthetic and musical viewpoint, but also in budgetary and pragmatical terms. The Académie entered a new era, in which foreign musicians immediately took on a previously unimaginable importance. Far from being overwhelmed by the new situation, the administration took advantage of it to orchestrate a vast quarrel on French soil between the supporters of German music and those of Italian music. While the champions, Gluck, Piccinni and Sacchini, were acclaimed by one faction and decried by the other, they were also held in check by their employer, anxious not to be a hostage to any unreasonable demands made possible by a monopoly. So while ensuring its success on the one hand, the Académie did its utmost to create rivalry on the other. This peculiar, tense but dynamic situation gave rise to several incontestable masterpieces, some of which were still in the repertoire in the mid-nineteenth century and a few of which have been revived in the past twenty years. Above all it set in motion a phenomenon of internationalisation of French tastes and style, enabling Paris to become the capital of the European Romantic movement in the first half of the nineteenth century, at a time when Cherubini, Spontini, then Rossini were taking hold at the Opéra.

Marie-Antoinette and Napoleon, unconditional supporters of foreign composers, may not have realised just how much the stance they adopted was going to change the direction of opera in France. Their accomplices were the directors of the Paris Opéra, who were possibly more opportunistic than truly visionary. And so it was that France, struck first of all by Gluckism and then by Rossiniism, presented all the symptoms of an operatic madness of such proportions, with its successive revolutions, that Paris and its Opéra were soon completely subjugated by foreign composers.

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The composer Piccinni, during his stay in Paris.  
Library of the Geneva Conservatoire.

Le compositeur Piccinni, lors de son séjour à Paris.  
Bibliothèque du Conservatoire de Genève.