



Opera-Comique: A Sourcebook

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Opera-comique, like grand opera a specifically French genre of opera, emerged from the political changes and intellectual discussion that played a recurrent role in determining the nature of artistic expression and production in Paris. Opera-comique is distinguished by its use of spoken dialogue to link the arias and sung parts, and its more restrained use of recitatives. This form of opera emerged out of the popular entertainments, called opera-comiques en vaudevilles that were a feature of the popular suburban theatres held at the spring and autumn fairs (foire) of St Germain and St Laurent (and to a lesser extent at the comedy playhouse, the Comedie Italienne). The similarity of the types of entertainment provided by both the Comedie-Italienne and the two seasonal fairs brought the two companies ever closer, until, decisively, on 3 February 1756 they amalgamated, and found a theatre for their joint productions, the Hotel Bourgoigne. Their type of entertainment, combining existing popular tunes with spoken sections, grew rapidly in popularity and soon lent its generic name to this house. The house, regardless of its changing venue, would become inextricably associated with the genre acted there, and known as the Opera Comique. The genre should not, however, be confused with the 18th century French version of the Italian opera buffa, which also emerged in the mid-century, and rapidly spread to France where it was known as opera bouffon. This is again different again from the 19th-century opera-bouffe which came to have special associations with the new form of operetta. The genre of opera-comique exercised a powerful popular appeal because of its unique fusion of fixed musical form with fluid improvised dialogue. The well-known airs of the day, invariably strophic, came to be the staple medium of artistic expression for the genre - the couplets. French and Belgian composers readily adapted the new and increasingly dynamic variety of opera-comique, and soon established its hegemony in the Parisian and provincial theatres. This astonishing development was by no means always associated with comic subject matter. The genre of opera-comique, despite its name, was not necessarily comic or light in nature. Indeed, the most famous of operas-comiques, Bizet's Carmen, is a tragedy. Increasingly, earlier composers in this genre - like Francois-Andre Philidor (Tom Jones, 1765), Pierre-Alexandre Monsigny (Le Deserteur, 1769), Andre Gretry (Richard Coeur de Lion, 1784), Luigi Cherubini (Lodoiska, 1791; Les Deux Journees, 1800) and Etienne-Nicolas Mehul (Joseph, 1807) - were concerned with more serious content, and produced works full of progressive musical innovation that made ever greater appeal to audiences beyond the borders of France (especially the famous type of the 'rescue opera' that emerged from the political storm and stress surrounding the French Revolution). The genre, with its unique mixture of comedy and drama, its captivating musical fluency, its increasing handling of serious or Romantic themes - expertly crafted by its most famous librettist Augustin-Eugene Scribe (1791-1861) - became universally popular in the masterpieces of its heyday during the fifty years between 1820 and 1870: Adrien Boieldieu's La Dame blanche (1825), Daniel-Francois-Esprit Auber's Fra Diavolo (1830) and Le Domino noir (1837), Ferdinand Herold's Zampa (1831) and Le Pre aux clerics (1832), Fromental Halevy's L'Eclair (1835) and Ambroise Thomas' Mignon (1866). The history of the opera-comique between 1762 and 1914 reflects the political and cultural life of France from the last days of the ancien regime, the tumult of the Revolution and Napoleonic era, through the on-going saga of France's search for the right mode of governance, the decisive battle between monarchy and republicanism, that found its watershed not in the revolutions of 1789, 1830 and 184

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