

Les Bayadères, or exoticism between Classicism and Romanticism

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In several respects – subject, musical treatment, style... – *Les Bayadères* appears to be situated between two different aesthetics. In its ‘Eastern’ setting, first of all: première in 1810, it comes more or less half-way between the often farcical turqueries of the mid-eighteenth to early nineteenth century and the ‘Oriental dream’ of the Romantics. To the former category belong Gluck’s *Le Cadi dupé* (1761) and *Les Pèlerins de La Mecque ou la Rencontre imprévue* of 1763 (Haydn used the same libretto for his *Incontro improvviso* of 1775), Mozart’s *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (1782), Grétry’s *La Caravane du Caire* (1783), Joseph Martin Kraus’s *Soliman II ou les Trois Sultanes* (1789) and even Weber’s *Abu Hassan* (1811, therefore contemporaneous with Catel’s *Les Bayadères*) and Rossini’s *L’Italiana in Algeri* (1813). The years 1810-20 saw a change in the approach of novelists and librettists to the ‘Eastern question’. There was a shift away from laughter – although a work in the *buffa* vein still occasionally put in an appearance, e.g. Cherubini’s *Ali Baba ou les Quarante Voleurs* of 1833 (but portions of the work had been written many years earlier for *Koukourgi*, 1793, which had never been staged) and later *Le Barbier de Bagdad* by Peter Cornelius (1858) – and towards emotion. The East continued to fascinate, but in a different way. It was better known in the European capitals, where readers often had access to travellers’ accounts. And in order to dream and inspire dreams in others, it was necessary to

go further afield, to India, China, Ceylon... After the deserts of the Mediterranean region came the damp forests of the Far East, while the blazing sun of Cairo, Algiers or Mecca was replaced by the heavier atmospheres of Benares or Colombo. Refinement, environments conducive to mystery, 'religious exoticism' and so on, were henceforth on the agenda. The French operas of that time presented in Paris included *Le Dieu et la Bayadère* (Auber, 1830), *Les Pêcheurs de Perles* (Bizet, 1863), *L'Africaine* (Meyerbeer, 1865; despite its title, it is mostly set in the 'Indies'), *La Princesse Jaune* (Saint-Saëns, 1872), *Le Roi de Lahore* and *Lakmé* (Massenet and Delibes, respectively; both 1883).

One also has this feeling of being in between two aesthetics in Catel's musical treatment of *Les Bayadères*, in the general style of the work, and in the handling of the orchestra and the voice. The *tragédie lyrique*, based on stories from Classical mythology or tales from Antiquity, had experienced its last great moments in the years 1780-90 with the French, Italian and German composers, such as Lemoyne, Vogel, Sacchini and Salieri, who adhered to Gluck's reform. Several works by musicians of the following generation were also connected with that tradition (some of them were première, not at the Paris Opéra, but at the Opéra-Comique, the Théâtre Feydeau): *Horatius Coclès* (Méhul, 1794), *Télémaque* (Lesueur, 1796), *Médée* (Cherubini, 1797) and *Sémiramis* (1802) by Catel himself. The First French Empire (1804-1815) saw a new offshoot spring from that branch: the *opéra héroïque*. It was undoubtedly heralded by Gaspare Spontini's *La Vestale* of 1807, that composer's most brilliant success, which has much in common with *Les Bayadères*. The *opéra héroïque* naturally paved the way for the arrival, some twenty years later, of the *grand opéra*, as exemplified by Auber, Meyerbeer, Halévy and others, which was to remain fashionable practically until the end of the nineteenth century.

All the ingredients of the *opéra héroïque*, many of which were later adopted in *grand opéra*, are also present in *Les Bayadères*: a historical subject (the rivalries between Démaly, rajah of Benares, and the Mahratta warriors of fourteenth-century India); sumptuous sets, depicting both interiors (the harem in Act I, the palace in Act III) and exteriors (the public

square in Benares in Act II); dances carefully worked into the action (the programme printed for the first performances of the work mentions thirty-two dancers in Act I, twenty-eight in Act II, and sixty in Act III); large choruses (thirty-three men and twenty-six women announced in the programme), giving Catel many possibilities for their use: 2 or 3 parts for the favourites or the Bayadères, 4- or 5-part mixed choruses, 6-part double male choruses (for the battle between the Indians and the Mahrattas). The result was a sumptuous pageant, a work that was visually splendid, with more than 130 artists on stage at the end of Act III.

Catel's orchestra is typical of the Romantic era, already with many brass instruments (4 horns and 3 trombones, in addition to the 2 trumpets), but its 'Eastern' percussion – triangle, cymbals and bass drum – had been used by Mozart almost thirty years earlier in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. Strings and woodwinds are treated in the tradition of the Viennese classics, except in the accompanied recitatives (they are all accompanied), in which Catel, like others of that time, makes much use of tremolo for dramatic purposes.

The treatment of the voice is in some respects innovative. The characterisation of the roles is, of course, traditional. The heroic Bayadère Laméa takes after Gluck's Iphigénie (*Iphigénie en Aulide*, 1774; *Iphigénie en Tauride*, 1779), for example, or Salieri's Hypermnestre (*Les Danaïdes*, 1784). But one cannot help seeing in the intense lyricism of her part in Act III a prefiguration of Meyerbeer's Alice (*Robert le Diable*, 1831) or even of Gounod's Mireille in the eponymous opera of 1864. And while the Three Bayadères obviously remind us of the three ladies in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* (1791), the two tenors, Rustan and Démaly, announce Meyerbeer's Robert and Rimbaut in *Robert le Diable*, and the powerful Olkar anticipates the same composer's Nelusko in *L'Africaine*. A nod to the past, therefore, and at the same time a hand outstretched to the future.

Les Bayadères, a grandiose work with music of constant refinement and a tone that becomes more and more moving as the action progresses, had all the requisites for success. It is hardly surprising that, eleven years after its première, it was chosen for the inauguration of the Salle

Le Peletier, the home of the Paris Opéra from 1821 until the building was destroyed by fire in 1873 and replaced by the Palais Garnier.



The performance of *Les Bayadères*, inaugurating the new Opéra, rue Le Peletier, 16 August 1821. Paris Opéra Library and Museum.

Représentation des *Bayadères* pour l'inauguration de l'Opéra de la rue Le Peletier, le 16 août 1821. Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra.