

Sacchini and the Sacchinists at the heart of the quarrels

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The most famous musicians in Europe come by turns to try their skills on the stage in Paris. After Gluck, Piccinni and Bach, now Sacchini has presented an opera here.

(Jean-François de La Harpe, *Correspondance littéraire*, IV, 1804, p. 86.)

For his *début* in the French capital – an important event – Antonio Sacchini chose to present a musical setting of *Renaud*. The rehearsals proved to be as stormy as had been those of *Iphigénie en Aulide* and *Roland*, for like Gluck and Piccinni before him, Sacchini had prejudice and intrigue to contend with.

What powers had to be used to persuade the Académie Royale de Musique to receive the first work by Gluck, the artist who has now become its idol! We know that Piccinni, through the unfortunate conduct of his friends, had to suffer even more troubles, more malicious tricks, more persecutions. How could Sacchini's fate have been otherwise? From the very first rehearsals his opera *Renaud* received the almost unanimous disapproval of the heads of that illustrious institution; one decided it was lacking in *relish*, another that it was too *gamesome*, as such trifling Italian music generally is; and so on. At first pretexts were sought for dismissing its performance; excessive production costs, the fact that the Opéra had contracts with other composers, and goodness knows what else, were advanced as pretexts for rejecting it. In the end, the directors even offered to pay the

author a gratuity of ten thousand francs if he were to agree to the work's being withdrawn. M. Sacchini received that proposal with the dignity one expects of a man of his talent; but without the special protection of the queen, requested by the Comte de Mercy [the Austrian ambassador, Florimond de Mercy-Argenteau], his perseverance alone would certainly have been insufficient to overcome the intrigues that had been worked up to alienate him from his career, not only on this occasion, but once and for all.

(Friedrich Melchior Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire*, March 1783, p. 350.)

Sacchini found strong support in his compatriot Piccinni, who had arrived in Paris a few years previously and was already well known in the capital through his operas *Roland*, *Atys* and *Iphigénie en Tauride*. He invited Piccinni to attend the first rehearsal of *Renaud*:

The latter did not fail to do so. He arrived early, climbed on stage, and taking Sacchini by the hand, led him towards the orchestra. 'Gentlemen,' he said to the musicians, 'let me introduce you to a great master who is my best and oldest friend. Kindly show him the same consideration that you would show me, for which I shall be likewise grateful.

(Pierre-Louis Ginguené, *Notice sur la vie et les ouvrages de Nicolas Piccinni*, 1802, p. 60.)

As Grimm pointed out:

It was Piccinni who encouraged his compatriot to try his skills at the Paris Opéra; it was he personally who, with the aim of associating that very talented artist with his new homeland and supporting the cause he was fighting to champion there, introduced him to a queen who was so willing to protect an art to which she herself loved to lend all the charm that the graces and beauty can inspire.

(Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire*, November 1786, p. 221.)

The Gluckists, who had examined the score of *Renaud* and advised against its performance, then changed their minds and eagerly hoped it would be a success. Having failed to kill off the work, they decided to use it as a means of getting the better of Piccinni. The Gluckists at that time were at a loss: '[Gluck] had suffered a series of strokes; his supporters could no longer expect him to produce the new compositions that were so needed if fresh interest was to be aroused in a public that had grown rather weary of admiring his masterpieces.' (Grimm, *op. cit.*, Nov. 1786, p. 222.) Sacchini was, if not an ideal substitute, at least a timely one. Without really believing in what they said and wrote, the Gluckists declared 'that he had as much melody and grace as his compatriot and rival [Piccinni], but was much more dramatic, and [...] – the ultimate praise – that [in *Renaud*] he resembled Gluck much more closely than Piccinni.' (Ginguené, *Notice sur la vie et les ouvrages de Nicolas Piccinni*, 1802, p. 61.) Even Grimm scoffed that 'he *Gluckinised* as much as he could' (*op. cit.*, March 1783, p. 351). Some felt that Sacchini's talents came 'possibly closer to our nation's tastes than those of any other composer' (Jean-Benjamin de La Borde, *Essai sur la musique ancienne et moderne*, 1780, III, p. 230), but Grimm noted in *Renaud* 'a kind of uneasiness that, for all his skill, [the composer] was unable to conceal' (*op. cit.*, March 1783, p. 351).

With both sides so very sure of themselves, there was potential for a real quarrel to break out. All that was needed now was for the seeds of enmity to be sowed between the two Italian composers, who were apparently such firm friends. And that happened very soon: 'Some false friends persuaded [Sacchini] that Piccinni had worked up a strong intrigue against him, while others of the same ilk constantly told Piccinni that Sacchini missed no opportunity to do him harm and speak ill of him. All too easily they succeeded in causing those two friends to fall out, and the friends of the one to fall out with the friends of the other, thus creating two weak parties where there could have been one very strong one.' (Ginguené, *op. cit.*, p. 61.) Their friendship having been brought to an end, Piccinni and Sacchini were henceforth rivals: 'The split gave rise to a third party: the Sacchinists – a sort of moderate version of the Gluckists, who only belong

perfectly to that sect out of jealousy for Piccinni.’ (Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire*, November 1786, p. 223.)

Renaud had been only the prologue; now the stage was almost set for the real contest. The Gluckists (in the guise of Sacchinists) grew a little more embittered with the successful revival of Piccinni’s *Atys* in 1783; the composer had made effective improvements, and – even more of an advantage – the production had Mademoiselle Saint-Huberty in the role of Sangaride. Would Piccinni emerge victorious? The answer is no. For they believed the time had come for Sacchini to take the sceptre at the Académie Royale.

The event was organised with the greatest of care. And in order to arouse further curiosity, as well as eagerness to know the result, the contest was taken far away from Paris, to Fontainebleau, to take place in the presence of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette:

Two famous composers, Messieurs Piccinni and Sacchini, are about to show their skills in turn, almost successively at the theatre of the royal court, the former with *Didon*, the latter with *Chimène ou Le Cid*. Such a contest, between two such distinguished and talented composers, is a focus of public attention. The rehearsals of these two works, which took place in Paris, have already created a divide among enthusiastic advocates of Italian music, and *Didon* and *Chimène* may well lead to as many quarrels as *Iphigénie* and *Roland*. The Gluckists, no longer able to set Gluck against Piccinni, would like Sacchini kindly to become their Gluck, and it will be the ardent hope of true and impartial lovers of art that the Gluckists will never choose another champion again.

(Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire*, September 1783, pp. 449-450.)

It had to be admitted that *Didon*, with the advantage of having Mademoiselle Saint-Huberty in the title role, marked the consecration of Piccinni’s fame. However, after that great success both at the royal court and subsequently in Paris, the composer’s short French career went into decline. In 1781 *Adèle de Ponthieu* had already been a disappoint-

ment: 'either the work [...] did not inspire the composer's genius, or that genius is beginning to wane,' commented La Harpe (*Correspondance littéraire*, 1804, III, p. 297). But in Paris *Chimène* did not meet with universal approval: 'The music of this opera was not an unqualified success; despite the beauties of the highest order that are to be found in M. Sacchini's score, despite the elegance and variety of the arias that he has generously provided almost throughout this new composition, apparently it did not live up to expectations of the author of *Renaud*.' (Grimm, *op. cit.*, February 1784, p. 63.)

As for the music of *Dardanus*, the following year, it clearly suffered from comparison with the work of the same name by the great Rameau, which, 'composed in 1739, was regarded as the triumph of French music at a time when the French themselves had no music' (Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire*, November 1784, p. 105).

The work was in fact a dismal failure and it was taken off after only six performances. Even the usually indulgent *Mercure de France* (25 December 1784, p. 184) admitted that 'M. Sacchini could have done better, as *Renaud* and *Chimène* have proved; but we believe even so that this work is judged too severely'. The work was a little more successful when it was revived early in 1786, but nevertheless it was not taken into the repertoire. Sacchini needed to come up with something better. He had not yet experienced an unmitigated success: 'So far Sacchini has not been successful in the contest against his fellow Italian Piccinni; and *Renaud* and *Chimène*, though often performed, are far from holding a position comparable to that of *Didon*, *Iphigénie* and *Roland*.' (La Harpe, *Correspondance littéraire*, 1804, v, p. 24.) Although Piccinni retained the crown, he seemed nevertheless to be running out of inspiration. In 1784 *Diane & Endymion* had only a polite reception, although parts of it were considered extremely beautiful.



Perhaps people sensed that Sacchini was not in the same league as Piccinni, which is probably why, at that same time, negotiations were resumed for Gluck's possible return to Paris. The matter was considered one of importance. Indeed, in the summer of 1780 a memorandum was prepared and presented successively to the Finance Minister, Jacques Necker, and to Louis XVI, its ultimate intended recipient being the Austrian emperor, via Queen Marie-Antoinette, with the aim of obtaining permission for the composer's return to France. Gluck replied almost immediately to the letter he received and negotiations slowly began for the presentation in Paris of *Les Danaïdes*. However, the composer had his own idea. Secretly he intended to take advantage of the situation to fool the French, for whom he now harboured very negative feelings, while giving his pupil Antonio Salieri a golden opportunity to make himself known in Paris. When *Les Danaïdes* was in rehearsal early in 1784, it was announced as a work by Gluck that had been completed by his pupil Salieri, but no specification was given as to who had done what – a stratagem intended to save face, should the work turn out to be a flop. La Harpe made fun of this: 'If it is a success, the whole of the work will be by Gluck; if it is a failure, it will all be by Salieri. What a perfect arrangement!' (La Harpe, *op. cit.*, 1804, IV, p. 198.)

The first performances were not very well received. And when Gluck announced that Salieri was the sole author criticism was stepped up. Grimm wrote: 'Though aiming for originality, the arias of the opera *Les Danaïdes* are for the most part based on the principles of Gluck. And it is generally agreed that one finds neither the sometimes hard, but often expressive and vigorous, touch of the famous author of *Orphée*, *Iphigénie* and *Alceste* [...] nor the realistic expression and pure, sensitive melody, of which Piccinni's works, especially *Didon*, have given us such marvellous examples that, without that merit, one should no longer expect lasting success today on stage at the Paris Opéra.' (Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire*, May 1784, pp. 494-495.) But that was reckoning without the superior talent of Mademoiselle Saint-Huberty, who gave an outstanding performance as Hypermnestre.

At that stage in the quarrels Piccinni's *Didon* had still not been deposed, although it had been followed by no other unanimously successful works by the same author. The Piccinnists were convinced that 'with each of his subsequent works, it was as if he was being made to pay for his successes, especially that of *Didon*. [...] *Diane & Endymion* [...] had little success in 1784. [...] *Pénélope*, presented in 1785, was more successful than *Endymion*, but still not as much as it deserved to be.' (Ginguené, *Notice sur la vie et les ouvrages de Nicolas Piccinni*, p. 70.)



At the beginning of 1786, however, the tide turned. Sacchini, shortly before his death, was about to present his masterpiece. Marie-Antoinette, who gave the composer her unreserved support, believed she was doing him a great favour in choosing his opera *Œdipe à Colone* (a *tragédie lyrique*) to inaugurate the new theatre in the north wing at Versailles. Unfortunately, both the artists and the technical staff were unfamiliar with the theatre, which proved detrimental to the work – so much so that the queen, feeling responsible for its semi-failure, promised Sacchini that it would be given again the following autumn, this time at Fontainebleau. He clearly looked forward to its revival, so we can imagine his disappointment when, in midsummer, the queen approached him personally with the following words: 'Monsieur Sacchini, it is said that I accord too much favour to foreigners. I have been called upon with such insistence to replace your *Œdipe à Colone* with *Phèdre* by M. Lemoine that I cannot refuse. You understand my situation; please forgive me.' That was the *coup de grâce* for poor Sacchini. He fell ill that very evening and died three months later (7 October 1786) at the age of fifty-two. (Félix Clément, *Les musiciens célèbres depuis le seizième siècle jusqu'à nos jours*, 1868, p. 160.)

The quarrel between Gluck and Piccinni had ended with a festive banquet. The quarrel between Piccinni and Sacchini ended with Piccinni paying a heartfelt tribute to his compatriot in a long and very apprecia-

tive letter published in the *Journal de Paris* a few days after his death. Commemorations were organised immediately. While Italy erected statues, the Académie Royale de Musique set about presenting the two works by Sacchini that had not yet been performed in Paris, while taking the necessary measures to secure the rights to those operas so that they could be included in the institution's repertoire. Early in 1787, the director of the Opéra made the following recommendations to the Minister:

Sir,

[...] Allow me to give you my thoughts [...] on the operas *Cédipe* and *Évelina* [sic]. Considering the tremendous success of the former, which the latter is bound to share, would it not be appropriate to show the queen how deeply the administration feels the loss of M. Sacchini by paying his family 20,000 lt [*livres tournois*] for those two operas, which would then belong therefore to the Académie, since the heirs would no longer have any claim to them.

(Archives nationales, O1 619 no. 231.)

On 30 January 1787, when *Cédipe à Colone* was at last presented in Paris, it was a great success: 'People are flocking to see this opera; never have any of his works been so brilliantly successful. Sadly, I think it unlikely that he would have obtained such success during his lifetime, and the reception of *Cédipe à Colone* is not so much a recognition of the work's true merit as a sort of posthumous tribute to the author's memory.' (Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire*, February 1787, p. 305.) Grimm (*op. cit.*, p. 306) felt that the music of both *Renaud* and *Chimène* deserved at least as much applause as that of *Cédipe à Colone*, 'but Sacchini was still alive then, and, as this wonderful success goes to prove, we only show justice towards the dead'.

Meanwhile, steps were taken to prepare the unfinished *Arvire & Évelina* for performance. After Sacchini's death, Marie-Antoinette had expressed to the Duc de Villequier her desire to hear the work as soon as possible.

She said she was most upset that [Sacchini] had not completed his opera *Évelina* [...]; someone else would have to do so. 'In France, possibly in Europe, only Piccinni is capable of doing so,' she added. 'Go straight away to Paris to see him, and tell him that I ask him to complete Sacchini's work and request that he see to it immediately.' [...] Piccinni accepted without hesitation, and promised that he would set to work as soon as he received the libretto and the score. But a French composer had the queen informed that before he died Sacchini had instructed him to finish *Évelina*. The queen, strongly solicited, did not expressly revoke her first orders, but declared that she would take no further part in the matter, and wished to hear no more about it.

(Ginguené, *Notice sur la vie et les ouvrages de Nicolas Piccinni*, 1802, p. 76.)

The French composer in question, Jean-Baptiste Rey, who was at that time *batteur de mesure* (conductor) of the orchestra of the Académie Royale de Musique, stood up to the directors of the Opéra on that occasion. Antoine Dauvergne had initially recommended for the task of completing the work the German composer Johann Christoph Vogel, 'who would certainly consider it an honour to [do so] without touching anything the author has done'. (Archives nationales, O1 619 no. 189.) But he soon switched his support to the queen's choice of Piccinni. To no avail, however:

Neither the queen's orders, nor the wishes of the public, nor Piccinni's zeal were able to prevail over the claims and remonstrations of the administration of the Opéra, which argued with perseverance but with the utmost respect that it was an insult to French musicians for an Italian to be given the responsibility of completing the work of an Italian composer; consequently it was the Opéra's *batteur de mesure* [Jean-Baptiste Rey] who took up Sacchini's work and set the last three scenes, while M. Piccinni, well aware of the possible consequences of quarrelling with the Opéra, was careful not to insist on his qualifications.'

(Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire*, May 1788, p. 82.)

Thus the French school, through Jean-Baptiste Rey, experienced a temporary triumph in having enabled Sacchini's second posthumous success: 'The music [of *Arvire & Évelina*] seemed worthy of the great composer to whom we owe so many masterpieces, it may even be one of the works in which he has displayed the greatest strength and vigour.' (Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire*, June 1788, p. 84.)

The quarrels seemed to have died down, which was not surprising: after Sacchini's death in 1786, news came that Gluck had died some months later, on 17 November 1787. As he had done for his Italian rival, Piccinni paid a posthumous tribute to his former Austrian adversary in a letter that was published in the *Journal de Paris*. Grimm felt that it was Piccinni who paid the most fitting tribute to the memory of Gluck:

M. Piccinni proposed a subscription, not for the purpose of erecting a bust to Gluck, as Rome and Florence had done for the famous Sacchini, but with the aim of founding for all time in the composer's honour an annual concert, to be performed on the anniversary of his death, composed only of his music, 'in order,' he said, 'to pass on the spirit and the character of performance of his compositions to the centuries that will follow the one that saw the birth of those masterpieces [and as an example] to young artists who intend to devote themselves to opera'. This tribute, which honours equally the great man who pays it and the man who is its subject, is a fine imitation of England's recent tribute to Handel. (Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire*, December 1787, p. 496.)

While Piccinni was honouring the dead, however, a new wave of musicians was preparing to take the Académie Royale de Musique by storm. Soon Vogel, Méhul and Cherubini were to be causing a stir.



An ancient-Greek-type costume for a Paris Opéra production, a fashion launched by Mademoiselle Saint-Huberty in the 1780s. *Le Théâtre*, April 1899.

Le drapé à l'antique fut mis à l'honneur par M^{lle} Saint-Huberty à l'Opéra dans les années 1780. *Le Théâtre*, avril 1899.