PART II

The Place and Function of Music and Dance in French Plays
A. Comedy, Tragicomedy, and Comédie-Ballet

INTRODUCTION

Changes in the fundamental nature of dramatic literature brought about a redefinition of the purpose of music and dance in French theatre in the early seventeenth century. As a new generation of professional actors began to focus attention on the external aspects of plays, they replaced the semi-dramatized poetic tragedies of Montchrestien's generation with more spectacular kinds of dramas intended not merely to be read, but to be acted out on-stage. Performing conditions in the public theatres—with spectators sitting on-stage, a continual hubbub coming from the crowd standing in the parterre, and soldiers maintaining order and expelling gatecrashers—militated against a dramatic action conveyed solely through spoken language. To overcome a multitude of distractions, playwrights devised a new kind of drama that would engulf the spectator in a total atmosphere of theatre. Fast-moving plots diversified with secondary episodes, colourful characters arrayed in sumptuous costumes, painted scenery depicting several locales at once on-stage, mechanical devices, lighting and sound effects, and musical set pieces all served to help the actors hold their audience's fragile attention.

Dramatists and theorists alike became increasingly preoccupied with different aspects of the theatrical experience. In *La Pratique du Théâtre* (1657), Aubignac addressed issues of dramatic illusion and the wilful suspension of disbelief: 'I know well that the stage is a type of illusion, but the spectators must be deceived in such a way that they do not imagine themselves to be so, as far as they are aware; during the time that they are being deceived their minds should not know of it consciously, but only upon reflection.' These remarks touch on a basic


2 This point is made esp. well in T. J. Reiss, *Toward Dramatic Illusion: Theatrical Technique and Meaning from Hardy to Herac (New Haven, 1971), 1-5.

aesthetic principle common to seventeenth-century theatre and ballet: the establishment through the arts of an interplay between the pleasures of the senses and those of the intellect. Once his senses are occupied by "that sweet illusion which is the whole pleasure of the theatre," the spectator may derive intellectual pleasure from applying his reasoning faculties to penetrate the illusion. With the new genre of machine plays, the elaborate sets, staging, special effects, and musical episodes took prominence over plot: "the common people take them for enchantments, while those of understanding take pleasure in seeing the ingenious employment of several of the arts together."\(^2\) Plays incorporating music and dance engage the intellect in a complex interworking of theatrical illusion. Are the performers depicted as the actors themselves, as professional singers and dancers, as the fictional characters of the play, or as mythical or allegorical beings? Is performance depicted realistically as song or dance, or are the arts used to heighten an illusory or supernatural situation? Do musicians appear on-stage singing and playing instruments, or does the music emanate from a phantom orchestra positioned somewhere off-stage?

Early in the seventeenth century musical performance could predictably occur in one of three places: before the play began, between the acts, or at the end of the play.\(^4\) By this time the tragic chorus of humanist drama that formerly marked the acts was often replaced by an instrumental ensemble, usually a consort of viol, which created the illusion of temporal distance between acts.\(^5\) This was particularly necessary in tragic comedy, where successive acts might take place several months later and in another country. Music also served as a frame for theatrical performance. Instrumental preludes announced the start of the first play and helped to quieten down the spectators—although like modern audiences, seventeenth-century spectators were prone to talk over the music.\(^6\) Actors usually followed a tragedy or tragicomic play with a farce, which frequently concluded with familiar chansons or vaudrilles; in many cases verbal cues imbedded in the final lines would announce the end of the play and the start of the songs.\(^7\)

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\(^2\) Aubry, *Pratique du Théâtre*, bk. 4, ch. 9 ("Des Spectacles, Machines et L'Éclairage du Théâtre"), 353. Indeed, everything about ballet de cour indicates that the rational mind enjoyed the mental activity of discerning varying degrees of illusion, interpreting the subjects and verses, the symbolism, the gestures, and the dance movements.

\(^3\) For an overview of the evolution of the intermèdes in both sacred and secular theatre of Italy, France, Spain, and England in the 16th and 17th centuries, see J. Mancinelli, *Les Intermèdes comiques italiens au XVIIe siècle* (Paris, 1972), ch. 2 ("Définition de l'intermède et apogée de son évolution").

\(^4\) According to Aubry, cruelles musiques prolonge the illusion of time passing by "faisant une manière d'intermèdes"—so that "we willingly take these moments for whole hours," see *Pratique du Théâtre*, bk. 3, ch. 6 ("Des Intervalle des Actes"), 234-9.

\(^5\) Evidence of violence behaviour is found in several plays of the 1670s featuring a "play-within-the-play," where a playwright dramatizes certain details which are not normally reported elsewhere, e.g. in Act 4 of *Le Boulanger de Chalusay's* *Blasme hypocrisie* (1679), violins play from the raising of the curtain until the first scene of a farce—during which the characters continue to converse. The prologue to Monday's *Le Comédien poli* (1673) is set behind the scenes during a dress rehearsal, where one of the characters gives the following instruction: "Do so that everyone will come to order, have your violins play the air that has been composed for the raising of the curtain ("l'ouverture du Théâtre")

\(^6\) Julien Tieysot cites numerous examples of this practice in *Histoire de la chanson populaire en France* (Paris, 1880), 499.

\(^7\) Le Duellié malheureux (Rome: Guillaume de la Haye, 1636), a stage direction included in the printed play (F. 2) allows for two performance possibilities, depending on whether or not the audience spontaneously joined in the singing: "L'Ordinaire chantera "En fin ceste Brande". Après une pause si l'on responda, "Ali la place rendre". Il dira: "Rois celle est bien dit, la poline vous est deu". Qui s'il l'on responda, il continuer le reste du couplet chantant, "Ali la place rendre, Qu'elle avait contre moy si long-temps defendu".

\(^8\) Two comedies by Giovanni Battista Andreini published in Paris reflect this practice: his comedy *Li dua Loli malati* (1632) concludes with a song ("to dunque spettare") followed by a marvelous, and his fairy-play *Amer nelli specchie* (1632) ends with a dance-song ("Signor vi si fa intendere") as a kind of musical event.

\(^9\) This aesthetic perspective is explored in L. Audin, *The Unity of Molière's Comedy-Ballets: A Study of their Structure, Meaning, and Values*, Ph.D. diss. (Bryn Mawr Coll., 1968).
comédies-ballets will illustrate the various ways that dramatists utilized music and
dance to evoke an atmosphere of exoticism, to serve as a turning-point in the
plot, to assist in courtship and lovemaking, to weave a spell of enchantment or
illusion, to express the inner reality of delusion and madness, or to accompany
ghostly apparitions, dreams, or other supernatural occurrences.