



REVIEW: BOOK

The Comedians of the King: Opéra Comique and the Bourbon Monarchy on the Eve of Revolution

Julia Doe

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021
pp. vii + 314, ISBN 978 0 226 74339 4

Olivia Bloechl 

Department of Music, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA, USA
olivia.bloechl@pitt.edu

The opéra-comique encompassed a striking variety of lyrical forms and subject matter across its long history, but two characteristics have been seen as defining features: its use of spoken dialogue and its popularity. Both characteristics, in a schematic account of old-regime musical theatre, contrast readily with the opéra-comique's more prestigious, fully sung counterpart, the tragédie en musique. The popularity of opéra-comique lay partly in its origins outside the 'legitimate' companies and theatres patronized by the Crown and partly in its ability to appeal to audiences that spanned the French social hierarchy. Indeed, this popular quality has, with good reason, been so closely associated with opéra-comique that a recent book by David Charlton integrates its history within a broader study of 'popular opera' in eighteenth-century France (*Popular Opera in Eighteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021)).

In contrast, Julia Doe's new study, *The Comedians of the King: Opéra Comique and the Bourbon Monarchy on the Eve of Revolution*, focuses on opéra-comique's fortunes in the decades just before the Revolution, and it yields a rather different view of the genre's development and its popularity. The book's Introduction and six chapters, including a substantial Epilogue, offer a study of the institutional and genre history of opéra-comique in France during the pivotal decades of the 1760s to the 1790s. As the book's title suggests, two 'revolutions', one aesthetic and the other political, haunt the discussion that unfolds across its chapters. Its central question, as I read it, is how we should view the relationship of opéra-comique to the dramatic cultural and political transformations of the later eighteenth century, with which the genre has been so intimately linked in French opera historiography.

The Introduction takes up this question and makes the case for the central importance of the genre's cosmopolitanism, a product of its extensive foreign diffusion as much as its absorption of foreign operatic influences. Subsequent chapters variously focus on institutional history, genre analysis and consideration of patronage, especially Marie Antoinette's championing of the opéra-comique at court. In the first chapter, Doe offers a close look at the reasons for the 1762 merger of the royally sanctioned Comédie-Italienne with the very popular Opéra-Comique troupe, based on her original research in the archives of the Comédie-Italienne. This chapter is one of my favourites, and it reminds me of Victoria Johnson's wonderful institutional history of the Opéra, which should have received more extensive notice in this study than it does (*Backstage at the Revolution: How the Royal Paris Opera Survived the End of the Old Regime* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008)). The second chapter turns to the content of opéra-comique productions post-merger, while the third and fourth chapters focus on the pivotal figure of Marie Antoinette, Louis XVI's Habsburg queen, detailing (in chapter 3) changes in court programming

that she introduced from the 1770s onward and (in chapter 4) looking closely at the small-scale pastoral productions she performed with members of her circle at the Petit Trianon. In the fifth chapter, Doe details the development of the *comédie héroïque* as it was performed in the new Salle Favart (which opened in 1783), and she concludes the chapter with a reading of Nicolas-Marie Dalayrac and Jacques-Marie Boutet's *Sargines* (1788), which, she argues, paired 'a reactionary political message with a highly progressive musical and dramatic idiom' (22). The Epilogue extends the book's scope into the nineteenth-century reception history of opéra-comique as a 'people's' art, taking the treatment of André Grétry's *Richard Coeur de Lion* (premiere 1784) as a paradigmatic case.

One of the book's main contributions is Doe's extensive work with administrative documents pertaining to musical-theatre troupes, royal arts legislation, box-office receipts and press notices, alongside the librettos, scores, production designs and, especially in France, the extensive pamphlet literature that opera historians usually deal with. Beyond its documentary richness, though, the book's contributions are analytical and historiographical. While the genre of opéra-comique has received quite a bit of attention from musicologists, Doe focuses on an under-recognized moment of institutional change that, she argues, helps explain some of the startling transformations the genre underwent in these decades.

Indeed, the 1762 merger of the Comédie-Italienne and the Opéra-Comique emerges in her account as a kind of hostile takeover, not unlike the 2010s absorption by Facebook (Meta) of Instagram, WhatsApp and other more popular platforms it perceived as threatening its market dominance. A modern corporate analogy is apt, despite important historical differences, because of the centrality of financial considerations in the institutional changes that the Opéra-Comique underwent in the 1760s. This decade was characterized by major financial and political crises generated by France's disastrous participation in the global imperial conflict that was the Seven Years War. I especially appreciate Doe's discussion of the domestic crises of the post-war period as factors in the institutional upheaval that she documents. The impact of France's wartime expenditures and losses is often underappreciated in histories of French opera, for understandable reasons. After all, the well-known mid-century *querelles* over opera stressed aesthetic matters, and when these debates hinted at political meanings they mainly spoke to domestic politics. Yet Doe's research contributes to a growing pile of evidence that the administrative logic behind opera production in Paris and at court responded to the consequences of French ambitions *outré-mer*, as well as to domestic aesthetic and political struggles. And let's not forget that Francophone opera, especially opéra-comique, thrived in colonial capitals as well as in continental European ones, as a wealth of recent research has begun to show. For example, a quick search of Julia Prest's excellent database *Theatre in Saint-Domingue, 1764–1791*, www.theatreinsaintdomingue.org, limiting the results to opéra-comique performances given at Port-au-Prince between 1764 and 1791, yields a grand total of 105.

Turning to the historiography of opera per se, Doe also revises the standard narrative of opéra-comique that casts it as almost the polar opposite of French lyric tragedy, or *tragédie en musique*, aesthetically and, by extension, politically. I share the author's dissatisfaction with the received wisdom that the *tragédie* was little more than an ideological prop for the monarchy, though it was also clearly that. She approaches this question from the perspective of opéra-comique's political significance, and she finds that the usual contrast drawn between the *tragédie* and the lighter, more popular and (most controversially, in her account) populist opéra-comique does not stand up to scrutiny. As support, she cites the increasing overlap in the 1770s and 1780s between the genres' subject matter, style and theatrical tone. This 'internal' evidence bolsters her claim that the institutional machinations of the 1760s effectively realigned the opéra-comique with royal priorities and aristocratic pleasures. In Doe's words, as the genre 'became increasingly fashionable in court circles, it frequently reflected the worldviews of the elite public that consumed it' (4).

Interestingly, this positions opéra-comique as more politically conservative than is often recognized and as having undergone more drastic transformations than I had realized, and I expect other

readers too will find much to think about in the light of these conclusions. Doe's use of 'dialogue opera' to refer to opéra-comique throughout the book tacitly distances the genre from its long-standing popular reputation by emphasizing formal features over socio-political ones. Demonstrating the partial conservatism of later opéra-comique, as Doe's study does, also calls into question another venerable commonplace of eighteenth-century opera: that opera reforms in France were ideologically aligned with the Enlightened social and political changes advocated by the *philosophes*. After all, the eighteenth century did not belong only to the *philosophes*, and neither, apparently, did the opéra-comique.

The overarching aim of Doe's revised story of the opéra-comique is to offer, in her words, a framework that can better 'match the nuance of the theatrical world it confronts'. Specifically, she hopes 'to temper the assumed polarities of opera comique and tragédie lyrique; to deepen our understanding of these genre's political functions; and to better capture the musical complexity, diversity, and contradictions of a society in the process of radical change' (216). I think the book she has created does achieve these goals, and I know my understanding of the opéra-comique, its social world and its political entanglements is much richer for it.

Olivia Bloechl is Professor of Music at the University of Pittsburgh, with research interests in European and colonial North American music history (1600–1800), French baroque opera and global music historiography. She is the author of *Native American Song at the Frontiers of Early Modern Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) and *Opera and the Political Imaginary in Old Regime France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), and co-editor, with Melanie Lowe and Jeffrey Kallberg, of *Rethinking Difference in Music Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). A trained pianist, she also enjoys dancing Argentinian tango and learning to play the lute.