Intrigue and controversy at the Académie Royale de Musique

Benoît Dratwicki

I was thus in a fair way to swell the ranks of the medical students, and might have added another name to the long list of bad doctors but for a visit I paid one evening to the Opéra. There I saw *Les Danaïdes*, by Salieri. The gorgeous splendour of the spectacle, the rich fullness of the orchestra and the chorus, the wonderful voice and pathetic charm of Madame Branchu, Dérivis's rugged power, Hypermnestra's aria, in which I seem to detect the features of Gluck's style, according to the ideal I had formed from some fragments of his *Orfeo* in my father's library, finally the crashing bacchanal and the voluptuously dreamy dance music added by Spontini to the score of his countryman, filled me with excitement and enthusiasm. I was like a lad with the inborn instincts of a sailor, who, never having seen anything but fishing-boats on a lake, suddenly finds himself transported to a three-decker in mid-ocean. I hardly slept a wink the night after the performance, and my anatomy lesson the next morning suffered in proportion. I sang the air of Danaus, 'Jouissez du destin propice', while sawing away at the skull of my subject; and when Robert, irritated by my constantly humming 'Descends dans le sein d'Amphitrite' when I should have been reading a chapter of Bichat, cried, 'Do attend to our work; we are not getting on at all, our subject will be spoiled in three days; eighteen francs wasted. You must really be sensible!' I retorted by singing the hymn of Nemesis, 'Divinité de sang avide!' and the scalpel fell from his hands.
(Hector Berlioz, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, London, Macmillan and Co, 1884.)

Berlioz's enthusiastic account – written in 1858 – of his encounter with Salieri's *Les Danaïdes* shortly after his arrival in Paris in the 1820s, shows the strong cathartic power of this opera, written in the modern style of Gluck. The audience had also been moved and impressed eighty years previously, when the work had been premièred at the Académie Royale de Musique.

In Paris in 1784 the opera world was at last relatively at peace after the open war that had been declared some ten years earlier between the 'Piccinnists' and the 'Gluckists' – a 'war' that had finally come to an end with the failure of Gluck's *Écho et Narcisse* in 1779, and the success in 1781 of Piccinni's *Iphigénie en Tauride*. Gluck, furious, had returned to Vienna, intending at first to retire from music altogether. However, in the summer of 1780 a memorandum was prepared and presented successively to the French finance minister, Jacques Necker, and to the king, 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 began for the presentation in Paris of a setting of a libretto entitled *Les Danaïdes*. In spring 1784 his return to the stage of the Académie Royale was publicly announced: *Les Danaïdes* was to be premièred on 26 April.

The strong subject had already been used several times: in 1716 by the composer Gervais for a *tragédie lyrique* to a libretto by Lafont, in 1758 by the dramatist Le Mierre for a tragedy, in 1764 by the choreographer Noverre for a *ballet-pantomime*, *Les Danaïdes ou Hypermnestre*, to music by Rodolphe. It was a good one for an opera – despite the difficulty of presenting the fifty daughters of Danaus on stage. For Gluck, who had composed an *opera seria* entitled *Ipermestra*, performed in Venice in 1744, it was to all appearances a return to one of his earliest subjects.

The gruesome story was perfect for a *tragédie lyrique*, a genre that Gluck had used to revolutionise French opera with fierce tales taken from ancient mythology. Ægyptus and Danaus, heirs to the kingdom of Egypt, have numerous offspring: the former fifty sons and the latter fifty daugh-

ters. When war threatens between the two brothers, Danaus prefers to flee with his daughters to Greece, but they are pursued by the sons of Ægyptus, who wish to marry their cousins. Feigning agreement, Danaus organises the mass murder of his nephews, who are to be killed by his daughters on their wedding night. Only Hypermnestra, the eldest of the Danaids, saves her husband, Lynceus. They live to enjoy happiness together, while all the other Danaids are tortured in Hades.

The text of *Les Danaïdes* was at the centre of a controversy. At the origin of the project was in fact a work by Ranieri de' Calzabigi, *Ipermestra o Le Danaidi*, which the librettist had completed in 1778 and sent to Gluck the following year in the belief that it was to be set immediately. But Gluck secretly entrusted the libretto for translation to Du Roullet and Tschudi with the idea of presenting the opera in Paris. Its successful première prompted Calzabigi to write a long letter, dated 25 June 1784 and published in the *Mercure de France* on the following 21 August, claiming authorship of the libretto and bitterly complaining about the infringement of his copyrights, before going on to describe in detail the background of his *Ipermestra*, regretting that he had been so unceremoniously dispossessed of the work, and deploring the 'mutilations' it had suffered for performance in France.

The score was the subject of intrigue of an unusual kind. Gluck accepted the libretto translated by Du Roullet and Tschudi, but immediately entrusted the composition to his student (also living in Vienna), Antonio Salieri. No doubt aided by Gluck's advice on what did or did not appeal to French audiences, the latter completed the work quickly, but did not present it to the directors of the Académie Royale de Musique under his own name. Gluck was far too familiar with the music world in Paris and its factions, its pitfalls, to leave Salieri to face alone a public that was so hard to please. To facilitate the reception of *Les Danaïdes*, he declared that he himself was the principal author of the music, written with the collaboration of his student. That at least was how the opera was announced in the press prior to the première.

Only after the work's success had been confirmed did Gluck admit to the deception, and by then it was too late for the public to call into

question Salieri's talent. Thus he became the new darling of Parisian opera circles and of the French court – having, of course, dedicated *Les Danaïdes* to Marie-Antoinette. Only after the sixth performance was it announced (in the *Journal de Paris*) that Salieri was the sole author of the music. This play of disinformation enabled the work to make an immediate and permanent place for itself in the repertoire of the Académie Royale de Musique, where it was revived until 1828. Two further operas written for Paris by Salieri established him as one of the leaders of the Gluckist school: *Les Horaces* (1786), unfortunately let down by a weak libretto, and *Tarare* (1787), to a text by Beaumarchais, one of the great Parisian successes on the eve of the Revolution.

Salieri's score was perfectly in keeping with the tastes that had gradually emerged in the early years of the reign of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette. By then the *tragédie lyrique* had come to resemble the Classical tragedies of Racine. The decorative, the supernatural, ballets and *divertissements*, elements present purely for the audience's delight: all these were excluded. Baron von Grimm wrote:

> At the Opéra we now want nothing but tragedies, we are so tired of seeing flying chariots, gods suspended in mid-air, cardboard monsters floundering about in a sea of gauze, etc., that such magic now has no ability to arouse in us the slightest admiration.

In many works of that time, therefore, gods and allegories were given only a minimal role – as in Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* and *Orphée et Eurydice*, in which Diana and Amour, respectively, put in only a brief appearance – or else they were omitted altogether, as in Salieri's *Les Horaces* and Lemoyne's *Électre* and *Phèdre*, and also in *Les Danaïdes*, except for the final scene.

The supernatural was out of favour; audiences preferred an antique, historical or exotic colouring, and crowd scenes, fights, fires, and all kinds of more realistic but nonetheless striking cataclysms. On *Les Danaïdes*, Dr Véron, writing in the *Revue de Paris*, noted:

> No work, notwithstanding the grim subject, is as rich and imposing when taken as a whole. The crowd of people on stage, the number of sets and their variety, the fine use of machinery, the bright costumes, all helped to capture the imagination and fill the viewer with amazement.

The use of Classical French tragedies or translations of *opera seria* librettos on antique or historical subjects also enabled the plot to focus on the emotional content, the human passions, which became the real heart of the drama, as in *Andromaque* (Grétry), *Alexandre aux Indes* (Lefroid de Méreaux), *Chimène ou Le Cid* and *Œdipe à Colone* (Sacchini) and the two versions of *Démophon* (Cherubini, Vogel). The ceremonial aspect, as Grimm noted after the first performance of Piccinni's *Adèle de Ponthieu* (1781), lost its prime importance:

> A work that formerly would have seemed full of interest, now no longer inspires, in a theatre in which the pomp of spectacle and the trappings of ceremony have become merely incidental, and in which we have grown accustomed to experiencing all the great movements of the tragedy and the drama.

Never had the *tragédie lyrique* and Classical tragedy been so close. Nevertheless *Les Danaïdes* surpassed everything that had previously been ventured on stage at the Académie Royale. Although the work was applauded, its audacity nevertheless shocked some of those who saw it. La Harpe was most virulent:

> And to think that this spectacle with its accumulation of cold atrocities that turns the stomach, without for a moment inspiring in us feelings of pity or fear, was tolerated on the very stage where *Armide*, *Atys* and *Didon* are performed! This should not come as a surprise to us; once the natural limits prescribed by good taste and common sense for all the imitative arts have been overstepped, there is no reason to stop. Each is a master in taking his most bizarre fantasies for fine inventions, and his absurdity

> for the *steps of a genius*. We shall be seeing small children eaten alive on stage next!

Even the romantic Dr Véron declared in 1837:

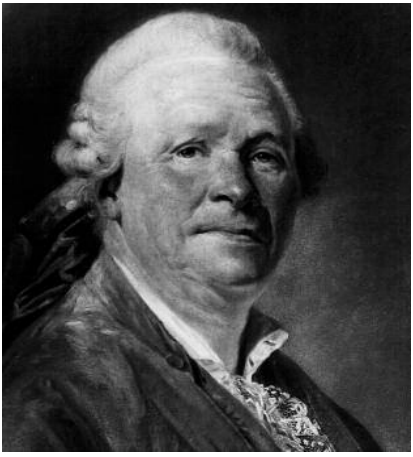
> Fortunately the acts of *Les Danaïdes* are very short: it would be hard to endure such a frightful spectacle for long; even the ballets, perfectly in keeping with the genre, are but atrocious games, pantomimes, representing allegorically what is about to happen in the action. The third act in particular, that of the wedding feast, reaches the absolute summit of horror, in the treachery of those women, dancing with their husbands, caressing them, leading them on, when they have decided to murder them.

Musical tastes had shifted towards the monumental and exaggerated expression: a loud orchestra with trombones, timpani and quivering strings, large choruses integrated into the action, amazing harmonies making the most of diminished sevenths, augmented sixths and bold modulations, tense vocal lines preferring the heroism of the gesture to the logic of phrasing. All of which is appropriately and effectively included in Salieri's score:

> The music of *Les Danaïdes* is fine in character, and strong and vigorous in style, sometimes melodious, always expressive. Several pieces, such as the choruses 'Descends dans le sein d'Amphitrite', 'Gloire évan évohé', are worthy of Gluck and written so much in the manner of that great composer that they could easily be ascribed to him. Hypermnestra's aria 'Par les larmes dont votre fille' and Danaus's 'Jouissez d'un destin prospère' are powerful and dramatic in their effect.

But it was above all the expressive performances of the principal singers, especially the soprano Madame Saint-Huberty as Hypermnestra, that fascinated audiences. The latter had already established herself as one of the leading singers at the Opéra, noted for her acting skills and for her

fine, strong voice, and she went on to première many new works by both French and foreign composers in the mid 1780s. Dauvergne, director of the Paris Opéra, said that she was particularly fond of subjects involving 'incest, poisoning or murder' (letter to Papillon de La Ferté, 18 December 1788); she therefore displayed her talents in the tearful, pathetic genre, whence the successive existences of *Électre* (Lemoyne), *Didon* (Piccinni), *Chimène* (Sacchini), *Pénélope* (Piccinni) and *Phèdre* (Lemoyne). This also explains why the main role in *Les Danaïdes* is so vocally demanding and so psychologically harrowing. Possibly – rather than Gluck's Alceste or Iphigénie – Salieri's Hypermnestre was the first truly Romantic role written for the stage of the Paris Opéra. In the early 1820s the famous Caroline Branchu was to show brio in the same role – that was when Berlioz, who had recently arrived in Paris, was so deeply impressed by the opera. And we may well be indebted to Salieri's *Les Danaïdes* for Berlioz's *Les Troyens*.



Christoph Willibald Gluck by Greuze.
Musée du Louvre, Paris, Leduc Archives.

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