Understanding French Grand Opera Through Dance

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Abstract
This dissertation examines the reception of nineteenth-century French grand operas (ca. 1828-1879) at the Academie Royale de Musique in relationship to dance in order to understand how past choreographic practices inflected audiences' understandings of the spectacle. It focuses primarily on the music and the practices of the Parisian composer Daniel-François-Esprit Auber, and leans heavily on journalistic accounts of dance from the Revue Musicale, Le Ménestrel, and La France musicale to place his works in the context of more general practices and perceptions of operatic and choreographic works at this theater. These journalistic accounts, in combination with archival sources such as violon répetiteur scores and the partie de ballet, reveal the aesthetic and commercial importance of dancers and danced episodes to the genre of grand opera in general. In demonstrating this importance, the study recovers aspects of the French operatic experience that have been comparatively neglected by musicological scholarship.

The dissertation is comprised of four case studies, each focusing on a different issue of musical expression and understanding in the context of dancing. The first chapter examines the many ways audiences interpreted the bodies of Opéra dancers, concentrating particularly on the criticism of Théophile Gautier, the travesty role of the page, and bacchanales in Meyerbeer's Robert le diable (1831) and Le prophète (1849). The second chapter discusses the reception of the 1837 revival of La Muette de Portici (1828), an opera that starred a female mime alongside the more conventional singing roles, suggesting that its performance history reveals the increasing conceptual separation of ballet from opera. In the third chapter, the performance history of the fifth-act ball scene from Gustave, ou Le bai masqué (1833) serves as an example of the many types of permutations that divertissements underwent as part of the Opera's production process. The final chapter addresses issues of social dance, demonstrating how quadrille arrangements of operas shaped operatic listening habits.

Recommended Citation