Opera in France, 1870–1914: Between nationalism and foreign imports

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Abstract

The high culture of late nineteenth-century France, which was for the most part Parisian, was marked by two contradictory trends. On the one hand, Paris was a global metropolis that attracted artistic elites from the entire civilized world and served as a stepping stone to fame for many of them. On the other hand, France itself was traumatized by the defeat of 1871 and felt outdistanced by more dynamic economic powers. In certain artistic fields, the country was now challenged by fledgling nations such as Germany or Italy that repudiated the former French cultural hegemony which dated back to the Enlightenment as well as the universalist ideals of the French Revolution. As a result, a type of cultural nationalism emerged which gradually spread into many fields, including literature, music, and of course the fine and decorative arts. One prominent victim of this heightened awareness of a national culture was Richard Wagner, whose works met with a difficult reception in Paris following the unfortunate first run of Tannhäuser, premiered at the Opéra on March 13, 1861, and dropped after just three performances. While private facilities and patrons compensated to some extent for the official institutions' lack of goodwill and for the conservatism of the general public when it came to welcoming foreign instrumental music, things were different for the opera. In France, this genre depended mainly upon theatres, which were in the hands of, or received subsidies from, the state.

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High Culture
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