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DAVID CHARLTON

OPERA IN THE AGE OF ROUSSEAU: MUSIC, CONFRONTATION, REALISM

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The situation is not an unfamiliar one in musicology: on rereading texts from a polemic such as the *querelle des bouffons*, new insights emerge and we must contend with change as a structuring element in historiography. Thus the confrontation and realism in the title of David Charlton's book gesture not only toward historical phenomena among Rousseau and the *philosophes*, but also to our own encounters with certain texts that Charlton recommends reconsidering. Chief among these are the reform treatises of Toussaint Rémond de Saint-Mard and the abbé Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, published more than a decade before Rousseau penned the *Lettre sur la musique française* (1753) on the failings of opera and the French language. As Charlton observes, Rémond de Saint-Mard and Mably admire the complexity of the operatic genre, opening up space to consider its music on the same level that commentators traditionally reserved for poetic livrets (162). While Mably avoids discussing performance, scenery or orchestral effects, he develops an argument about the cohesion of the livret and its musical setting that hews to what Rémond de Saint-Mard and eventually Rousseau himself advocated: textual and musical symbiosis, and even the desire for a single author to produce the livret and its musical accompaniment (167). This was Rousseau's dual role in crafting *Les muses galantes* (1745) and the *intermède* of 1752 *Le devin du village*, both of which reveal his familiarity with French operatic practice and a progressive approach to text setting, with words highlighting the emotional characteristics of individual characters, whether lofty and powerful, tender, or merry and comedic.

These reform texts and contexts lend fresh insights to Charlton's discussion of Rousseau's *Lettre sur la musique française*, a pamphlet whose pivotal role in the *querelle des bouffons* is widely acknowledged but whose praise of Italian melody, conceptualization of melodic unity, or *unité de mélodie*, and pronounced uncertainty about the expressivity of French language and opera are still not fully understood. As Charlton explains, we have been perhaps too quick to overlook one of the most significant aspects of the *Lettre sur la musique française*: its relationship to its precursor, the *Lettre sur l'opéra italien et français*, which distinguishes between Italian opera and music outside of the theatre (174). The latter repertoires win only the highest praise from Rousseau, who admits that he regularly performs and analyses instrumental works. On the other hand, the philosopher asks his readers not to broadcast the fact that he thinks much less highly of Italian staged works. When we consider that Rousseau wrote about this music after extended exposure to performances in Venice during his year as secretary to the French ambassador, comte Pierre-François de Montaignu, his discussions of Italian and French works in the fifth and sixth decades of the century are all the more intriguing. Appearing a decade before the *Lettre sur la musique française*, the *Lettre sur l'opéra italien et français* dates from the period between December 1744 and the composition of *Les muses galantes*. It is every bit the astonishing document that Charlton contends, showing Rousseau responding with disappointment to theatrical performance practices, rejecting the idea that Italian opera seria posed any real threat to French staged works, and commenting on issues of instrumentation and orchestration among Italian ensembles (173). He cares not a whit for contemporary Italian singing practices and is especially frank about the shortcomings of the da capo aria. In an aside that shows a debt to conservative commentators from Saint-Évremond to Boileau, Rousseau dismisses the value of historical plots in opera, claiming it would be better to perform Metastasian texts in the context of spoken theatre. Like a number of his Parisian contemporaries, including Rémond de Saint-Mard, Mably, Évrard Titon du Tillet, the moralist Luc de Clapiers de Vauvenargues, the Rameau collaborator Simon-Joseph Pellegrin and, after the middle of the century, Élie-Catherine Fréron and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, Rousseau applauds the variety and recitative style of French staged works, even singling out the masterful livrets of Quinault. The *Lettre*



sur l'opéra italien et français reveals a marked sympathy for the pastoral mode; it also shows Rousseau defending elements of the supernatural, or *le merveilleux*, in new and revived operas, including the early Lullian lyric tragedies *Thésée* (1675) and *Atys* (1676).

We would thus do well not to read the *Lettre sur la musique française* as entirely negative or wholly revolutionary in the context of Rousseau's wider musical epistemology. Charlton's discussion of its antecedents in the *Lettre sur l'opéra italien et français* joins a small number of scholarly studies addressing the earlier document, including those of Andrea Fabiano and Jacqueline Waeber, published respectively as 'Le chant italien en France à l'époque des Lumières: mythe et réalité', in *La voix dans la culture et la littérature françaises, 1713–1875*, ed. Jacques Wagner (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise-Pascal, 2001), 139–153, and 'Paysage d'avant Querelle: Rousseau continuateur de Grimm', in *Musique et langage chez Rousseau*, ed. Claude Dauphin (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2004), 229–249. As Charlton points out (172), the *Lettre sur la musique française* relies on an account of the relationship between linguistic development and the national character of music that is in fact already present in the writings of Mably, where we read that what distinguishes Italian repertoires from their French counterparts is not a matter of performance practice or musical form so much as one of language. In the anonymously published *Lettres à madame la marquise de P... sur l'opéra* (Paris: Didot, 1741) Mably describes a kinship between French and Italian musical traditions, tracing one major difference between them to the fact that among Italians, 'their language contains freer and more rhythmic sounds than the French language, which does not take transpositions in turns of phrase and which has no prosodic accent' (my translation; *Lettres à madame la marquise de P... sur l'opéra*, 139).

Among Charlton's discussions of the *Lettre sur la musique française* we find unsurprising remarks about its broad cultural influence that are nevertheless informed and fascinating. Charlton compellingly calls attention to two passages in the autobiographical *Les confessions* (1782) of Rousseau, one of which twins the *Lettre sur la musique française* with *Le petit prophète de Boehmischbroda: le correcteur des bouffons et la guerre de l'opéra* (1753), the defence of Italian opera published anonymously by Friedrich Melchior Grimm. As Charlton explains, Rousseau's letter digs deep, justifying conventions of contemporary Italian opera that figure no more prominently than in the footnotes of Grimm's pamphlet (205). A separate passage in *Les confessions* goes so far as to suggest that the *Lettre sur la musique française* very nearly prevented a political and religious revolution. The letter appeared in the midst of a protracted dispute between the clergy and the *parlement de Paris* over the papal bull *Unigenitus* (1713), condemning Jansenism. In the words of a proud Rousseau, 'the brochure appeared; in an instant all other quarrels were forgotten; people could think of nothing but the threat to French music, and the only uprising was against me. It was such that the nation has never completely recovered from it' (my translation; Rousseau, *Les confessions II: livres VII à XII*, ed. Alain Grosrichard, second edition (Paris: Flammarion, 2004), 129).

Charlton is right to point to the polemics of Rousseau and the *bouffonistes* as refashioned or recast examinations of issues from the *querelle des anciens et des modernes* in the seventeenth century. His detailed commentary on how operatic realism and myth continued to clash into the middle of the eighteenth century supports his reading of the *querelle des bouffons* as an interrogation of tensions between baroque and early classical musical styles, intensified by increasing French familiarity with Italian sonatas and concertos and by deeper epistemological frictions between a conservative, cyclic perspective on history and one stressing progress and improvement (179). As Charlton also explains, one of the central paradoxes of the hallowed lyric tragedy was its popular appreciation as a textual or poetic genre even in the face of its deeply expressive and complex realization in and through music. When Rémond de Saint-Mard, Mably and others advocated operatic reform, they defended a recitative style considered deficient even as they tended to value musical settings over the livret (223). When Jean-François Marmontel considered style and performance practice in a critique of d'Alembert and *De la liberté de la musique* (1754), he affirmed the lasting impression made by months and years of Parisian exposure to great pantomimes and to the performances of celebrated sopranos and members of the troupe of Eustachio Bambini. Charlton might



have pushed his penetrating reading of period concerns with performance even further by delving into two texts attributed to the poet and secretary François-Antoine Chevrier: *La constitution de l'Opéra* (1736) and the *Constitution du patriarche de l'Opéra, qui condamne cent une Propositions extraites de deux Ecrits intitulés: Reflexions sur les vrais principes de l'Harmonie, & Lettre sur l'origine & les progrès de l'Académie Royale de Musique* (1754), the latter also associated with the abbé Pellegrin.

Opera in the Age of Rousseau shines not only in its insightful tour through familiar polemics but also in its awareness of generic and stylistic trends that figure all too infrequently in scholarship on French staged works from this period. Comedy and the comic have their place in Charlton's numerous analytical discussions, all illustrated with elegantly set musical examples. He speaks to evidence of cross-pollination between theatres, describing comedy at the Opéra as an incorporation of features associated with *opéra-comique*, including the practice of closing plays and lighter lyric works with *vaudevilles* (286). This is a trend that Jean-Joseph Mouret exploited in *Les amours de Ragonde* (1714) and that Rousseau parlayed into the strophic song 'L'art à l'Amour est favorable' in the eighth scene of *Le devin du village*. Charlton also claims that we might make sense of Rameau's *Platée* (1745), the *ballet buffon* later styled as a *comédie lyrique*, as a fully composed poetic and musical debate about French language (346). This reading of one aspect of the comic subtlety of Rameau's work expands on research by Downing Thomas in 'Rameau's *Platée* Returns: A Case of Double Identity in the *Querelle des bouffons*' (*Cambridge Opera Journal* 18/1 (2006), 1–19). Where Thomas calls attention to repetitive, even incongruous use of pitches and timbres in *Platée*, Charlton elaborates on the work's phatic exclamations and its poetic emphasis on mute French vowels. In meditations on *Platée* as well as in accounts of how performers including Denis-François Tribou, François Poirier, Marie Fel and Pierre Jélyotte used operatic comedy to break free from heroic or sentimental roles, Charlton himself breaks free from a more traditional account of the changes that swept through French staged works in the eighteenth century (273). His study highlights the vigour and realism with which Rousseau and his colleagues turned to opera; it also emphasizes the rewards awaiting any modern musicologist who confronts these repertoires alongside their volatile reception histories.

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MARK DARLOW

STAGING THE FRENCH REVOLUTION: CULTURAL POLITICS AND THE PARIS OPÉRA, 1789–1794

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In *Staging the French Revolution: Cultural Politics and the Paris Opéra 1789–1794* Mark Darlow offers a cultural history of the Paris Opéra as an institution, interrogating the external forces that affected the Opéra, its internal policies and politics, and its repertory decisions over the course of three seasons during the French Revolution up to and including the Terror of 1793–1794. By identifying the Opéra, both institutionally and aesthetically, as a site of negotiation in a changing, politically charged historical and cultural context, this monograph effectively eradicates the unproductive label of 'propaganda' commonly attached to musical works of the Revolution. Darlow's approach and conclusions open up a plethora of research avenues not only for opera scholars and music historians of the French Revolution, but also for scholars of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music in general.