

An ambiguous reception?

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Amadis de Gaule received only seven performances and it was never revived – the sign of a dismal failure. *Écho & Narcisse*, three months previously, had had twelve performances, and its poor reception had prompted Gluck to leave Paris for good and even to consider ending his public career. The 1771 version of *Amadis*, which was not regarded as a success, had had twenty-three. Between 1769 and 1789 only five works fared worse: Sacchini's *Dardanus* (1784), with six performances; Floquet's *Hellé* (1779), Philidor's *Themistocle* (1786) and Salieri's *Horatii* (1786), with three each; and *Callirhoé* (1773) by Destouches and Dauvergne, with only one. At the other end of the scale, Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* had been presented thirty-four times between its première on 18 May 1779 and the first performance of Johann Christian Bach's opera in December that year. Although the first two performances of *Amadis* were successful, with takings of over 5,000 livres on the first night and 4,000 on the second, there came a significant drop after that, with the last performance bringing in little more than 1,000 livres. The deficit for the institution was enormous. The figures are even more telling when compared to those for the works immediately preceding and following *Amadis* on the stage of the Académie Royale: Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* and Piccinni's *Atys*, respectively. On the opening night, takings for *Amadis* were approximately the same as for *Iphigénie* and *Atys* (in decreasing order: *Iphigénie* 5,757 livres, *Atys* 5,500, *Amadis* 5,348). Queen Marie-Antoinette attended the première of *Amadis* with Madame Elisabeth, the Countess of Provence and the Countess of Artois, so there was certainly no outright rejection of the work. Attendance really began

to drop from the third performance onwards, with the gap steadily widening (third performance, *Iphigénie*, 3,989 livres, *Atys* 3,597, *Amadis*, 2,761; seventh performance, *Iphigénie* 4,917, *Atys* 3,542, *Amadis* 1,176).

There was no plot to sabotage *Amadis* and attendance was presumably as strong as for any other new work; the breach appeared after it had been heard. The opera had been eagerly anticipated because of the composer's reputation and the librettist's aura; but then the result came as a disappointment. As the critic Baron Grimm put it: 'Monsieur Bach's *Amadis*, so long awaited to revive or end the war between the Piccinnists and the Gluckists, [...] failed to fulfil our expectations.' (*Correspondance littéraire*, December 1779.)

Contemporary observations enable us to understand what the real issues were. Indeed, it was not so much Johann Christian Bach's music that was criticised as the revised version of the Quinault libretto. The *Mercur de France* devoted thirteen pages to the event in December 1779, of which the first ten, no less, were given over to considerations of an essentially literary nature about the changes made to the original libretto. Every other consideration – music, performance, staging and décors – was relegated to the last three pages! The score was despatched in just a few lines, reflecting the casualness of the criticism of Bach's new composition: 'Let us turn to the music: it is by Monsieur Bach, a famous German composer. This is the first work he has composed in our language. Although he may justifiably be criticised on several accounts, that cannot damage his reputation. The recitative is remarkable in the first two acts for the purity of its style and the realism of its tones. Praise is due to the first-act duet, "Qu'une horrible vengeance..."; the monologue for Amadis, "Je ne verrai plus ce que j'aime..."; Arcabonne's air, "Bientôt l'ennemi qui m'outrage...", although there is clearly too much repetition. Most of the *airs de ballet* are charming; we would have wished for more nobility and elevation in those of the third act. The orchestral piece, during which the followers of Arcabonne perform funeral rites around the tomb of Ardan, is finely crafted and perfectly befitting of the situation. In short, despite its faults, this composition announces a man of very great merit, very

skilled in harmony, and who, with a little more understanding of our theatres, is likely to acquire great celebrity amongst us.' (*Mercure de France*, December 1779, p. 195.) Nothing more! In the *Journal de Paris* and the *Mémoires secrets* too, we find the same very allusive manner of reporting on the musical aspect of the performance. This shows that the text was of fundamental importance at that time in determining the reception of an opera, and that tampering with Quinault's libretto, regarded as part of the French heritage and almost sacred, was not only appreciated, but was also a sure way of drawing fire from the critics. And it probably indicates incidentally that this work by the youngest son of Johann Sebastian Bach actually aroused little interest. Baron Grimm was the only one who took a particular interest in the music, but his opinion was neither hot nor cold: 'Monsieur Bach's style exhales pure and sustained harmony; his instrumentation is rich and delicate; yet although the result is always good it never rises to a higher level. In this particular work, at any rate, we cannot ignore the fact that his music on the whole lacks warmth and effectiveness. The Gluckists fail to find in it the originality or the marvellous élan of Gluck; the Piccinnists discover neither the charm nor the variety of Piccinni; while the supporters of Lully and Rameau, inveterate punsters, have decided that a *bridge* was what the Opéra needed, not a ferry.' (*Correspondance littéraire*, December 1779.)

Amadis de Gaule was soon withdrawn from the programme, and it was never taken into the repertoire. Bach, humiliated, was henceforth wary of the Paris Opéra audience. He returned to London, never to become the 'Paris Bach'. His Italian opera *Oriane*, which had been successfully presented in London, had been translated into French in anticipation of the success of *Amadis*, but all plans in that direction were subsequently dropped (Pougin, *Un directeur d'opéra au dix-huitième siècle*, p. 65). As for Devisme, director of the Académie Royale de Musique, this failure, following that of *Écho & Narcisse*, further increased the deficit and cost him his position. Johann Christian Bach had had no intention of being a Gluck or a Piccinni, and there was clearly no room in Paris at that time for a third alternative. There were only two poles, and therefore only

two alternatives for success: to fall in with one side or the other, or to create a balance between the two. Since Bach remained outside such considerations, he met with the polite indifference that is so typically French.



Mlle Levasseur – Oriane in J.C. Bach's *Amadis* – damaged her voice singing the heroic repertoire. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Mademoiselle Levasseur, créatrice du rôle d'Oriane, se consuma rapidement d'un répertoire trop héroïque pour ses moyens vocaux. Bibliothèque nationale.