11 Song and Declamation in French Opera

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The French versus Italian Problem

In his *Memoirs*, the Italian playwright Carlo Goldoni describes the performance of a French opera he attended in Paris at the Académie Royale de Musique in 1763. There is much to admire in this unnamed work, from the technical ability of the dancers to the sumptuous décors, machines, and costumes. But soon, all this spectacle wears him out:

I patiently waited for the airs, in the expectation that I should at least be amused with the music. The dancers made their appearance, and I imagined the act finished, but heard not a single air. I spoke of this to my neighbor, who laughed at me, and assured me that we had had six in the different scenes which I had heard. "What!" said I, "I am not deaf; the instruments never ceased accompanying the voices, sometimes more loudly, and sometimes more slowly than usual, but I took the whole for recitative . . . Everything was beautiful, everything was grand, everything was magnificent, except for the music . . . It is a paradise for the eyes, and a hell for the ears. ¹

This passage has often been quoted to pinpoint the strangeness of French opera, even its absurdity, at least when judged alongside the expectations of eighteenth-century audiences to whom *opera seria* provided the normative model. At the time of Goldoni's description, the *tragédie en musique* had been weakened by the vogue for opéra-comique and by the absence of a leading composer: Rameau had died in 1764, and his most recent *tragédie en musique*, *Zoroastre*, had been premièred in 1749.²

Goldoni perceived French opera primarily as a visual spectacle – the privileged place of ballet and the use of machines had been an essential feature of the *tragédie en musique* since its inception. His description sheds light on the clichés attached to French opera that had existed since the time of Lully. Goldoni's argument implies that the French conception of song is problematic, at least for Italian(ate) ears. That Goldoni refers to the French vocal style as nothing other than 'récitatif' was not an isolated claim at that time. Discussions about the relevant merits and flaws of French and Italian vocal styles had been going on since the birth of opera in France. These had

culminated with the *Querelle des Bouffons* (end 1752–1754) and were provoked when the Académie Royale de Musique invited Felice Bambini's Italian company to perform a series of *intermezzi comici*, among which was Pergolesi's *La Serva padrona*.³

The confrontation on the Parisian stage between the *tragédie en musique* and the repertoire of Italian comic opera triggered the polemical discussions of the *Querelle*, but this was also much more than the collision of two antagonistic conceptions of vocality as exhibited by French and Italian opera. The *Querelle* was the culmination of tensions that had accompanied the *tragédie en musique* since its inception, including the question of its attachment to the tradition of French *tragédie classique*, the spoken classical tragedy. Moreover, the *Querelle* led to radical reconsiderations regarding the musicality of French versus Italian – a debate that had been brewing throughout the seventeenth century, well before the publication of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Lettre sur la musique française* in November 1753.

Prior to the eighteenth century, the development of the *tragédie en musique* and other related dramatic genres, such as the opéra-ballet, provided secure outlets for French musicians and their librettists. The absence of real competition with the Italian operatic model helped them promote and preserve their own style. Still, to speak of a complete French rejection of Italian music and its lyric style would be excessive. Since the early seventeenth century, the fashion of 'Italianisme' had been encouraged by the presence at the court of the Marquise de Rambouillet, who was of Roman origin, and the marriage of Henry IV of France with Maria de' Medici in 1600.

Certainly, the French did not come naturally to opera, at least when we conflate the term 'opera' with the Italian dramma per musica. Understanding the complex history of the assimilation of Italian opera by the French stage cannot neglect the importance of non-musical factors, such as the political relationships between the kingdom of France and several powerful Italian states. Various attempts to graft the Italian operatic model on the French tradition of court entertainment ended with the advent of the tragédie en musique, which was inaugurated with Jean-Baptiste Lully and Philippe Quinault's Cadmus et Hermione (1673), a genre intended more as a departure from the Italian opera than a reappropriation of it. After Lully's death (1687) and throughout the eighteenth century (that is, until Gluck arrived in Paris in 1773), French opera continued to be contrasted with the Italian model. This was primarily due to the centralised system implemented through royal institutions that ruled the arts: it remained crucial for France, home to the second major operatic tradition in Europe, to preserve its own paradigmatic model.

The Persistence of the *Tragédie Classique* in the *Tragédie en Musique*

Other factors were paramount for explaining the physiognomy of French opera and its antithetical perception of Italian opera. Assessing the emergence of the French model for opera must first consider the ground on which this model originated: the classical tragedy, France's most illustrious theatrical tradition. The *tragédie en musique* was organically tied to theoretical and aesthetic conceptions that defined the genre of spoken tragedy, itself a reaction against the dramatic excesses of the sixteenth-century humanist tragedy. The blossoming of French tragedy was encouraged by improvements to Parisian theatrical locations – such as the reopening in 1644 of the renovated Théâtre du Marais – which better equipped them for the display of spectacular stage settings and machines. Another crucial factor was the emergence of a new generation of playwrights, among whom were the genre's two most prominent figures, Pierre Corneille (1606–1684) and Jean Racine (1639–1699).

French classical tragedy is defined by a series of paradigmatic features: division into five acts and a plot taken from Classical antiquity – be it history or mythology, as shown in Racine's plays – or from ancient or early history (for instance, Corneille's *Le Cid*). The genre also excluded lowly characters, privileging instead aristocratic, regal figures. This can be understood as an extension of the rule of *bienséance* (decorum), which prohibited the representation on stage of actions involving physical violence or death. Moreover, anything tending towards an excessive eroticisation of the body or any other physical activity that would have been deemed trivial was banned.

All these aspects transited easily from spoken tragedy to tragédie en musique. However, the crux of the problem originated with the adjunction of music and its entanglement in the requirements of the art of declamation expected for the performance of spoken tragedy. 'Musicalising' or not the spoken model of tragedy had been a consubstantial debate in the history of French opera since its inception. At the end of the seventeenth century, the tragédie en musique was a prominent topic among the debates propelled by the Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes. The writer Charles Perrault keenly defended the new genre of French opera, demonstrating its validity against the arguments in favour of the Ancients in his Critique de l'opéra, ou Examen de la tragédie intitulée Alceste (1674). This opened an enduring tradition of controversies that traversed the entire eighteenth century—the Querelle des Lullistes et des Ramistes (ignited by Rameau's

first tragédie en musique, Hippolyte et Aricie, premièred in 1733), the Querelle des Bouffons, and the Querelle des Gluckistes et des Piccinnistes (1775–1779).

It would be a mistake to imply that the French resisted the novelty of opera because they were 'less musical' than Italians. The model of the *tragédie en musique*, a consequence of French misgivings regarding Italian opera, was embedded in a paradigmatic conception of lyric poetry. Thus theatrical declamation was perceived as being as musical as it was poetic. To summarise the arguments of French contemporary commentators opposed to opera, why would the French need tragedies set to music when their art of theatrical declamation was already *musical*?

The Reign of the Alexandrine

The French strongly believed in the musicality of their poetic language, which could be revealed by an adequate observation of accents, quantity, and rules of versification. As Claude Jamain puts it, 'to bring back song to the spoken text had always been the natural inclination of [French] classicism', an attitude viewed as antithetical to the vocalic sensibility of Italian opera.⁴

Lyric poetry of that period relied to a great extent on the *alexandrin*, or alexandrine verse. Popularised during the sixteenth century by the poets Pierre Ronsard and Joachim du Bellay, the alexandrine remained until the nineteenth century the main verse in French poetry. The alexandrine line consists of twelve syllables and is divided by two hemistichs of equal length, separated by a caesura falling after the sixth syllable. When ending on a masculine rhyme, that is to say, any syllable ending with a consonant (as in the words *sommeil*, *fracas*, *vainqueur*, *soupir*, etc.), the alexandrine counts exactly twelve syllables. When the ending rhyme is feminine, it counts twelve syllables, plus a final one, the mute "e" (as in *heure*, *larmes*, *venge*, *soupire*, etc.). Both alexandrine lines given here, from Armide's famous monologue in Quinault's *tragédie en musique*, *Armide* (Lully, 1686), respectively end with a masculine and a feminine rhyme:

In the first line, the caesura of the first hemistich is marked by the tonic accent on 'ennemi' and in the second on 'frémis'. A defining prosodic feature of the classical alexandrine is to echo the caesura on the accented sixth syllable by the syllable of the final rhyme. To this can be added the possibility of other accents within each hemistich. For instance, in the line, 'Achevons, je frémis; vengeons-nous, je soupire', the natural rules of French prosody, aided by punctuation and, as indicated here, by the accent falling on the underlined syllables, tend to create within each hemistich an anapestic rhythm (BBL), a frequent one in the French language.

This tendency to create the repetition of rhythmic patterns, added to the length of the alexandrine line, encouraged a restrained declamation that was viewed as ideally suited to the solemn genre of tragedy. But the alexandrine was also frequent in comedies, as, for instance, in Molière's plays *Les Femmes savantes* or *Tartuffe*. Indeed, the declamation of tragedy was defined by a 'general *tempo* characterized by a certain slowness', what Grimarest had already praised in 1707, stating that the proper use of the French language is to be spoken aloud 'in a grave and noble manner'.

These declamatory standards and their poetic style were maintained in the *tragédie en musique*. While a libretto may give less prominence to the alexandrine by mixing it more frequently with other lines, such as octosyllables and decasyllables, the musical setting also tends to enhance the slowness of prosody, at this tempo creating something akin to a magnifying glass effect. In his *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture* (1719), Jean-Baptiste Dubos evoked the art of French opera singers as 'the art of declamation proper for the realization of a recitation *slowed down by song*'.⁷

If theatrical declamation possessed an inherently musical quality, attempting to outline its rhythm and melodic inflexions through musical notation was the obvious task of the musician. By the end of the seventeenth century, the most emblematic example was the one provided by the actress Marie Champmeslé (1642–1698). As one contemporary commentator put it, 'the delivery of the actors is a kind of song, and you would well admit that La Champmeslé would not please us so much, had her voice been less agreeable'. After La Champmeslé's death, Le Cerf de la Viéville gave a slightly modified retelling of this anecdote in his *Comparaison de la musique italienne, et de la musique françoise* (1704), according to which Lully was said to have fashioned many of his recitatives on La Champmeslé's declamation, an enduring tale that continued to be perpetuated well after the eighteenth century.

What appeared to be a porous line between declamation and song was in France an ongoing issue made all the more significant by the rise of the tragédie en musique. But this trope originated before the late seventeenth century and culminated by the end of the sixteenth century with the experiments of the Pléiade, an academy founded in 1570 by the poet Jean Antoine de Baïf. Using the technique of vers mesurés à l'antique, Baïf attempted to recover the Greco-Latin poetic metre by following French rules of prosodic quantity. Baïf and his circle were influential among French composers of the early seventeenth century, who adopted the style of the musique mesurée à l'antique in which the melody must adhere as much as possible to the scansion of the verses. Understanding the style of musique mesurée is essential to understanding both the melodic style of the French air de cour – which would later be incorporated into ballets and tragédies en musique – and the characteristic style of French musical recitative.

The Air de Cour and the Italian Model of Monody

In seventeenth-century French vocal music, the most important genre was the *air de cour*, which developed by the end of the sixteenth century. The expression 'air de cour' appeared in 1571 in the first printed collection of these pieces, which indicates that the form was originally meant for the entertainment of the king and court. Aided by the large number of airs available in collections published by royal printers, it quickly gained popularity beyond those venues.

The *air de cour* could be either polyphonic (mostly four to five voices) or monodic with a lute accompaniment, as shown in the compositions of Pierre Guédron (1564–around 1619–1620). As its popularity grew, the *air de cour* made its way into the *ballet de cour*, where it often had an introductory function by appearing at the beginning of an *entrée*, usually in a monodic form with lute accompaniment. Guédron himself, as well as Antoine Boësset (1586–1643), composed several airs for these staged works: both composers had a major impact on the incorporation of the *air de cour* into the *ballet de cour*.

It would be tempting to view the *air de cour* as the French equivalent to the new genre of the monody, as heralded by Caccini's *Nuove Musiche* (1602). Yet, the treatment of prosody and rhythm and the musical setting of the *air de cour* continued to be indebted to the French tradition of *musique mesurée*, with its musical accompaniment carefully supporting the standard accents and syllable counts. The vocal range, usually within one octave, tended to be much narrower than that of the Italian monody. Vocal

ornamentation was also much less common, the emphasis being instead on the syllabic setting of the text.

The French did not judge the Italian monody by hearsay only: Caccini came to the French court in 1604 at the invitation of Henry IV. In comparing the two styles, contemporary commentators noted that French song appeared much more restrained than the Italian monody, a feature that could be construed as a flaw or, by those who disliked the excesses of the Italian manner, a quality. In his *Harmonie universelle* (1636), Marin Mersenne pondered the respective merits of French and Italian song: he described the Italians as 'more vehement than us when it comes to expressing the strongest passions of anger with their accents, especially when they sing their verses on the theatre to imitate the staged music of the Ancients'. 11

As shown by his correspondence with Caccini, Mersenne had a good knowledge of the *Nuove Musiche* and the Italian manner of ornamentation. He adopted a compromise position, since he was aware of the negative perception that French musicians had of the Italian penchant to embellish melody with extended melismas, 'exclamations and accents'.¹² French singers rejected this manner, as it smacked too much of the genres of tragedy and comedy. Mersenne offered that it would be entirely possible to find a middle ground by softening these Italian 'excesses' of ornamentation and adapting them to the idiosyncratic 'French sweetness'.¹³

Mersenne also stressed the novelty of the Italian *stile recitativo*: he mentioned 'Giacomo [sic] Peri' as the one who 'had started to introduce in 1600, in Florence, during the wedding of the Queen Mother, the manner of reciting Music verses on the theatre'. ¹⁴ Mersenne's description suggested the superiority of the Italians, at least when it came to their capacity for representing 'as much as they can the passions and the affections of the soul and the mind, for instance, anger, fury, spite, rage, heartbreaks . . . with such an uncanny violence, that one thinks they are being affected by the very affections they represent through their song'. French singers, on the other hand, remained in a state of 'perpetual sweetness' that accomplished little else besides 'flattering the ears'. More importantly, such sweetness lacked 'energy', which Mersenne used in the sense of *enargeia*, the rhetorical manner of offering listeners a description so vivid that they seem to experience it. ¹⁵

For Mersenne these differences seemed more of degree than of kind: limited by its 'sweet' nature, French music was considered improper for the display of violent passions. Mersenne invited French musicians to unbridle their style – advice he may have gotten from his correspondence with

Giovanni Battista Doni, who recommended that French musicians take 'the opportunity to perfect [their musical style] and change it. . . . I am assured that if your princes would go to the expense, and time permitted it, this would succeed enormously.' A similar argument was offered by the French musician Pierre Maugars, who spent time in Rome during the 1620s and considered the manner of the Italian song 'more animated, ornamented' than that of the French, exhorting his countrymen to travel to Italy and free themselves of the rigidity of their rules. ¹⁷

Yet the comparison between French and Italian was unfair, as it took place at a time before the French had devised their own operatic genre. Epitomised by the *air de cour* that originated outside the world of the stage, the French vocal style was not entirely comparable to the Italian monody nor to the *stile recitativo* motivated by the expression of passions consubstantial to the *dramma per musica*. To this must be added the weight of French tragedy, which provided a normative model not only for the dramaturgy of opera but also for the varieties of its vocal style of delivery as first shaped by Lully and Quinault.

French recitative was theoretically rooted in the theatrical and musical practices of the Ancients - another point of comparison with the Italian tradition. The argument was clearly articulated in Dubos's influential treatise Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture. Originally published in 1719, Dubos' text was augmented by a third part in the new edition of 1733. Entitled 'Dissertation sur les représentations théâtrales des Anciens', this new part scrutinises the conception of music and declamation among the Ancients. Dubos defines the art of declamation as primarily an art of melopeia, a Greek term referring to the art of composing the modulation, thus melody. If melody belongs as much to 'music' as it does to the oratory of the Ancients, one can push the syllogism further by affirming that this oratory is a sort of music. Of course, when reading Dubos today we should ask ourselves what the term 'music' meant to him and his contemporaries, for whom the minimal separation between music and declamation was being constantly renegotiated. Dubos warns his readers that the art of melopeia should not be considered 'music' (in its modern sense); the musical art of the Ancients should be viewed as the crafting of an instrumental accompaniment to sustain tragic declamation.

This is why Dubos argues that 'the Ancients had a composed declamation that was written in notes, without being a musical song [chant musical]'. 18 Granted, in several instances he describes this declamation as 'musical', implying a double meaning to the term. The beauty of melopeia or declamation, which can be described in musical terms, is a consequence

of the poetic art. On the other hand, the beauty of music, as in the instrumental accompaniment to a tragic declamation, results from the principles of harmony.¹⁹

In any case, Dubos does not denigrate the art of declamation in comparison to the art of music: they were complementary in ancient tragedies. This is what he finds to have gone awry in modern operas, that is, those departing from the Lullian norm:

Let's admit that we do not fully understand how music could ever be considered as being part of the tragedy, so to speak; if there is anything in the world that seems alien and contrary to a tragic action, it is song, which is, whether the inventors of tragédies en musique like it or not, poetry as ridiculous as it is new.... Because operas are, if I may say so, the grotesques of poetry.²⁰

The French mistrust of Italian vocality lies essentially in the potential of the latter to supplant the virtues of French theatrical declamation, which they viewed as the most appropriate medium for the rendering of passions in their tragedies.

Experiencing the first Italian operas performed in Paris and at the court, the French perceived in Italian song a problematic mixture in which music appears as an *added* element to the text, endangering the primacy of the latter. Operatic vocality, for the French, should be a sublimation of declamation without ever becoming full song, and as such it runs the risk of detaching itself from its original textual substratum. The typical French concern for textual intelligibility is anchored in the necessity of finding as close a correspondence as possible between music and text – its syntax and prosodic qualities. The recitative is then viewed as the privileged vocal locus of the *tragédie en musique* – the pièce de résistance of the operatic spectacle – as long it does not become full song and lose its ties to the theatrical model of declamation (hence the enduring fame of the apocryphal anecdote on Lully modelling his recitative on La Champmeslé's declamation).

Récit and Air as Paradigmatic Categories

The vocal style of the *tragédie en musique* is divided into two categories, known as 'récit' and 'air' in late seventeenth-century terminology. The first referred to a syllabic, recitative-like manner, and the second to a more tuneful style.²¹ In practice, however, the categories could overlap: the delivery of the *récit* could take the character of an air, while the air could

also be referred to as a *récit* – this can be seen in scores and other sources. In its common usage, 'air' refers to a closed form, most frequently a vocal piece following the model of the *air de cour*, with which it also shares its brevity, especially when compared to the Italian aria. 'Air' could also be the name given to an instrumental piece (sometimes the instrumental adaptation of an *air de cour*), one often used for a specific dance in a ballet or a divertissement: for instance an *air de ballet* or, more specifically, a dance related to its performance (e.g., *air pour les matelots*, etc.). Whether instrumental or vocal, the air is defined by its recurrent melodic pattern and its regular metre, which is often matched with a dance rhythm: the 1694 edition of *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* defines the air as 'a succession of agreeable tones that make a *regular* song'.²²

'Récit' has a more varied meaning. When translating it as 'recitative', one should keep in mind that its original French meaning is 'narration', a relation of some action that occurred. The *Dictionnaire de Furetière* (1690) gives two entries for the term: 'narration' and 'what is sung by a solo voice and especially by a dessus. A beautiful music should be intermixed with récits and choirs'.²³ The 1694 edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* gives only one entry but addresses both meanings. As a musical term, a *récit* is 'what is sung by a solo voice, and that begins a ballet, an opera, or another divertissement by exposing its subject' and as 'everything sung by a solo voice detached from a great choir of music'.²⁴ Tellingly, neither definition elaborates on its musical peculiarities, except to mention that it is sung by a solo voice. What prevails is a rhetorical conception of the *récit* and its function to reveal and develop the tenets of the plot, or the 'sujet', to use the seventeenth-century French term.

The musical texture of a *récit* requires a *basse continue* written in a harmonic language generally simpler than the Italian recitative (all these features of Lullian opera were going to change dramatically in Rameau's works, leading many of his contemporaries to label his musical style exceedingly Italianate during the *Querelle des Lullistes et des Ramistes*). The French *récit* is easy to notice in a score, due to the changes of time signature and alternations between binary and ternary measures. Since the intention is to follow and emphasise the poetic rhythm of the lines by marking their caesuras and tonic accents, the *récit* is devoid of any regular beat, a feature that highlights the legacy of *musique mesurée*.

We tend nowadays to call this French recitative 'unmeasured recitative'. It was paradigmatic of the style idealised by the Lullian model of sung declamation, but its metrical idiosyncrasies were not systematically observed. Here, establishing a parallel with the Italian practice can be

helpful to a certain point. (Italian) recitative is routinely viewed as the primary vehicle for dialogue and for conveying information. As for the aria, it should focus on a more effusive exploration of one or two affects, which is why an Italian libretto easily reveals which verses are intended for the aria: they tend to be shorter than those for the recitative and are gathered in more compact strophes. For that reason, the aria is often said to create a pause in the dramatic unfolding of the action. To this must be added the case of impassioned monologues signalling extreme displays of passion (e.g., mad scenes). These would often be carried by the *recitativo accompagnato*, that is, a recitative with a more complex instrumental accompaniment, usually strings reinforcing the continuo. While this division of labour is mostly typical of eighteenth-century *opera seria*, it was already well under way by the end of the seventeenth century.

The function of the recitative in late seventeenth-century French opera could also be used both for conveying information and for rendering climactic moments of passion: but these different degrees of expression did not seem much to alter the style of the recitative itself, when compared with the Italian simple recitative and its accompanied counterpart. A typical instance of such a climactic use of the unmeasured recitative is Armide's celebrated scene in Lully's eponymous opera (1686; Act II scene 5). An extended monologue, the scene starts with an instrumental ritornello introducing Armide's unmeasured recitative, 'Enfin, il est en ma puissance', followed by a brief conclusion on a strophe of six lines (starting on 'Venez, venez, secondez mes désirs'). This conclusion is itself introduced by another instrumental ritornello on a ³/₄ time signature, the melody of which is repeated twice in the vocal part. Departing from the preceding unmeasured recitative, this conclusion is written entirely in the 3_4 time signature: the new ternary measure and its recurrent melodic pattern lend the passage the aura of an air. Yet, it would be a stretch to suppose, just by looking at the disposition and length of verses in a French libretto as compared to those of an Italian libretto, that this is where the closed form of an air should take place. Here, the dramatic emphasis of the entire monologue is carried by the unmeasured recitative, not by the concluding and much shorter air-like section.

During and after Lully's time, it was this section in unmeasured recitative ('Enfin, il est en ma puissance') that was regarded as the climax of the scene. Its fame as a model of impassioned monologue continued throughout the eighteenth century.²⁵ An Italian conception along the lines of *opera seria* would have predicted the contrary: a rather brief recitative, possibly with an accompanied recitative in the middle to emphasise Armide's

trouble (starting at 'Quel trouble me saisit'). Then, as the climax of the scene, Armide's 'aria' ('Venez, secondez mes désirs').

This scene typically uses the unmeasured recitative in contradistinction to another type of récit in which the time signature remains unchanged, as in an air (here the section 'Venez, secondez mes désirs'). This second type of recitative is usually referred to as a 'measured recitative' (récit or récitatif mesuré). However, these expressions (récit/récitatif mesuré and non mesuré) were anachronistic during Lully's time and at least during the first half of the eighteenth century. Pierre Estève may have been the first to distinguish both categories of recitative by coining the expressions 'récitatif simple' and 'récitatif mesuré' in his book L'Esprit des beaux-arts published in 1753. Récitatif simple, a French translation of the Italian recitativo semplice, was used by Estève to mean unmeasured recitative.26 Rousseau later followed with his own definition of récitatif mesuré in his Dictionnaire de musique (1768). His article is essentially a critique of this expression, which he finds to be a contradiction in terms. Understanding recitative as an Italian conception, Rousseau rejects the possibility of a recitative being measured, which is to him an absurdity belonging to French opera: 'any recitative where one can feel any other measure than the one of the poetic lines is not a recitative anymore'.27

The distinction between the two terms only began to be fully realised after the 1750s: for instance, the definition 'récit' in the first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie* (1694; quoted earlier) remains unchanged in the 1762 edition, except for this added sentence at the very end of the article: 'The récits are not subjected to the measure like the airs.'²⁸ By the middle of the eighteenth century the need to differentiate 'récit' from 'air' owes much to the growing knowledge among French audiences of Italian recitative and aria: 'récit' became increasingly synonymous with recitative in its Italian sense, finally and definitively differentiating itself from 'air'. Before the *Querelle des Bouffons*, Rousseau, Rousseau defined 'air' in Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* as the name given to 'any pieces of *measured music* [morceaux de musique mesurés] so that they can be distinguished from the recitative which isn't; and generally we call air any piece of music, be it vocal or instrumental, that has its beginning and its ending'.²⁹

Before the introduction of these eighteenth-century lexical terms, French opera generally used the term 'récit' indiscriminately, no matter whether the recitative was unmeasured or measured. This creates another layer of complication: the presence of these terms in engraved scores and writings was far from systematic, making it hard to establish any fixed

meaning. Certainly, an unmeasured recitative with its changing time signatures cannot be confused with an air, but the demarcation is murkier between an air and a measured recitative. The recurrent melodic and rhythmic patterns generated by a regular metre, often matched with a dance rhythm, would potentially make any *récit mesuré* lean towards the air category.

While not a paradigmatic rule, the appearance of a passage written in measured recitative following or preceding an unmeasured recitative is motivated by rhetorical emphasis: affirming a truth or a maxim, asserting a claim or a conclusive sentence. These passages can be woven within the unmeasured recitative in a manner not dissimilar to the Italian practice of embedding a mezz'aria within a recitative.30 When they reach a certain length that allows for the repetition of periods in order to generate a sense of form, these passages could be construed as airs, all the more so when they offer a clear sense of closure.³¹ Among these frequent forms is one that James R. Anthony has labelled an 'extended binary configuration', an ABB' structure often built on a poetic quatrain: its first two lines constitute the section A, the last two lines the section B. These two lines in B are also repeated musically, only with minor alterations to the melodic and rhythmic outline. This extended binary configuration was quite common in seventeenth-century arias in operas and cantatas by Italian composers such as Giacomo Carissimi, Marco Marazzoli, and Luigi Rossi. 32 Lully may have been familiar early in his career with this extended binary form: a probable first exposure could have been the performance of Rossi's Orfeo in Paris in 1647 when Lully was fifteen years old. Lully's frequent use of this form in his dramatic music contributed to its popularity among French composers in the subsequent generation, especially André Campra, who often relied on it in his opéras-ballets.33

In any case, these sections perform a structural role that clarifies the architecture of a scene. Act I scene 3 of Quinault and Lully's *tragédie en musique*, *Atys* (Saint-Germain-en-Laye, 1676) counts six sections, the first and the last being the ritournelle ('Allons, allons, accourez tous, / Cybèle va descendre'). The first section presents a first statement of the ritournelle, sung by Sangaride and Doris, followed by a *récit mesuré* ('Que dans nos concerts les plus doux') leading to the second statement of the ritournelle, now sung by Sangaride, Doris, Atys, and Idas. The final (sixth) statement of the ritournelle, sung by Atys and Idas, occurs at the conclusion of the scene. Between these two framing points, a dialogue between Sangaride and Atys takes place. But this exchange is itself subdivided into four sections, three of them written in *récitatif mesuré* (see Table 11.1).

Table 11.1 Distribution of récits in Quinault and Lully's Atys, Act I, sc. 3

1 Sangaride, Doris:

Allons, alcourez tous,

RITOURNELLE 2

Cybèle va descendre.

(mm. 1–12)

Sangaride:

Que dans nos concerts les plus doux, ${}^{*}MR_{2}^{3}$ (mm. 13–27)

Son nom sacré se fasse entendre.

Atvs:

Sur l'Univers entier son pouvoir doit s'étendre.

Sangaride:

Les Dieux suivent ses lois, et craignent son courroux.

Atys, Sangaride, Idas, Doris:

Quels honneurs! Quels respects ne doit-on point lui rendre?

Allons, allons, accourez tous,

Cybèle va descendre.

RITOURNELLE 2

(mm. 36–48)

2 Sangaride:

Ecoutons les oiseaux de ces bois d'alentour, **UMR mm. 49-81

Ils remplissent leurs chants d'une douceur nouvelle:

On dirait que dans ce beau jour Ils ne parlent que de Cybèle.

Atys:

Si vous les écoutez, ils parleront d'amour.

Un Roi redoutable,

Amoureux, aimable,

Va devenir votre époux;

Tout parle d'amour pour vous.

Sangaride:

Il est vrai, je triomphe, et j'aime ma victoire.

Quand l'amour fait régner, est-il un plus grand bien?

Pour vous, Atys, vous n'aimez rien,

Et vous en faites gloire.

3 Atys:

L'Amour fait trop verser de pleurs;

Souvent ses douceurs sont mortelles:

Il ne faut regarder les belles,

Que comme on voit d'aimables fleurs.

J'aime les roses nouvelles,

J'aime à les voir s'embellir;

Sans leurs épines cruelles,

J'aimerais à les cueillir.

MR [Air] 3 mm. 82-116

Table 11.1 (cont.)

4 Sangaride:

Quand le péril est agréable,

Le moyen de s'en alarmer?

Est-ce un grand mal de trop aimer

Ce que l'on trouve aimable?

5 Peut-on être insensible aux plus charmants appâts?

mm. 141-8 (descending

MR [Air] 3 mm. 149-85

MR 3 mm. 117-40

tetrachord)

Atys:

Non, vous ne me connaissez pas.

Je me défends d'aimer autant qu'il m'est possible.

Si j'aimais, un jour, par malheur,

Je connais bien mon cœur,

Il serait trop sensible.

Mais il faut que chacun s'assemble près de vous,

Cybèle pourrait nous surprendre.

UMR 186-9

6 Atys & Idas:

Allons, allons, accourez tous,

Cybèle va descendre.

mm. 190-end RITOURNELLE **2**

Translation:

Sangaride, Doris:

Come, come, all come,

Cybele is descending.

Sangaride:

May in our sweetest concerts

Her holy name be heard.

Atys:

May her power extend on the entire universe.

Sangaride:

The Gods follow her laws, and fear her wrath.

Atys, Sangaride, Idas, Doris:

What honours! What tributes should we not render her?

Come, come, all come,

Cybele is descending.

Sangaride:

Listen to the birds in these woods.

They fill their song with a new sweetness:

^{*}MR: measured recitative

^{**}UMR: unmeasured recitative

It seems that on this beautiful day They only speak of Cybele.

Atys:

If you listen to them, they will speak of love.

A feared King, Amorous, gentle, Will become your husband; Everything speaks of love to you.

Sangaride:

Indeed, I triumph and enjoy my victory. When love rules, is there any greater good? As for you, Atys, you love nothing, And you take pride in this.

Atys:

Love causes too many tears to be shed; Often his joys are deadly: One should only admire beauty, The way one looks at lovely flowers.

I love the new born roses, I love to see them grow beautiful, Without their cruel thorns, I would like to gather them.

Sangaride:

When danger is pleasant, Is there any reason to be alarmed? Is it evil to love too much What one finds agreeable?

Can one be insensible to the most beguiling charms?

Atys:

No, you don't know me.

I forbid myself to love as much as possible; If I should love, unfortunately, one day, I know well my heart, It would be too much hurt.

But let's everyone come gather around you: Cybele could take us by surprise.

Atys & Idas: Come, come, all come, Cybele is descending. Section 2, a dialogue between Sangaride and Atys, starts with an unmeasured recitative ('Ecoutons les oiseaux de ces bois d'alentour'). The changes of time signature are rather infrequent; compare this with the first part of Armide's monologue, where the changes of metre happen more frequently. Yet the declamatory style in this scene from *Atys* is aptly suited for this exchange between two characters who have not admitted their love for each other. Instead, they both continue to feign an amicable indifference.

What follows (Section 3), 'L'Amour fait trop verser de pleurs', sung by Atys on the time signature 3, presents features similar to those of an air. The libretto consists of two quatrains, the first in octosyllables (*rimes embrassées*: ABBA), the second in heptasyllables (*rimes croisées*: CDCD). The melody of both quatrains and the *basse continue* evoke the rhythm of a minuet. The whole setting creates a sense of closure characteristic of an air, with the repetition of the two last lines of the second quatrain ('Sans leurs épines cruelles, / J'aimerais à les cueillir'). The repetition is neither textual nor symmetrical (the first occurrence is longer due to the repetition of 'J'aimerais') but saves for the fourth line the cadential gesture V–I in G. After this, Sangaride sings one quatrain (Section 4: 'Quand le péril est agréable') in the same time signature. Here as well the *récit mesuré* takes on an air-like allure, with the exact repetition of the melodic line on the two last lines of the quatrain: 'Est-ce un grand mal de trop aimer / Ce que l'on trouve aimable?'

Before the conclusive return of the ritournelle, the second to the last section, also in *récit mesuré*, leans even more clearly towards an air (Section 5; see Example 11.1). It is introduced by two lines: first an alexandrine sung by Sangaride ('Peut-on être insensible aux plus charmants appâts?'), then an octosyllable sung by Atys ('Non, vous ne me connaissez pas': mm. 147–9). The continuo accompanies each line with a descending tetrachord, introducing a new section consisting of a quatrain.

The first line, an alexandrine ('Je me défends d'aimer autant qu'il m'est possible'), is also the longest: it is accompanied by three occurrences of the descending tetrachord (mm. 150–62). The second, third, and fourth lines (respectively an octosyllable, followed by two hexasyllables) are accompanied by three occurrences of the tetrachord, with repetition of the fourth hexasyllable, ending on the cadence V–I in G (mm. 163–74). The group consisting of these three last lines is repeated once more (as in a BB'



Example 11.1 Jean-Baptiste Lully, *Atys, Tragedie mise en musique* (Paris: Christophe Ballard, 1689), Act I, sc. 3, Sangaride and Atys, mm. 142–90

pattern) with the repetition of the final fourth verse and the cadential ending on G (mm. 175–86). The transition from this air to the conclusion (the final occurrence of the ritournelle 'Allons, accourez tous') is rendered by four measures written in unmeasured recitative and sung by Atys (mm. 187–90).

As Robert Fajon observed, 'when repetitions occur in the literary or musical text, one enters into récitatif mesuré'. 34 But the difficulty is to assess when a récit mesuré morphs into an air. The truth is that it remains difficult to establish according to the standards of the Lullian operatic model a clear-cut distinction between récit mesuré and an air, especially when considering these terms through purely musical means. A better angle would be to focus on the rhetorical intentions of the libretto, and consider how these motivate the musical articulations of the scene and how they determine the most adequate style to adopt.

This scene from *Atys*, as with many others from the same repertoire, is not by any means an undifferentiated flow of recitative: it reveals subtle articulations throughout the exchanges between Sangaride and Atys, here framed by the symmetrical structure provided by the ritournelle.³⁵ After Lully's death, long scenes in French operas perpetuated this model. Spectators more familiar with the language of Italian opera may have missed these articulations –as Goldoni obviously did. The full reappraisal of this technique and its merging with the binary recitative–aria of the *opera seria* would become an essential tool for the revitalisation of opera propelled by the reforms led by Christoph Willibald Gluck during the 1770s.

Notes

- 1 Carlo Goldoni, *Memoirs*, trans. John Black, with an essay by William D. Howells (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1877), 363–4; slightly emended.
- 2 Rameau's last *tragédie en musique*, *Les Boréades*, was rehearsed in 1763 but never performed before his death. After *Zoroastre*, other dramatic works performed at the Paris Opéra were his actes de ballet *La Guirlande ou les fleurs enchantées* (1751) and *Anacréon* (1757), the pastoral héroïque *Acanthe et Céphise* (1751) and the comédie lyrique *Les Paladins* (1760).
- 3 On the *Querelle des Bouffons* and the comparison between Italian and French styles, see David Charlton, 'Genre and Form in French Opera', in Anthony R. DelDonna and Pierpaolo Polzonetti (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 155–83.

- 4 Claude Jamain, L'imaginaire de la musique au siècle des Lumières (Paris: H. Champion, 2003), 28.
- 5 Jean Mesnard, 'La Musicalité du texte dans la tragédie classique', in Irène Mamczarcz (ed.), Les premiers opéras en Europe et les formes dramatiques apparentées (Paris: Klincksieck, 1992), 117-32: 123; emphasis in the original.
- 6 Jean-Léonor Le Gallois de Grimarest, Traité du recitatif dans la lecture, dans l'action publique, dans la declamation, et dans le chant. Avec un Traité des Accens, de la Quantité, & de la Ponctuation (Paris: Jacques Le Fevre et Pierre Ribou, 1707), 82–3.
- 7 Jean-Baptiste Dubos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poësie et la peinture.* 2 vols. (Paris: chez Jean Mariette, 1719), vol. 1, Section 41, 'Of simple recitation & declamation', 397; my emphasis. In the 1719 edition, Dubos did not name the singers but he had in mind Marthe Le Rochois, who was then explicitly referred to in the second edition of 1733. In this passage, Dubos also mentions that this quality is more frequently found among female as compared to male singers, due to their 'most sudden sensibility' to which they are more readily prone than men, and to 'the greater suppleness of their heart'. See Dubos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poësie et la peinture. Nouvelle édition revue, corrigée & considérablement augmentée*, 3 vols. (Paris: Pierre-Jean Mariette, 1733), vol. 1, 416.
- 8 In *Entretiens galans. La mode, La musique, Le jeu, Les louanges*, 2 vols. (Paris: chez Jean Ribou, 1681), vol. 1, 90. La Champmeslé's Parisian career started at the Théâtre du Marais; later, in 1680, she became a member of the newly born Comédie-Française. Many of Racine's leading female roles were written for her, including Phèdre in the eponymous play from 1677.
- 9 Jean-Louis Le Cerf de la Viéville, Comparaison de la musique italienne et de la musique françoise, où, en examinant en détail les avantages des Spectacles, & le mérite des Compositeurs des deux nations, on montre quelles sont les vrayes beautez de la Musique (Brussels: François Foppens, 1704–1706; rpt. Geneva: Minkoff, 1972), part 2, 149. In 1986, Claude V. Palisca was already questioning this 'myth' of La Champmeslé's declamation as a model for Lully, noting that Le Cerf was born in 1674; see Claude V. Palisca, 'The Recitative of Lully's Alceste: French Declamation or Italian Melody?' in Claude V. Palisca, Studies in the History of Italian Music and Music Theory (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 491–507: 497–8. In the absence of any fact reported in Lully's lifetime that would prove the veracity of this anecdote and thus the deconstruction of said myth, see Manuel Couvreur, 'Le récitatif lullyste et le modèle de la Comédie-Française', Entre théâtre et musique: récitatifs en Europe aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles. Cahiers d'histoire culturelle 6 (1999), 33–45.
- 10 See notably Jean Vignes, 'Brève histoire du vers mesuré français au XVIe siècle', Albineana, Cahiers d'Aubigné 17 (2005), 15–43; Barbara E. Bullock, 'Quantitative Verse in a Quantity-Insensitive Language: Baïf's vers mesurés', Journal of French Language Studies 7/1 (1997), 23–45. For an in-depth analysis

- of the 'musique mesurée' in Baïf's collection of poems *Le Printans* set to music by Claude Lejeune, see Pierre Bonniffet, *Un ballet démasqué. L'union de la musique au verbe dans 'Le printans' de Jean-Antoine de Baïf et Claude Lejeune* (Paris, Geneva: Champion-Slatkine, 1988).
- 11 Marin Mersenne, *Harmonie universelle*, part 2 (Paris: Pierre Ballard, 1637), Livre Sixième: 'De L'Art de bien chanter', Seconde Partie, Proposition XV, 371.
- 12 Marin Mersenne, *Harmonie universelle*, part 1 (Paris: Sebastien Cramoisy, 1636), 'Traitez de la voix et des chants', Livre 1 'De la voix'.
- 13 Mersenne, *Harmonie universelle*, part 2, Livre Sixième: 'De L'Art de bien chanter', Seconde Partie, Proposition VI, 357.
- 14 Mersenne implicitly refers to L'Euridice, ibid.
- 15 Ibid., 356.
- 16 Doni to Mersenne, Correspondence, quoted in Georgia Cowart, The Origins of Modern Musical Criticism: French and Italian Music 1600–1750 (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1981), 10–11.
- 17 For a useful overview of these arguments, see Cowart, *The Origins of Modern Musical Criticism*, especially 5–16.
- 18 Dubos, *Réflexions critiques*, 1733, vol. 3, Section V, 100. This argument runs throughout the entire Section IV as well ('De l'Art ou de la Musique Poëtique. De la Mélopée. Qu'il y avoit une Mélopée qui n'étoit pas un chant musical, quoiqu'elle s'écrivît en notes'), 54–83.
- 19 Ibid., 1733, 88.
- 20 Ibid., 1733, 92.
- 21 *Récit* can, of course, be rendered by the English 'recitative', as long as one does not have an Italian understanding of the latter. The term 'récitatif' also occurs in late seventeenth-century France, but it can refer to declamation in spoken theatre see, for instance, Grimarest's *Traité du recitatif*.
- 22 Dictionnaire de l'Académie française, 2 vols. (Paris: chez la veuve de Jean Baptiste Coignard, 1694), vol. 1, 25; my emphasis. The 1762 edition of the Dictionnaire provides the same definition except for the expression 'air de cour' that has been suppressed. Dictionnaire de l'Académie française, 2 vols. (Paris: chez la Vve Brunet, 4th edn. 1762), vol. 1, 47.
- 23 Dictionnaire de Furetière, 3 vols. (La Haye and Rotterdam: chez Arnout & Reinier Leers, 1690), vol. 3, 326.
- 24 'Récit', in Dictionnaire de l'Académie française, 1694, vol. 2, 380.
- 25 Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously criticised Armide's monologue in the final section of his *Letter on French Music* (1753) by using Lully's setting to demonstrate the impossibility for the French to have a music of their own. It provoked the wrath of the musicians of the Académie Royale de Musique and launched the final and most heated episode of the *Querelle des Bouffons*.
- 26 Palisca, 'The Recitative of Lully's Alceste', 492.
- 27 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Dictionnaire de musique*, ed. Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau Œuvres complètes. V. Écrits sur la musique, la langue

- et le théâtre, ed. Bernard Gagnebin, Marcel Raymond, et al. (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 'Récitatif mesuré', 1012. Rousseau criticises the use of a single time signature in the *récit mesuré*, yet this is also the case in Italian recitative, as it only uses the common time. In the latter, the time signature is purely conventional, as it does not affect the prosody (see his entry 'Récitatif', 1009).
- 28 'Récit', in Dictionnaire de l'Académie française, 1762, 553.
- 29 'Air', in Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert (eds.), *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une Société de Gens de lettres*, 17 vols. (Paris: Briasson; Neuchâtel: Samuel Faulche; Amsterdam: Marc-Michel Rey, 1751–1772), vol. 1 (1751); my emphasis.
- 30 See Palisca, 'The Recitative of Lully's Alceste', 493.
- 31 Paul-Marie Masson defined the air as a closed form, in his *L'Opéra de Rameau* (Paris: H. Laurens, 1930), 202–3. For a discussion of this structural aspect within the recitative sections, see Charles Dill, 'Eighteenth-Century Models of French Recitative', *JRMA* 120/2 (1995), 232–50: 234–5.
- 32 James R. Anthony, 'Lully's Airs. French or Italian?', *The Musical Times* 128/1729 (1987), 126–9: 127.
- 33 Ibid., 129.
- 34 Robert Fajon, *L'Opéra à Paris du Roi Soleil à Louis le Bien-Aimé* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1984), 35, quoted and translated in Dill, 'Eighteenth-Century Models of French Recitative', 235.
- 35 See, for instance, Lois Rosow, 'Lully's Musical Architecture: Act IV of *Persée*', *JSCM* 10/1 (2004), https://sscm-jscm.org/v10/no1/rosow.html.