PART I

Music and Public Theatre
in Paris
A. Musical Theatre before French Opera

INTRODUCTION

As the first French repertory companies formed in the latter sixteenth century, they were naturally drawn to seek their fortunes in Paris. There, itinerant troupes struggled to survive in a city where a religious confraternity, the Confrérie de la Passion, held the rights to the only public playhouse as well as a monopoly on all theatrical performances. During this formative period of French theatre, Valéran Le Conte, his company of viol-playing actors, and his playwright-in-residence, Alexandre Hardy, emerged as the first Paris-based repertory company. By 1628 another company bearing the King’s name and sponsorship had emerged as pre-eminent, and established itself at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Another troupe sponsored by Richelieu came to found the Théâtre du Marais, and built in Paris the first playhouse specifically designed for spectacular plays. These two rival theatres employed as their in-house playwrights Jean Rotrou and Pierre Corneille, who furnished a constant supply of fashionable comedies and dramas for a new theatregoing public.

Incidental music became an important element of the comedies, tragocomedies, and pastoral plays of the 1630s. In the following decade the Hôtel de Bourgogne and the Théâtre du Marais responded to the challenge posed by imported Italian opera by producing a new type of multigenre play featuring music, ballet, and machine effects. Court composers and choreographers provided the music and dance for many of these spectacles, for which professional singers and dancers were engaged. The return of Molière and his company to Paris in 1658 began a new era (1658–69), during which time three theatres—the Hôtel de Bourgogne, the Théâtre du Marais, and soon the Théâtre du Palais-Royal—vied to attract Parisian audiences with their musical and non-musical dramatic offerings. When Perrin attempted to found the Académie Royale des Opéra, he faced stiff competition offered by Molière’s comédie-ballets at the Théâtre du Palais-Royal; the musical comedies of Montfeur, Brécourt, and Boisrout at the Hôtel de Bourgogne; the machine plays of Boyer and De Visé at the Théâtre du Marais; and the threat of a rival opera company from Guichard.
and Sablières. Lully’s appropriation of Perrin’s opera privilège in 1672 and his establishment of a new Académie Royale de Musique finally led to Colbert’s reorganization of the public theatres in Paris, and the foundation of the Comédie-Française.¹