

THE MYSTERY OF *ERNELINDE*

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ABSTRACT

François-André Danican Philidor's Ernelinde was one of the most famous French operas of the late eighteenth century. A subject of great controversy when it was first performed in 1767, the history of its reception has been obscured by judgments rooted more in the politics of the French literary world than in the work itself. The opera is shown in a new light by reconsidering Philidor's librettist, Antoine-Henri Poinset.

In the web of contradictions forming the history of its reception, François-André Danican Philidor's *Ernelinde* is seen alternately as a grand success and an utter failure, praised or condemned for its innovation and written off as plagiarism. From its initial run of eighteen performances at the Académie Royale de Musique in 1767 and 1768 to its revivals in 1769, 1773 and 1777, the work was a subject of intense debate between partisans of traditional French music and proponents of the modern Italian style. And while in the history of the criticism of *Ernelinde* it has been conjectured that this opera was actually conceived as a practical joke, a 'mystification' consisting of a parody of Italian composers that Philidor intended to reveal once it had succeeded – a conjecture which Julian Rushton has shown to be largely unfounded¹ – we will see in the following pages that the reception of *Ernelinde* is, none the less, closely related to the history of mystification.

It was, in fact, for Philidor's librettist, Antoine-Henri Poinset, that the word 'mystification' was invented. The portrait of Poinset drawn by various authors is rendered typically by Louis Petit de Bachaumont in an obituary article following his death in 1769:

C'est un des personnages les plus singuliers qu'on pût voir qui, à beaucoup d'esprit et de saillies, joignait une ignorance si crasse, une présomption si aveugle, qu'on lui faisait croire tout ce qu'on voulait en caressant sa vanité. La postérité ne pourra jamais comprendre tout ce qui lui est arrivé en pareil genre: les tours qu'on lui a joués et auxquels il s'est livré dans l'ivresse de son amour-propre, sont d'une espèce si singulière et si nouvelle, qu'il a fallu créer un mot pour les caractériser: notre langue lui doit de s'être enrichi du terme de *mystification*.²

He was one of the oddest characters anyone could meet, who, along with a lot of wit and witticisms, displayed such crass ignorance and such blind presumption, that one could make him believe anything one wanted by stroking his vanity. Posterity will never be able to understand all that happened to him in this way; the tricks played on him, and with which he went along in the ecstasy of his self-love, are of a kind so strange and so new that it was necessary to invent a new word to characterize them: our language is indebted to him for being enriched with the term *mystification*.

This article is based in part on passages of my *Essai sur l'origine de la mystification* (Saint-Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2009), 60–77.

- 1 Marc Pincherle, 'Ernelinde et Jomelli', *La revue musicale* 4/7 (1923), 67–72; François-André Danican Philidor, *Ernelinde, tragédie lyrique*, Introduction by Julian Rushton (Stuyvesant: Pendragon, 1992), xvii.
- 2 *Mémoires secrets pour servir à l'histoire de la république des lettres en France, depuis 1762 jusqu'à nos jours*, ed. Christophe Cave and Suzanne Cornand (Paris: Champion, 2009), volume 2, 1174. Translations are my own.



While originally referring to a kind of burlesque initiation ritual fashionable in Parisian literary circles during the 1750s³ – in which a novice would, for instance, be asked to read his play in front of a disapproving audience, or made to stand so close to a fire that his legs would get burned – the word was soon to acquire an aesthetic sense, notably in the writings of Diderot, relating to various means of giving fiction the appearance of truth or vice versa.⁴ Though some may not be used to seeing aesthetics as having to do with ritual, their relation becomes apparent if we consider that mystification was originally part of an initiation into the world of letters.

The theory that *Ernelinde* was at once a plagiarism and a mystification, though essentially unfounded, points to an association that is fundamental. In the introduction to his account of Poinset's adventures, Jean Monnet underlines what he perceives to be the poet's confusion of invention with plagiarism: 'Since his childhood, he had read only new novels and verses from the *Mercur* from which he borrowed marvellously in composing what he called his poems' ('Depuis son enfance, il n'avoit lu que les Romans nouveaux & les Vers du Mercur dont il s'aidoit merueilleusement pour composer ce qu'il appelloit ses poësies').⁵ That the original victim of mystification is said to be a plagiarist echoes the language of literary initiation rituals in Paris, in which initiates were called 'originals' in a pejorative sense.⁶ The subject of a comedy by Charles Palissot de Montenoy, *Le cercle ou les originaux*, first performed in 1755, the mystification of 'originals' – that is, in a word, flawed copies, or bizarre individuals – emerged as a common theme in the French literary world during the following years before being taken up again by Poinset in *Le cercle, ou la soirée à la mode*.

Received with universal praise when it was performed in 1764, Poinset's comedy was viewed by Palissot as a copy of his own play. In a satirical pamphlet, *La Gageure de M. Poinset*, Palissot portrays Poinset as having made a wager in the presence of a 'society' that he would compose a play in which there was not a single line of his own invention, where everything, including the title, would be pillaged – and yet that the play would be rehearsed, performed and applauded as an original work. Although, as Auguste Vitu has shown, Palissot's accusations are, for the most part, false, or greatly exaggerated, they none the less reinforced Poinset's reputation as a plagiarist.⁷

At a time when it is said to have been emerging as a new aesthetic category, originality encountered strong resistance.⁸ An author as innovative as Denis Diderot was subject to the same accusations as Poinset, as, for instance, in Palissot's *Petites lettres sur les grands philosophes*, where he is criticized at once as a plagiarist and an 'original'. Though it might seem that the reception of authors should be contingent on the reception of their work, in a society as encoded as the Parisian literary world of the 1760s, it could happen that resistance to a work was predicated on resistance to its author. And Poinset is, more than any other perhaps, the author whose original works were received as the works of an 'original'.

3 The etymology of the verb *mystifier* proposed by Louis Delâtre (*La Langue française dans ses rapports avec le sanscrit et avec les autres langues indo-européennes* (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1854), 357) and confirmed by J. Vincent-Benn ('Historique du mot *mystifier*', *Revue de philologie française et de littérature* 37 (1925), 34–42) is reflected in the Oxford English Dictionary Online: 'The French word [*mystifier*] was apparently first used in relation to a popular form of practical joke in which the victim was the subject of a burlesque initiation ceremony.' Online version <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/124667>> (15 August 2011). The story of Poinset's mystifications has been widely told, notably by Jean Monnet in an appendix to his memoirs in 1772 and a long list of editors and contributors to reference works, as well as by William Makepeace Thackeray, who included a chapter on Poinset in his *Paris Sketchbook*. I intentionally refrain from the ritual retelling of this story so as to focus on Poinset's work as a librettist.

4 See, for instance, Jean Catrysse, *Diderot et la mystification* (Paris: Nizet, 1970), and Pierre Chartier, *Théorie du persiflage* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005).

5 *Supplément au Roman comique, ou Mémoires pour servir à la vie de Jean Monnet* (London, 1772), volume 2, 110.

6 See Reginald McGinnis, 'The Critique of Originality in French Letters', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 31 (2002), 127–143.

7 *Le cercle, ou la soirée à la mode, nouvelle édition, conforme au manuscrit original, précédée d'une étude par Auguste Vitu* (Paris: Ollendorff, 1887), xxvi–xxx.

8 Roland Mortier, *L'originalité: une nouvelle catégorie esthétique au siècle des Lumières* (Genève: Droz, 1982), 31–37.



Public excitement in anticipation of *Ernelinde* was largely owing to its association with a ‘new genre’ that, as Poinset explained in his Preface to the 1767 edition of the libretto, he was hoping to bring to the stage of the Académie Royale de Musique⁹ – a genre in which the setting of French words to Italianate music was linked to a debate as to the respective merits of French and Italian opera dating from the early 1750s, the famous ‘Querelle des Bouffons’.¹⁰ As told by Bachaumont, the turnout for the first performance, on 24 November 1767, was unlike almost anything in the history of the Paris Opera: ‘All the boxes were reserved: people were already there at noon, and the hall was overflowing, as were the corridors, the galleries and the avenues’ (‘Toutes les loges étaient louées: il y avait du monde dès midi, et la salle regorgeait, ainsi que les corridors, les galeries, les avenues’).¹¹ In spite of this overwhelming enthusiasm in anticipation of the premiere, Bachaumont offered an opinion of the piece that was less than favourable: ‘People were not satisfied at this first performance. Those sympathetic to the musician blame the poem, which in truth does not lend itself to singing and the stage.’ (‘On n’a pas été satisfait à cette première représentation. Les amis du musicien accusent le poème, qui à la vérité ne prête pas au chant et à la scène.’)¹²

Bachaumont’s assessment is not so simple as it first appears, however. He gives the impression that he is reporting a general opinion, but, as we will see, *Ernelinde* also had many supporters at its first performance. And since Bachaumont’s view is decidedly partial, we might question his assertion that ‘those sympathetic to the musician blame the poem’.

A year later, when the opera was staged for a second time, Friedrich Melchior Grimm offered a judgment recalling Bachaumont’s view that Poinset was responsible for the alleged failure: ‘The music of this opera is superb, but it was unable to sustain the poem when it was first performed, and it will not sustain it in this revival. It is obvious from this experiment that it is not with music that one can succeed at the Paris Opera.’ (‘La musique de cet opéra est superbe, mais elle n’a pas pu soutenir le poème dans sa nouveauté, elle ne le soutiendra pas à cette reprise. Il est bien démontré par cet essai que ce n’est pas avec de la musique qu’on peut réussir à l’Opéra de Paris.’)¹³

Although the judgments of Grimm and Bachaumont were the most influential, and are often echoed in the writings of nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics,¹⁴ other contemporary sources show that they were not representative of general opinion. While some contemporary judgments were critical, others were entirely favourable. An article in the *Avantcoureur* dated 30 November 1767 tells us that several pieces were applauded enthusiastically, and praises both the score and the libretto, which is said to be at once interesting and lively (‘Le poème a de l’intérêt et du mouvement’¹⁵). Further testimony is found in an ‘Épître au sujet d’*Ernelinde*’ published some weeks later in the *Mercure de France*, where a partisan of French music hostile to the new genre responds to what he perceives to be a shocking success. The work is said to offer new things little known to the French stage, while public acclaim appears so excessive as to be fanatical:

Ce brûlant fanatisme, au centre de Paris
Par ses gestes et par ses cris,
Proclame à grand bruit *Ernelinde*.¹⁶

This wild fanaticism, in the centre of Paris,
With its gestures and its cries
Loudly proclaims *Ernelinde*.

9 *Ernelinde, princesse de Norvège: tragédie lyrique en trois actes* (Paris: De Lormel, 1767), 5. Poinset’s libretto is based on an opera by Francesco Silvani. Regarding the circumstances of Poinset’s discovery of this work during his travels to Italy and his falsely attributing it to Matteo Noris see Rushton, Introduction, xiii.

10 In his *Lettre sur la musique française*, one of the pivotal texts of this quarrel, Jean-Jacques Rousseau argues that the French language, unlike Italian, is unsuited to music.

11 Louis Petit de Bachaumont, *Mémoires secrets*, volume 2, 818.

12 Bachaumont, *Mémoires secrets*, volume 2, 818.

13 *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique par Grimm, Diderot, Raynal, Meister, etc.*, ed. Maurice Tourneux (Paris: Garnier, 1879), volume 8, 263.

14 See Arthur Pougin’s Introduction to his edition of *Ernelinde* (Paris: Michaelis, 1883), 3.

15 *L’Avantcoureur* 48 (30 November 1767), 760–763.

16 *Mercure de France* (January 1768), 244.



Although unwelcome to the author of this epistle, the success of *Ernelinde* goes unquestioned. That the pleasure caused by the opera was, as he says, voiced both from the stalls and from the boxes suggests that approval was more or less universal. Nothing in the assessment by this partisan of French music, who, one has to assume, would have preferred to see *Ernelinde* fail, allows us to suspect anything other than a complete success.

The success of *Ernelinde* and the circumstances surrounding its creation are specifically addressed in an article in the *Journal de musique* by Nicolas-Étienne Framery from July 1770. Published at a time when the performances of *Ernelinde* were still a recent memory, but presumably after some of the initial controversy had subsided, this article offers a mix of praise and criticism for a project to which the author is openly sympathetic. According to Framery, *Ernelinde* was a 'big machine that could not have a mediocre success' ('une grande machine qui ne pouvait avoir un succès médiocre'); there was thus 'no middle ground between victory and death' ('point de milieu entre la victoire & la mort').¹⁷ And if 'all the good this work could be expected to bring to the musical arts did not occur' ('tout le bien que l'Art Musical pouvait attendre de cet Ouvrage n'arriva point'), this is 'because it had too many things stacked against it' ('parce qu'il réunit trop de choses contre lui').¹⁸ While pointing to the antagonism of the partisans of French music and of 'everyone opposed to the success of new endeavours, simply because they are new' ('tous ceux qui s'opposent au succès des nouvelles tentatives, par cette raison qu'elles sont nouvelles'),¹⁹ Framery also mentions Poinset, who, as Mark Darlow has observed, is criticized 'for both wishing to translate an Italian work and adding the aspects of French musical art which were not used in Italy, namely ballets and Italian recitative forms, difficult to employ in France because the declamation of the two styles is so radically different'.²⁰ That 'malice, much more often than taste, dictates criticism' ('la malignité, bien plus souvent que le goût, dicte les critiques');²¹ that the Académie Royale de Musique itself did not entirely wish to see the opera succeed;²² that substitutes – or 'actors that the public does not like to see, however good they may be' ('les Acteurs que le Public n'aime point à voir si bons qu'ils soient')²³ – were used in some of the first performances: these are some of the reasons Framery gives for what he persists in calling 'the success of *Ernelinde*', while adding that they are perhaps 'more worth knowing than the jokes that have been made about this work' ('meilleures à savoir que les plaisanteries qu'on a faites sur cet Ouvrage').²⁴

17 Nicolas-Étienne Framery, *Journal de musique* (July 1770), 54.

18 Framery, *Journal de musique* (July 1770), 54.

19 Framery, *Journal de musique* (July 1770), 54.

20 Mark Darlow, *Nicolas-Etienne Framery and Lyric Theatre in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2003), 237. Framery also considered it an error on the part of Poinset to have excluded the supernatural from the libretto: 'Il voulut introduire un Poème sans merveilleux, projet qui avait beaucoup moins de Partisans que la Musique moderne, & qu'on peut combattre bien plus raisonnablement.' (He wanted to present a poem without the supernatural – a project that had many fewer partisans than modern music, and that one can much more reasonably oppose.) *Journal de musique* (July 1770), 55.

21 Framery, *Journal de musique* (July 1770), 56.

22 Framery, *Journal de musique* (July 1770), 56–57. The opinion that *Ernelinde* encountered reluctance from the Académie Royale de Musique is echoed by Pierre-Louis Guinguené: 'On n'était pas encore mûr en France pour cette tentative. On ne l'était pas surtout à l'académie royale de musique.' (Things were not yet ripe in France for this attempt, especially not at the Académie Royale de Musique.) *Encyclopédie méthodique: musique* (Paris: Panckoucke, 1791), volume 1, 621.

23 Framery, *Journal de musique* (July 1770), 57.

24 Framery, *Journal de musique* (July 1770), 58. In an extensive analysis of the opera Framery alternates between praise, calling the *Chœur du serment* 'the most beautiful chorus known in France and perhaps in the world' ('le plus beau chœur qu'on connaisse en France & peut-être dans le monde' (61)), and criticism, notably 'that all of the characters act towards Ricimer as if he were an odious tyrant, when in fact he is not' ('que tous les Personnages agissent avec Ricimer, comme si c'était un Tyran odieux & qu'il ne l'est véritablement point' (65)), as well as calling certain scenes or verses 'useless' or 'ridiculous', all of which he insists would be 'easy to correct' ('faciles à corriger' (74)).



Framery thus implies that mockery of the work had diverted attention from its merits. This diversion of attention from questions of artistic merit to mockery is, as I have shown elsewhere, a pattern that pervades the reception of Poinset for his entire career.²⁵ Called *le mystifié* because of the various practical jokes played on him during the 1750s, Poinset is also remembered as one of the worst librettists of his time.²⁶ A closer look at his career shows a different picture, though, from the one usually projected. Hidden behind the label of *le mystifié* is an exceptional literary career that took shape in the 1760s. From 1762 to 1767 Poinset enjoyed a number of dramatic successes, including *Le cercle, ou la soirée à la mode* as well as *Le Sorcier*, and *Tom Jones* in collaboration with Philidor, while gaining the patronage of the Prince de Condé, for whom he organized a programme of festivities at Chantilly.

Whereas Poinset first became known in the world of French letters as an object of ridicule, he none the less was to receive literary acclaim beyond that of many of his most famous contemporaries.²⁷ Yet even during this period of success, he remained an object of persistent mockery.²⁸ The impression that Bachaumont and Grimm give of a man on the receiving end of so much ridicule is hard to reconcile with Poinset's literary achievements. Disinclined to recognize Poinset's success, Grimm, in his review of *Le cercle*, resorts to telling the story of Poinset's mystifications dating from a decade earlier, stating that he had previously been known only as 'a kind of imbecile' ('une espèce d'imbécile').²⁹ For Bachaumont, Poinset was simply too unrefined and too bourgeois to paint the manners of high society.³⁰ In a few short years Poinset had risen to the upper echelons of the literary world, and *Ernelinde* was an occasion for him to continue this ascent. It was accordingly met with strong resistance, and, once again exhibiting the tension between Poinset's reputation as an object of ridicule and his quest for literary fame, the much-anticipated unveiling of the opera was marked by a number of practical jokes.

In the days following the first performance Poinset wrote to various journals to disavow correspondence, supposedly with his mistresses, that had been circulated in Parisian society and published in Brussels. The letters are clearly a hoax, placing Poinset in ridiculous situations and attributing to him a number of inappropriate remarks: comparisons of Mlle Le Clerc, a famous prostitute and supposedly Poinset's former mistress, with the actresses who had played the leading roles in *Le cercle, ou la soirée à la mode*, for instance, could only have been insulting to Poinset's colleagues. These letters were clearly intended not only to mock Poinset, but also to damage his professional relationships.³¹ Shortly after *Ernelinde's* final performance Bachaumont describes how Poinset was attacked and beaten by a band of women at the *bal de l'opéra*, in the presence of a large crowd and to his great displeasure, adding that such was the price of fame and glory.³²

25 Reginald McGinnis, *Essai sur l'origine de la mystification*, 5–85.

26 See, for instance, Karin Pendle, 'L'Opéra-comique à Paris de 1762 à 1789', in *L'Opéra-comique en France au XVIIIe siècle*, ed. Philippe Vendrix (Liège: Mardaga, 1992), 88. While echoing traditional biases against Poinset, Pendle's own assessment of his qualities as a librettist is more nuanced: 'Il possédait le sens de la situation dramatique et de la construction du dialogue. Il pouvait composer des vers tout à fait adéquats à la musique et sentir les situations et les personnages qui appelaient la musique' (89). (He had a sense for dramatic situations and the construction of dialogue. He was capable of composing verses perfectly suited to music and sensing situations and characters that called for music.)

27 Bachaumont, *Mémoires secrets*, volume 2, 893.

28 See, for instance, the letter of 13 April 1766 from Charles Simon Favart to the Comte de Durazzo in Favart, *Mémoires et correspondance littéraires, dramatiques et anecdotiques* (Paris: Collin, 1808), volume 2, 226.

29 'M. Poinset, auteur de cette pièce, n'était connu jusqu'à présent que pour une espèce d'imbécile' (15 September 1764). Tourneux (ed.), *Correspondance littéraire*, volume 4, 69.

30 'On trouve le petit Poinset bien peu délicat, bien bourgeois, pour tracer les mœurs du grand monde.' Bachaumont, *Mémoires secrets*, volume 1, 374.

31 The supposed letters from Mademoiselle Le Clerc and Poinset are published in Bachaumont, *Mémoires secrets*, volume 2, 788–793.

32 Bachaumont, *Mémoires secrets*, volume 2, 854.



Meanwhile, a singer in the chorus at the Opéra, Mlle Le Blanc de Crouzoul, brought a lawsuit against Poinset over a watch she claimed to have given him ten years earlier. In a statement of case that was widely circulated in Parisian society – according to Bachaumont, it was read even by the king – Poinset is said never to have returned the watch; but more importantly, he is mocked for his naivety as the victim of so many jokes and for his presumptuous aspiration to be an author. The statement is admittedly very funny, yet was potentially damaging to Poinset, even though he ended up winning his case. But, as Poinset observed in his response, the statement of case against him invited judgments of his literary output and his naivety, neither of which had anything to do with Mlle Le Blanc de Crouzoul's actual complaint.³³

Is it a coincidence that these practical jokes were played on Poinset at the very moment he was engaged in a widely publicized and innovative artistic endeavour? Although the authors of these jokes remain for the most part anonymous, their purpose is readily identifiable: Poinset is reduced from the status of an author to that of a comic figure as part of a concerted effort to tarnish his success.

A subject of controversy during its first run, *Ernelinde* received universal praise when, with revisions to the score by Philidor and to the libretto by Michel-Jean Sedaine, it was performed again in 1777. So was this belated praise due, as some critics have suggested, to Sedaine's revisions to the work of Poinset?³⁴ Julian Rushton thinks not, observing that while the original *Ernelinde* was, in spirit and technique, 'the true harbinger of the Gluck–Piccinni era', the opera was well received only ten years later, 'coming, as it were, in the wake of Gluck'.³⁵ *Ernelinde* benefited from the fashion it helped to introduce only after the fact. In spite of its shortcomings, the 1767–1769 version of *Ernelinde* was perhaps more truly 'epoch-making',³⁶ and, in aesthetic terms, Sedaine's extending the libretto from three to five acts seems regressive.³⁷

33 See *Précis pour la Demoiselle Leblanc de Crouzoul, Demanderesse, contre le Sieur Poinset le jeune, Défendeur* ([Paris:] Louis Cellot, 1768); *Mémoire pour le Sr Antoine-Henri Poinset, de l'Académie des Sciences et Belles-Lettres de Dijon, et celle des Arcades de Rome, Défendeur et Demandeur* ([Paris:] Louis Cellot, 1768). Traditional bias against Poinset is exemplified by Eugène d'Auriac, whose retelling of this episode in the late nineteenth century relies exclusively on the statement of Mlle Le Blanc de Crouzoul: 'Procès curieux entre une danseuse de l'opéra et un auteur dramatique', *Revue des études historiques* (May–June 1884), 209–217.

34 See *Ernelinde*, ed. Arthur Pougin (Paris: Michaëlis, 1883), 3–5, and Pendle, 'L'Opéra-comique à Paris', 88.

35 Julian Rushton, 'Philidor and the Tragédie Lyrique', *The Musical Times* 117 (September 1976), 734–735.

36 The term 'epoch-making' has been used by modern scholars quoting Pierre-Louis Guinguené, who was apparently referring to the 1777 revival of *Ernelinde* when he wrote: 'The public had a lively appreciation of the beauties of this work, which marks an epoch, and which ensures for its composer the glory of having been the first in our theatres to replace the archaic and soporific French psalmody by simply declaimed recitative, and by arias, duets, trios and other pieces of measured music.' ('On sentit vivement les beautés de cet ouvrage, qui fait époque, & qui assure à son auteur la gloire d'avoir le premier substitué sur notre théâtre lyrique, le récitatif simplement déclamé et les airs, duos, trios & autres morceaux de musique mesurée, suivant la méthode italienne, à l'ancienne et soporifique psalmodie française.') Quoted in Rushton, Introduction, x. The expression *faire époque* had been used with specific reference to the 1767 version of *Ernelinde* as early as 1768: 'November 24th, *Ernelinde*, tragedy in three acts by Mr Poinset and Mr Philidor, was performed before a crowd the likes of which had never been seen. Although the turnout and the audience's applause seem to have assured the success of this long-anticipated work that should mark an epoch in the nation, the boldness of the poet and the musician, the innovations they had the courage to introduce, would require a dissertation which the variety of opinions, the more or less justified enthusiasm and the limits of this publication do not allow us to undertake.' ('Le 24 Novembre, on vit paroître, au milieu d'une assemble dont il n'y avoit jamais eu d'exemple, *Ernelinde*, tragédie en trois actes, par MM. Poinset & Philidor. Quoique l'affluence & les applaudissements des spectateurs semblent avoir assuré le succès de cet ouvrage, attendu depuis long-temps, & qui doit faire époque dans la Nation, la hardiesse du Poëte, celle du Musicien, les nouveautés qu'ils ont eu le courage d'introduire, demanderoient une dissertation que la variété des avis, l'enthousiasme plus ou moins justifiée [*sic*], les bornes de cet ouvrage ne nous permettent pas d'entreprendre.') Guinguené, *Etat actuel de la musique du roi et des trois spectacles de Paris* (Paris: Vente, 1768), 46.

37 According to Rushton, 'there are good reasons for preferring Version 1, which represents *Ernelinde* in its original epoch-making three-act form, to its appearance, spun out over five acts, in the Gluck era when three-act operas



It may also be that, for some contemporaries at least, Poinset's absence allowed for an unreserved expression of praise that was repressed in the original controversy. A comparison of Grimm's judgments shows that, whereas he originally blamed the opera's failure on Poinset, he later singled out for praise sections in which the words had not been changed, or had been only slightly altered, by Sedaine: Ernelinde's 'superb monologue' ('Où suis-je? quel épais nuage / Me dérobe l'éclat des cieux?') and the 'magnificent chorus from the first act' ('Jurons sur nos glaives sanglants').³⁸ So when Grimm, who had often expressed admiration for Sedaine and disdain for Poinset, finally came to praise *Ernelinde*, he was, despite appearances to the contrary (and perhaps unwittingly) lauding the latter.

Seen from a historical distance, Grimm's inconsistencies appear almost comical. But, in the reception history of *Ernelinde*, such inconsistencies are more the rule than the exception. From the time of its creation the theories of Philidor and Poinset were associated with those developed by François-Jean de Chastellux in his *Essai sur l'union de la poésie et de la musique*.³⁹ And while Chastellux himself was proud to recognize the influence of his own ideas on *Ernelinde*,⁴⁰ his opinion of the opera was the same as Grimm's: he admired it only for the music, and had nothing but disdain for the words. Whereas the object of his essay had been to make poets musicians and musicians poets,⁴¹ his own judgment of *Ernelinde* – that the music was perfectly suited to the stage, but that its success was prevented by the flaws of the poem⁴² – placed poetry and music at odds. And one has to wonder why he recognized his influence on a work for which his admiration consisted precisely in separating the musical score from the libretto.

From the similarities observed between theories of the encyclopedists and those associated with *Ernelinde*, it has been concluded that Poinset was influenced by the encyclopedists. Without dismissing this line of influence, we may also ask whether Poinset might not have had ideas similar to those of the encyclopedists without necessarily deriving his ideas from them. Two years prior to the creation of *Ernelinde*, Poinset exposed some of his views on lyrical theatre in his Preface to *La réconciliation villageoise*. Although his contemporaries often claimed he was incapable of invention, it would be unfair to assume that the ideas expressed in these pages are not his own:

Seven or eight years ago, all anyone wanted was music; the most ill-formed and inconsequential plays were applauded as long as there was singing; abundance has made the public more discerning, and it is expected now that a play will be both well conceived and well executed. Whereas the musician used to overshadow the poet, these days it is the poet who draws attention to the musician. Music aficionados do not wish to believe any of this; but I will let time be the judge, and it will prove what I say. I will venture even further: the genre will disappear if the musician is a tyrant to

had become the norm' (Introduction, xiv). Regarding Poinset's composing a lyrical tragedy in three acts, Manuel Couvreur observes: 'This was an innovation and, for the revivals of 1773 and 1777, Sedaine inopportunely restored the traditional division.' ('C'était une audace et, pour les reprises de 1773 et de 1777, Sedaine rétablit malencontreusement le découpage traditionnel.') Couvreur, 'Diderot et Philidor: le Philosophe au chevet d'*Ernelinde*', *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie* 11 (October 1991), 101n.

38 *Correspondance littéraire* (July 1777), volume 11, 493. 'Où suis-je? quel épais nuage / Me dérobe l'éclat des cieux?' belongs to Act 2 Scene 10 in 1767 and Act 3 Scene 11 in 1777. 'Jurons sur nos glaives sanglants' remains Act 1 Scene 3 from 1767 to 1777.

39 'Lettre à M. le Chevalier de * * * à l'occasion du nouvel opéra', 1768. Chastellux, *Essai sur l'union de la poésie et de la musique* (The Hague and Paris, 1765).

40 François-Jean de Chastellux, 'Observations sur un ouvrage nouveau, intitulé: 'Traité du mélodrame'', *Mercure de France* (September 1771), 157.

41 Chastellux, *Essai sur l'union de la poésie et de la musique*, 21.

42 'A deux morceaux près, cette musique étoit parfaitement théâtrale, & les défauts du poëme qui en ont empêché le succès auroient été choquans dans tous les tems, & avec quelque musique qu'on y eut adaptée.' (Except for two pieces, the music was perfectly suited to the stage, and the shortcomings of the poem that prevented its success would have been shocking in any period, whatever music was set to it.) Chastellux, 'Observations sur un ouvrage nouveau', *Mercure de France* (September 1771), 157.



the poet; he must be his companion, and nothing more. A composer will say: I cannot put these words to music, because such and such a rule is opposed to it: why does he not answer himself: all the arts of imitation have no other end than to mirror nature; the first rule is to possess genius to grasp it and taste to express it; all the rules imaginable are nothing more than reflections resulting from the production of taste and genius. But none of this will be understood by the composer, from which I conclude that, with respect to music, we are still in the same infancy we were in during the times of the abbés de Saint Genest and d'Aubignac, who preferred to defy taste and compose dreary tragedies rather than disrespect the rules of Aristotle. Since music is distinguished as being Italian, German and French, it follows that the truly best music has not yet been found; such as I imagine it, this music would be universally accepted. All people see the same colours, enjoy the same fruits, smell the same flowers; they must hear the same sounds; and since they have the same sense of taste, of smell and of sight, they must have the same sense of hearing. This appears to me an established truth. If I was not afraid of abusing the patience of an audience with which I am not yet used to conversing in my own name, I would develop a few ideas on lyrical comedy, which are the fruit of six years' reflection following what I have seen both in Italy and in France; I would dare to contradict some of the principles of a little work entitled *Essai sur l'union de la Poésie et de la Musique*; I would point out to the author that he tells us nothing new in saying that symmetrical verse is the most favourable to the musician, and that for quite some time now this has not been a secret to those working with some success in the new genre; but that it would be dangerous to believe it is always necessary to submit to symmetry, unless it were in romances and other little arias that are purely entertaining. In grander pieces, on the contrary, it is necessary that stylistic variety serve as a guide to the musician, and my proposition is proven by example. The same goes for periodic arias. If we were to make it into a general rule, the result would be that all arias would have the same colour; that the ensuing resemblance they would necessarily have would lessen their effect, and justify what is said by some aficionados of what is referred to as French music, namely that Italian ariettas are all the same. That there should be only one motive in an aria may be true in general, as the beautiful is always neighbouring the simple; but that more than one motive should never be allowed is something I deny. This would be to strip music of its greatest attribute, which is the painting of the passions; and there would be little remaining merit for the composer, as if one were to allow only a single figure in a painting. Finally, the poet must be clear and simple. He must announce only what is to follow, leaving to the musician the right of painting. He must choose his words and shape his sentences; but requiring him to be flat so that his work companion has an easier time appearing sublime is like asking that dead colours be used in a painting so that the varnish can give them life. Following these ideas, and perhaps some newer ones, I too could write a book just like anyone else; but I believe I should reflect for a long time still on an art in which discoveries are being made every day, and that it is only after a scrupulous study of the laws and their consequences that it is appropriate to set oneself up as a legislator.⁴³

La réconciliation villageoise is a lyrical comedy by La Ribardière, revised and adapted for the stage by Poinset, who, accustomed to accusations of plagiarism, answers them in advance by quoting passages from the original text:

Que mes ennemis répandent que cette Pièce n'est pas de moi, ainsi qu'ils l'ont dit et fait imprimer du *Cerle*, et du *Sorcier*, mon aveu prévient l'effet de leur malice; mais pour mettre le lecteur à portée de juger si j'ai eu tort ou raison de corriger et de refaire entièrement ce petit drame, je vais citer quelques passages du premier auteur.⁴⁴

43 Antoine-Henri Poinset, *La réconciliation villageoise* (Paris: Duchesne, 1765), ix–xiii. The French original is provided below in an appendix.

44 Poinset, *La réconciliation villageoise*, vii–viii.



Let my enemies spread the word that this work is not my own, as they said and had printed about *Le cercle* and *Le Sorcier*; my admission prevents the effect of their malice; but to allow the reader to judge whether I was right or wrong to correct and rework this little drama entirely, I will quote a few passages by the first author.

Although the association in this Preface of a discussion of theories of music with a response to accusations of plagiarism appears accidental, it is part of a broader pattern in the reception history of *Ernelinde*, where it has been widely assumed that Poinciset borrowed other people's theories.⁴⁵ But that Poinciset would simply have adopted the theses of the *Essai sur l'union de la poésie et de la musique* seems unlikely, given that the preface to *La réconciliation villageoise* shows him to be in disagreement with principles advanced by Chastellux. Perhaps it was partly because Chastellux had criticized the excess of verses and ideas in an arietta from *Tom Jones* that Poinciset decided to respond to him in this Preface.⁴⁶ Whatever his motivation, though, it is clear that, based on his own experience, he rejected what appeared to him to be too rigid in the theories of Chastellux.⁴⁷

The disagreement between Chastellux and Poinciset is only partial. Both are pleading for the union of poetry and music, Chastellux from the standpoint of musicians and Poinciset from that of poets. What distinguishes them from each other in particular is their relation to theory and practice: while one wishes to establish rules from which to derive a practice, the other deduces rules from his own experience. Whereas Chastellux wishes to determine the origins and progress of music from antiquity to his own time, the

45 See Couvreur, 'Diderot et Philidor', 100.

46 Chastellux, *Essai sur l'union de la poésie et de la musique*, 43–44. Regarding Chastellux's observations on this specific piece see David Charlton, "'L'art dramatico-musical': An Essay", in *Music and Theatre: Essays in Honour of Winton Dean*, ed. Nigel Fortune (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 257. Charlton's article provides a useful discussion of critical assumptions relating to opéra comique during the time of Philidor and Poinciset.

47 Poinciset had previously expressed some of his ideas on music in his 'Lettre à M. Fl . . . C. R. de l'A. des O, &c. sur le Théâtre Italien', *Mercur de France* (October 1760), 51–59, and in the Preface to his opera buffa *La bagarre* (Paris: Duchesne, 1763), 3–13. The Preface to *La réconciliation villageoise* is, to my knowledge, the most substantive presentation of Poinciset's ideas on an art in which, as he says, discoveries were being made every day, and on which he suggests that he might possibly write at some length in the future. Though specifically addressing lyrical comedy, Poinciset's comments resonate with a passage from the *Prospectus* ([Paris:] De Lormel, 1768), announcing the publication of the complete score of *Ernelinde*, presumably by Philidor or Poinciset. Like the excerpt from Poinciset's 1765 Preface quoted above, this passage from the *Prospectus* compares Italian, German and French music and opposes theory to practice, while proposing lyrical tragedy as the ultimate step in the evolution of the new genre: 'On a eu dans Paris la fureur des méthodes systématiques pendant l'espace de trente années; les Italiens & les Allemands n'ont presque point écrit de méthode, mais ils ont produit des Ouvrages, & la Musique chez eux a fait des progrès qu'elle ne pouvoit pas faire chez une Nation qui prétendoit faire une science d'un Art qui ne demande que du goût & du génie. Enfin, depuis dix ans il s'est élevé un nouveau genre de Spectacle parmi nous; les disputes & les commentaires ont cessés [*sic*]; on a composé des Opéra Comiques, & la nation Française peut se flatter d'avoir une Musique connue & chérie de l'Etranger . . . Quelle gloire pour la France, si ces mêmes Compositeurs, créateurs du genre comique, surmontant les obstacles de la Langue à force de génie, pouvoient un jour avoir l'ambition, dans le genre sérieux, d'égal nos premiers Maîtres, qui, fiers de posséder une Langue mélodieuse & le celebre Métastase, croient qu'on ne peut pas les atteindre' (4–5). (For thirty years systematic methods were the rage in Paris; the Italians and the Germans have written hardly any methods, but they have produced works, and their music has progressed in ways that were not possible in a nation that was claiming to make a science out of an art that requires only taste and genius. In short, over the past ten years we have seen the rise of a new kind of show; arguments and commentaries have ceased; we have composed comic operas, and the French nation can pride itself in having music that is known and admired abroad . . . What glory for France if these same composers, the creators of the comic genre, overcoming the obstacles of language with genius, would some day have the ambition, in the serious genre, to equal our first masters who, proud to possess a melodious language and the famous Metastasio, believe they are untouchable.)



observations of Poinset are specifically concerned with the state of music in contemporary France: 'Seven or eight years ago, all anyone wanted was music'. This period separated Poinset's first success, *Gilles, garçon peintre*, from his most recent one, *Tom Jones*. His own career having evolved with the new genre, it is reasonable to think that the path leading from lowly to more elevated subjects led him to propose a mixed aesthetic of Italian, French and German music, which prefigured *Ernelinde*, around the time of the essay by Chastellux.

While Poinset is assumed to have borrowed Chastellux's theories, the reasons why he would have done so are rarely explained. And if we applied as broad a frame of reference to Poinset's Preface as has been applied to Chastellux's essay, we could as easily conclude that others were indebted to Poinset, whose refutation of Chastellux rests on ideas that gained a new currency several years later, with the success of the new genre. In his *Lettre sur la musique* published a year prior to the creation of *Iphigénie en Aulide* – a document that is traditionally said to have brought about the reformation of the aesthetics of French opera – Christoph Willibald Gluck speaks of the relationship between words and music in terms similar to those used in Poinset's Preface: 'However talented the composer, his music will never be anything other than mediocre if the poet does not inspire in him that enthusiasm in the absence of which productions of all the arts are feeble and languid.' ('Quelque talent qu'ait le compositeur, il ne fera jamais que de la musique médiocre, si le poète n'excite pas en lui cet enthousiasme sans lequel les productions de tous les arts sont faibles & languissantes.'⁴⁸) Echoing Poinset's assertion of the pre-eminence of words over music – 'These days it is the poet who draws attention to the musician . . . I will let time be the judge, and it will prove what I say' – Gluck's letter could be said to fulfil a prophecy, as could Framery's response to a letter by Chastellux published a decade later in *Mercure de France*:

J'oserais avancer ce paradoxe, que dans les premières représentations d'un Ouvrage Lyrique, la musique n'influe en rien sur le succès; Mille exemples pourraient prouver qu'un Poème intéressant soutient une musique médiocre, et que la plus excellente musique attachée à un Poème sans valeur ne peut en empêcher la chute & est, au contraire, entraînée avec lui. On n'en citerait pas un où, par le secours de la musique seule, un Poème entièrement dénué de mérite ait pu réussir.⁴⁹

I would dare to advance the paradox that in the first performances of a lyrical work, music has no influence on its success; a thousand examples could prove that an interesting poem can sustain mediocre music, and that the most excellent music attached to a worthless poem cannot keep it from failing and is, on the contrary, taken down with it. There is no example that can be cited where, thanks to the music alone, a poem entirely without merit was able to succeed.

While Poinset's observations resonate through the debates about music in the decades following his collaboration with Philidor, their relevance is not limited to the realm of theory, but, according to some accounts, extends to the area of performance. A notice from the *Anecdotes dramatiques* published in 1775, apparently referring to the staging of *Ernelinde* in Brussels on 15 October 1772, suggests that the opera established the reputation of French music outside of France:

48 Christoph Willibald Gluck, 'Lettre sur la musique', *Mercure de France* (February 1773), 183–184. This is reminiscent of a famous passage from the 1769 Preface to *Alceste*: 'Je pensai réduire la musique à sa véritable fonction, qui est de servir la poésie.' See Francesco Algarotti, *Essai sur l'opéra en musique*, ed. Jean-Philippe Navarre (Paris: Cerf, 1998), 193. Like Poinset in his Preface to *La réconciliation villageoise* – 'Since music is distinguished as being Italian, German and French, it follows that the truly best music has not yet been found; such as I imagine it, this music would be universally accepted' – Gluck states as his objective 'to produce a music belonging to all nations, and to get rid of the ridiculous distinction between the music of different nations' ('produire une musique propre à toutes les nations, & faire disparaître la ridicule distinction des musiques nationales').

49 Framery, 'Réponse de M. Framery à M. le Marquis de Chastellux', *Mercure de France* (28 May 1785), 183.



Les entrepreneurs du Spectacle de Bruxelles voulant célébrer le jour de Sainte Thérèse, fête de l'Impératrice Reine de Hongrie, choisirent l'Opéra d'*Ernelinde*; & M. Philidor fut invité d'aller jouir en personne des applaudissements donnés à ses talents. Cette anecdote prouve que les étrangers même sont persuadés qu'on fait de la bonne musique sur des paroles françaises.⁵⁰

The entrepreneurs of the *Spectacle de Bruxelles*, wishing to celebrate the feast day of Saint Teresa in honour of the Empress Queen of Hungary, chose the opera *Ernelinde*; and M. Philidor was invited to go and enjoy the applause offered to his talents. This anecdote proves that even foreigners are persuaded that good music is made with French words.

While attesting further to the success of *Ernelinde* (and prior to Sedaine's revision of the libretto in 1773), the author of this anecdote suggests that Philidor and Poinset had vindicated the French language against the accusation that it was unsuitable for grand musical compositions – moreover, at a time when Gluck and du Roulet were making this vindication a primary objective in proposing *Iphigénie en Aulide* to the directors of the Paris Opera.⁵¹ With this comparison of Poinset's observations with writings by Gluck and Framery I do not mean to propose a direct line of influence, but rather to show Poinset's relevance to theoretical discussions in the period following *Ernelinde*, and also to revise the notion that his aesthetics were simply borrowed from Chastellux.

Although, in light of the development of the new genre, Poinset's observations from 1765 appear prophetic, when Diderot, following a period of silence, expressed an opinion on *Ernelinde*, he aligned himself with Chastellux and Grimm, dismissing Poinset's contribution: 'And if Philidor had had a prophet other than Poinset, would we not know, from the success of *Ernelinde*, that one could hear a lyrical tragedy from beginning to end with the greatest interest?' ('Et si Philidor avait eu un autre prophète que Poinset, ne saurions-nous pas, par le succès d'*Ernelinde*, qu'on pourrait entendre d'un bout à l'autre une tragédie lyrique avec le plus grand intérêt?')⁵² Yet one might argue that Philidor did have a 'prophet' other than Poinset. And, as Manuel Couvreur has shown, it was none other than Diderot himself: 'Although signed Poinset, the libretto of *Ernelinde* none the less bears the indelible mark of the *philosophe* and his encyclopedist friends.' ('Pour être signé Poinset, le livret d'*Ernelinde* n'en porte pas moins la marque indélébile du philosophe et de ses amis encyclopédistes.⁵³) While at odds with established opinion,⁵⁴ Couvreur's conclusions as to Diderot's collaboration with Poinset are founded on solid reasoning. Beginning with the testimony of Diderot's contemporaries, Couvreur considers a network of social relations in the French literary world as well as the ideas about music of Diderot, Chastellux, Philidor, Poinset and various others. According to Charles Collé, Diderot revealed to one of his friends that he had revised Poinset's libretto: 'I had *Ernelinde* in my hands for a long while; I cut one hundred and fourteen verses; I removed the ambitious expressions that are too obviously those of a young man; the work seems good to me now, and I

50 Jean-Marie Bernard Clément and Joseph de Laporte, *Anecdotes dramatiques* (Paris: Duchesne, 1775), volume 2, 368–369.

51 See 'Lettre à M. D., un des Directeurs de l'opéra de Paris', *Mercure de France* (October 1772), volume 2, 169–174. See also 'Lettre de M. de Chabanon, sur les propriétés musicales de la langue française', *Mercure de France* (January 1773), 171–191.

52 *Œuvres complètes de Diderot*, ed. J. Assézat (Paris: Garnier, 1875), volume 8, 509. Diderot's use of the word 'prophet' with respect to *Ernelinde* echoes a passage on lyrical drama from his *Entretiens sur le fils naturel*: 'Let him come, this man of genius who will bring true tragedy, true comedy to lyrical theatre. Let him cry out, as the prophet of the Hebrew people in his enthusiasm: "Bring me a musician", and the musician will appear.' ('Qu'il se montre, cet homme de génie qui doit placer la véritable tragédie, la véritable comédie sur le théâtre lyrique. Qu'il s'écrie, comme le prophète du peuple hébreu dans son enthousiasme: "Qu'on m'amène un musicien", et il le fera naître.') *Œuvres complètes de Diderot*, volume 7, 157.

53 Couvreur, 'Diderot et Philidor', 99.

54 See Couvreur, 'Diderot et Philidor', 84. Couvreur's article was undoubtedly published too late to be incorporated into Julian Rushton's synoptic Introduction to the 1992 facsimile edition of *Ernelinde*.



dare say that at present M. Poinset is one of our own.' ('J'ai eu longtemps *Ernelinde* entre les mains; j'en ai retranché cent quatorze vers; j'en ai ôté les expressions ambitieuses qui sentent trop le jeune homme; actuellement l'ouvrage me paraît bon, et j'ose dire qu'à présent M. Poinset est des nôtres.⁵⁵) Though critics have generally followed Assézat in dismissing Collé's remarks as unreliable, Couvreur shows that there are good reasons to take them seriously. Not only is Collé's testimony corroborated by Claude Joseph Dorat, who attributes to Diderot the chorus of the Priests of Mars and the Priestesses of Venus from Act 3, but one might observe that the broader aesthetic innovations associated with *Ernelinde*, such as its synthesis of French prosody and Italian melody and its attenuation of supernatural elements, are strikingly similar to ideas advocated by Diderot.

We may also note, in addition to Couvreur's analyses, that the chorus from Act 3 reflects a passage from Diderot's *Observations sur l'Iphigénie en Tauride de M. Guimont de la Touche*, suggesting that the author should have shown 'the people' on stage: 'Thoas is generally a cold character. The author should have replaced him with the people, and had the courage to have the people appear on the stage. The effect would have been entirely different.' ('Thoas est, en général, un froid personnage. Il fallait y substituer le peuple, et avoir le courage de faire paraître sur la scène ce peuple. L'effet aurait été bien autre.⁵⁶)

This 'entirely different' effect is plausibly something Poinset sought to achieve in *Ernelinde*, particularly in the chorus of the Priests and Priestesses of Mars and Venus. Here the stage directions specifically indicate the presence of the people on stage: 'CHEFS du PEUPLE, VIEILLARDS, le GRAND-PRÊTRE, SACRIFICATEURS, armés de haches ; la GRANDE-PRÊTRESSE & sa SUITE, PEUPLES'.⁵⁷

The originality of this chorus, which, according to *Mercur de France*, was well received during its first performances,⁵⁸ was singled out by Dorat, for whom the distribution of praise is, significantly from the standpoint of the present article, contingent on the question of authorship:

On n'a pas assez admiré, selon moi, la nouveauté du genre et l'exécution de ce morceau. On devoit même un éloge au poëte d'avoir fourni au musicien l'occasion d'un contraste sublime, où se mélangent si heureusement l'énergie et la volupté. Mais l'idée est de M. D... et l'éloge appartient à l'inventeur.⁵⁹

The newness of the genre and of the execution of this piece were not, in my opinion, given due recognition. Even the poet would be deserving of praise for providing the musician a sublime contrast where energy and sensuality are happily combined. But the idea belongs to M. D... and praise is owed to the inventor.

55 Charles Collé, *Journal et mémoires* (Genève: Slatkine, 1967), volume 3, 172–173.

56 Denis Diderot, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Hermann, 1980), volume 13, 29.

57 *Ernelinde* (Paris: De Lormel, 1767), 66.

58 'These contrasting choruses, and particularly that of the Priests, are the work of a master, and worthy of the applause they received.' ('Ces chœurs contrastés, & surtout celui des Prêtres, sont de main de maître, & dignes des applaudissements qu'ils ont reçus.') 'Ernelinde, Princesse de Norvège tragédie lyrique en trois actes, poëme de M. Poinset, musique de M. A.D. Philidor', *Mercur de France* (January 1768), 237. According to Couvreur's own assessment, 'this double chorus is powerfully original. Composed of three male voices for the priests of Mars and two female voices for the priestesses of Venus, this ensemble rests on a sharp musical and textual contrast. After answering each other in closer and closer alternation, the two choruses end up being most skilfully superimposed.' ('Ce double chœur est d'une puissante originalité. Composé à trois voix d'hommes pour les prêtres de Mars et à deux voix de femmes pour les prêtresses de Vénus, cet ensemble repose sur une nette opposition musicale et textuelle. Après s'être répondu selon une alternance de plus en plus serrée, les deux chœurs en arrivent à se superposer d'une manière extrêmement savante.') 'Diderot et Philidor', 104.

59 Claude Joseph Dorat, *La Déclamation théâtrale, poëme didactique en quatre chants*, fourth edition (Paris: Delalain, 1771), 169.



If Diderot had had a hand in revising the libretto of *Ernelinde*, then it would seem only fair, as Dorat suggests, that he should be given his share of praise – or blame, if it were warranted. In any case, he has received neither, since, after reportedly serving as his mentor, he seems to have preferred to dissociate himself from Poinset.

Withholding praise from Poinset and offering it to Diderot, Dorat once again reveals the pattern of exclusion in which Poinset is blamed for whatever can be criticized in this opera and dissociated from whatever is subject to praise. Even a reader as seemingly unbiased as Couvreur, who brings to light Poinset's importance in establishing the new genre and the merits of *Ernelinde*, still reflects some of the traditional bias against him. While observing at one moment that 'the role of Poinset is capital in the evolution that led comic opera towards elevated subjects' ('le rôle de Poinset est capital dans l'évolution qui a conduit l'opéra-comique vers les sujets élevés'), he then discounts this role, writing that Philidor 'had hardly any illusions as to the merits of his librettist' ('ne se faisait guère d'illusions sur les mérites de son librettiste').⁶⁰ Without entering into a discussion that would lead us away from our present subject, it seems that anecdotal evidence in support of Philidor's disregard for Poinset's merits as a librettist is of little weight compared with the extraordinary success they enjoyed together in the years leading up to *Ernelinde*, beginning with *Sancho Pança dans son île* and followed by *Le sorcier* and *Tom Jones*. Whereas music historians have sometimes wondered why, given the criticism from figures such as Grimm, Philidor continued to work with Poinset, their repeated successes are surely a sufficient explanation in themselves.

While Couvreur contributes to a reassessment of *Ernelinde* by uncovering Diderot's part in its composition, his assertion that the libretto, though signed Poinset, bears the stamp of Diderot and the encyclopedists raises once again the question of Poinset's authorship – if not plagiarism, then at least a divestment of authorial control that reduces Poinset to a signature, much as he was by Palissot in *La Gageure de M. Poinset*. Whatever their extent or legitimacy, Poinset's respective debts towards Diderot and Chastellux are invariably interpreted in a manner detrimental to Poinset, even though they could equally be understood as signs of progressiveness or simply good taste.

In contrast to the conceptual framework of a Palissot, in which authors are either copies or originals, Poinset appeared relatively unconcerned with authorial independence, equally inclined to assist others in their work or to invite the assistance of others in his own. After all, Poinset was asked by La Ribardière to revise *La réconciliation villageoise* at the time that he asked Sedaine to assist him in revising *Tom Jones*; Diderot's collaboration on *Ernelinde* would thus be consistent with Poinset's artistic practice.⁶¹ And, for an author who has so often been accused of plagiarism, it might surprise us to observe that he had a singular habit of naming his sources, as in the opening words of his Preface to *Ernelinde*: 'I have imitated this poem from the Italian' ('J'ai imité de l'Italien ce poème').⁶² This is in keeping with acknowledgements he made in Prefaces to *La réconciliation villageoise* ('The original idea of this play does not belong to me' ('La première idée de cette pièce ne m'appartient pas'⁶³)) and to *La bagarre* ('I admit at present that I owe to M. Guichard both the original idea and part of the scheme of the Opera Bouffon I am presenting' ('J'avoue aujourd'hui que je dois à M. Guichard & la première idée, & une partie du plan de l'Opera Bouffon que je présente'⁶⁴)).

Following Diderot's question – 'And if Philidor had had a prophet other than Poinset, would we not know, by the success of *Ernelinde*, that one could hear a lyrical tragedy from beginning to end with the

60 Couvreur, 'Diderot et Philidor', 89–90.

61 In his Preface to the 1768 edition of the libretto, Poinset states that he had previously sought the opinion of other authors: 'J'ai rétabli mon Poème dans l'état où il était quand il a mérité l'approbation [*sic*] des Personnes, justement fameuses dans la Littérature, sous les yeux desquelles je l'avais composé.' *Sandomir, prince de Dannemarck* (Paris: De Lormel, 1768), 6.

62 Poinset, *Ernelinde* (Paris: De Lormel, 1767), 5.

63 Poinset, *La réconciliation villageoise*, iii.

64 Poinset, *La bagarre* (Paris: Duchesne, 1763), 3.



greatest interest?’ – it should only be necessary to vindicate Poinset if it were understood that the opera was not a success. But, as Couvreur observes, in spite of long-standing assumptions to the contrary, we would be mistaken to view *Ernelinde* as anything other than a triumph in its own time: ‘Though bitterly disputed and discussed, the success of *Ernelinde* – and this from its creation – is unquestionable. A series of eighteen performances was not such a common thing. The opera roused universal interest and “Louis XV was so charmed by it as to have given the author a pension of six hundred pounds from his purse”.’ (‘Pour avoir été âprement disputé et discuté, le succès d’*Ernelinde* – et cela dès la création – est incontestable. Une série de 18 représentations n’était pas chose si courante. L’opéra suscita l’intérêt unanime et “Louis XV en fut si charmé qu’il accorda à l’auteur une pension de six cents livres sur sa cassette”.’⁶⁵)

The story of Poinset is the story of an author whose works were judged from the point of view of his enemies. Just as he was blamed, first by contemporaries and later by historians, for the ‘jokes’ that were played on him,⁶⁶ Poinset was blamed for what has often wrongly been described as the failure of *Ernelinde*.⁶⁷ A more complete understanding of this opera may be obtained by re-evaluating the contribution of Philidor’s librettist.

APPENDIX

From Antoine-Henri Poinset, Preface to La Ribardière’s *La réconciliation villageoise* (Paris: Duchesne, 1765), ix–xiii.

Il y a sept ou huit ans, on ne voulait que de la Musique; les Pièces les plus difformes, les plus inconséquentes, étaient applaudies dès que l’on y chantait; l’abondance a rendu difficile, on veut aujourd’hui des Pièces bien pensées & bien rendues: le Musicien faisait jadis oublier le Poète; aujourd’hui c’est le Poète qui fait écouter le Musicien. Les amateurs de Musique n’en veulent rien croire: mais j’en appelle au tems, il prouvera ce que j’avance. Je dirai même plus; le genre s’anéantira, tant que le Musicien voudra se rendre le Tyran du Poète; il doit être son camarade, & voilà tout. Un Compositeur viendra dire: je ne puis mettre ces paroles en Musique, parce que telle ou telle règle s’y oppose; pourquoi ne se répond t-il pas à lui-même: tous les Arts d’imitation n’ont d’autre fin que de peindre la nature: la première règle est d’avoir du génie pour la saisir, & du goût pour la rendre; enfin toutes les règles possibles ne sont autre chose que les réflexions qui résultent des productions du goût et du génie. Mais voilà ce qu’il ne voudra point entendre, & d’où je conclus que nous sommes encore, sur l’article de la Musique, à peu près dans la même enfance où nous étions du tems des Abbés de Saint Genest & d’Aubignac, qui aimaient mieux révolter le goût & composer d’ennuieuses Tragédies, que de pécher contre les règles d’Aristote. Puisque l’on distingue une Musique Italienne, une Musique Allemande, une Musique Française; il s’ensuit de-là que l’on n’a pas encore trouvé celle qui est réellement bonne, telle que je la conçois; elle seroit universellement reçue: tous les hommes voient les mêmes couleurs, goûtent les mêmes fruits, sentent les mêmes fleurs; ils doivent entendre les mêmes sons, & puisqu’ils ont le même goût, le même odorat, les mêmes yeux; ils doivent avoir les mêmes oreilles. Cette vérité me paraît démontrée. Si je ne craignais d’abuser de la patience d’un Public avec lequel je ne suis pas encore dans l’usage de m’entretenir en mon propre nom, je détaillerais ici

65 Couvreur, ‘Diderot et Philidor’, 105.

66 The pattern of blaming Poinset is exemplified by M. Petitot in his biographical notice from the *Répertoire du théâtre français* (Paris: P. Didot l’aîné, 1804), volume 23, 57: ‘But what is one to say and think about a man who, through his ridiculous vanity, brought upon himself all the ills he suffered?’ (‘Mais que dire et que penser d’un homme qui, par sa vanité ridicule, s’est attiré tous les maux qu’il a soufferts?’)

67 The judgments of Bachaumont and Grimm are echoed, for instance, by Pincherle, ‘*Ernelinde* et Jomelli’, 67: ‘L’exécrable livret de Poinset et, disait-on, la “nouveauité” de la matière musicale, firent bientôt échouer la pièce.’ (The execrable libretto by Poinset and, it was said, the ‘novelty’ of the musical material, soon caused the piece to fail.)



quelques idées sur la Comédie chantée, qui sont le fruit de six ans de réflexion, d'après ce que j'ai vu tant en Italie qu'en France; j'oserais contredire quelques principes d'un petit Ouvrage intitulé *Essai sur l'union de la Poësie & de la Musique*. Je représenterais à l'Auteur qu'il ne nous apprend rien de nouveau en nous disant que les coupes quarrées sont les plus favorables au Musicien, & qu'il y a longtems que ce secret n'en est plus un pour ceux qui travaillent avec quelque succès dans le nouveau genre; mais qu'il serait dangereux de croire qu'il faille s'asservir toujours à cette coupe, à moins que ce ne soit dans les Romances & autres petits airs de pur agrément. Dans les grands morceaux, au contraire, il faut que la variété même du style, serve de guide au Musicien, & l'exemple prouve ma proposition. Il en est de même des airs périodiques, si l'on en faisait une règle générale, il en résulterait que tous les airs seraient de la même couleur; qu'ils auraient entr'eux une ressemblance obligée qui nuirait à leur effet, & qui justifierait ce que disent encore quelques amateurs de ce qu'on appelle la Musique Française: c'est que les Ariettes Italiennes se ressemblent toutes. Qu'il n'y ait qu'un seul motif dans un Air, cela peut être vrai en général, parce que le beau est toujours voisin du simple; mais qu'il ne faille jamais admettre plus d'un motif, voilà ce que je nie: ce serait interdire à la Musique son plus beau partage, c'est la peinture des passions; & il ne resterait pas un grand mérite au Compositeur; c'est comme si l'on ne voulait dans un Tableau qu'une seule figure. Enfin le Poëte doit être clair & simple, il ne doit qu'annoncer, pour laisser au Musicien le droit de peindre; il doit choisir ses mots, couper ses phrases: mais exiger de lui qu'il soit plat, pour que son compagnon de travail ait plus de facilité à paraître sublime; c'est vouloir que l'on n'employe dans un Tableau que des couleurs mortes pour que le vernis leur donne la vie. D'après ces idées, & peut-être de plus nouvelles, je pourrais aussi faire un Livre tout comme un autre; mais je crois avoir besoin de réfléchir encore long-tems sur un Art dans lequel on fait chaque jour des découvertes, & que ce n'est qu'après une étude scrupuleuse des Loix, & de leurs conséquences, qu'il convient de s'ériger en Législateur.