



PROJECT MUSE®

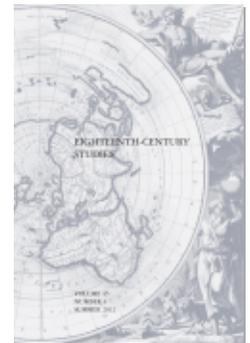
---

Old Sluts and Dangerous Minuets: or, the Underlying Musical  
Tensions of the *Querelle des Bouffons*

Geoffrey Higgins

Eighteenth-Century Studies, Volume 45, Number 4, Summer 2012, pp. 549-563  
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecs.2012.0059>



➔ *For additional information about this article*  
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/481778>

# OLD SLUTS AND DANGEROUS MINUETS: OR, THE UNDERLYING MUSICAL TENSIONS OF THE *QUERELLE DES BOUFFONS*

*Geoffrey Higgins*

---

Between 1752 and 1753 Paris witnessed the *Querelle des Bouffons*, a polemic involving some of the greatest minds of the time. Supposedly sparked by a troupe of Italian actors performing Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona* (1733), the debate at first glance appeared to concern French versus Italian opera. This cannot have been the reason, however, as pamphlets began appearing some six months before the Italians' debut. By 1753, dozens had been published both in support for and often scathing attack on each side, in an artistic and philosophical war. Such writers as Friedrich Melchior Grimm (1723–1807), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), and Denis Diderot (1713–1784) took center stage as they discussed the qualities of music and its substance. Scholarly focus on the *Querelle* has at times questioned the significance of the event; Jeffrey Pulver, for example, opened his 1916 article on the subject as follows:

There are many matters for which much space cannot be spared in our works of reference and of musical history, but which, nevertheless, are often instructive and sometimes entertaining. One of these subjects is the pamphlet-war that was waged in France at the middle of the 18th century,—a bloodless contest that may serve very well to illustrate the methods of argument and the manner of thought prevailing at the period,—and that shows us something new, too, in the characters of many otherwise well-known personages.<sup>1</sup>

---

Geoffrey Higgins works primarily on theater and music from eighteenth-century Britain. In particular, he is interested in the tenor John Beard and how his career influenced music-making in London and aided the rise of the British tenor. Other research interests include how music and theater facilitated discourse on politics and society; early modern gender theories and the manipulation of perceived gender qualities in theatrical productions; and Orientalism.

He goes on to say that as “great wars are often to be traced back to trivial affairs,” so the *Querelle* began with “an innocently-intended writing of Grimm’s on a work of the Lully school,” concluding that it was “petty.”<sup>2</sup> On the surface, pamphlets contrasting Italian opera with its French cousin will doubtless appear mundane; the problem with this perspective is that it can overlook underlying currents.

Recent research has corrected much of this inherited underestimation and has shown that the *Querelle* was in fact a highly significant event. Of note is a study by Elizabeth Cook, in which she shows how many of the pamphlets resonate with the polarized political background at the time, using the musical debate as a subversive cover.<sup>3</sup> Supporters of the royal establishment championed French opera, forged on the principles of French classicism and absolutist ideology, while proponents of Enlightenment saw in Italian opera a vehicle for subversive attacks on that establishment. Elsewhere, Emmet Kennedy and Daniel Hartz have examined the effect of the perceived “liberties” of Italian music at this time, with Kennedy focusing on the associated political freedoms<sup>4</sup> while Hartz reflects on the polemic’s relationship with the opera reform movement from the 1750s, particularly in reference to the search for verisimilitude and simplicity.<sup>5</sup>

But to understand fully the cultural and political significance of the *Querelle* we must now ask several other questions. Why did the polemic ground itself in a musical debate in the first place? What meaning did music (especially Italian music) carry for people in general and critics of the establishment in particular? To answer these questions, in this article I will investigate the history of subversive currents present in French music before this time. In doing so, it will be seen that a long history of conflict existed between French and Italian music, the roots of which can be traced to the de facto co-regnum of Louis XIV’s mother Anne and her Italian first minister, Cardinal Mazarin, during the first half of the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, we will see how the conflict stemmed from ideological and aesthetic differences between the two, with Italian styles coming to be perceived as a threat to French absolutism.

To begin, we must first assess how political and social currents manifested themselves in *Querelle* documents. It is impossible to cover every pamphlet and its context and meaning here, but a choice few can set the scene. The first—the *Lettre de M. Grimm sur Omphale*—appeared in February 1752, and was published after Baron von Grimm (1723-1807) attended a revival of André Cardinal Destouches’s (1672–1749) opera *Omphale* (1701). Grimm’s enthusiasm for the Italian style cannot be missed:

Le caractere du Récitatif Italien est si sublime, qu’il assure lui seul à cette Musique une supériorité de laquelle aucune autre n’approche. . . . Également capable de toutes les expressions & de tous les caracteres, il déclame & marche avec pompe & majesté dans la Tragédie; il parle avec feu & rapidité le langage de toutes les passions; & avec le même bonheur il fait parler la joie, la gayeté, le sentiment, l’enjouement, la plaisanterie, la bouffonnerie.

[The character of Italian recitative is so sublime that it assures to him [the listener] that it alone has a superiority to which none other can approach. . . . Equally capable of all expressions and all characters, it declaims and

moves with pomp and majesty in the tragedy. It speaks with fire and speed the language of all the passions, and with the same delight it speaks of joy, gaiety, sentiment, cheerfulness, comedy, and antics.]<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, in his assessment of French opera Grimm offers some praise, but overall finds it to be lacking:

. . . je lui trouve de grandes beautés, quoique toujours inférieures à celles de la Musique Italienne. La Musique Française est très-bien adaptée au génie de la Langue; & l'Opéra Français fait aussi un genre à part, dont la Nation a raison d'être jalouse. . . .

[I find them [French operas] to be of great beauty, though always inferior to those of the Italian style. French music is very well adapted to the genius of its language; and French opera has become a genre in itself, of which the nation has reason to be jealous. . . .]<sup>8</sup>

More important, however, is his loaded remark about the right to speak freely on such matters, even if this amounts to criticism of the French national art form:

. . . j'espère, d'obéir à vos ordres, & de hazarder quelques remarques sur la Musique d'Omphale, avec toute la franchise qui m'est naturelle . . . c'est une gloire que la France a seule parmi tous les Peuples de l'Europe, que tout Etranger peut parler librement dans son sein, même pour relever les défauts qu'il y trouve.

[. . . I hope to fulfil your request, and to hazard a few remarks on the music of *Omphale*, with all the frankness that is natural to me. . . . It is a glory that France has alone among the nations of Europe, that every foreigner can speak freely from his breast, in order to question the defects he finds there.]<sup>9</sup>

Here, for Grimm, French opera embodied the French state. Though his comments appear complimentary, they are in fact ironic and barbed. The truth of the matter was that he could not speak freely, as criticism of the French state was dangerous. Rousseau reflected on this in his epistolary novel *La nouvelle Héloïse* (1761):

It [French opera] is said to be the most superb monument of the magnificence of Louis XIV. In fact, every one is not so much at liberty, as you imagine, to give his opinion on so brave a subject. Every thing may be made a point of dispute here, except music and the opera; but with respect to these, it may be dangerous not to dissemble one's thought as the French music is supported by an inquisition no less arbitrary than severe. Indeed, the first lesson that strangers are taught is, that foreigners universally allow that nothing in the whole world is so fine as the opera at Paris. The truth is, discreet people are silent upon this topic, because they dare not laugh, except in private.<sup>10</sup>

Grimm's remarks actually conceal a subversive attack on the establishment, as his *Lettre* followed the suppression of the first two volumes of the philosophe *Encyclopédie*, a project to which he contributed and which championed the idea that "Il faut tout examiner, tout remuer sans exception & sans ménagement" [Everything must be examined, and stirred up without caution].<sup>11</sup>

Other critics of the French regime were less discreet. Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach (1723–1789), satirized the staunch French position in his *Lettre à une dame d'un certain âge sur l'état présent de l'opéra*. Written from the perspective of a French supporter to an unknown “Madame,” d'Holbach's personal views are as clear as his language is deliberately melodramatic and disingenuous. The lady may have been Madame de Pompadour, the king's mistress, who moved in philosophe circles.

Madame,

No doubt it was a premonition which caused you to decide to leave a city in which the most extraordinary things were about to happen. How fortunate you are not to have witnessed them! How sad it is for me that because of your orders I am obliged to tell you about the unhappiness which I already know you will share. Listen, Madame, and tremble! The times you predicted have come. To the shame of our nation, and the age we live in, we have seen the august theatre of the Opera profaned by unworthy buffoons. . . . Her dignity has just been affronted by the most burlesque performances and frivolous music. Noisy high spirits and uncontrolled shouts have rent the veil of this temple. . . . Amidst the perversion, some honest Israelites remain, who have not bent the knee before the idol of the day. . . .<sup>12</sup>

Like Grimm's, d'Holbach's use of language is symbolic. In this case the use of biblical vocabulary is an overt reference to the growing religious unrest in Paris at that time. The conflict centered on a Jansenist translation of the New Testament that had been condemned as heretical by Pope Clement XI in 1713. Despite the papal censure, many clergy refuted the ban, and the controversy persisted in the following decades. By the late 1740s, hard-line bishops and priests began to refuse the sacraments to dissenters, and by 1752 were requesting death-bed *billets de confession* from parishioners as proof of orthodoxy. Thus d'Holbach's letter can be seen to resonate with the political and religious strife he and others were witnessing at that time. By using religious imagery, he managed to parallel his painting of the out-of-touch French-opera supporters (the “honest Israelites”) with criticism of the state they represented.<sup>13</sup>

Conversely, at the center of the arguments in pro-French opera pamphlets there is often a defense of tradition and accepted doctrine. From their authors' perspective, Italian music was a threat to the national idiom and its musical institutions—and, as these had come to embody many national ideals under absolutism, a threat to the French way of life itself. In particular, Lully's legacy in creating the first French operas (*tragédies lyriques*) was considered too precious to lose to a foreign import considered base and frivolous. Likewise, the Paris Opéra had become the personification of French glory under Louis XIV (1638–1715), and such writers as Mathieu-François Pidansat de Mairobert (1707–1779) mourned what they saw as the decline of a shining beacon of national identity. Mairobert's pamphlet takes the form of a series of prophetic visions experienced by Jean Monnet (1703–1785), then director of the Opéra-Comique. It also parallels Grimm's pamphlet *Le Petit Prophète de Boehmischbroda*, which appeared earlier in the same month (January 1753), and which is mentioned in verse 3. Here Lully's name is invoked as the spirit of French music as he rebukes Monnet for not appreciating his work:

2: After this discourse, M. de Lully seized me by the forelock, which gave me a headache; he picked me up and put me down in a place which I recognised as the king's balcony [at the Opéra], where I listened happily to the overture to *Armide*. The monologue "Plus j'observe ces lieux et plus je les admire" seemed divine to me; I was startled by Hatred, and I said, enraptured, how interesting the supernatural is when it is well introduced and linked to the plot . . . I exclaimed to myself, if only German vespers were like this (as I read in a certain *Lettre sur Omphale*), I would be in church all the time!

3: . . . and I saw Signors Manelli, Lazzari, Cosimi and Guerrieri and Signoras Rossi, Lazzari and Tonelli appear. Lully spoke these words: "Here are the servants of the so-called Prophet of Boehmischbroda."<sup>14</sup> "Alas, M. de Lully," I replied, "the so-called Prophet of Boehmischbroda is badly served." . . .

11: O *Académie Royale de Musique* . . . I weep for you. O theatre that I formed and made famous, I look upon your downhill slide into ruin with bitterness. Oh ye ungrateful, unkind people; in my mercy I gave you my servants Campra and Destouches to soften the blow of my loss. *Tancredi*, *Issé* and *Callirhoé* were not unworthy to succeed *Atys*, *Phaëton* and *Persée*; . . . A man [Rameau] was born who could have taken my place had he allowed himself to be led, but he misunderstood the words . . . Your ingratitude has aroused my indignation; I have abandoned you to the spirit of giddiness and error, and I have let you be led by foreigners, and I have brought in the *Bouffons*.<sup>15</sup>

Note how in verse 11 Lully appears godlike, chastising his wayward disciple. Like the pro-Italian writers, Mairobert's choice of language, reminiscent of the Old Testament prophets, is significant. Parallels can be seen with texts from Micah 6, which form the basis of the *Improperia* (the "Reproaches") in the Good Friday liturgy:

3. O my people, what have I done unto thee? and wherein have I wearied thee? testify against me. ["Oh ye ungrateful, unkind people"]

4. For I brought thee up out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed thee out of the house of servants; and I sent before thee Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. ["in my mercy I gave you my servants Campra and Destouches"]

16. For the statutes of Omri are kept, and all the works of the house of Ahab, and ye walk in their counsels; that I should make thee a desolation, and the inhabitants thereof an hissing: therefore ye shall bear the reproach of my people.<sup>16</sup> ["I have abandoned you . . . and I have let you be led by foreigners"]

Verse 16 is particularly suggestive: Omri and Ahab his son were successive kings of Israel in the ninth century BCE, but the Bible depicts these men in an unfavorable light. The story of Ahab is especially symbolic: he marries the infamous Jezebel, loses his way from God, and becomes a worshipper of Baal (paralleling the "foreigners" mentioned in Mairobert's pamphlet). Ultimately, Ahab suffers God's wrath and destruction for his sins, being "evil in the sight of the LORD above all others before him."<sup>17</sup> Thus the French are once more portrayed as the ancient Israelites, who have been led out of the land of Egypt and the wilderness of the desert (here a metaphor for the artistic barrenness following the loss of Lully) by Moses (?Cam-

pra), Aaron (?Destouches), and Miriam. Those who have not followed the word of the Lord (Lully) are now suffering his abandonment and the consequences of following false prophets (the *Bouffons*).

Mairobert's reference to *Armide* in his second verse is also no coincidence, as that work was long considered to be Lully and Quinault's greatest masterpiece. The reference to the monologue from it appears to have been selected specifically to reflect Mairobert's thoughts on the Paris Opéra. Here the "light" ("the more I observe the lights, the more I admire") refers to the Opéra as it served as a monument to French taste and ideals. Moreover, that light is "divine." The divine nature of French opera is contrasted sharply with that of Italian opera in the following sentence, as Mairobert draws our attention to the appropriate (i.e., French) use of the supernatural—a jibe at Italianate plots. That Rameau is mentioned is also noteworthy, as his music was sometimes seen to be too experimental and modern for him to serve as a suitable successor to Lully. In addition, Rameau had aligned himself with the Italians in mocking the French (see below) and was therefore not viewed favorably. For French die-hards, these were difficult times, as Rousseau made clear: "What became of our times of glory? Where did the happy times go, when we were unanimously accepted as the finest orchestra in Europe. . . ? . . . we must all remain united against her [Italian opera] to our last breath."<sup>18</sup>

### THE ITALIAN CONNECTION

Italian traveling troupes had been visiting France since the early sixteenth century, but the Comédie-Italienne only became established as a permanent troupe in Paris in 1662. Originally giving performances completely in Italian, and relying on the commedia dell'arte tradition, they gradually began to incorporate scenes in French, until they abandoned their natural language altogether. This they did to attract more business after the king moved them to the Hôtel de Bourgogne, a reportedly inconvenient location for their foreign customers lodging in Saint-Germain.<sup>19</sup> In 1680, when Louis XIV merged the French theatrical troupes into the Comédie-Française "in order to render the representation of plays more perfect by means of the actors and actresses to whom he gives a place in this troupe,"<sup>20</sup> the French-speaking Italians naturally became a competitive problem. The king granted the Comédie-Française sole right to perform theatrical works in French, but the Italians continued to do so as well. In 1683 the Comédie-Française petitioned the Lieutenant Général of the police, Gabriel Nicolas de la Reynie (1625–1709), to stop the Italians performing in French:

When it pleased Your Majesty [. . .] to order the Italians to move to the Hotel de Bourgogne, you ordered the French actors at the same time to pay them a pension of 800 *livres*, in consideration of the fact that they were leaving the Hotel de Guénégaud . . . However, Sire, far from this change having done them harm, they have drawn from it two advantages, the first being that to attract the public, the greater part of their plays are performed in French, and the second that, instead of four days a week to which they were limited for their performances before the union, they perform plays every day which caused considerable harm to the French.<sup>21</sup>

This time, however, the Italians prevailed; they were allowed to perform in French so long as it constituted only parts of the whole performance.

Despite being an official troupe *du Roi*, because of their nationality the Italians were in a unique position within the system of state-controlled entertainment. The Comédie-Française and the Opéra promoted ideal works of French literature and music, and as they both operated with the assent of the king, they were therefore vehicles for state ideology as well. Though the Italians performed under royal patronage (receiving an annual subsidy of 15,000 francs), they provided entertainment not founded on French absolutism or its ideals, or indeed the ideals of French classicism. This proved to be a rewarding position with audiences, but a dangerous one with the establishment. The troupe sailed dangerously close to the wind on several occasions, repeatedly satirizing prominent figures and current events from French society in their comedies. In doing so, provocative Italianate entertainment began to prosper in Paris some sixty years before the *Querelle*. The Italians' activities often incited official intervention; for example, on 23 February 1688 they were placed under official observation after one of the actors made reference to foreign affairs on stage:

His Majesty has ordered me [Marquis de Seignelay] to write to you that you should have the actor Aurelio observed, so that if it should occur that, as it is said, he speaks badly of the affairs of Rome, you will have him arrested.<sup>22</sup>

The warning seems to have gone unheeded, as the troupe would use more contentious plots and themes throughout the 1690s. A letter from Commissaire Lefrançois to La Reynie in 1695 is a (humorous) cry for help, as the Italians had mocked the character of a similar *commissaire* in one of their recent comedies, *Le Retour de la Foire de Bezons*. Lefrançois's complaint is important for our purposes because he suggests that the troupe (and their controversial style of theater) could pose a serious threat to "the system":

*Commissaire* Lefrançois to La Reynie (9 October 1695): Monsieur, although you have had the goodness to warn the Italian actors to remove from their stage the scene with the *commissaire*, they still continue to perform it in the most unworthy manner possible [. . .]. After their promise to you there is no other remedy than to suppress the play and to forbid them from ever performing it again in future. [. . .] If you allow *commissaires* to be ridiculed in this way . . . what will become of their most serious functions in the service of the King and the public?<sup>23</sup>

As an entity in French society, the "theatre" was often endowed with symbolic purity. It therefore had a role to play in reflecting the king's own "purity," as he was the one who created and sustained it. In this system, actors participated in the construction of the Sun King mythology, attending him like priests in their "temple." The Italian actors, however, were bringing into question the sanctity of that temple and their "god" and therefore deserved the highest penalty:

It has come to the King that the actors are getting into very bad ways, that indecent expressions and postures are starting to take hold in their performances, and that, in a word, they are straying from the state of purity which the theatre had attained. His Majesty orders me to write to you that you should have them come and that you should explain to them on his behalf that if they do not correct themselves, His Majesty

will, on receipt of the least complaint, put into effect resolutions against them which will not be pleasant for them.<sup>24</sup>

By 1697 the Italians had pushed the boundaries too far, and the king ordered them to be expelled:

From Paris, 17 May: Recently, the sieur D'Argenson [the new] *Lieutenant Général de Police*, went to the Italian actors' theatre, and informed them that by order of the King they were to cease their performances and leave the Kingdom, following which all the doors were closed with iron bars.<sup>25</sup>

It is not known exactly what provoked the expulsion; certainly their decline in popularity with the king and repeated warnings about on-stage lewdness and vulgarity had a part in it. Other factors may have contributed as well, such as the death of Domenico Biancolelli (who played Arlequin) in 1688 and the retirement of Tiberio Fiorilli (who played Scaramouche) in 1690, which led to bickering and infighting within the troupe. The same decade also saw the church rail against the licentiousness of their comedies.<sup>26</sup>

It is also possible that a notorious play the troupe intended to give, or did give, was a deciding factor. *La Fausse Prude* had been published previously in Holland, but its reputation as an attack on Madame de Maintenon, the king's pious second wife, was the talk of Paris. Saint-Simon states with certainty in his memoirs that the Italians did indeed perform the play, saying that "Mme de Maintenon was instantly recognizable" and that it had been performed four times, "making a fortune."<sup>27</sup> The Duchesse d'Orléans's correspondence agrees, although she refers to the play by a different title, *La Fausse Hypocrite*:

There was here a troupe of Italian actors who wanted to perform a play entitled *La Fausse Hypocrite* (in which people said they were making fun of Mme de Maintenon). When I learned what they were doing, I summoned them and warned them against performing this play, but to no avail. They performed it and thus gained a great deal of money but were soon expelled [. . .]. They came back to see me again and wanted me to intercede for them, but I said "No! Why didn't you follow my advice?" People said they represented the old slut in the funniest way, I would very much have liked to see that play but did not go for the fear that old woman would tell the King it was I who started the whole thing off.<sup>28</sup>

An article from the *Gazette d'Amsterdam* shows, however, that despite these assertions there was some disagreement over what exactly caused the Italians' expulsion:

From Paris, 17 May: Recently, the sieur D'Argenson, *Lieutenant Général de Police*, went to the Italian actors' theatre, and informed them that by order of the King they were to cease their performances and leave the Kingdom, following which all the doors were closed with iron bars. The real cause of their disgrace is not known. . . . Everyone has expressed opinions, but the reasons given are very different. Some claim that the main reason for their disgrace is that they did not want to suppress certain impure expressions and a quantity of indecent postures . . . even though the orders to do so had been repeated several times. Others say that the Court of France wishes to give itself over absolutely to devotion

. . . Some maintain that they wanted to perform a new play by the sieur Lenoble, entitled *La Fausse Prude*, in which he draws a very unflattering portrait of a lady held in high esteem by the King. Finally, there are others who do not believe themselves mistaken when they put forward that His Majesty is expelling them only because they were impudent, sometimes not scrupling to represent even members of the Royal Family, as they one day did with Mme la Dauphine.<sup>29</sup>

That we are here dealing with serious ideological issues can be seen in a letter written by the Duchesse d'Orléans a few years earlier in 1690. It is clear from her tone that she was genuinely frightened and felt a real sense of danger concerning the consequences of theatrical pieces:

I must say no more, for since the actors here, both French and Italian, have been forbidden for the fear of God to say anything that has a double meaning unless they want to be promptly dismissed, and as even I am no longer in favour, I am afraid that, if they read my letters in the post [. . .] they may possibly send me to the Bastille, which is a place I certainly do not want to end up in.<sup>30</sup>

In the space of seventeen years, the Comédie-Italienne had become a controversial form of theater, refusing to bend to the establishment and even using that establishment in its irreverent and comical farces. Despite the troupe's growing popularity with audiences, and the declining popularity of their French counterparts, the king banished them.<sup>31</sup> Ironically, this would not be the end of subversive Italianate entertainment in Paris, as it had found a niche with the populace—not surprising given the unwavering nature of absolutism and the waning of the Sun King mythology. Despite the theater's closure and the Italians' expulsion, an indelible mark had been made; an official note made some six months after the event shows just how difficult it was proving to completely eradicate their legacy:

It is necessary . . . to efface the inscription which is on the theatre of the Italian actors and destroy what intrudes there on the public way.<sup>32</sup>

Unfortunately for the king and the Comédie-Française, this was not to be the end of the problem; much of the Italian repertoire, traditions, scenes, characters, and even actors simply migrated to the annual Paris *foires* [fairs]. In fact, only two actors from the troupe are known to have returned to Italy; the rest stayed in France, though they were ordered to remain at least thirty leagues from Paris.<sup>33</sup> For the French "privileged" theaters this made matters worse; the *foire* theaters, already considered the lowest form of entertainment, now had adopted both the contentious Italians' repertoire and their actors. In the years to come the privileged theaters would do everything in their power to try and suppress them. In 1706 they obtained their first injunction: the *foires* were forbidden to give any performances containing dialogue:

The widow Maurice and the other farce actors are forbidden to represent on their stages any spectacle in which there are dialogues, or to give any performance which is contrary to the rules of decency and modesty. And for having done so they are each condemned to pay 300 *livres* in damages and interest to the French actors and a fine of 20 *livres* to the king, together with all expenses, and in the case of further contraventions, the

French actors will be permitted to demolish the theatres of the widow Maurice and others.<sup>34</sup>

The ban did not have the desired effect, as the performers [*forains*] simply devised comic means to contravene the order. For instance, dialogue was banned but monologues were not:

In each scene an actor speaks aloud, the others reply by means of gestures in some place, and in others reply aloud after the actor who has just spoken has retired into the wings, from whence he [. . .] reappears [. . .] a moment later to continue aloud with what follows the speech. This forms a play which is performed in its entirety, with most of the actors speaking aloud in turn alone, but interpreting the dumb play of the other actor, thus forming a complete play with its denouement.<sup>35</sup>

*Arlequin-Deucalion*, an amusing example of *opéra-comique* (as the genre would be called after 1715), was “acted” out in 1722. Written for puppets, the comedy is a thinly-veiled retort to the ban, as its plot recounts—with only one speaking “actor” (“DEUCALION-ARLEQUIN, *le seul acteur qui parle*”)—the epic myth of Deucalion and his survival of “the deluge,” the ancient Greek version of the biblical flood.<sup>36</sup> The description of the opening scene is fraught, but comedy is never too far away:

*Le théâtre représente le double coupeau sur les deux ailes et le temple de Thémis, avec une mer immense qui occupe le fond. L’orchestre joue une tempête effroyable. Éclairs, tonnerres, grêle et pluie convenable à un déluge. On voit venir de loin sur les ondes Arlequin, jambe deçà, jambe delà, sur le tonneau. Le fracas cesse.*

[*The theater represents the double summit [of mount Parnassus] over the two aisles and the temple of Thémis, with a great sea at the bottom. The orchestra plays a frightful storm. Flashes of lightning, thunder, hail, and rain befitting a deluge. From a distance we see Arlequin coming atop the waves, floating on a barrel with one leg over one side and one over the other. The tumult ceases.*]<sup>37</sup>

Besides *le seul acteur qui parle*, the most notable character listed is “UNE VOIX.” When the voice speaks in scene 2, however, it is “La VOIX *d’un invisible*” (an actor offstage). The “dialogue” that follows between the voice and Arlequin is deliberately absurd:

DEUCALION-ARLEQUIN, une VOIX.  
 La VOIX *d’un invisible*. Coquin! coquin! maraud!  
 ARLEQUIN, *surpris*. Qui m’en veut? qui va là?  
 La VOIX. A déjeuner! A déjeuner! Tôt! tôt! Apporte! apporte!  
 ARLEQUIN. Ne voilà-t-il pas mes écornifieurs? Décampons! (*Il remet tout dans son bissac, & le jetant précipitamment sur l’épaule gauche, s’en donne par-dessus la droite un grand coup à travers le nez*) Ouf! je me suis cassé le nez! Quel chien de coup!  
 La VOIX. Apporte! Apporte!  
 ARLEQUIN. Que le diable t’emporte, toi-même! Qui vive!  
 La VOIX. Vive le roi! Vive le roi! (*plusieurs fois.*)  
 ARLEQUIN. Grand merci: car il n’y a plus d’autre roi que moi. Montre-toi donc. Que es-tu?

[DEUCALION-ARLEQUIN, a VOICE.

The VOICE *of an invisible*: Rascal! Scamp! Rogue!

ARLEQUIN, *surprised*: Who wants me? Who goes there?

The VOICE: To lunch! To lunch! Soon! Soon! Come! Come here!

ARLEQUIN: There now! No scrounging? Let's go! (*He puts everything in his bag, and throwing it over his left shoulder in a great hurry it swings over to his right and hits him a great blow on the nose*) Ouf! I broke my nose! What a nasty blow!

The VOICE: Come on! Come on!

ARLEQUIN: May the devil take you, the same to you! Qui vive!

La VOIX: Long live the king! Long live the king! (*several times.*)

ARLEQUIN: Thank you very much: because there is no other king than me. So show yourself . . .<sup>38</sup>

Other characters appear and interact with Arlequin, but they never speak; for example: "PYRRHA *places a finger on her mouth and makes a sign that she is mute.*"<sup>39</sup>

Music also played a role in such floutings. One record recounts an event in which the actors, in order to contravene the ban on dialogue, simply spoke to each other in song, with "one couplet acting as a question and the other as a reply." Moreover, to show their scorn, songs that had no rhyming scheme would also be performed.<sup>40</sup> Music from famous operas, including Lully's, was also hijacked and parodied, which only made the situation worse.<sup>41</sup> Other methods involved general tomfoolery, such as having only one actor speak, while the others traced their replies "with the index fingers of their right hands on the inside of their left hands," which the speaking actor then "read" aloud.<sup>42</sup> Although they had not technically broken the order, the Comédie-Française complained that the *forains* were performing dialogues in all but name:

It is a sad and even crying injustice for the French actors regularly, twice a year, to be forced to take legal action against individuals, vagrants without premises, who are known only for their continual disobedience, which could even be called revolt, against the decrees of the Court, which they interpret in their own fashion. They say, "We do not perform plays, we merely give scenes in which only one of our actors speaks at a time." They call these monologues. You only have to define the term monologue to see the falseness of their claims. . . . If the monologue is a dramatic scene, the rope dancers are not allowed to perform monologues, since a scene is part of a play, and these they are forbidden.<sup>43</sup>

For the purposes of this article it is important to understand the reasoning behind this reaction and its significance in relation to the *Querelle*. The Italianate entertainment at the *foires* flew in the face of French standards that had evolved over decades and been incorporated so meticulously into French theater. Though their popularity posed a financial problem for the privileged theaters, it was also an ideological problem and a matter of taste; French audiences were being drawn away from the nation's lauded art forms to an Italian substitute that was popular only because of its vulgarity and controversial nature. The relationship between the privileged theaters and those in the *foires* may seem cat-and-mouse, but it helps explain the context and setting of the *Querelle* in 1752, when the *Bouffons* opened with an Italian comic opera at the Paris Opéra in 1752.

For their part, the *foire* theaters continued along an antagonistic path. Consequently, in 1709 the Comédie-Française successfully applied to have the *foire* theaters destroyed. On Saturday, 20 February, a mob of parliamentary forces together with axe-wielding men from the Comédie-Française gathered at one of the theaters, where the order for demolition was read. A bailiff from the Grand Conseil arrived, however, with a counter-order forbidding any destruction. The mob left, but “caused part of the stage and boxes to be demolished, and broke up the decorations and the benches in the *parquet*.”<sup>44</sup> This action only increased interest in the *forains*; the damage was repaired overnight, posters were put up throughout Paris the next day, “and the public which had learned of the troupe’s disaster, came in crowds to satisfy themselves as to the reality of its restoration. This curiosity ensured the associates a most satisfactory day’s takings.”<sup>45</sup> On hearing the news, the mob returned on Monday and completely destroyed the theater. To ensure that no repairs could be made this time, the sorry mess was burned to the ground. The king overturned an initial order requiring the Comédie-Française to pay 6,000 *livres* in damages, and commanded that the monies be returned. That year also saw a ban on monologues come into force, although the *forains* again came up with a means of getting around it, this time with *pièces en écriteaux*. These involved the actors miming their parts with the words they would have spoken printed on placards or scrolls held up for the audience to see. Texts from vaudevilles and popular catches were used, and the audiences sang along while the *forains* acted out the drama.<sup>46</sup>

In 1722 the Duc d’Orléans (then the Regent) tried to restrict the actors to tightrope walking and marionettes. To retaliate, Aléxis Piron and Jean-Phillipe Rameau devised the afore-mentioned *Arlequin-Deucalion* as a comedy for puppets. Rameau was thirty-nine at the time, and his involvement with the *forains* undoubtedly resulted in his icy reception with the French pamphleteers of the *Querelle* (see Mairobert’s *Les Prophéties* above). For the French privileged theaters, the heart of this problem was popularity; they simply could not fight against the growing appeal of *opéra-comique*. The situation was made worse with the decline of their own popularity during this period. Despite having an official monopoly over each of their respective genres, the French theaters were forced to watch their mainstream audiences disappear. Between 1680 and 1715 the Comédie-Française commanded an average audience of around 150,000 spectators, but this number began to fall gradually from 1701, with the 1709/10 season attracting 114,000.<sup>47</sup> By 1718 they had also amassed a debt of 300,000 *livres*.<sup>48</sup> The only solution, therefore, was to remove the Italians altogether, and this is exactly what happened in 1744. It would not be until August 1752 that an Italian comic opera was performed again, when a troupe of traveling Italian actors performed Pergolesi’s *La Serva Padrona* at the Paris Opéra.

The *Querelle des Bouffons* must therefore be viewed within this wider context of musical aesthetics and criticism. It takes its place in a long tradition of French and Italian musical spheres coming to blows over recurring ideological differences. Its arguments may have taken a different form from what had come before—in the organized setting of written pamphlets and letters—but the “staging” within the Franco-Italian music controversy was the same. It may have started over different issues, but the *ancien régime* was, like before, at the heart of the conflict. More than fifty years after the Italians were first banished in 1697, the symbolism of their

theater was so well understood that philosophes were able to evoke it to front their attacks in the *Querelle*. The long standoff between the two theatrical camps must therefore be read in parallel with societal change over the two centuries, especially in the waning of the ancien régime and even the path to revolution. Indeed, the proximity of the *Querelle* to the revolution perhaps explains the increase in overt attacks observed in the pamphlets. Italian theater was no longer just a means to poke fun at the establishment and drum up good business; here it was being used for a serious political purpose, because of its understood associations. As one of the *Querelle* pamphlets simply put it: “a minuet can become a dangerous thing.”<sup>49</sup>

---

NOTES

1. Jeffrey Pulver, “La Guerre des Bouffons,” *The Musical Times* 57 (1916): 18.
2. Ibid.
3. Elizabeth Cook, “Challenging the *Ancien Régime*: the Hidden Politics of the ‘Querelle des Bouffons,’” in *La “Querelle des Bouffons” dans la vie culturelle française du XVIIIe siècle*, ed. Andrea Fabiano (France: CNRS Editions, 2005), 141–60.
4. Emmet Kennedy, *A Cultural History of the French Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1989), 116–18. Kennedy quotes Alembert: “In the dictionary of certain men, the words *bouffiniste*, republican, *frondeur*, atheist, indeed, materialist, are all synonymous. . . . Liberty of music supposes that of feeling; liberty of feeling carries with it that of thinking, that of action; and the liberty of action is the ruin of states.”
5. Daniel Hertz, *From Garrick to Gluck: Essays on Opera in the Age of Enlightenment*, ed. John A. Rice (New York: Pendragon, 2004), 257–70.
6. See Geoffrey Higgins, “Art as Criticism of the Ancien Régime: Underlying Causes of the Querelle des Bouffons” (master’s dissertation, Queen’s University Belfast, 2007).
7. Friedrich Melchior Grimm, *Lettre de M. Grimm sur Omphale* (Paris, 1752), 9–10. Translations mine unless indicated otherwise.
8. Ibid., 4.
9. Ibid., 6–7.
10. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Letter LXXXVIII; To Mrs. Orbe,” in *Eloisa, or a Series of Original Letters Collected and Published by Mr. J. J. Rousseau, Citizen of Geneva* (Amsterdam, 1761); printed in *The Royal Magazine*, 17 vols. (London: 1761), 5: 226. GB-Lbl P.P.5441, British Library, London.
11. Denis Diderot, “Encyclopédie,” in *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 35 vols. (Paris, 1755), 5: 644v.
12. Paul-Henry Thiry, Baron d’Holbach, *Lettre a une dame d’un certain âge, sur l’état présent de l’opéra* (Paris, 1752), trans. in Caroline Wood and Graham Sadler, *French Baroque Opera: A Reader* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2000), 105-7.
13. Cook, “Challenging the *Ancien Régime*,” 144–46. See also Mita Choudhury, “‘Carnal Quietism’: Embodying Anti-Jesuit Polemics in the Catherine Cadière Affair, 1731,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39, no. 2 (2006): 173–86; and Choudhury, “A Betrayal of Trust: The Jesuits and Quietism in Eighteenth-Century France,” *Common Knowledge* 15 (2009): 164–80.
14. See Cook, “Challenging the *Ancien Régime*,” 148–49 for a brief chronology.
15. Pidansat de Mairobert, *Les Prophéties du grand prophète Monnet* (Paris 1753), trans. in Wood and Sadler, *French Baroque Opera*, 107.
16. Micah 6, King James translation.

17. 1 Kings 16: 30. See also Marvin Alan Sweeney, *I & II Kings: a Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 205–7.
18. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Lettre d'un symphoniste de l'Academie Royale de Musique à ses camarades de l'orchestre* (Paris 1753), trans. in Wood and Sadler, *French Baroque Opera*, 109.
19. William D. Howarth, ed., *French Theatre in the Neo-Classical Era, 1550–1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press: 1997), 323. (Hereafter cited as *FT*.)
20. *Lettre de cachet pour l'établissement des Comédiens du Roi*, trans. in Jeffrey S. Ravel, *The Contested Parterre: Public Theatre and French Political Culture 1680–1791* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1999), 97.
21. *Comédie-Française, dossier Italiens* (1683), trans. in *FT*, 323.
22. Letter from Seignelay to Lieutenant Général of the police La Reynie, 23 February 1688, trans. in *FT*, 301.
23. Translated in *FT*, 302.
24. Letter from Ponchartrain to D'Argenson, 31 March 1701, trans. in *FT*, 303.
25. *Gazette d'Amsterdam*, 23 May 1697, trans. in *FT*, 304.
26. See William Brooks, "Louis XIV's Dismissal of the Italian Actors: The Episode of *La Fausse Prude*," *The Modern Language Review* 91 (1996): 840–47.
27. Duc de Saint-Simon, *Memoirs, 1691–1709* (London: Prion Books Limited, 2001), 92.
28. Duchesse d'Orléans, *Correspondance*, trans. in *FT*, 305-6.
29. *Gazette d'Amsterdam*, 23 May 1697, trans. in *FT*, 304–5.
30. Duchesse d'Orléans, letter of 9 July 1690, trans. in Brooks, "Louis XIV's dismissal of the Italian actors," 841.
31. John Lough, *Paris Theatre Audiences in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1957), 272.
32. Qtd. in Ravel, *The Contested Parterre*, 110.
33. Jan Clarke, "The Expulsion of the Italians from the Hotel de Bourgogne in 1697," *Seventeenth Century French Studies* 14 (1992): 97, qtd. in Brooks, "Louis XIV's dismissal of the Italian actors," 840.
34. Claude and François Parfait, *Memoires pour servir à l'histoire des spectacles de la Foire, par un acteur forains (1679–1742)* (Paris, 1743), 1: 47–48, qtd. in *FT*, 308. See also Emile Campardon, *Les Spectacles de la Foire*, 2 vols. (Paris: Berger-Levrault et Co., 1877); facsimile, Elibron Classics (2006), 2: 116.
35. Archives des commissaires 4415, trans. in *FT*, 360.
36. *Arlequin-Deucalion, Monologue En Trois Actes. Donné à l'Opéra-Comique en 1722*; repr. in Derek Connon and George Evans, *Anthologie de pièces du Théâtre de la Foire* (Runnymede Books: England, 1996), 120.
37. *Ibid.*, 121.
38. *Ibid.*, 124.
39. *Ibid.*, 131.
40. Archives des commissaires 3829, trans. in *FT*, 360–61.
41. Archives des commissaires 921, trans. in *FT*, 359–60.
42. Archives des commissaires 3831, trans. in *FT*, 361.
43. Parfait, *Memoires*, trans. in *FT*, 329–30.

44. Ibid., 309.
45. Ibid.
46. See, for example, *Arlequin Roi de Serendib, Piece en trois actes. Part M. le S\*\*\**, Représentée à la Foire de Saint Germain 1713; repr. in Connors and Evans, *Théâtre de la Foire*, 84.
47. John Lough, *Paris Theatre Audiences in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1957), 49–50.
48. Robert Isherwood, “Popular Musical Entertainment in Eighteenth-Century Paris,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 9 (1978): 307.
49. *Lettre au public par Sa Majeste le Roi de Prusse*, x, trans. in Cook, “Challenging the Ancien Régime,” 157.

