



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <https://www.neh.gov/grants/research/fellowships> for instructions.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: The Comedians of the King

Institution: Columbia University

Project Director: Julia I. Doe

Grant Program: Fellowships

The Comedians of the King: Opéra-Comique and the Bourbon Monarchy on the Eve of Revolution **Research and Contributions**

Few repertoires in the history of western music have been more persistently identified with absolutist politics than the tragic operas of pre-revolutionary France. *Tragédie lyrique* was invented under the auspices of monarchy, and functioned from its start as an embodiment of national cultural hegemony and governmental prestige. The most famous examples of the genre, by Lully and Rameau, have been described by one historian as veritable “symbol[s] of musical Bourbonism”—by another, more colloquially, as the “courtliest court operas that ever were” (Weber 1984; Taruskin 2005). During the final decades of the old regime, however, it was not only the tragic idiom but also its less esteemed and more politically ambiguous comic counterpart—*opéra-comique*—that was produced under the protection of the French crown. *Opéra-comique* had popular origins (at the seasonal fairs of Paris), but by the middle of the eighteenth century had emerged as a threat to the three royally-sanctioned theaters of the capital, the Opéra, the Comédie Française, and the Comédie Italienne. In 1762, the government responded by engineering a merger between the fair players and the youngest of these official companies (the Comédie Italienne), elevating lyric comedy to the status of royal entertainment and, in the process, creating a new venue where national music might be debated and defined.

My book project, *The Comedians of the King*, investigates the impact of Bourbon patronage on the development of *opéra-comique* in the period between the 1762 merger and the onset of the Revolution. In simplest terms, the book presents the history of an understudied musical genre and the institutional structures that supported it, determining how novel modes of royal sponsorship contributed to the rapid evolution of this lyric form at the Comédie Italienne. As composers grappled with the legitimized standing of the comic genre, they began to test and expand its limits, transforming it into a substantive alternative to the elite *tragédie lyrique*. More broadly, my work interrogates the political implications of this stylistic shift during a time of tremendous cultural change. I demonstrate how comic theater was exploited in (and worked against) the construction of the monarchy’s carefully cultivated public image. In the waning of the old regime, *opéra-comique* increasingly appropriated the rhetoric of courtly ceremony, but it did so uneasily, and in a manner that frequently contradicted the established expectations of its form and social message. In essence, *The Comedians of the King* examines the aesthetic, institutional, and political tensions that arose when a genre with popular roots was folded into the Bourbon propaganda machine—and when a collection of actors trained at the urban fairs of Paris became official representatives of the sovereign, or *comédiens ordinaires du roi*.

The central claim of this book is that there existed a fundamental conflict between the modernizing musical taste of the Bourbon monarchs and the longstanding—and politically symbolic—organizational system for lyric theater that the crown itself had put in place. In eighteenth-century France, operatic production was based on a hierarchy of privilege, a set of rigid bureaucratic regulations that reinforced the cultural supremacy of the Opéra and guaranteed the homogeneity and exclusivity of the tragic works that it staged. However, as the government admitted the lighter and more cosmopolitan *opéra-comique* into the rubric of acceptable courtly art, it undermined this legal and aesthetic precedent in a number of significant ways. On the one hand, I argue, the legitimation of *opéra-comique* represented a considerable (and potentially transgressive) challenge to the conventional demarcations of French theaters and theatrical forms. For opponents of the Bourbon regime, the rise of comic opera marked an affront to dramatic, and by extension, to social propriety—a dangerous and politically charged effacement of the true “kingly” opera, *tragédie lyrique*. On the other hand, and somewhat paradoxically, this porousness of generic boundaries was a direct consequence of the manner in which *opéra-comique* was incorporated into existing structures of royal representation and display. Put another way, if the monarchical emphasis on lyric comedy constituted a disruption to the theatrical status quo, this was only because the genre was so successfully adorned with the trappings of traditional courtly spectacle.

The Comedians of the King is the first monograph-length history of the Comédie Italienne in the eighteenth century, offering a corrective to the Opéra-centric view of musical composition in old-regime France. Its primary contributions are twofold. First, this project reevaluates the political stakes of *opéra-comique* in the period immediately preceding the French Revolution. Many scholars have underscored the

genre's fairground beginnings, Enlightenment influences, and subversive emphasis on characters from the third estate. However, as the repertory sponsored by the crown indicates, the subsidiary aesthetic standing of the genre did not translate neatly into the marginalized status of its audiences or the radical nature of its politics. As *opéra-comique* became increasingly fashionable in Bourbon court circles—and, especially, as it was patronized by the music-loving queen Marie Antoinette—it began to mirror the worldview of the aristocratic public that consumed it. Second, this research provides a more complete understanding of the relationship between the French monarchy and the formation of national taste—a predominant concern in the history of opera in the eighteenth century. In the 1770s and 1780s, as the aging repertory of Lully ceded to the more outward-looking aesthetic of Gluck and his Italian rivals, the once unbreakable association between *tragédie lyrique* and national music began to loosen. This did not imply that the government ceased to further its agenda through lyric spectacle—but rather that the comic genre might now also, however problematically, fulfill this role.

Methods and Work Plan

The Comedians of the King draws upon both musical and archival evidence—a corpus study of nearly one hundred little-known operatic scores, on the one hand, and a complete reconstruction of the finances and repertory of the French court theaters, on the other. (This research has been compiled over several years of residency in Paris, at the Archives Nationales, the Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris, and the Bibliothèque Musée de l'Opéra.) This diversity of source material allows me to present detailed analyses of individual *opéras-comiques* within a richly documented historical and institutional framework. The structure of the book is as follows:

The introduction provides an overview of the legal statutes that dictated the early development of *opéra-comique*. I argue that the expansion of this lyric form stood in opposition to three established features of musical production in old-regime France: to the rigid organization of dramatic institutions; to the traditional division between national and cosmopolitan styles; and to the conventional correlation between hierarchies of genre and hierarchies of social class. The first two body chapters are centered on the 1760s, addressing why the French monarchy was compelled to bring *opéra-comique* under royal control, and then untangling the effects—both intended and unintended—of the theatrical merger. In Chapter 1 (“Popular theater on the privileged stage”), I posit that the government legitimized *opéra-comique* to protect the crown-sanctioned companies of Paris: officials hoped to contain the popular genre and thereby safeguard the integrity of national theater as a whole. Chapter 2 (“Character, class, and style in the bourgeois drama”) explores in precise musical and dramatic terms how the events of 1762 were reflected in comic operas of the post-merger period. The most provocative result of the theatrical union, I contend, was a reconfiguration of the relationship between social class and musical style—a correspondence, long accepted in France, between the societal position of operatic characters and their expected modes of outward expression. Through an assessment of “boundary-pushing” music, I underscore the paradoxes engendered by the genre's newly respectable standing at the Comédie Italienne. If composers were encouraged to elevate the content of their works for the royally-sponsored troupe, these experiments were often highly subversive. In the *opéra-comique* of the 1760s, the traditional stylistic order was briefly replaced by a hierarchy of character—where even “noble” savages might be rewarded with more dignified tones than aristocrats of questionable virtue.

Chapters 3 and 4 offer a largescale reevaluation of Marie Antoinette's contributions to French operatic culture in the 1770s—the first comprehensive treatment of the queen's musical patronage since the writings of Adolphe Jullien in the late-nineteenth century. The first of these sections (“Musical Modernization and Marie Antoinette”) presents my analysis of ceremonial theatrical programming at Versailles and Fontainebleau. I show how the tastes of the queen cemented an ongoing reorientation of courtly fashion, away from serious opera and towards the upstart genre of *opéra-comique*. An examination of two sub-types of lyric comedy favored by Marie Antoinette (translations of Italian *opera buffa* and satires of *tragédie lyrique*) demonstrates how closely comic composers were involved in contemporary disputes over national style and how flagrantly they were allowed to defy their customary restrictions during their residencies at Versailles. Thus, if systems of artistic privilege were violently dismantled at the end of the eighteenth century, this was a process accelerated from “within”—as *opéra-*

comique was altered to meet the extravagant demands of courtly display. In Chapter 4 (“Pastoral politics, from court to capital”), I trace the impact of the queen’s preferences as they radiated outwards from the court theaters to Paris. I focus, in particular, on rustic-themed *opéras-comiques*, contextualizing their import within the broader framework of aristocratic *paysannerie* and addressing the ways they engaged with the political agenda of the Bourbon regime. As Marie Antoinette abdicated her public responsibilities, withdrawing to her famed “country” retreat at the Petit Trianon, she sponsored comic operas that presented a critical (if illusory) corrective; these lyric comedies offered a utopian view of aristocratic utility, demonstrating how the French nobility might reassert its own standing through an intimate and charitable relationship with the nation’s third estate.

If Chapters 3 and 4 took as their starting point the literal presence and influence of the queen, Chapter 5 (“Heroic comedy on the eve of Revolution”) considers the symbolic representation of the king. Here, I discuss a sub-category of *opéra-comique* that emerged in the 1780s: a body of expansive, historical works, dedicated to the allegorical celebration of monarchy and described as “heroic” comedies. An analysis of this repertory complicates two prominent components of the accepted musical narrative of the French Revolution: the assumed correlation between artistic and political rupture in 1789, and the conventional link between the counter-cultural orientation of *opéra-comique* and its revolutionary-era success. In the epilogue, I delve further into this pressing issue of reception: Given the irrefutable association between the Bourbon monarchy and *opéra-comique*, when and why did the genre acquire its now commonplace reputation as an emblematic, “people’s” art? To resolve this apparent inconsistency, I turn to two kinds of evidence from the nineteenth century—the earliest scholarly histories of French comic opera, written in the aftermath of the Revolution, and a series of revivals of eighteenth-century works in Paris during the Empire, Restoration, and July Monarchy. I contend that the reframing of the genre’s identity (from monarchical to national) was a politicized means of grappling with the revolutionary legacy—and a quirk of historiography that has colored our understanding of *opéra-comique* to the present day.

Although the archival work for this book developed out of my dissertation (Yale Univ., 2013), the final product is comprised of more than 70% new material. The sections most closely related to my previous project (parts of Chapters 2 and 5) are being significantly expanded, building on three additional summers of Paris-based research that I have pursued since the conclusion of my graduate study.

Competencies, Skills, Access; Final Product and Dissemination

The NEH fellowship will support seven months of leave, during which time I will undertake the crucial final stages of manuscript preparation. This period will be devoted to the drafting of the third chapter (6 weeks), the research and drafting of the epilogue (4 months), and the confirmation of copious archival citations (6 weeks). My work on *The Comedians of the King* is well underway, and I am on track to submit a completed manuscript by December of 2018. I have published two articles related to the monograph. An introduction to Marie Antoinette’s operatic patronage appeared in the 2017 edition of *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*; a longer piece on “heroic” comedy was printed in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* in 2015, and won this society’s Alfred Einstein Award for exceptional achievement by a junior scholar the following year.

My book is primarily aimed towards an academic audience, but it is nonetheless highly interdisciplinary in outlook and composed in a style accessible to the general reader. Outside of the realm of traditional musicology, *opéra-comique* is a topic of growing importance in the domains of French literature and theater. My findings will also be of interest to historians of the Revolutionary period, a field that has recently seen a significant market for investigations of cultural production, broadly construed. The widest potential public audience for my project comes through my association with the preeminent company presenting French opera in the United States—the Washington, DC-based Opera Lafayette. I have previously spoken about my research at Opera Lafayette events at the Kennedy Center in Washington and the French Institute-Alliance Française (FI AF) in New York; and my commentary appears with the group’s new recording of André Grétry’s *L’Épreuve villageoise* (released by Naxos in 2016). I am keenly interested in bridging the gap between performance and scholarship, and can envision similar collaborations in conjunction with the book’s release.

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