

French Opera  
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[*French Opera: A Short History*,  
Vincent Giroud, Yale, 352  
pages]

## Opera à la Française

By R.J. Stove

ANYONE PRONE to examining books on classical music must have felt periodic bafflement at how some topics are flogged almost to death—by now there are probably doctoral theses on Mahler's laundry lists and Shostakovich's bed socks—while others, surely just as estimable, are for decades ignored.

Firmly in the second group is the tale of French opera. Given that at least two works from France, Charles Gounod's *Faust* and Georges Bizet's *Carmen*, have been among the most popular operas of all time—and that, furthermore, not even the shortest history of music could decently omit such masterpieces as Camille Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila*, Claude Debussy's *Pelleas et Mélisande*, and Jules Massenet's *Manon*—one might think that the genus would have attracted vast secondary literature. But it has not.

So the first thing to be said about this new volume is an expression of gratitude that it has been produced at all. Alas, the result will be likelier to arouse cool respect than warm affection. Compared with a truly enthralling synoptic exercise like *German Opera: From the Beginnings to Wagner* by British musicologist John Warrack, *French Opera: A Short History* seems decidedly uninspired. Warrack's superb survey included abundant musical examples; Vincent Giroud, professor at the University of Franche-Comté—on the French side of the border with Switzerland—gives us none, though this might have been a publishing rather than an authorial decision. Moreover, Warrack's prose abounds in witty touches; Giroud's is penny-plain, with little discernible effort to win hearts and minds.

This is particularly regrettable when so much of the music that Giroud needs to cite has been gathering dust on library shelves, in cumbersome folio-sized collected editions ignored by all save specialists. France, for some reason, has an oversupply of composers who warrant inclusion in every encyclopedia but who in recent times are hardly ever performed. Four instances from the early 1800s—three of them foreign-born—are Gasparo Spontini (a favorite of Empress Josephine), Luigi Cherubini, Fromental Halévy, and Giacomo Meyerbeer.

No latter-day historian can rely on the average reader, however musically educated, having memories of what these men's creations sound like. The situation is identical with earlier and still more obscure figures such as Jean-Marie Leclair, M.P. de Montéclair, Louis Clérambault, and Jean-Joseph de Mondonville, all active in the 18th century's first half. (A little of their theatrical music has turned up on CD.) Bringing such shadowy folk to life requires a gift for pedagogic persuasion, rather than the mere archival diligence that Giroud exhibits.

JEAN-BAPTISTE LULLY DIED IN 1687—OF GANGRENE CAUSED BY BANGING HIS FOOT, INSTEAD OF THE FLOOR, WITH A CONDUCTOR'S STAFF.

There had been Italian operas since 1600, and German operas since 1627, but not till 1659 did the first unambiguously operatic piece, called *La Pastorale d'Issy*, appear in France. Its composer, one Robert Cambert, soon ceded place to the far more gifted and ruthless Jean-Baptiste Lully, who transcended his Tuscan birth and his unorthodox sexual preferences to become more French than the French. While Lully died in 1687—of gangrene caused by banging his foot, instead of the floor, with a conductor's staff—the patterns of French operatic writing that he had codified stayed intact for another 70-odd years: the so-called Lullian overture, with a stately, chordal first section followed by

a much faster, more polyphonic second section; abundant classical allegory, the better to appease Louis XIV; and plenty of dances.

Not all of these patterns—even, Giroud informs us, the overture—were Lully's inventions, but he did more than anyone else to establish them. Jean-Philippe Rameau, only four years old at Lully's death, operated surprisingly often within Lullian molds in his own theatrical contributions. Most of these, despite the spate of Rameau stagings that started in Europe during the 1980s, continue to be much more famed via enchanting orchestral excerpts than as coherent wholes. (From Giroud comes the unexpected information that one of Rameau's best works, *Les Indes Galantes*, was heard repeatedly at the Paris Opéra during the 1950s.) Giroud calls Rameau, "along with Berlioz and Debussy ... one of the three indisputable geniuses of French music." A rather odd assessment—why the implied denigration of François Couperin, Gabriel Fauré, Maurice Ravel, and Olivier Messiaen?—but Rameau's creative splendors, however uncongenially marmoreal to Romantic tastes, cannot be denied.

The French Revolution had almost as calamitous an impact on opera, with its *ancien régime* support, as on organ music. In a survey as brief as this review, not a single French opera between Rameau's death in 1764 and Meyerbeer's Paris emergence in 1831 warrants mentioning, excepting perhaps Cherubini's *Médée* (1797), now usually heard in a garbled Italian-language version instead of the original French. The huge public for Meyerbeer's three most popular operas—*Robert le Diable*, *Les Huguenots*, *Le Prophète*—came from the bourgeoisie, not from the royal-aristocratic environment in which Lully and Rameau had flourished.

Wagner traduced the Jewish Meyerbeer on racial grounds, whilst Mendelssohn and Schumann denounced Meyerbeer's streak of healthy vulgarity, although the usually squeamish Chopin revered him. Nevertheless he attained millionaire status and wrested sardonic compliments from Heinrich Heine, who credited Meyerbeer's mother with being only the second woman in the world to bear a Messiah. He might yet become the Next Big Thing, as did the even more completely forgotten Monteverdi in the 1960s. Whether the once adored operas by Meyerbeer's rivals Daniel Auber (*Fra Diavolo*, *Masaniello*) and Adolphe Adam (most celebrated for his ballet *Giselle* and his carol "O Holy Night") will soon return to the regular repertory is doubtful.

With Gounod's *Faust*, in 1859, we enter the modern world. Giroud tells us that *Faust* had been accorded its 2,000th Paris Opéra performance—to say nothing of productions elsewhere—by 1975. None of Gounod's dozen other operas came within miles of *Faust*'s acclaim, though his *Roméo et Juliette* receives the occasional outing, and his subsequent *Le Tribut de Zamora*, dealing as it does with Christian-Arab relations, might, to quote Giroud, "seem to be an intriguing candidate for revival in the early 21st century."

Several great French operas took ages to be heard in Paris at all. Berlioz died in 1869. The first uncut rendition of his saga *Les Troyens* was performed at Karlsruhe, southwestern Germany, in 1890. *Samson et Dalila* had its première at Weimar and elicited widespread Teutonic admiration well before Saint-Saëns could interest any French theater in it. Jacques Offenbach's posthumous *Tales of Hoffmann* underwent so many drastic changes to the scoring, and to the sequence of its acts, that simply reading Giroud's long paragraph on the subject induces seasickness. *Hoffmann*, too, at first fared better in German-speaking lands than in France. The same with *Carmen*, famously beloved by Nietzsche, Wagner, and Brahms; the same with Massenet's *Werther*.

By contrast, *Pélleas et Mélisande* was and is so quintessentially Gallic in its *sensibilité* that it could have been envisaged nowhere except in France, and Debussy's own gifts for courting controversy ensured that it provoked considerable distaste even there. Giroud mentions, yet regrettably leaves unnamed, one conductor who said that it could be "enjoyed only by snobs and pederasts." Though no one has been comparably rude about Ravel's two operas, *L'Heure Espagnole* and *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges* (the latter to words by Colette), these—like *Pélleas*—are very much "caviar to the general," their exquisite harmonic and instrumental trellis-work being as far from grand Verdian or Puccinian gestures as can be imagined.

Giroud also analyzes long-overlooked operas by Debussy's and Ravel's lesser French contemporaries, including Proust's lover Reynaldo Hahn; Henri Rabaud, now remembered, if at all, as the Paris Conservatoire's openly pro-Vichy boss; Albéric Magnard, killed in action during 1914; and someone called Camille Erlanger, whose last opera, *Forfaiture*, culminates promisingly in the heroine being branded with a red-hot iron.

It remains remarkable, at least from Giroud's narrative, not how much but rather how little damage two world wars and even the most embittered domestic political battles inflicted on French operatic traditions. Success sometimes befell the least probable composers, such as Francis Poulenc. With his earlier, often scatterbrained output, Poulenc had conveyed the sense of one plagued by Attention Deficit Disorder. But in *The Dialogues of the Carmelites* he came perilously close to tragic perfection. Its bloodcurdling climax, in which the guillotine's blade again and again slices through the nuns' choral textures, is sickeningly memorable. Perhaps Messiaen's late and solitary opera, *Saint-François d'Assise* (1975-1983), merits similar renown. Still, its infrequent appearances outside France have been courteously rather than enthusiastically greeted.

Giroud conscientiously lists 20-odd operas written in France since *Saint-François*. On these, judgment is best reserved, even if it is striking how completely French musicians have decided to ignore the self-proclaimed "300% Marxist-Leninist" Pierre Boulez, with his famous 1967 demand in *Der Spiegel* that opera houses be blown to bits. It is hard, from Giroud's account, to desire closer acquaintance with the post-Messiaen repertoire, and the last chapter manages to epitomize the whole book's slightly disappointing effect. As a storehouse of benumbingly recondite information, it is invaluable. As a reading experience, it is on the enervating side. ■

R.J. Stove is the author of *A Student's Guide to Music History* and is writing a biography of César Franck.

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