

# The Roman theatre of Orange

## before *Les Barbares*

Étienne Jardin

The ancient theatre of Orange was built by the Romans in the first century of our era, and its restoration was carried out in the nineteenth century thanks to the work of two architects: Augustin Caristie (1783-1862) and later Jean-Camille Formigé (1845-1926). Its use as a venue for staged performances dates from the end of the Second Empire, by which time it had been partially restored. On 21 August 1869, under the auspices of Félix Ripert and Antony Réal, active members of the *Félibrige* (the regionalist movement founded by the poet and activist Frédéric Mistral), the first large-scale artistic event, a project entitled 'Fêtes romaines', was launched, intended to be devoted entirely to opera. The evening began with *Joseph*, a 'drame lyrique' of 1807 by Étienne-Nicolas Méhul, a work that was then experiencing a revival at various theatres in France, having been restaged at the Théâtre-Lyrique in Paris in 1862. It was followed by the tomb scene from *Roméo et Juliette* by the Italian composer Nicola Vaccai, then the première of *Les Triomphateurs*, a secular cantata by the local Avignonnais composer Germain Fuzet Imbert (1812-1886) to a libretto by Orange-born Antony Réal. The leading roles were taken by renowned artists who travelled down from Paris: Genevois, a recent recruit of the Paris Opéra, Bataille, from the Opéra-Comique, and Mlle Palmyre Wertheimber (Théâtre-Lyrique). However, most of the singers, as well as the orchestra, conducted by Imbert, came from

the theatre at Avignon. Furthermore *Les Triomphateurs* ended with a tribute to local artists:

The final tableau featured a group of goddesses and Muses. Peace came forward and recited verses invoking triumphant heroes ancient and modern. Among other great names, she mentioned one close to the hearts of the people of the South: that of the great poet Mistral.

(*Le Ménestrel*, 29 August 1869.)

In many ways that event represented an important step forward in the development of music in Vaucluse. The theatre at Avignon, strongly supported by local authorities since the end of the Restoration, emerged in the course of the nineteenth century as a venue specialising essentially in opera, at a time when theatres in cities of similar importance in the *département* were staging only plays. The abiding nature of opera also favoured the emergence in Vaucluse of other musical activities: *sociétés philharmoniques* – more typical of northern France, however – appeared as the need arose in the course of the July Monarchy (1830-48), and the Orphéon, a choral movement corresponding to the democratic ideal of the Second Republic, flourished during the 1850s and 1860s through the combined efforts of Joseph Brun, director of the Avignon Conservatoire, and the composer Germain Fuzet Imbert. Thus, with the choruses, some of the singers and the orchestra from its theatre, and a work written by a local composer, Avignon was strongly represented at that first performance in the Roman theatre of Orange, which provided a perfect showcase for its artistic capacities, and its prestige was relayed by the accounts of that first night in the Paris press.

That first edition of the 'Fêtes romaines' in 1869, organised by members of the *Félibrige*, was rooted in a specifically Provençal ideology. But it was nevertheless part of a Europe-wide movement: the creation of summer festivals aimed at showing off the local musical heritage, while drawing notables from all over the continent. During the summer break in the concert seasons of the major musical centres, other, smaller cities became

engaged in a competition in which the stakes were both symbolic (artistic prestige) and financial: such festivities were organised preferably to coincide with a trade fair or an agricultural show (the case in Orange in 1869) with the aim of enhancing the attractiveness of the latter and drawing a maximum number of potential buyers. This type of event – sometimes called a festival – appeared in northern France at the beginning of the nineteenth century; it gradually expanded as improved transport by rail and sea made cities more easily accessible. Parisian artists – thus carrying on a long tradition of touring the major theatres across the country with the roles they had created or performed to acclaim in the capital – found in such events a means of earning a substantial additional income and their names (together with those of the great operatic institutions they represented) helped to draw large audiences.

The Franco-Prussian War prevented the organisation of any further festivals in Orange until 1874. That year's edition, modelled on the 'Fêtes romaines' of 1869, presented Bellini's *Norma* (in French) twice, on 23 and 24 August, followed by two very popular *opéras-comiques*, *Le Chalet* by Adolphe Adam (1834) and *Galathée* by Victor Massé (1852). But there was soon dissension among the organisers of the event. Had not the original intention been to produce plays, either dating from antiquity or based on such subjects, in the Roman theatre? Was not the presentation of operas, popular though they were in the region, counterproductive to the achievement of that end? From 1886, therefore, actors from the Comédie-Française gave the performances. *L'Empereur d'Arles* by the Avignon-born poet Alexis Mouzin was première on 28 August of that year, and the next day Molière's *Les Précieuses ridicules* was given. Two years later, in 1888, ancient drama finally came to Orange with *Cédipe-Roi*, Jules Lacroix's French translation of *Cedipus Rex* by Sophocles, which had been taken into the repertoire of the Comédie-Française in 1858.

The director of the festivals from 1888 to 1911 was Mistral's Lyon-born protégé Paul Mariéton, who in the 1890s and the early years of the new century succeeded in keeping in check the disagreements between the advocates of ancient drama and those of opera. Although the festi-

vals of 1894, 1897 and 1899 turned away from opera, music was not excluded, since incidental music was required for the plays that were staged. In 1897, for example, Leconte de Lisle's drama *Les Érinnyes*, an adaptation of the first two parts of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, was accompanied by the score Massenet had written for its première at the Théâtre de l'Odéon in Paris in 1873, while *Antigone*, the tragedy by Sophocles, included the music by Saint-Saëns that had been premièreed at the Théâtre-Français in 1893; in both cases the orchestra was that of Édouard Colonne. Music by Saint-Saëns was also billed on 14 August 1899, when his hymn for soprano and orchestra, *Pallas-Athénée*, was premièreed. On 12 August 1900 opera returned to the Roman theatre with Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* (1779), which was a resounding success, appealing as it did both to the proponents of ancient drama (it was ultimately based on a play by Euripides) and to lovers of Romantic music. Paul Mariéton noted:

This masterpiece of musical tragedy in which, even more than in *Orphée*, *Armide* and *Alceste*, Gluck has risen above the times to sing the immortal hymn of Friendship and Sacrifice, seemed to us to be the ideal spectacle for the world's most prestigious theatre. Gluck's music was exceptionally appropriate [...] to the proportions of the sublime Wall.  
(*Le Théâtre antique d'Orange et ses chorégies*, 1908.)

The success of *Iphigénie* partly explains the commission for Saint-Saëns to compose an opera specifically for Orange – an opera that was to respect the aesthetics of the 'Chorégies', as the festivals were called from 1899 onwards.

The dynamism of Paul Mariéton is undoubtedly to be credited for the national importance that the originally regional events in Orange had acquired by the turn of the century. In this he received the support of the radical socialist politician, deputy for the Drôme, Maurice Faure (1850-1919), who in 1876 had founded *La Cigale*, the first regional literary society in Paris (for artists and authors from the South), which from 1888 to 1897 joined forces with the *Félibrige* for the organisation of the festivals

in Orange. On Faure's initiative, the government granted funds for restoration work on the Roman theatre to be continued and appointed a Ministerial Commission in charge of overseeing the organisation of the festivals. Three ministers of the Dupuy government attended the performances in 1894; in 1895 further funding was provided for the completion of the restoration work. The festivals thus became as it were a justification for the State's investments: the Roman theatre of Orange warranted restoration, since it permitted 'artistic and literary decentralisation'. During the parliamentary debate of 16 February 1895, the deputy Édouard Lockroy pointed out:

There is, somewhere in Bavaria, a town that was once poor and unknown, but which is now rich and famous, having become a major centre for the arts, attracting from all over Europe devout artists and society people who like to pretend to be artists. The obscurity of the German genius is celebrated there in its highest, most perfect manifestation. Why should not we help to create, in contrast, in this semi-Roman Provence, near the great inland sea whose shores saw the birth of the civilisation, philosophy and poetry of our race, a great centre for the arts, where people would come to celebrate the Greek and Roman genius, the ancestor of our own, and whose spirit, heritage and traditions we have received and established with in modern society?

That day in the Chamber of Deputies, no one dared to mention the name of the Bavarian town. In the end it was a German, the journalist Ludwig Bräutigam, who clarified the situation in a monograph on the revival of ancient drama at the Roman theatre of Orange entitled *Das französische Bayreuth* (1900).

During the last decade of the nineteenth century, the dams that had been built to hold back Wagnerism in France began to give way: between 1893 and 1900, *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Die Meistersinger*, *Tristan und Isolde* and *Siegfried* received their French premières. Bayreuth had become a new Mecca for music in Europe, a place of pilgrimage that seemed to be strengthening day by day a German cul-

tural hegemony that worried the French after the defeat at Sedan. The strong antagonism between France and Germany impelled political leaders to seek support by turning towards the Mediterranean. 'Race', as the term was employed by the politician Édouard Lockroy, was not something that ran in the veins (as in the German conception); it was a question of historical heritage. To boil down the writings of the historian Gérard Noiriel to their absolute basics, a radical change came about in the definition of French national identity after 1870: hitherto it had been based on Michelet's way of thinking, turned towards the future, but henceforth there was a tendency (notably with the historian Fustel de Coulanges) to position itself in relation to the past. Having lost part of its territory (most of Alsace and some parts of Lorraine), France needed to redefine itself, which it did by declaring itself heir to the Roman civilisation, thereby proposing a counter-model capable of competing with Germany. On the aesthetic level, Paul Mariéton assimilated that objective perfectly:

Does not Provence alone, with the Pont du Gard, the Roman theatre of Orange, the Arles and Nîmes arenas, the ruins of Glanum at Saint-Rémy, all within a radius of less than a hundred kilometres, possess the best-preserved monuments of ancient times? [Provence,] an educated land, where our Roman theatre was destined for the illustrious function of presiding over the rebirth of Taste, in accordance with the traditions of our Race. [...]

In future we must stage, every year, not only recognised masterpieces, but also one or more new works that are in keeping with Greco-Latin traditions and possess that classical, Mediterranean, spirit, from which so many barbaric currents have deviated Romanity over the past century.

*(Le Théâtre antique d'Orange et ses chorégies, 1908.)*

That, therefore, was the context, when the libretto was commissioned for Saint-Saëns to compose his opera *Les Barbares*. And one cannot fail to notice the political transparency in the librettists' treatment of the initial subject, with the Gauls ousted almost comically from the plot in the

second stanza of the prologue: 'Before [the Teutons] the legions fled. Cities were seized by terror at the clamour of their voices. Thrown into a panic by that yelling mass, the Gauls sought refuge in the woods.'



Saint-Saëns at the piano, with, from left to right, librettist Félicien Sardou, director Pedro Gailhard, René Joly, and co-librettist Pierre-Barthélemy Gheusi. José Pons Collection.

Saint-Saëns au piano, entouré – de gauche à droite – par le librettiste Félicien Sardou, le directeur de l'Opéra Pedro Gailhard, René Joly et le co-librettiste Pierre-Barthélemy Gheusi. Collection José Pons.