Claire Moran (ed.)

# The Art of Theatre

## Word, Image and Performance in France and Belgium, c. 1830–1910

Peter Lang

# Le Romantisme et après en France

# Romanticism and after in France

This collection of essays explores the relationship between art, literature and the stage in France and Belgium in the period 1830–1910. It is the first book to bring together scholarship on this neglected area of study and provides unique insights into current research within this rich interdisciplinary field. The rise in popular theatre, the beginnings of a 'society of spectacle', the emergence of the print media and the development of stage direction and set design, along with the crisis in pictorial and literary representation, created a dynamic cultural climate wherein the interface between writing, painting and dramatic representation thrived. The chapters in this volume chart different facets of this phenomenon: from the art of performing assumed by writers and the collaborations between artists and theatre directors to the theatrical motifs that infiltrated visual art and the increasingly 'dramatized' relationship between painting and spectator at the end of the century.

Claire Moran is Lecturer in French at Queen's University Belfast. Her research interests lie in the relationship between art and literature in nineteenth-century France and Belgium.

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The Art of Theatre

Le Romantisme et après en France
Romanticism and after in France

Volume 23

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and edited by Patrick McGuinness

Peter Lang
Oxford · Bern · Berlin · Bruxelles · Frankfurt am Main · New York · Wien

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# Introduction

This volume, containing contributions in French and English from international specialists in art history, drama studies and literature, investigates the relationship between art and theatre in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century France and Belgium (c. 1830–1910). Its focus is on this specific cultural interface fostered by the increasing importance of all types of spectacle in the long nineteenth century. The essays included here chart the multifaceted dimensions of this relationship: from the 'society of spectacle' and the collaborations between artists and dramatists to the theatrical themes of nineteenth-century visual art and the aesthetic plays with form between the two artistic genres. Common to all essays is the contemporary rich cultural context where theatre, in its many forms, was paramount to social and artistic life.

One of the most significant developments from the perspective of this investigation is the growth in number and variety of theatres in nineteenth-century France and Belgium.[1] Theatre became by far the most popular form of entertainment for all social classes in nineteenth-century Paris.[2] The city

1 It was following the exile of Napoleon in 1815 that restrictions on theatres were lifted and minor houses in particular grew in number and variety in France, most notably in Paris. Brussels saw a similar if later growth in popular theatre, where between 1845 and 1855 showhouses multiplied by the dozen. See Paul Aron, *La Mémoire en jeu. Une Histoire du théâtre de langue française en Belgique* (Brussels: La lettre volée, 1995), p. 18.

2 While the most expensive seats (ten francs in 1830) were at the Opéra, thereby attracting the wealthy bourgeoisie, cheaper seats could be found at the Opéra comique or the Comédie-Française (between six and eight francs) while the working class could afford seats at the minor houses, such as the Théâtre des Funambules, where the highest admission price was seventy-five centimes. Figures from Anselm Gerhard, *The Urbanization of Opera* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 29.

became home to a large number and wide variety of theatres, including state-subsidised theatres such as the Opéra and the Comédie Française, as well as numerous boulevard houses and music halls. The most celebrated popular theatres included La Gaîté and Les Funambules and much of the dramatic action took place on the Boulevard du Temple, known as the Boulevard du Crime due to the specialization of many theatres in crime melodrama.[3] Drama and spectacle also permeated every aspect of social and cultural life in nineteenth-century Belgium. As in Paris, theatre played an important social function in nineteenth-century Belgian life becoming, as Paul Aron remarks, both the site of collective leisure and of a cross-fertilization of different classes.[4] Many new theatres opened, specializing in different genres such as melodrama, vaudeville, the *opérette* and the specifically Belgian genre of the *revue*, a mixed genre of text and music, often characterised by irony or black humour, known as *zwanze*. While Le Parc and La Monnaie provided a similar function to the French national theatres, Le Vaudeville and Le Cirque Royale were examples of this new trend. Puppet theatre was particularly popular in Brussels. The Toone Puppet theatre was the most famous, with its star marionette, the young Walloon, Woltje. The parodies of Belgian puppet theatre were also echoed in the base humour and travesty found in festivals such as *Le Mardi Gras*. Nineteenth-century Brussels was home to a number of parades and carnivals; the street the site of a spectacle, where everyone undertook a role.

While the success of the minor houses in Paris in the first half of the century was principally due to the emergence of the genres of melodrama and vaudeville, the reinstating of censorship in France of the Second Empire led to less emphasis on social and political critique[5] and more on the spec-

3 For a full account of the development of popular theatre in nineteenth-century France, see John McCormick, *Popular Theatres of Nineteenth-Century France* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

4 See Aron, *La Mémoire en jeu*, p. 16.

5 The most successful melodramas of the period maintained close links with nineteenth-century social and political life. A series of satires and socially critical dramas emerged in the 1830s, following the July revolution and its lifting of censorship. Fréderick Lemaître's creation of *Robert Macaire* exemplified melodrama's ability to serve as a

tacular aspects of the stage. The great spectacle theatres included the Cirque Olympique and the Funambules, while in the Panorama Dramatique or in Daguerre's Théâtre Pittoresque, actors were replaced by the atmospheric effects of illuminations. In Brussels, these spectacular shows were staged at L'Alhambra, known as le Théâtre du Cirque which, with its 2,500 seats, gave full advantage to the effects of lighting, participants and props. The popular appeal of spectacle was also seen in the public demand for acrobatic displays, pantomimes and rope dancing. Pantomime and puppet theatre in particular underwent an aesthetic renewal, championed by critics such as Champfleury and Baudelaire. At the end of the 1860s, the Hanlon-Lee brothers introduced a new Pierrot to the Parisian and Brussels public. This reinvented *Commedia del Arte* character who was both acrobatic and macabre fired the imagination of Zola, Manet, Mallarmé, Huysmans and others.[6] Similarly, the vogue in puppet theatre epitomized by Louis Duranty's Tuileries gardens *Théâtre des Marionnettes* and Lemercier de Neuville's *Théâtre des Pupazzi* in the 1860s was later echoed in the plays of Maeterlinck and Jarry. The second half of the century also saw a rise in operettas, a genre defined above all by its irreverence. Offenbach's *Orphée aux enfers* (1858), *La Belle Hélène* (1865) and *La Grande Duchesse de Gerolstein* (1867) accompanied by Ludovic Halévy's libretti, painted a shrewd yet comic vision of the affectations and pomposity of the period, all the while revelling in exuberance and *joie de vivre*.

From an aesthetic perspective, the theatrical examples of Naturalism and Symbolism at the end of the century are of particular importance. Although principally associated with the novel, Naturalism was ideally suited to the theatre, which offered the possibility of creating an exact reproduction on stage of the outside world. Zola's essay 'Le Naturalisme au théâtre' (1881) called for a mimetic relationship between the stage and the world; one which focused in particular on the importance of set design and costume. For Zola, the theatre set was the equivalent of description

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social and political critique, denouncing the hypocrisy of the new political regime in its protagonist being a crook who rises to power through crime.

6 See Jean Starobinski, *Portrait de l'artiste en saltimbanque* (Geneva: Skira, 1970).

in the novel. Similarly, the artificiality of the acting style of classical actors was criticized by Zola who encouraged actors to 'live' rather than to 'act' their roles, thereby employing gestures, expressions and diction reflective of their characters. Zola's theories found expression in Octave Mirbeau's *Les Mauvais Bergers* (1897), Henry Becque's *Les Corbeaux* (1882) and *La Parisienne* (1885), Camille Lemonnier's *Le Mâle* (1899) and in the innovative stage direction of André Antoine, which revolutionized late nineteenth-century theatre. His 'Causerie sur la mise-en-scène' (1903) exposed his agenda which sought to obtain the highest level of realism on the stage through the organization of the set, props, costumes and the actors. Following Antoine's understanding of theatre, the spectator became an active witness to the scene on stage, the fourth wall of theatrical illusion separating the audience from the actors, as conceived by Diderot, becoming transparent.

Symbolist theatre in many respects opposed the Naturalist school, privileging the art of suggestion over a realist representation. As with Naturalism, theatre was not its principle outlet and instead it more generally found expression in poetry and prose, such as that of Rimbaud, Verlaine, Rodenbach and Mallarmé. However, as with Symbolist painting, the stage offered in many ways an ideal terrain in its translation of an idea through a material reality. Inspired by occult, mythological and supernatural subjects, Symbolist theatre prioritized the ideal and the mysterious over the real and the known, inspired by the philosophy of Hegel and Schopenhauer and the concept that all reality is essentially in the mind. The set therefore did not seek to evoke a specific place but rather sought to suggest a mood or state of mind. It is not surprising that Symbolist dramatists, in their quest for suggestivity, collaborated with artists in their stage design.[7] The Symbolist stage also benefited from technological developments, especially the use of

7 For example, Pierre Quillard's *La Fille aux mains coupées* (1891) saw Paul Sérusier design the backdrop; Maurice Denis created the costumes and set for Édouard Dujardin's, *La Légende d'Antonia* (1891); Fernand Khnopff designed the set and costumes for the 1907 production of Maeterlinck's *Pélléas et Mélisande* at La Monnaie, while Edvard Munch designed the production of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* in 1896 at the Théâtre de L'Œuvre.

electricity, which allowed subtle and complex lighting effects. In terms of acting, ambiguous and abstract characters were evoked through an emphasis on a lack of movement, silence and isolated gestures and words. Paul Fort's creation of the Théâtre d'Art in 1890 saw Symbolist theatre find its first permanent home and the first staging of productions of Maeterlinck's *L'Intruse* (1891) and *Les Aveugles* (1892). Its commercial failure led to an actor from Antoine's Théâtre Libre, Aurélien Lugné-Poe creating the Théâtre de L'Œuvre in 1893. Lugné-Poe's manifesto of 'un théâtre quasi-magique, un théâtre de fantasie et de rêve'[8] stood in direct opposition to Antoine's naturalist school, but he also sought to expose French audiences to the plays of foreign dramatists, such as Ibsen, Hauptman, Gogol, Marlowe, Verhaeren and Strindberg. The work of Ibsen and Strindberg, in particular, closely resonated with that of the French and Belgian Symbolists with less emphasis on action and a greater sense of mood and state of mind. The success of the experimental theatre of Antoine and Lugné-Poe inspired a series of similar ventures in late-nineteenth-century Paris and Brussels, including, the Théâtre de l'Avenir Dramatique (1891), the Théâtre d'Art Social (1893) the Théâtre des Lettres (1894) and the Nouveau-Théâtre (1897), thereby complementing the popular theatres, all the while reinforcing the status of drama as an essential element of modern aesthetics.

The breadth and variety of theatricality was complemented by the theatricality of modern life in the late nineteenth century. It was essentially its spectacle of display that famously rendered Paris 'The Capital of the Nineteenth Century' for Walter Benjamin.[9] Arcades and department stores as well as the newly gas-lit streets and boulevards offered a fantastic vision to be beheld by the flâneur. The Expositions Universelles housed the exotic and the novel, and 'glorified commodities', creating 'a phantasmagoria into which people entered in order to be distracted'.[10] The effect of such emphasis on spectacle in everyday life led to a proliferation of

8 Aurélien Lugné-Poe, *Acrobaties* (Paris: Gallimard, 1931), p. 55.

9 *Charles Baudelaire, A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn and Quentin Hoare (London: NLB, 1976), p. 154.

10 Ibid., p. 165.

representations which, increasingly, were interchangeable with reality.[11] Concurrently, private life gave way to a life lived in public in the popular bars and cafés of the capital or as evidenced for Baudelaire in the dress of the middle-classes, whose 'habit noir [...] de croque-morts' was 'l'expression de l'âme publique'.[12] This theatre of appearances in the public domain was complemented by the vogue in theatricality in private settings. Drama was also an essential part of nineteenth-century middle-class family life, as Aron has shown.[13] The writing of a play destined to be produced in a familial setting was a widespread bourgeois activity; one which probably encouraged from a young age self-dramatization in everyday life. The salon was an essential part of nineteenth-century artistic life and one which was permeated by theatre in the form of performances of poems, plays and music. The *tableau vivant* was a popular salon activity; one which exploited the theatrical potential of visual art.

The importance of theatre to nineteenth-century artistic and cultural life is indisputable and it is little surprise that it figures so prominently in the visual art of the period, most notably in the works of the Impressionists, namely Degas, Manet and Renoir. However theatre was much more than a thematic resource for nineteenth-century artists. This book charts the rich cross-fertilization between art and theatre in France and Belgium during this period. The first part, 'Cultures of Performance in the Nineteenth Century', offers different perspectives on the relationship between theatre and art in nineteenth-century French and Belgian cultural life. Laurence Senelick's essay opens this section and shows how, in the realm of popular visual culture, Offenbach and his operas were rich sources of imagery. While on the one hand, the figure of Offenbach and scenes from his works appeared in illustrated journals as woodcuts and steel engravings, Senelick shows how the modernity of the composer's achievements was best seen in the era's technological advances in pictorial reproduction. Colour lithography

11 See Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

12 Charles Baudelaire, 'Le Salon de 1846' in *Baudelaire, Œuvres complètes II* (Paris: La Pléiade, 1976), p. 494.

13 See Aron, *La Mémoire en jeu*, p. 25.

provided the seductive images that appeared on sheet-music covers and posters, in particular the kinetic broadsheets of Chéret. Photography similarly reproduced the distinctive costumes and makeup of the actors, so that certain characters took on an iconic status. Likewise, scenes in the operas were replicated by accurate miniatures peopled by figurines and then disseminated through stereopticon slides, thereby fusing art and theatre and bringing the riotous emotions of the playhouse into the domestic sphere. The intricate relationship between art, theatre and the contemporary media is also discussed by Karen Humphreys. Focusing on an 1869 confrontation between Barbey d'Aurevilly and the demi-mondaine actress Augustine Duverger, she shows how representations of spectacle in the *salle de théâtre* are transformed in newsprint, which, she argues, constitutes yet another form of spectacle in nineteenth-century France. Humphreys reveals how Barbey's journalistic text dramatizes the theatrical and social scenes in the *salle de théâtre*, while offering his appraisal of the playwrights' work. She emphasises the critic's narrative dandyism as a rhetorical device in his theatre criticism, one which is embedded in a greater dynamic of spectating and performance specific to Barbey's understanding of entertainment as life-like and conversely modern life as spectacle. The relationship between fiction and reality is also discussed by Séverine Reyrolle who focuses on the marionette theatre of Maeterlinck, Pierre Albert-Birot and Paul Claudel to show how it constituted a reaction to both positivism and contemporary middle-class tastes. She argues that the illusions and bizarre creatures of the puppet world challenged conceptions of time and space, actor and spectator, fiction and reality, thereby renewing relations both between art and the stage and between the artist and the actor, offering a way forward for modern theatre. The dividing lines between the real and the imagined are discussed further by Arnaud Rykner who details how, originating as a para-theatrical mid-nineteenth-century activity, the *tableau vivant* came to be characterised as a form of spectacle between the *mondain* and the pornographic, between cultural exhibition and bodily exhibition. Situated at the crossroads between theatre, salon life, cabaret and medical demonstration, the *tableau vivant* is discussed by Rykner in terms of a psychological tension between the real 'stage' and the interior 'theatre' which each spectator experiences within him or herself.

The second part of this book, 'Exchanges and Collaborations: Dramatists, Painters and the Stage', focuses on precise examples of interactions between artists and the theatre. The relationship between painting and the stage is discussed in the opening essay by Sandra Bornemann who analyses Édouard Vuillard's interior paintings in the context of his multifaceted work for the Théâtre de l'Œuvre in Paris which included set designs, illustrations of plays, and posters for theatrical productions. She reveals how Vuillard's collaboration with Lugné-Poe led to an innovative concept of the stage-interior, which became an important part of the formation of a new theatre. The chapter argues that Vuillard created an intimate theatre – both on stage and on canvas – and sheds new light on his contribution to the development of the Symbolist representation of interior space. The collaboration between visual artists and playwrights is also discussed by Jill Fell who focuses on the critically neglected figure of Paul Ranson. She discusses his 1890 marionette theatre and details the contribution of the Nabis, showing how Maurice Denis and Georges Lacombe sculpted the puppet heads and Vuillard, Ker-Xavier Roussel and Maurice Denis painted the backcloths. The chapter also investigates the involvement of the Nabis with Lugné-Poe's Théâtre de l'Œuvre, and explains how, following the break with Lugné-Poe after the fracas generated by *Ubu Roi*, the Nabis rallied around Jarry and conceived The Théâtre des Pantins (1897–1898) for his benefit; a theatre which was to be perfected by Ranson at the turn of the century. The theme of collaboration is continued by Camille Racine who discusses the work of the painter, George Desvallières for the theatre director, Jacques Rouché at the Théâtre des Arts in 1910. She explains how Rouché employed a number of artists, including Léon Bakst, Émile Bernard, Pierre Bonnard and Vuillard to create sets and costumes for plays, dances and operas. Her focus is on three shows designed by Desvallières: *Anathema* by Leonid Andreieff (1911), the dance show of Mlle Trouhanova based on l'*Istar* by Vincent d'Indy (1912), and Gluck's Opera, *Orphée* (1913). Racine considers how this first-hand experience of theatre permeated the painter's own visual work, notably his decorative panels where the representation of the figures may be interpreted as choreographic and where gesture is emphasised. Katherine Hoffman's chapter focuses on the ballet rather than the theatre, examining some of the important productions of the Ballets Russes

from 1909 to 1910, considering the role of visual design, set, lighting, and costume design, as well as photographers' images of performers. Referring to contemporary cultural developments, it shows how the beginnings of the Ballets Russes may be seen as providing an important bridge between East and West, and between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, serving as an open laboratory for important modernist experiments in visual art and theatre. Aude Campmas's chapter takes another approach to this mutually enriching field, focusing on literature, rather than ballet and addresses the *tableaux vivants* of Zola's *La Curée*. She shows how these specific *tableaux vivants* are both literary and horticultural 'tableaux naturalistes', which expose Zola's understanding of the artificiality of the *femme-fleur* in the Second Empire. For Campmas, the *tableaux vivants* of *La Curée* represent the novel's own 'mise en abyme'; these *tableaux naturalistes* are also paintings from a literary and horticultural point of view since they stage an artificial nature and contribute to a broader, more critically pervasive portrayal of women as greenhouse flowers. She reveals how the theatrical staging of women in *La Curée*, epitomized by the *tableaux vivants*, offers a critique of Parisian women's refusal of maternity and domestic duties, and questions its consequences for the French nation. In the final essay in this section, Dominique Jeannerod offers further examples from the *Belle Époque* of how art and theatre interact, with a focus on the popular figure of Arsène Lupin. He explores the different visual strategies adopted to represent the elusive gentleman thief in a play adapted from the work of Maurice Leblanc: the 1908 comedy *Arsène Lupin* (Théâtre de l'Athénée) by Francis de Croisset. Jeannerod studies the multiple contemporary devices employed to assign a modern visual identity to 'l'homme aux cent visages' and interprets the way in which the public image of a dandy of crime is both staged and disseminated.

The final part of the book, 'Aesthetics: Towards an Art of Theatre', brings together essays which question the formal relationship between the two media and its consequences for modernity. Olivia Voisin's chapter opens this section and discusses the emergence of a new pictorial genre in the mid-nineteenth century: 'Le Spectacle dans un fauteuil'. Focusing on the catalogues from private exhibitions by Romantic artists, she reveals the predilection for theatrical and musical subjects. She argues in particular how

the paintings, watercolours and prints of Oscar Guët, Louis Boulanger and Eugène Devéria adapt the aesthetic codes of theatre to painting to create a new genre independent of the original stage production and one which is essentially modern in form. The transition from theatre as thematic resource to theatre as aesthetic code is also discussed in my own chapter which focuses on Manet's self-portraits and portraits of actors in the role of Hamlet. She argues for a mise-en-abyme in the self-portraits echoing the literary device of the play within a play of Shakespeare. It reveals how this manifests itself in Manet through the portrait of an actor which lies within the portrait of the painter, showing how performance becomes not only a metaphor for the artist in society, but also for the relationship between the painting and the spectator, between reality and its representation. A dynamics of performance and representation is also investigated by Karen Stock in her discussion of Degas and Zola. This chapter questions the shifting nature – between transparency and opacity – of the screen in Zola's *Nana* of 1880 and Edgar Degas' images of the ballet. While Zola positions Nana as the archetypal sexual object and Degas pictures her backstage bartering for sexual favours, both men, she argues, pierce the veil of representation, peer behind the curtain of artifice, and ultimately demystify the theatre. Stock argues that both Degas and Zola challenge the audience's possession of the spectacle, which includes both the performance and the performer. The contrasting media of text and image are further interrogated through the antagonistic relationship between Zola and Degas, which serves as a microcosm of the troubled relationship between art and literature and exposes the fundamental differences between text and image as sign systems. Xavier Fontaine's chapter, also focused on text/image relations, examines how the dialectic of language and representation of Maeterlinck's neo-medieval play, *Pelléas et Mélisande* and Khnopff's illustrations for the text, is materialised by the book artefact itself. It focuses on a number of examples, including, the captioned tissue guards, which challenge the reader. Fontaine argues, for instance, that their repeated 'unveiling' results in highlighting what is at the core of Maeterlinck's play and its representation: its visuality. By achieving a subtle synthesis between the Symbolist theatre meant to be read and the Symbolist theatre performed live, this edition proves to be what the author terms a

'book-theatre': a theatre made possible through the handling that the book as object imposes on the reader. Andrei Pop's essay, which also focuses on Maeterlinck, considers the relationship between the motif of the mask and the advent of a modern culture of egotism with specific reference to the theme of St Anthony in Ensor and Maeterlinck. He highlights the affinities between these two very different figures of Belgian modernity, showing how Maeterlinck's *Miracle of St Anthony* (1908–1918), a marionette-play set in modern Flanders, could serve as a script for Ensor's *Anthony* cycle and, conversely, how Maeterlinck's 1890 proposal for a theatre of masks and inanimate objects throws critical light on Ensor's own dramaturgy of masks and skeletons. Clément Dessy's chapter on the arabesque which completes this section, also discusses text and image, with particular reference to how the Nabis imported the pictorial element of line into the dramaturgical space. He discusses how line is used to define characters in both genres, giving the example of the costumes designed by Maurice Denis for *La Fin d'Antoine* (1893). Dessy discusses how the pictorial arabesque infiltrated theatre in different ways: through its effect on the text itself as well as by its manifestation on the stage, showing the extent to which avant-garde theatre was indebted to visual art.

These essays show the wealth of current research in this multidisciplinary of study. By emphasizing the intricate relationship between art and theatre in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, together they offer a new understanding of the cultural context which led to the birth of modern art and theatre; one wherein the generic interplay between visual art and performance was to become increasingly dominant.

PART I

# Cultures of Performance in the Nineteenth Century

LAURENCE SENELICK

# The Offenbach Century

In 1954, an American husband-and-wife team published a short biography of Jacques Offenbach entitled *Cancan and Barcarolle*. That summed up and continues to sum up the general impression of the composer. The *cancan*, made familiar by the ballet suite *Gaité Parisienne* and movie portrayals of the Moulin Rouge in the 1890s, is an aural cliché, suggestive of French naughtiness. And the *barcarolle* is exploited as a lush and languorous background for romantic scenes in films and even commercials, the musical equivalent of melted chocolate.

*Cancan*, French for gossip, is a misnomer for *le chahut*, a high-kicking frolic made popular in working-class Parisian dance-halls in the 1840s. In actuality, Offenbach's 'cancan' is a *galop*, a lively dance of Hungarian origin. He employed it in the grand finale of *Orphée aux enfers* (1858), in contrast to a staid minuet, as an exuberant bacchanal to mock the gods of Olympus and the neoclassical traditions of French culture. As for the *barcarolle*, technically a gondolier's song, it bookends the Venice act of Offenbach's unfinished opera *Les Contes de Hoffmann* (1881). In context, its melodic dreaminess brackets a cynical intrigue of jealousy, betrayal and murder.

The hackneyed recycling of these musical passages promotes the impression that Offenbach is all champagne and puff pastry. Similar clichés circulated in his lifetime. Flaubert's *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* defines him as 'Very Parisian, good form [*bien porté*]'.[1] 'The little Mozart of the Champs-Élysées'[2] was Rossini's clever *mot*. Such neat encapsulations conceal the real importance of Offenbach and his achievements to modern culture.

1 Gustave Flaubert, *OEuvres, II*, ed. A. Thibaudet and R. Dumensil (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 975.

2 Cited in Jean-Claude Yon, *Jacques Offenbach* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), p. 175.

Comedy, notoriously, gets short shrift from aesthetic philosophers and cultural critics. Solemnity is confused with profundity. So the pervasive influence of Offenbach's comic operas has been overlooked or slighted. Yet, in the West (and even parts of the East), they have been as significant in shaping attitudes towards music in the theatre, sexual mores and the classical legacy as any artwork created in the mid-nineteenth century. Offenbach, a cynical deflater of unexamined certainties and instigator of exuberant, ebullient melody, shrewdly undermined establishment values. Pigeonholed as 'Parisian', in the sense of sophisticated, light-minded or racy, he was also distrusted as a Jew and a German who contributed to the subversion of traditional French virtues. Offenbach shares with Heine the paradoxical position of an outsider who exemplifies Gallic wit. Heine, who translated his own poetry into French, was regarded by contemporary Parisians as a French writer.[3] Offenbach, the cantor's son from Cologne, the violoncello virtuoso with the burlesque accent, outstripped even him in becoming a fixture of French identity.

Another limiting cliché about Offenbach designates him the musical spokesman for the Second Empire. This linkage of Offenbach to the *mœurs* of the society of Napoleon III began quite early: Jules Lemaître, writing of *La Belle Hélène*, Offenbach's Homeric parody of 1864, called it 'one of the favourite diversions of an age which was, alas, very frivolous, but was also one of the most peaceful lively, amusing and brilliant ages in our history'.[4] Later commentators endorsed Lemaître's first clause, but not

3 He was the favourite poet of Offenbach's librettist Ludovic Halévy. Daniel Halévy, 'Une musique jaillit', *Le siècle Offenbach /Cahiers de la Compagnie Madeline Renault/ Jean-Louis Barrault* 24 (nov. 1958), p. 18.

4 Jules Lemaître, *Impressions de théâtre, 1re série* (Paris: Librairie H. Lecène et H. Oudin, 1888), pp. 217 et seq. Francisque Sarcey seconded this opinion: 'That famous quadrille in *Orphée* carried away our whole generation in its frantic vortex. At the first sounds of that rabid orchestra, didn't it seem to you to see a whole society leaping up at a bound and stampeding to the dance. It would waken the dead, that music! How those rhythms, now skipping, now furious, seemed to be made to communicate both a moral and a physical trepidation to that whole out-of-tune audience for whom life was only a sort of dance of death'. *Quarantes ans de théâtre. Feuilletons dramatiques. La critique et les lois du théâtre. La Comédie-Française* (Paris: Bibliothèque