

# The Théâtre-Italien de Paris at the time of *Fausto*

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At the time of *Fausto*'s premiere, the Théâtre-Italien was the only permanent foreign-language theatre in France. Specialising in the production of Italian operas sung in the original language, since 1807 it had been under the tutelage of the French state, which reserved the right to appoint directors and charged them with implementing an exacting brief. Nevertheless, this status did not protect the Théâtre-Italien from the zones of turbulence bound up with its modes of governance and the successive venues it occupied.

Installed in turn at the Théâtre de l'Odéon, the Salle Favart on place Boieldieu, the Salle Louvois and then the Salle Favart again, the Théâtre-Italien went through several managements, one bankruptcy, and a period of joint administration with the Académie Royale de Musique from 1819 to 1827. Following this, management of the theatre was entrusted to Émile Laurent, who made way for Édouard Robert in 1830. Alongside him, Gioachino Rossini presided in the role of artistic director. It was then that the Théâtre-Italien experienced a veritable golden age: a reign of stars devoted to the Rossinian repertory, put together each season by means of patient negotiations, paying top prices for the singers' services, and guaranteed by the financial support of the banker and patron of the arts Alejandro María Aguado.



## A PREMIERE IN THE PEAK YEARS OF THE THÉÂTRE-ITALIEN

'The enterprise was a daring one', opined the *Journal de Paris* on 11 March 1831. The premiere of Louise Bertin's third opera, a few days earlier, had been held on a prestigious stage then at one of the most auspicious periods in its history. The consolidation of the institution, state-subsidised yet dedicated to a foreign dramatic tradition, had taken a number of years since 1814, when Louis XVIII had approved the name 'Théâtre royal italien' and granted the singer Angelica Catalani the privilege of administering the venue. Establishing such a theatre was a risky undertaking, and if it was to survive, it had to be inserted in a structured political project. And, in fact, the subsidy granted to the Théâtre-Italien was often justified by the idea that it would constitute 'an advanced vocal conservatory' (*une haute école de chant*) for French performers. This formulation, defended by music writers such as Castil-Blaze, was a well-worn topos that had existed since the first appearances in France of the Bouffons (companies producing Italian *opera buffa*).

The policy of the institution's management, centred on its troupe of singers, confirms this. Approximately half of its expenditure was devoted to assembling excellent singers each season. The aim was not to reveal new talent, but to present on its stage artists associated with the legendary Italian school. It did not matter that these were not all Italian by birth or descent, as long as their qualities and experience made them international personalities, as in the case of Henriette Méric-Lalande, Louise Bertin's Margarita.

The same applied to composers. Among these, the non-Italians formed a small group, with Mozart very much the outstanding figure in terms of popularity. Parisian audiences were most familiar with *Le nozze di Figaro* (first performed in the city in 1807) and *Don Giovanni* (Paris premiere 1811), which they had had the possibility of hearing at the Théâtre-Italien, and of which Berlioz once said that 'in [his] eyes they had the failing of appearing to belong to the Italian school'. Mozart was a byword for genius and extreme precocity, and therefore the very symbol of modernity; he

was regarded as an anti-Classicist, before whom the Italian masters bowed. Only Rossini managed to withstand this prejudice, making his mark at once with the Paris premieres of *L'italiana in Algeri* in 1817 and *Il barbiere di Siviglia* in 1819. The Théâtre-Italien then achieved a temporary balance between the two composers, whose respective merits *Le Miroir des spectacles* summed up in 1821: 'The German composer has greater learning and profundity; but the Italian has greater wit and grace'.



#### THE HEGEMONY OF ROSSINI

This balance did not last, however, and from the 1820s onwards the Théâtre-Italien played a decisive role in disseminating the operas of Rossini. The popularity of this repertory was at its height, galvanised by the composer's presence in Paris. The bedrock of the theatre's programme consisted of eight of his operas, headed by *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *La gazza ladra* and *Otello*, all of which topped the 200-performance mark in 1848. The institution thereby confirmed its status as a repertory theatre: the aim was to build on a core of masterpieces, occasionally renewed by works never before previously performed in France.

The institution's terms of reference did require the production of two new scores per season, but these did not necessarily have to be world premieres; most of the time, they were operas imported from Italy. This is why the number of composers performed at the Théâtre-Italien between 1815 and 1848 did not exceed forty. None of them, even the best-known, could rival Rossini in terms of number of works or of performances.

In this context, the tally of genuine creations was extremely limited. The 1820s saw only four: Manuel García's *Il fazzoletto* (1820), Rossini's *Il viaggio a Reims* (1825) and, in 1828, Louis Niedermeyer's *La casa nel bosco* and Fromental Halévy's *Clari*. The following decade, under Robert's aegis, marked a turning point: no fewer than eight new operas were composed especially for the Théâtre-Italien.

*Fausto* opened the series in 1831. The next true premieres did not appear until 1834, with *Il bravo* by Marco Aurelio Marliani and *Ernani* by Vincenzo Gabussi. The year 1835 began with the triumph of Bellini's *I puritani*, followed in March by Donizetti's *Marino Faliero*. The following year saw the premiere of *I briganti* by Saverio Mercadante, 1837 that of *Ildegonda* by Marliani and *Malek-Adel* by Michele Costa. But although Robert's management pursued an active policy of supporting new works, the results were mixed. Most of these commissions did not attain ten performances. *I puritani* was the only one to stand out from the crowd, buoyed up as it was by the legendary quartet formed by Giulia Grisi, Giovanni Battista Rubini, Antonio Tamburini and Luigi Lablache: in fourteen years, the opera chalked up more than 130 performances.

There was only one woman composer in this panorama, and before Louise Bertin, only five more non-Italians: Mozart, of course, but also Manuel García, Giacomo Meyerbeer, Louis Niedermeyer and Fromental Halévy. With the exception of Mozart, none of them achieved a breakthrough on the stage of the Théâtre-Italien.



#### THE SAD FATE OF NON-ITALIAN COMPOSERS

García's reputation as a singing teacher and a great Rossinian tenor earned him sufficient credit to compose *Il califfo di Bagdad* (1817) and *Il fazzoletto* (1820) for 'Les Italiens'. The Spaniard only managed a total of twenty performances with the first title, and just two with the second. Five years passed before another non-Italian composer came along: Giacomo Meyerbeer, with the Paris premiere of *Il crociato in Egitto*, on a libretto by Gaetano Rossi, featuring Domenico Donzelli in the role of Adriano. Premiered the previous year at La Fenice, the opera was given only twelve times in Paris: an initial series of six performances in 1825, interrupted by Donzelli's departure and ending with a benefit for Giuditta Pasta in the role of Palmide, was followed by a further run of six evenings between July and September 1828.

Shortly before this, in June 1828, the world premiere of Niedermeyer's one-act *opera buffa* *La casa nel bosco* had taken place. Only six performances were given in two months. 'The music seemed thin and colourless', wrote *La Pandore* the day after the premiere. 'But the claque stood firm.' The management under Laurent must have paid a team of sham spectators to lend a helping hand to the premiere of an opera penned by a Swiss composer trained in Vienna, Rome and Naples, who was little known on the stage of the Théâtre-Italien.

On 9 December of the same year, Fromental Halévy premiered his opera *Clari* on a libretto by Pietro Giannone. A pupil of Cherubini at the Paris Conservatoire, Halévy won the Prix de Rome and took up the associated residence in Italy in the early 1820s. On his return, he worked as *chef de chant* (head of vocal studies) at the Théâtre-Italien, where he was commissioned to write *Clari*. The production gave rise to a publicity campaign founded on two key points: for the first time, a French composer was writing for 'Les Italiens', and, another first, Maria Malibran was allotted a new role specially written for her at the theatre, after having sung five Rossini parts there. However, the opera received only six further performances, despite good box-office receipts.

Was its fate affected by the mixed reactions to the interpreter of *Clari* herself? Perhaps, like *Il crociato* before it, it suffered above all from not having a tenor to replace Donzelli after his departure. Since his debut in the title role of *Otello* in 1825, that artist had made an active contribution to the rich history of the Théâtre-Italien. But his sometimes prolonged engagements in London and Italy kept him away from Paris. Having been absent for a long period in 1830, he played the name part in the premiere of *Fausto* before taking up an engagement in Livorno and then leaving the Théâtre-Italien for good in 1831.

The fate of works by non-Italian composers, then, does not seem to have depended solely on their nationality. In a generation dominated by 'Rossinism' and star performers, any opera not written by Rossini struggled to establish itself, unless, as in the case of *I puritani*, an exceptional cast ensured its long-term success. Donzelli was not the only one to take

his leave in the spring of 1831: the soprano Henriette Méric-Lalande and the bass-baritone Vincenzo Felice Santini went off to London at the same time, and ‘the departure of these three virtuosos put an end to the run of *Fausto*’ (*Journal des débats*, 4 April 1831).

Moreover, competition was fierce that year. When the theatre reopened after the summer, Donizetti entered the repertory of the Théâtre-Italien with *Anna Bolena* on 1 September; at the end of October, the theatre’s audience discovered Bellini’s *La sonnambula*, with the famous Giuditta Pasta in the title role. Along with *I puritani* and *Norma*, both of which had their Parisian premieres in 1835, this work was to make up the institution’s trio of favourite Bellini operas.



#### AN INTIMIDATING AUDIENCE

In such a context, creating an opera at the Théâtre-Italien was a risky operation – especially as its public was one of the most demanding of the period. ‘What courage does it not take for an unknown to face an audience so hard to please?’ asked *Le Globe* on 20 March 1831. That audience, made up of a social and cultural elite, seemed to contemporaries, in the words of the critic Joseph d’Ortigue, to be a veritable ‘population of dilettantes, [...] steeped in music, perfumed and refined, who are to music what the *Doctrinaires* are to politics’. Here passionate lovers of Italian opera gathered to enjoy a repertory and artists whose performances they compared over and over again; here assembled the old aristocracy, loyal to the Bourbons and the Church, who went only to the Théâtre-Italien, whereas the nobility of the Faubourg Saint-Germain and Faubourg Saint-Honoré also attended the Opéra.

The fall of Charles X in 1830 and the advent of Louis-Philippe, the ‘Citizen King’, apparently did nothing to change this situation. Rentals of boxes for the entire year accounted for two-thirds of attendance at the theatre, which functioned as a stronghold of a community as cosmopol-

itan as it was exclusive. 'The same spectators meet each other there every evening,' observed *Le Globe* in October 1830, 'and those spectators are pillars of the throne, the altar, and the fiorituras of Rossini.' The Théâtre-Italien formed an integral part of the life of the upper classes, who went there once or several times a week, on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays – and even on Sundays or Mondays for special occasions such as the premiere of *Fausto* for the benefit of Donzelli on Monday 7 March 1831.

Louise Bertin presented her *Fausto* to this audience, which saw itself as an elite body whose tastes ran to a specific repertory and top-flight artists: 'Her Majesty the Queen attended the performance', read the article in *Le Corsaire* the day after the premiere. 'There were calls for the author, but it was announced that he wished to remain anonymous.'

The anonymity was merely a façade: in the more than a year that had elapsed since the announcement of the new opera, it was easily exposed by reports, relayed in 1830 by *Le Courrier des théâtres* among others, that 'the music is by a young lady already known for the score of *Le Loup-Garou*'. The opera, already 'abandoned, taken up again, suspended and rehearsed once more' several times, according to this journalist, was therefore presented before an intimidating judge: 'There is no general agreement on the merit of its music, which we know to be by a most interesting young lady. It seems to us that in such a case, more than in any other, the public should be the judge, since its verdict is the only one that remains.' And that verdict did indeed weigh heavily on *Fausto* and its composer for two centuries. At least it has not had the last word.

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Eugène Delacroix, illustration for *Faust*: Gretchen, 1827.  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Eugène Delacroix, illustration de *Faust* : Marguerite, 1827.  
Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.