



REVIEW: BOOK

Popular Opera in Eighteenth-Century France: Music and Entertainment before the Revolution

David Charlton

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The avowed aim of this well-documented book is to explore the development of French opera that contains spoken dialogue. In its investigation of this repertory from its beginnings, the study follows a roughly chronological course, with thematic chapters covering a period bookended by the careers of Molière (Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, 1622–1673) and André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry (1741–1813). The choice of these chronological markers, attached to easily identifiable historical figures rather than to political events, is interesting. First of all, it links ‘popular opera’ – David Charlton’s term of choice – both to a man of the theatre (Molière) and to a composer (Grétry). These historical figures are significant for the very definition that the author will offer for ‘popular opera’. Secondly, as noted above, these two individuals are intimately attached to the historical trajectory at hand: Molière actively participates in the creation of lyric theatre in France, while Grétry embodies the most ‘popular’ genre at the end of the ancien régime: *opéra-comique*, a repertory that is at the centre of the book. Finally, it renders the end date of the study more flexible (or more elastic) by associating it with a period – that of Grétry’s career (which began twenty years before the outbreak of revolution) – rather than a political event – the French Revolution, the start date of which can itself be flexible, but is invariably associated for most with the year 1789.

Charlton begins by defining what he considers ‘popular opera’ to be. It is above all a lyrical genre mixed with dialogue: “Popular opera” in this book refers to comedy where dialogue occurs in music as well as speech’ (3). He insists that this definition is not limited to a place, musical style or genre, but is intended to be universal. As a result, one will find under this term a whole spectrum of works and genres, such as ‘comédies en vaudevilles’, ‘comédies mêlées d’ariettes’, parodies of Italian intermezzos or even *opéra-comique* in its widest sense. Charlton’s definition allows him to distinguish opera – an entirely sung genre – from *opéra-comiques en vaudevilles*, which could be entirely sung but which differed from the genre represented at the Académie Royale de Musique in the nature of its dialogues.

The book, made up of thirteen chapters, provides an unprecedented analysis of various elements that contribute to the history of eighteenth-century French opera. After an introduction (chapter 1), the next two chapters are devoted to the genesis of popular opera. In the second chapter, Charlton studies the ways in which music was integrated into spoken-word comedy, starting with the origins of French lyric theatre in the 1670s, in order to find the roots of popular opera. Molière is designated as a ‘nodal point’ for two reasons: ‘his comedies had a lasting effect on writers and audiences, which informed *opéra-comique*; and his uses of music were both integrative and extensive, especially in his last play’ (27). The following chapter explores in detail the close links between the *commedia* tradition, through an investigation of the Italian troupe of Evaristo Gherardi

(1663–1700), and French popular opera. Charlton considers what this troupe bequeathed to opéra-comique in terms not only of musical resources, but also of social themes, topics which would be developed beyond the French Revolution: satires of the lesser nobility and professionals as well as paternal or familial power over a daughter or ward. The fourth chapter extends the definition of popular opera to works performed in the domestic sphere and shows what kinds of intimate connections bound composers to their domestic audiences. By exploring the different practices of appropriation of French popular opera by the public (from publishing to performance), Charlton convincingly demonstrates how amateur practice contributed to its dissemination.

Chapter 5 explores the different mechanisms of vaudeville, from the role of text to the function of music. After addressing its representation on stage, Charlton approaches the crux of his musical interpretation by bringing to vaudeville – which he labels an ‘unknowable’ object (113) – elements allowing us to develop a clearer and more precise vision of the genre: how to sing it, how to perform it on stage, how vaudeville performance fluctuated according to dramatic meaning. As a result, the section on vaudeville accompaniment will be useful to both the musician and the musicologist by providing insight into different performance practices. The following chapter draws up a table of the spaces the shows occupied (theatres and stage equipment) and their constituent elements (scenery, staging and lighting), which makes it possible better to understand the experience of popular opera in a very concrete way. Although popular opera in eighteenth-century France might be hard for us to imagine today, the descriptions – including theatre size, audience and ambience – Charlton offers in this chapter help the reader to visualize the medium.

In chapter 7 Charlton examines the transition from *opéra-comique en vaudevilles* to *opéra-comique mêlé d'ariettes* by focusing on two key areas: a common source (the tales and fables of Jean de la Fontaine (1621–1695)) and a common theme (marriage), but it is with chapter 8 that the author explains how popular opera finds its unity and acquires a certain ‘type of maturity’ (207). He analyses the innovations that changed popular opera’s aesthetic direction through a synthesis of French and Italian vaudeville models. The hybridity of the French genre is therefore mixed with the influential cosmopolitan Italian version (the impact of the Italian tradition on popular opera is detailed in chapter 10). Beyond the in-depth analysis of these processes of evolution, chapter 9 is enriched with valuable tables deriving from the author’s careful compilation of numerous primary and secondary sources.

Chapter 9 also describes how popular opera managed to go ‘beyond vaudeville’ (208) by analysing the methods through which old and new music were brought together. The final chapters describe the strategies that were put in place to reform popular opera, particularly after the departure of the *bouffons* from the French capital. Through examples of key works – *La Servante maîtresse* (1754), *Le Devin du village* (1752) and *Le Peintre amoureux de son modèle* (1757) – and central figures – Pierre Baurans (1710–1764), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) and Egidio Duni (1708–1775) – one witnesses the creation of a ‘new operatic language’ (288). Chapter 12, which focuses mainly on *Le Roi et le fermier* (1762), reveals how these initiatives materialized, notably through the fruitful collaboration between a composer – Pierre-Alexandre Monsigny (1729–1817) – and a playwright – Michel-Jean Sedaine (1719–1797).

Popular Opera in Eighteenth-Century France is a detailed work that significantly reorients our vision of eighteenth-century French opera. The subtitle could suggest that Charlton’s study covers all of popular opera’s history in France before the Revolution. But, as the author explains in the Introduction, his book explores this repertory until the beginning of Grétry’s career, or about twenty years before the start of the French Revolution. Indeed, the latest work analysed is Monsigny’s *Le Déserteur*, which premiered in 1769. The book’s detail and richness with respect to the first half of the eighteenth century makes us regret that the author did not pursue his investigation with the same precision during the reign of Louis XVI (1774–1792). Nevertheless, the erudition of the study, as well as the finesse of the analysis and the interest shown to inhere in the works, makes it possible for the reader to imagine experiencing these dramatic pieces close to how an eighteenth-

century spectator might have done, one far from the stereotypes inspired by political visions or teleological views of the history of French opera. Ultimately, David Charlton's study calls for a reassessment of the impact of popular genres on the history of music more widely. This is its greatest contribution: *Popular Opera* opens up new research perspectives by bringing together genres that are often neglected, or sometimes considered less important – such as fairground comedy, vaudevilles and operatic parody – with more widely studied and accepted genres such as the opéra-comique or the tragédie lyrique.

The research of **Maxime Margollé** focuses on musical life in France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by crossing political, cultural, aesthetic and artistic approaches. His main research subject is opéra-comique during that time, with a particular interest in the French Revolutionary period. He is currently preparing a book on the subject, and holds a Marie Skłodowska-Curie postdoctoral fellowship for his research on French opéra-comique in Scandinavia at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries.