

Introduction

Nineteenth-century French opera suffers on the whole from a poor reputation; out of a considerable repertory, only a few works such as *Faust* and *Carmen* appear to have stood the test of time. In approaching this subject, we must discard critical assessments inherited from Germany during the era of triumphant Wagnerism and adopt different criteria. French opera rarely aspired to sublimity, intensity, and depth of expression or density of composition. The preference was for the entertaining, pleasant, subtle, and light—and also for something that would surprise and impress. Bizet, and Gounod before him, would seem to fall between the two extremes. While it reflects particular attention to the orchestra, to the unfolding of the drama, to inventiveness, and to the quality of the writing, *Carmen* unquestionably remains part of the long *opéra-comique* tradition, particularly in terms of its structure and its lighter passages. The origins of this fusion are to be sought in the position of opera in mid-century France and in the variety of approaches it was taking.

Far from being the result of a free creative flowering, nineteenth-century French opera, perhaps more than any other art form, was governed by a complex set of codes and practices, and by a system of production that intruded on every level of composition, preparation, and performance. It was organized in keeping with a genuine system, with powerful structures, whose diverse components interacted and were governed by rules sometimes far removed from purely aesthetic considerations. Each stage in this system had its principal actors: the authors in the writing and composition of the work, the interpreters in its performance, and the public and the press in its reception. In addition, there were seemingly secondary players such as theater directors, publishers, and politicians.

In order to identify the foundations of this system and understand how it worked, we must look at a key phase in the history of French opera: the

Second Empire (December 2, 1852–September 4, 1870). Like all turbulent, questioning times, this period serves to point up sensitivities—by exacerbating issues, crisis makes them easier to identify. Viewing the Second Empire as the crossroads of many influences, we can observe the various paths taken by French opera during the century, some of them conservative, others more original, and a few of them completely atypical. Situated between Italy, the birthplace of bel canto, and Germany, the motherland of introspective romanticism, the French school sought to strike a balance that could only be achieved in the capital—the creative juices of the French nation flowed to Paris, and no composer could hope for wide success elsewhere.

In systematically retracing the creative process along the paths that any French composer had to follow in this unstable period if his music was to be heard, we need as our guide a work that will serve to illustrate each link in the chain of creation linking the artist to the spectator—a work that can shed new light on the repertory of contemporary French opera, illuminating the system that produced it and revealing its limits in seeking to emancipate it. Georges Bizet's *Les Pêcheurs de perles* perhaps best meets these requirements.

First performed on September 30, 1863, at the Théâtre-Lyrique, *Les Pêcheurs de perles* marked a decisive moment in the career of the twenty-five-year-old Bizet—and in the history of French opera, which was torn between devotion to tradition and a need for renewal. After eighteen performances, it was never again performed during the composer's lifetime and was forgotten for two decades. When it returned to the stage at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, its appearance changed several times. These revivals are a part of the opera's history and highlight something too often forgotten: the mutability of operas.

Les Pêcheurs de perles was the beneficiary of propitious circumstances in 1863 that enabled Bizet to make the transition from young supplicant to fulfilled creative artist very swiftly. He had to overcome many obstacles to gain entry to the great operatic institutions: to win the favor of a theater director, to be given a libretto, to try his luck with a publisher, to get his work published, and to have announcements placed in major periodicals. Various occasions of surprise, irritation, and enthusiasm, Bizet's youth became a pretext for holding forth on the central problem of French opera: its renewal. That was the lot of young composers in the Parisian operatic system. Seemingly impossible to pigeonhole, this opera by a beginner was viewed as a rejection of the traditional categories of *opéra-comique* and *grand opéra*, and it provoked thinking about the concept of genre.

In *Les Pêcheurs de perles*, these basic issues are better combined than in other scores of the time. Gounod's *Faust* (1859), for example, sheds no light on the plight of a young composer, because Gounod was already well established, having had *Sapho* (1851) and *La Nonne sanglante* (1854) produced at the Opéra and *Le Médecin malgré lui* (1858) at the Théâtre-Lyrique.

The unfamiliar paths opened up by both the radical Wagner and the more conciliatory Gounod gave rise to controversy among Paris critics, whose reaffirmations of the traditional rules of French opera—which they saw as threatened—illustrate its aesthetics. “Good history . . . is history that asks a good question and tries to resolve it,” Georges Duby remarks. “This is what gives an event its value: it makes it possible to pose and approach a problem better. The merit of an event is to be revelatory.” And he adds: “The exceptional, sensational, unexpected, or surprising nature of an event spurs a rash of critical utterances, a sort of proliferation of chatter.”¹ The 1863 production of *Les Pêcheurs de perles* was on the face of it a less notable event than that of *Tannhäuser* in 1861 at the Opéra. Nonetheless, critics expressed strong reactions and did not refrain from expounding their opinions.

In the numerous periodicals that published long articles on the theater (prominent in Parisian society of the day), operas were analyzed as works, steeped in various influences, that followed well-known outlines, employed tried-and-true forms, and were in general based on specific models. The libretto, score, and physical production of an opera—its dramatic structure, poetry, music, sets, and costumes—all clung to stereotypes. Operatic writing was subject to expressive conventions, blending the meaning of the verses with the evocative power of music and staying within categories specific to the period; this writing defined lyric drama.

This study is in three stages, rather like a series of overlapping and ever-deeper X rays. In the first part, I address the material conditions surrounding the creation of an opera, which determined the work's writing, performance, and reception. Then, in the second part, I turn to the laws of artistic structure that dictated the drama, the poetry, and the music of an opera. Finally, the third part seeks to identify the social, generic, and aesthetic foundations of the nineteenth-century French operatic system.

The period I explore has no precise boundaries. There were no sudden transformations—much less revolutions—in the history of nineteenth-century French opera; rather, there was gradual change. Various influences

overlaid and blended with fashions in taste; some forms and genres survived as their language evolved; repertory thought to be dead and buried was resuscitated (the works of André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry, for example). Nonetheless, we can delimit a period of change between 1820 and 1830 during which *opéra-comique* acquired the form that would be viewed as classic for the rest of the century; *grand opéra* emerged from its chrysalis; and stage design underwent major changes at the Académie de musique.²

The 1820s saw both the arrival in France of Rossini, who would play a decisive role in French opera, and the first real appearance of Weber's operatic music on the Parisian stage. Despite major developments in musical language and new expressive trends, however, the influence of tradition was always substantial, and one of the strongest unifying factors in the French operatic world until the eve of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 was Daniel Auber, whose long and successful career ran from *Le Séjour militaire* (1813) to *Rêve d'amour* (1869).³

At the turn of the twentieth century, the music of Jules Massenet—which without question dominated that period, thanks to its great success—is in large part to be viewed more as reviving the operatic system described in this book than as replacing it. “Reconciliation” is the byword of this music: reconciling the old with the modern, Italian with German influences, and the primacy of the singer with the accurate rendering of the drama.

To analyze nineteenth-century French opera from within, rather than impose any particular view, I have called on contemporary witnesses. Among the journalists of the day, I pay particular heed to musicians, especially Hector Berlioz (1803–1869), who left a body of criticism of no less literary and historical interest than his musical output, and whose final article contains an account of *Les Pêcheurs de perles*. We shall also hear the somewhat later—but very valuable—opinions of Ernest Reyer (1823–1909), himself a talented composer, who succeeded Berlioz and Joseph d'Ortigue at the *Journal des Débats*; Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921), the true conscience of French opera, of which he wrote so well in classic style; Reynaldo Hahn (1874–1947), who inherited and carried on the genre, and who was also a remarkable writer and discerning analyst; and Alfred Bruneau (1857–1934).

The persistence of a consistent French attitude to opera in the nineteenth century is also demonstrated by other contemporary commentators, among them writers such as Stendhal (1783–1842), Balzac (1799–1850), Théophile Gautier (1811–1872), Alfred de Musset (1810–1857),

Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), and Emile Zola (1840–1902). Composers other than the musician-critics named above also provide examples, such as François Adrien Boieldieu (1775–1834), Daniel François Esprit Auber (1782–1871), Louis Ferdinand Hérold (1791–1833), Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791–1864), Jacques Fromental Elie Halévy (1799–1862), Adolphe Adam (1803–1856), Félicien David (1810–1893), Jacques Offenbach (1819–1880), Victor Massé (1822–1884), Edouard Lalo (1822–1892), and, of course, Georges Bizet (1838–1875), as well as Emmanuel Chabrier (1841–1894), Jules Massenet (1842–1912), André Messager (1853–1929), Gustave Charpentier (1860–1956), and Claude Debussy (1862–1918). Among their works, a few have the status of genuine paragons of French opera, including especially Boieldieu's *La Dame blanche*—first produced in 1825, and considered the model *opéra-comique* for more than half a century thereafter—whose thousandth performance at the Opéra-Comique took place in 1862 in the presence of Napoleon III and Empress Eugénie.

In the course of 1863, there were performances, on January 20, of a revival of Auber's *La Muette de Portici* (1828) and, on November 4, of *Les Troyens* by Berlioz. Symbolically, the first performance of *Les Pêcheurs de perles* took place between the two, in September. Auber's score remained for many an "accomplished masterpiece of lucid, straightforward and easy melody, as radiant as the sun."⁴ Berlioz's opera on the other hand was seen by the vast majority of the public as an "impossible" work that shattered the aesthetic framework of French opera. Bizet was thus confronted with these two emblematic models, one representing conservative tradition and the other innovative creative passion. But his deepest thoughts turned in a third direction: he was an admirer of Gounod. We shall proceed under the aegis of these three tutelary figures. Auber was the aesthetic and social model of operatic success under the Second Empire; Berlioz exemplified the frustration of originality and creative individualism; and Gounod took a middle road between these extremes, creating a new lyrical style and bringing about a perceptible renewal within the framework of that ambiguous genre, opera.