

# Phèdre: a composer, a singer, a work

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## A COMPOSER: JEAN-BAPTISTE LEMOYNE (1751-96)

Though completely unknown nowadays, Jean-Baptiste Lemoyme was an admired figure on the Parisian operatic scene in his day. At a time when the Opéra had opened its doors to a host of foreign masters – Gluck, Vogel, Piccinni, Sacchini, Salieri, Cherubini and the like – he may even be seen as a true defender of the national cause, alongside Gossec, Dezède and Candeille, although they enjoyed less success than he in this respect.

Lemoyme was born in the Dordogne, and received his first musical education from an uncle who was *maître de chapelle* at Périgueux Cathedral. While still a teenager, he embarked on a career as an itinerant conductor in France, but took advantage of a theatre company tour in 1770 to go to Germany. He studied in Berlin with Graun, Schulz and Kirnberger. His first compositions earned him the position of Second Kapellmeister in the opera house of Frederick II of Prussia. He then travelled to Warsaw, where his one-act opera *Le Bouquet de Colette* (1775) was premiered; the leading role was played by Antoinette Saint-Huberty, a Frenchwoman he had met there and who became his pupil. He became very attached to the singer, and joined her in France in 1782, by which time she had achieved fame there; thanks to her support, he had his first *tragédie lyrique*, *Électre*, staged at the Académie Royale de Musique. The work was not well received: the subject was considered too severe and the music excessively difficult, going even further than the audacities of the Chevalier Gluck.

*Phèdre*, his second tragedy, was premiered to greater success in Fontainebleau during the winter of 1786 and revived almost immediately in Paris, where the run of performances was prolonged. Lemoynes then left for Italy to perfect his art and acquire that 'Italian manner' he lacked, for contemporary audiences in Paris were wholly devoted to Piccinni and Sacchini. Upon his return in 1788, he presented works in diametrically opposed genres: two comedies, *Les Prétendus* (1789) and *Les Pommiers et le Moulin* (1790), and two tragedies, *Nephté* (1789) and *Louis IX en Égypte* (1790). *Nephté* was a triumph, with the audience even calling the composer onto the stage on the evening of the premiere. But his greatest success was to remain *Les Prétendus*, which remained in the Opéra's repertory for more than thirty years. In the years up to 1795, Lemoynes put on several more compositions at the Théâtre Feydeau, Salle Favart and the Opéra. None, however, achieved any real success, not even *Miltiade à Marathon* (1793) and *Toute la Grèce ou Ce que peut la liberté* (1794), patriotic tableaux following the fashion of the moment. When he died in 1796, rehearsals of *L'Île des femmes* were suspended, and in the end the work was not premiered. Lemoynes left other unperformed pieces, including *Nadir ou Le Dormeur éveillé* (intended for the Académie Royale de Musique, but cancelled in 1787 when a fire in the Menus-Plaisirs warehouses destroyed the sets already built) and *Sylvius Nerva ou La Malédiction paternelle* (rehearsed in 1792, but whose subject was considered inappropriate in the political circumstances).

Although he presented himself as a follower of Gluck and dedicated his first Parisian opera to Marie-Antoinette, Lemoynes did not succeed in overcoming the cabals that were to inflict lasting damage on his career. The polemic between partisans of Gluck on the one hand and Piccinni on the other was not yet over when he gave *Électre*, and the work was taken to task and rejected by both clans on account of its excessively harsh style, which was considered to be the perverse result of his years in Germany. To make matters worse, Gluck refused to acknowledge the composer as one of his disciples. Injured by this snub, Lemoynes took up the cause of Piccinni and modified his style in the direction of

the Italian composer's, though without renouncing his own personality. It would certainly be a mistake to deny him the merit of originality. From *Électre* to *Louis IX en Égypte*, Lemoine's 'manner' in the noble genre preserves a remarkable austerity, severity and theatrical effectiveness. If his melodies reject the pleasant charm of a Philidor or a Grétry, if his harmony surprises one with layouts or gaps that are sometimes disconcerting on the printed page, he knows how to embellish his scores with theatrical gestures, orchestral shocks and vocal outbursts that give them great intensity. In less than ten years, however, his personality had developed significantly: whereas *Électre*, atypical and personal, had bewildered the audience, *Phèdre*, four years later, achieved a favourable consensus. Jean-François de La Harpe described the music of *Électre* as 'the most hideously piercing one could possibly hear', but admitted that he admired 'fine things in the music' of *Phèdre* (*Correspondence littéraire*, V, letter CCXXXVIII).



#### A SINGER: MME SAINT-HUBERTY (1756-1812)

Lemoine's career, and more particularly the success of his *Phèdre*, are closely bound up with the charismatic figure of Mme Saint-Huberty, the finest female singer at the Opéra in the last years of the eighteenth century. Her short career (1777-89, just over ten years) marked a glorious period for the institution, at a time of aesthetic and, soon, political revolutions.

Anne-Antoinette-Cécile Clavel was born in Strasbourg in December 1756, the daughter of Jean-Pierre Clavel, an impecunious former soldier who became a répétiteur in the opera troupe of the Elector Palatine at Mannheim. She showed early on that she had an aptitude for singing. In 1770 she travelled to Prussia and then to Poland, where she became a protégée of Princess Lubomirska. It was during this period that she met Lemoine, who took her under his wing, trained her and gave her her first

roles on stage. She remained eternally grateful to him. On 10 September 1775, in Berlin, she married Claude-Philippe Croisilles de Saint-Huberty, who quickly squandered the couple's resources and proved to be violent. Back in France, she performed in the theatre of her native city before moving to Paris, where she was given an opportunity to make her debut at the Académie Royale de Musique in 1777. After having created small roles in Gluck's *Armide*, she joined the troupe on a trial basis, but remained in the shadow of Mlle Levasseur, Mlle Laguerre, Mlle Arnould and Mlle Beaumesnil. However, Gluck perceived that she possessed outstanding potential: an anecdote relates that he nicknamed her 'Madame la Ressource' and affirmed that one day she would be one of the pillars of the Opéra. The retirement of Mlles Arnould and Beaumesnil gave her access to the 'second' roles: while understudying Mlle Levasseur in the 'dramatic soprano' roles (*rôles de force*), she attracted attention in *Roland* and *Andromaque* in 1780. The declining health of Mlle Laguerre, who now sang the leading roles, gave her an increasing number of opportunities to appear to her advantage. Mlle Laguerre's death, shortly afterwards, allowed her to create certain roles spurned by Mlle Levasseur, such as Églé in Gossec's *Thésée*, in which she distinguished herself with expressive singing and touching acting. Grétry's *L'Embaras des richesses*, the same year, demonstrated her comic style. When Mlle Levasseur finally gave signs that she would soon retire in her turn (during the run of Piccinni's *Renaud* in 1783), Mme Saint-Huberty was set to become the *première actrice* of the Opéra, but not without having already displayed an awkward temperament: 'There is reason to believe that Mlle Levasseur will hand in her notice, and that Mme Saint-Huberty will then become even harder to please', wrote an alarmed Papillon de La Ferté (letter to Amelot, 1783).

The premiere of *Didon* at Fontainebleau the same year was her triumph. She banished the (adjusted) court dress that singers had worn until then, appearing instead in tunics and sandals, and was immortalised in this realistic costume by the sculptor Houdon. The Parisian revival earned equal applause: the audience crowned her with laurels on stage. The 'truly admirable acting of Mme Saint-Huberty [...] today delights both

court and city', wrote La Harpe (*Correspondance littéraire*, IV, letter CXCVI-11). She also distinguished herself in concert, even though observers believed her talent was better suited to the stage. Every year from this time on, she requested several weeks of leave to tour the provinces, where she achieved unprecedented success performing in both tragedy and *opéra-comique*. She was even drawn through the streets on a chariot in Marseille. By this time she was regarded 'one of the foremost female singers in Europe and one of the most celebrated actresses ever to have appeared on the operatic stage' (*Tablettes de renommée*, 1785). From now on, commentators no longer hesitated to compare her to Le Rochois, Dumesnil and Clairon of the Comédie-Française. The King granted her a pension and the title of Chanteuse de la Musique du Roi à Paris. One success followed one another, in both new works (including *Chimène*, *Les Danaïdes* and *Panurge* in *L'Île des lanternes*) and revivals (*Atys*, *Armide*, *Alceste* among others). In 1786, the title roles in *Phèdre* and *Pénélope* won her new laurels. According to Jean-François La Croix, 'it is more especially the role of *Phèdre* that she plays with an understanding, a strength and at the same time a verisimilitude of character that rouse admiration and astonishment', although she also shone 'in those of *Alceste*, *Pénélope*, etc.' (*Dictionnaire portatif des femmes célèbres*, 1788).

After that date, her voice deteriorated; she limited herself to taking on old titles from the repertory, and created only the roles of *Camille* in Salieri's *Les Horaces* (1786) and *Dircé* in Cherubini's *Démophon* (1788). During her last season, in 1788/89, she gave further performances in *Renaud*, *Alceste*, *Iphigénie en Tauride*, *Didon*, *Phèdre* and *Chimène*, but also – surprisingly – sang *Colette* in *Le Devin du village*. Before the annual period of closure at Easter, she sang *Eurydice* in *Orphée et Eurydice* (10 March 1789). This was to be her last appearance. Absent the following spring, she retired from the stage as soon as the first revolutionary upheavals began, then emigrated in April 1790. Not having sung for the requisite fifteen years, she was not entitled to any pension from the Opéra. During her career, she had played some thirty roles, most of which were expressly composed for her remarkable resources.

In January 1781 Mme Saint-Huberty had divorced her husband (with whom she had not lived since 1778). She then had a liaison with Count Alfonso Maria Turconi, through whom she met Louis-Alexandre de Launay, Comte d'Antraigues, around 1783-84. D'Antraigues was a representative of the nobility at the Estates General in 1789. He shared the ideas of the Revolution but remained a royalist, and ended up condemning the excesses that occurred. When he was placed under investigation over a plot to allow the King to escape, he emigrated to Lausanne, where his mistress joined him and married him. A son was born to the couple in 1792. They travelled together to a number of countries before settling in Italy, in the entourage of the Comte de Provence. Arrested in Trieste by Napoleon's army, the Comte d'Antraigues was able to take advantage of his wife's connections (she had beseeched Joséphine de Beauharnais on his behalf) and managed to flee. They journeyed all over Europe – Austria, Russia, England – and then, around 1808, elected to live in Barnes, near London. In recognition of her attachment to the monarchy and of the various royalist activities she undertook with her husband (they were said to have held for safekeeping papers of the greatest importance, including the original of Louis XVI's will), the Comte de Provence apparently decorated her with the Ordre de Saint Michel. Plunged into political intrigues that went over their heads, the Comte and Comtesse d'Antraigues were murdered by a servant on 22 July 1812.

Mme Saint-Huberty had a powerful voice and expressive acting skills, but was not particularly beautiful: she was tall and thin, with light hair and commonplace features. As for her voice, 'it lack[ed] that charm which art cannot provide' (Rulhière, *Le Petit Tableau de Paris*, 1783). But her acting, patiently moulded, transfigured her to the point where she exerted a genuine fascination on the audience and made them forget her defects:

One must have seen her to conceive what the grandeur, the powerful expression of the lyrical Melpomene can be! Sublime actress! In Athens, or in Rome, they would have raised altars to you! I have seen you, Phèdre! You surpassed Clairon, you surpassed Dumesnil! I did not think the lyrical

muse could reach such heights! How you stir the soul! How skilled you are in bestowing on your accents the naturalness of spoken expression, softened, made more pleasant by melody! Before you, there were singers, even actresses at the Opéra! Never was there a perfect tragedienne.

(Rétif de La Bretonne, *Les Nuits de Paris, ou le spectateur nocturne*, 1790)

Early in her career, Mlle Saint-Huberty worked to correct irregular gesticulation, a somewhat harsh timbre, and pronunciation marred by a German accent. However, she never abandoned a controversial style of singing that favoured a rounded sonority and bel canto effects alien to the French stage at that time. According to Framery and Guinguené, she 'had a very fine *bas-dessus* [mezzo-soprano] voice when she entered the Opéra, and [...] found herself forced to impair its beauty, to adapt her voice to roles written far too high for it' (*Encyclopédie méthodique*, 1791). She therefore developed a heroic vocal style that destined her for tragic characters. The problems that resulted from this technique entirely built on vocal tension explain why her voice deteriorated in only a few years, sometimes obliging her to use expressionist effects close to the spoken word.

Lemoynes, especially conscious of this *bas-dessus* range (since he had been her teacher), made frequent use of the lower extension of her voice – which nevertheless covered more than two octaves, from *a* to *c*<sup>'''</sup> – in *Phèdre* and *Nephté*. Mme Saint-Huberty was known for her prickly temperament, her tantrums and rages, which led to many disputes with the administration of the Opéra. She flaunted her bisexuality in numerous entanglements with other actresses in the troupe. She could not stand her rivals, Mlle Maillard and Mlle Dozon, and intrigued in an attempt to damage their reputations, but without managing to get rid of them. Her tastes attracted her to pathetic subjects, extreme effects and a certain voyeurism, which Lemoynes knew how to use to best advantage in *Phèdre*, their great joint success. In fact, the Opéra's director, Dauvergne, deplored the fact that the composer and his muse found 'agreeable to them in opera only subjects dealing with incest, poison or murder' (letter to Papillon de La Ferté, 1788). Her salaries and gratuities and the gifts showered on

her by her admirers enabled her to amass a considerable personal fortune, including several properties in Paris, Neuilly and Montmorency, which were partially confiscated in seizures by the revolutionary authorities.



#### A WORK: PHÈDRE (1786)

*Phèdre*, a *tragédie lyrique* in three acts on a libretto by François-Benoît Hoffman, was premiered before the court in Fontainebleau on 26 October 1786 and revived at the Académie Royale de Musique on 21 November. The libretto is directly inspired by Racine's eponymous tragedy (1677): it is in keeping with the contemporary trend for turning plays from the repertory of the Comédie-Française into operas. That same year, 1786, Salieri's *Les Horaces* and Vogel's *La Toison d'or*, both based on Corneille, provided two further examples.

The premiere of *Phèdre* was particularly well received with respect to both the libretto and the music. However, the critics pointed out a few *longueurs*, which the authors removed at once. With this tragedy, the young Hoffman – he was only twenty-six years old – came to be regarded as one of the most promising poets of the day. *Phèdre* nevertheless reopened the debate on the advisability of adapting French classical tragedies for the operatic stage; but dissenting voices were stifled and the work triumphed. The *Mercur de France* found Hoffman's poetry 'sweet, agreeable and fluent' (9 December 1786).

The score of *Phèdre* shows that Lemoynes was anxious to smooth out the asperities with which his earlier efforts had been reproached. The music gains in lyricism, which partly explains its favourable reception. The subject, conducive to highly intense scenes of introspection for the three principal characters, permitted the composer to conceive superb monologues, sometimes elegiac, sometimes passionate. The orchestration skilfully colours the most picturesque numbers – those for the hunters,



for example – and even strikes a pre-Romantic tone in some places, as in Phèdre's final monologue ('Il ne m'est plus permis de vivre, / Et je dois trembler de mourir'). In contrast to the Italian school, the score cultivates a more typically French art, in the tradition of Gossec in particular, in which drama and declamation retain their primacy over singing. The sets and costume designs were highly praised. The ballets, although episodic, were also applauded, even if the press criticised a certain excess of modesty in the Priestesses of Venus, who seemed to serve the chaste Diana more than the Goddess of Love. Mme Saint-Huberty, then at the height of her career, played Phèdre in sublime fashion, renewing the miracle of her appearance as Didon in Piccinni's eponymous *tragédie lyrique* three years earlier. She was only criticised for sometimes 'forsaking the musical voice to adopt the spoken voice. It is only a cry, it is only for a moment, but that moment is a disagreeable one'.

*Phèdre* proved to be one of the great successes of its time. From 21 November 1786 to 4 December 1792, the work was staged every year, reaching a total of some sixty performances. There was a further run in the 1795/96 season, for only seven evenings: following in the footsteps of Mme Saint-Huberty, it was Mlle Maillard who took over the role. But the tragedy's career did not end there: it was revived again on 2 November 1813. Hoffman, then at the height of his glory, was afraid that modern taste would detract from the memory of his former success, and published a letter to try to mollify the critics:

It has been almost thirty years since I wrote this work, and one had to be young to dare to desecrate such a subject. It was Mme Saint-Huberty who made me commit this sacrilege; as the reward for my recklessness, she promised me success; she kept her word: the piece was performed so often that I am still a little ashamed of it. But when that famous actress left France, my poor *Phèdre* felt such grief that she died a sudden death. Around the Year IV or V an attempt was made to resurrect her; it was in vain: she felt so at ease in the other world that she hastened back there. I therefore ask the gentlemen of the press to remember that I am not guilty of the revival

of the piece, or of its being reprinted, or of the annoyance it may cause to so many honest people who have done me no harm.

(Delandine, *Bibliographie dramatique*, 1820)

The revival did indeed end in failure: even Mlle Branchu's talent in the title role was not enough to convince the audience. 'Phaedra is a poor subject for an opera', the *Journal de l'Empire* asserted somewhat too arbitrarily (19 November 1813). The *Mercure de France* noted that 'the revived opera made but little effect, and perhaps it will not reappear' (November 1813); and so it proved. On the sixteenth of the same month, after only two performances, *Phèdre* left the Opéra's repertory for ever, not to resurface in its complete form until 2019.



The Paris Opéra at the Porte Saint-Martin, c.1786.  
Private collection.

L'Opéra de la Porte Saint-Martin vers 1786.  
Collection particulière.