
H-France Review Vol. 23 (July 2023), No. 120

Julia Doe, *The Comedians of the King: 'Opéra-Comique' and the Bourbon Monarchy on the Eve of Revolution*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. 296 pp. Color plates, halftones, line drawings, tables. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780226743257; \$54.99 U.S. (pdf). ISBN 9780226743394; \$54.99 U.S. (epub). ISBN 9780226743394.

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The main aim of *The Comedians of the King* is to retrace the evolution of opéra-comique in the last decades of the Ancien Régime: more precisely, from the merging of the Opéra-Comique of the fair and the Comédie-Italienne in 1762 to the beginning of the French Revolution. Julia Doe begins her introduction by reminding the reader of a few important things. First, she explains that few repertoires have been more identified with absolutist politics than the Tragédie lyrique. Then she presents opéra-comique as its “less esteemed and more politically ambiguous comic counterpart” (p. 1). After indicating the fairground roots of opéra-comique, she explains how the lyric comedy was elevated to the status of royal entertainment. The government engineered a merger between the *forains* (fair players who played opéra-comique) and the youngest official company, the Comédie-Italienne. One must say that, at that time, France had three crown-sanctioned companies: the Opéra, named the Académie royale de musique, which had the exclusive *privilège* of performing sung works; the Comédie-Française, which had the *privilège* of performing spoken works; and the Comédie-Italienne. Throughout her book, Julia Doe aims to examine three main theses: first, she postulates that the pragmatic voice of regulations, administrative structure and economic changes dictated the evolution of opéra-comique in the last decades of the French monarchy. Secondly, according to the author, opéra-comique served as a privileged place of innovation and an intermediary between opera buffa and Tragédie lyrique (especially because of Marie-Antoinette’s patronage). Finally, this book aims to reexamine the political issues of opéra-comique in the period preceding the Revolution.

In chapter one, entitled “Institutional History,” Doe examines the musical and political background that preceded the merger of the Comédie-Italienne troupe, supported by the Crown, and that of the fair players, to demonstrate its short-term and long-term repercussions. Until 1762, the Comédie-Française and the Opera had tried on several occasions to limit or suppress the ability of actors of the fair to produce their opéra-comique repertoire, because of its success. Julia Doe therefore argues that the institutional events of the 1760s achieved the main objectives of Papillon de la Ferté and the first gentlemen of the court: as the opéra-comique gained in prestige and sophistication thanks to its function as an official theater, the merger safeguarded the vogue for the Comédie-Italienne while allowing the renewal of the programming of the theaters of Versailles and Fontainebleau. At the same time, Julia Doe underlines a new

reorganization clearly favorable to the Comédie-Italienne in the Parisian theatrical landscape. This came to sow disorder, or at least raise new challenges for the first theater in France: the Opéra (Académie royale de musique). More than suppressing the competition between the privileged theaters and the theater of the fair, the merger of the Comédie-Italienne and the fairground actors accentuated the competition of the official theaters by displacing innovation and erasing the borders between comedy and tragedy, the Italian and French styles, and popular and aristocratic culture.

The second chapter, “Character, Class, and Style in the Lyric Drame,” addresses more directly the transformation of the repertoire enabled by the merger, the growing sophistication of opéra-comique and the erosion of the previously strict lines between “serious” and “comic.” Julia Doe explains that, very quickly, the merger of the troupes went beyond the simple pragmatic aspect (economic and artistic) and that it reached a major transformation of the repertoire of the troupe. To illustrate this aspect, Julia Doe takes the example of *Sancho Pança dans son île* by Philidor and Poinciset, created on 8 July 1762, only a few weeks after the merger. In this opéra-comique, Sancho Pança, freed from his master Don Quixote, believes he is governor of the island of Barataria, and pride goes to his head. According to Julia Doe, this work offers a reflection of the ambiguity of the new position of the fair players now supported by the Crown. Indeed, while at the beginning of the work the lyrical expression of Sancho Pança corresponds to the metastasian aria model to ironically paint his suddenly elevated social position, he abandons his ostentatious style of singing when he returns to his farm. Julia Doe emphasizes the moral of this work: peasants should not be burdened with affairs of state nor should opéra-comique actors be emboldened by their new status. Doe also argues that the development of opéra-comique is indebted to “the rise of the Diderotian drama” (p. 12) through the importance that the latter gives to new and more serious subjects, forms of staging, and of expression. Under this influence, authors and composers of opéra-comique extended the dramatic and musical conventions of the genre. Thus, authors like Poinciset, Marmontel and above all Sedaine, assisted musically by Duni, Philidor, Monsigny and Grétry, turned away from the light and comic foundations represented at the fair, to move toward often more complex emotions and feelings. This new initiative ushered in an era of artistic expansion, making opéra-comique one of the main progressive genres of this period.

In the third chapter, titled “The musical revolutions of Marie-Antoinette,” Julia Doe significantly reevaluates the evolution of lyrical theater in France in the 1770s. While Gluck’s “revolution” is often seen as the only event which occurs in the French theater of the end of the Ancien Régime, Julia Doe brings in concrete elements which allow us to put these aesthetic evolutions in perspective. In particular, she reexamines the role that Marie-Antoinette played during this period. The general lines of the artistic training and influence of the Queen of France are well known. The role she played in the French career of Gluck, her childhood music tutor, contributed to his becoming one of the most important composers at the Opéra and bringing about long-awaited and profound changes in the programming of this theater. Julia Doe particularly underlines how the Queen’s patronage and her progressive tastes in music enabled a global renewal of the lyrical repertoire by integrating opéra-comique within the framework of this modernization. Indeed, the operas performed at the court theaters were above all the modern works by Sacchini, Grétry, Gluck and Piccinni, while the old works by Rameau and Lully gradually fell into disuse. Moreover, between 1770 and 1789, the majority of lyrical works performed at court were not operas but opéras-comiques. From this point of view, table 3.3, “Most popular court composers, 1770-1789 (total repertory)” (p. 96), reverses the traditional

hierarchy of French lyrical genres by demonstrating, thanks to a statistical tool, the overwhelming numerical superiority of opéra-comique performances at court. While Grétry monopolizes the top of the ranking, followed by the main opéra-comique composers of the period (Monsigny, Philidor, Duni, Dezède and Dalayrac), Sacchini and Gluck finish the ranking outside the top ten most performed composers. At the same time, Doe demonstrates the unprecedented vogue for parody at court under the impetus of the Queen. While this genre—formerly rarely represented at court—was until then looked on with a certain disdain by the higher classes, Doe counts more representations of parodies of the tragedies of Gluck or Sacchini than representations of these tragedies themselves.

The fourth chapter, “The Decadence of the Pastoral,” studies two categories of pastoral works: the “villageois” opéras-comiques performed at the Petit Trianon, which belong to a relatively old repertoire, and the new opéras-comiques created for the court and the Comédie-Italienne under the Queen’s influence. For the first category of opéras-comiques, Julia Doe highlights the discrepancy between the roles interpreted by the Queen, in the idealized countryside of the Petit Trianon in the company of the Troupe des seigneurs, made up of a group of noble amateurs, and her official status. Indeed, the works performed at the Petit Trianon, the list of which is given on page 133, were in dialogue with the literary discourses in fashion at the end of the Ancien Régime and encouraged a simple and virtuous life in the countryside, while questioning the hierarchies established by the monarchical system. The performance of these works in the privileged and intimate setting of the Queen’s little theater contributed to the Queen’s waning popularity and exacerbated the accusations of detachment and impropriety often associated with Marie-Antoinette. According to Julia Doe, these productions can therefore be read as the meeting point of the tensions and contradictions of the Petit Trianon. Doe also shows how Marie-Antoinette encouraged the creation of opéras-comiques offering an idealized vision of the aristocracy. These works, like *Le Droit du seigneur* or *La Rosière de Salency*, depict benevolent links between lords and peasants and underline the hierarchies in place while giving a utopian vision of the nobility. The analysis of the pastoral repertoire leads her to underline its flaws and contradictions while observing the evolution of the genre. The new works are indeed more developed than their elders: most of these opéras-comiques are in several acts, and the poetic form becomes higher (in verse rather than in prose), for example. The chapter ends with a case study, that of *Ninette à la cour*, a work by C. S. Favart created in 1755, but readjusted to the taste of the years 1770-1780. This allows Doe to observe the process of appropriation of “rustic” art by the aristocracy and to comment on the political implications of the rise of opéra-comique within French culture.

In chapter five, Julia Doe illustrates the changes undergone by opéra-comique over the period studied through the example of *Sargines*, a “heroic” opéra-comique in three acts by Monvel and Dalayrac created on the eve of the Revolution. How could the creation of such an ambitious work be made possible at the Comédie-Italienne? Part of the answer provided by the author lies in the construction of the Favart theater in 1783. One of the troupe’s priorities for their new theater was the size and quality of the stage space. The new theater made it possible to modernize all aspects of theatrical production, from costumes to machines. These new technical means allowed them to develop certain scenic elements which were impossible until then, in the aging theater of the Hôtel de Bourgogne. These new means encouraged the creation of works with visual effects unprecedented in opéra-comique, as *Sargines* by Monvel and Dalayrac testifies. Julia Doe explains the development of “heroic” comedies through two main elements of response. The first comes from the “Arrêts du Conseil,” which Julia Doe studied with attention. The members of this committee evaluated and judged the works that were proposed to the Comédie-Italienne in order

to renew the theater's repertoire as best as possible. Doe notes that the nature of the works rejected by the committee suggests a desire to represent more serious works, allowing for greater diversity than the lighter older repertoire. In fact, the "heroic" opéra-comique resulting from this selection had a higher artistic aspiration, making use of recent technical and artistic improvements, without, however, omitting the comic scenes, thus causing a first hybridization of the genre. The second is brought by the librettist Durosoy, a fervent defender of the "heroic" style.

The last chapter studies the reception in the nineteenth century of the opéra-comique repertoire studied up to this point, through the example of *Richard Cœur-de-Lion* by Sedaine and Grétry. *The Comedians of the King* constitutes a major contribution to our knowledge of the opéra-comique of the end of the Ancien Régime and, more broadly, of the history of French music of the eighteenth century, by centering its arguments not solely on the works, but above all on the actors—administrative, historical and artistic. As the title of the book announces, Julia Doe offers a methodological alternative to the history of the opéra-comique genre. The sources (accounting registers, contracts, minutes of commissions, box office receipts, opera programming etc.), rich and skillfully exploited, provide a new vision of the material aspects that had, as the author indicates, an indisputable impact on the evolution of opéra-comique in the last decades of the Ancien Régime. Moreover, the study of the Troupe des seigneurs and the approach to parody allow us to give a broader and unprecedented dimension to the importance of a genre often overshadowed by the Tragédie lyrique. Another important aspect of *The Comedians of the King* is the cosmopolitan aspect of opéra-comique in the years preceding the Revolution. If the desire to leave the traditional Francocentric framework by replacing the genre in a larger context offers a fairer and more relevant vision of opéra-comique, it also sometimes brings about some confusion: the terms "Italian" and "cosmopolitan" seem, for example, to merge into a single definition. Moreover, the wide diffusion of opéra-comique outside France (or Paris) during the period studied would have made it possible to put the term cosmopolitan into perspective. Finally, Doe demonstrates how librettists and composers came to test the limits of this genre by turning it into an alternative to Tragédie lyrique for the elite, while explaining how opéra-comique was exploited in the construction of the cultivated public image of the monarchy. This contribution is all the more important as it offers a nuanced picture of the aesthetic and musical evolutions of a complex genre that contributed to the construction of a *genre éminemment national* in the nineteenth century.

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ISSN 1553-9172