Aesthetics of Opera in the Ancien Régime, 1647–1785

Downing A. Thomas

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

© Downing A. Thomas 2002

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Dante MT 10.75/14 pt   *System* LaTeX 2ε   [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Thomas, Downing A.
Aesthetics of opera in the Ancien Régime, 1647–1785 / Downing A. Thomas.
p.   cm. – (Cambridge studies in opera)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-521-80188-5
1. Opera – France – 17th century. 2. Opera – France – 18th century.
3. Music and state – France – History. 4. Enlightenment – France.
5. Music – France – Philosophy and aesthetics. I. Title. II. Series.
ML3858 .T46 2002
782.1′0944′09032–dc21 2002067211

ISBN 0 521 80188 5 hardback

CONTENTS

List of illustrations | viii

Introduction | 1

Part I French opera in the shadow of tragedy

1 Song as performance and the emergence of French opera | 17
2 The Opera King | 53
3 The ascendance of music and the disintegration of the hero in *Armide* | 100
4 The disruption of poetics I: *Médée*'s excessive voice | 129
5 The disruption of poetics II: *Hippolyte et Aricie* and the reinvention of tragedy | 154

Part II Opera and Enlightenment: from private sensation to public feeling

6 Heart strings | 179
7 Music, sympathy, and identification at the Opéra-Comique | 201
8 Architectural visions of lyric theater and spectatorship | 265
9 Opera and common sense: Lacépède's *Poétique de la musique* | 293

Conclusions | 321

Notes | 325
Works cited | 383
Index | 405

ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1 *Siege of Douai* (1667) by Charles Le Brun and François-Adam Van der Meulen, after cartoon by Baudoin Yvart. Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon, Versailles. Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, N.Y. | 57

Fig. 2 *The Franche-Comté Conquered a Second Time in 1674*, drawing by Jean-Baptiste Massé after Charles Le Brun. Louvre, Paris. Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, N.Y. | 64

Fig. 3 Illustration of the prologue of *Cadmus et Hermione* (1673), engraving after Jean Berain. Photo courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Cabinet des Estampes, Paris. | 78

Fig. 4 Destruction of Armide's palace, engraving by Jean Dolivan after Jean Berain. Photo courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Cabinet des Estampes, Paris. | 105

Fig. 5 Médée hovering over Jason on a dragon, from *Recueil général des opera représentez par l'Académie royale de musique*, 16 vols. (Paris: Ballard, 1703–45), vol. IV [1703], n.p. Photo courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris. | 150

Fig. 6 From Pierre Patte, *Essai sur l'architecture théâtrale* (Paris: chez Moutard, 1782), 210. Photo courtesy of Special Collections Department, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa. | 268

Fig. 7 From Charles-Nicolas Cochin, *Projet d'une salle de spectacle pour un théâtre de comédie* (London and Paris: C.-A. Jombert, 1765), 44. Photo courtesy of Special Collections Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. | 270

Fig. 8 From Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, *L'Architecture considérée sous le rapport de l'art, des moeurs et de la législation*, 2 vols. (Paris: chez l'auteur, 1804), 1:224. Photo courtesy of the Environmental Design Library, University of California, Berkeley. | 276

Fig. 9 From Charles de Wailly, "Plan d'aménagement de la place du théâtre français, transformée en aire de rassemblement public, avec gradins et tribune d'orateur" (1794). Photo courtesy of the Bibliothèque-Musée de la Comédie-Française, Paris. | 288

1 Song as performance and the emergence of French opera

Though French opera utterly transformed its remote Italian cousin to suit indigenous cultural and aesthetic exigencies, Italian opera continued to loom over the newly minted French genre. Aesthetic conflict melded with political tensions to make French opera highly contested in its infancy. In Italy, opera emerged as the imaginary restoration of ancient tragedy, and at the same time as a strong bid for the superiority of modern music through its *stile rappresentativo* and the text-centered compositional usages of the *seconda pratica* on which it was based. It offered sovereigns grand spectacles with which they could celebrate important marriages and victories, and stage their power and influence as permanent and timeless. Brought to France, opera continued to benefit from its Greek pedigree and from the lure of the modern; and it continued to be used as a form of political display to further the aims of the sovereign. Ever since the days of Catarina de' Medici, however, though Italian actors and singers were welcome at court they were treated as pariahs by the French public. As one can see from the many disparaging references to opera in the *Mazarinades*, the barrage of writings against Cardinal Mazarin emanating from the civil war known as the Fronde, in its early days in France opera retained a degree of association with things Italian and with the memory of aristocratic recrimination against the monarchy.[1] The development of *tragédie en musique* generated intense discord within the aesthetic discourse generally referred to as neoclassicism because French opera was seen as a bastardized or corrupt form of tragedy. As such, it became an instrumental force in the skirmishes that finally erupted as the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns in 1687. When the first French opera, Pierre Perrin's *Pomone*, opened on March 3, 1671, at the Guénégaud theatre – a modified tennis court known as La Bouteille in the rue des Fossés de Nesle (now rue Mazarine) – opera was already implicated in a series

of interlocked cultural problems and conflicts, at once aesthetic and political.[2]

Jules Cardinal Mazarin, first minister under the regency of Anne of Austria, brought Italian opera to Paris in the mid-1640s, importing or commissioning works by Venetian and Roman composers. Francesco Sacrati's *La Finta pazza* was given at the Petit Bourbon in December, 1645; Francesco Cavalli's *Egisteo* came to the Paris stage in 1646, his *Xerse* in 1660, and his *Ercole amante* was performed at the Tuileries in 1662, the year following Mazarin's death; Carlo Caproli's *Le Nozze di Peleo e di Teti* premiered in 1654; Luigi Rossi's *Orfeo* opened at the Palais Royal in 1647 with the eight-year-old Louis XIV and the young Charles II of England in attendance.[3] Giacomo Torelli's machines and stage effects entranced the French courtiers. Torelli, according to Prunières, was referred to as "le grand sorcier."[4] Parisian accounts of Sacrati's *La Finta pazza*, a Venetian opera on a libretto by Giulio Strozzi which Ellen Rosand characterizes as "the first operatic hit," are particularly striking in their insistence on the effects of Torelli's machines: "the entire audience was no less enthralled by the poetry and the music than it was by the stage decoration, the ingeniousness of the machines and of the admirable scene changes, until now unknown in France and which captivate the eyes of the mind no less than those of the body through imperceptible movements."[5] The poet François Maynard dedicated to Mazarin a sonnet on these special effects:

> Jule, nos curieux ne peuvent conçevoir
> Les subits changemens de la nouvelle scene.
> Sans effort, & sans temps, l'art qui l'a fait mouvoir,
> D'un bois fait une ville, & d'un mont une plene.
>
> Il change un antre obscur en un palais doré;
> Où les poissons nageoient, il fait naistre les rozes!
> Quel siecle fabuleux a jamais admiré,
> En si peu de momens tant de metamorphozes?
>
> Ces diverses beautés sont les charmes des yeux.
> Elles ont puissâment touché nos demy-Dieux,
> Et le peuple surpris s'en est fait idolâtre.

Mais si par tes conseils tu r'amenes la paix
Et que cette Deesse honore le Theâtre,
Fay qu'il demeure ferme, & ne change jamais.

Jules, the curious cannot conceive
The sudden [scene] changes of the new theater.
Effortlessly and in an instant, the art that moves it
From a wood makes a city, and from a mountain a plain.

It changes a dark cavern into a golden palace;
Where fish once swam it produces roses!
What fabulous century has ever admired
In so few moments so many metamorphoses?

These diverse beauties charm the eyes.
They have powerfully touched our demi-Gods,
And the amazed public worships them.

But if by your counsel you restore peace
And this Goddess honors the theater,
Pray that it remains firm and never changes.[6]

Written near the end of the Thirty Years' War, when conflict with Spain remained a constant backdrop, Maynard's sonnet skillfully praises Mazarin along with the marvelous theatrical transformations made possible by Torelli's engineering. The spectators – both of royal blood ("nos demy-Dieux") and of less dignified extraction – admired and were transfixed by the effects they witnessed. Similarly, the larger public which could not have actually attended the opera ("le peuple") is said to have delighted in what they heard of these effects. The final stanza abruptly shifts perspective, mimicking the swift transformations of Torelli's machines ("Où les poissons nageoient, il fait naistre les rozes!"), to foreground the ongoing European conflicts of the 1640s. The magic of the stage suddenly vanishes to reveal the potential effects of Mazarin's resourceful diplomacy. In the imagination of the poet, the stunning instability of the stage gives way to an even more impressive, and more lasting, peace.

However different they were in formal and aesthetic terms, the Italian operas imported or commissioned by Mazarin were important precursors for the genre that emerged in France during the early 1670s.

Responses to them likewise prefigured aspects of the reaction to *tragédie en musique*. I want to consider in this light *L'Orfeo*, termed a *tragicomedia per musica*, that Francesco Buti and Luigi Rossi created for Mazarin in 1647. In a sonnet to Rossi ("Monsieur de Luiggy"), Charles Coypeau d'Assoucy writes above all of the sensuality of the opera:

> Ange qui nous ravis Dieu de la Simphonie,
> Pere des doux accords dont les inventions,
> Font gouster à nos sens tendres aux passions,
> Des delices du Ciel la douceur infinie.
>
> Angel who ravishes us, God of music,
> Father of the gentle chords whose inventions
> Give our senses, susceptible to passions, a taste
> of the infinite sweetness of heavenly delights.[7]

Coypeau's sonnet goes so far as to make of Rossi's music a foretaste of heavenly delights. In its praise, however, Renaudot's *Gazette* revealed the potential ambivalence that lay behind this sensuality. The *Gazette* commented on the "perpetual ravishment of the spectators," and "the grace and harmonious voices" of the singers and "the magnificence of their costumes," while attempting nonetheless to shore up the questionable morality of the spectacle, affirming that "virtue always wins out over vice."[8] The Parfaict brothers later noted the mixed reception *Orfeo* received: "this dramatic poem, which was even more well attended than the precedent [*La Finta pazza*] for the beauty of the voices, the variety of the airs, the scene changes, and the magnificence of the costumes, was nonetheless criticized *for the bizarre storyline, the useless proliferation of events, and the singular character of its music.*"[9] Taken together, these comments point to issues – the sensual deluge, the questionable poetic construction – that return later in the quarrels surrounding French opera. *Orfeo* also figured prominently in the many political recriminations against Mazarin. Rossi had to bring a veritable army to Paris for the performance, and the expense of the opera was a recurrent source of hostility against Italian opera generally and against Mazarin, hostility which focused at times on the Cardinal's extravagance and at other times on the opera's perceived shortcomings

(such as its inclusion of castrati, who were constantly reviled by the French public) and its immorality.[10]

Orfeo's focus on song as performance – song that is explicitly or implicitly identified as such by the operatic characters – can be said to resonate in particularly important ways with aspects of the future *tragédie en musique*. This self-reflexivity relates less to specific musical structures or forms per se, than it does to a way of framing music within opera, of determining where and how music belongs. The use of song as performance is not the only link to *tragédie en musique*; nor is this aspect of early Italian opera unique to *Orfeo*. There are a number of other connections between *Orfeo* and later French opera: notably, the sleep scene in act 2, scene 9, which returns as a virtually required element in the Lullian *tragédie en musique*, and the astounding music of the Chorus of Graces ("Dormite, begl'occhi, dormite" [Sleep, beautiful

Example 1: "Dormite begli occhi"

Example 1: (*cont.*)

eyes, sleep]) which lulls Euridice into slumber, prefiguring the way in which Lully used the sleep scene to lavish attention on the music and produce impressive ensemble numbers, as he did, for example, in *Atys* and *Armide* (see example 1). The specific argument I advance here, however, is that song as performance in *Orfeo* points to uncertainties that opera provoked in theorists and commentators in France over the

Example 1: (*cont.*)

next several decades regarding the aesthetic and moral foundations of the genre.

Ellen Rosand has argued that songs in *dramma per musica* tested the limits of verisimilitude, requiring composers to frame them within "situations in which singing was either natural or purposely unnatural," such as musical scenes, moments of madness, or other extraordinary situations.[11] This usage holds, Rosand points out, even after the formal

aria had been fully accepted after mid-century. She summarizes the situation by noting that songs therefore "acquired a special significance within the context of opera as a kind of test of the basic premise of the genre: the distinction between speech and song."[12] Rossi's *Orfeo*, too, repeatedly probes this distinction. Before presenting Euridice with an ominous vision of her future marriage to Orfeo, a vision in which she sees two turtledoves carried off by black vultures, an Augur introduces a chorus of fellow fortune-tellers, suggesting that they can summon the turtledoves only by imitating their songs: "Ma sol da questa parte / invitiamo con canti / i più miti volanti" [But only from this region shall we invite with songs the gentlest birds].[13] Here, the song of the chorus becomes plausible as a form of solicitation, one which must deviate from ordinary speech in order to elicit the cooperation of creatures who communicate in another "language." Later in the act, Euridice suggests that she, her father, and her nurse sing the song whose title is "Al fulgor" [In the brightness] while they make their way to the wedding (I:27). In this case, song is naturalized as a way to pass the time: the actors sing because the characters would be expected to sing in this circumstance (see example 2). In scene 3, Aristeo – Orfeo's rival – and a Satyr exchange opposing views on jealousy by quoting lyrics that are said to come from popular songs. Aristeo says, "Non rammenti quei carmi?" [Do you not remember those verses?], before launching into a canzonetta on the torments of jealousy. The Satyr counters with another song, "Mi piaccion più quegli altri" [These other verses are more to my liking], in order to take an opposing position in the argument: "Che m'importa?" [What's it to me?], he sings, why should I be unhappy about another man's happiness (I:40)? Here the song's verses are cited by the characters who are therefore permitted to sing them. In act 2, song becomes a cover for Aristeo and Venere who, disguised as an old woman, has promised to help him in his bid for Euridice's hand in marriage. When Euridice and her Nurse appear, the "Old Woman" whispers to Aristeo: "Fingerò d'insegnarti / quella bella canzon sopra la speme" [I shall pretend to be teaching you that lovely song about Hope] (II:74). As for Orfeo himself, because he must "sing his way into Hades," as Ellen Rosand has remarked, his songs are integrated into the drama as its very premise.[14] Song in

Example 2: "Al fugor"

Endimione Euridice
An - dia - mo! An - diam, mio Ge - ni - tor, Ma trà di noi can-tan - do La can-
zo - ne 'Al ful - gor'.
Endimione
Sì, ch'è ve - ra - ce.

Euridice
Al ful - gor di due bei ra - - - - - i, di due bei ra - - - - - i Chi più ac - ce - se il cor do - - - - nò
Nutrice
Al ful - gor di due bei ra - - - - - - - - - - - - - i Chi più ac - ce - se il cor do - - - nò
Endimione
Al ful - gor di due bei ra - - i Chi più ac - ce - se il cor do - nò

Orfeo becomes increasingly naturalized as the plot moves into the netherworld where gods and goddesses can speak in otherworldly tones, and particularly at the conclusion where a heavenly chorus sings and the harmonies of Orfeo's lyre overtake the world, thereby making the difference between song and speech, in a sense, irrelevant.

Another wrinkle within the question of verisimilitude in song as performance – one which Rosand does not consider and which moves beyond the strict concern with the seamlessness of appearances on stage – involves larger questions of musical and dramatic rhetoric and truth. There are several reasons, of course, that make Ottavio Rinuccini's and Jacopo Peri's opera on the subject of Orpheus's descent, or that of Alessandro Striggio and Claudio Monteverdi, the epitome of opera: the identification of music with grief, the attempted resurrection of a lost loved one (in part, at least, as the figure of ancient tragedy), and, in the case of the latter opera, the apotheosis of music as Orpheus ascends to the heavens.[15] In the *Orfeo* of Buti and Rossi, however, when operatic characters make statements such as "now let's sing," or "listen to this song," they specifically draw attention to the musical rhetoric that is at the heart of the Orpheus myth as the original operatic fiction. In other words, they emphasize the fact that the story hinges on Orpheus's ability to persuade and seduce listeners through his art. This focus on the performance of song allowed Rossi to frame Orfeo as a convincing and successful performer and Aristeo as an unconvincing and therefore unsuccessful one. Because song is so often staged as song – in other words, as a performance – it elicits a particular form of attention on the part of the audience. Song may indeed be naturalized as the expression of pastoral idleness, or as celebration; yet it is also framed as an extraordinary and expressive moment, as a moment of transcendence in which the acts of singing and listening stand out (see example 3). As such, it draws attention to such moments as either authentic or inauthentic, furthermore highlighting them as specifically musical. Song may be introduced with careful consideration for the verisimilitude of musical interventions within drama, yet Rossi presents singing in such as way as to make the truth of expression itself an issue in the relationship between singer and listener. Because

Example 3: "O tu non sai"

song is so often staged as performance in *Orfeo*, Orfeo's and Euridice's act 1 duets, which are not marked in this way, are made all the more salient as signs of transcendence and truth – not performances, but rather moments of "pure expression." This situation can, of course, easily be reversed, so that song reverts to "mere" performance, as in act 2 when Aristeo's bid for Euridice is staged as a naked stratagem. As a result, Aristeo, whose songs are constantly full of repetitive, empty rhetoric, is never taken seriously. It is in this way that Rossi uses the performativity of song to frame ideal versions of virtue and truth. On the one hand, song can easily become mere pretense, as in the example of Venere (as the old woman) and Aristeo noted above; on the other hand, Orfeo is told that he cannot be virtuous – he cannot be himself – if he is silent.

A decade after the performance of *Orfeo* at the Palais Royal, the dramatic theorist d'Aubignac made a point of distinguishing between *représentation* [performance] and *vérité de l'action* [truth of the action]

in his *Pratique du théâtre* (1657): "I therefore call truth of theatrical action the story of the dramatic poem, insomuch as it is considered veracious, and as all the things that occur in it are considered as having actually happened or having had to have happened. But I call Representation the bringing together of all the things that can serve to represent a dramatic poem."[16] The truth of dramatic action concerns the story itself; *représentation*, or performance, pertains to the presence of spectators, musical instruments, costumes, actors, and the like. D'Aubignac emphasized the proper separation of these two spheres, and condemned the practices of ancient comedy, such as that of Aristophanes, in which no such distinction was maintained. In Aristophanes, he noted, an actor on stage might gesture to a man in the audience whose character he represented.[17] Indeed, by abandoning the chorus of ancient tragedy, seventeenth-century spoken tragedy had eliminated a significant "relay" between audience and stage.[18] D'Aubignac shunned any such element of theater that might blur the boundaries between story and its performance: "one would not approve of it if [the actor] Floridor, representing Cinna, saw fit to confuse the city of Rome with that of Paris, such distant actions with our current affairs, and the day of that conspiracy with a public entertainment taking place sixteen hundred years afterward."[19]

By framing song as performance, *Orfeo* drew attention to the fact that opera often explicitly violated the distinction d'Aubignac later stressed. Sometimes accoutrement, sometimes central to the dramatic action, song obscures the boundary between *représentation* and *vérité de l'action*. Saint-Évremond pointed directly to this "problem" when he wrote that "the composer comes to mind before the operatic hero does; it is Rossi, Cavalli, Cesti whom we imagine . . . and one cannot deny that in the performances at the Palais Royal everyone is thinking a hundred times more of Lully than of Thésée or of Cadmus."[20] In *Orfeo*, Buti and Rossi underscored this oscillation between story and performance when they framed Aristeo's songs as counterfeit or unconvincing performances to onstage audiences, and Orfeo's performances as genuine expressions of the truth and as integral to the progression of the drama. With the exception of Mercurio's concluding speech

("Mortali, udite" [Mortals, listen]), there is no straightforward address to the spectator (III:202). However, because Buti and Rossi staged song as performance – not merely naturalized within the plot – they made a distinct bid for the spectator's attention to the undifferentiated presence of the two facets of theater that d'Aubignac sought to distinguish. Opera ultimately attempts to dismantle the opposition between music as diegetic (part of the plot) on the one hand or extradiegetic (external to the plot) on the other by engaging song in a theatrical mode distinct from that of poetics or diegesis, and by rendering it transcendent when it reaches out as a speech act, or rather as a song act, to the audience.[21] The question of the deceptiveness or illusionality of song as it was raised in *Orfeo*, and by extension that of opera's truth or integrity and of the value of music itself, returned later in critical reactions against French opera, and in what I see as its programmatic response to these accusations.

Even before the final performance of imported Italian opera that Mazarin was to organize before his death, with *Ercole amante* in 1662, a number of French genres – the *pastorale*, the *ballet de cour*, the *comédie-ballet*, and the *tragédie à machines* – had begun to appear, anticipating or preparing the development of French opera. Through-sung pastorals were produced in the 1650s, such as *Le Triomphe de l'Amour* (1655) by Charles de Bey and Michel de La Guerre, and the so-called *Pastorale d'Issy* and *Ariane* (both 1659) by Pierre Perrin and Robert Cambert. Defining this genre, d'Aubignac remarked that pastorals were composed of "several episodes and entertaining circumstances, everything deriving from country life. The characters are but shepherds, hunters, fishermen, and similar kinds of folk; thus we have taken in its entirety the stuff of the ancients' idylls and eclogues, and we have applied to it the economy of satyric tragedy."[22] Unfortunately, the music to these French pastorals has been lost. Dances, elaborate machinery, and music were also present in the *ballets de cour* created by Isaac Benserade during the same period, such as the *Ballet de la nuit* in which both Louis XIV and Lully danced. These creations joined a series of *entrées* into a loose narrative whose verse texts were printed and distributed to

the spectators.[23] Molière's *comédies-ballets* with music by Lully, and later by Marc-Antoine Charpentier, burgeoned in the 1660s. This genre was without question a crucial aspect of Molière's creative output: twelve of his twenty-nine plays are *comédies-ballets*, "a dramatic hybrid designed to enliven and enhance celebrations at the French court, and composed of alternating segments in which a spoken comedy [*actes*] is punctuated by episodes of music and dance [*intermèdes*]."[24] Finally, there were the spectacular machine plays, staged beginning in 1650 with Pierre Corneille's *Andromède* which recycled Torelli's machines and sets from *Orfeo*. The *tragédie à machines* adopted the elaborate machinery and décors of Italian opera to create a mixture of spoken text, music, and ballet.[25] With the founding of the Académie Royale de Musique in 1672, the French court officially created an opera of its own, and *tragédie en musique* emerged from the ruins of these genres which were larged subsumed by it.

Two interrelated views of opera in late seventeenth-century France had a particularly determinant influence on its creation and reception well into the eighteenth century. First of all, as its name indicates, *tragédie en musique* was understood to be tragedy set to music. Tragedy was the matter at hand; music was a mode of delivery or was supposed to be an added *agrément*, or charm. The pleasure of spoken tragedy was understood by its theorists to be an intellectual and moral one. For the père René Rapin, tragedy used *terreur* and *pitié* to produce pleasure and ultimately, through this pleasure, moral lessons:

> This pleasure, which properly speaking belongs to the mind, consists in the agitation of the soul when moved by the passions. Tragedy becomes pleasurable to the spectator only because he himself is affected by everything that is represented to him, because he enters into the various emotions of the actors, because he becomes involved in their experiences, because he fears, hopes, grieves, and rejoices with them.[26]

Music could conceivably contribute to the moral workings of tragedy by enhancing these effects. Le Cerf de la Viéville succinctly articulated the basic tenet of the poetics of opera as it was understood in the late seventeenth century. Music was obliged to adhere in all ways to the

centrality of the poetic text: "music is there only in order to express the discourses and emotions of tragedy."[27] Similarly, for Antoine-Louis LeBrun, "sometimes music enhances the beauty of the words; but sometimes, when it strays from its model only in order to follow its whims, it diminishes their enjoyment."[28] The poetry provides a model with which the music must always coincide. When it does, as if transparent, it enhances the text; when it does not, it erupts in unwelcome and unpleasantly conspicuous display. Furetière expounded a similar understanding of the relationship between music and text when he discussed Philippe Quinault's lyric texts, "which are very pleasant when they are set to music, just as drugget is striking when it is covered in embroidery."[29]

The second view of opera focused on the strong affective force of its music, and often led theorists and commentators to degrade the operatic spectacle to the low status of mere sensual pleasure. If opera was only for the senses, if it had lost its "true" identity as tragedy, it could not be an intellectual or moral vehicle. Whatever the Greeks may have believed about the moral power of music, many early-modern theorists argued that the effects described by the ancient historians were the result of circumstances particular to those peoples and that they no longer applied in early-modern Europe. The abbé Dubos, for example, speculated that "perhaps the war sounds from *Thésée*, the muted passage [*les sourdines*] from *Armide*, and several other instrumental passages from the same composer would have produced these [moral] effects, which seem incredible [*fabuleux*] to us in the texts of the ancients, if we had played them to men of such a spirited nature as the Athenians."[30] Ideally, the effects of music would still demonstrate a link to morality; however, for late seventeenth-century theorists, opera always risked falling into pure sensation. The music and spectacle of opera stretched the limits of an aesthetics based on mimesis (where tragedy was understood as the imitation of certain kinds of actions) and therefore also threatened to annul the moral basis for such an art. Art without a proper object would be mere display. *Tragédie en musique* was thus for many commentators a misnomer or a contradiction in terms.

While perhaps some may have believed that the affective force of the music reached beyond the senses, before the eighteenth-century rehabilitation of musical sensibility, in part through forms of medical discourse – a topic that will be explored in subsequent chapters – there was no compelling and theoretically sophisticated defense of opera. Some may have agreed with the abbé Pierre Bourdelot and Jacques Bonnet in their *Histoire de la musique et de ses effets*, that music was not "for the pleasure of the senses, but rather serves as a guidepost for the governing of men and can correct the tumult of their passions."[31] At the turn of the eighteenth century, however, few were able to articulate strong arguments in this direction. Some commentators, however, were forthright in their assertion that sensual saturation constituted the dominant pleasure of opera. Antoine-Louis LeBrun made distraction central to the spectator's enjoyment: "for fear that the sight of a wood becomes tiresome, you are led into a magnificent palace; and from this palace you are brought to the seaside; from this seaside you are ushered to a glorious temple. The spectator, whose senses are charmed, is thus led every which way . . . "[32] Because opera was properly "a poetic monster," because it had neither the constraints of tragedy nor the freedom of epic, "one does not risk breaking the rules since there are none, and since the slightest constraint is incompatible with the supernatural which is its principal character . . . the spectator must be almost constantly spellbound."[33] For LeBrun, opera was an aesthetic free-for-all, a world of pleasure with few or no rules – and so much the better. Yet for many there was a decided emptiness to this pleasure. Samuel Chappuzeau, a defender of spoken theater against the religious *dévots*, bore witness to the fact that Lully "has charmed the entire court, the whole of Paris, and all foreign nations that come there. Yet these beautiful spectacles are only for the eyes and ears. They do not reach to the bottom of the soul; and afterwards one can say that one has seen and heard all, but not that one has learned anything."[34] For Chappuzeau, opera took pleasure too far: whereas the potentially objectionable pleasures of spoken theater were offset by its function as a moral vehicle, opera had no such redeeming feature. The abbé François de Châteauneuf argued similarly that opera was for the eyes and ears only,

and had no positive impact upon the soul. Discounting the stories of the power of music found in ancient texts, he argued that the ancients had "souls cast in a different mold from ours, and far more susceptible to good or bad impressions. For how could one ascribe to music the *exemplary power* [*la vertu instructive*] that was formerly attributed to it? What power does it exert over us to make us better?"[35]

For Saint-Évremond, music and spectacle had a decidedly negative effect on the intellectual value of tragedy: "it is in vain that the ears are delighted and the eyes enchanted if the mind is not satisfied."[36] André Dacier was careful to exclude music altogether from the essential components of tragedy by making it fall entirely within the realm of what he called "sentiment," by which he means the perception of physical sensation: "I call 'sentiment' the impression that the animal spirits make on the soul." Dacier argued that the purpose of tragedy was instruction – if the Bible were accessible to everyone, we would not need tragedy at all.[37] The addition of music takes tragedy beyond its purpose of instruction, even reversing its desired effects: "if there is anything in the world that seems foreign and even contrary to tragic action, it is music . . . For operas are, if I may say so, the *grotesques* of poetry, and grotesques that are all the more unbearable that they are made to pass for works created according to the rules of art."[38] Music was in no way essential to Greek tragedy, Dacier argued, though it might seem so from a cursory examination of Aristotle; it was, rather, a cultural accident.[39] By qualifying music as pure arabesque, thereby separating it from the central concerns of a poetics of tragedy, even apologists for theater such as Dacier could use arguments against opera that were virtually identical to those employed by pious theorists and clergymen against all theatrical spectacle.[40]

The condemnation of opera spearheaded by the partisans of the ancients during the various skirmishes that defined the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns took the sensual arousal associated with opera as a serious problem by arguing that it served as a conduit and catalyst for the lax morality of lyric poetry. Boileau's condemnation of opera in his "Satire X" (1692), entitled "Les Femmes," is surely the most well-known example. He railed against opera's sensual distraction as an

outright sinister, malevolent force. Writers like Antoine Arnauld, who noted that Boileau is "among my best friends," reiterated these attacks against opera and, in particular, against Lully's airs as "effeminate":[41]

> But what is specific about the author of the Satire [Boileau], and where he is most praiseworthy, is in having represented with so much wit and force the devastation that opera verses can wreak upon good morals, verses which are all centered on love and sung to airs which he is perfectly correct in calling *licentious*, since songs can hardly be imagined that would be more likely to ignite the passions and to convey into the hearts of spectators *the lewd morals* of the verses. And what is worse is that the poison of these lascivious songs is not confined to the place where these performances are held but spread throughout France, where an infinite number of people try to learn them by heart and amuse themselves by singing them wherever they go.[42]

Adrien Baillet remarked that because of this focus on pleasure, "if it were permitted to name all those who have been perverted at the opera, whether actors or spectators, their numbers would be infinite."[43] Saint-Évremond repeated many of the same remarks in his comedy, *Les Opera*, about a young girl who has been damaged from overexposure to fiction and who, having read too many libretti, now believes that she is an operatic heroine: "the *Astrées* had given her the fantasy of being a shepherdess; novels had inspired in her a desire for adventures; and what we see today is the work of operas."[44] In the end, the only way to cure this madness is show her the true face of opera by sending her off to attend one:

> Only opera can detach her from the foolishness of her belief. When she sees that the most marvelous machines are but painted cloth, and that the Gods and Goddesses who descend to the stage are but opera singers, when she touches the ropes which make possible the most amazing flights, goodbye Jupiter and Apollo, goodbye Minerva and Venus. She will shed all those illusions.[45]

For Saint-Évremond, theatrical illusion disappears and the object of drama is lost amidst the visual and auditory profusion and confusion. We are faced with the here-and-now of performance which cannot be separated from the objects being represented because it merges

with them. After a few moments at the opera, he argued, "the music is no longer but a muddled noise from which nothing can be distinguished . . . the mind, which has exerted itself vainly trying to sort out these impressions, lets itself wander into reverie or is dissatisfied in its uselessness."[46] Though the abbé Pierre de Villiers does not reject music per se when it is used outside of opera, "operas," he writes, "are but a monstrous jumble"; and he refers to their "poison" and to their "lascivious songs."[47] Promising instruction through terror and pity, opera arouses only sensation:

> Juger donc, si je puis, judicieux & sage,
> Coûter sur le papier cette espece d'ouvrage,
> Qui loin de l'embellir estropie un sujet,
> Et n'ayant que la danse & le chant pour objet,
> Nous fait voir des Heros, des amants sur la Scene,
> Qui viennent, transportez ou d'amour ou de haine,
> Sans jamais exciter ny pitié ny terreur,
> Au goût seul de l'oreille ajuster leur fureur.
>
> Judge therefore, if I may, judicious and wise,
> Put down on paper this kind of work,
> Which far from embellishing mutilates its subject,
> And having only song and dance for objects,
> Shows us heroes, lovers on the stage
> Who appear, swept away by love or hate,
> Exciting neither pity nor fear,
> To the ear's taste alone directing their furor.[48]

For many, opera's appeal to the senses signaled a decline in taste. Villiers argued that the *amateur*, "Ainsi l'esprit nourri de spectacles frivoles, / Rebute tout bon Livre, & court aux fables folles" [Whose mind is thus nourished on frivolous spectacles, / Turns away from all good books, and rushes over to absurd fictions].[49] As tragedy's monstrous other, opera was destined to destroy its spoken counterpart: "what angers me the most about this opera mania is that it will ruin tragedy, which is the most beautiful thing we have, the most appropriate for lifting the soul and the most effective in shaping the minds of spectators."[50] The supposedly inherent softness of *tragédie en musique*

put tragedy itself in danger. Villiers criticized the devastating influence he believed that opera had on tragedy:

> La fiere Tragedie en auroit moins souffert,
> On n'eût point sous son nom impunément offert
> Les lubriques chansons, & la danse effrontée;
> Peut-être dans sa force elle seroit restée.
>
> Proud tragedy would have suffered less
> Had we not with impunity under its name presented
> Lewd songs and shameless dance
> It might have kept its forceful stance.[51]

Having dared to steal the name of tragedy, as *tragédie en musique* opera was the harbinger of a general decline in taste. Villiers argued that if opera could be eliminated, good taste would return again to France.[52]

Saint-Évremond's and Villiers's remarks were not isolated ones, nor were their views short-lived. One can see traces of the conviction that opera was to blame for the decline of tragedy in France in reactions to the works of Quinault, Lully's principal librettist, from the 1690s through the mid-twentieth century. Although later critics sought to distance themselves from certain positions taken by Boileau, his judgments on opera were echoed and elaborated by generations of critics from Saint-Évremond to La Harpe, and from Gustave Lanson to Antoine Adam, and were intentionally used by these critics to generate an image of a golden age of seventeenth-century stage works which suffered from the influence of opera but eventually overcame it to become classics. Quinault and the dramatic characters he created, in both his spoken works and in those written for the lyric stage, were belittled as "unmanly" [*damerets*].[53] True works of art – in contrast to opera, it was understood – should be masculine and virile. Adrien Baillet noted of Quinault: "It is said that sentimentality [*la tendresse*] is the principal quality of this author's plays."[54]

For nineteenth-century literary history, opera posed a real threat to the future of literature as long as opera remained a part of *belles-lettres*. Promoting Racine above the other minor writers of the seventeenth