



ACADÉMIE
DES BEAUX-ARTS
INSTITUT DE FRANCE



OPERA

AT THE CROSSROADS
OF THE ARTS

LA LETTRE DE L'ACADÉMIE
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Editorial

Opera is quintessentially the field in which all the disciplines of our Compagnie have found an expressive outlet. Whether it is a question of building an opera, of composing one, conducting its music, choreographing its ballets, staging it, designing its sets and costumes, filming it, photographing it, directing its administration and programme, studying it from a musicological point of view, editing and restoring its scores, all these skills are found within the Académie des Beaux-Arts. This total art has given rise to fascinating cross-reflection between our different sections. Librettists and singers used to be absent from this list, but we have since remedied this omission.

On 16 March 2022, as we were writing this 96th *Lettre de l'Académie des Beaux-Arts*, the Donetsk Regional Drama Theatre in Mariupol, Ukraine was bombed. This cultural landmark was then serving as a shelter for over 500 inhabitants. It was destroyed despite signs placed outside of it, and written in Russian, warning of the presence of many children inside. In all likelihood, the death toll will be atrocious.

When this appalling and absurd conflict is finally over and the time has come to rebuild this martyred city, we will use all our skills to participate in the rebirth of this theatre, which symbolizes both the best and the worst of mankind: the quest to elevate our spirits on the one hand and, on the other, the madness an unquenchable thirst for power can cause.

Laurent Petitgirard

Composer, conductor,

Permanent Secretary of the Académie des Beaux-Arts

Opposite: the theatre of Marioupol,
Ukraine, in June 2021.

Photo credit: Creative Commons / V1snyk



THIERRY MALANDAIN

On Wednesday 6 April 2022, Thierry Malandain, who had been elected to Seat n°1 of the choreography section on 24 April 2019, was installed at the Académie des Beaux-Arts by composer and permanent secretary of the Académie, Laurent Petitgirard. The ceremony was held under the Coupole of the Institut de France.

On this occasion, Jon Olascuaga (dance) and Xabi Etcheverry (violin) performed the “Vestris Gavotte”, as staged by Claude Iruretagoyena of the Maritzuli company. Arthur Barat performed Aurresku, a traditional dance from the Basque Country, accompanied by Sébastien Paulini on txistu and tambourine.

Dancer and choreographer Thierry Malandain was born in Petit-Quevilly (Seine-Maritime) in 1959. He studied classical ballet with Monique Le Dily, René Bon, Daniel Franck, Gilbert Mayer and Raymond Franchetti. From 1977 to 1986, he danced with the Opéra de Paris, the Ballet du Rhin and then the Ballet-Théâtre Français de Nancy. After winning several choreography competitions, he retired as a dancer to establish the Compagnie Temps Présent, along with eight of his friends, in the Parisian suburb of Élancourt. They subsequently moved to Saint-Étienne in 1991 as an “associated company” of the Esplanade Saint-Étienne Opéra. In 1998, the Ministry of Culture and the City of Biarritz invited him to found the CCN Malandain Ballet Biarritz, which was the first neo-classical National Choreographic Centre (CCN) in France. Over the last thirty years, Thierry Malandain has created over eighty choreographies in an aesthetic style that he describes as neo-classical: “My culture is that of classical ballet and I remain unapologetically attached to it. While I readily acknowledge that its artistic and social codes are from another era, I also think that this discipline, inherited from four centuries of history, gives dancers invaluable resources. So, I have fun with it. Some see my work as classical, others as contemporary; I’m simply looking for a type of dance that I love, that not only leaves the trace of pleasure but, as a response to the difficulty of being, can also reconnect with the essence of the sacred”. This unique creative approach has led his company to become one of the most prominent French companies, both domestically and internationally.

In 2016, to support the emergence of new talent, Thierry Malandain founded a competition for young ballet choreographers with the Opéra National de Bordeaux and the Opéra National du Rhin. The next edition will take place in July 2022 in Biarritz where, since 2009, he has also been artistic director for the festival Le Temps d’Aimer. – This festival, with a deliberately eclectic line up, presents multiple artistic expressions from around the world, ranging from classical ballets to contemporary, traditional, and urban dance.

Thierry Malandain cares deeply for transmission and emergence, which will underpin his work at the Académie, as will his wish to see the opportunity to dance extended to all and integrated into school curricula. Thierry Malandain has the honorary title of Officier in the Ordre National des Arts et des Lettres.



Excerpt from Laurent Petitgirard’s speech:

“Beyond your great aura as a choreographer, I believe you also owe your success to your commitment to a spirit of sharing, both in your artistic work and in the administrative organization of the troupe. You involve all the dancers in a collective adventure, protecting them not only during their career on stage, but also when the ever so delicate moment arrives for them to retire from it. This characteristic generosity of yours is as evident on stage as it is in your life. [...] Your passion for dance, your intimacy with the music, your tender care for dancers, for this life that is so tightly orchestrated and yet so unpredictable, whose constraints, drudgery and glories you know intimately; your determination to overcome all the financial and administrative obstacles that others would have pretended not to notice, your loyalty in friendship as well as in Art – all of this has given you a stature that has naturally become prominent in the world of dance, over which you float a breath of love and freedom.” ■

Centre: members of the Choreography section Blanca Li and Thierry Malandain, on either side of Didier Deschamps, correspondent of the Académie in this same section.

Photo credit: Patrick Rimond



To celebrate her first year as chairperson, Astrid de La Forest wished to launch the Rencontres de l’Académie, a series of panel discussions open to a broad audience.

“Our aim in inviting personalities from the world of art and culture is to familiarize the Académie with an audience of younger people who are not necessarily regulars at our establishment. The ‘Rencontres de l’Académie’ are broadcast live on our YouTube channel and invitations are widely distributed to art schools, to cultural venues, and on social media.

The first Rencontre took place on Wednesday, 9 February. It dealt with “Collections and collectors”, and featured Marin Karmitz and Antoine de Galbert, two collectors who are deeply involved in contemporary art and for whom a collection is above all an “oeuvre” and the adventure of a lifetime.

A large audience thoroughly enjoyed this discussion, which was hosted by art critic, author, exhibition curator and correspondent of our academy, Bernard Marcadé.

The second Rencontre, held on Wednesday, 11 May, focused on the theme “Platforms and art cinema”. Filmmakers and producers discussed the profound changes that cinema is currently undergoing. I chose to invite Agnès Jaoui and Coline Serreau, a member of our Académie, to discuss this topic. They are both “rebellious” and passionate women whose courage and commitment have contributed significantly to the influence of French cinema abroad. Along with them was scriptwriter and director Marc Fitoussi and producer Isabelle Madeleine, who has



been the chairperson of the Union of Film Producers (UPC) since 2020. Journalist, author, editor and radio and television producer Laure Adler hosted the event.

The third Rencontre was held on Wednesday, 22 June, on “Architecture, climate and landscape”. After the IPCC’s alarming 6th report and the current focus on climate risk prevention, we are looking at the profound upheaval that these changes are bringing about in the planning, landscaping and building of our cities. The panel brought together landscape architect Bas Smets, architect and member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts Anne Démians, architect Éric Daniel-Lacombe, who specializes in risk and flooding resulting from climate change, geographer and co-director of the École Normale Supérieure’s training centre on society and the environment Magali Reghezza-Zitt, and former architect and urban planner turned journalist and correspondent for our Académie, Philippe Trétiack.

In November, as part of the 15th edition of the Marc Ladreit de Lacharrière Photography Prize in partnership with the Académie des Beaux-Arts, a panel will be organized on the topic of documentary photography and photography in countries at war or under heavy censorship. Reporter Pascal Maitre, a specialist of Africa and Mali especially – and winner of the prize in 2020 –, will debate with other eminent international photographers who are specialists on other regions of the world such as Afghanistan and Venezuela.

Others will follow before the end of 2022, on diverse fascinating topics inspired by the different disciplines of our academy.” ■

Astrid de La Forest, Chairperson of the Académie

Above: the 9 February meeting took place in the Salle des Séances of the Institut de France. Astrid de La Forest, Antoine de Galbert, Bernard Marcadé and Marin Karmitz.

Centre: views of the meeting on 11 May, under the Coupole of the Institut de France, as Laure Adler gave a speech.

Photo credit: CmP / Juliette Agnel

Pavillon Comtesse de Caen – Palais de l’Institut de France

« ITINÉRANCE 2022 »

AN EXHIBITION OF ARTISTS AT THE CASA DE VELÁZQUEZ – ACADEMIE DE FRANCE IN MADRID

The group exhibition *Itinérance*, held at the Pavillon Comtesse de Caen of the Académie des Beaux-Arts from 20 January to 6 March, presented the works of the 2020-2021 resident artists at the Académie de France in Madrid, the artistic section of the Casa de Velázquez.

In September 2020 the 91st cohort of Académie de France artists arrived at the Casa de Velázquez in Madrid. For one year, fifteen artists from seven countries, working in ten disciplines, were enriched by the experience of the residency to strengthen their practice or explore new avenues. These fifteen voices were as promising as they were powerful. Throughout the year, the artists faced doubt and uncertainty on a daily basis. After the shock of an unprecedented health crisis and several months in lockdown, they individually and collectively experienced their adventure in Madrid as a constant challenge, a test of resilience and adaptability, as creating, moving around, and showing their work was never a given during that year.



The focus of the *Itinérance* exhibition was once again on the diversity of practices – painting, drawing, video, photography, architecture, and sound creation among others – and on the multitude of approaches and interests that brought Casa de Velázquez to life: environmental reflection on water and the exploitation of ores, questions related to social representations, (in)hospitality and memory, new feminism-focused visual conceptions, a renewed exploration of the concept of allegory or the reactivation of signs to generate new poetic forms, post-pandemic imaginaries, and so on.

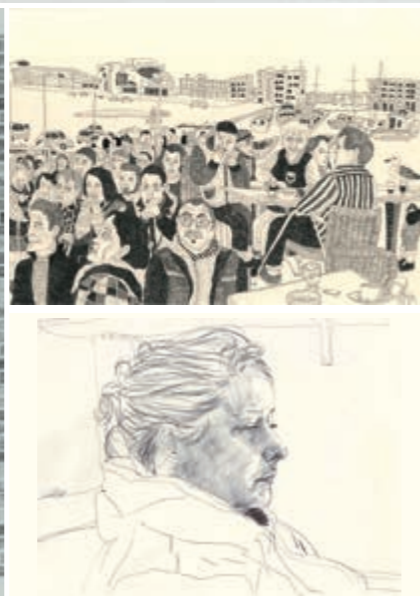
The 2020-2021 group was joined during this year of residency in Madrid by two scholarship holders, winners of the calls launched by the Diputación Provincial de Zaragoza and the Ayuntamiento de Valencia in collaboration with the Casa de Velázquez.

For eleven months, each of these artists was able to dedicate themselves fully to artistic creation and research, with their individual initial project proposals serving as a compass. The exhibition *Itinérance* presents the public with the fruit of these original projects and, sometimes, the ways in which some have veered away from them and cleared new paths over the months.

The exhibition presented the works of thirteen artists. All of them were members of the Académie de France in Madrid, the artistic section of the Casa de Velázquez, who had been rigorously selected among 250 applicants in the spring of 2020: Liza Ambrossio, Bianca Argimon, Laía Argüelles, Rudy Ayoun, Iván Castiñeiras, Julien Deprez, Guillaume Durrieu, Emma Dusong, Silvia Lerín, Francisco Ferro, Clara Marciano, Callisto Mc Nulty, Alessandra Monarcha Souza E Silva Fernandes, Adrian Schindler and Xie Lei. ■



Left: Liza Ambrossio, *Entropía*, 2021, photograph, 1.5 m. x 1 m.
 Top: Xie Lei, *Evanescent*, 2020, oil on canvas, 150 cm. x 190 cm.
 Above: Emma Dusong, *Los escondites*, looped video, 2021-2022.
 Opposite: Rudy Ayoun, *Vue d'atelier*, 2021-2021, oil on canvas, 195 x 130 cm.
 Left page: resident artists of Casa de Velázquez at the opening of the exhibition. They were welcomed by the Permanent Secretary, Laurent Petitgirard.
 Photo credit: Patrick Rimond



Top: Julien-Arnaud Corongiu, *C'est comme si je n'existais plus 2* (diptych), 2021, charcoal on paper, 76 x 56 cm.

Above: Violaine Desportes, *Peut-être (Fille derrière la fenêtre)*, 2021, ballpoint pen on cardboard, 18 x 24 cm.

Centre: Éléonore Joubrel, *Retour du marché*, fine felt pen on paper, 42 x 29.7 cm.

Yann Kebbi, *Julie 4*, 2017, black ballpoint pen on paper, 29.5 x 22 cm.

Right: Solène Rigou, *Boulevard d'Olonne*, 2021, graphite on marouflaged paper, 24 x 33.5 cm, © ADAGP, Paris.

Pavillon Comtesse de Caen - Palais de l'Institut de France

2022 PIERRE DAVID-WEILL-ACADÉMIE DES BEAUX-ARTS DRAWING PRIZE

From 24 March to 1 May, the Académie des Beaux-Arts exhibited some fifty works by the winners and finalists of the 2022 Pierre David-Weill – Académie des Beaux-Arts Drawing Prize at the Pavillon Comtesse de Caen. The prize was created in 1971 by former member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, Pierre David-Weill, to promote the practice of drawing as a fundamental act of artistic creation, among new generations of artists. It has been actively supported for over forty years by his son, fellow member of the Académie, Michel David-Weill.

This year's jury, composed of members of the painting, sculpture and printmaking sections of the Académie des Beaux-Arts – Jean Anguera, Pierre Collin, Érik Desmazières, Philippe Garel, Fabrice Hyber, Astrid de La Forest, Catherine Meurisse, Anne Poirier and Brigitte Terziev –, examined 74 pre-selected applications. The prizes were awarded respectively to Julien-Arnaud Corongiu (first prize, worth 8,000 euros), Solène Rigou (second prize, worth 4,000 euros) and Violaine Desportes (third prize, worth 2,000 euros). A distinction was furthermore awarded to each of the two artists Éléonore Joubrel and Yann Kebbi. The drawings of 33 other candidates were also selected by the jury to be exhibited.

Julien-Arnaud Corongiu (first prize), born in 1988, studied graphic design before entering the Beaux-Arts de Liège where he obtained a Master's degree in Plastic, Visual and Spatial Arts, majoring in painting, in 2018. He then joined the École Nationale Supérieure d'Art de Bourges. In his work, which is essentially centred around painting and drawing, he examines the themes of identity, exclusion, determinism and subjection.

Solène Rigou (second prize), born in 1996, lives and works in Paris. She is studying visual arts at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris. In her work, she stages memory and remembrance, using objects that she collects. The collections of the Beaux-Arts de Paris, Agnès b., and Bellier, among others, feature her works.

Violaine Desportes (third prize), born in 1987, studied Modern Literature at the ENS in Lyon. She graduated with a Master's degree in Comparative Literature and attended the Émile Cohl art school in Lyon, then taught visual arts in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region. A holder of the prestigious teaching qualification, the *Agrégation*, in plastic arts, she now teaches in Roubaix. As an assigned teacher for the FRAC in Dunkerque, she designs educational tools and runs training courses for fellow teachers.

Éléonore Joubrel, currently in her first year of a Master's degree in art and storytelling, entered the EESAB in Lorient after passing her technological baccalaureate in applied arts in 2018. Logbooks and drawn diaries are among her favourite media for working on themes from everyday life.

Yann Kebbi, born in 1987, studied at the École Estienne and then at the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, from which he graduated in the Printed Image section. Drawing is at the centre of his artistic practice. He occasionally works with the press (*New Yorker*, *M Le Monde*, *New York Times*, *Le Monde*), in addition to holding exhibitions and publishing books. Over the past year, he has been collaborating with the Fondation Cartier. ■

Musée Marmottan Monet

« LE THÉÂTRE DES ÉMOTIONS »

The Musée Marmottan Monet, a property of the Académie, is exhibiting almost eighty works, from the Middle Ages to the present day, from private collections and prestigious French and foreign museums. This exhibition, which ends on 21 August 2022, retraces the history of emotions and their pictorial expression from the 14th to the 21st century.

Emotion, with its “often intense reactions”, is systematically present in the visual arts, where it is worked on, tracked down, and considered from different angles. It even embodies most of their meaning, suggesting flesh and stimulating curiosity. All expressions are illustrated: from suffering to joy, from enthusiasm to terror, from pleasure to pain; the whole range is present in Louis-Léopold Boilly's *Thirty-five Heads of Expression* (circa 1825, Tourcoing, Musée Eugène Leroy), a repertoire of a theatre in which human sensitivity is exhibited and diversified. From the Middle Ages to the modern era, Dürer's *Melancholy* (1514, Paris, École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts), the aching of young hearts (Jeanne-Élisabeth Chaudet, *Jeune Fille pleurant sa colombe morte*, 1805, Arras, Musée des Beaux-Arts), the *Têtes d'expression* of the École Parisienne des Beaux-Arts or terror leading to madness, as Charles Louis Müller depicted it (*Rachel in Lady Macbeth*, Paris, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire du Judaïsme): all are manifestations of feelings that everybody can grasp and decipher instantly; their features, their clichés are eloquent. The recent sudden increase in the attention paid to psychological themes, traumas and affects, can but serve to bolster the legitimacy of an exhibition on emotions in the visual arts, with their diverse forms and degrees. The exhibition points towards an endless repertoire of affective resonances in our inner world, through their presence or absence, from mute medieval ivories to their screaming sublimation in Jean Fautrier's *Hostage Heads* (1945, Paris, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou).

Yet these nuances are of interest in a more precise and valuable way. They also reveal the variations these same emotions may have undergone over time, how their manifestations shift, how the attention paid to them or even sometimes the meaning given to them change. “Emotional” objects are strengthened, gazes are renewed, intensities differ, as do interpretations; physiognomies are differentiated and broken down more than ever in Boilly's or Daumier's work. Emotion then offers endless nuances, enriched and singularized by history. The exhibition renders the gradual construction of the Western psyche, the imperceptible unfolding of its representations over time, its hidden aspects, its ever more differentiated particularities.

The eight sections of the exhibition illustrate the artists' slow transcription of emotions, then its evolution over time, in the light of aesthetic and scientific reflection and successive events. The exhibition, the fruit of a joint endeavour by historian and philosophy professor Georges Vigarello and art historian Dominique Lobstein, takes a new look at these works by contextualizing their creation. ■

Musée Marmottan Monet | Until 21 August 2022



Above: Émile Friant, *Les Amoureux*, 1888, oil on canvas, 114 x 145 cm.

Nancy, Musée des Beaux-Arts. Photo credit: M. Bourguet

Left: Chevalier Féréol de Bonnemaïson, *Young Woman Overtaken by a Storm*,

ca. 1799, oil on canvas, 100 x 80.5 cm.

New York, Brooklyn Museum, gifted by Louis Thomas.

Photo credit: Brooklyn Museum

Opposite: André-Victor Devambez, *Les Incompris*, ca. 1904, oil on canvas, 91.7 x 115 cm.

Quimper, Musée des Beaux-Arts collection, Corentin-Guyho bequest, 1936©

Musée des Beaux-Arts de Quimper collection – Photo credit: mbaq



OPERA

AT THE CROSSROADS OF THE ARTS

Opera is often described as “total art”, and rightfully so, as it encompasses all the artistic disciplines: not only composition, music and singing, but also the arts of acting and dancing, painting, sculpting and, nowadays, even filmmaking. In opera, all of these arts are used to offer the audience an incredible journey into a world of dreams and fiction; not to mention the talent and commitment of the architect who designs and builds such a vessel, the intelligence of the director, and the intuition of those who create the programme and compile its repertoire. This all amounts to an entire world at the centre of which the voices of the singers burst forth and then blossom to bring us to the heart of the poem.

Performance of *Saint François d'Assise*, at the Opéra National de Paris, Palais Garnier (1983), musical composition and libretto by Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992), directed by Sandro Sequi.

Photo credit: Daniel Candé



COMPOSING AN OPERA

Interview with two members of the Music Composition section, **THIERRY ESCHAICH** and **LAURENT PETITGIRARD**, by Nadine Eghels

Laurent Petitgirard: What matters to me is composing the music while thinking about the libretto. I'm obsessed with intelligibility, because most of the time what is sung in a French opera isn't sufficiently understood. I therefore use a prosody with one syllable per note, which is very demanding for singers. My first opera was *Joseph Merrick, dit Elephant Man*, the second was *Guru*. I started by composing symphonic poems, always with an underlying theme. For my first opera I first thought of *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* and then of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, but finally I turned to *Elephant Man*, which was also set in Victorian England, and which dealt with the theme of exclusion. I then started to consider the structure of the story, which is essential, and chose to work with Eric Nonn, the librettist, for the quality of his writing. We wanted to move the audience from voyeurism to compassion and finally to identification. It was a fantastic experience. Once the opera was composed, a first production project at the Opéra-Comique failed to materialize. I realized that if I didn't want these three years of composition to remain on the shelf, I had to produce a recording, which I did with the Monte Carlo Philharmonic Orchestra and a magnificent cast that I had chosen myself. Only upon listening to the recording did the director of the Prague Opera offer his venue for the show to be produced. It was directed by Daniel Mesguich.



Top and right page: *Guru*, 2010, opera in three acts by Laurent Petitgirard, libretto by Xavier Maurel based on an original idea by the composer. Premiered at Castle Opera in Szczecin (Poland) in 2018.

Photo credit: M. Grotowski

Nadine Eghels: You have each composed several operas. What led you to this? What do you get out of it, compared to "usual" composition work? What are its particular challenges and joys?

Thierry Escaich: At a certain point I realized that I needed to draw on texts in order to compose symphonic music, for example. There was a kind of dramaturgy in my work, but I didn't really own it. I wasn't much of an opera goer, having been raised with cinema and theatre. About ten years ago, I created an opera libretto with Robert Badinter, based on *Claude Gueux*, Victor Hugo's short story about the death penalty. As we gave shape to this story together, I realized how vital this narrative construction work was to my music. I was already familiar with dramaturgical research work, but the opera allowed me to dive further into it. I then composed *Shirine*, based on a libretto that Atiq Rahimi had drawn from a 12th century Persian poem. This forced me

to renew my craft, as I discovered a fairy-tale world that was far removed from my first attempt at opera writing, and I had to integrate certain tones of Persian music into the piece. My third opera, called *Point d'orgue*, is quite recent. It is based on a libretto by Olivier Py, and is a kind of chamber opera. With only three characters, it is a continuation of Poulenc and Cocteau's monodrama, *La voix humaine*. That also brought about renewal in my work, as I entered Olivier Py's bustling world, embracing his desire to describe the inexorable sinking of the main character into a depressive darkness from which his lover and his wife try to extract him in a frenzy that is sometimes reminiscent of Feydeau's work. This mixture of sensuality, surrealism, biblical ranting and sadomasochism had me create a sort of musical "bipolar disorder"! So, three very different experiences. And each of them opened a new world up to me.

The French premiere took place in Nice. It was also produced in French again later, in Minneapolis.

For *Guru*, I wanted to tackle the theme of mental manipulation, based on the collective suicide of the Jim Jones sect on the one hand and, on the other, on the Solar Temple tragedy. Playwright Xavier Maurel wrote the libretto according to the outline I proposed. I had in mind a character who resisted the guru's mental manipulation: madness was singing, and the only character who resisted spoke – but did so rhythmically, so that the duets with the singers worked. Again, production concerns finally led me to record *Guru* in 2010 before it could be staged. Eight years later, in 2018, and after a great many more tribulations, an opera house in Poland committed to produce it. It took a lot of energy for these two operas to exist, at the expense of other works, and I invested heavily in them, at a loss.



I have a third opera in the pipeline, based on the script of Xavier Gianolli's film, *L'apparition*, set in a small French provincial town, where a young woman claims to have seen the Virgin Mary, which upsets everybody. It's a very beautiful subject and he's agreed that I should write it, but I won't start working on it until production is guaranteed. Opera directors need to be involved in a project from the start; they themselves need to think about the subject, the librettist, the composer, and the conductor. When I come to them with something that is already very precisely constructed, it deprives them of a form of initiative.

T.E.: I was in contact with the former General Manager of the Lyon Opera, Serge Dorny, who for years had wanted to see me take the step of writing an opera, and we'd spoken about some potential subjects. For example, I suggested Koltès' *Roberto Zucco*, a fiery, hallucinatory play, but he wasn't keen. He had other suggestions, of undeniable literary interest, of course, but that I didn't necessarily see myself transposing to an opera. Then came the idea of the death penalty, with Robert Badinter. He insisted and I finally accepted, albeit with a few caveats. The story of Claude Gueux is strong and symbolic but I didn't see what I could do musically with the first version of the libretto. We decided to work together on writing a libretto. As Robert often told me, this opera was a first for both of us and we were discovering issues as they arose! This dialogue with Badinter



Above: *Joseph Merrick dit Elephant Man*, opera in four acts by Laurent Petitgirard, libretto by Éric Nonn, 2001. Premiered at the Prague Opera in 2002. Photo credit: Ville de Nice

Right page: *Claude*, opera by Thierry Escaich, libretto by Robert Badinter after Victor Hugo, directed by Olivier Py. Premiered at the Opéra de Lyon in 2013.

Photo credit: Bertrand Stofleth

lasted two years. I needed poetry in the writing. We looked for it in *Les Contemplations* and in *La Légende des Siècles...* The result is a mixture between Hugo's short story, the libretto of a former Minister of Justice who wanted to keep a real crudeness in his writing to better describe the inhumanity of prison conditions, Hugo's works of poetry, and also certain ideas that I had already had for *Roberto Zucco*, which I reintegrated. These poetic ideas were necessary to inspire me, and it was exciting to make them coincide with the story. The last intervention was the director's, for we needed someone who would understand our approach and not try to fight it. We were fortunate: Olivier Py was dedicated to our project and designed a production that was at once personal, effective, and perfectly adapted to the project's general philosophy.

N.E.: Where does an opera composer's desire come from? From the music, or perhaps from the libretto?

L.P.: They coexist. When I think of a subject, the first thing that defines the music is the setting. I envision *L'apparition* as a more humble opera in terms of the orchestra, with choirs and an extremely pure female voice for this young girl. When considering a subject, I know exactly what the voices of the different characters are, who is soprano, mezzo, bass or tenor. One must never forget that voice is the foundation of opera. Composing an opera is about putting it forward. Some musical languages are so far removed from the human voice that opera is impossible for them. As I mostly compose by thinking thematically, opera is an almost natural means of expression for me. It is the encounter between a form that is mine and the contemporary tonal music in which it is embedded.



The risk with composing an opera is that after such an exciting adventure, involving a long period of musical composition for a programme, one may sometimes find it hard to write a "mere" concerto. And opera requires a long commitment, which may seem excessive when compared to "usual" compositions. But once you've tasted this intensity you don't forget it – and I especially can't, as in my case it comes with the joy of directing the creation and thus staying in control of my work until the end.

N.E.: And you, Thierry Escaich, when a libretto is submitted to you, do you first engage with it through a musical impulse?

T.E.: Yes, that's what happened with Atiq Rahimi, the writing was quite gradual and we created practically everything together. I composed the music with a slight delay, but I was present when



he wrote, and Serge Dorny often was too, as he had called for this project and supported it, and he wanted to remain closely associated with it. We formed a trio. As soon as I heard Atiq's writing read out loud, I knew what I wanted to do with it, not only the voices that would sing it, but the type of atmosphere I was going to create, and how I was going to operate transitions from one scene to the next. What I want to do is sketch out the broader musical form from the beginning, to feel it while the text is being written, with its different stages of evolution, its surprises, its dramatic node. So at certain points I asked him to add or remove parts of the text. Atiq's penmanship is a magnificent weaving of oxymorons and illuminations. But there is an episode in the poem that takes place on a mountain top, where time seems to be suspended and a secondary, symbolic, and ethereal love story takes place. At that point, instead of these long, ornamented verses, I just wanted essential words interspersed with silences, the kind that Duras might have written, in a sense. I needed a break in language. I wrote it because I could already hear the haunting, bewitching chords that would be interspersed throughout this scene and only I knew what words to put on it to match that rhythm. Atiq then integrated it. During the year of this team-writing process, I monopolized the story, so to speak, going so far as to remove characters for better dramaturgical readability if necessary, or to modify and shape such or such other character to accentuate their ambiguity and psychological depth, even if this meant going beyond the myth's original frame. I need characters that are both consistent and nuanced and, through an interval or a change in harmony, my music will depict doubt suddenly traversing them. This densification of characters is the wellspring of a composer's inspiration.

N.E.: For you, Laurent Petitgirard, don't writing and composition happen simultaneously?

L.P.: I start composing as soon as the libretto, or at least one of its acts, is written. An unavoidable musical form may appear, to which the libretto may not be adapted. So, I come up with a text that matches the music and ask the librettist to replace my words with their own. In *Guru*, the character of Marie – an actress' role – resists the guru, speaks, refusing to sing. But at the end, all of a sudden she starts singing to make it look as if she is surrendering. My wife Sonia Petrovna played her – and did so remarkably well.

N.E.: Is it sometimes complicated to collaborate with librettists?

L.P.: Complications can arise from the librettist's necessarily humble posture. They are at the service of the music, its composition and its execution. Their work is far less time-consuming and committed than that of the composer, who has to create an orchestral score. Librettists always write too much and must understand that while a sung text inevitably loses intelligibility, it can also become more meaningful, so there is much to be gained in concision.



Illustration: *Shirine*, an opera in twelve scenes by Thierry Escaich, libretto by Atiq Rahimi. Premiered at the Opéra de Lyon in May 2022. Photo credit: Jean-Louis Fernandez



N.E.: New technologies, and video especially, are now all over theatre and opera stages. Do you have to take this into account when composing?

T.E.: Opera has always evolved with the times. At first it became more theatrical. After the 20th century and the development of cinema, opera took on a more cinematographic rhythm in the sequence of scenes. The use of images or video is more important on the director's side. But we composers are more inclined to imagine mises en abyme or spatial or temporal shifts, as we know that it will be possible to represent them on stage. In *Claude Gueux* or *Shirine*, for example, I used rotating sounds because I wanted the audience to be caught up in it, to spatialize the choirs, often with the goal of creating two levels of reading: what was happening on stage, but also a more philosophical reading of the narrative level. Let's not forget that opera is total art, all arts must feature in it. Vocality will always remain at the centre of it. But several types of vocality can now find a place in it, and among them, for instance, rhythmic phrasing or declamation. Working with Olivier Py has sometimes led me towards a style drawn from Bel Canto. His alexandrines and the sweet folly of his text led me to push the vocality into a more Mozartian style, closer to 19th century forms than what *Claude* had allowed me to experiment with. In some contemporary operas there are rhythmic recitations that are very relevant... We can mix different types of vocality, nothing is precluded – as long as we keep our singers singing! ■

GENERAL MANAGER OF THE OPERA ... A DELIGHTFUL CHALLENGE?

By **HUGUES R. GALL**, of the Free Members section, former director of the Grand Théâtre de Genève (1980-1995) and of the Opéra National de Paris (1995-2004)

If opera is to be defined as a "total work of art", one has to say that the "profession" – for it is one – of directing a theatre with the mission of both producing masterpieces from its repertoire, at the highest level and for the greatest number of people, and enriching this repertoire with new creations, is quite a challenge!

Yet there are hundreds of functioning opera houses in the world, all of which have found enthusiasts who are crazy enough to do the job, and even to do it quite well in some cases! Each theatre has its own history, each opera house has its own traditions, its own resources, its own audience; they are rooted in the fertile soil of interweaving rules, customs and requirements that vary according to countries and policies.

Each General Manager of an opera arrives with their experience, passions, tastes, sometimes convictions and... ego. Throughout the ages and depending on the country, their role and even their title have varied widely. They have in turn been a composer, a singer, a conductor, an impresario, a doctor, a decorator, a journalist, a playwright or even simply an ambitious man, one that is fond of power and spotlights, and gifted when it comes to intrigue.

Many of them have left memoirs, some of which delight musicologists and enthusiasts alike. The only ones who deserve to be studied, in my opinion, are those who worked with the great creators of their time: Gatti-Casazza, who moved from La Scala to the Metropolitan Opera, with Puccini, Caruso and Toscanini; Sir David Webster who built the new Royal Opera House at Covent Garden with Sir George Solti and Dame Ninette de Valois; and, for Paris, Jacques Rouché and Rolf Liebermann who re-founded the Opera de Paris, in their own way.

From their many diverse and often disenchanted testimonies, a few principles emerge which should apply to all directors.

- First, a vision of the meaning of their mission, of the role of their theatre in society at their time in its history.

- A passion for music and a real knowledge of the operatic, symphonic and choreographic repertoire. In this respect, there's no harm in knowing how to read a score!

- Open curiosity and readiness to take risks by betting on new talent. In this respect, although he was not an opera General Manager *per se*, the unsurpassed example is Serge de Diaghilev.

- Inherent dramaturgical skills and inspiration for the work they wish to stage. This is what dictates the choice of director and set designer, and of the conductor with whom to bring together the cast according to the artists they know and who are available.

Some works, more than others, depend on a single performer: no *Elektra*, no *Turandot*, no *Lulu*, no *Siegfried*, no *Brunhilde* or *Traviata*? We're putting on another work!

- A sure ear trained by long exposure to live performances and artists, because recordings are no substitute for a live experience!

- In a prominent opera staging major works, a casting director is essential, but the final say does remain with the opera's General Manager.

- The General Manager must also have a view of all the areas at play in the production of their shows: artistic, technical, administrative services, human resources management, commercial management, public relations, etc.

It is agreed that no hierarchy should be established between them, but it would be hypocritical not to give pride of place to the artistic masses – starting with the quality of the orchestra on which everything rests! To the choir director too, of course, and to the corps de ballet; hence the importance of choosing the



right musical director, conductors, head of choirs and head of the Dance department. Without forgetting the vocal coaches on whom so much depends!

A total work of art, you say? This includes the sets, complex works of art created in workshops by a hundred different artists: carpenters, sculptors, painters, stucco experts, gilders, seamstresses, wigmakers, make-up artists, etcetera, under the direction of highly qualified technical managers. Before approving and costing the models that reflect the set design developed by the production team they have assembled (director, choreographer, set and costume designer, lighting designer), the opera director must ensure that the conductor has also been involved in the project. This requirement is not always observed, which often leads to drama during rehearsals – in which the opera General Manager then has to arbitrate.

All of the seasons planned (often 4 or 5 years in advance) must

form a harmonious whole, where past, present and contemporary creations are balanced and illustrated within the most varied spectrum. Eclecticism is the order of the day!

All of the opera's activities are reflected in a restrictive annual budget, which is drawn up and updated by the Financial Manager under the General Manager's supervision, and then submitted for approval to a board that includes the opera house's supervisory bodies. Every artistic decision has economic – and often social and political – consequences.

The structure briefly described here implies an essential condition: loyalty and above all trust.

This trust is essential, and the director is accountable for it.

Trust between the Institution and its supervisory authorities.

Trust between management, staff and their representatives.

Trust between management, artists, their representatives: one's word is binding!

Trust with audiences, based on maintaining the quality of each performance and the regularity of performances.

Trust also relies on a reasonable pricing policy and on the widest possible opening to new audiences.

Some opera directors place the greatest importance on their relations with the press – and who could blame them? They have an enviable talent... Yet this raises the question of whether to programme according to the expectations of certain "influencers" who, knowing themselves to be read by a management caste whose judgement is often hesitant, are imbued with their own importance.

This conception of the role of the opera director is admirably summed up in these lines, which I am shamelessly borrowing from the First Dancer of his time:

"Princes who have good intentions and some knowledge of their affairs, either by experience or by study, and great application to making themselves capable, find so many different ways in which they can make themselves known, that they must show particular care, and universal application to everything.

The profession of King is great, noble and delightful, for one who feels worthy of fulfilling all the things to which it commits him, but it is not free from pain, fatigue and worry. Uncertainty sometimes makes one despair, and when one has spent a reasonable amount of time examining a matter, one must determine to take the course one believes to be the best."

(Reflexions on the profession of a king in *Mémoires de Louis XIV, le métier de roi*, presented and annotated by Jean Longnon, Paris, Tallandier, collection "Relire l'histoire", 2001, pp. 279-280). ■

Illustration: costume for the ballet *La Nuit* performed at the Court in 1653, in which Louis XIV appeared dressed as the sun.
Anonymous author, watercolour, graphite, wash, embellished with gold.
Bibliothèque Nationale de France / Gallica

REDISCOVERING TRAGÉDIE-LYRIQUE: A FRENCH ADVENTURE

By **WILLIAM CHRISTIE**, of the Free Members section, harpsichordist and conductor

There is not a single opera house in France today that does not include a baroque opera in its musical season. Monteverdi, Handel, Lully, Purcell, and Rameau are familiar names to the music-loving public. But this has not always been the case – far from it, actually. When I founded my ensemble *Les Arts Florissants* in 1979, these same opera houses were more than reluctant to present anything from the “pre-Mozartian” repertoire, especially lyrical tragedies, opera ballets, pastorales or lyrical comedies by French composers. So, you might ask, how did such a turnaround happen? How did what I would characterize as one of the most important musical events of the late 20th century, the rediscovery of Baroque music and especially of *tragédie-lyrique* in France, come about?

Come to think of it, what is *tragédie-lyrique* anyway? Quite simply, it is the most complete and important musical and theatrical form from the period of Louis XIV’s reign – one that was invented by the king himself. Let us not forget that, throughout the 17th century, theatre was considered one of the most prized, most advanced forms of French culture. The French language was then at its peak – and fascination for this topic has been at the heart of *Les Arts Florissants* from the outset. It served as a model of eloquence, refinement, beauty and understanding for the whole world, and was the envy of all the other royal courts of Europe. It inspired the likes of Racine, Corneille, Molière and Quinault. *Tragédie-lyrique* was born in those days, a testimony to a perfect synthesis between classical theatre and musical recitative, which Lully had brought back from Italy. And it was the king, with Lully’s help, who brought about this brilliant synthesis by combining the musicality of the tongue with music. All the richness of the Italian continuo was thus combined with the beauty of French classical theatre. I consider *tragédie-lyrique* to be a near perfect form. I am moved by the pleasure I get from listening to this extraordinary balance of words and music, and my aim is to share it with a growing audience.

Yet, after the death of the Sun King, these plays were forgotten for several centuries. It took over 300 years for one of Lully’s most glorious *tragédie lyrique* to be revived. This was *Atys* which, during the lifetime of Louis XIV, was known as “the king’s tragedy” or “the king’s opera”.

The re-creation of *Atys* in 1987 was a turning point. And I can say in all modesty that my ensemble *Les Arts Florissants* contributed greatly to this rediscovery. In 1985, then director of

the Paris Opera, Massimo Bogianckino called on me to work on a vast project: to recreate *Atys*, to celebrate the tercentenary of Lully’s death. For an institution such as the Paris Opera, this was a completely new undertaking, which suddenly highlighted the work of a handful of musicians, musicologists and passionate researchers who had been working on this almost unheard-of material for several decades. For me, it was the opportunity of a lifetime. Imagine this: recreating a work that had not been performed since it premiered in 1676, while Louis XIV was alive! With my *Ensemble Les Arts Florissants*, we therefore made the best of our fifteen years of research and interpretation work to bring *Atys* back to life.

But we weren’t alone; for this resurrection to happen, we needed help on the theatre side. Jean-Marie Villégier provided it. He became my adviser, my inspiration and, in a way, my catalyst to deepen the relationship between words and music. This would lead to years of discoveries and creations together, the most spectacular of which was certainly the production of *Atys*, on which we both worked with dance historian and choreographer Francine Lancelot. Thanks to all this glorious collaboration, we were able to reveal the musical and theatrical greatness of these forgotten and unappreciated works to French and foreign audiences.

What were the ingredients for this rediscovery? First and foremost, of course, the work of musicologists and the historically informed interpretation of a new generation of musicians. In-depth exploration was necessary, not only into the vocal techniques of the time, but also declamation, pronunciation, embellishment; in a word, the whole rhetoric that accompanies singing from centuries ago. Baroque music is entirely driven by a

Left and next pages: views of the performances, at the Opéra Comique in Paris, of the opera *Atys* by Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632-1687). 1986 production by the choir and orchestra *Les Arts Florissants*. Musical director William Christie, stage director Jean-Marie Villégier, choreography Francine Lancelot. Photo credit: Michel Szabo - Les Arts Florissants



desire to communicate, an art of touching and convincing, which finds its most accomplished form in dramatic music. The libretto plays an essential role in this, in sublime concert with the recitative and orchestrated parts.

In the Baroque period, the *tragédie-lyrique* had a very specific form: a prologue followed by five acts, in which the recitative took precedence. In the hands of someone who is not specialized, this prominence of the recitative constitutes a major obstacle, as it is misunderstood and denied the treatment it deserved. To be appealing, the recitative must be entrusted to an ensemble of continuo players, instrumentalists capable of improvising on a figured bass.

The same applies to the voices. The singer must be given specific preparation to tackle these works; in addition to the preliminary work on the score and its context of creation, there are theatrical and linguistic requirements, as pronunciation and diction must be

impeccable. This issue of phrasing and articulation may seem very technical, very boring, but one cannot understand this music or share it with today's audiences without paying attention to it. It also requires a certain type of voice. Are we looking for the same kind of voices as for an opera by Verdi or Puccini? Obviously not. The demands of 19th century opera, with its huge orchestras, placed the question of volume at the heart of singers' education, thus creating a regrettable form of standardization of voices. But the music in question here does not have the same needs at all. A baroque orchestra is never made up of more than a handful of musicians, with a predominance of continuo. Volume is therefore not the primary requirement and, instead, flexibility, tone, subtle modulation – in a word, expressiveness – take precedence. And therefore emotion.

I believe that this is precisely what made *Atys* such an event. This production was a revelation for the audience, permanently

transforming their perception of *tragédie-lyrique*, and more broadly of baroque music. In France, prior to *Atys*, it was very rare to hear *tragédie-lyrique* performed by specialists – and generally the few performances that were given were boring. What a difference it made when audiences rediscovered Lully's music with historically informed performers who were able to convey all the subtleties of the score!

The success of *Atys* paved the way for a whole movement towards a rediscovery of *tragédie-lyrique*. These glorious works of the baroque repertoire, which may well be those that have the most to say to today's audience, have thus finally found their eloquence, their voice, again.

In conclusion, I would say that this adventure has convinced me of one thing: success is guaranteed to those who observe the musicological and artistic requirements of a work by studying it in context. But this is a fragile type of music, because producing it with materials and methods designed later, for pieces from the 19th or 20th centuries, will inevitably lead to failure. Older instruments are of the essence, to render the style required by the vocal customs of the time.

The appeal of this whole universe also lies in its capacity to make us dream. *Tragédie-lyrique* and operas with machines offer an all-encompassing show in which audiences meet with marvellous fairy-tale imaginaries and intense dramatic situations. Baroque dramatic music seeks above all to entertain. And in many ways, the world we live in has the same needs as the world of the 17th and 18th centuries. In the 21st century, we need to entertain ourselves in the face of a disorienting world, one that baffles us and which we understand only through hypotheses or terrifying

certainties. Baroque music offers us the image of a world made of surprises, enigmas, metamorphoses... which removes us from the uniformity into which our society plunges us.

The demand for historical accuracy must always serve a goal anchored in the present: to give its spontaneity, grace, and freshness back to theatrical production so that the listener experiences a new musicality, a new sound, every time. For me, being "baroque" does not simply mean being part of a repertoire from the past. It is above all a state of mind, the "Baroque spirit", which fosters an intellectual attitude, a philosophy with regard to our musical heritage as a whole. ■



DIRECTING, FROM CINEMA TO OPERA

By **COLINE SERREAU**, member of the Cinema and Audiovisual section

To write this text on directing operas, I will have to talk about my personal experience, my way of working. Other directors proceed differently, there are as many methods as there are creators; we are manufacturers of prototypes and our biodiversity is fertile.

The basic difference between directing an opera and directing a film or a play is that opera does not leave you in control of the time sequence of the work. You can, in agreement with the musical director, speed up or slow down the tempi – which can be of some dramaturgical importance – but you cannot change temporal relationships within the score. Being accustomed to freely playing with time, be it during the writing, shooting, editing or stage performance, a film or theatre director can experience this as a source of frustration. And yet this additional constraint, in a profession that already has many, can lead directors to make some rich discoveries.

For me, work on an opera begins with an in-depth study of the piano-vocal score, and then of the complete orchestral score, to make direct contact with the raw material, the source that will feed the stage translation of the work, before any interpretation begins.

I then gather the most exhaustive body of documents possible on the composer, the author of the libretto, the work from which it is adapted, and the artistic and political history of the period in which it was composed. I read a lot, immerse myself in the social issues of the time, and dig for lesser-known documents that reveal interesting details of the composer's life, because their works reflect the emotions and traumas experienced by the artists as much as they do their involvement in the artistic and political currents of their time. It is like a rebus, the start of a meticulous investigation. This gives me ideas to go beyond convention and leads me to an interpretation that is faithful to the deep spirit of the work but must also reach contemporary audiences.

Of course, this research is carried out through each director's personal lens, a lens that I, for one, am very open about, because I too am creating a work and what I discover in my readings

determines some very concrete staging choices I make. For example, why did Rossini describe an overworked Figaro with such pathos? In the middle of his first grand aria, he begs to be left in peace: *"Uno alla volta, uno alla volta, per carità!"* (One at a time, one at a time, mercy!). Is Rossini talking about Figaro, the *"factotum della città"* (the city's handyman), or about himself? Was he being harassed by his patrons too? In 1816, the year of the *Barber's* premiere, Rossini was 24 years old, and this was already the seventeenth opera he had composed! Could Figaro's – or Rossini's – exhaustion, so plainly expressed in this aria, be a premonitory explanation for the composer's retirement at the age of 38 and the silence he shut himself up into until his death, after composing forty operas in twenty years? These questions are not only of concern to music historians, they translate directly to the way the role of Figaro is played and the implications that its interpreter should bear in mind. Either one plays a good-humoured Figaro, one that lacks any depth, or one plays a tragi-comic man struggling through life, working his health away in pursuit of a rise in his social status.

Rosine's journey towards freedom is also embodied visually. I wanted the sets to move towards stage right (to the left of the audience), symbolising the origin, while Rosine, on the contrary, always progresses towards stage left, symbolising her exit from

childhood, from the bosom, towards a social life and encounters with the others.

For the first act I wanted a desert, a prison caravanserai in a dead environment. The second set is also cold, only in blues and whites, like Rosine's icy emotional life. And the cold setting disappears on stage right to make way for the warm, red and gold world of Bartholo's salon, the set of her fiery love encounter with Almaviva, disguised as a music master. And when Rosine thinks she has been betrayed by her lover, she destroys this set during the beautiful orchestral page *"Temporale"* (storm), which describes the character's inner chaos. We then return to the desert of the beginning, but when the lovers are finally able to reunite, lush palm trees rise from the ground and the desert becomes a garden, a palm grove.

Another character in Rossini's *Barber* gives food for thought: how to play Bartholo, Rosine's abusive father? As a bumbling old fool, or as a man truly in love who sees his patriarchal authority crumble, and who can no longer contain the inexorable tide of women's desire for freedom? Bartholo is neither stupid nor guilty; he has ticked all the boxes of his society's codes of propriety. He is well within his rights, yet he has got it all wrong and loses everything. He belongs to a world that is collapsing, whose upheavals he has not been able to anticipate, and that will crush



Above and on the following pages: performances at the Opéra National de Paris in 2002 of *The Barber of Seville*, an opera by Gioacchino Rossini, libretto by Cesare Sterbini after the comedy by Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais. Directed by Coline Serreau, sets by Jean-Marc Stehlé and Antoine Fontaine, costumes by Elsa Pavanel, musical direction by Bruno Campanella and Fabio Luisi. Orchestra and chorus of the Opéra National de Paris.

Photo credit: DR / Opéra National de Paris



Opposite: Act 1, Figaro and Rosina on the patio of Bartholo's house.

Below: sketches of the costumes created by Elsa Pavanel.

Photo credit: DR / Opéra National de Paris

him. The singer must understand the character's distress, defend his humanity in spite of his apparent stupidity, and portray his dreadful destiny, which is as tragic as it is comical. And here again the music guides us: when Bartholo lectures Rosine in the aria "A un dottor della mia sorte" ("To a doctor of my class"), the old man suddenly goes half mad, choking on his yells of, "Si si si si si si, I'll lock you up and even the air won't come in through the door", a desperate assertion of his ownership over a body that is evading him, of an authority that is withering away in his own house.

One of the most difficult things to achieve in opera is to motivate singers to challenge the conventions they have learned in training. Career opera singers have difficult lives: they travel constantly, are at the mercy of the slightest cold or hoarseness, and have to deal with different conductors and directors at every new production, which challenges their routine. In singing schools, they are taught vocal techniques and amplification, but they also have to cram in the many roles in the repertoire that correspond to their tessitura, in order to become bankable for opera houses around the world. It is a colossal task. They are rigidly trained to this end, they are taught traditions that have been established once and for all, and vocal work largely takes precedence over acting work. They

were told that Figaro is a friendly and funny boaster, Bartholo a ridiculous buffoon, Rosina a cunning coquette and Berta a bitter old woman. Singers usually stick to these clichés which, being devoid of any analysis of social relationships or gender conflicts, are often course and lack humanity. This obedience to convention prevents them from searching for emotional material within themselves to build a rich, new character. They stay in their comfort zone, focusing only on their voice, to make it as loud as possible and as bright as possible, in order to get the most noise from the audience when the time comes to bow. Some singers present abysmal emptiness to their audience, it can sometimes be really pathetic to see. As George Sand wrote in her admirable novel *Consuelo*, which recounts the life of a genius singer modelled after Pauline Viardot: if you present the audience with glass jewels, it will behave as a "good girl" and accept them, and might even make them a success. But if a diamond appears, then this same audience is transformed, and suddenly subjugated, overwhelmed; it recognizes the value of a true artist. It can no longer stand the glassware, which seems to melt away like snow in the sun as it must make way. Confronted with great talent, the audience's taste is refined, and admiration and love burst forth and sweep away mediocrity.



Back to opera singers, not only do many of them cling to the clichés they have been force-fed in schools, but they are also extremely unsettled if you ask them to portray their character differently. And since in opera, unlike in film or theatre, singers are not hired by the director, for management is in charge of casting, they are more prone to bow to the management's whims than to those of the director. Hence, if the director asks them to change their habits or questions the conception of a role that they have successfully performed dozens of times all over the world, they resist, sometimes vehemently. Our role as directors is however to get a camel through the eye of a needle, so we have to be patient and cunning to get what we want from the singers. It's not the most fun part of staging in opera and you often only get a small percentage of what you would have liked to achieve in terms of acting, but sometimes you get wonderful surprises, you meet enthusiastic young singers who happily take the lemons you hand them and make lemonade. I had an unforgettable experience with Joyce di Donato, who was still very young and debuting as Rosine. With her, an extraordinary singer and yet such a humble person, we built a new character, a Rosine who was sincere, profound, in love with freedom, intelligent, funny and sensual. It's one of my fondest memories of directing.

Then there is the choir. Out of respect, they should be addressed not as "the choir", but as "ladies and gentlemen, the chorus artists". This union demand to call them artists is quite legitimate: these singers work all day long either in musical rehearsals or on stage, do incessant costume fittings, go through the Bastille Opera and its thousands of doors without respite, and have to sing everything by heart on stage, even the most complex scores. Their voices are often tired and their hopes of becoming soloists have vanished with their youth. Some of them have capitulated and are hiding in the background, determined to shamelessly slack off. Yet most of them, if treated with the respect they deserve, are admirable; they want to be given "things to do, to play", they are thirsty for artistic nourishment, because they remain unconditional music lovers. These are the ones I have always relied on, and my sincere respect, my desire to involve them in my vision of the work, has allowed me to take them on the wildest adventures.

On the other hand, one of the things you absolutely have to understand if you want to stage an opera is the notion of "breaks". In the motion picture and theatre industries we don't have "breaks". We have tables with refreshments and actors can wait in their dressing rooms when they're not shooting or rehearsing. There's a vague mini break around 4.30pm for the crew when you're shooting non-stop for a whole day, but basically you're working flat out for seven hours. At the opera, there are breaks. Each trade has its own break, and they vary in length and frequency. There's a break for pianists and conductors, a break for the props crew, stagehands and dressers, a break for the soloists, one for the chorus, one for the "mimes" (or extras) and, when rehearsing with the orchestra, a break for the instrumentalists. Furthermore, the time choir artists spend getting

into and out of rehearsal costumes is deducted from their working time. This means that on a three-hour shift, you generally have only a little under two hours of actual rehearsal time.

That issue can't be solved; the unions are powerful. The director should therefore not consider rehearsal time as a time for creation, but as a time to put in place what had been planned beforehand, at full speed. Just like in cinema, you have to come to the rehearsal with everything in mind, and to know who's doing what in every bar of the score. When there are fifty chorus artists, twenty or so "mimes", ten or so soloists, and the clock is ticking, it can be somewhat intense. As a film director once said: directing can be like trying to write *War and Peace* in a bumper car in an amusement park. It's the same with opera. But you manage.

For sets and costumes, the work is more or less the same as in a cinema or theatre production, except for the constraints of alternation. The Opéra Bastille has extraordinary stage spaces and equipment, except that most of the time you have to make do with a few poles for the lights and always adjust your schedules to the sets of other productions, which are often monumental, and which have to move at the same time as yours for rehearsals, performances and dress rehearsals.

At the Opéra Bastille, the costume department is about three kilometres, two lifts and five opportunities to get lost from the rehearsal space. When the whole cast has to go and try on their costumes, that tends to cut into your meagre rehearsal time even more. And that's the charm of modern theatres, built by ingenious engineers who know everything about nothing and nothing about what counts, namely how to optimize the artists' working conditions. As an actress on tour in state-of-the-art theatres, I have had to open and close seven doors between my dressing room and the stage. In such cases, you better not have forgotten a part of your costume in your dressing room before going on stage!

And then there's the relationship with the conductor. In cinema and theatre, the director is the boss. Being a boss has never been a passion of mine, but being able to materialize a vision, an aesthetic and societal conception, with the invaluable contribution of the artists around me, being the guide and leading the project to its realization, is indeed my passion. That's my job, and I'm the one who directs the company from A to Z. But only during working hours. At 7.30 p.m., I'm no longer the head of anything, I'm back to being Jane Doe, and what a relief! In the opera, the conductor is the boss of the musical part of the work. They too have their own conception of the work, and have a hand in the tempi, the dynamics and the musical atmosphere of each scene. What if our wishes clash? As a musician and choral conductor myself, I can discuss music in technical terms with the conductor, but will they listen to me? Fortunately, I was very spoiled in my experiences at the Opéra Bastille. First of all, with the brilliant conductor Armin Jordan, for Strauss's *The Bat*, which he considered not as an operetta but as a masterpiece worthy of Mozart. I got on well with Armin because he understood that I wanted my staging to serve the music instead of using it. He conducted with such sensitivity, such life, and such freedom! The musicians of the orchestra, who are not tender-hearted, would have followed him to hell's end.

Opposite: Act 1, the desert and the prison, the Count and Figaro.

Photo credit: DR / Opéra National de Paris



For the *Barber*, during the ten years that the show was performed, I have had either impeccable and unmovable craftsmen, or directors which the musicians of the orchestra somewhat unfairly called "dopes", or others who have never bothered me, with whom I've always got on well, because my staging almost choreographically stuck to the music.

This is what I can say briefly about my experience as an opera director at the Opéra Bastille, under the direction of Hugues Gall, who suggested these productions to me. Hugues Gall introduced me to a young and brilliant costume designer, Elsa Pavanel, and he always followed Jean-Marc Stehlé, Antoine Fontaine and myself in our set design follies, thanks to which the four of us were able to create worlds of immense beauty.

As certain ayatollahs of art have now decided that beauty should be cursed and shunned, some opera General Managers

who succeeded Hugues Gall set about destroying Stehlé and Fontaine's brilliant sets, smashing them, when they should have been preserved as heritage treasures. At least the photos and videos remain.

I am eternally grateful to Hugues Gall for having made the Paris Opera an eclectic place of creation while under his supervision, where all trends had their place, where women directors could still work, where the public came *en masse* and left the theatre happy and determined to come back.

That was a golden age. We don't know if we'll experience it again, but we certainly will remember it for a long time. ■



1- "One fine day we shall see", the famous solo aria from Act II of *Madame Butterfly* ("On the calm sea...").

Right and next pages: images from the film *Madame Butterfly*, a German, British and French production, directed by Frédéric Mitterrand, 1995, a film adaptation of the opera *Madame Butterfly* (1904) by Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924), libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica.

Above: the film's set.

Photo credit: Frédéric Noy



UN BEL DI, VEDREMO...¹

By **FRÉDÉRIC MITTERRAND**, member of the Cinema and Audiovisual section



Most often, cinephiles are not really fond of seeing opera on screen. They struggle to recognize it as a specific genre on a par with westerns, melodramas or detective stories, for example, and to see filmed operas – or opera films – as a type of feature film whose script was designed for the stage and obeys the precise constraints of a musical score embodied by artists who are not film actors.

Recordings broadcast on television do not arouse this type of suspicion because they do not encroach on proper cinema's territory. They are a kind of Polaroid intended only to transmit information, and perhaps to educate their audience a little, in the most pleasant way possible. Hollywood musicals, on the

other hand, or the magical works of Jacques Demy, belong to the enchanted realm of the seventh art; they are films, and were originally imagined and directed as such.

Opera lovers are also fastidious. Their musical erudition is nourished by the limelight, by recordings and by radio broadcasts. They need no images; memories, dreams, and emotions are enough for them. While they may engage in fierce confrontations between opposing coteries in the middle of a performance, and tear each other apart for a mere top C, they do come together as a harmonious ensemble in considering films as flavourless canned goods. Thus, for the former and the latter alike, opera in films is like Jean de la Fontaine's bat: "I'm a bird, see my wings. I'm a bat: long live the rats". And talking of bats, I watched *The Bat* – Johan Strauss' delightful operetta – on film at an open-air screening on the Ring in Vienna. It was a long time ago and there was a huge crowd there, unreservedly singing at the top of their voices throughout the film!

Actually, cinema and opera are not estranged lovers. They have loved each other since the birth of cameras, to the delight of a broad audience, and many musicians and filmmakers have not hesitated to indulge in the transgression of making what is, in fact, simply a film. The list of all those who have tried is long. In the silent era, films were shown in an opera house. The composer would be in the orchestra pit and lead the singers, who were placed in the mostly dark area below the screen.

Richard Strauss thus conducted a memorable screening of *Der Rosenkavalier* in Dresden in 1926. The film, directed by Richard Wiene, one of the masters of expressionist cinema, lasted an hour and twenty minutes, and Richard Strauss gladly modified his score to go with each sequence! In Italy, Cinecittà and bel canto had many offspring together. The *assoluto* record holder for the production of those filmed operas is Carmine Gallone who directed a good ten of them between the advent of talkies and the late fifties: a *Scipio Africanus* dedicated to the Duce's glory, a string of melodramas and pepla, *telefoni bianchi* comedies where everyone loves everyone else, and several performances of *Don Camillo*. Watching his *Manon Lescaut* with Alida Valli, his *Casta Diva* with Antonella Lualdi, or his *Traviata* with the all-too-forgotten Nelly Corradi would likely bring a touch of amused, albeit legitimate, excitement to a contemporary audience. Try to imagine a version of *Carmen* in intense colours directed by Jean Delannoy at the Boulogne studios, with Martine Carol and the voice of Mathé Altery, and you'll get the idea.

Carmine Gallone was tireless. He also filmed Verdi and Puccini biopics, which provide an accelerated overview of the two masters' most famous arias! Brilliant actresses then stood in for the singers: Sophia Loren, for instance, playing a very luscious Aida, sang with the voice of Renata Tebaldi, whose natural distinction would undoubtedly have been lost in the African slave's vertiginous cleavage. Gina Lollobrigida's devotees were not left out: they could admire her in *Lucia di Lammermoor*

and *L'elisir d'amore*, with Silvana Mangano making some fleeting appearances too. The names behind their voices have unfortunately disappeared in the catacombs of credits rolls, except for the unforgettable Nelly Corradi (again!), as she did her own dubbing.

At some point, filmed opera stopped being more or less uninspired, albeit optimistic and often charming, illustrations. It is hard to tell when, but it became the modern cinema versions we now know, in which the singers have replaced the actors, becoming actors in their own right whose voices we hear. No one cheats anymore. The two artifices of opera and cinema are placed on an equal footing to offer us a film. Actually, this was a gradual shift, first found in American jazz films, where Paul Robeson's roles made black singer-actors visible at last. Even the astute Louis B. Mayer picked up on this. He began to add opera excerpts to some of his major Hollywood productions and endeavoured to make Lena Horne a fully-fledged star. Then, after the war, came the extraordinary, extremely sophisticated recordings that were in fact already real films, directed by Herbert von Karajan and illuminated by the genius and beauty of Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. In France, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle was the first to systematically explore this new path. Although he was a magnificent master of theatrical representations, he emancipated himself from them to sign a series of films that remain standard references, several operas by Monteverdi and Mozart, and even *Tristan and Iseulte*. Yet the old antagonism persisted, and he was not given the means usually allocated to a film's promotion.

The honours should therefore go to Daniel Toscan du Plantier, a great lover of opera. He had been seduced by the isolated successes of Franco Zeffirelli's *La Traviata* and Ingmar Bergman's *The Magic Flute*, and became the first to imagine opera on film as an art form with mainstream distribution potential. As the head of Gaumont in the late 1970s, his first idea was to entrust the direction of opera films to film directors who did not necessarily have extensive knowledge of music and opera but who would bring the freshness of their own talent, as well as their mastery of the syntax and techniques of film's language. Thus, Francesco Rosi did *Carmen*, Joseph Losey did *Don Juan*, Luigi Comencini *La Bohème*, and they paved the way for all those who followed, such as Benoît Jacquot with *La Tosca* and Andrzej Zulawski's *Boris Godunov*. Daniel Toscan du Plantier thus gave me the opportunity to direct Giacomo Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, which I had always dreamed of making into a film. The libretto is a perfect melodramatic scenario without a single superfluous word and the music miraculously masters the edit.



The opera – where a teahouse girl, Miss Butterfly, is seduced by an American officer – is described in the score's autograph as a *tragedia giapponese in due atti* (Japanese tragedy in two acts).



The score was followed to the last note, and the voices and music were recorded with the Orchestre de Paris at the Maison de la Radio, under the direction of James Conlon and following advice from Maria Callas' renowned agent Michel Glotz, along with the Radio France choir and the Olivier Messiaen Auditorium. What we were doing was truly opera. We shot in Tunisia, in a remote corner of the world where we reconstructed a Japanese village thanks to the talented set designer Michèle Abbe. The view on Lake Ichkeul was made to look like the bay of Nagasaki, as represented on prints, under rain and autumn light. Christian Gasc's costumes earned him a César, we had a mixed French-Tunisian team at all the stages of the production, and the casting was impeccable. Our main actor-singers were the same ages as their characters, thanks to Isabelle Partiot with whom we had spent hours looking at videos from around world. We also introduced the young Ying Huang, discovered in Shanghai, who as Cio Cio San was deeply moving. Many scenes were shot outdoor both by day and by night, and the music and singing were broadcast on the set and perfectly synchronized with lip movements, the extras' motions and the rigging. All this with the unfailing support of executive producer Pierre-Olivier Bardet, the man behind Bruno Monsiegeon's unforgettable documentaries. This was truly cinema.



There is a magic to close-ups, as the camera moving as close as possible to the performers affords the incredible opportunity to follow characters when they are not, or no longer, singing, and thus to give them a presence and an intensity that would have been lost on stage. This is the case of Goro, for example, the vile matchmaker played by the magnificent Jin Ma Fan whose evil and tragic shadow looms large until the very end of the story. Not to mention the subtitles, which allow the audience to keep reading the libretto all along.

That was twenty-five years ago, and I don't think I've ever been happier. ■

When, in 1867, the façade of the new Paris Opera House was unveiled from behind giant roof-high boarding, the crowd that had gathered on the square was stunned by the size of the building, the scale of its architecture, the diversity and polychromic aspect of its materials, its many sculptures and ornaments, and the gilding that illuminated its entire façade.

The Avenue de l'Opéra was merely a project at the time, and only the Grand Hôtel de la Paix and the rotundas of the buildings that would mark the beginning of this new axis stood on the square.

It took another eight years for the new Opera House to open its doors, as construction was interrupted by the 1870 war and the fall of the Empire. The work undertaken more than ten years earlier was re-launched only after there was a fire at the Opera House on rue Le Pelletier.

An enthusiastic public was thus introduced to the impressive volume of the grand staircase lined with balconies

in the form of boxes, where it was invited to become part of a total show, integrated not only into the lyrical work performed on stage with the singers, the orchestra, and the sets, but also as a part of the architecture, the audiences and all the artists who participated in the elaboration of this work.

Then there was the extraordinary innovation of the grand foyer where, for the first time in the history of theatres in France, women were admitted and invited. This space was moreover open to the entire audience, whereas previously each category of spectator, depending on the price of their seat, was assigned to a separate foyer. In this large foyer, at each end of the ceiling painted by Paul Baudry, visitors could contemplate the sculpted face of Charles Garnier in the guise of Mercury, and that of his wife Louise, facing him at the other end in the guise of Amphitrite – which shows her importance in his life and in his relations with other artists.

The main foyer led to a vast loggia that opened onto the city. Much like the rest of the interior, it was decorated with marble, mosaics and paintings, and was lit by gas flares.

Without being aware of it, through the multiple steps leading from the outside staircase to the first level of the main staircase, audiences ascended almost ten metres above street level to access the hall.



THE NEW OPÉRA CHARLES GARNIER

By ALAIN CHARLES PERROT, member of the Architecture Section

To this day, everything in this place still seems to be from a dream and designed to prepare the audience to enter the oneiric world of opera and its musical, plastic, and artistic imagination.

On the show side, the space it offers was unheard of at the time. Its stage measures over 60 metres high and 27 metres deep, owing to a vast riveted metallic structure. Huge flies and trap rooms provide enough space for monumental scenery to be manoeuvred, making illusionist surprise effects possible.

Behind this stage there is ample room for the dance foyer and the spaces reserved for the artists and the theatre's staff, including lifts allowing for sets to be brought onto stage level in trailers, or a staircase with a gentle slope to allow horses and elephants to reach the stage. Finally, the costume and wig studios, the numerous artists' dressing rooms and the extras' cloakrooms occupy another part of the building, while the west wing is reserved for the opera General Manager's office and the east wing for the architect's office.

While Le Corbusier considered this architecture as "lying art" and stated that the "Garnier Movement is a décor of the grave", the new Paris Opera was appreciated as a palace offered to music, dance, lyrical art and above all to the arts in general, to all artists and all crafts. And it is fair to highlight the Académie des Beaux-Arts' extraordinary contribution, with its *Premier Grand Prix de*

Rome, to the design and construction of this work.

Charles Garnier was born into a very modest Parisian family; his father was a blacksmith and built horse-drawn carriages, and his mother was a lacemaker. At the age of eleven, Charles had not had any formal education, and his father tried to get him to work at the forge like himself. However, the boy had a very weak build, and his father had to give up all hope of his son becoming a blacksmith. When he was thirteen, his mother placed him in an "auditors'" office so that he could start earning a living. He was mainly tasked with sweeping the place, and was quick to quit.

As his father's finances improved, Charles Garnier was able to belatedly resume his schooling, and enrolled in the drawing school on rue de l'École de Médecine, which was to become the École des Arts Décoratifs. This was when his qualities started to shine through, as he developed his mathematical intelligence and his artistic talents for drawing and painting. His sense of friendship was already apparent, and he formed close relationships with Jules Gabriel Thomas and Carpeaux, who would both go on to win the Grand Prix de Rome.

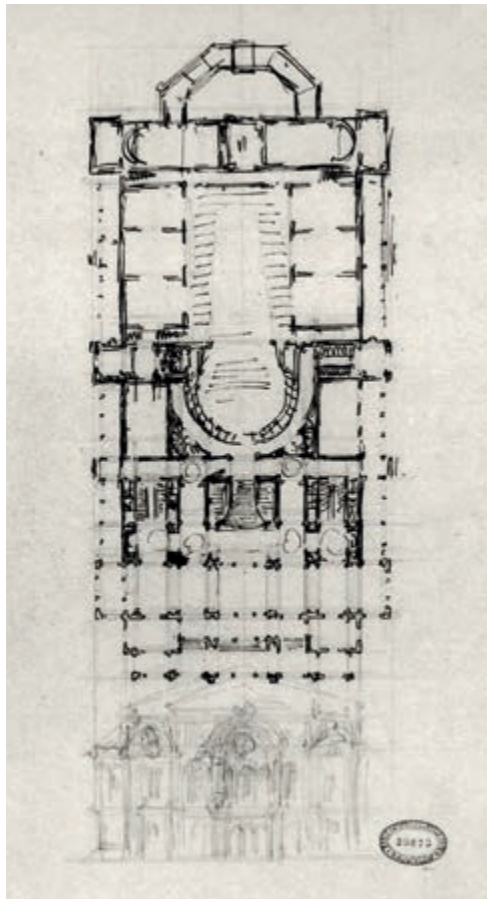
At the age of fifteen, he joined the studio of the architect Leveil, where he met his friend Ginain (1852 Grand Prix de Rome) with whom he then joined the studio of the architect Hippolyte Lebas, one of the leading studios in Paris at the time. Although Lebas

was only a second-prize winner at the Grand Prix de Rome, he was committed to training first-prize winners. He was one of the most conservative architects, those who were attached to the values of the Académie des Beaux-Arts of the time, and of its former permanent secretary Quatremère de Quincy, who had firmly opposed the new ideas that architects like Labrousse were proposing. It was in his studio that Garnier met Louis Jules André and Victor Louvet, both laureates of the Grand Prix de Rome, in 1847 and 1850, respectively.

His passion for mathematics and his exceptional memory got Charles Garnier into the École des Beaux-Arts two years later, at the age of seventeen. While he deemed that architectural science was to be learned elsewhere, in a practical way, in the studios and according to each one's specific methods and principles, he saw all the possibilities that the school offered, especially when it came to training for competitions. Garnier explained that "[I]n the past, when the École des Beaux-Arts was little more than

Left: Portrait of Charles Garnier (1825-1898), circa 1880, attributed to Nadar (1820-1910).

Above: the impressive volume of the grand staircase. Photo credit: Alamy / Stockbym



an arena where combatants met, they were ardently trained to fight for the honour of supporting the studio that housed them, and emulation was vigorous because a victory won by a student became a victory for the studio from which he came". Six years later, in 1848, the Académie des Beaux-Arts awarded him the Grand Prix de Rome for architecture. He was then twenty-three. He travelled to Rome with his friend Jules Gabriel Thomas. This was the first time he had left Paris. It has indeed always been one of the Académie des Beaux-Arts' missions, through the stay it offered at the Villa Medici, to allow boarders to weave friendships and cultural links, to share, to exchange, to build an artistic vision in which each one would contribute their own part. It was during these four years that Charles Garnier, who held dear some very conservative values, acquired the mental dispositions that would later enable him to design and execute his masterpiece. His return to Paris was gloomy and he would spend almost a decade on menial tasks and unrewarding projects. It was without any hope of winning, but only to be "spotted" and obtain orders from the Pereire brothers, who were building Haussmann's Paris at the time, that Charles Garnier entered the competition for the new Paris Opera, which the Emperor had launched on 29 December 1860.

This attitude is reflected in the motto he chose to represent his project while remaining anonymous: "*Bramo assai, poco spero*" (I aspire much, I expect little). While his was the last of the five projects selected in the first round, he was unanimously declared the winner at the end of the competition on 30 May 1861. He was then thirty-five years old. The project presented by Charles Garnier obeyed the same rules as Prix de Rome applications: a very visibly readable programme, broad and practical interior circulation spaces, and a general disposition that would allow for monumental facades on all sides of the building. As Hugues Gall pointed out, for the parts through which the audience would enter the building, he drew inspiration from the grand staircase of the Grand Théâtre de Bordeaux, which Victor Louis had built in the 18th century. He modelled the hall after the one still in use in the Opera House on rue Le Pelletier, which offered excellent acoustics. The jury appreciated the qualities of the main facade, inspired by the works of Palladio, especially the Teatro Olimpico's stage facade, but also the facades of Saint Mark's Square in Venice, which Charles Garnier had drawn during his stay at the Villa Medici. The loggia, said to be the first of its kind, was modelled after that of the Toulon Opera House, which was under construction at the time.

The arrangement of two rotundas on the sides of the building was considered particularly noteworthy because of their monumental appearance. To assist him through this project, he called on his colleague Louis Victor Louvet, to be his right hand, along with 38 painters and sculptors, all Grand Prix de Rome winners, including the painters Jules Lenepveu and Paul Baudry, and the sculptor Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux. Thus, from a very classical architecture, the new Paris Opera, through the exuberance and the quality of the sculpted and painted decorations Charles Garnier had wanted, acquired the exceptional character that made it the monument best representing the 19th century. In a way, Charles Garnier's project is the Grand Prix de Rome's manifesto. The new Opera House, a temple of the arts, was where all the artists from the Académie des Beaux-Arts, all of whom were awarded the Prix de Rome, were able to exercise their talent. In firmly directing their work, Garnier was able to bring out the best in each of them by pushing their art to the extreme. Thus, on the caryatids on the Great Staircase, he wrote to his friend the sculptor Thomas: "*My dear Thomas... Do you remember Bernini's statues in Rome, those dishevelled draperies, those telegraph arms and corkscrew legs? Well, you have to do even worse than that, you have to do Bernini in bad taste! If my bottom cornice is in the way, wiggle your figures...; I mean, give me some movement in Pulcinella style and you'll be on the perfect path.*" Of his fruitful collaborations, Charles Garnier would later say: "*I won the battle as a General wins it, that is to say, with an army of officers and soldiers, and my own army was so well composed that I believe that all my soldiers were at least Colonels.*"

Charles Garnier was elected to the Académie des Beaux-Arts on 14 March 1874 in Victor Baltard's seat. I would like to thank above all Hugues Gall who opened the doors of this magical place for me, Gérard Fontaine who spoke so well about it, and Jean-Michel Leniaud who made me discover the life of Charles Garnier, a genius with such a surprising career. Finally, I would like to thank Charles Garnier for the attention and advice he has always given me during our long conversations when, at night, I've submitted my projects and restoration choices to him. ■

Left page: sketch of the plan, circa 1860, showing the essence of what became the Garnier Opera House. Below: New Paris Opera House, sketch of the elevation of the main façade, January 1861. ENSBA. Right: view of the Place de l'Opéra from the roofs of the building before the opening of the Avenue de l'Opéra, ca. 1870. BNF collection Below: model of the longitudinal section of the Paris Opera House, made between 1984 and 1986. H. 240.0; W. 578.0; D. 110.0 cm. Musée d'Orsay. Photo credit: Jean-Pierre Dalbéra



A SHORT HISTORY OF OPERA IN PARIS

By **MATHIAS AUCLAIR**, General Curator, Director of the Music Department of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France

Cardinal Jules Mazarin, impressed with the opera performances he had seen during his various stays in Rome, decided to introduce Italian opera to France. After his death in 1661, national forms of opera and choreography – especially *ballet de cour*, in which Louis XIV regularly performed – were more actively developed. The king's decision to stop dancing in 1670 marked the end of an era, which had been foreshadowed slightly earlier by a series of royal measures that opened the path to the professionalization of singers and dancers.

The Opera and royal power (1669-1687)

An Opera "Académie" was created in Paris in 1669 after a royal privilege was granted to the poet Pierre Perrin, authorizing him to establish theatres with the exclusive right to offer the public "operas or performances in French music and verse". These theatres were in no way subsidized by the king and had to find their own means to operate. Perrin was swindled by his associates and, to pay his debts, ended up selling his privilege to the superintendent of music of the king's chamber,



Jean-Baptiste Lully. Lully obtained Louis XIV's agreement to re-found the institution for his benefit, under the name *Académie royale de musique*, in 1672. With *Cadmus et Hermione* (1673), Lully created a new dramatic genre, musical drama, or *tragédie-lyrique*, whose heroic aspects, opulence and solemnity resonated with the king's desire for glory and grandeur. When he died in 1687, Lully left his successors an institution that was financially prosperous and had a popular repertoire.

The Opera and Paris (1687-1774)

After the death of the Queen in 1683 and the ensuing change in the atmosphere at the Court, the theatre was deprived of any royal support and had to rely on the city to ensure its influence and prosperity. In 1749 it was attached to the city, by royal decree. In the meantime, Jean-Philippe Rameau had created *Hippolyte et Aricie* (1733).

It followed the structure of Lully's lyrical tragedies, but Rameau's musical and orchestral writing was very different from that of his predecessor, and its premiere led to intense conflict between the supporters of Lully's style and the defenders of Rameau's boldness. This quarrel between Lullistes and Ramistes would soon be followed by the *Querelle des Bouffons*, sparked by the invitation of an Italian troupe to the Opéra, between 1752 and 1754, and which pitted supporters of Italian opera, led by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, against defenders of French opera, led by Rameau.

The Opera of aesthetic and political reforms (1774-1802)

In 1774, in the hope of taking Paris by storm, Christoph Willibald Gluck set to work on a *tragédie-lyrique* that would reconcile the Italian and French geniuses. The Opera accepted his *Iphigénie en Aulide*, which was a great success at its premiere. As Gluck had been the young queen's teacher, he remained on her payroll and was able to give several more works to the Opera.

During the Revolution, in 1790, the task of administering the Opéra was returned to the city of Paris, and the theatre was run by a committee of artists. Under the Reign of Terror, the decree of 3 August 1793 established strict control over the theatre's repertoire, which subsequent texts further reinforced. Until the fall of Maximilien de Robespierre in July 1794, the number of performances of patriotic works increased significantly and ballet was erased from the Opéra's programme.

Opera as an instrument of power (1802-1830)

Napoleon reorganized the Opera and transformed it into a powerful propaganda tool. Anxious to control the theatre as closely as possible, he attached its administration to that of his own House, supervising and validating everything in person, starting with the repertoire. He also gave the Opera House financial resources unlike anything it had ever received from the State.

After the fall of Napoleon I, the monarchy restored the organization that had prevailed under the Ancien Régime since 1780. To resolve the artistic crisis the Opera was experiencing, the administration invited Gioachino Rossini to Paris to direct the

Théâtre-Italien and compose new works for the Parisian stages. With his last work, *Guillaume Tell* (1829), he offered the Opera an accomplished synthesis of Italian and French styles, as well as the first French romantic opera.

The Romantics' Liberal Opera (1831-1854)

The July Monarchy entrusted an entrepreneur-manager with the Opera. In return for an annual subsidy, he was to run the theatre according to a set of specifications that precisely defined his obligations. He was personally liable for the institution's financial equilibrium. This new General Manager of the opera, Doctor Louis Désiré Véron, very quickly made the Opera a place of prominence, where elites discussed politics and economics, and where fashions took hold.

The first work premiered during his mandate was Giacomo Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* (1831), which set the standard for French grand opera. Filippo Taglioni was commissioned to choreograph the ballet for *Robert le Diable*. It marked the birth of romantic ballet, the canons of which Taglioni definitively established in the following year, with *La Sylphide*.

Véron's successors lacked his business acumen, and they bankrupted the theatre despite the success of works composed by Meyerbeer and Fromental Halévy, and the vitality of romantic ballet, of which the premiere of Jean Coralli and Jules Perrot's *Giselle* (1841) was a symbol.

Opera for an Empire: prefiguring the modern Opera House (1854-1875)

Faced with the Opera House's considerable deficit, Emperor Napoleon III decided to return to an administrative organization similar to the one that Napoleon I had chosen, and directly meddled in the theatre's affairs. Although the Second Empire's artistic output was limited – its repertoire essentially stuck to successful works created since the end of the Restoration –, it outlined what the Opera House would become in the modern era. In 1860, the competition for the "Nouvel Opéra" was launched and Charles Garnier won. In 1864, as the imperial regime was becoming more liberal, Napoleon III put an end to the organization he had borrowed from Napoleon I and to the Opera House's monopoly. Two years later it returned to the operating regime the July Monarchy had given it, becoming a private company, which it would stay until 1939.

The Palais Garnier's Belle Époque (1875-1914)

The Palais Garnier – which is the thirteenth theatre hall to host Paris' Opera House – was inaugurated with great fanfare on 5 January 1875, two years after the fire in the Salle Le Peletier. It aroused such immense curiosity that the programming was secondary to the theatre itself in the first years of its operation. Moreover, lyrical and choreographic creation was at a standstill; the last masterpieces that were linked to the Parisian model were no longer premiered at the Opéra, but in Cairo for Verdi's *Aïda* (1871) and in Weimar for Camille Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila* (1877).

Having shunned Wagner's works since the *Tannhäuser* fiasco in 1861, the Opera resolved to show a new work by the Bayreuth master again in 1891: *Lohengrin*. Wagner was then in fashion, and the show was such a triumph that the theatre's management decided to include most of the composer's works in the Opéra's

Top: Engraving, unknown author, 25 x 41 cm, of the theatre on rue Le Peletier (9^e arr.), ca. 1821. Built after the demolition of the Salle Montansier, rue de Richelieu (2^e arr.), and inaugurated in 1821, this theatre remained the home of the Opéra until a fire destroyed it in 1873. New York Public Library

Above: portrait of the composer Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632-1687).

repertoire in the following years. Between 1908 and 1914, Wagner's works accounted for a quarter of the performances and four complete performances of the *Ring of the Nibelung* cycle were given between 1911 and 1913.

The Opera of Modernity (1914-1939)

In 1914, Jacques Rouché took over as General Manager of the Opera House. His tenure was the most fruitful in the House's history: 170 new works, including over 120 creations, in thirty-one years. To ensure a flexible unity, he would task a single artist with designing all the sets and costumes for a show and, to avoid any monopoly, he chose a different person each time. Rouché not only hired a great many painters, but also experimented with the use of film and projections. He also directed several stage productions.

In order to renew the opera scene as he wished to, Rouché called on avant-garde companies and invited them to the Palais Garnier. Foremost among those were the Ballets Russes, which he admired and took as a model. After the death of Serge Diaghilev and the dissolution of his company in 1929, he hired one of its dancers and choreographers, Serge Lifar, to direct the Opera Ballet. Lifar led a major reform of dance. In 1932, tired of having to replenish the coffers of the Opéra, whose performances were chronically in deficit, Rouché threatened to resign. Eventually, after the election of the Front Populaire and the bankruptcy of the Opéra-Comique in 1936, he obtained the creation of a public establishment federating the Opéra and the Opéra-Comique, called Réunion des Théâtres Lyriques Nationaux (RTLN), in 1939.

The Opera House and the State (1939-1972)

Rouché stayed at the head of the RTLN during the Second World War and had to deal with the occupying forces and enforce the Vichy regime's anti-Semitic legislation. The Occupier banned works by Jewish composers, imposed four lyrical works and favoured ballets, which were very popular with the occupying troops. Lifar choreographed most of them. After the Liberation, Rouché, Lifar and many artists were declared guilty of collaborating with the enemy. Rouché was dismissed in 1945 (but rehabilitated in 1951). His successor, Maurice Lehmann, proposed sumptuous shows that he directed himself and whose success was partly guaranteed by television broadcasts.

From the 1960s onwards, the mediocrity of the programming, the exponential cost of the shows, an inability to win over new audiences, and internal dissensions within the two RTLN theatres were the targets of sustained criticism. After several reports highlighted these issues, the State decided to reform the institution. In 1970, the collective agreements were terminated, the singing troupe was disbanded, new choirs were recruited, and the director of the Hamburg Opera, Rolf Liebermann, was appointed to head the theatre.

The Globalized Opera (1973 to present)

Rolf Liebermann's tenure from 1973 to 1980 was marked by far-reaching changes that gave the opera some of its present-day characteristics. Works were no longer sung in French but in their original language, and soloists were recruited on the international



star market. The Opera House went from being a specialized venue to being a "permanent festival", structured in seasons. Lyrical creation was revived when Olivier Messiaen was commissioned for *St Francis of Assisi* (premiered after Liebermann's departure in 1983) and Raymond Franchetti gave ballet new impetus. Liebermann's artistic success was total, but disagreements at the head of the institution, in addition to the theatre's financial needs, deemed excessive, led to further reforms. The RTLN was dissolved in 1978. The Palais Garnier and the Salle Favart have since been the two halls of the Théâtre National de l'Opéra.

The Opéra Bastille project was launched in 1981, following François Bloch-Lainé's report recommending the construction of a 3,000-seat opera house offering more affordable tickets. The building, inaugurated in 1989, was to house opera, while the Palais Garnier would be dedicated to ballet, to which Nureyev, as director of dance from 1983 to 1989, had restored its prestige. After an audit in 1993, Hugues Gall proposed a new administrative structure for the Opera House. In 1994, following his recommendations, the Opéra National de Paris was created as a public establishment. Hugues R. Gall (1995-2004), Gérard Mortier (2004-2009), Nicolas Joël (2009-2014), Stéphane Lissner (2014-2020) and Alexander Neef have successively directed the theatre, each giving the Opera's artistic policy a different aesthetic, and ensuring the necessary balance between the heritage of a house that celebrated its 350th anniversary in 2019 and the modernity of an institution that is intrinsically turned towards creation. ■



Top: Place de l'Opéra around 1916. Photo credit: DR

Right: The Opera Paris Bastille, opened in 1989. Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons / Arthur Weidmann

The Conférences de l'Institut



Composing an opera nowadays

As part of the "Conférences de l'Institut" held in the Auditorium Liliane et André Bettencourt, from 3 October 2022 to 13 February 2023, the Académie des Beaux-Arts presents a series of lectures on composing opera and the place of lyrical works in the contemporary musical landscape. Eight composers, including five members of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, will detail their various experiences. The one-hour lectures will be interspersed with video excerpts and followed by a Q&A with the audience.

Monday 3 October, 4 pm: Laurent Petitgirard; Monday 17 October, 4 pm: Thierry Escaich; Monday 7 November, 4 pm: Philippe Hersant; Monday 28 November, 4 pm: Régis Campo; Monday 12 December, 4 pm: Michaël Levinas; Monday 16 January, 4 pm: Bruno Mantovani; Monday 30 January, 4 pm: Kajia Saariaho; Monday 13 February, 4 pm: Pascal Dusapin. ■

Free admission, reservations:
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[#conferences](https://twitter.com/institutdefrance)

Above: the audience at the inauguration of the Liliane and André Bettencourt Auditorium in February 2019. Architect: Marc Barani. Photo credit: Atelier Barani

CREATION AT THE OPÉRA-COMIQUE

By Académie des Beaux-Arts correspondent **MARYVONNE DE SAINT PULGENT**, (Music Composition Section)



Fantasio (Offenbach), *Le Roi malgré lui* (Chabrier), *Louise* (Gustave Charpentier), *Fortunio* (André Messager), *Le pauvre matelot* (Milhaud), *La voix humaine* and *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* (Poulenc). Another masterpiece, *La Damnation de Faust*, was also premiered at the Salle Favart, but this was solely on Berlioz's initiative; he had to rent the theatre and, according to his *Memoirs*¹, he went bankrupt doing so.

Thus, although it is deemed “secondary” to the Paris Opera House, the Salle Favart has a more than honourable record of lyrical creation, which might actually be more “lasting” than its elder brother's – at least when it comes to the period following the great era of the Académie Royale de Musique et de Danse, and that of the Grand Opéra Français which is important in the history of the genre, even though it yielded fewer masterpieces. Moreover, looking at it solely from the point of view of genres, what remains universally admired today in the French contribution to the world history of opera is the *tragédie-lyrique* invented under Louis XIV by the founders of the Académie Royale, and the *opéra-comique* as it emerged in the 19th century. Here, the term “comique” describes only that which characterizes it: not so much the alternation of song and spoken word (which was largely abandoned at the end of the century and yet still featured in *La voix humaine*) as the emphasis on drama and on the authenticity of feelings and situations rather than on beautiful singing. Before becoming a great stage for musical creation, the *opéra-comique* was one of the driving forces of theatrical innovation in France and remained so afterwards as well. The third Salle Favart was inaugurated with Massenet's *Cendrillon*, the first opera to use electricity as a technique and as a source of inspiration – something Philippe Hersant may have remembered when he created *Les Eclairs*, the latest work to be premiered on this stage. It is also worth noting that what was so disconcerting about *Pelléas* in 1902 was not only the alternation of speech and song, but also its symbolist dramaturgy, which was avant-garde at the time, as was the naturalism likewise represented at Favart with *Louise* – two aesthetics that were then banned from the Opéra Garnier. It was also at the Opéra-Comique that tenors stopped taking their hats off before going into their grand aria – which Albert Carré had demanded – and, a century earlier, that female singers playing peasant women gave up wearing their court dresses and adorning themselves with diamonds.

This flouting of the conventions on official stages probably stimulated the imagination of composers. For example, it could explain why, while most of Massenet's works were intended for the Paris Opera House, all of his most performed works were written for the Opéra-Comique. In any case, it clearly forms the

Above: main façade of the Salle Favart, drawing by the architect Stanislas Louis Bernier, in 1893. BnF Gallica

Opposite: plate from *Le Monde Illustré* (1883) by M. Guiaud showing the different rooms of the Opéra Comique.

Right: poster for the opera *Cendrillon*, by Jules Massenet (1842-1912), which inaugurated the third Salle Favart in 1899.



What do *La Fille du régiment*, *Mignon*, *Carmen*, *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, *Lakmé*, *Manon*, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue* and *L'Heure espagnole* have in common? These French operas by Donizetti, Ambroise Thomas, Bizet, Offenbach, Léo Delibes, Massenet, Debussy, Paul Dukas and Ravel, which are still part of the international repertoire, were all created at the Opéra-Comique. We could even add *Werther* to this list, as although it was premiered in Vienna in 1892, it was commissioned by Léon Carvalho on the eve of the 1887 fire at the Salle Favart, and its French premiere took place in 1893 at the Place du Châtelet, where the theatre spent ten years rebuilding its historic auditorium. The following works have been performed less often outside of France but are worth mentioning, as they count in the history of music: *L'Enfance du Christ* (Berlioz),



Left: Poster by Georges Rochegrosse (1859-1938) for the first performances in 1902 of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, an opera in five acts by Claude Debussy, to a libretto by Maurice Maeterlinck.

Opposite: Philippe Chaperon (1823-1906), sketch of the set for Act 2 of Daniel Auber's opera *Haydée ou Le secret* (1891), pen, watercolour and gouache, 20 x 25.2 cm. BnF Gallica

Below: *Les Boulingrins* (2010), by Georges Aperghis (born 1945), libretto after Courteline, directed by Jérôme Deschamps. Photo credit: E. Carecchio.

DNA of a genre born in fairs as a parody of Lully's operas, and in which heroes and gods, solemn tirades, pompous music and antique costumes were copiously mocked, and replaced with pantomime actors and popular ritornellos. These "voices of the town" ("voix de la ville") gave rise to "vaudeville", a song in verses bearing great lyrical promise, which would materialize in the mid-18th century, when original scores started to be written for it. Mozart used it for the character of Osmin in *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, with a libretto borrowed from an opéra-comique by Favart, and Rameau reused the colourful linguistic discoveries he had made when writing his opéras-comiques in *Les Indes Galantes*. Opera had previously not been amenable to a mixing of genres; it was either *seria* or *buffa*, and Simon Favart's troupe, once again, was the one to innovate by inventing the semi-seria opera. With *Richard Cœur de Lion* (1784), Sedaine and Grétry created the "rescue opera" model, to which Beethoven's *Fidelio* is related. In this opera a hero of high birth narrowly escapes death, rescued by someone of humble origins with the help of the common people. It also initiated the fashion of Medieval topics in operas, and preceded the Académie Royale in its interest in historical themes, which would flourish from the Revolution onwards. The work was so popular that its most famous aria, *Ô Richard, ô mon roi*, served as a rallying cry for the royalists during the Revolution. Grétry lost sleep over it, although he would eventually be saved from the guillotine by his amiable nature and Robespierre's soft spot for his music. It should be noted that, after Grétry, operas-comiques were called by their composer's name rather than that of their librettist. Around the same time, Cherubini composed *Médée*, the first opera with a tragic ending, and the pre-Romantic composer Méhul made his opera debut

with love dramas. He would eventually become famous with *Le Chant du départ* and his "biblical drama" *Joseph* (1807), which Berlioz, Weber and Wagner saw as a masterpiece. Thus, the main reason for which an initially purely parodic and theatrical genre became the main vehicle of French lyrical creativity was the freedom it offered young musicians from the late 18th century onwards. Unlike *tragédie-lyrique* first, and then grand opera, which rigidly imposed the five-act drama format with a grand ballet in the middle, *opéra comique* had only one rule - the alternation between song and spoken word. Institutions were nevertheless also a major factor in this development. The Opéra-Comique was declared an official yet secondary theatre by the imperial ordinance of 1807 and, in 1822, a royal decree required that it open its doors to artists awarded the Académie des Beaux-Arts' Prix de Rome from 1803 onwards, so that they could gain the experience necessary for their works to be performed at the Opera House. A work was to be commissioned from each Premier Grand Prix laureate, and the theatre was required to premier twelve new works every year, which forced it to break out of the circle of established composers. The licensees who ran the theatre from 1828 onwards did not scrupulously respect their obligations, for by 1849, works from a mere 18 of the 43 Prix de Rome had actually been performed there, and very often even the lucky ones were granted only a one-act curtain-raiser. Yet the Opéra-Comique still acted as a springboard for most of the composers who subsequently entered the repertoire. It moreover fostered long and committed relationships with many of them, as it did with Massenet, for instance, while never letting go of its staple names: Boieldieu, Auber, Adolphe Adam, who were behind its greatest successes. The latter were

a secondary stage that depended on the interests of the Paris Opera, which appropriated its most profitable repertoire. Yet its reasonable size allowed it to take risks that the vast Garnier auditorium could not afford to take, thus enabling it to open to contemporary music and especially foreign works. This had always been the tradition at Favart - Puccini gave the French premieres of all his works there - but now these works were most often sung in their original language. Among the composers featured were Schoenberg, Janacek, Dallapiccola, Berg (whose *Lulu* was a major event in 1969), Berio and Lutoslawski. In 1972, Ohana managed to get in with *Syllabaire pour Phèdre*, just before the venue was closed for six years. Liebermann reopened it in 1978 and presented Henze, Denisov and Aperghis' *Je vous dis que je suis mort*, but the real "creation" of that time was *Atys*, in the historic production by William Christie and Jean-Marie Villégier (1987), an aesthetic shock with which the public rediscovered *tragédie-lyrique*.

The Théâtre National de l'Opéra-Comique, established in 2005, re-instated the Salle Favart's autonomy and gave it a statutory mission to devote itself to the French repertoire, from the 17th century to the present, and to enrich it by commissioning works. Its mission as a creative stage was thus revived, and opened this new era by presenting Aperghis once again. Alone or in association with other opera houses, the Opéra-Comique has commissioned *Les Boulingrins* (Aperghis, 2010), *Re Orso* (Marco Stroppa, 2012), *Robert le cochon et les kidnappeurs* (Marc-

Olivier Dupin, 2014), *Les contes de la lune vague après la pluie* (Xavier Dayer, 2015), *Le mystère de l'écureuil bleu* (Dupin, 2016), *Kein Licht* (Philippe Manoury, 2017), *La princesse légère* (Violetta Cruz, 2017), *Macbeth Underworld* (Pascal Dusapin, 2019), *L'inondation* (Francesco Filidei, 2019), and *Les Eclairs* (Philippe Hersant, 2021), a series of works that blend together the aesthetics and genres of music theatre, children's opera, chamber opera, and opera proper. Its contemporary productions also include revivals - as we know, this is one of the main challenges of opera creation: *Romeo and Juliet* (Dusapin, 1988, played again at Favart in 2008), *Lady Sarashina* (Peter Eötvös, 2008, played again in 2009), *Written on Skin* (George Benjamin, 2012, played again in 2013), *Au monde* (Philippe Boesmans, 2004, played again in 2014). Fortunately, the theatre's third director, conductor Louis Langrée, intends to pursue this



discredited in the 20th century but are now being re-integrated into the repertoire by the Théâtre National de l'Opéra-Comique.

While the theatre's policy regarding new works was not quite as strict in the 20th century, it remained brilliant under the direction of Albert Carré, thanks especially to his musical director André Messager, a composer of inconsequential works but a firm supporter of the avant-garde, such as Wagner, Debussy, Ravel and Dukas. Efforts at premiering new works were hindered by Favart's financial difficulties, which culminated in the 1930s and led to the Opéra Comique being "reunited with" (actually, absorbed by) Garnier in 1938. At the time, Favart really became

policy while also fulfilling his other mission: to rediscover unfairly forgotten French works, especially from the 19th and early 20th centuries. Let's hope that he will make as many good calls as his predecessors of the Salle Favart's "golden century", which runs from the 1840s to the 1950s. ■

1) For a complete list of premieres at the Opéra Comique, from 1717 to 2010, see Maryvonne de Saint Pulgent, *L'Opéra Comique, Le Gavrache de la Musique, Découvertes Gallimard*, 2010.

COMPLACENCY AND RESISTANCE

Excerpt from *Faire et refaire* ("Building and rebuilding") (ed. Alma),
by **PAUL ANDREU** (1938-2018), member of the Architecture Section (1996-2018)

“ Much like a tool, a room can be expected to serve a purpose. Yet one would be mistaken to think that it should efface itself for this to happen. A good tool shows resistance. This resistance forces the will to find and define itself. The will chooses its tool and then accepts that it resists it, that it remains faithful to the logic that formed it. The creative will accepts that something beyond it can oppose it, something that comes from it. The creative will struggles with the tool it has freely chosen for itself; it subdues it while also submitting to it.

The creative will is in a relationship of connivance with the tool. It wrestles with it in a fight that it has chosen but which can reveal itself to be new and unexpected at any moment, in a loving and sometimes furious struggle.

Painters struggle with their tool, and musicians with their instrument. The tool and the instrument are not complacent. Artists have conferred part of what they demand of themselves onto them. With what remains of this demanding character, artists oppose that which is imposed on them. One could see this as just another application of Vant'Hoff's old law, the law of moderation, which holds that effects oppose the causes that create them. But there is nothing mechanical here, nothing that evades the will or could overpower it. No, there is only the will at work, refusing to abdicate even before itself. Yet it will eventually be contained, defeated, diverted towards perhaps unknown paths, at the end of which there is something new to be discovered.

An opera house, a concert hall or a theatre is a tool. It is made to both individually and collectively serve and to espouse the sometimes diverse wills of the conductor and the director, the singers, the musicians and the actors. Old or new, it was essentially made for this purpose. Yet it resists everyone, just as a tool would, whether its designers had planned to be its users or not. Tools are not complacent. Art has no use for complacency, be it material or moral.

The hall is a tool, an instrument, but a very special one. With very few exceptions, halls do not move. They are bound to a place with which they are often mutually defined. This is a new source of resistance to those who use them. For what do they most often want? What fiction and dreams want: to create the place where they will unfold freely, a fictitious, utopian place, inseparable from them, which enters and leaves memory along with them! In its materiality and its attachment to the real world, the actual hall is of course opposed to this desire. Which way will the architect go? Everything tells them to tear the hall they are designing away from its site, to place it in the utopia in which it will meet all those who will have contributed to the show through their creation, as well as— one can only hope —those who will be its spectators. What could be better than to serve the creators and the spectators, to always remain one of them? And yet, as they pride themselves on having managed to disappear, is the architect not still too present? Should the hall and, with it, its site and of course its architect, taken in their own time, not resist and be defeated, subjected to the hazardous search of desires, leading perhaps to spectators and actors meeting in another place, one that is unknown to the former and the latter alike?

For sure, accepting to disappear is not enough. Utopia cannot be achieved without some tearing apart, without a departure, a crossing. The hall is this place that you have to leave, that you have to take the trouble to leave, that you have to love like a haven shore, a place to stay which nothing pushes you to leave, and from which desire alone, in its ignorant stubbornness, will drive you away — a place that you must love and leave.

The hall's architect should make it a place to stay that nothing would have one flee; a place where desire can gather and grow without impatience; a place that proceeds only from the audience's familiar desire; a place that requires nothing but to let longing and nostalgia secretly invade everybody there.

It is from this place that the show will draw performers and spectators alike. It should not want to disappear but only agree to do so, after a confrontation that is luminous but uncompromising. And, from this confrontation between the site of the hall, the edge of the familiar world, and the utopian site of the show — and from the momentary victory of the latter — the moment will be born: a reality given to time suddenly, for ever. After this moment has passed, after the fiction has come to an end, when all that remains in the most intimate part of each person is the wound,

the hall will be the place of recollection, one that is tied to the passing of time and the familiarity of forgetting.

Architects are no builders of utopias. How could they be, when they are caught up in the heft and presence of materials? They can certainly evoke utopias, but at the risk of encumbering their creation with an image. They remain in the place and in time. They consent to it. They build the site's shores, making them as beautiful, as attractive as possible but not captivating; shores that face duration head-on where time passes. They can only contribute to one's ability to escape from the place and evade time for a moment — and that is already a lot, or at least enough to be entirely required. ■

Top: The Grand National Theatre (opera house) in Beijing, built by Paul Andreu between 1999 and 2008, as captured by Bruno Barbey (1941-2020), member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts' Photography Section.





SHOW AND LABORATORY

An interview with dramaturge and artistic advisor to the Festival International d'Art Lyrique d'Aix-en-Provence **TIMOTHÉE PICARD**, by Nadine Eghels



Above: *L'apocalypse Arabe* by Samir Odeh-Tamimi (1970), directed by Pierre Audi, libretto by Claudia Pérez Iñesta and Samir Odeh-Tamimi after the poem by Etel Adnan. Aix-en-Provence Festival 2021. Photo credit: Ruth Walz

Orfeo et Majnun by Moneim Adwan, Howard Moody and Dick van der Harst (2018), directed by Airan Berg, Martina Winkel. Aix-en-Provence Festival 2018. Photo credit: Patrick Berger / ArtcomPress

Nadine Eghels: How did you get to this position of dramaturge and artistic advisor for the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence?

Timothée Picard: I've been passionate about opera since childhood. I was part of the Paris Opera Children's Choir, which was a great opportunity for me. I loved classical music but there, the voice and the total art that is opera came as a revelation to me. I was a boarder, which I hated, and being able to go and sing on Parisian stages was truly an escape for me. Later in life, I would have to make a difficult decision: I wanted to stay in the world of opera, but I didn't know if it would be on the artistic side (I was interested in directing) or on the administrative side (after Sciences-Po, I was considering the national administration school ENA to access administrator positions in culture). I ended up going to the École Normale Supérieure and, in the end, it turned out that the historical and documented approach to opera was the one that interested me most. I devoted all my academic work to opera and to its place in our civilization, and I wrote several books on the topic. But there came a point at which I felt like on-field experience would nourish me intellectually; I needed to be closer to creation. Gradually I gained experience as a dramaturge with artists and institutions, and when a position became available at the Aix-en-Provence Festival, the director Pierre Audi hired me.

N.E.: Are you the one working out the programme for the next few years?

T.P.: There are two artistic advisors. Even though nothing is written in stone, and we constantly exchange views on all aspects of our work, my colleague Julien Benhamou is mainly in charge of casting singers and conductors, while I'm more concerned with the choice of works, creations, and staging.

N.E.: How does it work?

T.P.: It's quite pragmatic; we have several parameters in our hands and have to solve a sort of equation with one or more unknowns. Often, when it comes to the repertoire, Pierre Audi starts with the artists: conductor and director. We have to see not only who is available, who we would like to work with, what their wishes are, but also what we could offer them. It's a sort of a carousel: who we could have as a conductor, as a director, which work would be best for the general balance of a programme, both over a single season and over several years, and so on.

N.E.: What are the focuses of these programmes?

T.P.: Our programmes range from early Baroque (Monteverdi, Cavalli) to contemporary creation, so that's four centuries of operas! We try to represent all the centuries and all the aesthetics in the ten or so operas we propose each season, mainly in stage version, sometimes in concert version. For new works, we have a more specific system that really starts with the composers.

N.E.: How much of the programme is repertoire and how much is creative work?

T.P.: This year we have seven operas in stage version, three in concert version. Two of the former are premieres. Their formats and ambitions vary, but we always have at least one, sometimes up to three, in any given year. Creation is very important for the Festival d'Aix; Pierre Audi sees it as an essential trademark. One section of the programme, called "Incises" after a piece by Boulez, includes everything in the field of contemporary creation: operas, concerts and musical theatre. The Festival is recognized for the importance of this choice, as the last ten years have seen major events in contemporary creation blossom in Aix. For example, George Benjamin's *Written on Skin*, with a libretto by Martin Crimp, premiered in Aix in 2012 and has toured extensively, including with stagings other than Katie Mitchell's original one – a sign that it is now repertoire. And last year, Kaija Saariaho's *Innocence*, with a libretto by Sofi Oksanen and directed by Simon Stone, was the edition's most clear-cut success. The recognition this brings us is useful in building relationships with composers.

N.E.: Are these co-productions?

T.P.: Yes, for which the Festival is the main producer, with exclusive rights to the first performances.

N.E.: What exactly do you mean by repertoire? Does a piece created last year and performed again this year enter the repertoire?

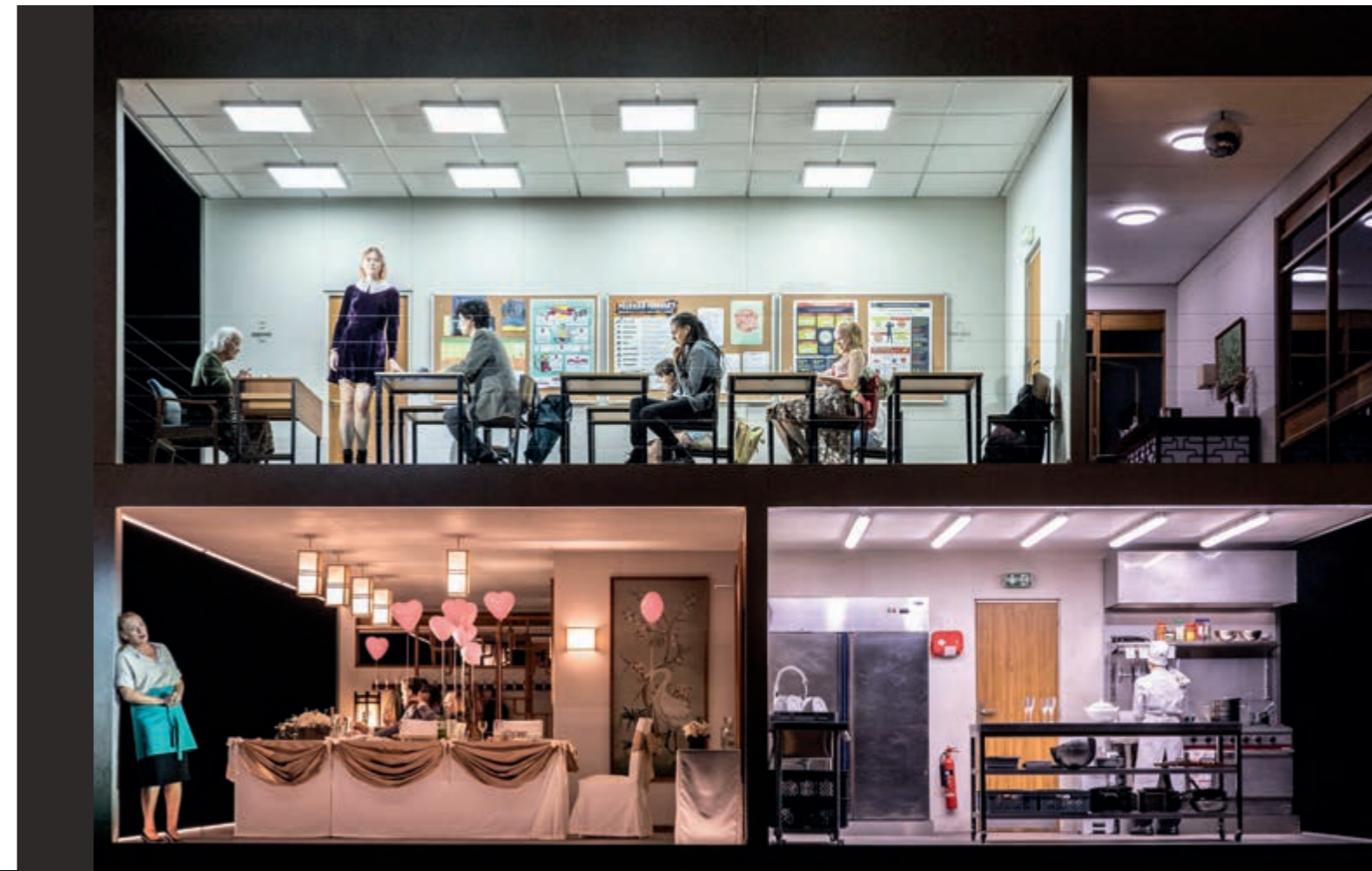
T.P.: Repertoire implies a certain notion of heritage. An inversion has been at work since the early 20th century: whereas creation used to be given greater importance than repertoire, works from the past tend to be increasingly produced, and there are fewer and fewer contemporary works. A work enters the repertoire when it is performed a certain number of times over the years. It is extracted from its original production and the tours that were associated with it, and is revived elsewhere, in other productions, with other co-production circuits... and this takes place over time. Messiaen's *Saint François d'Assise* is a good example of this. As far as Kaija Saariaho is concerned, one may argue that all her works in opera are in the process of becoming heritage: they are performed often and everywhere. Her first opera, *L'Amour de loin*, premiered in 2000 at the Salzburg Festival, is already regularly performed in other productions. As for *Innocence*, which premiered last year, it will be some time before we know whether the work will become repertoire, but there is every reason to believe that it will too. This is actually quite rare in contemporary creation!

N.E.: Where does the desire for a new creation lie? With a composer, with a book?

T.P.: Mostly the composer. But there are two quite distinct types of creation at the Festival. The most common is a strong relationship initiated by Pierre Audi with a composer, which will be at the origin of long-term projects. The other entry point is more experimental, it functions on a project basis and is aimed at younger and less established artists. These two creative processes coexist at the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence.

N.E.: How did they materialize this year?

T.P.: Pascal Dusapin was commissioned by the Paris Opera to write a work based on the figure of Dante and the *Divine Comedy*, with a libretto by Frédéric Boyer. This is a representative project, one that is a long time in the making and deals with one of European culture's major works. It will be directed by Claus Guth and conducted by Kent Nagano. Also premiered this year will be an opera by the young Lebanese composer Bushra El-Turk, who is starting to make a name for herself in the profession. This project came out of a network of European academies dedicated to opera creation. This is another interesting aspect of the Festival: ensuring that future generations are trained and emerge. We have an academy with residencies for composition, chamber music, opera and so on. This Academy is part of a European network initiated by the Festival, called ENOA (European Network of Opera Academies), a place for incubating projects. The one



I'm talking about, *Woman at Point Zero*, is quite an engaged work: an opera by five women – composer, librettist, director, video artist and conductor – based on an adaptation of a story by the recently deceased Egyptian feminist Nawal El Saadawi. It deals with the place of women in Egyptian society at the time, a situation that is necessarily extended into our own times. In addition to the subject matter, which is treated in a universal way, it also raises the question of the place of women in opera's creative processes today. We are aware of the difficulties they encounter, and are trying to overcome the sometimes strong resistances that persist in the world of classical music. So, we have two creations that are quite typical: on the one hand, an opera by a well-known composer, with a very ambitious creation process, based on a work that is part of our heritage. And on the other, a creation closer to musical theatre, with brilliant members of the new generation, in a project that asserts its political commitment, with a small ensemble of instrumentalists belonging

to the European, Eastern, and Middle Eastern traditions. This also speaks volumes about dialogue between cultures through music and the will to renew the genre.

N.E.: So, is the Festival d'Aix also a laboratory?

T.P.: Exactly. We must continue the beautiful adventure of opera as a total and magnificent art, but we also want to provide a focus for reflection on the question which drives us all: what is opera today, and what will it be tomorrow? We need to tackle new subjects, invent new artistic languages, build new collaborative circuits, test new ways of working. These two aspects coexist. ■

Left: *Les Mille Endormis* by Adam Maor (1983), libretto and direction by Yonatan Levy. Festival d'Aix-en-Provence 2019
Photo credit: Patrick Berger / ArtcomPress

Top: *Innocence* by Kaija Saariaho (1952), opera in five acts, directed by Simon Stone, libretto by Safi Oksanen.
Aix-en-Provence Festival 2021.
Photo credit: Jean-Louis Fernandez

"PAPILLON NOIR", A TEXT IN SEARCH OF ITS VOICE

An interview with writer **YANNICK HAENEL**, by Nadine Eghels



Nadine Eghels: You're a writer, and you've written a libretto for an opera called *Papillon noir* for the composer Yann Robin. How did this proposal come about?

Yannick Haenel: I met Yann Robin at the Villa Médicis where we both stayed in 2008-2009. From our combined love of contemporary music and literature came a desire to work together and to do the folly that is an opera. So I wrote the voice of a woman for a monodrama.

N.E.: Was the theme defined?

Y.H.: There was the idea of sexual indecision, perhaps this woman had been a man. At first, I'd placed this long monologue under the aegis of David Bowie, but this reference was too overbearing. Yet the remains of a transformation emerge as this woman, in her moment of dying, not only remembers everything but also welcomes all the men and women who have been her lovers in a hallucination. I wanted her desire to encompass the whole world and not just half of it. One of the movements in this text is a constant flow, where everything happens. Like in writing; you're in the dark, in the unknown, you don't know what's going to happen and little by little something comes forth through this darkness. In this case, it's a voice, which is seen as light. We wanted the scene to be in the dark, with dotted lights like little fireflies, lights on this woman's face, which would gradually fade away, and in the end, only a butterfly would remain, that had turned black. She had to talk all the time, that's what was keeping her alive. Like the light keeps the butterfly alive. It's a voice that resists its silencing.

N.E.: What did you want to represent?

Y.H.: I wanted to represent the unrepresentable, the moment of death. I imagined representing this through language, which gradually becomes weaker and finally breaks down. She speaks, the words become very poor, like in Beckett's work... and then she falls silent.

N. E.: How did she come to this?

Y.H.: She goes home in the evening, picks up the phone, talks to her mother, and says she's just been hit by a car. She's alone, doesn't want to go out again, pours herself a glass of wine. She's had an accident but she's fine... although it revives old pains. In fact, she's dead. I wanted the audience to get a sense of it, little by little. We drew inspiration from the Tibetan Book of the Dead in writing both the score and the libretto. And from the bardo. It's a corridor that opens up at the very moment of physical death, or just after it. The soul, or spirit, is still in a kind of indecision. This is limbo. In the Tibetan Book of the Dead, there are several diminishing degrees of consciousness, each with its colour. This allowed Yann Robin to introduce different timbres into his music, to colour it. On stage, there's a choir, which reads Sanskrit. This image of the bardo provided me with the interior scenography I needed to create this fiction. A woman at home, who thinks she's at home, who is talking to her mother... but is in fact alone. She takes small steps through the darkness of her flat, and in this corridor that opens onto the distance she maintains with herself, she must gradually leave what attaches her to her body. She walks along the thin wall that separates her from herself.

N.E.: Where does this sentence is written in bold in the libretto come from?

Y.H.: This sentence has been with me for years: "I tread lightly along the thin wall that separates me from myself". It's an

enigmatic sentence that I carry with me. I've been told that it was by Heidegger, or Kierkegaard. I haven't found it in either of their oeuvres, but I have written it into all of my books. Because writing, to me, is like unfolding this sentence, whose meaning I'm not sure I understand. Sometimes I tend to see it as something favourable, a beautiful plan, while at other times I see in it the death it heralds. It's both a dream and a nightmare. It's the very movement of writing.

N.E.: Was this the first time you wrote for a voice?

Y.H.: Yes... I enjoyed it immensely.

N.E.: Did you know Yann Robin's music?

Y.H.: It's a very violent music, that's been described as spectral. It's all ruptures, it's saturated, it defies chaos. It's a material that I enjoyed breaking down. As I wrote this text, I gradually started wanting to stop using punctuation. In the inexorable movement that sucks this woman in, I replaced all the scansion with dashes. While typing the text, which was initially handwritten, there was a kind of pleasure in typing these dashes, which were both a gap and something of a revival... and that became a rhythm. Gradually I saw more and more dashes appear as her words thinned out, as she spoke less and less and gave way to silence. I had the impression I could feel her heartbeat slowing down, while the text was drawn towards something mad. A call from ahead. Like the sirens' call. At the end there were only dashes, and soon there were no more words, only a horizontal graph, like an encephalogram that became flatter and flatter.

N.E.: Does the writing come from the moment of death rather than from memories or accumulated emotions?

Y.H.: Yes, it's an unreasonable intuition, but it is what brought to life this brief text – written in a flash of inspiration. Usually, one

feels like you're being traversed by language coming from a deep source. This time, inexplicably, I felt like I was moving towards a point that was the beginning. A point that was located ahead of me, which coincided with this woman's death. As if the moment of death, from which there is no return, was raptuous, a kind of ecstasy which, mirrored back on us, would yield all the energy of existence. I hinged this little theory together with the one that claims that one relives one's life in their moment of dying. And I introduced moments of acceleration to bring back these epiphanies. It turned out that the text would be impossible to sing, but from the start I had imagined spoken word instead.



N.E.: Was this agreed upon with the composer beforehand?

Y.H.: Yes, I had total freedom, and I couldn't see myself writing arias and recitatives! The plan was for the soprano to say the text without singing it, but in a measured way. All the words, all the moments of this text were introduced in a score and were rhythmically set. The singer says the text, but with the score. It's a show revolving entirely around a voice that finds its music. The moment of death gives rise to a voice, and it is as if this voice ignites music... A woman loses herself in her being and speaks to we don't know whom. And behind it, an orchestra and choirs seem to be born from this voice.

N.E.: How did you work together? Did you write the whole text first?

Y.H.: In the first phase, when we agreed on the project, I showed some passages to Yann Robin, but he composed the music only after I'd handed him the whole libretto. Although I knew his musical world, I wrote not according to the music but according to the textual logic. He then sowed a musical dress onto this body of text. Nothing was taken away from it, he drew his soundscape from the text. For me, it is also a piece of literature; I intended to publish it and it had to be able to exist independently from the opera. It's a text in search of its voice. ■

Views of the opera Papillon noir, text Yannick Haenel, music Yann Robin, directed by Arthur Nauzyciel. Soprano Élise Chauvin and conductor Léo Warynski during the performances at the Théâtre National de Bretagne in 2021.

Photo credit: Gwendal Le Flem / TNB

DANCE IS A COMMITMENT

An interview with **BRIGITTE LEFÈVRE**, former director of dance at the Opéra National de Paris (1995-2014), by Nadine Eghels

Nadine Eghels: You left your position as Director of Dance at the Opéra National de Paris in 2014. What were your main objectives in this crucial position?

Brigitte Lefèvre: Life is an accumulation of layers, and mine too is marked by important stages. Entering dance school, joining the corps de ballet, becoming aware that art is very well represented in this magnificent institution, the Paris Opera, but wanting to share it with a wider public. At a certain point I realized that I could put everything I'd learned as a dancer at the opera into practice by leaving the institution. I opened the door, and I never closed it again. This allowed me to found a contemporary dance company, with just a few dancers. I set it up in La Rochelle, in a spirit and framework of decentralization, with the ambition of reaching out to the most diverse audiences, those most far removed from the world of art, in prisons, hospitals, schools... No one asked us to do this, we felt obliged to do it, it was a natural part of our practice. Everything I'd learned, I had to give back. I liked this multiplicity, which always started from the same source – the energy of an artist, joined by others, to make life more intense for everyone. After a few years of work in this company, where I loved dancing and choreographing, a new and very talented generation arrived, supported by the Ministry of Culture under Jack Lang. And shortly afterwards, I was asked to join this Ministry of Culture, which surprised me greatly... but I agreed.

N.E.: It was a big change...

B.L.: It taught me a lot about the administrative workings of culture. The government soon changed and François Léotard appointed me as a delegate for dance. He had made the bold choice of picking an artist rather than calling on someone trained at the ENA. It was fascinating. I found myself defending artistic projects, putting them in contact with the national education system; together we created a degree awarded by the State. I contributed not only to the development of choreographic centres but also to giving companies the opportunity to make a name for themselves. I had a wonderful team around me that supported me in these projects. Governments changed but I stayed for a good number of years, continuing this work between the field and ministers' cabinets. All this formed another base. But the most important thing is what I learned from opera, both when going to it and when leaving it.

N.E.: And you came back...

B.L.: When the Opéra Bastille opened, the house of opera became considerably larger. I was then called by Jack Lang, who asked me to become general administrator of the Opéra Garnier. I didn't hesitate much; the call of the house was strong. At the time, the director of dance was Patrick Dupont, Jean-Paul Cluzel was the general director, and Jean-Marie Blanchard was the general administrator of Bastille. We'd taken an oath to speak frankly to one another in the event of a problem. This alliance was important because the two structures were being built together to form this Opera entity, with its two major theatres and all that it represented culturally, artistically, and administratively. Everything that was at stake was shared, as was our concern to address a broader audience, and a will to achieve economies of scale – which never really materialized. Then the government changed again. Hugues Gall arrived and completely changed the organization chart. As an all-powerful director, he proposed that I become the director of dance. I had found the position of general administrator interesting, it had been an opportunity to understand how the institution worked and to contribute to its evolution from within. An approach that was not revolutionary, but evolutionary. But I was so happy to be back in the field of choreography! I stayed there for almost twenty years.

N.E.: What have been the main challenges of your mission over these years?

B.L.: I had phenomenal confidence in Hugues Gall, and he trusted me too. His action was seminal, laying the foundations for what the Paris Opera has become. Hugues had immense experience



with opera, he had come from Geneva, and I knew what fieldwork was like. I was aware of the honour I was being granted and at the same time of the responsibility I was taking on. We had to provoke unusual encounters, like that of Paul Andreu and a young choreographer Nicolas Paul, and to be careful not to disconnect the golden palace from the field of experimentation. We had to follow up on its story and make sure it continued onwards; to find a way to fit projects into budgets and schedules... because the real head of the opera is the person in charge of schedules. They are the master of time. We drove all this with modern management methods. What's great about the opera is this combination of skills, the will to move forward, the demand for quality. Opera requires total dedication. It's a house that has its rules, and where social partners sometimes oppose artistic management. There are very formalized procedures, but there's also plenty of room for invention. It's a place of meeting where people are together and make things happen together. You get there and you know that something is going to happen. Even in the face of organizational issues, planning problems, and so on, the know-how that is gathered there must radiate out so that it can be shared and transmitted. Always with a view to excellence. These are the challenges we face.

N.E.: What is the difference between the opera's ballet and a choreographic centre with the same resources?

B.L.: Season after season, its dance school allows the Paris Opera to constitute its corps de ballet. Even though the school is often criticized for its rigour – which is nevertheless indispensable – having it within the opera is a huge advantage.

It has opened up to young people from different backgrounds, who enthusiastically commit body and soul to it. For dance is a commitment. Nureyev anchored ballets at the Paris Opera which are now part of the grand academic repertoire. Even though he was sometimes criticized for his demanding approach to dance, his choreographies have left their mark on history, bridging the gap between the past and our times. Yet this does not mean that contemporary works should be excluded, and from the outset I was particularly attentive to that.

N.E.: What does the Opéra de Paris have to offer dancers that other places don't have?

B.L.: The feeling of belonging to a great house, steeped in history, where one also meets singers, stage designers, musicians, directors, technicians... Even though they are fairly sectorized, all the artistic disciplines are present there. And dancers rub shoulders with them. Opera is total art. We must continue to develop it so that it also reflects its time. This is the challenge of the magnificent house that is the Paris Opera. Everyone should know this and support it. ■

MAINTAINING BALANCE

An interview with bass-baritone **LAURENT NAOURI**, by Nadine Eghels



Laurent Naouri in *Madame Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini, libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, directed by Robert Wilson, at the Opéra Bastille in 2019.
Photo credit: Svetlana Loboff / Opéra national de Paris

Nadine Eghels: You're a bass baritone opera singer, you travel the world and the repertoire. How did you come to this practice?
Laurent Naouri: My musical vocation came from identification rather than some inner motivation. I've been in this profession for thirty years and I was lucky enough to have an extraordinary music teacher in secondary school. I've learned a lot through a process of identifying, wanting to resemble the teacher whom I found so inspiring. And I met some great teachers who marked my life, in different fields. I was a bad musician and pianist, but I dreamed of making music... Using my voice as an instrument was the only alternative!

N.E.: Was it a default choice then?

L.N.: I went in without much conviction... I studied engineering and took singing lessons at the same time. But I didn't feel at home in the scientific world and after three years I opted for the vocal path. I really learned by doing! I loved music but I didn't know

opera, and I didn't know that I would enjoy it so much. I came across it out of necessity. Coming from a vocal universe that was mostly informed by jazz and chanson, I had clichés about opera genre ... To me, opera was "fat people yelling". I went to see shows, and had revelations. For example, Luca Ronconi's staging of *Voyage à Rome*, which is filled to the brim with humour and fancy. Or Andrei Tarkovsky's production of *Boris Godunov* at Covent Garden, which also dazzled me. I remember the scene in which Boris goes crazy; he's in his study tripping on a carpet that has a map of Russia on it. That scene really resonates now.

N.E.: Which director did you start with?

L.N.: From my first professional performance, I met Pierre Constant. With his *Così fan tutte*, I got a feel of what a successful staging is like. It was a discovery for me. My concern was to tell a story as well as possible, and this first collaboration allowed me to do so. I learned to love this work, I never got tired of it. I'm fortunate enough to be in a vocal range for which there's an infinite variety of roles.

N.E.: What attracts you to a project: the role, the music, the general set-up?

L.N.: With very few exceptions, we are the employees of opera houses. When I'm told about a project that will premiere in three years at the *Metropolitan Opera*, I have no idea who will conduct it, and sometimes I don't even know who will direct it, let alone design the set. It's up to the General Managers of opera houses to compile their programme with the people they want to bring together – and who are available! This way of working dates from the time when opera General Managers were impresarios. They're still very attached to this prerogative to this day. As they have the opportunity to travel and see shows all over the world, they have a catalogue in mind. As a result, a singer may be imposed on a director who doesn't find them suited for the part, or on a conductor who doesn't feel that they have the same perception of the work. We have to work with that! I wish there was some intermediate position between the organization of a theatre, where directors build their artistic team, and that of an opera house, where the General Manager brings everyone together. The director and the conductor should be able to coordinate more, get together and agree on a joint project. Unfortunately, this doesn't happen often. Schedule constraints make it difficult, but more communication would produce more interesting artistic results. I did a revival in Japan of an opera created in Aix, and when I heard about it I called my partner of then, but she didn't know about it; they had offered the role to another singer without asking her first if she was interested. Let's face it, we kind of are luxury cattle! Our working conditions are fantastic, so it is assumed that we shouldn't complain.

N.E.: What kind of role do you prefer?

L.N.: I like them to be varied! At my age, I often assume a father figure, and I've also played a lot of bad guys and devils. "The bad and the dad". I'm always happy to do anything but that! Of course, putting on an opera always involves risk and labels serve to reassure producers and audiences alike. I don't protest, but I do take a closer look at any proposal that will take me off this beaten track. It opens up the range of my possibilities and challenges me. I'm entering a decade of my life in which proposals will rely heavily on experience, and I know I have to be satisfied with what I'm offered. Some directors I like are happy to work with me, and this leads to repeat collaborations. I have little reason to complain. But I'm not in charge of organizing my own career!

N.E.: How much of your work is contemporary opera and how much is classical?

L.N.: What interests me is novelty. The last contemporary opera I performed was *Trompe la mort* after *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* at the Paris Opera. The composer was Luca Francesconi, who also wrote the libretto, and drew inspiration from the end of *Lost Illusions*. It was an original idea of the Paris Opera to have these adaptations of classic texts; it's always stimulating to do something new with something familiar. We were lucky enough to have an extraordinary staging by Guy Cassiers, with the exceptional Suzanna Mälkki as conductor, and an ideal working atmosphere. Mine was an easy role to learn. However, there's no denying that there was a real problem with

the contemporary language of its music. It's very strange to see seasoned, experienced, intelligent musicians being totally baffled by the work they're given!

N.E.: Was it too far from any frame of reference?

L.N.: The 20th century has seen an extremely broad public take an interest in contemporary art. People discover it, perceive it, reject it, or embrace it, but they frequent it regardless. For me, the crucial question is that of reference points. Even in the most conceptual contemporary art, there is always a framework within which to organize one's perception. With music, one is moved as the work unfolds; the frame no longer exists, there's no time to take a step back. Filling in for the frame is something like a pulse: the inner beat that marks time. A composer writes with reference to a flowing tempo, which the conductor then transposes. If I sing what is written, the only common time is my inner time, which I synchronize with the conductor's and the composer's perception. But for the audience, there is no longer any pulse, any framework. Henceforth, their only way into the music is either an orchestration effect or the staging. The composer writes with reference to their inner tempo, and the performer reproduces it according to the tempo which is rendered by the conductor's baton, but only these three protagonists are in relation with an inner tempo; the audience has no access to it. Fortunately, this is not the case with all contemporary music, but I think that in Europe this has been a major stumbling block, which we are only starting to overcome now. The composer must be aware of the need for their inner rhythm to connect with that of everyone else, without them having to read the score.

N.E.: How does that apply to the singer?

L.N.: It's difficult for the singer, who has to perform and can't keep the conductor in sight at all times to follow the tempo. So, trying to avoid pulsations leads to another pitfall, and the result is devoid of any meaning. To be intelligible, speech must rely on elements of common grammar. One part is necessarily predictable because it is derived from the shared syntax; another unpredictable part constitutes the creative act. If one only does the creative act with no regard for the shared syntax, the result is incomprehensible; and if one is only concerned with the common syntax, it is insignificant. It's like a pendulum... You can fall to one side or the other. You have to maintain balance. And a certain degree of humility.

N.E.: How do you handle the libretto?

L.N.: Opera as a genre has evolved a lot over the centuries. At the beginning it was intended for very small audiences of learned people. As it was aimed at a select audience, it could combine sophisticated music and elaborate poetry. Then the focus turned to the music, and librettos became simpler because they had contained too much information in relation to audiences' size and cultural level. When you are in front of a larger audience, a theatre with five hundred people, you have to reduce the amount of information that is given per second. So, if the music is sophisticated, the text is reduced to the essential. In around 1830, with the last form of belcanto, just before Verdi, supreme precedence was given to voice. Then, with Wagner and then the late Verdi and the 20th century, librettos were made denser

again. And the music was all over the place, as were all artistic forms around that time. It was an explosion. Music and librettos became more complex, in works performed before 2000 people, where 17th century audiences were typically no more than 20 to 40 people. This is an enormous change.

N.E.: Nowadays, singers are also actors. They sing and act. How has your practice evolved in recent years, with the new technologies that have taken over stages?

L.N.: I entered this profession in the 1990s, at a time when the revolution was underway. More and more directors were coming from theatre, which suited me because I've always liked this kind of challenge. I'm more interested in performance than in



Laurent Naouri (left) in *Samson et Dalila* by Camille Saint-Saëns, libretto by Ferdinand Lemaire, directed by Darko Tresnjak. Performances at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 2018.
Photo credit: Ken Howard / Met Opera

perfection, and it was obvious to me that I would act. On the other hand, the fact of capturing everything, of wanting to keep everything, is almost a negation of the ephemerality of theatre. Like filming everything up close, ever closer. A close-up on a singer's face is seldom beautiful. So I pretend it doesn't exist. I try to forget about the cameras and the ambient microphones. I don't take them into account in my acting or in my singing. It may be good for sharing, but it's certainly not good for art. It's like breaking an unspoken pact between the audience and the performers, who'll put in 200% effort on stage, and only a small part of this will be perceived. But that's how it is, and that small part contains something immense. When this immense something gets across, it's incredible. That's the magic of live performance. ■

Nadine Eghels: How did you get into stage design and opera design in particular?

Aurélie Maestre: I come from a village near Marseille; my connection with the world of opera wasn't something I inherited. When I was about 8 or 9, our school teacher took us to the opera to see *Lakmé*. I was completely fascinated by it, I felt like I was made for that world... and then I forgot about it. I studied science, then I became interested in cinema, and finally in the visual arts. I was admitted at Arts Déco, where a scenography section had opened a year earlier. I followed this course under the guidance of Richard Peduzzi, with whom I would later work as an assistant at the Aix-en-Provence Festival. After I graduated, my academic supervisor, Guy-Claude François – who is owed the credit for many magnificent sets for stages and cinema alike – encouraged me to apply for the Aix Festival, which was reopening with Stéphane Lissner and a new team. The technical director, Félix Lefèvre, hired me and that's how I found myself in the opera world that I'd dreamed of as a child.

N.E.: How long did you stay there?

A.M.: I joined for the 1998-99 season, and that's where I sharpened my teeth! I worked in the design office, followed construction, and studied all the technical details for five seasons. And above all I was fortunate to work there with set designers and directors who taught me a lot.

N.E.: How did you become a freelance set designer?

A.M.: After ten years or so, I felt that I was ready to leave my job as an assistant and focus on my own creation. With a few companions, we set off. I worked with three or four directors, especially Vincent Huguet for opera, Clément Hervieux-Léger and Daniel San Pedro with the Compagnie des Petits champs for theatre, and I recently started working on ballet with Bruno Boucher who directs the Ballets du Rhin. It's very interesting because for dancers, the set is an obstacle. So you have to look at it differently.

N.E.: How is it significantly different to design an opera set, that will be used by singers?

A.M.: The scale is radically different, in terms of both volumes and budgets. Secondly, working with singers means helping them with their voices. In theatre you can have an empty stage with just a few elements placed on it and the actors will be very comfortable with it; in opera, if you put the singers on an empty stage, it will be a real ordeal for them because there's nothing to reflect their voice. You have to put in solid elements to reflect sound. You need walls, angles. All sound-absorbent materials are forbidden. Even though singers have evolved a lot now; they can even sing upside down! The constraints are not the same, but the budgets are bigger, which helps to find solutions.

N.E.: As an opera set designer, what is your relationship with music, how does it inspire you, does it influence your creation?

A.M.: First of all, I love music! When I work on an opera, I take it

very much into account. The music gives a colour, expresses a feeling, translates a tension that can't be in contradiction with those that will emerge from the set. However, the music often comes in very late; we have to design the set and sometimes even the staging before the music is finished! We then rely only on the libretto, and make last-minute adjustments if necessary. This is what happened for *Des éclairs*, the opera that Philippe Hersant composed on a libretto by Jean Echenoz, based on his novel with the same name.

N.E.: The music came late?

A.M.: Yes, we had Echenoz and Hersant's revised libretto, but not the music. We were moving along by trial and error. The opera had no fewer than 27 sets in an hour and forty minutes! We didn't know if we would be given time for transitions, if the music would be loud or soft, if there would be mechanical sounds that could fit in with certain elements of the set or if we should ignore them... it was quite confusing!

N.E.: How does your work proceed?

A.M.: For me, the first stage is purely creative, it's designing the set. I imagine atmospheres, I start to draw sketches and make small models – they're much better suited to scenography work than 3D projections. I then present these models and sketches to the director, and a back and forth with them starts. Sometimes they push me to go further, sometimes they're reluctant and it's up to me to convince them that my proposals are relevant. Once we're in agreement, I make a final model and technical plans, sectional views of all the elements, drawn in their context, as informed by back and forth exchanges with the technician.

Then the building starts in the workshop and here again I have a role to play. I monitor the progress, we readjust if necessary while keeping an eye on the budget, we find solutions or alternatives. Finally, there's the aesthetic work, painting, sculpture, and so on. Obviously, there have to be several phases of adaptation between the model and the reality. Only when you finally get to

Les Éclairs, opera by Philippe Hersant, based on the first lyrical libretto by Jean Echenoz, scenography by Aurélie Maestre. Performances at the Opéra Comique in 2021. Photo credit: Aurélie Maestre

MAKING THE FAKE REALER THAN THE REAL

An interview with set designer **AURÉLIE MAESTRE**, by Nadine Eghels



the stage do you realize whether you've got it right, whether there are elements you won't be using, and so on. Which means you're still adjusting the set during rehearsals, to make sure it suits the singers and is really consistent with the staging. But these are micro-adjustments; everything should be designed beforehand.

N.E.: Do new technologies play an important role in your work?
A. M.: Hardly... but I can't ignore them either. In the staging of *Don Giovanni* for which I am currently designing sets in Berlin, we're planning to show scrolling on dating websites, to show telephone screens with message exchanges, photos, etc. New technologies should not be avoided, but perhaps we should rather leave more room for the imagination. I think the use of these technologies is more relevant in films or video games. Opera is not the place for realism.



N.E.: Sometimes their use can be justified, to evoke a flashback, a dream, a foreign place...

A.M.: For sure, but often it's done in a lazy way. That said, in the recent production of *Les Damnés* at the Comédie française, I found that the screens, the feedback capture or the close-ups of different scenes added an extra dimension to the show by allowing for a diversity of viewpoints. But one has to admit that it's often used as an easy way out of a problem; we resort to video because we can't find any other way to evoke something. Yet theatre has so many resources to offer!

N.E.: Theatre, and opera in particular, is the realm of the fake. How do you feel about the use of "real" materials - which are sometimes very expensive - for sets?

A.M.: There was a time when opera sets were outrageously fake. Very crude faux marble. Exaggerated trompe l'oeil. It was so fake that it was grotesque. And hardly credible. Set designers like Richard Pedduzzi wanted to counter this trend drastically by, for example, creating their sets with real materials. Nowadays, a balance has been achieved. Opera is a place of total illusion. You need something fake. You can't tell from thirty metres away whether a marble is fake or real... but if you put in real marble, the audience can't even see that it's marble! For it to be perceived as marble from thirty metres away, it must be exaggeratedly marbled; therefore fake! And therein lies the magic of theatrical illusion: making the fake look realer than the real.

N.E.: But then, that's an issue for video recordings...

A.M.: Exactly! As most operas today are filmed and even streamed, the use of close-ups makes the faux marble look really fake. Horribly fake. With total realism on the singers' faces

and bodies, we get vivid falseness on the sets. This poses a real problem. The set designer will have to choose whether to make a set for the audience in the theatre or for the one watching the show from their sofa. I work for the eye of the spectator, not for the camera. But I try to find the right balance between an optical illusion and its rendering on film, and I don't mind showing quite a few rough spots on camera. I chose my side and I continue to prioritize the live audience - which seems fair, for live performances!

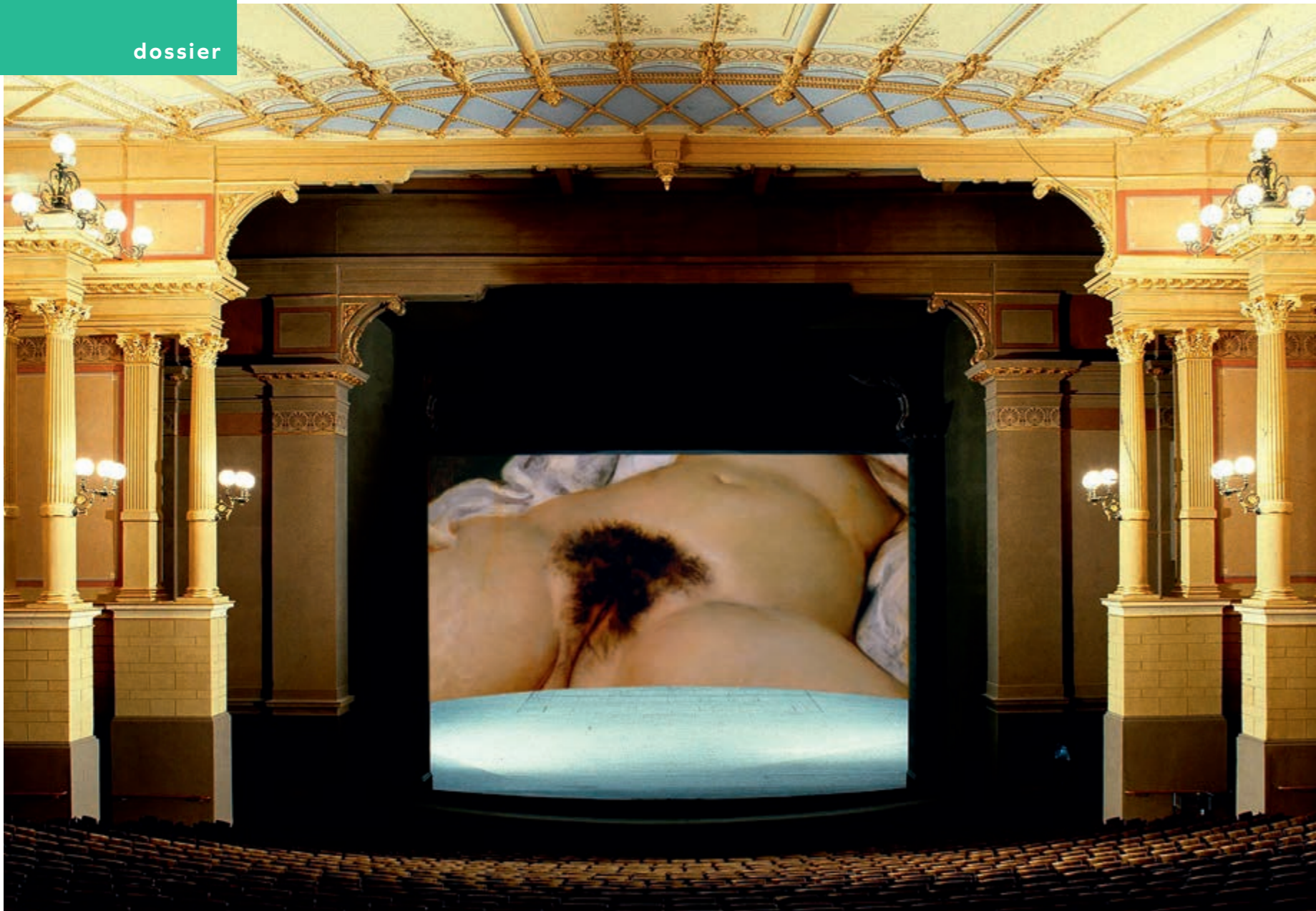
N.E.: In any case, the camera already introduces falseness through its framing and selection.

A.M.: Nothing in opera is made for the camera, neither the set, nor the costumes, nor the make-up. Nor the singing. Everything that happens on stage is faced with this trend and we really must resist it, even though it brings a wider audience into the world of opera and makes a lot of money for opera houses. I don't know what the solution is; it's a challenge today's set designers must address. ■



Left page, top:
Les Contes d'Hoffmann, opera by Jacques Offenbach (1881), libretto by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, conducted by Marc Minkowski, directed by Vincent Huguet, set design by Aurélie Maestre. Produced by and performed at the Opéra National de Bordeaux, 2019.
 Photo credit: DR

Left and opposite: *Les Éclairs*, an opera by Philippe Hersant, based on Jean Echenoz's first opera libretto, scenography by Aurélie Maestre. Performances at the Opéra Comique in 2021.
 Photo credit: Aurélie Maestre



“ So many contortions were needed to obtain this coveted seat, to open these enchanted doors, to be able to attend the 2026 *Ring*: the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary, in the famous wooden hall at the top of the Sacred Hill, where so many vicissitudes have been traversed by the wind of a spirit that has never ceased to be new – that of Wagner. A completely new team has been chosen to bring this work back to life. The work holds secrets still, and the team has neither given any interviews, nor met anyone or appeared anywhere. We don't know the faces of these Daft Punk of theatre and music, nor where they come from, nor what they think, nor, especially, what they are going to show to an audience that has flocked from all over the world without knowing anything about what they would see – except that, as soon as the *Festspielhaus* goes darker and then pitch black, as silence invades the space with unspeakable expectation, a low *E flat* major will rise from the hidden pit, which will be covered, according to Wagner's wish, to give a molten-together feel to the sounds that escape it, ricochet off the back of the stage, and return to the hall like an imperious river.

Many times, many people have tried try to find out what was going on in the theatre, but it was as if the venue were armoured. One could only access it after going through two checks and taken an oath not to reveal anything about what they would see when the singers, musicians, technicians, stage managers, props people – all those professionals that concretely weave a show's fabric after it was designed in an artist's mind – met in the canteen, behind the theatre, or in the alleys, the gardens, the car parks. A few fine minds put on conspiratorial faces to make people believe that, as privileged people or friends of the venue's gods, they knew a lot and a half about this mysterious show – about which they really couldn't say anything when pressed further... In fact, nothing has filtered out.

And the darkness came.

The *E flat*, the famous *E flat*, kept us waiting for long, breathless seconds, our ears wide open, our whole body on the alert, all mobilized in an interminable silence – perhaps thirty or forty seconds, hardly more, but what a wait!

The eight double basses launched into the famous *E flat*, the “level zero” of music, the surge of the sound world that transports our immobile selves so far away. Then three bassoons joined in, like a rumbling emerging from who knows where, from the depths of our being as well as from a chthonian murmur that had been waiting for several eternities for the opportunity

BAYREUTH 2026

By writer and music journalist **ALAIN DUAULT**

to awaken, unfold, emerge, as if this droning were finally surfacing. Then a first horn adorned this pedestal *E flat*, that remained obstinately held, followed by a second horn, then by all eight horns, always leaning on the double basses' harmonic foundation. Little by little, all the instruments awakened in this multiplying portrait of a blossoming world, like a rising that would no longer stop, as the superposition of musical layers were all, for one hundred and thirty-six bars, laid on top of the initial *E flat* chord, still obstinately held, precisely highlighting the proliferation of the world at its origin.

And, while the first hundred and thirty-five bars had let a thick, blue and green but opaque and almost ominous mist rise on the stage, at the hundred and thirty-sixth bar, an intense sun broke through

this mist and suddenly revealed, across the entire back of the stage, immense and unexpected, a formidable woman's sex, offered, radiating with all its palpable splendour, flesh, skin, black hairs crowning a slightly open slit: *The Origin of the World* by Gustave Courbet.

I had seen this painting before, a long time ago, at Jacques Lacan's home on rue de Lille, where he had agreed to meet me to discuss a text of his, published in 1965, *Hommage fait à Marguerite Duras, du ravissement de Lol V. Stein*. I had been ushered into his midnight blue velvet antechamber where I waited for him until he emerged from a barely visible door: “Monsieur”, he said in that voice that I knew so well, as I attended the seminar he taught. He nodded gently and gestured towards his office to invite me in. It was a beautiful room cluttered with books, a few unusual objects, and boxes. I walked in with emotion – and suddenly, thrown before my eyes, was *this* painting, this famous painting by Courbet of which I had of course only vaguely seen reproductions in passing, and which was there, on the wall, *alive*. Smaller than in my imagination, but so present, almost pulsating, breathing, smelling. Lacan was standing behind me when I approached it: “A mystery, isn't it?”. I was transfixed.

And here it was again, on the tail end of this long harmonic trampling, this formidable erection of sound, this birth of a world, of *the world*, while I was carried away by these waves of an orchestra which little by little unfolded its skin, deployed

its muscles, flexed its flesh before the Rhinemaidens launched into their babble. I was taken back to this memory of my first encounter with the painting and my initiation to vertigo, so many years earlier, at the same time as here, on this sacred stage of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, this sublime sex, open, enlarged, deployed in majesty, was an invitation to the journey that Wagner's music was going to tell.

The hundredth anniversary of the *Ring* in 1976, driven by the imagination of Patrice Chéreau and his set designer, Richard Peduzzi, also used a painting for *The Valkyrie*: Arnold Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead*. Once again, in 2026, for this hundred and fiftieth anniversary, a painting was used to project a different light on Wagner's *Ring*.

In 1976, death, in 2026, sex: nothing unexpected, as these are the universal totems of knowledge and understanding. So why does “scandal” still emanate from these reversals of the gaze? The 1976 Centenary production of the *Ring* relied on a combination of endeavours to historicize the opera and emphasize its close relationship to death. That was what made it unforgettable. The display of a powerful sexualization, as a revelation of an unknown flip side, opened this 150th anniversary production of the *Ring* this summer of 2026.

We all thought hard to decipher the mysteries of what turned out to be a subtle penetration of the unconscious minds of both Wagner and our contemporaries, the zeitgeist of questions stirred up over the last decade by the many sexual minorities who strive to assert their truths. The essence of a successful show is to combine the questions raised by the work with those raised by the times of its performance. From *The Isle of the Dead* to *The Origin of the World*, time has passed. Yet this raw image, woven onto the music, remains “a mystery”, does it not?

Now, in 2026, for the bicentenary, what will it be? ■

Left page:

The auditorium of the Bayreuth Festival Hall (Bayreuther Festspielhaus).

Gustave Courbet (1819 - 1877), *The Origin of the World* (detail), 1866, oil on canvas, 46.3 x 55.4 cm. Musée d'Orsay

Photo credit: DR

BAYREUTH, BUILDING A DREAM

By CATHERINE DUAULT, biographer and contributor to the website *Opera-online.com*

“ You go [to Bayreuth] as you please, on foot, on horseback, by coach, by bicycle, by train, but the true pilgrim should go on his knees”: every Wagnerian knows this famous opening to *Le voyage artistique à Bayreuth*. Combining humour with a connoisseur’s fervour, musicologist Albert Lavignac has created a valuable guide which has the particularity of bringing together practical advice and analyses of the operas that one will hear in the mythical Festspielhaus.

The foundation stone of this building, specially designed for Wagner’s operas, was laid on 22 May 1872, on the composer’s fifty-ninth birthday. Will 21st-century festivalgoers follow in the footsteps of their 19th-century predecessors and, with the same devotion, climb the “sacred hill” on top of which the imposingly sober building stands? The “pilgrimage to Bayreuth” remains something of an initiatory journey, with its rites and enchantments that range from the most seemingly insignificant detail to symbols conveying the most ardent enthusiasm. The audience gathers to enter the hall at the signal of the orchestra’s brass section, which plays one of the scheduled opera’s *leitmotifs* from the Festspielhaus’ facade’s balcony. Everyone is dressed in very elegant clothes, as this is a solemn occasion. Should one enter Wagner’s universe as one would a religion? Sometimes it really feels like it – there are so many legends and memories around Bayreuth, not to mention the dangerous political ties and the family feuds his descendants have so skilfully kept alive.

When Richard Wagner made a stop in Bayreuth on 26 July 1835, he was only 22 years old. He had been appointed conductor in Magdeburg the previous year and had already written his first opera *The Fairies* (1834), which would not be premiered until five years after his death, two years before *The Ban on Love* (1836). The young composer was seduced by the landscape he discovered, although he had no inkling that Bayreuth would be the focal point of his entire oeuvre – his entire life in fact. As he saw the theatre as having a social and moral mission that went far beyond mere aesthetic issues, the need for a specific venue to perform his operas would soon become apparent to him. The Festspielhaus was built as the result of



much reflection, informed by his avid reading of philosophical and political-historical texts. As early as 1848, he had compiled all his proposals in a report entitled *Plan of Organization for a German National Theatre for the Kingdom of Saxony*. It contained the blueprint for the future Bayreuth Festival. From a mere entertainment, it elevated theatre to the dignity of a ceremony that should uplift the audience towards the Ideal.

After the failure of the 1849 revolution, in which he had actively participated, Wagner adopted a more radical point of view, and wished to see

lyrical theatre once again become a grand popular festival in the spirit of ancient Greek tragic performances. As early as 1850, he spoke of building what he imagined as “a very primitive type of theatre”, made only of beams and boards, where admission would be free. In November 1851, Wagner outlined his plans: “Only the revolution will bring to me the artists and the audience. ... At the Rhine, I will then set up a theatre, and invite people to a great dramatic festival ... I shall, in the course of four days, set up my whole work, with which I enable the people of the revolution to recognize the importance of this revolution, according to their noblest sense”.

But how could Wagner, who was always short on funds, carry out such a project? Where could he find the financial capacity to build this ideal venue for drama as a fusion of all the arts, destined to become the “work of art of the future”? This new musical drama was to mark a return to the ancient model while at the

same time reviving national sources. After *Tannhäuser* (1845), Wagner would stage only Germanic heroes who would embody the political ideal of the rebirth of the German nation. A decisive encounter would enable Wagner to make his dream a reality. In 1864, he met the young Ludwig II of Bavaria, who offered to become his protector and patron. Having been deeply moved by *Tannhäuser* (1845) and *Lohengrin* (1850), Ludwig II took a passionate interest in everything Wagner the genius did and thought, and truly regarded him as a living god. The composer immediately saw all the potential in such fervour and started to believe he could build the theatre where *The Ring of the Nibelung* would finally be performed in the best conditions possible.

The most prominent German architect of the time, Gottfried Semper, was soon asked to draw up plans for a future building, which was to be located in Munich. These early sketches, which never went beyond the project phase, already showed both of the current Festspielhaus’ main features. Semper changed the shape of the hall. It was no longer focused on *itself* – as are Italian theatres, where the hall mirrors society – but on *the stage*, the centre of the action. The orchestra pit was moved to a lower position, *below* the visual field. This newly designed hall was to be plunged into total darkness so that the audience could concentrate exclusively on the action on stage. Unfortunately, cost estimates amounted to a considerable sum! The Bavarian government put pressure on Ludwig II to refuse. The revelation of Wagner’s affair with Cosima von Bülow was a blow to the young king’s idealism, and he gave in to his advisors’ demands. In December 1865, Wagner was forced to leave Munich to settle in Tribschen, and his grand project seemed to be compromised.

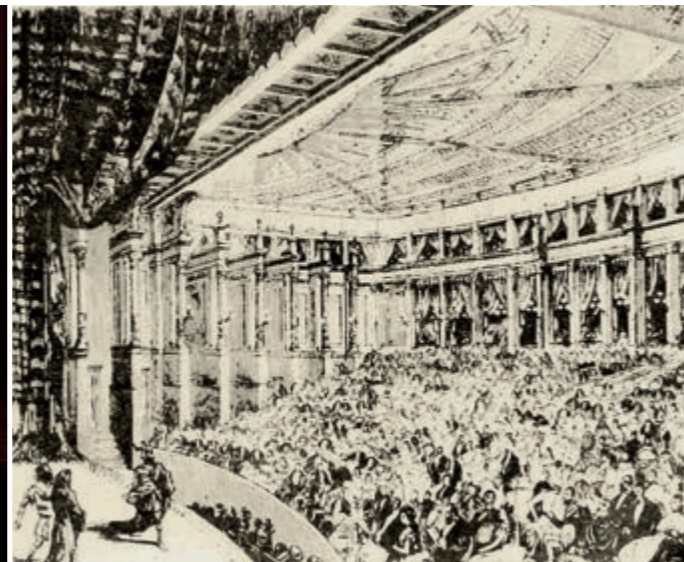
It was Cosima who revived Wagner’s dreams, as she wrote in her *Diary* on 5 March 1870. The young woman drew her lover’s attention to a small town in Franconia named Bayreuth. Wagner had fond memories of the place and immediately saw all the advantages it could present for his future project, which would develop far from the competition of big institutional venues. He also certainly saw the influence of Goethe and Schiller’s Weimar as an example to follow. By settling in a small city with a rich history, Wagner hoped to return to the heyday of German culture, which had always developed in the provinces. The immediate proximity to nature was clearly another decisive advantage, bearing in mind that his *Tetralogy* contains an uncompromising critique of industrial capitalism.

In April 1871, Wagner and Cosima made their final decision. On December 15, the city of Bayreuth donated to Wagner a plot of land it had recently acquired. But technicians pointed out that the water table was too high to build the theatre, which would need considerable foundations. The site would eventually be retained for the construction of the composer’s house, the Villa Wahnfried, in 1874. Wagner found another location for his theatre, a bit further outside the city, at the top of a hill that is still referred to as “sacred”, to this day. Later on, his detractors would gleefully point out that the chosen site was “not far from a lunatic asylum”.

Left page: Portrait of Richard Wagner in Munich in 1871 by Franz Hanfstaengl.

Top: Illustration of the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth, circa 1890. Wikimedia Commons





The plans for the theatre were drawn up by Otto Bruchwald, an architect from Leipzig, since Wagner had fallen out with Semper. Bruchwald met Wagner's expectations and satisfied his aspiration to the greatest architectural simplicity. It is worth keeping in mind that his first wish was for a *temporary* theatre. Wagner undertook to finance the construction himself, which began on 29 April 1872. On 22 May, on his 59th birthday, the foundation stone was laid, even though he did not have the necessary funds. This memorable day ended with a concert in which the composer conducted Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. For four years, Wagner gave concerts throughout Europe to finance his project. Patrons came to his aid, from the Khedive of Egypt to Sultan Abdul Asis and Hans von Bülow, who held no grudges against him for taking his wife. Numerous associations also made contributions. The city of Berlin offered Wagner a million marks to move his festival there, but he refused. In 1873, the financial situation was so catastrophic that the construction work had to stop. Ludwig II then released 100,000 thalers! He even added 75,000 thalers from his personal coffers for the construction of the Wahnfried.

The *temporary* building was completed in 1874. It shaped like a Greek theatre, as Wagner wanted. As he described it, everything was designed to create communion between the auditorium and the stage: "As soon as he takes his seat, the spectator today in Bayreuth finds himself in a real 'theatron', that is to say, an enclosure built exclusively for those who want to watch. (...) Nothing disturbs the view from the seat to the stage (...) Mysterious music (...) emerges like pure spirit from the "mystical abyss". This music transports the listener into a state of enthusiasm and rapture which makes him see the scene on stage as the truest image of life itself".

Thirty rows with a total of 1800 seats are arranged in a steeply sloping conical triangle. The acoustics are ideal because everything is made of brick and wood, including the comfortable seats. The orchestra pit, described as a "mystical abyss", is covered, allowing for a unique orchestra/voice merging. The resulting sounds were to be characteristic of *Parsifal* (1882), the only opera Wagner composed for Bayreuth. On 13 August 1876, the Festspielhaus was inaugurated with the *Ring*. The event was

huge, celebrities from across the world attended, the press went wild... but the deficit was abysmal: 148,000 marks! Once again, Ludwig II sent the necessary money, but Bayreuth remained closed until 1882, when it came back to life thanks to the triumph of *Parsifal*, which was performed 16 times to full houses. The gamble finally paid off, and financial balance was guaranteed. On 29 August, for its last performance, the old composer slipped into the pit during the change of scenery between the second and third acts. Wagner took Hermann Lévi's baton and conducted the entire third act!

On 14 September he left Bayreuth to rest in Venice, where he died five months later, on 13 February 1883. ■

Top left: The orchestra pit at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus is covered by a "hood" so that the orchestra is completely invisible to the audience. Wikimedia Commons / Frieria

Right: First performance of *Das Rheingold* on 13 August 1876. Wikimedia Commons

Symposium

NFTs, an evolution or a revolution in the art world?

On Tuesday 1 March 2022, at the André and Liliane Bettencourt Auditorium of the Institut de France, and following the report submitted by Secretary General of the Académie, Cyril Barthalois, the Sales council and the Académie des Beaux-Arts organized a colloquium on "NFTs¹, an evolution or a revolution in the art world – One year after Beeple²".

What room is there for artistic creation in the world of NFTs? What is the market for NFTs in France? What place is there for France in a world that is transnational by definition? What are crypto currencies and crypto assets? What is their role in the NFT trade? Who are the collectors? Can NFTs solve certain inequalities? What is their long-term value? Are there NFT validators? What is the process of authentication these works? What are the risks and challenges of this new market?

These were the questions addressed during the day of 1 March, which brought together 25 speakers in the auditorium of the Institut de France, before an audience of over 400 people, either in person or watching the streaming provided by the *Gazette de Drouot*: auctioneers, gallery owners, representatives of cultural institutions and relevant ministries, students, personalities from the art world, collectors, etc.

This symposium was organized on the same day as the promulgation of the law to modernize the regulation of the art market, which authorized auction houses to sell intangible goods, and therefore NFTs. ■

1- An NFT (Non-Fungible Token) is a valued datum composed of a type of cryptographic token that represents an object, to which a digital identity is attached. This data is stored and authenticated using a blockchain protocol, which gives it its first value. Source: Wikipedia

2- Mike Winkelmann, known as Beeple or Bleeple Crap, is an American digital artist. His entirely digital work, *Everydays: The First 5000 days*, was sold for \$69.3 million by Christie's auction house, which is a record for this type of work.

Image: one of the 5000 images that make up the digital work *Everydays: The First 5000 Days*, 2016, digital JPEG file, 21,069 x 21,069 pixels. Creative Commons license

Academic work



The Académie des Beaux-Arts' decentralized session in Nice

For the fifth time since its creation in 1816, the Académie des Beaux-Arts held its weekly plenary session outside the Palais de l'Institut de France. Photo credit: Ville de Nice

The Wednesday 27 April session was exceptionally made public and held at the Centre Universitaire Méditerranéen in Nice. It opened with a welcome speech by Christian Estrosi, Mayor of Nice and President of the Métropole Nice Côte d'Azur, and a tribute to Jacques Perrin who had recently passed away (see page 74).

The session, chaired by member of the Printmaking section Astrid de La Forest, was then punctuated by talks by Maryam Roustia Giroud, head of the Cinema and the Studios de la Victorine of the City of Nice, as well as by Vincent Jourdan, author, film columnist and president of the association Regard Indépendant, and Aymeric Jeudy, deputy director of the Matisse Museum and co-author of *Nice, Cinémapolis* (edited by Jean-Jacques Aillagon).

Hélène Guenin, Director of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MAMAC) in Nice, gave a speech titled: "À propos de Nice. L'école buissonnière".

This session concluded a two-day trip to the Alpes-Maritimes which took the members and correspondents of the Académie des Beaux-Arts to the Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild (a property of the Académie), the Villa Kérylos (a property of the Institut de France), the Théâtre National de Nice – Les Franciscains, and the Matisse Museum. ■

Elections



During its Wednesday 18 May 2022 plenary session, the Académie des Beaux-Arts elected Kaija Saariaho and Giuseppe Penone as foreign associate members. The Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho was elected to Seat II, previously held by Philippe Roberts-Jones (1924-2016), and the Italian sculptor Giuseppe Penone to Seat VI, previously held by Ousmane Sow (1935-2016).

After studying at the University of Industrial Arts in Helsinki, Kaija Saariaho, born in 1952, began composing music in 1976 at the Sibelius Academy. She graduated in 1980 and went on to study with Klaus Huber and Brian Ferneyhough. In 1982 she moved to Paris to study music computing at the IRCAM. The use of these new technologies remained an important component of her compositional technique. Her music, inspired by spectral music, illustrates her reflection on the very matter of sound. Thus, several of her works were combinations of electronic and acoustic music, such as *Verblendungen* (1982-1984) and *Nymphéa* (1987). Her repertoire includes works for ensemble and orchestra, five operas and several vocal works. Kaija Saariaho has received the Grawemeyer Award (2003) and the Léonie Sonning Music Prize (2011). In 2021, she was awarded the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale Musica, and in 2022, she won the Victoire de la Musique Classique in the "Composer" category. Photo credit: Maarrit Kytöharju

Giuseppe Penone, born in Italy in 1947, is a major artist and an heir to the *arte povera* movement, who advocates for a return to essential art by reflecting on the relationship between nature and culture. After graduating from the Accademia di Belle Arti in Turin, where he chose sculpture, he held his first solo exhibition in 1969 and went on to do a series of installations, public commissions, and exhibitions in galleries and museums around the world.

His work is characterized both by the vitality of his exploration of humans and nature, and by the beauty of his forms and materials. He has held exhibitions at the Centre Pompidou (2004), the Venice Biennale (2007), the Villa Medici in Rome (2008), and in the gardens of the Château de Versailles (2013). He won the prestigious Praemium Imperiale in 2014. In 2021-2022, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France exhibited his work, "*Pensieri e linfa*". Photo credit: James Ewing Photography

Support

The Académie supports Ukrainian artists

War in Ukraine: the Académie des Beaux-Arts mobilizes a first emergency fund of 300,000 euros to support artists. Photo credit: Ivan Kmit / Alamy

On 9 March 2022, in their first meeting in a plenary session since the beginning of the Russian invasion, the members, foreign associate members, and correspondents of the Académie des Beaux-Arts discussed the situation in Ukraine and, more specifically, its consequences on art and culture. They expressed their full support for Ukrainian artists, some of whom are currently engaged in the military defence of their country and their families – and some have already lost their lives in combat – as well as for the leaders of public and private cultural institutions. The members of the Academy also wished to express their concern about the protection of the architectural and artistic heritage of Ukraine and the irreparable damage caused to it by military operations.

The Académie des Beaux-Arts has therefore decided to mobilize an initial emergency fund of 300,000 euros. This sum will be used to help artists in exile.

The methods of distribution of this emergency fund will be specified shortly, particularly in liaison with the cultural services of the French Embassy in Ukraine, those of the Ukrainian Embassy in France, and the civil society organizations concerned.

At the same meeting, the members, foreign associate members and correspondents of the Académie des Beaux-Arts unanimously reaffirmed that artists and works should be distinguished from the actions of their country's political leaders. The Académie has issued a reminder that, with the exception of those who have deliberately and publicly taken a stand in favour of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russian artists cannot be stigmatized or dismissed on the sole basis of their nationality. Furthermore, the members of the Académie have deemed that decisions to cancel works by Russian classical and contemporary artists are disproportionate and even absurd. The Académie des Beaux-Arts called for restraint and measure, and affirmed its full support for artists of all nationalities. ■



Giovanni Battista Piranesi, known as Piranesi

Top: *Veduta di un gran Masso, avanzo del sepolcro della famiglia de' Metelli* (View of a large rock, vestige of the Metelli family tomb), 1756.

Above: "The Gothic Arch", plate XII of the *Invenzioni di Carceri...*, ca. 1749.

Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France

Exhibition

Piranesi and his imprint: a dream in stone and ink

Institut de France | Mazarine and Institut de France libraries

Until 14 May, the Mazarine and Institut de France libraries were exhibiting the engraving oeuvre of Piranesi (1720-1778), an emblematic figure of the "Academy of Europe" that Rome was in the 18th century, who stands out in our artistic heritage and visual culture.

Of course, Piranesi was not alone in making representations of architecture, whether real or fictional, a genre in its own right. But this artist of impetuous and tormented genius, through the flexibility of his technique, the dramatic effects in the arrangement of light, and the use of disproportions and unexpected perspectives, produced a visual universe of unparalleled poetic power. Piranesi nourished the French vein of neoclassicism, and his sons' tireless endeavours to disseminate his work have extended his influence beyond Rome and Paris. Yet, after half a century of fascination, his genius productions fell victim to the fatigue of curiosity and taste. From the Restoration onwards, the artists of the new century turned their back on his imprint. While some enthusiast would still celebrate the "vigour" of his style here and there, critics would soon call his work "improvised with ease by the imagination rather than produced by study and time" (Alfred Maury).

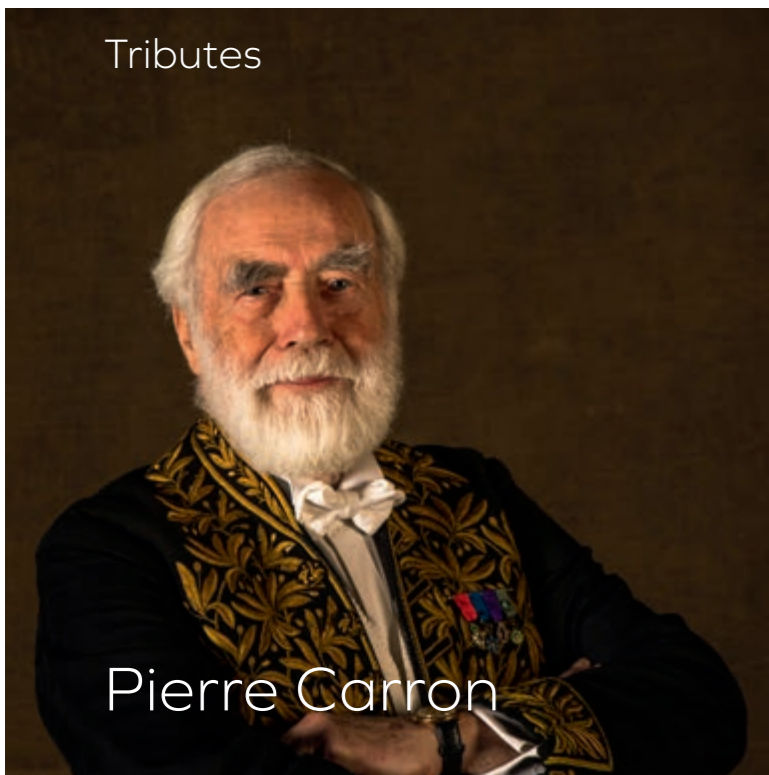
Yet this loss of influence was not total. The poetry of his plates, which had had such a considerable and early influence on pre-romantic art and literature, made Piranesi an unexpected intermediary. An obsessive motif filtered out from his *Prisons*, which was found in England and then in France, from Thomas De Quincey to Théophile Gautier. It took until the inter-war period for the engraver finally to regain the favour of specialists, of the public, and of artists who drew inspiration from him once again – perhaps because his restless exploration of the past, his attraction to the sublime and the excessive, to loss and distress, reflect the obsessions of our time. ■

Yann Sordet, Director of the Mazarine and Institut de France libraries

Curator: Yoann Brault, with the collaboration of Olivier Thomas (Bibliothèque de l'Institut)

Artistic and scientific advisor: Érik Desmazières (member of the Printmaking section)

Tributes



Pierre Carron

Pierre Carron died on 19 March 2022. He was a member of the painting section of the Académie, where he was elected on 21 February 1990 to the Seat previously held by Félix Labisse. Photo credit: Yann Arthus-Bertrand

“ Pierre Carron was a rare man, and rare beings are important.

He was a painter for whom memory was always present and active. While others denied it, he modelled it, worked on it, and presented it adorned with a benevolent melancholy. His paintings do us good. They are a comforting interlude, a welcome break from the constant escalation the duty of modernity demands of its followers. He drew inspiration from Piero della Francesca, Masaccio and the entire Italian Renaissance. Pierre Carron communicated this enthusiasm to us not only in images, but also in words, with equal enthusiasm. During sessions, we would sometimes joyfully witness his magnificent tirades, in which he never lost control and which he would maliciously conclude on a light note, as if to apologize for having been a little too serious for his own taste. He knew how to combine deep and light, sweet and spicy, rigor and humour.

Pierre Carron's academic trajectory – this term should still retain some virtue among us – is perfect. It started with his birth in Fécamp in 1932, followed by the École des Beaux-Arts in Le Havre, the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1951, and the Critics' Prize in 1957. He was awarded the Premier Grand Prix de Rome in 1960, appointed professor of painting at the École des Beaux-Arts de Paris in 1967, and elected to the Académie des Beaux-Arts in the Painting section in 1990, where he was president in 2002 and 2019. “The same story as Ingres” he might ironically have added, with a smile that we are not about to forget. ■

By Philippe Garel, member of the Painting section



Jacques Perrin

Jacques Perrin passed away on 21 April. He had been elected on 7 December 2016 in the Cinema and Audiovisual section, to the Seat previously held by Francis Girod. Photo credit: Yann Arthus-Bertrand

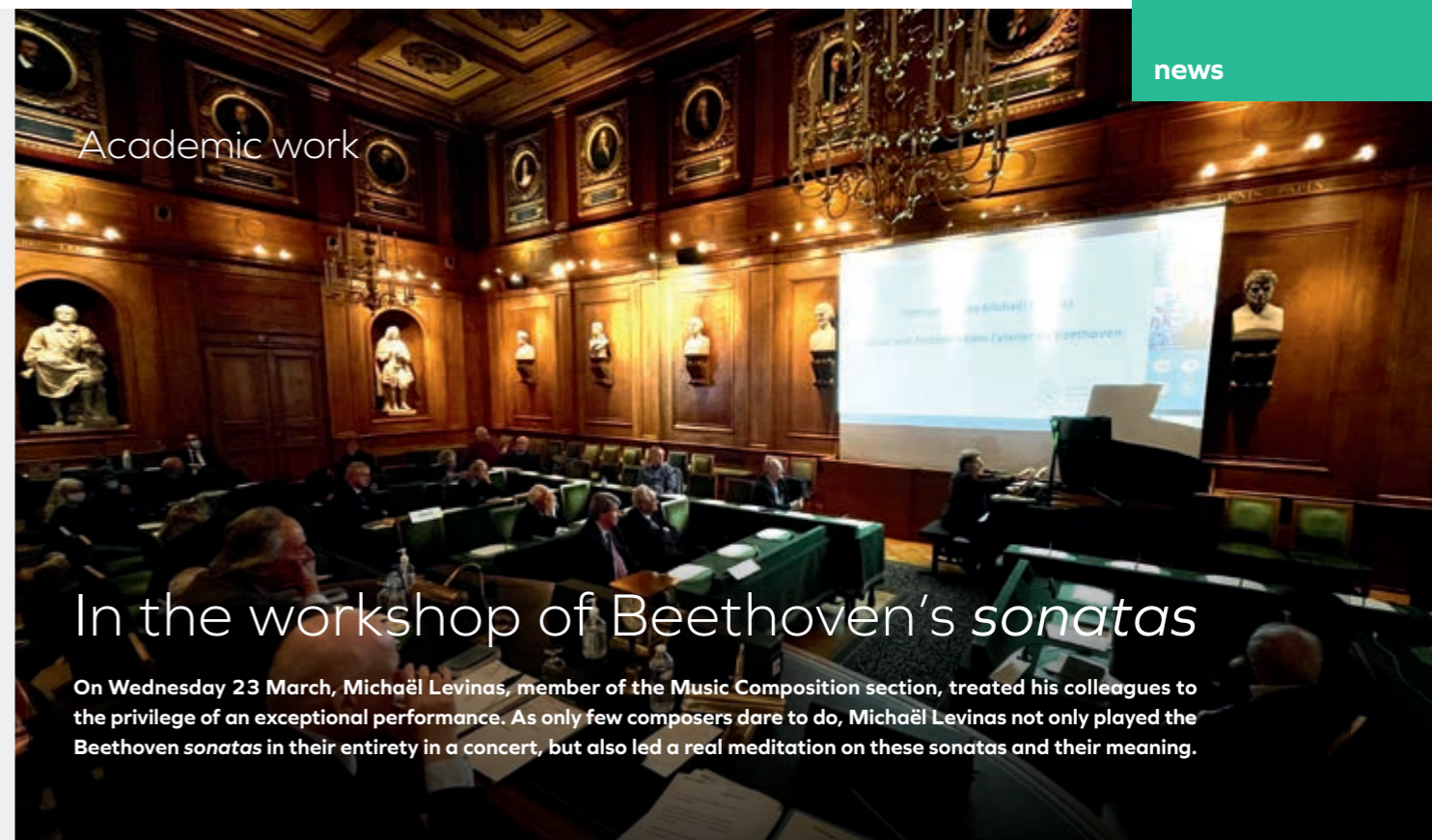
“ Jacques Perrin's presence has illuminated sixty years of cinema history. After some short appearances on screen, Valério Zurlini gave him the lead role in *The Girl with the Suitcase* (1961). Having firm convictions and unshakable loyalty, he would follow the director in *Le désert des tartares* (1974) and remain faithful to Italy with Giuseppe Tornatore's deeply moving *Cinema Paradiso* (1988). His qualities as an actor and his demanding artistic and moral standards caught the attention of Pierre Schoendoerffer, who gave him the role of second lieutenant Torrens in *La 317^e section* (1965). The film sealed a lifelong friendship between them, and they went on to shoot *Le Crabe Tambour* (1977) and *L'honneur d'un capitaine* (1982) together. Yet, while his career was taking off in France, especially with *Les demoiselles de Rochefort* (1967) and *Peau d'Âne* (1970), his personality led him to become a producer. He produced Costa Gavras' *Z* (1969), *État de siège* (1973) and *Section spéciale* (1974), Jean-Jacques Annaud's *La victoire en chantant* (1976), as well as three films by Christophe Baratier, including *Les choristes* (2004), which was a huge success. He took extraordinary risks in 1996 and 2001 with *Microcosmos*, *Le peuple de l'herbe* and *Le peuple migrateur*, which he co-directed and produced. These were teenage dreams and Jacques Perrin has always remained the man he was in his youth.

A workaholic, he did not mind tapping into the television industry's teeming energy and played many roles in television films. But his most important contribution is perhaps *La 25^e heure*, the programme in which, from 1991 to 2000, he presented films that no one had seen elsewhere.

If I had to sum up the whole of Jacques Perrin's contribution, an impossible task, perhaps I should simply write that he embodied a very rare value, in cinema and in life at large: the sense of honour. ■”

Excerpt from the tribute paid by Frédéric Mitterrand, member of the Cinema - Audiovisual section.

Academic work



In the workshop of Beethoven's sonatas

On Wednesday 23 March, Michaël Levinas, member of the Music Composition section, treated his colleagues to the privilege of an exceptional performance. As only few composers dare to do, Michaël Levinas not only played the Beethoven sonatas in their entirety in a concert, but also led a real meditation on these sonatas and their meaning.

Michaël Levinas believes that what happened in Beethoven's studio still concerns the twenty-first century. “*I write for the future*”, said Beethoven. After the shock of the French Revolution, musical composition, which was at the heart of the European civilization, entered the transitional phase between the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, the birth of modernity in art. “*I write for the future*”: this sentence by Beethoven simultaneously marks the birth of the concept of artistic modernity and is a part of a long process linked to the history of European musical creation; what is known as the written tradition. This clearly defined process corresponds to a slow elaboration of the signs of notation, the passage from oral tradition to musical writing and, consequently, to the concept of the score. The notion of a work is thus identified with creators and the transmission of what is written. “*I write for the future*”, said Beethoven, which, as Michaël Levinas still understands it to this day, meant: “*I am transmitting a work that goes in the direction of history; my work announces and anticipates two centuries of musical creation and writing*”.

The eighteenth century closed with the end of Baroque, the stabilization of tempered pitches, the signs of musical writing, the notation of metrics and even intensities and punctuation. The French Revolution had taken place; the creator was emancipated and Beethoven's sentence “*I write for the future*” now took on a heuristic dimension. The future was one of modernity in search of a new hope, which was no longer to come solely from religion or from the court; it could also originate in social and technical progress. Beethoven, situated at the point of transition between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was the heir not only to revolutionary ideas, but also to a musical language that had become paradoxically uniform with the end of Baroque. Without the maturation of the signs and syntactic laws of musical writing – the invariants of the tonal and tempered system – his oeuvre would have remained difficult to transmit.

The concept of a work's perennity was already essential for Beethoven. Signs made it possible to decipher and reproduce the sound and the abstract structure that organize musical

language. This was the golden age of the tonal system, which opened up a space for reflection at the heart of modernity. To enter Beethoven's studio was to understand that for him, “writing for the future” was a twofold process, namely, not only discovering the complete and formal potential of the tonal system, but also seeking out new and original timbres in relation to the evolution of instrument making – and especially the pianoforte – and the development of the philharmonic orchestra. Beethoven's studio was an early research centre. Michaël Levinas spent a long time there. He brought back this lecture from it, full of original ideas and punctuated with excerpts from some of the thirty-two sonatas in this body of masterworks. ■



Above: the Institut de France's Salle des séances during Michaël Levinas' speech, at the piano.

Photo credit: C. Barthalois / Académie des Beaux-Arts

Above: Portrait of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827), author and date unknown.

Glasshouse Images / Alamy

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Above and page 1: performance of *Il Trovatore*, an opera by Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901), on a libretto by Salvatore Cammarano and Leone Emanuele Bardare, at the ancient theatre of Orange during the 2015 Chorégies d'Orange. The Orchestre National de France and the choirs of the Grand Avignon, Nice, and Toulon opera houses were conducted by Bertrand de Billy. The opera was directed by Charles Roubaud.

Photo credit: Philippe Gromelle



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Académie des beaux-arts | 23, quai de Conti 75006 Paris | +33 1 44 41 43 20