

## Stage scenery for *Les Danaïdes* and the architectural language

Marc-Henri Jordan

There is no dramatic work, however dark its theme may be, which offers an ensemble as luxurious and as imposing. The range and diversity of the characters, the number of the stage decorations and their pictorial character, the handsome way in which the machinery worked, the remarkable brilliance of the costumes, all were contributing to capture the imagination and to leave the audience amazed.

(*Mémoires secrets*, April 26, 1784.)

In his account here, the memorialist paraphrases the article from the *Journal de Paris*, in turn emphasizing the distinctive character of the work's subject matter. Most importantly, he is informing us about what impact the performance of the opera had on the audience. According to other accounts, it appears that the spectacle *per se* also played a part in the work's success – equal to that of the music, if indeed, not more so. Today, it continues to be striking to note at what point music, singing, scenery and *pantomime* all contributed to the culminating final scene of the opera. Following the comments of *Le Mercure de France*, it must be concluded that the 'Administration [of the Académie Royale de Musique] has spared nothing in equipping the performance of this opera with all the pomp and brilliance which it appears to demand' (May 15, 1784). Therefore, following the return after Easter in 1784, two major events were to leave

their mark on the world of the Parisian spectacle – not unsurprisingly filling the pages of the gazettes: the performance on April 27 of *Le Mariage de Figaro* by Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais at the Comédie-Française, but also *Les Danaïdes* given the evening before at the Opéra.

At a time when the *tragédie lyrique* was becoming closer to the *tragédie classique*, especially with its themes and subjects being taken up at the Opéra, that institution was provoking complaints from the Comédiens-Français who, in a letter sent to the minister of the Maison du Roi, the Baron de Breteuil, dated March 2, 1784, denounced these ‘usurpations’. In it they highlighted the fact that at the Opéra, the music had the advantage of being able to enhance and beautify the plots. In fact, the Opéra possessed all the apparatus of the spectacle and of the ‘decorations’ (the French period term for scenery), allowing it to appeal to an audience hungry for emotions and sensations. What follows here primarily concerns the ‘decorations’ for *Les Danaïdes*, of which three executed designs, belonging to the collection of the architect and designer Pierre-Adrien Pâris (today kept in the Bibliothèque of Besançon) and brought together here for the first time, provide a visual testimony.



Various challenges were presented for the staging of *Les Danaïdes* by the number of singers, dancers, and actors which it demanded, as well as by the number of its decorations. The rehearsals for this *tragédie lyrique* commenced sometime between the end of January and the beginning of February 1784. Given the complexity of the task involved, by the sixteenth of the month, one of the librettists, Bailli du Roulet (Marie-François-Louis Gand Le Bland), was asking for these rehearsals to be sped up. It transpired that the date of the first performance was postponed to after the Easter adjournment. The creative spirit behind these decorations was none other than Pierre-Adrien Pâris (1745-1819), the designer for the Menus Plaisirs of the King since 1778, in which formal capacity he was responsible for the decorations of the spectacles given on Court stages. While

he had been, on an occasional basis, one of the designers of the decorations for the Académie Royale de Musique since 1779 (including in that year *Écho et Narcisse* by Christoph-Willibald Gluck), 1784 marked the beginning of his regular participation with the Parisian institution. The following year he became the official designer there, and until 1792.

According to the directions provided in the libretto, the staging consisted of five decorations. Three of them were produced at this time, whilst the other two, adapted or constructed from various flats, would have originated in the warehouses of the Opéra and the Menus Plaisirs. The manner in which they were placed, one after another, within the overall dramatic composition provides marked contrasts, a climax being reached with the final decoration. By that point, the public had acquired a taste for spectacle and this might have resulted from recent operatic productions such as *Armide* by Gluck, which had first been performed in Paris in 1777, but which had not been performed since the end of 1781.

#### ACT I

In the front rows of flats, the decoration consisted of large rocks, with – in the distance – the port, also marked out by rocks, being the location for the ships from which were disembarking the sons of Ægyptus. On one side of the set stood the temple dedicated to Juno. Pâris had put together here a decoration using various components taken from the Opéra warehouse. For the scene of the swearing of the oaths, he in all likelihood designed the altars in the classical style, circular and decorated with golden reliefs on a red ground, fitted with tin basins intended for the burning of spirit-of-wine.

#### ACT II

A design for this second decoration, immediately displaying the designer's intentions regarding the dramatic contrasts of light, provides details for the architecture of the underground temple in the palace of Danaus,

dedicated to the goddess of Revenge, Nemesis (see p. 29). In the Doric order, here without base – such as were to be found in the temples at Paestum or in Greece – this underground chamber impresses with the squat proportions of its columns, which bear a segmental arch-shaped vault, and with a powerful arch being shouldered from the ground up. From a sloping perspective the viewpoint highlights these columns in the foreground, in clear contrast with the space illuminated by the sanctuary lamp. The painting of the flats and the borders, carried out in *trompe-l'œil* fashion, provided the genuine classical lamp – intended to illuminate the whole space on its own – with all its intensity. Protain, as a painter-decorator specialized in architecture, carried out the designer's drawing in granite-grey with worked-out joints, and with the black columns veined in a blood red. Onto these columns Tardif painted red draperies with, between them, the statue of Nemesis in a bronze-red colour, enhanced with gold, raised upon porphyry pedestals and standing against a background of black draperies. In his *Correspondance littéraire* Jean-François de La Harpe made a particular note that this decoration was very beautiful indeed.

Although Pâris made only rare use of the Doric order without base in his architectural work, he made recourse to it as a designer of stage decorations – particularly in order to express the character of an underground room or prison – in a variety of operas whose plots took place in Ancient Greece. Informed by the work of Julien-David Leroy, *Les ruines des plus beaux monuments de la Grèce* (published in 1758), the drawings made in Sicily by Jacques-Germain Soufflot and circulated through the engravings made by Gabriel-Pierre-Martin Dumont in 1764, as well as by Thomas Major's 1768 work *The Ruins of Paestum*, and being familiar also with the prints of Giovanni Battista Piranesi, in his turn, Pâris had undertaken a journey to Sicily in 1774 (in the course of his residence at the Académie de France in Rome) and, whilst there, had had the possibility to study the Greek temples in Paestum himself; his designs were engraved for the third volume of the *Voyage pittoresque du royaume de Naples et de Sicile* by the abbé Richard de Saint-Non, which appeared in 1783.

The decoration for Nemesis' temple is in keeping with designs submitted since 1778-79 by Pierre-Adrien Pâris to the Court and to the City of Paris, such as for example for the underground chamber for the *tragédie Numitor* by Jean-François Marmontel. This *tragédie* was to have been given by the Comédiens-Français at Fontainebleau in the autumn of 1783, and then in the Théâtre de la Cour des Princes in Versailles at the beginning of 1784 (although, in fact, it was never performed). At the Opéra the character of the decoration for *Les Danaïdes* is not unlike that of the chamber of Orestes and Pylades, which was scheduled to be made for the revival of Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* in 1790. These chambers, of the Tuscan order without base and rustic in character, are shown in a frontal perspective – contrary to that of Nemesis – with a spatial design which is both sophisticated and dramatic. This served to create some difficulties for the painters responsible for the tracery and painting. It should be noted that, back in Paris, a brilliant and celebrated decoration for a prison setting, comparable in its dramatic contrasts, made a return appearance on stage on November 30, 1784 for the first performance of *Dardanus* by Antonio Sacchini. Adapted for the dimensions of the stage of the Théâtre of the Porte Saint-Martin which, since 1781, was being used as the auditorium of the Académie Royale de Musique, this decoration had been put together in 1760, to the designs of Pierre-Antoine Demachy (1723-1807), for the celebrated revival of *Dardanus* by Jean-Philippe Rameau. Taking as a model for the decoration's background a plate from the *Prima parte d'architettura* by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, the artist had skilfully designed the front rows of flats, which prolonged and placed the engraved view into perspective, conferring on it a scale then unknown.

### ACT III

The design for the garden dedicated to Bacchus (see p. 29) corresponds to the central part of the decoration, in the lower half of the back of the raised set. In this instance, these elements were intended to fit in with a substantial decoration brought from the warehouse of the Menus Plaisirs

in Versailles, and adapted for the occasion: the garden of the palace of Céphée, from the second act of *Persée* by Jean-Baptiste Lully. This had been devised in 1779 for *Persée's* revival on the stage of the Grand Théâtre of the castle in Versailles, this being one of the spectacles specially created to celebrate the marriage of the Dauphin and the Archduchess Marie-Antoinette. An approximate idea of the ensemble thus brought together can be made. A garden laid out in two terraces is represented on the initial frames, with bases supporting stone balustrades, staircases, all enlivened by sculptures in white marble set on pedestals. The central part of the decoration – in the original layout occupied by a marble palace – is consequently shown on the design: three substantial *buffets*, dominated by the statue of Bacchus, placed in front of a base and sheltering under trees; the trunks of these trees are girdled in vine branches and embellished with crystal chandeliers (painted on transparent panels). The marble ensemble of the central *buffet* rests on gilded lions. Atop the *buffets* are placed quantities of vases, plates and ewers in gold, silver and precious stones, both classical and mannerist in form. Appropriately enough in a garden dedicated to Bacchus, thyrsi and tambourines are to be seen, strewn around large vases placed on the ground. The back of the decoration is painted in a manner to suggest a half-moon-shaped arbour pierced by arcades.

#### ACTS IV AND V

The sumptuousness of the scenery for the festivities echoes that for the palace interior, more precisely that of the gallery 'which communicates to Hypermnestra's apartment and to those of her sisters'. It is there where Hypermnestra and Danaus meet, and into which Lynceus manages to get himself, unknown by all. No design for the ensemble of the decoration is any longer in existence, since Pâris reused the decoration for a rich palace interior, and one reworked to create the gallery demanded by the librettist. That palace interior is that of Armide: it follows the Corinthian order, in white, green and red agate colours with a ceiling decorated with

figures. This was a decoration prepared for the Opéra and created for Gluck's opera by the architect Charles De Wailly (1730-1798), not for the first performance of that work in 1777 but for some two years later (it was only completed in 1780 or 1781). Pâris modified this interior by repeating – in order to create the gallery effect – the alternation of the first frames. These represent fluted columns with a shaft decorated with *grotesques* in the lower part, and alternately candlestands bearing incense burners and female figures on pedestals. He also replaced the central part of the backdrop.

#### ACT V (FINAL SCENE)

As soon as Pelagus has fatally struck Danaus with his dagger, and Lynceus has proclaimed that his brothers have now been avenged in such a manner, and for its part the chorus is offering up thanks to the beneficence of the gods, thunder rings out. The gallery is cast into darkness and while all sing, 'Hades is opening up to swallow this place of bloodshed into its depths.', lightning strikes the palace of Danaus, which then bursts into flames, and disappears in order to give way to the decoration for Hades. In specific terms and at the first whistle blast, the ruined palace, painted on flat-pieces attached to the décor flats – which then pivot – suddenly occupies the back of the stage. From there, stones (made of wicker and covered by painted canvas) tumble down. The letters of the cellist Hivart (Hyvart), some of which are reproduced later on in this publication – describe in a particularly detailed way the swift series of actions involved in the manoeuvre by which the scenery was changed, as well as the means used to simulate the conflagration. Pierre-Adrien Pâris' very suggestive design reveals an awe-inspiring decoration for Hades. With an appropriately terrifying character, rocks and architectural fragments are all mixed up under suitably a rough-hewn and oppressive vault (see p. 30). The entrance for the setting is situated stage right, fitted with a metal grating placed between two 'columns with diamond-shaped bossage'. The columns are painted on transparencies – a procedure also employed to provide the

illusion of a river of blood and of fire flowing across the stage – behind the rock on which Danaus is subjected to the Promethean torment. The interior of caves can be glimpsed through rock archways. In front of these rocks unfolds and rages the *pantomime* of the demons, furies and the Danaïdes. Above and stage left, the decoration reaches its climax in the temple of Pluto, the squat Tuscan columns of which, with the colour of porphyry and rimmed with iron, bear a coffered vault bristling with diamond-shaped motifs. Bursting with flames, this edifice also underlines the frightful character of Hades, and in it here and there are strewn instruments of torture. At the back, stage right, clear frames also simulate streams of fire.

Pâris' drawing here displays a section of the tableau which was designed for the first performance, that is, with Danaus' body stretched out on a boulder and being devoured by a vulture. The wicker structure of the predator permitted a child to slide inside, and to agitate its legs and wings. From the second performance of *Les Danaïdes*, this meal was judged to be somewhat unappetizing for the audience and, added Jean-François de La Harpe, was not served up again! The writer for *Le Mercure de France* praised 'this great tableau of Tartarus, where the assembly of a superb decoration, an impressive *pantomime*, and music full of energy, created one of the most striking spectacles that has ever been performed in any theatre' (May 8, 1784). The *Journal de Paris* (July 10, 1785) also referred to the innovative character of this scene. Additionally, it should be noted that the *pantomime* was played out under a rain of fireworks which caused certain spectators to be fearful of a fire breaking out: all were 'at last buried in such a shower of fire that I wonder the Playhouse was not burned to the ground', wrote an English spectator, William Bennet, in his travel diary, also in 1785. Among the many eye-witness accounts regarding this striking final scene, it is worth mentioning an article from *Affiches, annonces et avis divers*: 'the tableau presented by the *pantomime* at the end is admirable above all for its sense of organization; it also incited the liveliest of outbursts' (April 27, 1784). Some years later, the public was able to witness another representation of Hell, with the celebrated ballet



of *Psyché* by Pierre Gardel (music by Ernest-Louis Miller), which caused a sensation at its first performance in Paris on November 14, 1790, a level of success that was borne out by a record number of performances. The decorations for *Psyché* had also been designed by Pierre-Adrien Pâris, and proved once more that the successful nature of such decorations also came as a result of the close collaboration between designer and machinist, in this case Pierre Boullé.



It is worth mentioning that without having located the designs illustrating the Parisian production of *Les Danaïdes*, as sent by Hivart in Russia to Count Nikolai Sheremetev, one could have evoked by use of drawings the clothing worn on stage with a design for an Egyptian costume (perhaps for Lynceus), as signed by Jean-Michel Moreau, *dit* Moreau le Jeune, the designer who participated in productions at the Opéra from 1782-1784. It is not yet known if this design was carried out.

Thanks to Hivart's correspondence, information exists, as it were from the inside – from the wings even, and in detail – about the manner in which *Les Danaïdes* was staged and about the methods implemented in order to realize certain effects, conducive to contributing to the creation of this illusion that proved to be so popular with audiences.



LES  
DANAÏDES,  
TRAGÉDIE LIRIQUE

en cinq Actes

MISE EN MUSIQUE

PAR

*Salieri*  
Elevé

DE GLUCK.

*Représentée pour la première fois  
par l'Académie Royale de Musique  
le Lundi 19 Avril 1784.*

---

Prix 48<sup>s</sup>

---

A PARIS.

*Chez BOIELDIEU Jeune, Rue de Richelieu, N° 80, au coin de celle Feytaud.*

Title page of the first edition of *Les Danaïdes*.  
Villa Medici Collection, Rome.

Page de titre de la première édition des *Danaïdes*.  
Collection Villa Médicis.