

# Oratorio and *opéra sacré* in France (1700-1830): experimental genres?

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The oratorio in France began in a very limited way. At the end of the seventeenth century, Marc-Antoine Charpentier, strongly inspired by the works of Carissimi and other Italian composers heard during his stay in Rome, composed numerous *histoires sacrées* of varying lengths, all of them masterworks. But performed before small cenacles, never published and having a very limited circulation, they had no impact or influence in inspiring others to follow suit. After the last *histoire sacrée*, *Judicium Salomonis* of 1702, and Charpentier's death in 1704, hardly any oratorios were composed in France. There were a few relatively minor attempts: Jacques-François Lochon's *Oratorio pour la naissance de l'enfant Jésus* (1701), Louis-Nicolas Clérambault's *Histoire de la femme adultère*, Sébastien de Brossard's *Sopra l'immacolata conceptione della Beata Vergine* and the anonymous *Oratoire Saint-François de Borgia à grand chœur sur la mort d'Isabelle reine d'Espagne*. These pieces had no more influence on their time than those of Charpentier.

While the concert oratorio had little fortune in France under Louis XIV, the *opéra sacré* likewise remained confined to a few experiments, which, though successful, were not followed up. That was the case with the biblical tragedy (*tragédie biblique*) *David et Jonathas*, also by Charpentier, to a libretto by Père François de Paule Bretonneau. The work was first

performed at the Jesuit College of Louis-le-Grand in 1688, before being revived in other Parisian and provincial schools until the middle of following century. 'It could not have received greater applause, either in the rehearsals or in performance. The music was by Monsieur Charpentier, whose works have always enjoyed great success,' reported the *Mercure Galant* (March 1688). Intended for the annual prize-giving ceremony at the school, the opera consisted of a prologue and five acts; the French texts were interposed between the five acts of a Latin tragedy, *Saül*, by Père Chamillart. Charpentier thus composed a series of relatively static *tableaux*, intended to provide a musical counterpoint to the recitations of Chamillart's play. *David et Jonathas* is referred to as an opera, but it could equally well be an oratorio... although it was refused both labels in its time: 'How can it be that no one has imagined or attempted to write an opera on Christian themes? None has ever been presented to my knowledge, other than Charpentier's *Jonathas*, played at the Collège de Clermont. A spectacle in which the Jesuits refuse to permit even one woman to take part or for there to be the slightest trace of the most harmless *galanterie* only half deserves to be called an opera; apart from that, *Jonathas*, it seems to me, is too dry and wanting in moral and pious sentiments to be called a Christian opera.' (Lecerf de La Viéville, *Comparaison de la musique italienne, et de la musique française*, Part III.)

After attempts to present operas based on the chivalric novel (Lully's *Amadis*, 1684) and on comic and historical subjects (Mouret's *Les Fêtes de Thalie*, 1714, for the former, Colin de Blamont's *Les Fêtes grecques et romaines*, 1723, for the latter), the Académie Royale de Musique had the idea of presenting a biblical opera and commissioned Michel Pignolet de Montéclair to compose *Jephté*, which he duly delivered in 1732. The composer (d. 1737) was over sixty at the time and had spent much of his career playing the cello and double bass in the orchestra of the Académie, so he was familiar with the Opéra's requirements. The sacred opera (*opéra sacré*) *Jephté*, in five acts plus a prologue, was set to a libretto inspired by the Old Testament story of Jephtha and written by Abbé Pellegrin. In the prologue, Truth and the Virtues chase away the false pagan gods Apollo,

Polyhymnia and Venus, ordering them to return to the underworld, where they belong. Truth then reminds the listener that man's only light comes from God and evokes Jephthah's tragic vow. The unexpected success of *Jephté* irritated the Church authorities and Cardinal de Noailles, shocked by the boldness of the Académie, had it banned: sacred history is not to be equated with mythology in order to provide a subject for secular entertainment. After long negotiations, performances were resumed and the work enjoyed a long career until its last revival in 1761. However, *Jephté* was left without succession. Nevertheless we must note the importance of this work in the history of French music. Indeed, as the *Mercure de France* of March 1761 proclaimed, it was after seeing *Jephté* staged that Jean-Philippe Rameau decided to try his hand at opera; so it was *Jephté* that led to *Hippolyte et Aricie* (1733), which was recognised as the most significant opera to appear in France since the death of Lully.

In fact only the *cantate spirituelle* had some posterity at that time, in the Paris salons and at the royal court. Between 1700 and 1730 Brossard, Jacquet de la Guerre, Clérambault and Drouard de Bousset composed cantatas in which Judith, Esther, Abraham and Moses fearlessly appeared alongside Orpheus, Dido, Medea, Bacchus and other mythological characters. The taste at that time for the *cantate sacrée* is comparable with the contemporary liking for *parodies spirituelles*: both genres harmoniously combined the modernity of opera with the severity of edifying subjects.

After a period of absolute silence, the oratorio reappeared in France, on the initiative of the directors of the Concert Spirituel, the famous concert institution in Paris that had opened its doors in 1725. Between 1760 and 1790, some fifty works, variously referred to as *oratorio*, *histoire sacrée* or *hiérodramme* (appellations that were interchangeable), were presented to audiences that delighted in the new genre, which was gradually to replace the *grands motets* that had been given at the Concert Spirituel since its founding. Maybe this genre in the vernacular was invented to cater to the tastes of audiences at the Concert Spirituel, which, according to a contemporary account, was then 'made up of men who have mostly forgotten their Latin, and women who have never heard of it' (Bricaire de La

Dixmérie, *Lettre sur l'état présent de nos spectacles*). The man who ushered in the revival was Jean-Joseph Cassanéa de Mondonville, with *Les Israélites à la montagne d'Horeb* (1758). As director of the Concert Spirituel at that time, he had sensed the dramatic limitations of the *grand motet* and had had the idea, as an alternative, of creating a large-scale setting of a dramatic text, based on a biblical story, performed by soloists, chorus and orchestra in the manner of a concert. The success of his first attempt encouraged him to compose other works along the same lines, and so *Les Fureurs de Saül* (c. 1759) and *Les Titans* (1760) came into being. Many other composers followed suit, including François-Joseph Gossec, Henri-Joseph Rigel, François Giroust, François-André Danican Philidor and Nicolas-Jean Lefroid de Méreaux, but also Italians such as Giuseppe Maria Cambini, Antonio Sacchini and Antonio Salieri.

Although he was not the most prolific composer of such works, Gossec nevertheless left three of the most emblematic compositions: *Saül* remained limited in its impact, but *L'Arche d'alliance devant Jérusalem* (1781) and especially *La Nativité* (1774) had an tremendous influence. First performed on 24 December, *La Nativité* was given every year on that date until the eve of the Revolution. It was its spectacular finale in particular that brought it such success, with an invisible choir of angels represented by an eight-part choir singing offstage. Lefroid de Méreaux did not obtain as much applause with his *Samson* (libretto by Voltaire), *La Résurrection* and *La Fuite en Égypte*, despite his skilful use of fine ingredients: ariettes with vocalises, brilliant choruses, tormented orchestral pieces showing great expressive force. Rigel manifested true talent, so much so that Gluck saw him at the time as one of the real hopes for French opera: *La Sortie d'Égypte*, *La Prise de Jéricho*, *Les Macchabées* and *Jephthé* are all admirably written, with great variety of tone and an excellent sense of proportion and balance. *Esther*, given in 1786, was especially appreciated. Rigel's use of the double choir, in particular, is both grandiose and dramatic, without ever sinking into excessive pathos, which is where the works of Lefroid de Méreaux sometimes fail. Giroust and Philidor were the only ones who composed oratorios in Latin, with-

out much success, although the latter's vast *Carmen saeculare*, first performed in London in 1779, then in Paris the following year, caused a sensation. One oratorio was enough to establish the reputation of Sacchini at the Concert Spirituel the year he died: *Esther*, given in 1786, was highly acclaimed. But it was not really a new work; it actually dated from 1777 and was originally composed in Italian and performed in Rome. This explains not only the format, on a much larger scale than that of the purely French oratorios, but also the style, very close to Italian opera, of the recitatives, airs and ensembles. Despite its verve and virtuosity, *Esther* suffered from a clumsy translation of the text, which affected the vocal performance. With his *Jugement dernier*, given in Paris the following year, Salieri did not add to the fame he had already achieved on stage at the Opéra with *Les Danaïdes* (1784) and *Tarare* (1787). But his very short oratorio includes a masterful cataclysmic episode, as God saves the pure souls and condemns the unrighteous.

Despite the success of the oratorio for almost thirty years at the Concert Spirituel, the idea persisted that 'the French have never yet had a regular oratorio of any sort performed in their country' (Burney, *Present State of Music in France and Italy*, 1773). Jean-Jacques Rousseau too claimed that the oratorio 'is not accepted in France' (*Dictionnaire de musique*, 1768). Did their small format prevent the French works from being seen as what they actually were? Be that as it may, the French Revolution put an end to the public's enthusiasm for sacred music in general and the oratorio in particular. The genre again disappeared for almost a decade. In that landscape only the figure of Jean-François Lesueur stands out: as *maître* of the Tuileries Chapel, he composed ten or so astonishing works that he called 'oratorios', but which were in fact liturgical pieces intended to be heard during Low Mass, like the old *grands motets* at Versailles. *Rachel*, *Ruth* and *Déborah* (titles given much later) were written in that context, as were his *Oratorio de la Passion*, *Oratorio de Noël* and *Oratorio du Carême*. More solemn, the three *Oratorios du Couronnement* (1825) were composed for the coronation of Charles X at Reims Cathedral. According to the composer himself, these works were

'an entirely new genre', in style (simple and archaic), structure (use of significant recurring themes) and forces (orchestra, chorus and soloists: about a hundred participants).

Although, with the exception of Lesueur, French composers were then reluctant to compose oratorios, audiences nevertheless discovered, with curiosity and enthusiasm, the foreign repertoire that was performed at the concerts established by Alexandre Choron; this included Handel's *Messiah*, Haydn's *Die Jahreszeiten* (*The Seasons*) and Beethoven's *Christus am Ölberge* (*Christ on the Mount of Olives*). The performance of Haydn's *Creation – Die Schöpfung* – under the French title *La Création du monde*, at the Opéra on 24 December 1800, was a particularly decisive event in the history of French music. Consecrating Haydn's long-recognised genius, it also revived interest in the sacred genre at the dawn of the nineteenth century. Devisme, director of the Opéra (in his second term in office; he had already been director from 1777-79), was fully aware of the issues and prided himself on his approach: 'I think I may safely say that never, anywhere in Europe, not even in Germany, has this marvellous work been performed with more unity and precision. [...] It is a monument that the Théâtre des Arts [the Opéra] has raised to the glory of Haydn, and no doubt, after hearing it, the public will rank it among the finest musical compositions, as the Apollo Belvedere is considered to be one of the finest sculptures.' (*Courrier des spectacles*, 18 December 1800.) The French translation of the text inspired little comment, but the musical arrangement, by the pianist and composer Daniel Steibelt aroused the indignation of the press. The adaptation was necessary, however, to enable the soloists of the Opéra – totally unaccustomed to such a style – to sing the score, and above all to create a good, balanced sound when performed by the 250 or so participants who were brought together for the occasion. For the event was on an enormous scale, with an orchestra of more than 160 instrumentalists: 5 flutes, 6 clarinets, 6 oboes and 6 horns, 4 trumpets, a timpanist, 5 bassoons, 4 trombones, 1 serpent, 52 violins, 20 violas, 30 cellos and 26 basses! The Paris première of *La Création du monde* had a significant impact and the performance was to be remembered for a long time

afterwards. The idea thus emerged of continuing along those lines and thus restoring the art of sacred music to its full magnificence – at a time when the Concordat was about to attempt to re-Christianise France.

Three years later, at the Opéra, the first attempt was successful. Premiered in 1803, *Saül* was the first staged oratorio, *oratorio mis en action*, of the nineteenth century. The music was a compilation of pieces by different composers then in vogue, especially Mozart. Christian Kalkbrenner and Ludwig Wenzel Lachnith had been commissioned to produce the work. The German Kalkbrenner, pianist and *chef de chant* at the Opéra, had been living in Paris since 1799. At that time he had already written several operas, including *Olympie* in 1798 and *Ænone* in 1800, as well as symphonies, concertos and sonatas. Lachnith, who came from Prague, had been in France for longer; he had composed three operas, thirty or so violin sonatas, twenty-four symphonies, twelve quartets and many other instrumental pieces, showing fertile creativity. His arrangement of Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, presented in Paris in 1801 under the French title *Les Mystères d'Isis*, brought him as much public fame as scorn from the music world. In the preface to the libretto of *Saül*, Kalkbrenner and Lachnith noted that the work followed the Italian tradition, which had never hesitated to stage operatic works with a biblical subject. Following the success of that work, they presented, in April 1805, *La Prise de Jéricho: oratorio en trois parties*, taking up the formula of the musical pasticcio. Again, Mozart made a substantial contribution, providing most of the musical material.

A slightly different experiment was carried out some time later at a rival theatre. First performed in 1807 at the Théâtre Feydeau, Méhul's *Joseph*, an *opéra biblique* in three acts, based on the story of Joseph from Genesis, belonged to the vein of the tormented, heroic *opéra-comique* of the Revolutionary period, while showing a particularly edifying mystical inspiration. Its musical and dramatic qualities led to its being often revived at French theatres, although the success of Spontini's *La Vestale*, premiered the same year at the Opéra, had somewhat overshadowed it. While idolising Gluck, Méhul distanced himself from his model, infusing the score of *Joseph* with an epic tone and accents of great fervour.

It was not until 1809 that the Paris Opéra finally decided to present an absolutely new work on a biblical subject. It was again Lesueur who, having regenerated the oratorio, composed the first sacred opera of the Romantic period, *La Mort d'Adam*. This *tragédie lyrique religieuse* in three acts, to a libretto by Nicolas-François Guillard, had been composed much earlier, while Lesueur was still teaching at the Conservatoire. In 1802 the première was postponed in favour of *Sémiramis* by Charles-Simon Catel, one of Lesueur's colleagues at the Conservatoire. A quarrel ensued, with the institution torn between the two rivals, and on 23 September of that year Lesueur was relieved of his duties as *inspecteur* at the Opéra. His appointment at the beginning of 1804 as *maître de chapelle* to the First Consul enabled him to gain a social status of sufficient importance for him to have his *Ossian ou Les Bardes* staged at the Opéra that same year. It was followed in 1807 by *Le Triomphe de Trajan* (written jointly with Louis-Luc Loiseau de Persuis) and, at last, *La Mort d'Adam* on 21 March 1809. The latter was not his first opera: before he began work on it, at the very beginning of the 1800s, he had already presented an impressive *opéra-comique*, *La Caverne*, which had been a great success in 1793. His reputation was already well established: the reform of sacred music begun under his aegis after the Revolution earned him, if not public esteem, at least the curiosity of the music world, including at the forefront his pupil Berlioz. Patronised by the Emperor, while Spontini enjoyed the favour of the Empress, Lesueur presented few operatic works, but proved to be a bold experimenter in the field of choral writing and orchestration. With *Ossian*, Lesueur is regarded as one of the founders of the French Romantic opera, with the magic of the sets and the originality of the orchestration together evoking a 'fantastic' world far removed from the *merveilleux* – the magical aspect – of Baroque. The grandeur, yet relative simplicity of his sacred music – as exemplified in many places in *La Mort d'Adam* – laid the foundations for a stylistic revival that was gradually to turn towards a quest for an archaic or timeless colouring, as practised in his wake by Cherubini, Gounod and Saint-Saëns. As for the pomp of *Le Triomphe de Trajan*, it was one of the most brilliant expressions of the glory of Napoleon.



The following year, 1810, Kreutzer presented *La Mort d'Abel* which, also completed earlier, had been kept away from the stage by intrigues and power struggles. The revival of 1825, especially, aroused great interest, prompting the management of the Opéra to continue to follow that path. Thus in 1827 Rossini's *Moïse et Pharaon ou Le Passage de la mer rouge* was staged – a translation and revision of *Mosè in Egitto*, which had been premièred at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples in 1818. But the spectacular dimension, as well as the wealth of choruses and ballets – additions made to please French audiences – turned Rossini's original work into a *grand opéra*: a new direction had been taken that was to dismiss religious themes from the official opera stage for a long time to come. Indeed, the style and form adopted by Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* (1829), then the works of Halévy, Auber and Meyerbeer, were ill suited to the oratorio. It was not until the time of the July Monarchy that sacred subjects began to be treated again – but in the concert hall, not the theatre – by Antoine Elwart (*La Naissance d'Ève*, 1845), César Franck (*Ruth*, 1846), Félicien David (*Moïse au Sinai*, 1846; *L'Éden*, 1848; *Le Jugement dernier*, c. 1849), Charles Gounod (*Tobias*, 1854) and Hector Berlioz (*L'Enfance du Christ*, 1858). Then the oratorio really came into its own in France.

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Gaspare Spontini. His operas *La Vestale* and *Fernand Cortez* overshadowed Kreutzer's *La Mort d'Abel*. Collection of the Geneva Conservatoire.

Gaspare Spontini, dont les opéras *La Vestale* et *Fernand Cortez* firent ombre à *La Mort d'Abel* de Kreutzer. Collection Conservatoire de Genève.