Biens Symboliques / Symbolic Goods

Revue de sciences sociales sur les arts, la culture et les idées

8 | 2021
Varia

The Creation of an Operatic Canon in Nineteenth-Century Europe

Towards a Quantitative Approach

La constitution d'un canon de l'opéra en Europe au XIXe siècle. Tentative d'approche quantitative

Christophe Charle

Translator: Delaina Haslam

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/bssg/655>

DOI: 10.4000/bssg.655

ISSN: 2490-9424

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Vincennes

Electronic reference

Christophe Charle, "The Creation of an Operatic Canon in Nineteenth-Century Europe", *Biens Symboliques / Symbolic Goods* [Online], 8 | 2021, Online since 20 May 2021, connection on 23 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/bssg/655> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/bssg.655>

This text was automatically generated on 23 July 2021.

Biens Symboliques / Symbolic Goods

The Creation of an Operatic Canon in Nineteenth-Century Europe

Towards a Quantitative Approach

La constitution d'un canon de l'opéra en Europe au XIXe siècle. Tentative d'approche quantitative

Christophe Charle

Translation : Delaina Haslam

Fig. 1.

A popular postcard showing Meyerbeer's apotheosis, surrounded by his main characters
Bulla Frères (c. 1865), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

- 1 The study of processes of cultural canonization has for the most part focused on exceptional artists or writers: Bach, Beethoven, and Van Gogh, for example (Fauquet & Hennion 1999; Veit 2007; De Nora 1995; Heinich 1991). It constitutes—one could argue—an appendix to the lives of great men and great creators after their death. I will attempt to broaden this approach to analyse a particular phenomenon specific to opera in the nineteenth century: the long-term promotion of a group of composers whose works have been consecrated without this being questioned by subsequent generations up to the present day. Posterity had formerly carried out a much more rigorous filtering process on lyric works of the past. In order to encompass such a vast body of material, I will employ a quantitative approach, allowing temporal and spatial comparisons to be made. I thus intend to reconstruct the specific process by which several generations of composers were canonized collectively. These canonical processes in the world of music generally lasted longer and were recognized as more stable than those in painting or literature. Best known, of course, is the corpus of concert works that came to be revered as “classical music” from the 1820s onwards, and which has held an extraordinarily high status within cultural life ever since. Much less has been written on a similar phenomenon in the world of opera in which works by composers from Mozart to Wagner and Puccini came to dominate the repertory of the great international stages despite vast differences in genre and style between them¹.
- 2 This process of canonization was not as direct as it was in other genres of music since it partly depended on the theatrical traditions and economic constraints specific to the different countries (or even to certain cities) in which the operas were performed. After a historical overview of this process, I will ask on which aesthetic terms these works were deemed to be “classics” in a way that was specific to the domain of opera, and what were the most important factors in this consecration.

1. The Emergence of an Operatic “Canon”

- 3 Studies of the history of opera in the nineteenth century have revealed a rupture in the fundamental nature of programming in major European theatres as the nineteenth century progressed. There was a gradual decline in the production of new works by living composers, while an increasing proportion of already-known composers and older works dominated concert programmes, meaning that the overall age of the repertory grew exponentially. As Roger Parker and Carolyn Abbate put it, from around 1850 “a privileging of the new slowly became eroded by the hardening of an operatic repertory” (Parker & Abbate 2012: 528). Whereas formerly canonical opera repertories would disappear after one or two generations, from the early twentieth century, stable programming of the same pieces set in, of which the majority are still performed today.
- 4 The evolution of Italian opera theatre repertories illustrates this change most dramatically. In 1830, the 180 theatres on the peninsula gave a total of 490 performances, of which 210, in other words almost half, were of works by the then 38-year-old Gioachino Rossini. Ten years later, there were more than 200 theatres offering 730 performances of which 270 were of works by Gaetano Donizetti, 110 by Vincenzo Bellini, and 80 by Gioachino Rossini. Though the three composers dominated nearly two-thirds of programmes, they were all living and two were still composing (Bini & Commons 1997: 9; Conati 1989). Between 1830 and 1839, Donizetti enjoyed 1,316 performances (of 42 works), compared with Rossini’s 1,266 (of 26 works), and 1,079 (of 9

works) by Bellini. This concentration on a few composers also took place at Her Majesty's Theatre in London, even if the impresarios of this city were not exclusively focused on Italian composers. Figure 2 shows a new phenomenon, which would become more widespread: the increasing age of works performed, that is to say the emergence of a canon of music which was favoured over new pieces.

Fig. 2.

	1826	1831	1841	1851	1860
Average age of all operas	14 years	16 years	19 years	24 years	27 years
Average age of the 50% most performed	11 years	15 years	15 years	24 years	26 years

Average age of operas performed at the King's/Her Majesty's Theatre (London) (1826-1860)

Source: Hall-Witt 2007: table D. 4.

- 5 While from 1760-1770, three quarters of operas in London were only performed for a single season, between 1820 and 1830 this was just 30-41%. Mozart's operas represented 48% of the King's Theatre repertory from 1816 to 1820, but this fell to 11% between 1821 and 1831. Rossini then replaced Mozart with 59% of the repertory in the 1820s, and continued to be performed in the following decades; but it was above all Bellini, Donizetti, and Verdi whose works were performed for increasingly long periods during the nineteenth century, which accounts for the increase in the average age of operas performed in figure 2 (Hall-Witt 2007: 52; Fenner 1994; on Mozart, see also Cowgill 2000, 2006).
- 6 On the Continent, the ageing process took place along similar but not identical lines; since, unlike in England, there continued to be a desire to preserve older works by local composers, and promote new ones, which partially limited foreign-almost always Italian-domination.

Fig. 3.

	Meyerbeer	Rossini	Auber	Donizetti	Verdi	Mozart	Weber	Spontini	Bellini
1820-1851	671	868	811	238	0	43	73	56	3
1852-1869	813	428	232	398	314	64	8	9	25
Total	1,484	1,296	1,043	636	314	107	81	65	28

Number of performances at the *Opéra de Paris* of main composers (1820-1869)

Source: Chronopera database

Fig. 4.

	Gounod	Wagner	Meyerbeer	Verdi	Massenet	Saint-Saëns	Rossini	Donizetti	Mozart	Weber	Auber

1870-1900	1,007	352	1,191	409	224	234	334	307	179	100	59
1901-1940	1,326	1,257	203	897	871	735	127	29	151	116	0
Total	2,333	1,609	1,394	1,306	1,095	969	461	336	330	216	59

Number of performances at the *Opéra de Paris* of main composers, (1870-1940)

Source: Chronopera database.

- 7 Unlike the London opera house, the *Opéra de Paris* in fact had an official mission (to which its state funding was explicitly linked) to support new works by French composers. However, throughout the whole period 1814-1879, only 145 new lyric works were created—less than two a year. Thus, if we combine performances by the most-played composers in the table between 1820 and 1869, we see that reprises of the most popular works occurred on over half of performance days at the *Opéra* during the period: 5,054 performances in 9,000 days (an average of 180 per year), or 56.1%.
- 8 Figure 3 shows how the preferred composers of Parisian opera-goers of the previous period—Donizetti (Rollet 2012), Daniel Auber, and Giacomo Meyerbeer, along with Giuseppe Verdi—continued to be in the lead in the 1850s and 1860s. A certain degree of originality also emerged with the promise of a relatively long future: *L'Africaine* by Meyerbeer (1865), *Hamlet* by Ambroise Thomas, and *Faust* by Charles Gounod (firstly at the *Théâtre-Lyrique* in 1859, and then at the *Opéra* in 1869), which would enjoy a long history that continues to the present day (Lacombe 2010: 162-65; Rollet 2012).
- 9 Over the next seventy years (Fig. 4.), these newcomers, along with Wagner who came later, consolidated their status in the repertory to the detriment of the old Italian masters, whose successors, including Puccini, bounced back to some extent at the turn of the century with the fashion for *verismo* operas. Thus, we see how canonization did not preclude a renewal of composers and the most-performed operas on the fringes of the Parisian repertory. For example, Meyerbeer, formerly the dominant canonic composer, was performed much less often although he remained popular for much longer at provincial theatres such as Rouen's *Théâtre des Arts* (Goubault 1977; Elart & Simon 2019).

Fig. 5.

	Donizetti	Meyerbeer	Mozart	Rossini	Auber	Bellini	Weber
1810-1870	1,112	1,005	827	784	555	546	429

Most-performed opera composers in Vienna between 1810 and 1870 (accumulated number of performances of various works)

Source: Figures according to Jahn 2002, 2004, 2007

Fig. 6.

Verdi	Donizetti	Meyerbeer	Rossini	Wagner	Bellini	Gounod	Bizet
-------	-----------	-----------	---------	--------	---------	--------	-------

1,751	1,150	875	642	540	488	259	157
-------	-------	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----

Most frequently performed opera composers at the *Teatro Real de Madrid* 1850-1924

Source: Figures according to Turina Gómez 1997: 315-327

- 10 As Figure 5 suggests, repertoires in Vienna were generally similar to those in Paris in the prominence they accorded to Rossini, Auber, Donizetti, Bellini, and Meyerbeer. Local masters, such as Mozart, were an exception given relatively prominent billing, whereas in Paris, performances of his operas had slowed to a trickle and were played in adapted forms far removed from the original. In certain contexts, incidentally, Mozart was assimilated into the Italian tradition. Madrid's *Teatro Real* (see Figure 6), which did not open until 1850, adopted European opera trends with a strong audience preference—if we go by the frequency of performances—for Italian operas of the first two thirds of the nineteenth century (the younger Verdi and Donizetti had now overtaken Rossini) and for some French composers renowned in Paris and in the German sphere (Meyerbeer, Gounod, Bizet). Wagner's breakthrough, on the other hand, came as late as it did in France: his first long-term success in Madrid, *Lohengrin*, was not performed until 1881, two years before the composer's death.
- 11 The Italian scene, although the most productive in terms of creation of new operas, experienced factors which encouraged an increasing degree of iteration in programming on the peninsula as well as in the countries where its works were exported. Production of new pieces began to slow in the 1840s, and even more so in the 1850s. La Scala went from thirty-eight creations between 1831 and 1840 to just one or two a year in the 1860s. The stabilization of the repertoire took place in a majority of Italian theatres in the 1850s and 1860s, while construction of larger venues, known as *politeami*, in cities and the spread of opera to smaller towns, called for a selection of works that were best-known and best-loved by the general public, and thus generally older (Sorba 2001).
- 12 Did this ageing process which gradually affected all countries' opera repertoires – except perhaps the emerging nations who consciously fostered their own national operas to combat the dominance of foreign works – also result in a process of consecration or canonization of what had already been established? Except in central and eastern European cities, where, as Philippe Ther (2006) points out, nationalist sentiment led to loyalty to local composers, what were the contexts in which new composers and new works, albeit less numerous, managed to find their place beside composers who had already been consecrated in the first half of the nineteenth century?
- 13 Figure 7, showing the most successful operas in four European capitals, helps answer this question. It shows both the international circulation of works as well as the protection of a crucial repertoire in terms of local identity or the national opera tradition. Even though recent works were still introduced on a regular basis, these amounted to a tiny fraction of programmes in terms of number of performances. Indeed, opera lovers almost everywhere ultimately favoured the same works from the dominant cultures of the genre. These works were based on a combination of elements from Italian *bel canto*, French theatrical tradition (the principal source of many librettos, plots and themes²), with some characters and stories taken from German mythology and music (the latter was beginning to establish its own independent

repertory in the 1840s). The prevailing practice of translation and adaptation (or even remaking), the sharing of star singers, impresarios and composers, collaboration between artists of different nationalities, and the re-use of fragments of older operas contributed to this blurring of national music borders.

Fig. 7.

Paris (Opéra and Opéra Comique)	Berlin (until 1885) Hofoper	Vienne (1810-1848) Hofoper	Dresde (1816-1862) Hofoper
- <i>Le Pré aux clercs</i> , Herold: 1000 (1833-1871), 1500 in 1891	- <i>Der Freischütz</i> , Weber: 504	- <i>Le Barbier de Séville</i> , Rossini: 221	- <i>Der Freischütz</i> , Weber: 262
- <i>La Dame blanche</i> , Boieldieu: 1000 (1826-1862)	- <i>Don Juan</i> , Mozart: 487	- <i>Der Freischütz</i> , Weber: 209	- <i>La Muette de Portici</i> , Auber: 146
- <i>Le Domino noir</i> , Auber: 1000 (1837-1882)	- <i>La Flûte enchantée</i> , Mozart: 404	- <i>Norma</i> , Bellini: 185	- <i>Oberon</i> , Weber: 134
- <i>Fra diavolo</i> , Auber: 909 (1830-1906)	- <i>Fidelio</i> , Beethoven: 317	- <i>Don Giovanni</i> , Mozart: 181	- <i>Le Barbier de Séville</i> , Rossini: (in German) 110
- <i>Robert le diable</i> , Meyerbeer: 750 (1831-93)	- <i>Les Huguenots</i> , Meyerbeer: 235	- <i>Robert le Diable</i> , Meyerbeer: 167	- <i>Robert le Diable</i> , Meyerbeer: 103
- <i>La Fille du régiment</i> , Donizetti: 600 (1840-1875), 1000 in 1914	- <i>Robert le Diable</i> , Meyerbeer: 210	- <i>La Muette de Portici</i> , Auber: 171	- <i>La Flûte enchantée</i> , Mozart: 98
- <i>Zampa</i> , Herold: 500 (1831-1877), 685 in 1900	- <i>La Muette de Portici</i> , Auber: 276	- <i>La Flûte enchantée</i> , Mozart: 165	- <i>Norma</i> , Bellini: (in German) 49 + (in Italian) 40 = 89
- <i>Guillaume Tell</i> , Rossini: 585 (1829-1875) - <i>Les Huguenots</i> , Meyerbeer: 545 (1836-1875)	- <i>Le Barbier de Séville</i> , Rossini: 229	- <i>La Vestale</i> , Spontini: 153	- <i>Le Prophète</i> , Meyerbeer: 87
- <i>Le Prophète</i> , Meyerbeer: 322 (1849-1876)	- <i>Der Troubadour</i> , Verdi: (in German) 176	- <i>Les Noces de Figaro</i> , Mozart: 139	- <i>Don Juan</i> , Mozart: (in German) 86
- <i>La Muette de Portici</i> , Auber: 489 (1828-1882)	- <i>Fra Diavolo</i> , Auber: 156	- <i>Jean de Paris</i> , Boieldieu: 127	- <i>Euryanthe</i> , Weber: 80

- <i>L'Étoile du Nord</i> , Meyerbeer: 400 (1854-1885)	- <i>Der Feensee</i> , Auber: 146	- <i>Joseph et ses frères</i> , Méhul: 119	- <i>La Dame blanche</i> , Boieldieu: (in German) 79
- <i>Faust</i> , Gounod: 416 (1859-1862) and (1869-75)	- <i>Jessonda</i> , Spohr: 101	- <i>Guillaume Tell</i> , Rossini: 102 - <i>La Somnambule</i> , Bellini	- <i>La Fille du régiment</i> , Donizetti: (in German) 72
- <i>La Favorite</i> , Donizetti: 443 (1840-1875)	- <i>Norma</i> , Bellini: 99	- <i>Zampa</i> , Herold: 97	- <i>Fra Diavolo</i> , Auber: 72
- <i>La Juive</i> , F. Halévy: 368 (1835-1875), 500 in 1886	- <i>Guillaume Tell</i> , Rossini: 96	- <i>Les Huguenots</i> , Meyerbeer: 93	- <i>Alessandro Stradella</i> , Flotow: 69
- <i>Lucie de Lammermoor</i> , Donizetti: (1838-1889), 270 in 1889	- <i>Die Capuletti und Montecchi</i> , Bellini: 87	- <i>La Dame blanche</i> , Boieldieu: 85	- <i>Fidelio</i> , Beethoven: 62

Most frequently performed operas in four European capitals in the first two thirds of the 19th century (The given figure is the number of performances during the specified period)

Sources: Loewenberg 1955; Kaminski 2003; Wolff 1983; Wolff 1953; Lacombe 2010: 162; Chronopera online database; Patureau 1991: 154-155; Dresden 1862; Schäffer & Hartmann 1886; Jahn 2002; Jahn 2004; Jahn 2007.

- 14 The plots of the most-performed operas in Europe took their themes from cultural traditions – including from France, Britain, Germany, and Italy—and from a diverse range of eras and places—Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the early modern era, exotic civilizations, etc. The goals were escapism and an excuse to show striking or spectacular scenes. Ancient eras continued to provide a historical framework for work at the beginning of the century, as they had throughout literature, before gradually giving way to more recent history. For example, François-Adrien Boieldieu's *La Dame blanche* (1825) with a libretto by Eugène Scribe is an adaptation of two Walter Scott novels, *Guy Mannering* and *The Monastery*, which were published in 1815 and 1820. Set in Scotland in the eighteenth century, the story takes place at the castle of the Count and Countess Avenel, which is haunted by the eponymous white lady. *La muette de Portici* (1828, performed 450 times in Paris up until 1860) is another French opera which enjoyed international success; it was based on the seventeenth-century Neapolitan insurrection against Spanish troops. It broke ground by giving the lead singing role to a man, while the female (mute) role is danced and not sung, thus integrating ballet into opera in a new way. Through its foregrounding of the role of the choir in its market scenes and scenes depicting revolt, the work was seen as subversive in the climate of political restoration of the era (Fulcher 1987; Gerhard 1992; Clark 2003). Through their historic transposition of political and religious tensions of the era, other *grand opéras* by Rossini (*Guillaume Tell*), Meyerbeer (*Les Huguenots*), and later Verdi (*Les Vêpres siciliennes*, *Don Carlos*, and in a different context *Nabucco*) and even the young Wagner (*Rienzi*, *Lohengrin*) satisfied a Europe-wide desire of the public in conservative restored monarchies for a depiction of both history and future perspectives. At the same time, this relative audacity risked provoking scandal (as was the case for Wagner), or at least

problems with censors. When such works achieved a breakthrough, their success would often then be long-lasting.

- 15 We can also see that each theatre's repertory, while having works in common, preserved specific local or national traits. Each favoured composers working in their native language, which was better suited to the characteristics of singers or troupes; it was common practice at the time to translate or adapt foreign works, which posed several practical problems. Thus Carl Maria von Weber was the most-performed composer at Germany's three opera houses (a total of 975 performances of *der Freischütz*), but he remained practically unknown in Paris, despite an early attempt by Castil-Blaze to adapt the work under the title *Robin des Bois* at the *Odéon* in 1824, and then a further transposition attempt by Berlioz in 1840. Likewise, Beethoven's *Fidelio*, which was unsuccessful in Paris, became a classic of the German opera houses. The latter institutions proved, by contrast, much less closed to works from the foreign repertory than the French or, to an even greater extent, Italian stages, which is an indication of the still-inferior position of German opera on an international scale before the breakthrough of Wagner and Humperdinck at the end of the century. On German stages, French *grands operas*, some *opéras comiques* and some Italian operas thus found themselves high in the relative ranking in terms of number of cumulative performances: two works by Meyerbeer created in France were in the fifth place in the German repertory. This honour was just missed out on by two Italian composers – Rossini and Donizetti – despite the fact that they made an effort towards Gallicization by ending their days in the French capital and collaborating with local librettists.
- 16 The final phenomenon revealed by this Table is that the opportunity of becoming a mainstay in opera programmes throughout the nineteenth century was chiefly available to a certain generation of composers: those which had known success before 1848. These composers fully benefited not only from the ageing phenomenon of the repertory from the middle of the century on, but also from the concentration on a limited number of works that filled the gaps in terms of ticket sales in between less predictable works. Since what was consecrated was not only a limited number of composers (half a dozen), but equally, of their production, an even smaller number of operas that were performed over and over. Rossini, who composed the music for thirty-nine operas, saw just two of these survive long term (*Guillaume Tell* and *The Barber of Seville*); and likewise, only two operas by Donizetti, who was even more prolific (sixty-five works), endured (*La fille du régiment* and *La favorite*). The same severe selectivity is seen for French or Gallicized composers such as Auber, Meyerbeer, Gounod, and Halévy – various theatres' repertories generally maintained one or two of their works that promised long-term and, above all, international success.
- 17 However, this does not mean that in the first two thirds of the nineteenth century a cannon was set in stone to be passed on in its definitive form to posterity. On the other hand, the subsequent filtering process proved less severe than that to which the vast majority of eighteenth-century composers were subjected during the nineteenth century, owing to the relative decline in new work produced.

2. The Canonization Process: Origins and Limits

- 18 To understand these new, gentler means of selection which then became standard, it is necessary to examine the most significant factors governing how operas were

produced. The pace of creation of new works slowed from the 1840s partly because librettists and composers strove to gain firmer control over the whole production process, which further slowed the time it took to put on new works. The decrease in new productions encouraged the best-known composers to propose fewer potential operas and to concentrate on more carefully considered artistic projects. The reinforced concern for quality in new works then raised the costs of new productions. This in turn increased the need to keep putting on works in the repertory, to revive older works, and to import successful operas from other countries. As I suggested above, the value given to national and local repertories was thus not incompatible with the introduction of works from abroad. At Milan's *Teatro la Scala*, the percentage of Italian pieces was between 88 and 97% prior to 1870 but fell to 61% between 1871 and 1914, thanks to the import of French and German operas. The opening-up to foreign repertories tended to reinforce the choice of established, older works, which had already been recognized in foreign repertories, in order to limit the risks (Charle 2013: 17, 25).

- 19 Thus, the introduction and public acceptance of Wagner's operas outside the German space progressed similarly to foreign works by much less well-known or less controversial composers. Although the Wagnerian repertory was long delayed in being staged in Paris, his first works were then performed there as often as they were in the rest of Europe. In 1912, *Lohengrin* was staged 319 times (compared with 300 times in Vienna) and *Tannhäuser* 233 times, while *Die Walküre* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (as *La Walkyrie* and *Les Maîtres chanteurs*) were also frequently performed. The other parts of the *Ring*, on the other hand, tended to draw the public considerably less, as was often the case in other European cities. The popularity of operas was also largely due to adaptations in the form of excerpts of famous tunes or piano transcriptions in Europe and America, which reinforced canonization (Blackmar 2012).
- 20 Elsewhere, Wagner acted as a catalyst in interesting ways. In Catalonia, for example, musical theatre was completely dominated by the Italian repertory in the second half of the nineteenth century, but Wagner's works increasingly began to compete. Moreover, Wagner's ideas and the Wagnerian movement were the true source of operatic modernism, contributing to the rise of a nationally defined Catalan opera. Catalan modernists applied Wagnerian ideals to define independence not only from Italian music but also from Castilian political and social predominance as Wagner's repertory was performed in the 1890s: *Rienzi* (1874), *Lohengrin* (1882), *Der fliegende Holländer* (1885), and much later *Die Walküre* (1899) and *Tristan und Isolde* (1899) (Alier i Aixalà & Mata 1991: 49-69).
- 21 However, the entry of Wagner's operas into the international canon at the end of the century should not fool us. The new composers at the turn of the century felt that the new situation was an obstacle to their recognition and to the increasing burden of economic constraints on the staging of new works. In an interview in 1911 following a trip to Vienna, Claude Debussy said:
"While in Vienna the other day, I saw what was playing at the opera. *Carmen* one night and *Tosca* the next. Do Austrian composers count for nothing? I really do not know. But what I do know is that throughout the world, theatre directors are forced to present works that make money; and none of them would have the sound judgement to go bankrupt to please a composer" (Debussy 1987: 315).
- 22 Debussy's purely materialistic analysis of opera is a candid exposure of the basic financial considerations that governed this world, but these were not new, as

demonstrated by the misfortunes of Berlioz's operas *Benvenuto Cellini* (which opened in 1838) and *Les Troyens* (partial opening in 1863) (Cairns 1999: 160-166, 701-707). Whatever the future had in store for a work either critically or aesthetically, the enormous costs of producing a new work during the period scared opera directors and encouraged conservatism, which limited the number of new creations and likewise their repeat staging if they were not an instant success.

- 23 At the same time, an opposing set of factors made it possible for a new group of operas to attain popularity and be gradually admitted to the already well-established canon from the mid-nineteenth century. In 1872 and 1873, fifteen European opera houses created new operas, and in 1892 and 1893 twenty-nine did so (this time in America as well as Europe)³. The change came about in large part as a result of the increasingly close relationships that grew up throughout the opera business, helping theatre directors work together to take advantage of the few rare new works that succeeded in attracting a wide audience. Any work that did well during its initial performances would be taken up by the more prudent directors or those who were best-connected on the national and international circuit, which would have a snowball effect, thereby bringing wider public recognition.
- 24 Nevertheless, as opera grew as an international commerce, it did not enjoy similar success everywhere. The expansion of the operatic canon in the late nineteenth century left some works in a sort of temporary purgatory, or as objects of derision by critics who saw them as inferior to the much-loved canon from Mozart to Verdi.
- 25 We can see the phenomenon of this relative success by comparing the fate of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* with that of *Salome* by Richard Strauss. Both operas were situated outside the mainstream Italian tradition, and each experienced a different reception. Composed in 1895, *Pelléas et Mélisande* was perceived as too unusual for opera houses to undertake, until the *Opéra-Comique* finally staged it in April 1902 without the approval of its librettist Maurice Maeterlinck (Pasler 1987 & 2008). After that, it was only put on seven or eight times a year, reaching its hundredth performance in 1913. Although at the time Debussy was the most famous composer of his generation, his opera was not performed outside Paris until 1907 when it played in Brussels and Frankfurt.
- 26 By comparison, *Salome* entered the repertory much more quickly and with greater impetus. Known in large part for having been inspired by the controversial play by Oscar Wilde, it had its premiere on the 9 December 1905 and, thanks to wide press coverage, was then performed in fifty towns and cities in the space of two years, generally in German. A particular widening of its linguistic geography occurred when it was performed in Polish in Warsaw, and then in England, where its official censorship (on account of its Biblical subject matter) was finally lifted, allowing the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden to show it in 1907. As this example shows, the popularity of operas varied greatly and depended on the themes they dealt with rather than their intrinsic musical or aesthetic qualities, which have been judged by posterity. Whereas a biblical context and indirect publicity generated by its official censorship helped advance public recognition of *Salome*, the conservative public remained hostile to *Pelléas et Mélisande* in particular since its medieval and symbolist context lacked universal appeal to attract a wide audience (Jameux 1971: 74-75; Fulcher 1998). Similarly, the references to antiquity of *Elektra* (1909) and the eighteenth-century plot of *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911) by Richard Strauss spoke more to the public's imagination in

this period of revival of ancient Greek theatre and fascination throughout Europe with the lifestyle of the Ancien Régime.

- 27 One final factor – which we also find in the case of theatre – played in the favour of the permanence of repertoires: the increasing dominance of those whom I propose to call “double men” (they were almost always men). They would combine and accumulate musical expertise and economic or administrative power, and were able to attract the public either towards novelty, or conversely to striking remakings of old works (Charle 1998, 2008). In this way, theatre directors and producers cooperated with patrons (or the state), famous singers, and critics to resolve the tension between the desire to offer something somewhat new and that of satisfying average tastes without jeopardizing the financial balance of an ever-fragile entertainment economy in the medium term. This dilemma, which was resolved in a provisional and precarious manner, depended entirely on the choices and intuitions of these strategic intermediaries. The majority favoured the more conservative option, as Debussy implied, but some were responsible for a partial opening-up without which the old repertoire would have been definitively fixed on the norm set at the turn of the twentieth century. There were also those who revived works from earlier eras such as baroque or Renaissance operas, or who today boldly modernize sacred classics such as Wagner, Puccini, or Mozart.

Conclusion. The Struggle Between the Canon and the New

- 28 Let us conclude by comparing musical and spoken theatre in dealing with the dichotomy between new and canonic works. Much as happened in the opera houses, a gulf emerged between theatres that were focused on literary works and those with popular repertoires. The divide developed differently in larger and smaller cities (Charle 2008; Yon 2012). In both types of theatre, the same question arose of whether to follow the taste for classics or to try to guide the public towards new and innovative works – whether to privilege big, popular shows or high-quality original theatre. The costs involved in musical theatre were so high (and getting higher) that they limited the options for administrators, despite the existence (at least in Europe) of state subsidies and a public committed to invention in music. Although fewer new works face an empty room – as had been the case not long before – audiences still prefer to hear celebrated arias of the sort that were the centre of canonic operas consecrated in the nineteenth century. For their part, composers tried to find their way in a world more or less controlled by national or international canons, carefully exploiting practices suggested by the few successful new operas. However, they always ran the risk of being kept out of the main theatres and being identified with the isolated world of “contemporary music.”
- 29 Taking a broad perspective on the process of canonization in the nineteenth century, as I have done here, has a definite flaw in that it overlooks many irregularities and peculiarities. But it has the merit of highlighting a fundamental shift from a repertoire focused on novelty to one rooted in tradition. The cycle of changes after one to three generations, such as was the pattern in France, gave way to a broad and common or similar repertoire in the main opera countries. Undoubtedly at times, successful new works have been introduced despite the long-term reinforcement of a canonized tradition. Such rare innovation depends on the intervention of intermediaries in

strategic positions: librettists, composers, star singers, producers, and patrons—those who initially craft an opera’s reputation, and its circulation—wide or narrow, local or international—without which lasting access to the repertory is impossible. It is this that produces fluctuations in the market for the birth or resurrection of operas despite the apparent stability of the canonical repertory.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Chronopera database

Operabase database

ALIER I AIXALÀ Roger & MATA Francesc X. (1991). *El gran teatro del Liceo, historia artistica*. Barcelone, Ed. F. X. Mata.

BINI Annalisa & COMMONS Jeremy (1997). *Le prime rappresentazioni delle opere di Donizetti nella stampa coeva*. Milano, Skira-Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia.

BLACKMAR Matthew (2012). *Wagner domesticated, Wagner democratized: The parlor reception of Musikdrama*. Master dissertation. Long Beach, California State University.

CAIRNS David (1999). *Berlioz, vol. 2. Servitude and greatness 1832-1869*. London, Allen Lane, The Penguin press.

CHARLE Christophe (1998). *Paris, fin de siècle, culture et politique*. Paris, Seuil.

CHARLE Christophe (2008). *Théâtres en capitales, naissance de la société du spectacle à Paris, Berlin, Londres et Vienne, 1860-1914*. Paris, Albin Michel.

CHARLE Christophe (2013). “La circulation des opéras en Europe au XIX^e siècle.” *Relations Internationales*, 155: 11-31.

CLARK Maribeth (2003). “The body and the voice in *La muette de Portici*.” *19th-Century Music*, 27(2): 116-31.

CONATI Marcello (1989). “I periodici teatrali e musicali italiani a metà Ottocento.” *Periodica Musica*, VII: 13-28.

COWGILL Rachel (2006). “Mozart productions and the emergence of *Werktreue* at London’s Italian Opera House, 1780–1830.” In MONTEMORRA MARVIN Roberta & DOWNING Thomas (eds.). *Operatic migrations: Transforming works and crossing boundaries*. Aldershot, Ashgate: 145-186.

COWGILL Rachel (2000). “‘Wise Men from the East’: Mozart’s operas and their advocates in early nineteenth-century London.” In BASHFORD Christina & LANGLEY Leanne (eds.). *Music and British culture, 1785–1914: Essays in honour of Cyril Ehrlich*. Oxford, Oxford University Press: 39-64.

DEBUSSY Claude (1987). *Monsieur Croche et autres écrits*. Paris, Gallimard.

DE NORA Tia (1995). *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius. Musical Politics in Vienna 1792-1803*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

- DRESDE (1862). *Verzeichnis der vom 1. Okt. 1816 bis 1. Jan. 1862 auf dem Königl. Sächs. Hoftheater zu Dresden neu aufgeführten Stücke*. Dresde.
- ELART Joann & SIMON Yannick (eds.) (2019). "Théâtre des Arts de Rouen des origines à nos jours (1776-2020)." (Accessed on 28 December 2019).
- FAUQUET Joël-Marie & HENNION Antoine (1999). *La Grandeur de Bach. L'amour de la musique en France au XIX^e siècle*. Paris, Fayard.
- FENNER Theodore (1994). *Opera in London: Views of the Press 1785-1830*. Carbondale, South Illinois University Press.
- FULCHER Jane F. (1987) *The Nation's Image. French Grand Opera as Politics and Politicized Art*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- FULCHER Jane F. (1998). *French Cultural Politics and Music from the Dreyfus Affair to the First World War*. New York/Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- GERHARD Anselm (1992). *Die Verstädterung der Oper: Paris und das Musiktheater des 19. Jahrhunderts*. Stuttgart, Verlag J. B. Metzler.
- GOUBAULT Christian (1977). *La Vie musicale à Rouen de 1830 à 1914*. PhD dissertation. Paris, Université Paris IV.
- HALL-WITT Jennifer (2007). *Fashionable Acts, Opera and Elite Culture in London 1780-1880*. Lebanon, University of New Hampshire Press.
- HEINICH Nathalie (1996) [1991]. *The Glory of Van Gogh: An Anthropology of Admiration*. Translated by Paul Leduc Browne. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- JAHN Michael (2002). *Die Wiener Hofoper von 1848 bis 1870, Personal, Aufführungen, Spielplan*. Tutzing, Schneider.
- JAHN Michael (2004). *Die Wiener Hofoper von 1836 bis 1848, die Ära Balochino/Merelli*. Vienne, Verlag der Apfel.
- JAHN Michael (2007). *Die Wiener Hofoper von 1810 bis 1836, das Kärnthnertheater als Hofoper*. Vienne, Verlag der Apfel.
- JAMEUX Dominique (1971). *Richard Strauss*. Paris, Seuil.
- KAMINSKI Piotr (2003). *Mille et un opéras*. Paris, Fayard.
- LACOMBE Hervé (2007). *Géographie de l'opéra au XIX^e siècle*. Paris, Fayard.
- LACOMBE Hervé (2010). "L'Opéra sous le Second Empire." In YON Jean-Claude (ed.). *Les spectacles sous le Second Empire*. Paris, Armand Colin: 159-172.
- LOEWENBERG Alfred (1955) [1943]. *Annals of Opera*. Genève, Societas bibliographica.
- PARKER Roger & ABBATE Carolyn (2012). *A History of Opera*. New York, Norton.
- PASLER Jann (1987). "Opéra et pouvoir, forces à l'œuvre derrière le scandale de *Pelléas* de Debussy." In DUFOURT Hugues & FAUQUET Joël-Marie (eds.). *La musique et le pouvoir*. Paris, Aux amateurs de livres: 147-177.
- PASLER Jann (2008). "Pelléas and Power: Forces behind the reception of Debussy's Opera." In PASLER Jann. *Writing through Music, essay on Music, Culture, and Politics*. Oxford, Oxford University Press: 181-212.
- PATUREAU Frédérique (1991). *Le Palais Garnier dans la société parisienne 1875-1914*. Liège, Mardaga.

- PISTONE Danièle (1986). *L'Opéra italien au XIX^e siècle de Rossini à Puccini*. Paris, Honoré Champion.
- ROLLET Stella (2012). *Donizetti et la France, histoire d'une relation ambiguë*. PhD dissertation, History. Guyancourt, Université de Versailles-Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines.
- SCHÄFFER C. & HARTMANN C. (1886). *Die königlichen Theater in Berlin, statistischer Rückblick auf die künstlerische Thätigkeit und die Personal-Verhältnisse während des Zeitraums vom 5. December 1786 bis 31. December 1885*. Berlin, Berliner Verlagscomptoir.
- SORBA Carlotta (2001). *Teatri, L'Italia del melodramma nell'età del Risorgimento*. Bologna, Il Mulino.
- THER Philipp (2006). *In der Mitte der Gesellschaft: Operntheater in Zentraleuropa, 1815-1914*. Vienne/Munich, Oldenbourg.
- TURINA GÓMEZ Joaquín (1997). *Historia del Teatro Real*. Madrid, Alianza Editorial.
- VEIT Patrice (2007). "Bach à Berlin en 1829: une 'redécouverte'?" *Annales Histoire sciences sociales*, 62(6): 1347-1386.
- WOLFF Stéphane (1953). *Un demi-siècle d'Opéra-Comique (1900-1950), tome 2, les œuvres et les interprètes*. Paris, André Bonne.
- WOLFF Stéphane (1983) [1962]. *L'Opéra au Palais Garnier (1875-1962)*. Geneva, Slatkine. Facsimile reproduction of the Paris edition, "L'Entracte".
- YON Jean-Claude (2012). *Une histoire du théâtre à Paris de la Révolution à la Grande Guerre*. Paris, Aubier.

NOTES

1. We can see this relative permanence by comparing statistical data on Operabase, which ranks the most performed operas in the world. See the data in the tables that follow in this article.
2. According to Danièle Pistone, of 157 operas composed by Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, Verdi, and Puccini, 63 have a French source, 16 an English source, 15 an Italian source, 11 a German source, and 52 have unknown sources (Pistone 1986: 22).
3. Namely: Paris, St Petersburg, Brussels, Milan, Prague, Warsaw, Leipzig, Ljubljana, Berlin, London, Vienna, Marseilles, Florence, Bologna, Hamburg (in decreasing order of number of new works created); between 1892 and 1893: Paris, Milan, Prague, London, Berlin, Vienna, Venice, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Munich, Florence, Boston, Saint-Petersburg, Turin, Gotha, Geneva, Rome, Dresden, Karlsruhe, Barcelona, Weimar, Genoa, Brussels, Liverpool, Budapest, Moscow, Mexico, Bogotá, and Aix-les-Bains (Lacombe 2007; Lowenberg 1955; Charle 2013: 27).

ABSTRACTS

The numerous monographs centred on the evolution of the repertoires of nineteenth- and twentieth-century opera houses make possible a statistical measure of the increasing ageing process of the most frequently performed operas. The canonisation of early successes takes place mainly from the second half of the 19th century onwards and becomes more pronounced in the

20th century. This refusal of novelty is due to the rising costs of performance, to the emergence of a pantheon of composers that has been little renewed over the generations, and to the growing influence of show organisers, singing stars and theatre directors. The dissemination of the most famous arias, which made certain composers particularly popular, notably in Italy (Verdi), France (Gounod, Bizet), Germany (Wagner), and later in Russia and Central Europe, also encouraged the repeated performances, for the widest possible audiences at festivals or in the media, of works gradually selected by posterity. This process is reminiscent of the emergence of the great masters of classical music or painting before the advent of modernity, but it has its own specific features due to the weight of a show mobilising several arts (theatre, set, costume, music, dance) and the early internationalisation of the most frequently performed works. A few reference scenes serve as test beds for the future canonisation process, which is rarely called into question, as can be the case for other arts that are less dependent on the major European cultural capitals' institutions. However, this canon is never definitively stabilised: discontinuation may still happen, particularly when the conditions of production make it impossible to revive works that were once central. This marginal renewal implies a very strong selectivity for new works and significantly slows down the recognition of the most innovative ones.

Les multiples monographies sur l'évolution des répertoires des opéras en activité au XIX^e et au XX^e siècle permettent de mesurer statistiquement le processus de vieillissement croissant des opéras joués le plus fréquemment. La canonisation des succès anciens intervient principalement à partir de la seconde moitié du XIX^e siècle et s'accroît au XX^e siècle. Cette fermeture à la nouveauté tient aux coûts croissants de représentation, à l'émergence d'un panthéon de compositeurs très peu renouvelé au fil des générations et au rôle croissant des organisateurs de spectacle, des vedettes du chant et des directeurs de salle. La diffusion des airs les plus célèbres, qui rend particulièrement populaires certains compositeurs notamment en Italie (Verdi), en France (Gounod, Bizet), en Allemagne (Wagner), plus tard en Russie et en Europe centrale, incite aussi à la reprise constante dans les festivals ou les médias pour les publics les plus larges des œuvres sélectionnées progressivement par la postérité. Ce processus rappelle celui de l'émergence des grands maîtres de la musique classique ou du canon de la grande peinture avant la rupture de la modernité, mais il présente des spécificités qui tiennent aux pesanteurs d'un spectacle mobilisant plusieurs arts (théâtre, décor, costume, musique, danse) et à l'internationalisation précoce des œuvres les plus jouées. Quelques scènes de référence servent de bancs d'essai au futur processus de canonisation, qui est rarement remis en cause comme cela peut être le cas pour d'autres arts, moins dépendants des institutions des grandes capitales culturelles européennes. Pour autant ce canon n'est jamais définitivement stabilisé et n'exclut pas des abandons, notamment lorsque les conditions de production rendent impossibles certaines reprises d'œuvres autrefois centrales. Ce renouvellement à la marge implique une sélectivité très forte pour les nouveaux entrants et impose aux œuvres les plus novatrices une reconnaissance très progressive.

AUTHORS

CHRISTOPHE CHARLE

École d'histoire de la Sorbonne (EHS)