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Musical Materiality: 19th Century French Music Culture Embodied in the Palais Garnier Main Facade

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Abstract

My research project analyzes the main facade of the Palais Garnier Opera House in Paris in the context of nineteenth-century French music culture. During the Second Empire of France, Napoleon III entrusted the commission to build a new imperial opera house to the architect Charles Garnier. This structure played a major role in the urbanization of Paris under Baron Haussmann, who brought “air, light, and cleanliness”, to create a city worthy of an empire. The Neo-Baroque style of the new Paris Opera House synthesized classical and baroque elements, creating a dazzling edifice that met those standing along the axis of the grand boulevard. As the city of Paris transformed, the middle class grew and contributed to the modernization of musical culture. Classical music witnessed an increase in private practice with the rise of print culture and commercialization. Public locations became sites of discourse on the latest compositions, ultimately establishing a musical hierarchy that prized intellectually-stimulating classical music reflecting the legacy of German masters and held popular and dance music at a lower rank. I argue that the Palais Garnier facade expresses this hierarchy with the organization and style of the gilded busts of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Ludwig van Beethoven, assuming a privileged placement on the facade. By contrast, I will address the public scandal regarding Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux’s *La Danse* (1868) created for the lower level of the facade, which reveals

who the Opera House served, further underscoring music culture disparities in nineteenth-century Paris.

Keywords: Paris, Classical Music, Public Art

Introduction

The Palais Garnier, the Paris Opera House, is an architectural monument of the Second Empire of France echoing the style of Baroque-period architecture in a Neo-Baroque marriage of classicism and modern social interpretations. Commissioned by the last emperor of France, Charles-Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, known as Napoleon III, the new opera house aimed to evoke the “Baroque metaphor of *theatrum mundi* - that the world is a stage” (Read 4), while asserting its place as a national *immeuble* or building. Constructed by architect Charles Garnier between 1860-1875, the opera’s main facade presents a spectacular exposition of the Beaux-Arts style, reviving classical elements of architecture and celebrating the art of music. Charles Garnier’s opera house engages with Paris’ nineteenth-century boulevards, redesigned in the urban landscaping by Baron Haussmann, as an axial center offering a public sphere for theatrical interaction and social display. With a selective representation of musical giants, including Mozart, Beethoven, and Rossini, depicted on the loggia, the facade negotiates the elite consumption of music and art by the nineteenth-century Parisian bourgeois elite and the disparity between music classes. The social gap between art and music patrons is confirmed by the century’s consolidation of a musical hierarchy and further confirmed by the public defacement of Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux’s *La Danse* (1868). This paper will explore how the Paris Opéra’s main

facade embodied nineteenth-century Parisian music culture with respect to its role as a public work of art and a place for community engagement.

Nineteenth-century Paris

In the nineteenth century, France witnessed political upheaval, reconciliation, and instability following the revolution of the eighteenth-century and Napoleon Bonaparte's (1769-1821) rise to emperor. The initiation of the Napoleonic Wars left what could only be the fantasy of a nation in a state of uncertainty despite the emperor's intended establishment of a new "Roman Empire" with the erection of public monuments echoing the architecture of antiquity, such as the *Arc de Triomphe* (1806-1836) and *Vendome Column* (1806-1810) (Ackerman 23). After the defeat and evacuation of Napoleon's troops in Moscow during the War of 1812 and the emperor's exile, France experienced a brief restoration of the House of Bourbon until the July Revolution of 1830, when Louis-Philippe (1773-1850) assumed the throne, until he was forced to abdicate and replaced by the presidential reign of Charles-Louis Napoleon Bonaparte (1808-1873) in 1848.

Charles-Louis Napoleon Bonaparte adopted the public title of Napoleon III, and as the nephew of the late emperor of France and rising successor in a shaken society, it was important for him not to revive the negative structures of imperial history. Napoleon III's transition from the Second Republic (1848-1852) to the Second Empire (1852-1870), ending with his defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, indicated a need to initiate social developments within a rising public market and consolidate Parisian life as a homogenous culture in nineteenth-century France. One of the most historical developments initiated by the new emperor was his mid-century city-project - the urbanization of Paris by Baron Haussmann (1809-1891) called Haussmannization. This not only prevented the practice of revolutionary barricading but also erased the spatial

memories of a politically contentious period, making way for the modern era, graced with wide boulevards, new buildings, parks, and a sewage system (Parry 50). Preceding this renovation, Parisian streets resembled medieval slums suffocated by disease and darkness. The emperor requested Haussmann to bring “air, light, and cleanliness” to his new empire worthy of national pride, power, and public investment (Chapman 182). This mission was reflected in broader international initiatives where “capital cities of European nations and empires were replanned and reconstructed to express a newly conceived national-imperial identity...” with “...public monuments that sought to locate and embody national and imperial identities and meanings in key metropolitan locations” (Atkinson and Cosgrove 32).

Nineteenth-century Europe confronted the industrial revolution, advancements in technology, and the beginnings of international communication and globalization through increased material accessibility and production. This, along with the rise of the middle class and economic stability, developed a public sphere paralleling the landscaping of Haussmann, as the bourgeois middle class cultivated enlightenment ideology in salons, cafes, and other public venues. Walter Benjamin captures the interactive atmosphere of nineteenth-century Paris with an analysis of the capital’s “Second Empire... at the height of its power... [where] Paris was confirmed in its position as the capital of luxury and of fashion” (Benjamin 168). This interest in material commodities expresses the moral and aesthetic pride embellishing Parisian identity.

To ensure nationalistic efficacy of Louis-Napoleon’s new Paris, the emperor employed the construction of a new opera house. This would become the location for the Paris Opéra and Paris ballet company, but was also a “representational building.” For, “institutions when concretized as groupings of architectural volumes [that] will communicate... the Opéra’s function as the principal theater of France, the state-run Académie imperiale de musique” (Van

Zanten 18). However, before unwrapping the monumental significance of the Palais Garnier one must understand music in the context of nineteenth-century Paris.

Classical Music in the Modern Era

Emerging from the courts, churches, and taverns, public concerts had not existed until after the late eighteenth-century to early nineteenth-century revolutions, due to government censorship. However, following the final cessation of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, a period of economic stability provided a foundation for the expansion of the middle class, who became independent entrepreneurs, and the mass production of musical instruments and dissemination of sheet music. The city of Paris established itself as an essential capital for music development as early as in the eighteenth-century, where “Mozart acknowledge[d] that Paris was a ‘must’ financially and for reputation” (Levy 6). Previously, the exclusivity of classical music in courts and upper-class homes required contemporary listeners to have exceptional abilities in memorizing and notating what they heard from live concerts. In addition to urban development and technology, distinct social classes molded the modern music sphere, venues for amateur and professional musicians, the consolidation of musical hierarchy, and canonization of European composers into the classical narrative.

Italian opera informed French music culture with the establishment of operatic institutions like the *Opéra* and *Opéra Comique*, but the fascination with light, pleasurable music evolved into a form of popular music, critiques as entertaining and insubstantial rather than cognitively stimulating. This distinction in musical taste became an identifier between social circles. These preferences had roots in the philosophy of individuals like Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), who endorsed “simplicity” and “natural” content supported by the demands of intellectual contemplation (i.e. the works of Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)). The distinction in

musical taste intersects with social status and geographic regions. According to Walter Frisch, the period of 1815 witnessed a manifestation of musical practice in the private and public sphere by both amateurs and professional musicians. With respect to the rise of the middle class and access to materials, this early period in the nineteenth-century is coined “the age of Beethoven,” or interchangeably, “the age of Rossini” or “of Paganini” (Frisch 4). These titles represent styles of classical music including symphonic and chamber (Beethoven), opera (Rossini), and virtuosic repertoire (Paganini). The lineage of German masters, including Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven claimed the status of high culture, reserved for intellectual discourse between elite groups, whereas the operatic literature and virtuosic form occupied a position in popular music. William Weber states “Popular culture is always assumed to be contemporaneous and non-esoteric... High culture is the opposite: focusing upon classical forms, it is assumed to require some kind of knowledge for its comprehension, and thereby received an elevated cultural standing” (Weber 11). Despite the seemingly disjointed music audience, it maintained its place as a social fundamental in French culture, for it was regarded to be an integral part in the breeding of refined bourgeois children and families (Ausoni 179).

Contemporary composers illustrate the essence of nineteenth-century Paris, “to see and be seen” informed by the notion of commodity fetishism proposed by Walter Benjamin. In a review of Benjamin’s “Paris: Capital of The Nineteenth Century,” Higonnet et al. clarifies how modern social ideas informed the opera house’s architecture under the eye of Charles Garnier (1825-1898):

“Jacques Offenbach gives a costume party at which guests who pay five francs will be called ‘mon prince’. The Opéra is a facade rather than a building. It expresses the innermost principles

of the Second Empire... the facades, writes Garnier, of his *opus magnum*, is the most typical and the most personal part of the whole work” (Higonnet et al. 399).

The manifestation of luxury and “bombastic, overblown expressions of bourgeois high culture” permeated throughout Europe in preparation to entertain international exhibitions and world fairs (Atkinson and Cosgrove 32), which foster “places of pilgrimage to the fetish commodity” (Benjamin 167). The sociocultural value embedded in this monumental edifice certified its inevitable submission to public opinion.

The Palais Garnier: Main Facade

The project to build a state institution for the performing arts was awarded to Charles Garnier (1825-1898), a student of the *École des Beaux-Arts* and recipient of the *Prix de Rome* in 1848. Garnier received the commission following a competition and under collaborative drafting and redrafting Garnier’s plan to reformulate classical architecture to serve a modern public came to fruition. The facade of the opera house greets the citizens of Paris “at a nexus of avenues [that] elevate the Opéra House to an urban role normally reserved for civic or religious buildings” (Read 38). The grandiose display of classical, baroque, and renaissance style throughout the opera house confused Garnier’s patrons; Empress Eugenia was aghast with Garnier's designs, stating “What is this style? It is not a style? It is not Greek, nor Louis XVI, not even Louis XV!” (Mead 3). Garnier is said to have replied that his opera house was in the style of Napoleon III. Whether or not Charles Garnier truly uttered such a phrase is conjecture, but historians have adopted this term to express the revival of what Charles Mead refers to as the “Renaissance of French Classicism.” It is known, however, that “Garnier wanted the Opéra’s decoration to express an artistic school - a school created by gathering a group of artists who shared his

training...” (Mead 177). This statement identifies the social class Garnier was working for, elites and individuals educated in the classics.

The facade is divided into three parts, the arcade, loggia, attic, and flytower adorned with gilded sculptures of *Poetry* and *Harmony* by Charles Gumery (1827-71), topped with a bronze sculpture by Aimé Millet titled *Apollo, Poetry, and Music* (1860-69). Here Apollo, an oxidized teal color, raises his golden lyre to the heavens overseeing the people of Paris. Acting as the apogee of European music, grounded in ancient history, the sculptural contributions echo early imperial architecture such as the *Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel* (1809-06). Millet’s statue crowns the auditorium dome centered in front of a large pediment as “the facade speaks loud and clear of the cult celebrated within: that of all the arts united in opera under the aegis of Apollo” (Fontaine 11). Moving downward, the facade incorporates comique and tragic ancient masks, “N” and “E” medallions in the attic, the renamed title of the institution “Académie Nationale de Musique,” seven gilded busts of composers below the attic, separated by polychrome collonettes and Corinthian columns, and an arcade divided by four composer medallions and eight sculptures (four centered individual designs and four group sculptures). Garnier’s appropriation of historical buildings like the Louvre solidified the opera’s presence as “the architecture of palaces, not of theaters...” (Mead 105). It is noteworthy that the location Garnier was provided at the Place d’Opéra is framed by large apartments, as an emblem of the Haussmannization, that dwarf the Opéra’s exterior as one looks down the grand boulevard. Therefore, it was an essential task for Garnier to build “A successful facade...” that “... explains the function of the building and draws him [the passerby] inward” (Higonnet et. al 402).

Garnier’s Beaux-Arts project was stripped of its scaffolding for public view just before the Universal Exhibition of 1867. Despite concern for propagandizing the state’s elites, Garnier’s

unveiling met a positive opinion where “The public response was enthusiastic... a ‘remarkable edifice’... Bravo Garnier” (Mead 185). However, the front of the Opéra was not the main entrance - rather the east and west facades acted as the gateway into the theatre for the King and season ticket holders, whereas the facade was utilized as the entrance for those living a humble life within the extravagant displays of the upper-middle class. These guests walked to the theatre, which only had 400 available tickets of the 2,000-seat opera house (Fontaine 12), revealing a significant disparity in Opéra attendance as Patrice Higonnet asserts the facade excluded the non-bourgeois class.

Higonnet’s claim is emphasized in the facade’s use of musical emblems, including the gilded busts, stone medallions, and four group representations of music - the most intriguing being Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux’s *La Danse* (1868), which established itself as a cultural emblem of public art and democracy. As previously mentioned, distinctions in class were informed by taste in music. This knowledge crystallized itself when “Hierarchies of music were conceived by mid-century, which rated dance music at the bottom... This was catchy music that had lots of glitz but no substance” (Baron 305). In turn, the refined compositions of Beethoven and Mozart held their position at the head of the hierarchy, as symphonies and chamber music physically excluded the public sphere. The stratification of music is highlighted in the selective placement and materialization of musical icons and histories as the architect and artist negotiate and cater to the class that filled the opera house seats.

Busts: Mozart & Beethoven

The bronze busts of classical composers are placed within niches. They have expressionless faces resembling death masks, for the composers’ eyes are closed as if in an eternal slumber undisturbed by the public affairs and internal activities passing beyond and

within their resting place. The truncation of the busts is distinctly geometric and unnaturalistic, absent of textured drapery or illusions of natural anatomy; rather the busts appear to be faithful to the human form and identity from the top of the head to the base of the neck where the throat meets a flattened pentagon support with no clavicle, musculature, or bodily structure. In comparison to the facade as a whole entity, these busts are formal and underwhelming as they materialize the legacy of these composers for the sake of architectural and intellectual ornamentation. Despite the lack of expressivity, the integration of composer busts correlate with “the emergence of composers as cultural heroes” who “had become objects of public veneration” and “cultural icons in their own right” (Bonds 93).

In her dissertation, Abigail Fine equates the materiality of music culture to the Catholic practices of collecting and cultivating venerated relics of saints “to position their native composers as local saints” (Fine 3-24). Fine continues to demonstrate how the commodification of these objects reflected the social status of its beholders. Garnier’s decision to continue this ritual within the facade of the new opera house asserts the strong dialogue between public architecture and nineteenth-century music culture. Each bust has a plaque detailing the date of birth and death and the name of each composer. However, it is interesting to recognize the placement of these figures within the attic. As previously addressed, German composers were held in great reverence within high culture and often built upon each other’s musical form. The composer’s genius and international reputation transformed their successes as national symbols of pride. Their depiction acts within a space of public familiarity, indicating that this edifice was to be a location where the arts intersected for the sake of cultural and intellectual enlightenment, as well as “a genuine tribute to the arts, a recognition of the intangibles of culture” (Chapman 189).

The didactic nature of these formal busts is enhanced by their positions within the facade and the way in which the composers' names "mark the building as [a] shrine, reminding music lovers of their primary duty, homage to the great masters" (Nettl 19). The busts of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Ludwig van Beethoven are centered along the axis of the grand boulevard. Mozart's placement directly under the god of music evokes his innate talent as a music prodigy and "genius who accomplishes without effort," whereas Beethoven's orientation at the right hand side of Mozart asserts the German composer's continuation and improvement of classical music in the form of "great human achievement requiring enormous effort" (Nettl 20). By formally materializing the cultural impact of German music, the opera facade not only serves those educated enough to appreciate their work but also justify the immortalization of their legacy within public memory and architecture. However, the absence of French composers further emphasizes the social stratification of Paris, for Paris' own composers were more associated with Hausmusik or popular music that was ranked below the status of those entitled to seats at the emperor's opera house.

La Danse

The most controversial event regarding the opera house facade involves the commissioned sculpture of dance music intended to grace the exterior arcade. This was to be a series of four allegorical sculpture groups, including Jouffroy's *Poetry*, Guillaume's *Instrumental Music*, and Perraud's *Lyric Drama*, which are all consistently executed with a stoic winged-Genius accompanied with figures exemplifying the dignified decorum of their associated music genre. Carpeaux's design emerged from an outline of dimensions provided by Garnier, and in the final design "Carpeaux freely mixed sources from the past with contemporary observations" (Draper and Paper et al. 144). Carpeaux's sculpture group increased the former

quantity of figures from three to nine and with the additive number of bacchantes executed in a more naturalistic style, his work starkly contrasts with the lack of visual engagement in the other three statues. The Genius of dance music thrusts his extended arms in exaltation, waving a tambourine, with an open-mouth expression of laughter and song leading the bacchantes around him. Juxtaposing the formality in the heroic Geniuses of *Poetry*, *Instrumental Music*, and *Lyric Drama*, Carpeaux's bacchanal is sensualized by the disrobing of the Genius due to the engagement in physical movement and celebratory action. The Genius of dance directly participates in the revelry of his female company, who are in the nude, gallivanting about his music. A single putto is caught in the excitement, resting at the feet of the Genius, behind the steps of the bacchantes. Carpeaux's sculpture elevates the manner in which "Garnier moved beyond the formal paradigms of Beaux-Arts composition to its expressive purpose" in "[replacing] abstract natural order with immediacy of human action" (Mead 106-114).

Carpeaux's design was greeted with polarizing reactions, one of which praised his expansion of traditional design while criticizing the mediocrity of the other sculpture groups. The opposing opinion argued the subjects of *La Danse* were "... all-too-fleshy and erotic denizens of a Paris Dance Hall" (Mead 190). Both sides had a resolution - to either remove the three mediocre groups or Carpeaux's set of lively entities, which coined a new euphemism for physically intimate practices *a trois* in a "Groupe de Carpeaux" (Draper and Paper et al. 147). The watershed moment immortalizing public response to the opera house facade occurred on August 26-27, 1869, when a citizen threw a bottle of ink, staining the right hip of the left bacchante and surrounding area. Solutions to mend the defacement of Carpeaux's group were proposed by the public who supported and financed the cleansing of the new martyr, a voice representing "all ages and social stations" (Draper and Paper et al. 151). Although a chemist was

able to remove the stain, under the supervision of Garnier himself, the sculpture group became the source of political upheaval and disapproval. To the dismay of Carpeaux, the emperor ordered the replacement of *La Danse*, which was offered and begrudgingly denied by the artist himself. Thus, Garnier faced artistic tension between his responsibility to the state's demands, appeasing the people of that state, and the architect's loyalty to his artist's liberty (Mead 190), but ultimately Garnier submitted to the will of the public:

“There is something more decisive than the wishes of the architect, the good will of the administration and the Emperor's orders, and that is public opinion, and it is this opinion that obliges us all to have the group removed” (Draper and Paper et al. 152).

However, one must question who made up the public addressed in Garnier's statement, for where was the voice of those who flooded the opera house with letters of the sculpture's approval and preservation? It is probable that the public opinion with the loudest voice were patrons of high art culture, such as the Paris Opéra, who grounded their negativity towards Carpeaux's design in morality and decorum. In Mead's *Urban Contingency*, the author problematizes the national ethos of the Paris Opéra House by delineating its transition from an imperial institution to a host of public engagement for the bourgeois class. Despite this shift in the identity of the public, the opera facade remains an elite emblem of nineteenth-century public art; quoting Jurgen Habermas, “the state is ‘private people coming together as a public’” (Mead 168).

Following the effects of the Franco-Prussian war, which transformed the opera house into a warehouse for military supplies, and the death of the artist who was to work on the replacement of *La Danse*, Carpeaux's group became a representation of artistic tragedy and maintained its

restored position at the opera's facade until replaced by a copy in 1964 by Paul Belmondo (1898-1982).

The Opéra Garnier facade is a material representation of public opinion concerning music culture, social status, and artistic aesthetic in nineteenth-century Paris. Charles Garnier assumed the role of an architect, “to design the city and its elements with proportional precision to elevate the theatre of social life in each of its aspects to create a unified, urban identity” (Read 6). In constructing a facade that presents the Parisian public with a taste of luxurious entertainment, while concurrently reviving Baroque style, Garnier celebrated the distinguished identity of those who appreciated high music culture amidst the rising publicity of nineteenth-century French music criticism and analysis. The representation of monumental composers and record of public engagement with the lowest ranked style of music in Carpeaux's *Las Danse* articulate the ways in which public art and architecture navigate the relationship between the image of a state and the individuals who are the makeup of that national identity. Today, the Paris Opera House is an architectural gem that highlights the layered social history of art and music culture in Paris, communicated in the “principle of the École des Beaux-Arts that grand public buildings should be... set in a clear hierarchy” (Bergdoll 251-252).

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