

## The critical reception

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A premiere at the Académie Royale de Musique was an event that the public and the press followed with special attention. And *Phèdre* had even more reasons than usual for attracting a large audience: its librettist dared to compete with Racine, Mme Saint-Huberty appeared in a more gruelling role than ever, and the composer purloined his subject from the Comédie-Française, while being thought likely to correct the audacious style he had been accused of in his previous opera.

On 22 November 1786, the *Affiches, annonces et avis divers* [AAD] relaunched a century-old debate: could a spoken tragedy be set to music? And what relationship should one maintain with the model, especially when it bore a famous name?

Though it is a mark of great temerity in the author of a new tragedy to aspire to the *Racinian* style, it is a mark of great wisdom in the librettist of an opera on a subject treated by *Racine*, to imitate that poet's manner as far as possible, even to copy, word for word, his verse, whose harmony seems to lend itself wonderfully to music.

(AAD, 22 November 1786)

In a word: it is better to pastiche the *Racinian* style and give it a lyrical idiom that preserves its spirit than to force the composer to work from the original text, less appropriate to musical setting. And then, 'perhaps it was the sentiment of the superiority of so daunting a model that led

M. \*\*\* [Hoffman] to abandon it' (ibid.)? The *Mercur de France* [MdF], for its part, remained sceptical:

Every commentator has quite rightly said, and long repeated, that there is the greatest danger in seizing upon the tragedies of our great masters in order to transform them on the stage of the Opéra. Although those who make such adaptations are obliged to conceive the new poem so that it will unfold in a different manner, they can never get far enough away from the ideas of the poet they are imitating to avoid frequent reminiscences of them. If they take over his verse as it stands, they necessarily disfigure it, on account both of the forms demanded by music and of their proximity to the verse they are obliged to add to it. If they limit themselves to the poet's ideas, those ideas recall to the mind of the entire audience, which knows it by heart, the beautiful verse that was originally used to express them. Who is the man today who can believe himself strong enough to withstand this struggle, especially when Racine is the model he has chosen?

(MdF, 9 December 1786)

The plot of Hoffman's *Phèdre* differs significantly from Racine's, owing to the complete removal of the role of Aricie. This character whose gentle nature gives Rameau's *Hippolyte et Aricie* its charm, who counterbalances the threatening invective of Racine's queen, no longer existed: all the interest in the female roles was now focused solely on Mme Saint-Huberty. If the *Mercur* set about summarising the plot of the new opera, it was precisely to underline this vital transformation, 'so that we can compare the unfolding of the opera's libretto with that of Racine's tragedy, and judge where the author was forced to deviate from his model' (MdF, 2 December 1786). This practice of cutting text and characters was widespread at the time: the 'lyric time' of an opera, much longer than the 'dramatic time' of a tragedy, makes it impossible to deploy the same quantity of verse. That is why Grétry's *Andromache*, Sacchini's *Le Cid* and Catel's *Sémiramis*, just like this *Phèdre*, blithely take the scissors

to their theatrical model. The article in the *Affiches*, advocating the authors' cause, explains that Hoffman 'aimed to speed up his action by deleting the episode of Aricie, which somewhat slows down Racine's; and to spare Thésée the long and painful description of the death of his son, which, in the critics' view, is "the finest and most inappropriate monologue that exists in the theatre"' (AAD, 22 November 1786). However, the journalist could not pass over in silence an awkward corner resulting from this simplification, namely the fact that Thésée's indignation, 'again because of the need to tighten up the action, is motivated, not by the sight of Hippolyte's sword in Phèdre's hands, nor by the latter's ambiguous answer to her husband, nor by the very means that Hippolyte uses to justify himself, but solely by Œnone's accusation, so that the whole cause of the young prince's death is contained in a line given to Phèdre, "Œnone l'a perdu, je n'ai fait que l'aimer" [Œnone caused his downfall; I only loved him]; which makes the father's role quite revolting' (AAD, 22 November 1786). Aside from this piece of dramatic licence, Hoffman was generally applauded for his work: the *Mercure* asserted that 'when the author is a little more educated in the plotting and the conventions of this type of theatre, more accustomed to the yoke of music, he will count among those whose talent promises to distinguish themselves most brilliantly there, and we can only incite him to new efforts' (Mdf, 9 December 1786).

The composer, for his part, crystallised all expectations after the semi-failure of his *Électre* four years earlier. The *Mercure* welcomed the fact that Lemoyme had 'singularly profited from the advice of the public'; 'by rejecting all systematism, and trusting more in the natural impulse of his genius, he demonstrates a most precious talent, which one can only encourage' (Mdf, 2 December 1786). The journalist clarifies this point by expressing his belief that one must know how when to forsake facile, raucous effects in order to guarantee lasting success.

Simple, natural, fluent music, which does not use violent, exaggerated means, does not immediately strike our ears, which are still a little hard

of hearing; it takes time to penetrate to the heart; but once it has succeeded, its success is more certain and more lasting than the temporary enthusiasm sometimes aroused by noisy music. Noise can cause intoxication; but when the intoxication has passed, it leaves no trace of pleasure.

(*MdF*, 23 December 1786)

The critic of the *Affiches* considered that Lemoyne had ‘the rare merit of possessing a style of his own’ and that his music did him ‘infinite honour’, being ‘from beginning to end, sensible, serious, and filled with the sweetest expression, though it does sometimes degenerate into a kind of melancholy’ (*AAD*, 22 November 1786). This hint of yearning in the music does indeed distance itself from the interminable furies of his *Électre* of 1782, and finds expression in the *airs tendres* for the heroine that constitute the gems of the score. The *Mercur*e emphasises another initiative of the composer’s, this time concerning the style of the recitatives:

M. Lemoyne has tried, in several scenes, to replace the recitative with melody proper [*du chant proprement dit*]. This idea, which is in keeping with the opinion of a highly intelligent man who has written about music in a most ingenious manner, was indeed something that deserved to be tried out rather than merely discussed: the experiment was more likely to shed light on it than any amount of reasoning. But even though, in performing that experiment, M. Lemoyne has always retained a noble, graceful melody, appropriate to the character and dignity of the protagonists, he has demonstrated that this way of doing things is not without its disadvantages. When a scene is a little long, and, being animated by a single passion, can do no more than offer the development of that passion, the outcome is that the situation, which remains the same over a lengthy period, does not offer the music enough means of providing variety. This is the case in the scene for Phèdre and Hippolyte; something similar occurs in that for Phèdre and Œnone. One must conclude that

this technique could only be used for scenes or acts that are very full of movement. M. Lemoyme himself has sensed this defect, and whenever he could find vividly expressive numbers, he has treated them in such a way as to produce a powerful effect.

(*MdF*, 9 December 1786)

It is quite true that the most tormented recitatives are not conceived in the same spirit as the less dramatic passages. The further we progress in the work, the more the orchestra is called upon to punctuate with originality the words of the protagonists, making especial use of the string tremolo later so dear to the Romantic composers. Thus the *Mercur*e describes 'the monologue of Phèdre pursued by her remorse. This piece is no more than a recitative, but the way in which it is conceived, the mysterious, profound, terrifying strains in the orchestra, must give us the most elevated idea of the talents of M. Lemoyme. If the whole work were of this merit, it could already lay claim to the most distinguished rank alongside the greatest masters' (*MdF*, 9 December 1786). However, if he had proceeded in this way elsewhere, the composer would probably have been accused of multiplying recitatives featuring 'grand effects', such as those he had conceived in his controversial *Électre* in 1782.

Did the combined talents of Hoffman and Lemoyme result in a triumph? Yes, without a shadow of a doubt, averred the *Mercur*e, which, along with the spectators, 'was strongly impressed by a great number of musical beauties [...]. The audience was grateful to the author of the poem for the simplicity of his plotting and the good use to which he has put this subject' (*MdF*, 2 December 1786). But 'the success would have been the greater (and may become so in the future) if a few sluggish passages that were noticed in the action, and even in the music, had not frequently slowed down the interest that the beauties were beginning to inspire' (*MdF*, 2 December 1786). Aware of these potential improvements, 'the authors have announced, for future performances, omissions that can only be beneficial' (*MdF*, 2 December 1786). A few weeks later, the same periodical welcomed the fact that 'the opera of *Phèdre*, which is still being

performed, shorn of a few longueurs, has finally attracted universal approbation, as we had hoped' (*MdF*, 23 December 1786).

What were the incriminated passages, and, conversely, the numbers considered as the best? In Act One, even if the *Mercure* admired 'the hymn to Diana in the first scene' and 'the prayer to Venus sung by Phèdre's women' (*MdF*, 9 December 1786), it considered that 'what is more detrimental to the new opera is the slow pace at which these scenes are conceived; for there is often a lack of those contrasts so necessary to music, and this defect results in a monotony which, in the midst of the most beautiful things, inspires distraction, cooling of interest, and boredom' (*MdF*, 9 December 1786). The journalist points out in particular the accumulation of prayers throughout the score:

Hippolyte opens the opera: he goes hunting, and since Diana is his tutelary goddess, he addresses a hymn to her, repeated by his companions:

*O Diane! chaste Déesse, etc.*

The same scene contains another hymn, or, if you will, a prayer:

*Déesse des bocages,  
Appelle les Zéphyr,  
Défends aux noirs orages  
De troubler nos plaisirs.*

The third scene begins with a hymn to Venus:

*Divine Cythérée, etc.*

sung by Phèdre's court, then this one, sung by the Priestesses:

*Vénus, du haut des cieux, etc.*

Then in the same scene, when Phèdre indiscreetly pronounces Diana's name, her women again utter a prayer to Venus:

*Pardonne-lui, Déesse tutélaire, etc.*

Hippolyte, in the third act, addresses yet another prayer to Diana and an invocation to Friendship; Thésée addresses one to Neptune.

It certainly shows a lack of skill, which comes from insufficient stage experience, to have accumulated so many pieces of the same type one after the other. It is true that they might at least not have had the same

character, and it must be admitted that the composer deserves criticism for not having paid sufficient attention to this.

(*MdF*, 9 December 1786)

Once a few superfluous numbers had been deleted, *Phèdre*'s career took off, and the press no longer printed anything but praise and dithyrambic reviews of it. Since Gluck's departure, it is probable that no opera had been so unanimously applauded. The *Affiches* judged that Act One contained

very fine numbers: one may mention, among others, Phèdre's prayer ('Prends pitié de ma souffrance; Sois sensible à mes tourments') and her duet with Œnone, followed by the monologue 'Il va venir... c'est Phèdre qui l'attend', which perfectly depicts the turmoil that agitates the queen. But what is bound to ensure the success of this work is the third act, which is composed in superior fashion throughout. Above all, the scene for Thésée and Hippolyte was rapturously applauded, as was the latter's farewell to his friends, which it is difficult to hear without shedding tears.

(*AAD*, 22 November 1786)

The *Mercur*e points out the same passages, adding 'the duo between Phèdre and the nurse [Œnone] in the second act' and insisting on 'the invocation of Thésée to Neptune', 'Hippolyte's justification in the third act' and above all 'the monologue of Phèdre pursued by her remorse' (*MdF*, 9 December 1786).

The principal singers were given plum roles in the score, and all of them fared well. Chéron (Thésée) and Mlle Gavaudan (Œnone) were praised for their zeal, the latter having 'shown great intelligence' according to the *Affiches* (22 November 1786). 'M. Chéron deserved no less praise in the role of Thésée, for the nobility of his performance, and his clear, resonant voice, which has lost none of its beauty in his long illness', added the *Mercur*e (9 December 1786). Rousseau (Hippolyte) garnered particular applause in the third act, whose melancholic pages

were 'rendered in the most touching fashion' (AAD, 22 November 1786). The *Mercure* found he showed 'an infinite grace, a precious sensibility', adding that 'every day he acquires new rights to the esteem and applause of the public' (MdF, 9 December 1786). But it was of course Mme Saint-Huberty who was the focal point for the attention of the entire audience. Her gruelling role showcased every facet of her art: sometimes pleading, sometimes threatening, Phèdre expires in shame after having known glory and power. Sometimes shifting suddenly from one mood to another, she managed to avoid the impression of a gallery of characters and to construct a realistic psychological framework. 'The truthfulness with which [she] declaimed the recitative and sang all the airs [...] of *Phèdre* made no mean contribution to its persuasiveness' (AAD, 22 November 1786). The *Mercure* particularly admired her manner of 'speaking', even more so than singing:

When one assigns to the actor the greatest merit of the recitative, it is enough to say how sublime Mme Saint-Huberty's appeared. It is impossible to employ more truthful, more deeply felt or more noble inflections. This great actress expresses all the nuances of passion, and she deserves no less praise for her singing than for her declamation. However, will we dare to mingle with this just tribute the voice of criticism, or rather a simple counsel? Everything that is beyond perfection is a defect; excess of truth itself is a defect. Sometimes, impelled by that truth, by the expression of the situation with which she is so deeply imbued, Mme Saint-Huberty forsakes 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. She appeared to realise that these places were less applauded than the rest; even had they been more applauded, Mme Saint-Huberty is above this feeble triumph, and should renounce it. In the arts of imitation, one must not lose sight of art for a single moment. [...] One must not get any closer to nature than the boundary fixed for art. Mme Saint-Huberty has gone too far in her own art not to be convinced of this truth, of which it is probably enough to remind her.

(MdF, 9 December 1786)



Finally, the *Affiches* thought it pointless to discuss the dancing 'even though it was well performed, nor the ballet music, since it is no more than a very weak accessory in this opera, which, incidentally, is magnificently staged' (AAD, 22 November 1786). The *Mercure* confirmed that 'there are few *divertissements* in this work, but they are very skilfully done' (MdF, 9 December 1786).



Costume design for Thésée.  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Costume de Thésée.  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.