

Princess on leaving her, because she will not appear again before the King.

But if His Majesty desire another dance to be performed, one of the First Gentlemen of the Bed Chamber announces his wish, which does not prevent the same bows being observed.

Pierre Rameau, *The Dancing Master* [1725], trans. Cyril Beaumont (London: C. W. Beaumont, 1931), 37-39.

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*Rationalistic Distaste for Opera*

The French were skeptical of the whole idea of opera during its first century. They possessed a glorious and very intellectualized spoken drama, compared to which the Italian *dramma per musica* seemed a kind of child's babble, in which verisimilitude was impaired, credibility made difficult, and the emphasis placed not on the content of the play but on decorative trappings. Music was admitted to their theaters mainly in an incidental capacity, on a par with the spectacular "machines" on which gods descended or winged chariots took off. And as the great French dramatist Pierre Corneille (1606-84) makes clear in the preface to his *Andromède* (1650), a *pièce à machines*, the machines were far more integral to his conception of that sort of play than the music that accompanied them.

Each act, and the prologue as well, has its own set, and at least one flying machine, with a musical accompaniment which I have only used in order to entertain the ears of the spectators while their eyes are engaged in watching the descent or ascent of a machine, or are focused on something (like the fight between Perseus and the monster) which would prevent their paying attention to what the actors might be saying. But I have been very careful to have nothing sung that is essential to the understanding of the play, since words that are sung are usually understood poorly by the audience, owing to the confusion caused by the multitude of voices which pronounce them at once. It would make for a great obscurity in the body of the work if sung words were to try to impart to the audience anything of importance. But all this does not apply to the machines, which in this play are anything but a dispensable frill; they are the very essence and point of the play, and are so necessary that you could not omit a single one without causing the whole edifice to tumble.

Pierre Corneille, "Œuvres" *complètes*, I (Paris, 1834), 570. Trans. R. T.

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Opera in French made its real appearance only in the 1670s, with the works of Robert Cambert (c. 1628–77) and Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632–87). In England, outside of a few isolated works, such as Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (1689), it was not established until the next century, and then it was an imported Italian opera rather than a native one that found favor. The prejudices that worked against the opera in these countries were nowhere expressed more forcefully than in a famous letter from a Frenchman, the courtier and wit Charles de Marguetel de Saint-Denis, Seigneur de Saint-Évremond (c. 1610–1703), to an Englishman, the Duke of Buckingham. St-Évremond gives a virtual catalogue of operatic offenses against reason. The points he raises have bedeviled opera throughout its history.

I have long had a desire to tell your Grace my thoughts of operas. The occasion I had of speaking of it, at the Duchesse Mazarin's, has rather increased than satisfied that desire; therefore I will gratify it in the discourse I now send your Grace.

I shall begin with great freedom, and tell your Grace, that I am no great admirer of Comedies in music, such as nowadays are in request. I confess I am not displeas'd with their magnificence; the Machines have something that is surprising; the Music, in some places, is charming; the whole together seems wonderful: but it must be granted me also, that this Wonderful is very tedious; for where the mind has so little to do, there the Senses must of necessity languish. After the first pleasure that surprise gives us, the eyes are taken up, and at length grow weary of being continually fixed upon the same object. In the beginning of the concerts, we observe the justness of the concords; and amidst all the varieties that unite to make the sweetness of the harmony, nothing escapes us. But 'tis not long before the instruments stun us; and the music is nothing else to our ears but a confused sound that suffers nothing to be distinguished. Now how is it possible to avoid being tired with the *Recitativo*, which has neither the charm of singing, nor the agreeable energy of speech? The soul, fatigued by a long attention, wherein it finds nothing to affect it, seeks some relief within itself; and the mind, which in vain expected to be entertained with the show, either gives way to idle musing, or is dissatisfied that it has nothing to employ it. In a word, the fatigue is so universal, that everyone wishes himself out of the house; and the only comfort that is left to the poor spectators, is the hope that the show will soon be over.

The reason why, commonly, I soon grow weary at Operas, is, that I never yet saw any which appeared not to me despicable, both as to the contrivance of the subject, and the poetry. Now it is in vain to charm the ears, or gratify the eyes, if the mind be not satisfied; for my soul being in better intelligence with my mind than with my senses, struggles against the impressions which it may receive, or at least does not give an agreeable consent to them, without which, even the most delightful objects

can never afford me any great pleasure. An extravagance set off with music, dances, machines, and fine scenes, is a pompous piece of folly, but 'tis still a folly. Tho' the embroidery is rich, yet the ground it is wrought upon is such wretched stuff that it offends the sight.

There is another thing in Operas so contrary to nature, that I cannot be reconciled to it; and that is the singing of the whole piece, from beginning to end, as if the persons represented were ridiculously matched, and had agreed to treat in music both the most common, and most important affairs of life. Is it to be imagined that a master calls his servant, or sends him on an errand, singing; that one friend imparts a secret to another, singing; that men deliberate in council, singing; that orders in time of battle are given, singing; and that men are melodiously killed with swords and darts? This is the downright way to lose the life of representation, which without doubt is preferable to that of harmony: for, harmony ought to be no more than a bare attendant, and the great masters of the stage have introduced it as pleasing, not as necessary, after they have performed all that relates to the subject and discourse. Nevertheless, our thoughts run more upon the musician than the hero in the opera: Luigi [Rossi, 1597–1653, chief opera composer in Rome], [Pier Francesco] Cavalli [1602–76, Monteverdi's pupil and successor in Venice], and [Antonio] Cesti [1623–69, leader of Italian opera in Vienna] are still present to our imagination. The mind, not being able to conceive a hero that sings, thinks of the composer that set the song; and I don't question but that in Operas at the Palace-Royal, Lully is a hundred times more thought of than *Theseus* or *Cadmus* [heroes of Lully operas presented in 1675 and 1673, respectively].

I pretend not, however, to banish all manner of singing from the stage: there are some things which ought to be sung, and others that may be sung without trespassing against reason or decency: Vows, Prayers, Praises, Sacrifices, and generally all that relates to the services of the Gods, have been sung in all nations, and in all times; tender and mournful passions express themselves naturally in a sort of querulous tone; the expressions of love in its birth; the irresolution of a soul tossed by different movements, are proper matters for stanzas, as stanzas are for music. Everyone knows that the chorus was introduced upon the Grecian Theatre, and it is not to be denied, but that with equal reason it might be brought upon ours. So far, in my opinion, music may be allowed: all that belongs to conversation, all that relates to intrigues and affairs, all that belongs to council and action, is proper for actors to rehearse, but ridiculous in the mouth of musicians to sing. The Grecians made admirable tragedies where they had some singing; the Italians and the French make bad ones, where they sing all.

Would you know what an Opera is? I'll tell you, that it is an *odd medley of poetry and music, wherein the poet and musician, equally confined one by the other, take a world of pains to compose a wretched performance*. Not but that you may find agreeable words and very fine

airs in our Operas; but you will more certainly find, at length, a dislike of the verses, where the genius of the poet is so cramped; and be cloyed with the singing, where the musician is spent by too long a service.

I forgot to speak to your Grace about *Machines*, so easy it is for man to forget that which he would have laid aside. Machines may satisfy the curiosity of ingenious men, who love mathematical inventions, but they'll hardly please persons of good judgment in the theatre: the more they surprise, the more they divert the mind from attending to the discourse; and the more admirable they are, the less tenderness and exquisite sense they leave in us, to be touched and charmed with the music. The ancients made no use of machines, but when there was a necessity of bringing in some God. If men love to be at expenses, let them lay out their money upon fine scenes, the use whereof is more natural and more agreeable than that of machines. Antiquity, which exposed their Gods, even at the gates, and chimney-corners; antiquity, I say, as vain and credulous as it was, exposed them, nevertheless, but very rarely upon the stage. Now the belief of them is gone, the Italians, in their Operas, have brought the pagan Gods again into the world; and have not scrupled to amuse men with these ridiculous vanities, only to make their pieces look great, by the introduction of that dazzling and surprising Wonderful. These stage deities have long enough abused Italy: but the people there being happily undeceived at last, are disgusted with those very Gods they were so fond of before, and have returned to plays, which, in truth, cannot pretend to the same exactness, but are not so fabulous, and which with a little indulgence, may pass well enough with men of sense.

A man runs a risk of having his judgment called in question, if he dares declare his good taste; and I advise others, when they hear any discourse of Operas, to keep their knowledge a secret to themselves. For my own part, who am past the age and time of signaling myself in the world by a sense of the fashionable, and the merit of new fancies, I am resolved to strike in with good sense, and to follow reason, though in disgrace, with as much zeal, as if it were still in as great vogue as formerly. That which vexes me most at this our fondness for operas, is that they tend directly to ruin the finest thing we have, I mean *Tragedy*, than which nothing is more proper to elevate the soul, or more capable to form the mind.

After this long discourse, let us conclude, that the constitution of our Operas cannot be more faulty than it is. But it is to be acknowledged at the same time, that no man can perform better than *Lully*, upon an ill-conceived subject; and that it is not easy to out-do [Philippe] Quinault [1635–88, Lully's librettist] in what belongs to his part.

John Hayward (ed.), *The Letters of Saint Évremond*, trans. [in 1705] by Pierre Desmaizeaux (London: G. Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1930), 205–17.