

James Johnson

Listening in Paris

(excerpt from chapter one, about opera in Paris in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries)

The *coup d'archet* of the orchestra, a loud and mostly futile attack to silence the audience for the overture, signaled the start of the spectacle. In the orchestra pit, a conductor of sorts beat time by striking one of the wooden music stands in rhythm with a big stick from start to finish, through loud and soft passages alike (Since Lully's untimely death by gangrene of the foot, pounding the podium with a sharpened log had been inadvisable.) Rousseau complained of the "terrible racket," and Grimm joked about the "woodchopper" among the violins, but all agreed that the incessant clatter was a necessary evil: even with it the orchestra, huddled as they were around common "pulpits" and reading by candlelight, had a hard time staying together.

The great green and gold curtain rose to reveal a stage filled with the fantastical. (Once the curtain was up it stayed up, so spectators not only watched singers and dancers but saw the illusion-shattering scene changes between acts.) Decorations were lavish and costumes exuberant. The characters included clowns, sultans, demons, peasants (always happy), gods, a monkey or two, wood-nymphs, mermaids, and Indians. When François Chastelus, Sébastien Slodtz, and Pierre Dumesnil inventoried the Opéra's scenery in 1748, the task consumed two weeks and produced 161 items, including a Palace of Victory, a Palace of Ceres, a desert, twelve rustic countrysides, a Palace of Armide, a Palace of Neptune, one transparent garden, two rainbows, a grotto, six green fields with flowers, a Temple of Isis, a Temple of Destiny, a Temple of Memory, the port of Marseilles, a Throne of Theseus, a Palace of Persius, three altars, two ships, and a forest.

At times the special effects made the Opera seem more like a house of novelties than a temple of high art. Chariots bearing singers descended from the ceiling above the stage, surrounded by sparkling clouds strategically placed to hide the ropes. Altars billowed smoke through trap doors. Great creaking, multihinged floors were rolled out for nautical scenes, and water flowed through fountains, rivers, and grottoes. By the second act of Lully's *Isis* the eponymous goddess has already descended in a peacock-drawn chariot six times; a small orchestra floats down on a cloud in *Atys*. In Rameau's ballet *Nais* mountains grow from the earth and giants climb them to fight with the gods; the climax comes when a thunderbolt from Jupiter reduces everything to rubble.

After the machines it was the dancers that attracted the attention of the spectators. A certain mystique surrounded Louis Dupré, who performed until he was sixty and appeared onstage with a mask, flowing black hair that reached halfway down his back, and a heavy mantle that swept the floor as he danced. Another celebrity, Gaetan Vestris, was so popular – or so he believed – that when a woman accidentally stepped on his foot in the gardens of the Palais Royal he howled that all of Paris would mourn for two weeks.

But the greater interest lay with the female dancers, the *filles d'opéra* [opera girls], whose reputation for

loose living inspired innumerable accounts of the Opéra. Just after the ballet corps raised the length of dresses for the *filles*, who, moreover, were for the first time leaping into the air on the stage of the Opéra, Casanova and his friend Patu visited the parterre to report triumphantly that the famous lead Marie-Anne Camargo was wearing no underwear. The claim was certainly in the spirit of the spectacle, but it was hardly verifiable, as the dancers' dresses now hit them just above the ankle. Still, people talked. Pidansot de Mairobert claimed that men milled about on the stage after performances for “*négociations de volupté*” [negotiations for sex] with the dancers; others received dancers in their boxes during performances. These *danseuses entretenues* [dancers kept as mistresses], often orphans or runaways, were said to arrive at the Opéra in richly appointed carriages; they sometimes struck up conversations with the renters of the onstage boxes, and they were blamed for the ruin of “young foreigners and old financiers.”

In the mid-eighteenth century an evening at the Opéra was more likely to be diverting than particularly somber. Gripping moments in the drama or especially renowned airs brought silence and genuine attention, but on the whole the Opéra in 1750 was a public setting for private salons, for which the music, dancers, and machines provided an excellent backdrop. Rémond de Saint-Mard, writing on contemporary opera in 1741, claimed that one watched the performance “perhaps the first time one goes, but thereafter the effect was no longer noticed.” Between the unexpected distractions of fistfights or wisecracks shouted above the music and the more routine preoccupations of keeping social appointments, it was possible to forget about the performance altogether. “One listens to a song, one watches a fete, and sometimes one does neither one nor the other.” Voltaire called the Opéra a “public rendezvous” where everyone meets “no matter how terrible the singer or how boring the performance.” The common view, repeated in accounts from the period many times over, was that music touched the senses but not the soul.

Not surprisingly the parterre [the downstairs seats; what we’d now call the orchestra seats, where in those days the more common people sat] was the source of endless amusement for the boxes [where the nobles sat] and infinite anguish for the performers. Arrests were frequent there for public drunkenness, which as often led to loud singing as to violence. In 1700 the captain of the King's Dragoons showed up in the parterre and “demonstrated his drunkenness by cries that troubled the opera.” The next year, “a young *gentilhomme* [gentleman] from Normandy whose head had been slightly warmed by the wine of Champagne” earned three weeks in prison for attacking a military officer with a walking stick in the parterre.

Singing was common in the parterre: Rameau tested his theories about the innate sense of harmony there by listening to spectators humming along with the music, and at the 1751 revival of Rameau's *Les Indes galantes* the parterre joined in singing the most famous chorus, “*Brillant soleil*.” Addison likened the actors at such moments to parish clerks drowned out by their own congregation.

Nor were spectators in the parterre hesitant to express their artistic judgments, despite the edicts from the king attempting to quiet loud and unruly displays....

The ordinances had little effect. When a substitute singer replaced the lead in Marin Marais's *L'Ariane et Bacchus* without notice, whistles from the parterre quickly forced him to stop singing. After an awkward

silence the singer composed himself and asked the parterre how they expected him to have a thousand-écu voice when he was paid only six hundred livres, a response that so delighted the troublemakers that they cheered him to the end of the opera.

The greatest pastime at the opera was conversation, and no place was better equipped than inside an opera box. Depending upon one's guests the topics ranged from war to religion to who was in favor at court. But most of the time the subject was other spectators....

Rétif de la Bretonne gives a spectacular account of conversation during the opera in his *Tableaux de la bonne compagnie*. The setting is the box of an unnamed *parlementaire's* wife [the wife of a member of parliament], and her guests include a countess, a marquis, and Rétif. Before the music starts the présidente [the box owner] begins a spicy story about a soldier who seduces the very farm girl his commanding officer had earlier tried (unsuccessfully) to bed. As the story is drawing to an end – with the soldier in a cloister, the girl in a convent, and the officer doubly inconsolate – the music starts. The conversation continues for a time, but the music grows loud enough to silence them momentarily. (“The sacrifice of pleasure that a pretty piece of music can cause,” Rétif observes, “costs us nothing if we are trying to please a woman who wishes to listen to it.”)

A sharp peal of laughter from the countess soon dispels any notion that the women want to listen. A vicar from the adjoining box enters to announce that the music is preventing him from hearing their conversation....

If the *honêtes gens* [respectable people] of Paris took advantage of the Opera to see and be seen, less reputable types also exploited the visibility for their own purposes. There were persistent reports of prostitutes renting the prominent first-balcony seats for professional reasons. Other shady characters appeared there, too. Because the opera is “essentially a school for gallantry and luxury,” Pidansat de Mairobert warned, it inevitably has its vile elements: “men dishonored by lost women...[who] continually bring license, debauchery and corruption.” The young especially were instructed to beware of older women of easy virtue who went to the opera seeking riches....

Yet if spectators were free to arrive late, talk, watch others, and circulate, there was plenty at the Opera that proper etiquette did not permit. Spectators, for example, mocked particularly arrogant or brusque behavior, as when the Marichal de Noailles wrongfully tried to evict a spectator from his seat. When priests sat too near a [female] companion, cries of “Monsieur abbé, let's see your hands!” would ring out.

Some maintained that it was bad form to stay for the entire opera....Others held a prejudice against listening too intently to the music. A traveler to Paris who was quick to grasp the dynamics of behavior at the Opéra wrote with some derision that the only spectators who listened to the music were “several clerics, several shopkeepers, several schoolboys, sucklings of the muses and soldiers just returning from or about to leave for a tour of duty.” And a young nobleman explained to his guest that listening to the music with focused attention was “bourgeois.” “There is nothing so damnable,” he went on, “as

listening to a work like a street merchant or some provincial just off the boat.”

For these spectators, attentiveness was a social faux pas, as the *Mercantile* observed: spectators who attempted to listen to a work before judging it, the paper claimed, were regarded by the rest as “creatures from another world.” Circulating, conversing, arriving late, and leaving early were an accepted part of eighteenth-century musical experience, grudgingly tolerated by some and positively encouraged by others. “We listen at most to two or three pieces consecrated by fashion,” as a character in *Angola* declares, “and at the end we excessively praise or thoroughly damn the whole work.”