

**Marian Smith. *Ballet and Opera in the Age of "Giselle"*.  
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Since the publication of Jane Fulcher's *The Nation's Image* in 1987, there has been growing interest in exploring the appeal of French *grand opéra*. This has generally taken the approach of grounding the works in their political context (Fulcher) or, more recently, their social setting.<sup>1</sup> A more tentative strand of interest in situating *grand opéra* in its contemporary theatrical context and in examining other lyric genres produced in Paris in the 1820s and '30s in their own right (Sala 1995; Wild 1987; Hibberd 2001) has encouraged a reevaluation of what has been perceived as the merely "sensational" and a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the musical and visual dimensions of drama.

Perhaps the most promising subject for such a comparative exercise is the genre staged at the Opéra alongside opera: ballet-pantomime. In her pioneering work, Marian Smith has noted the equal status the genres enjoyed at the Opéra—both ballet and opera were still being presented, either in the same or in separate works, at every performance during the July Monarchy. Indeed, ballet was often more popular than opera.<sup>2</sup> Tellingly, Meyerbeer's first grand opera, *Robert le diable* (1831) has been remembered above all for its ballet divertissement in Act 3, in which a group of debauched nuns lure the hero into taking a sacred branch. Smith's principal argument in her new book is that "the longtime marriage between opera and ballet at the Opéra had not yet fully ended in the 1830s and 1840s" (xiii). More specifically, she suggests that audiences had a "crossover fluency in the languages of both ballet and opera" (xiv). Thus, in order to appreciate more fully the experience of ballet and opera audiences of the time, Smith argues, it is necessary to examine the genres in relation to each other: "we stand to discover a rich array of connections that can increase our understanding . . . and, at the same time, allow us to experience some of the same pleasures of recognition and familiarity that helped attract their first audiences to the opera house" (xvii). Smith's perhaps surprising conclusion—to modern audiences of ballet, anyway—is that plot and words were essential to both genres, and that clues to this narrative component can be found in the scores of *ballets-pantomimes*.

Smith's book is at once a comparative study of ballet and opera and a long overdue history of ballet-pantomime that presents basic information, such as the sorts of plots, characters, dancing techniques, and musical styles

common to the genre. In the first chapter, "Music and Stories," Smith addresses the question of how a genre with no sung or spoken dimension can communicate action and plot. While the story is told essentially through action or mime scenes, more formal dance numbers and divertissements contribute to the atmosphere and the *couleur locale* of the setting. The music that accompanies mime scenes takes several forms: it might suggest general mood, action, or personality; provide diagetic music and noises; weave in snatches of ethnic or national music; or use recurring motifs and passages of borrowed music. The orchestra switches fluidly between these tasks, and, as critics noted, it was more important than gesture in communicating what was happening. Similar techniques had been used since at least the end of the eighteenth century in a number of genres, including *pantomime dialoguée* and melodrama, genres which were influential on the development of ballet-pantomime at the turn of the century. Audiences would, therefore, have been used to listening for such aural clues, not only at the Opéra, but also at the commercial theaters where such techniques were still being used. Although frequently dismissed as "popular" theaters, some venues attracted a cross section of the public, including the wealthier citizens who attended the Opéra. Indeed the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin had a ballet troupe that was seen as a rival to that of the Opéra. Although, as Smith suggests, this crucial narrative role of music has been largely erased from ballets in modern productions, it was nevertheless a familiar part of the sonic world of the Parisian theater-going public in the 1820s and '30s.<sup>3</sup>

One of the most important tools of narrative music was the *air parlant*. The orchestra played a few bars of a popular opera air or traditional song (a *timbre*); the unsung words provided an instant translation of the action. Sometimes the general dramatic situation of the opera from which the *timbre* had been drawn, or the personality of the character originally associated with it, would add further significance. An example of the sophisticated implications of the choice of *timbres*—a subject that Smith touches on only briefly—is found in Ferdinand Hérold's 1827 ballet-pantomime *La Somnambule*. This work launched a fashion for works featuring sleepwalkers—to the extent that one critic warned the public going out into the streets after dark to take umbrellas to protect them from the young somnambulists who would doubtless be falling from the crowded rooftops where they would typically wander.<sup>4</sup> At this time scientists were drawing parallels between the conditions of sleepwalking, dreaming, and madness, while disciples of Anton Mesmer were artificially magnetizing willing volunteers who apparently developed a sixth sense while in a trance. This complex melange of so-called trance phenomena, their association with the spiritual world, and their increasing association with women was being exploited

in literature of the period (Balzac, Nodier, Dumas, and Hugo each drew examples into their novels) as well as in the theaters. In the ballet-pantomime we find a range of borrowed airs that between them suggest this whirl of relationships: a traditional air, "Dormez mes chères amours"; a *contredanse* from Nicolas-Marie Dalayrac's 1786 opera *Nina, ou La folle par amour*, about a young girl who has lost her lover and in turn her sanity; excerpts from Rossini's *Armida* (1817), whose sorceress heroine leaves the stage at the end of the opera in a mad frenzy; the opening bars of the sextet from Rossini's *La Cenerentola* (1817), in which confusion and affront at the unsuitable behavior of the heroine are expressed. These and other borrowed melodies suggest the myriad of associations that Parisians would have made with sleepwalking at the time, and present specific comments on the dramatic action and sentiments of the characters. Indeed such techniques go beyond words and add another dimension to the business of storytelling. They are also an important clue to the musical tastes of the time and the way in which audiences listened; the vast majority of works being staged in Paris featured arrangements of known music rather than new compositions. The tendency of both contemporary and modern critics to denigrate "mere" arrangements—however sophisticated, and to whatever ends—ignores their pervasive power and appeal.

In the second chapter, "Family Resemblance," Smith goes into some detail about the similarities between opera and ballet-pantomime. These include the shared use of themes and settings; dramatic devices; aria, recitative, ensemble, and chorus, and their equivalents in dance; as well as visual spectacle, *mise en scène*, and tableaux. And of course many of the same artists and backstage personnel were involved in producing both genres. Again, it becomes clear not only that ballet-pantomime and opera were closely related, but that they were also deeply embedded in more general theatrical practices and fashions of the time. Smith notes that the emphasis on *mise en scène* and tableaux, for example, derives in part from the practices of the commercial theaters. And of course a work's creators—from composer to librettist, set designer to artist—not only worked on both operas and ballets, but had often worked (or even continued to do so) in one or more of the secondary theaters.

Chapter 3, "The Lighter Tone of Ballet-Pantomime," considers one of the most obvious differences between opera and ballet, with a view to accounting for ballet's distinctive qualities. Smith tackles it from two angles. First, she examines the way in which dancing is treated in a literal fashion within ballet (with the emphasis on verisimilitude and on objectifying the body) and how this affected the nature of the plots. Second, she studies the phenomenon of parody, in which *opéras comiques* were routinely transformed into ballets. In the first part, Smith notes how there generally had

to be a reason for dancing, much like the need in early opera for the characters to have a reason for singing—musicians (Orpheus), gods of music (Apollo), and supernatural characters in general (the Furies) all had the “right” to sing. This was also a time when the phenomena of sleepwalking, madness, and muteness, all of which popularly afflicted male characters in works at the beginning of the nineteenth century, were converted to popular female afflictions. And with this shift came a more lingering, voyeuristic attitude to the performance; Smith, Lynn Garafola (1993), and Maribeth Clark (2001) have written about ways in which the female body was fetishized in ballet. Given the physical nature of the genre, dancers—far more than singers—were gazed upon by male members of the audiences not only onstage, but also backstage in the *foyer de la danse*. Here aristocratic “patrons” were allowed to observe them in a more intimate setting, and even to take this to its obvious conclusion in a system of glorified prostitution. The sexual reputation of dancers was thus legendary, and this expectation, Smith suggests, was even transposed into ballet plots in which masculine power and female submissiveness were reinforced more categorically than they were in opera.

The ballet parodies that Smith claims also contributed to the “lighter tone” of the genre are another facet of broader theatrical practices of the period. Three adaptations of *opéras comiques* are considered, and Smith suggests that this choice of light-hearted works for the Opéra provides a direct and unique pipeline from the Opéra-Comique. It should perhaps be acknowledged that other “pipelines” were also being exploited by such composers as Auber and Halévy: both made their reputations at the Opéra-Comique, but both wrote works for the Opéra that incorporated musical devices of the “lighter” genre, such as the use of ballads and other short-breathed forms with simple lyrical melodies. (Indeed the emerging genre of *grand opéra* was in part defined by its synthesis of devices from other genres, notably *opéra comique*.) Yet Smith also makes the important point that part of the significance of this impact on ballet was that “parody ballet had . . . been designed to be dependent on words (even if at second hand) to make its performances work” (96). This assertion leads into one of the most fascinating chapters in the book.

*La Somnambule* was described by one critic at its 1827 premiere as being an “opera lacking only words.”<sup>25</sup> In chapter 4, “Ballet-Pantomime and Silent Language,” Smith reveals the extent to which words were in fact at the heart of ballet, and were the focus of attention in a way that they were not in opera. She identifies a variety of methods of insinuating speech into the genre: onstage sign, libretto, instrumental recitative, *air parlant*. However, it seems that by the 1830s words were already beginning to “sink below the surface” (97), though without disappearing altogether. As noted

above, the quoting of known melodies—which had the potential of adding both specific and general meanings to a performance—was a valuable technique in ballet. But by around 1830, composers were increasingly writing new scores for ballets. Some critics complained that the orchestra's primary role should be to “translate” the dancers' gestures, and that *airs parlants* were essential for this. Others, however, welcomed a more abstract move. Indeed, house composers at the commercial theaters had already become less dependent on borrowed music: quotations had been largely abandoned in melodramas by the 1820s, and although newly composed airs were officially forbidden in most *comédies* and vaudevilles, composers increasingly introduced numbers of new songs. This was perhaps a sign that theater composers were becoming frustrated with arranging and were trying out a more creative role. Smith points out, however, that although specific texts were gradually eliminated from scores, composers still created an instrumental approximation of voices—whether whispering, arguing, or shouting—and audiences still expected a ballet to tell a detailed story.

Intriguingly, the apparent narrative compatibility of ballet and opera meant that in 1828 it was still possible to have singers and dancers “talking” to each other in the same work. Smith's fifth chapter, “Hybrid Works at the Opera,” is a fascinating examination of three very different examples of such crossbreeding, which illustrate the degree to which audiences were fluent in a variety of musical languages. The best-known of the works, Auber's opera *La Muette de Portici* (1828), as its title suggests, features a silent heroine, Fenella, who has lost her voice before the curtain rises because of a traumatic experience. On one level she has ambiguous symbolic significance, embodying the “voiceless” oppressed Neapolitans under Spanish rule and triggering their uprising. At the more practical level of communication, as Smith describes, music and gesture enable Fenella to “talk” easily to the other characters—and to the audience. Although most of the critics marveled at the legibility of Fenella's “speeches,” Castil-Blaze was uneasy about the mixture of gesture and song. In particular, given the crucial role of music in “translating” her gestures, he was unconvinced by the scenes in which Fenella had “conversations” with singing characters, as the role of the orchestra became unclear. Should it be heard as Fenella's voice? Or simply as the accompaniment to song?<sup>26</sup> Few other critics engaged in such philosophizing, however, perhaps because in such scenes the orchestra's dual role was always carefully handled; in any case, it was not an issue that anyone would have thought of raising at the time. In a scene with her brother, Masaniello, Fenella's voice is indeed “represented” by the orchestra—using quotations from earlier in the work to underscore the meaning of her gestures, and tracing her shifting moods—while

Masaniello's responses are either unaccompanied, or punctuated by spare chords. It is only towards the end of their conversation that Fenella's despair becomes subsumed by Masaniello's anger and call to arms; her distress at having been seduced and then abandoned by a Spaniard inspires Masaniello to launch the uprising against their oppressors. Her final gestures are simultaneous with his declaration of vengeance, and tremolando strings build into the finale. Thus her despair—and her “voice”—is assimilated into the broader drama and Masaniello's actions.

Although later critics, notably Wagner, saw *La Muette* as a popular but one-off experiment that could not be repeated, it had clearly been enough of a success for its creators to produce another hybrid work two years later: *Le Dieu et la bayadère*. This time the heroine's muteness is explained by the fact that she is a foreigner, a common affliction of melodrama and vaudeville heroines that was mined for its potential for mime and comic misunderstanding. Auber, however, retreated from the detailed mimed narratives of Fenella. Instead, his heroine mimes simpler ideas, and dances in set pieces and in dramatic scenes. As Smith notes, this is probably explained by the fact that the young dancer, Marie Taglioni, was more of a dancer than a miming actress, and Auber and his librettist approached their task with this in mind—indeed the way in which she “[swam] in your eyes like a curl of smoke” charmed the audience (140). But in contrast to the positive reception of *La Muette*, the reaction to *Le Dieu* was more equivocal: critics were more impatient with a dancing heroine in the middle of an opera.

The creators of the next hybrid work, Halévy and Gide's opéra-ballet *La Tentation* (1832), retreated from the practice of inserting mime and dance scenes into an opera. They shifted the balance, placing sung numbers into a spectacular ballet-pantomime. This appears to have been a more consciously “popular” work altogether. The influence of works from the commercial theaters is evident, the most obvious being a number of Faust dramas and an adaptation of Frankenstein, *Le Monstre et le magicien* (which featured a blue monster like that drawn out of the cauldron in the ballet). *La Tentation* also featured a fair amount of “borrowed” music, a large number of scenes for the chorus and *corps de ballet*, and extraordinary special effects including the earth opening up during a climactic combat between devils and angels. The emphasis was thus on dazzling display, and it was this aspect that the critics applauded.

Smith concludes that it is “striking that the three works should have been created at all, could find box-office success, and could be reviewed by critics who, in some cases, saw no reason to say much (or anything) about their hybrid nature” (166). It is also striking that although they slotted reasonably comfortably into the dramatic conventions of 1828–32, no at-

tempt to create similar hybrid works was made after this time. The gradual shift from visual narrative to display in these works was perhaps symptomatic of the greater gulf developing between modes of mime and dance (or narrative and display) within ballet-pantomime itself, an issue that is considered in the final chapter.

Smith observes that “one would not guess, by watching most of today’s productions, how much the original *Giselle* behaved like opera” (167). She then sets out to reveal what Adolphe Adam’s 1841 *Giselle* would have been like as well as how modern producers have gradually erased its narrative aspects altogether, and how modern audiences have quite different expectations. Mime and action scenes are generally cut, and those that remain are transformed. *Airs parlants* and speech-like passages slip by unnoticed—and are often misunderstood and accompanied by inappropriate mime—and the virtuosity of the dancer becomes more important than the plot. Furthermore, a modern audience is unlikely to register some of the suggestions of local color in the dance scenes—such as the “Germanness” of a waltz, or the “Frenchness” of a minuet—even though one might recognize a bolero as Spanish, if one were to listen for such signals.

One of the most striking aspects of *Giselle* for someone more familiar with opera than ballet of the July Monarchy is its complex relationship to operas in the repertory. In the heroine’s celebrated mad scene, for example, obvious visual influences appear to be not only the trance scene from *La Somnambule*, but perhaps the “ghost” scene from Adrien Boieldieu’s extraordinarily popular *opéra comique* *La Dame blanche* (1825); the mad scenes of Italian operas such as Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835); the tomb scene in Halévy’s *Guido et Ginevra* (1838); not to mention the ballet of debauched nuns in *Robert le diable*, which apparently inspired Nourrit’s scenario for *La Sylphide* (1832)—no doubt another influence. In other words, *Giselle* fits into a continuing vogue for trance-like heroines on the brink of delirium, and illustrates the rarely acknowledged influence of the dramatic and visual elements of Italian opera on works staged at the Opéra at this time.

One of the most significant developments in Parisian theater of the 1820s and ’30s was the growing importance of the relationship between the musical and visual dimensions, and the simultaneous decline in the significance of spoken or sung words. The “visual legibility” of melodrama was finding a place in opera and other drama; in *La Muette*, for example, tableaux at the end of each act summed up the preceding action. In the same year (1828), the playwright Léon Halévy was moved to complain that the Théâtre Français had become a “Tragediorama” (Allévy 1938:85). This power of the visual has been attracting the attention of opera scholars who

have explored the translation of gesture into musical language, or the complex, often conflicting, relationship between music, text, and *mise en scène*. Smith, however, reminds us how narrative is nevertheless still essential to non-verbal genres. Paradoxically, in ballet-pantomime music, not gesture, is the primary tool for unlocking this narrative. Yet, the fact that words were “sinking below the surface” in the 1830s can be viewed as the first step towards the elimination of narrative altogether—and the concurrent rise of virtuoso dance which later came to define ballet.

Smith asserts in her introduction—and confirms unquestionably in her book—that we have much to gain by examining ballet and opera alongside each other. I would suggest that it is also difficult, even undesirable, to isolate ballet from its broader theatrical context, in particular from its relationship with melodrama and vaudeville as well as with opera and *opéra comique*. The array of musical and visual languages on the Parisian stages necessarily had an impact on the creation and reception of ballet-pantomime. Journalistic reviews highlight such connections effectively. The growing disenchantment with narrative ballet sparked hostile reviews reminiscent of those written about melodramas and vaudevilles. Genres that combined musical arrangements and medleys with imaginative special effects routinely drew mocking and patronizing comments that missed the whole point of such works and took their popular appeal as a sign of their aesthetic inferiority. The turn to newly composed music was perhaps part of a desire to give ballet-pantomime—and melodrama and vaudeville—an acceptable status.

The observations Smith makes about modern attitudes towards ballet, as illustrated by her comparison of the “original” *Giselle* with modern productions, points to the crucial importance of how audiences listen (ed). Our failure to recognize the cues in ballet-pantomime is symptomatic of our attitude to July Monarchy opera and theater generally. Although the influence of melodrama, *opéra comique*, and *grand opéra* on later repertoires and genres is frequently asserted, such works have tended to be dismissed as precursors of more significant works or genres, and are rarely revived. On the rare occasions that they are revived, they are usually cut and reworked to suit our modern palates. Smith’s triumph is in identifying the (surprisingly?) sophisticated listening and viewing strategies of ballet-pantomime’s original audiences, giving us an understanding of why they were so extraordinarily popular, and creating in the reader a desire to see *Giselle* as it was originally staged.

More than twenty tables provide a wealth of fascinating facts—settings of operas and ballets, borrowed music in ballet scores, scenes cut from modern productions of *Giselle*—and numerous illustrations present contemporary sketches of costumes and *mises en scène*. Smith also includes many



contemporary descriptions of these works, an important contribution to our understanding and “connection” with ballet-pantomime. Her translations preserve, even enhance, the wit and spirit of the originals. The book is essential reading for anyone interested in nineteenth-century music theater.

#### Notes

1. Anselm Gerhard (1998) relates the evolution of the genre to the development of the modern city.
2. Although the genre was known as ballet-pantomime, while danced segments within an opera or ballet-pantomime were referred to as ballet, like Smith I occasionally use the word ballet as a shorthand term for the genre.
3. Indeed, such techniques are fundamental to silent and modern film and cartoon music, genres that are similarly perceived as being “popular” today.
4. *Le Courrier des théâtres* (October 6, 1827). For an examination of the translation of this phenomenon to the stage, see Hibberd (2004).
5. *La Pandore* (March 2, 1828).
6. *Journal de débats* (March 3, 1828).

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