OPÉRA-COMIQUE, CULTURAL POLITICS AND IDENTITY IN SCANDINAVIA 1760–1800

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As a contribution to the history of public life and cultural practice, this article examines the political and social implications of the fondness for French comic opera in Scandinavia between 1760 and 1800. The urban elites’ interest in opéra-comique is examined as a part of the self-fashioning processes of mimetism and distinction, but also as a way to consolidate the community. Opéra-comique was promoted by the literary and diplomatic elites. It became important for the cultural politics of the Scandinavian monarchies as well as for intellectual milieus able to propose alternative models for life in society. The appropriation of opéra-comique by an expanding public transformed the nature of the supposedly aristocratic and cosmopolitan genre, which became an element in the defining of new bourgeois and patriotic identities. With a cross-disciplinary and transnational perspective on eighteenth-century Northern Europe, the article underscores the links between politics, patronage and literary sociability, and shows that opera and music, in eighteenth-century Scandinavia, were much more than artistic issues.

Keywords Scandinavia, eighteenth-century, opera, cultural politics, identity, public

During the last two decades, historians have increasingly been investigating the role of musical practice in the development of early-modern public life. Opera has become a relevant object of study, not only for its aesthetic aspects but also with regard to issues concerning distinction and consumption, sociability and participation, politics and opinion, mobility, cultural transfer, and circulation. The present study focuses on the comédie à ariettes, a French opera genre where music is intertwined with spoken dialogue, as an example of the many cultural practices that shaped the identities of urban elites in eighteenth-century Scandinavia.

Opera provides both entertainment and elements of collective identities. Despite being ‘popular and high art at once’, it is generally associated with elite culture. In the eighteenth-century, however, the most widely received form of opera in Scandinavia was not the aristocratic opera seria but comic opera – buffà, opéra-comique or Singspiel – which appealed to both high and low. Particularly opéra-comique presented the
advantage of exploiting a cultural set of references familiar to Northern European audiences: that of French literature and lifestyle. During the last third of the century, opéra-comique spread throughout Europe though translations and adaptations. Exploiting well-known plays and bestselling novels, the libretti contributed not only to the spread of French literature in Europe, but also to the vulgarization of civic ideals, social representations and concepts central to the Enlightenment.  

Opera was a powerful political medium. The power of opéra-comique resided in its literary, musical and dramatic characteristics — bestselling stories, catchy tunes, situational comedy — which made it malleable, easy to sell and easy to follow. Outside France, it went through processes of appropriation, making it a European genre with national variants. The reception of opera-comique, as well as its influence on identities, is here studied through Scandinavian examples. The key argument is that opéra-comique, promoted by the literary and administrative elites, was not only supported by governments and courts, but also appropriated by an expanding urban public and by intellectually emancipated groups who had assimilated elements of contemporary philosophical discourse or simply favoured opéra-comique as a marker of taste. This appropriation and the transition from a courtly context to a socially broader one eventually altered the cosmopolitan nature and distinctive functions of the genre.

Patronage, production and promotion

Opera was a recent phenomenon in eighteenth-century Scandinavia. Performances did not become regular before the 1750s, and during the first years, the impetus mostly came from abroad. When the foundations were laid for a ‘national’ operatic life in Sweden and Denmark, opéra-comique and its derived forms *Syngespil* and *Sångspel* played a decisive role: they required fewer musical and financial resources than the Italian *opera seria*, and French actors capable of at least some singing were present at the courts of Copenhagen (1748–1753, 1766–1773) and Stockholm (1751–1771, 1781–1792). In the process of the importation of French comic opera to Scandinavia, diplomacy, sociability and aristocratic patronage played a central role.

Opéra-comique was far from a noble genre. Considered a minor or hybrid genre by contemporary theoreticians, it originated in the farce, the Neapolitan *commedia* and the French *vaudeville*. That kind of entertainment had been present at the fairgrounds at the outskirts of Paris since 1697 and up to the 1720s, when the Opéra-Comique as an institution became established with a theatre house of its own. In the 1740s, opéra-comique was much developed by the playwright Charles-Simon Favart (1710–1792). His innumerable sung comedies circulated in Europe and were performed by professional comedians as well as by amateurs. From the late 1750s, after the *Querelle des Bouffons* had split French operagoers into supporters of French vs. Italian ideals, composers such as Egidio Duni, François-André Danican Philidor or Nicolas Dezède turned their attention to opéra-comique and developed what became known as *la comédie à ariettes*, uniting popular tradition with contemporary literary themes and Italian-styled music that appealed to cosmopolitan urban populations. This was a convenient solution to the rivalry between French and Italian opera, but it also corresponded to Diderot’s ideals on dramatic literature. The Italian features of the
opéra-comique were strengthened by the fusion of the Opéra-Comique troupe with that of the Comédie-Italienne in 1762.7

By the early 1760s, opéra-comique had become a prestigious business. The literary and administrative elites took part in the production process both in Paris and at a European level. The librettists of opéras-comiques included several second-tier authors but also renowned names such as Michel-Jean Sedaine or Jean-François Marmontel, who can be described as representatives of the ‘High Enlightenment’, the worldly philosophers close to the Encyclopédie and the French Academy. Those were influential circles, mostly favourable to Italian opera, and it was a milieu frequented by foreign intellectuals in Paris, including Scandinavian and particularly Swedish diplomats.8

Swedish diplomats in Paris had shown an interest in the French operatic stage ever since the late 1730s, when embassy secretary Baron Carl Fredrik Scheffer reported on the opera and theatre to his friend in the Swedish foreign office, Count Clas Ekeblad. Later, both Scheffer and ambassador Count Carl Gustaf Tessin echoed theatrical novelties in their correspondence, while Ekeblad as an envoy to Paris in 1742–1744 regularly attended performances at all the privileged theatres, including the Opera, and at the Opéra-Comique. However, it was only Count Gustav Philip Creutz (1731–1785, envoy and later ambassador in Paris in 1766–1783) who took up an active role as a promoter of opera. He played a decisive part in the early career of one of the most performed composers of the time, André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry (1741–1813).9

The young Walloon composer had arrived in Paris from Rome via Geneva in 1767. His artistic breakthrough is an example of the importance of patronage. After an unsuccessful attempt to produce an opera on a libretto by Voltaire, and after having tried his hand at Favart’s Isabelle et Gertrude, Grétry chose to work with the less-known Pierre Légier for his first opera intended for the French scene, Les mariages sannites, based on a tale by Marmontel. As the composer observed, however, it was necessary for a newcomer in Paris, particularly a foreigner, to have influential protectors. Grétry had befriended two journalists, Abbé François Arnaud and Jean-Baptiste Antoine Suard, both well connected in the literary circles of high society. Soon Grétry was invited to play his music at a dinner party at the Swedish envoy’s residence Hôtel de Bonnac, rue de Grenelle, in one of the most aristocratic quarters of the town.10

Count Creutz, himself a poet, was a friend and admirer of the philosophes, Voltaire, Diderot, d’Alembert and Marmontel. Creutz had arrived in Paris only the previous year but was already a habitué of the most important salons, those of Madame Geoffrin, Madame Necker and Madame de Boufflers, the Prince of Conti’s mistress. It was probably Creutz who mentioned Grétry to the prince. Conti ordered his musical director Jean-Claude Trial to arrange for an audition of Les mariages sannites at his residence. Trial, who also happened to be co-director of the Opera, complied, but the musicians plotted against the Italianizing newcomer and sabotaged the performance in front of some 200 guests from the court aristocracy. Instead of abandoning the misfortunate composer after the flop, Creutz became even more determined to help. He convinced Marmontel to write a libretto for Grétry, thus initiating a fruitful collaboration that resulted in Le Huron, an opéra-comique based on Voltaire’s L’Ingénu, soon to be followed by other co-productions. Auditions were held at Creutz’s house with the actor Caillot, who agreed to do the title role, and at Madame La Ruette’s, who was to become the leading soprano in Grétry’s operas until 1773. The opera premiered at the Comédie Italienne in Paris on 20 August 1768, and it was a considerable success.11
Shortly after the premiere and the first very positive critiques in the press, Creutz started to work toward the exportation of Grétry’s work to Sweden. The first week of September he sent the libretto of *Le Huron* to Crown Prince Gustav. Some days later, in a letter to the prince dated 6 September 1768, he reiterated his appraisals of Grétry’s music. In March 1769, he approached Scheffer, who after his diplomatic missions had worked as governor of the prince, and asked him for his opinion on Grétry’s new opera *Lucile*. On 26 June 1769, *Le Huron* was performed in French in Stockholm. *Lucile*, translated into Swedish, was not performed until 1776, after a rather normal seven-year delay. The rapid production of *Le Huron* in Stockholm may indicate that the diplomat’s recommendations had not been without effect. As a matter of fact, Gustav III, after having become king, took them so seriously that he ordered the ambassador himself to write an opera for the king’s brother’s wedding and have the music composed by none other than Grétry.\(^\text{12}\)

It is significant that the first libretti Grétry set to music were by Marmontel and, in the case of *Le Huron*, based on Voltaire. Operas based on well-known stories or literary bestsellers were easy to follow and relate to. The reference to Voltaire can also be read as a guarantee of ‘good taste’. Voltaire, revered in France, was adulated at the Swedish court, as was Marmontel. Both Creutz and Grétry had visited Voltaire at Ferney shortly before, and they seem to have nurtured a vision of an Italianizing comic opera not only new to the French, but also ‘philosophical’ in the enlightened sense.\(^\text{13}\)

Creutz’s interest in Grétry’s career lasted approximately eight years, during which Grétry continued to work with Marmontel. Creutz supported Grétry by lending him 25 *louis d’or* (600 livres), which was fairly much, roughly corresponding to a one-year salary of a mid-rank official, but less than the price of a courtier’s coat. Grétry paid his debt by dedicating *Le Huron* to Creutz. In his *Mémoires*, Marmontel later criticized Grétry for living off the ambassador’s charity, but Grétry affirmed he had never received any other money from Creutz than the 25 *louis*.\(^\text{14}\) For Creutz, lending or giving money to friends and protégés was a commonplace practice that was part of his role as a magnificent diplomat and patron.\(^\text{15}\)

By the mid-1770s, Grétry had composed another ten opéras-comiques, five of these with Marmontel, and his music now belonged to the repertoire all over Northern Europe, including Russia.\(^\text{16}\) The musical entertainments that were part of diplomatic sociability reflected this expansion. On 8 October 1774, a couple of months before the production of Grétry and Marmontel’s *La fausse magie* at the Comédie Italienne, Creutz arranged a musical luncheon where Grétry played some of his new compositions for Marmontel, the Russian minister Prince Ivan Sergeyevich Baryatinsky, the latter’s wife Princess Catherine, née von Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Beck, his brother Prince Feodor Sergeyevich Baryatinsky, the Danish envoy Baron Otto Blome, and the Piedmontese amateur Joseph Louis de Ponte, Count d’Albaret. Far from exceptional, such ‘pre-shows’ were an efficient way to promote a composer in high society. For the Swedish ambassador, inviting the Russian minister and his family was also an act of diplomacy, at a moment when the Swedish monarchy, with the help of France, was asserting its freshly restored power both militarily and culturally after Gustav III’s *coup* of 1772.\(^\text{17}\)

Like other intellectuals, composers were aware of the possibilities offered by diplomacy in terms of networks and income. Six weeks later, on 25 November,
Grétry himself invited the diplomatic corps and performed music in honour of Countess Stroganova (née Ekaterina Petrovna Trubetskaya). As the 25th of November was the feast of Catherine of Alexandria, the patron saint of Countess Stroganova and of Empress Catherine II, it cannot be excluded that Grétry was seeking to recommend himself to the Russian court, as opéra-comique was appreciated by the Russian elites and particularly by Grand Duke Paul, while the empress herself despised French music. It is revealing that Grétry’s status now allowed him to receive the diplomatic corps at his home: since the early summer of 1774, he had been the musical director for Queen Marie Antoinette, who stood on good terms with the Swedish ambassador. Less than a decade after Creutz had helped to launch Grétry in society, the musician was an established composer with a European reputation. In Scandinavia, he was becoming by far the most performed opera composer up to 1800, after which he was rivalled only by Nicolas Dalayrac.

As is evident from Creutz’s guest list, the Swedish ambassador was not the only one interested in opéra-comique. Among the tenants of a box at the Comédie Italienne between 1766 and 1792, we find, hardly surprisingly, the ambassadors of Naples, Genoa and Venice, but also Northern Europeans such as the Danish envoy Baron Otto Blome, Creutz’s successor Erik Magnus Staël von Holstein and the Couronian amateur Baron Carl Ernst von Bagge, a habitué of the Parisian concert societies. Personal taste, affinities and networks of sociability might explain Staël’s presence among the subscribers, whereas his predecessor Creutz used to go to the theatre with his Neapolitan homologue Caraccioli instead of renting a box of his own. In January 1775, Creutz attended the rehearsals of La fausse magie, and on 3 February, two days after the premiere, he went to the show with the Sardinian ambassador Justin de Viry and the Prussian envoy Baron Bernhard von Goltz. The British ambassador Lord Stormont was also there, in another box, together with some Englishmen.

When it came to fashions of all kinds, the diplomats stationed in Paris contributed to setting the tone in their home countries. With red-carpet routes at his disposal, an ambassador was able to recommend opera productions and authors directly to his court and to leading persons in his country while reporting on artistic novelties; in addition, he could provide that country with original texts, scores and critiques, even actors and singers, thus transplanting French or Italian operas into new surroundings. In 1781, when Gustav III wanted a new French theatre troupe after an interruption of ten years, Creutz and his assistant Staël helped the king recruit Jacques-Marie Boutet de Monvel, an actor and librettist who became famous for his opéras-comiques produced in collaboration with Dezède and later Dalayrac.

Creutz’s support was decisive in Grétry’s rise to success. The impact of this kind of patronage was, however, hardly comparable to the mass of translations, adaptations and spin-offs of opéras-comiques that appeared all over Europe from the 1770s onwards. Scores and libretti circulated with travellers and wandering artists, in correspondence and literary gazettes, over printers’ and booksellers’ networks, and elements of repertoire spread like rings on water, without the support of the aristocracy that tended to import prestigious productions directly from Paris. Why, then, did opéra-comique appeal so much to the elites? Let us take a closer look at how opéra-comique became a political matter in Scandinavia.
Opéra-comique and royal cultural politics

If diplomats promoted opéra-comique and reported on it in their official dispatches, it was not only because protecting the arts and socializing in the boxes of the theatre were part of the aristocratic logic of diplomacy. It was also because theatre had a function in the shaping of opinion and taste. As it was performed in vernacular and featured simple, moralizing intrigues, opéra-comique was, at least in theory, accessible to a broader audience than serious opera. It had an evident potential for ideological purposes, both overtly propagandistic and more subtly pedagogical ones. In Scandinavia, the promotion of opéra-comique was closely linked to the cultural politics of the monarchies and to the power dynamics at and around the courts.

The comédie à ariettes was introduced in Scandinavia as a variant of the French comedy that formed the core of the repertoire of the comedians and amateur actors at the courts. In Denmark, in the early 1760s, a group of amateurs including Crown Prince Christian’s Swiss preceptor Élie Reverdil as well as the poet and translator Charlotte Dorothea Biehl privately performed opéras-comiques by Favart at Charlottenborg. In 1766, when Christian (VII) became king, he invited a French troupe and founded a court theatre that played a certain role in the diffusion of new comédies à ariettes in the Northern Baltic area, where its libretti printed by Claude Philibert in Copenhagen circulated. At approximately the same time, the Swedish court, too, was becoming interested in this new type of opéra-comique. In 1768, Duni’s and Anseauem’s La clochette was performed by Duke Charles of Sudermania, second in line to the throne, and some members of the Fersen family. The duke, whose musical library by 1789 included over sixty comic operas by Duni, Philidor, Grétry, Monsigny, Dezède and a few other composers, soon became the highest protector of opéra-comique in Sweden.

From the early 1770s onwards, while the works of Monsigny, Dezède and Grétry were conquering Europe, opéra-comique was introduced at town theatres frequented by Northern European bourgeoisies, and by 1780, it was becoming mainstream. In Copenhagen, the public Royal Theatre had been established in 1748 at Kongens Nytorv. During the decades that followed, comédies à ariettes were translated in private circles close to the court, before being set up in Danish at the Royal Theatre from 1770 onwards. The following year, Niels Krog Bredal, a translator, author and mayor of his native Trondheim, became one of its co-directors.

Playing in vernacular was a central idea also in the efforts that resulted in the foundation of the Swedish royal opera by Gustav III in 1773. One of the incentives for a national stage had come from a private theatre entrepreneur, Petter Stenborg, who directed a touring Swedish troupe specialized in vaudevilles and comedies. At the end of the year 1771, he asked for permission to perform at Bollhuset opposite the royal castle. Gustav III, however, preferred tragedy and serious drama, and the result was a double set on the French model, where a royal academy of music ensured the production of prestigious serious opera in Swedish, and Stenborg’s theatre continued to perform comedies and opéra-comique.

Nevertheless, translations of comédies à ariettes were in the repertoire of the Swedish royal opera in Stockholm during the first years of its existence. From January 1773 to the end of the season of 1779–1780, the Opera produced sixteen pieces. Thirteen of these were more or less direct translations from French. Five of them, all premiering between 1776 and 1780, were comédies à ariettes. The first to be performed in Swedish was Lucile, translated by Anna Maria Malmstedt and premiering at Bollhuset on 19 June 1776.
Lucile was Grétry and Marmontel’s second opera. A young woman is about to marry a nobleman but discovers she is the daughter of her wet nurse and a servant. The characters are embodiments of virtue, and overall, the piece is critical against birth as a criterion for an individuals’ value. We do not know why this play was chosen nor by whom, but it was not the king’s choice. Malmstedt’s translation is dedicated to Duchess Charlotte of Sudermania, and according to the preface, the commissioner was none other than her spouse, the king’s brother Charles, who, as we already know, was a keen admirer of opéra-comique with a cultural and political agenda of his own.  

In his memoirs, however, the director of the royal theatres, Baron Gustaf Johan Ehrensvård, took credit for the idea of setting up an opéra-comique in early summer, instead of the lengthy serious operas that the royal theatre had performed until then. Ehrensvård belonged to a circle of freemasons and amateurs close to the duke. In 1770–1771, he had visited Paris together with Prince Gustav. There he had been introduced, probably by Creutz, into a coterie of radical philosophers including Marmontel, Thomas, Morellet, Helvétius and Grimm, all friends of the ambassador. While the prince was shocked to find out that the much-admired Marmontel was a republican, Ehrensvård was delighted, since, as he said, the philosophers’ company made him feel he had a heart. Ehrensvård was thus familiar with Marmontel and his ideals. Duke Charles, however, had also visited Paris in 1770, less than a year after the French premiere of Lucile. Whosever’s idea it was, it seems clear that Lucile appealed to both Ehrensvård and Charles, probably for slightly different reasons.  

Although Lucile was a success, Ehrensvård resigned from his post later in 1776. The ducal court still kept a foot in the door of the opera, as Ehrensvård’s successor, Baron Adolf Fredrik Barnekow, was chamberlain to the duchess of Sudermania. During the five years that followed, four other opéras-comiques in the same style were performed at the Swedish opera: Monsigny and Sedaine’s Le déserteur (Alexis, eller deserteuren, translated by Carl Stenborg) from 1769 in 1777–1781, Grétry and Fenouillot de Falbaire’s Les deux avarès (De begge girige, transl. Carl Manderström) in 1778–1779, Grétry and Marmontel’s Zémire et Azor (Malmstedt) in 1778–1780, and Monsigny and Favart’s La belle Arsène (Malmstedt) in 1780.  

The king, however, was not satisfied with Barnekow, and in 1780, Count Carl von Fersen was appointed director of the royal theatres. That same year, opera singer Carl Stenborg took over his father Petter Stenborg’s theatre. At this point, opéra-comique disappeared from the Opera’s repertoire, now dominated by serious operas by composers such as Gluck and by original Swedish works featuring heroes of national history. In the meantime, opéra-comique moved over to Stenborg’s stage, ensuring its success amongst the urban elites. This partition of tasks lasted until Gustav III’s death in the spring of 1792.  

When Duke Charles became regent for the thirteen-year-old king, his nephew Gustav IV Adolf, he proceeded with a purge at the opera and replaced his late brother’s favourites with his own men. The regency meant a return of opéra-comique at the royal opera, with the staging of Dalayrac and Monvel’s Raoul, sire de Créqui ( Folke Birgersson till Ringstad, transl. Olof Kexel) in January 1793 and of Dalayrac and Lachabeaussière’s Azémia (transl. Rosenheim) in June 1793. In view of these developments, it is possible to conclude that operatic preferences and an opera repertoire were not only part of the cultural politics of the monarchy but also influenced by rivalries inside the royal family.
As opéra-comique was popularized by the public theatres, it became the most performed genre in Scandinavia: in the 1770s–1780s, translations of French opéras-comiques formed the major part of the Scandinavian operatic repertoire. In numbers of works produced in Copenhagen and Stockholm from 1760 to 1799, the most frequently staged composers were Grétry (14 opéras-comiques performed in Copenhagen, 16 in Stockholm), Duni (15 and 11, most of them performed in French), Monsigny (9 and 9), Philidor (12 in Copenhagen, most of them in French, but only 5 in Stockholm) and Dalayrac (4 and 9 respectively). While Duni and Philidor represented an older type of opéras-comiques with burlesque elements, Grétry’s and Monsigny’s operas were comédies à ariettes of the 1770s and 1780s displaying models of sensibility and virtue. If we look at the libretti for Grétry’s opéras-comiques, Marmontel was the author of eight of those performed in Copenhagen and of five of those performed in Stockholm, four of which were also put on in Copenhagen, while Sedaine had written two that were performed both in Copenhagen and Stockholm and another two played only in Stockholm. Sedaine was also the author of five libretti for Monsigny performed in both capitals.  

The relatively strong presence of Marmontel and Sedaine in both capitals was hardly a coincidence. These authors represented a milieu close to the Encyclopédie, to which Marmontel was a contributor. The strongest examples of how philosophical discourse influenced opéra-comique are to be found in three of Grétry and Marmontel’s first co-productions, Le Huron (1767), Lucile (1769) and Silvain (1770). Le Huron was a bow to Voltaire and modelled on his satirical novel L’Ingénu, which pointed out the corruption of the Catholic Church and the arbitrariness of the police and the judiciary. Lucile, in its turn, celebrated the marriage between a servant’s daughter and a nobleman, while Silvain defended the peasants’ rights to use the common lands. According to Grimm, Silvain had been received with mistrust by the French court, which saw in it a plot by the radical encyclopédistes to propagate their ‘doctrine’ of liberty and equality. Both Lucile and Silvain contain remarks on the prevalence of virtue over birth.

Of course, an author such as Marmontel was highly aware of the political potential of dramatic literature and did not refrain from realizing it when writing. Nevertheless, the most distinguished authors and composers of opéra-comique also worked for the monarchy. Out of about 45 operas and opéras-comiques composed by Grétry before 1793, fourteen – almost one-third – were originally written for the French court, four in collaboration with Marmontel, whose Bélisaire had been banned by the Sorbonne for criticizing religious intolerance. As a comparison, out of Monsigny’s fifteen operas and opéras-comiques, four were premiered at court, and of Philidor’s 28, only two. The works performed at the French court, however, particularly those at the queen’s theatre at the Trianon in the 1780s, appear less philosophically engaged than those written for the Comédie Italiene, with its preference for pastorals, fairy tales and entertaining but stereotypical stories of love, greed and jealousy.

Marmontel’s moralizing views on family, virtue and equality were certainly compatible with the ideals of an enlightened but paternalist rule. When the operas were exported, however, their political significance changed. If, for instance, we look at the five most popular opéras-comiques according to numbers of performances at Stenborg’s theatre in the 1780s–1790s, we find three libretti by Anseaume and only
one by Sedaine and one by Marmontel. At court, in its turn, the appreciation of individual composers was influenced by the logic of prestige. For instance, it can be presumed that when choosing music for official festivities, the Swedish court would favour Grétry before another foreign composer, certainly because his music was pleasant and his name was in the French-language periodical papers read in all European capitals, but also because he had been Creutz’s protégé, he was Marie Antoinette’s musical director, and he had composed for the royal opera in Paris. In other words, formal status did contribute to artistic reputation, and to put it simply, if philosophical radicalism was rarely seen as a guarantee for ‘good taste’, references from other courts generally were.

Moreover, philosophically inspired opéras-comiques were not necessarily chosen because they were perceived as radical, but rather because their thematic was in line with the policies of rulers desirous to pose as ‘enlightened’. The Swedish government seems to have been sensitive to the philosophical undertones of certain texts. During the festivities after the foundation of a new court of appeal at Vasa by Gustav III in June 1776, there was a gala performance of Grétry’s Lucile, which thus appeared to celebrate the virtue of the commoners and the equality of the king’s subjects before the law. The following year, in the spring of 1777, Monsigny’s Le déserteur, which ends with a philosophizing king pardoning a death-sentenced soldier who has deserted for love, was put on at the Stockholm opera at the same time as Gustav III was considering a legal reform that would reduce the number of crimes defined as capital offences and enlarge the king’s possibilities to use his prerogative of mercy.

In periods of turbulence, the choice of particular operas for the stage easily became a political statement. The French revolution in particular had incidences in both repertoire and translations. After Grétry and Sedaine’s Richard Cœur de Lion from 1784 had been performed during a banquet for Louis XVI’s lifeguards at Versailles on 1 October 1789, this rescue opera became a symbol of the counter-revolution, and its aria ‘Ô Richard ô mon roi’ (‘Oh Richard, my king’) a rallying cry for the émigrés during the Coalition Wars. The play entered the Scandinavian stage the same year that it left the repertoire in Paris. It was put on in Danish for the first time in January 1791. In Sweden it was performed for the first time in December 1791, in French and in Swedish, almost exactly six months after the French royal family’s aborted flight to Varennes. While in Denmark, it was played only four times, in Sweden it became the most performed of Grétry’s operas, with three successive translations and over 130 performances up to the late 1850s.

In Sweden, the opera indeed seems to have had a particular significance from the beginning. In the first version given at Stenborg’s theatre in 1791–1799, Carl Stenborg himself sang the role of Blondel, Richard’s faithful troubadour who has come to liberate his king from prison, and played the violin solo belonging to his part. The translation, written by the in-house translator Carl Envallsson, contained an explicitly royalist modification. Immediately before his famous aria ‘Oh Richard, my king’, Blondel declares: ‘Orpheus animated by love had the gates of hell opened. Perhaps the gates of these towers will open to the accents of friendship.’ Envallsson translates this as follows: ‘And what should I not endeavour [to do]? I am, after all, strengthened by love for my monarch.’ This affirmation of loyalty to the royal cause was probably no coincidence. Indeed, Carl Stenborg not only ran a theatre and adapted opéras-
comiques, but as a singer at the opera he was a servant of the royal household. Together with Enwallsson, he also put on patriotic divertissements celebrating the Swedish victories during the war of 1788–1790 against Russia.44

Subversive elements were not absent from Stenborg’s stage. Marie-Christine Skuncke has shown how formal censorship of the theatres was introduced in May 1785 only some months after Gustaf von Paykull’s comedy Ordensvrmen had been banned for having ridiculed the knightly orders so cherished by the king’s brother Charles and after Beaumarchais’s Barbier de Séville had premiered in Swedish. Since April, Stenborg had been advertising the sequel, Le mariage de Figaro, but it did not come; instead came censorship, and the Mariage was not performed until 1792. With the new regulations, plays had to be approved beforehand. Censorship concerned offences to religion, the form of government, royal sovereignty, the reputation of private citizens and the purity of language. According to Skuncke, the majority of the plays from this period are so submissively orthodox and royalist that by the 1790s the degree of self-censorship among Swedish authors and translators must have been considerable.45

The censors Johan Henric Kellgren and Abraham Niclas Clewberg (later Edelcrantz) were, still, men of letters themselves. When suspecting, in 1793, ‘a little odour of sans-culottisme’ in the translation of Desforges’s play Féodore et Lisinka, ou Novgorod sauvée from 1788, which made reference to a slave rebellion, Kellgren indulgently dismissed it as ‘political foolishness’, as he thought the ‘good, honest mob’ of Stockholm would hardly venture any further than to invectives against the privileged.46 Other plays performed at Stenborg’s in 1793 included Beaumarchais’s Mariage de Figaro, Grétry’s Richard Cœur de Lion and Dalayrac’s Nina, ou la folle par amour, all remarkable for different reasons: the first for its criticism of the nobility, the second as a celebration of royalty, loyalty and heroism, and the third for featuring an insane heroine. The diary of Duchess Charlotte for that year mentions that at all theatres, young merchants and salesclerks applauded any allusion to liberty, which seems to indicate some spirit of opposition in a context where the regency was becoming increasingly repressive after a short liberal phase.47

More often, however, it was bad taste that captured the attention of the authorities. ‘Decency’ seems to have become a more important criterion after the assassination of Gustav III in 1792.48 This may have been linked to the sensitive situation of the royal family, as the king was only a child and the queen mother was mourning. Immorality at the playhouse could even become a diplomatic issue. Thus, in 1803, after a gala performance of Grétry’s Anacréon as part of the celebration of Queen Frederica’s churching after the birth of Prince Carl Gustaf (1802–1805), Gustav IV Adolf asked the diplomatic corps to excuse the director of the royal theatres, Baron John Hugo Hamilton, for his ‘lack of taste and judgement’.49

The governments and the literary elite, which in Scandinavia generally cooperated, had obvious interest in controlling the theatres by giving the theatre an official status, by exercising censorship and by letting concerns for the audience’s morality and patriotism guide the choice of repertoire. The rivalry over the public eventually led the royal theatres to impinge on the activities of private theatre entrepreneurs. In Sweden, the return of opéra-comique onto the royal stages, which after 1788 included the new Dramatiska Teatern, had increased competition, and at the end of 1798, Carl Stenborg was faced with no other alternative than to sell his theatre with all its libretti,
scores and props to the Opera. The last performances took place in April 1799. Only a few years later, Stenborg was declared bankrupt. 

Playing and enjoying theatre and music, however, did not require public institutions or even theatre-houses. Opéra-comique was continuously performed by amateurs both at court and in the homes of the wealthy bourgeoisie, and theatre and opera played a significant role in elite sociability. It is now time to look closer at this process of appropriation and at how opéra-comique contributed to the shaping of identities.

Opéra-comique, role-modelling and identity

For early-modern elites, music and drama were central elements in the social construction of self. Singing or playing an instrument were as natural parts of education as reading or letter-writing, since they were central to mastering posture, balance, body language and conversational skills, including gestures, facial expression and vocal pitch. Similarly, the role-playing game of amateur performance provided training for social situations and lessons in identification, empathy and hierarchy. It also offered escapist excursions where acting and enacting were safe ways to redefine social relations, imagine alternative societies, and express commitment to these. Performances were thus more than simple pastimes; they were essential manifestations of sociability and as such appreciated by not only the aristocracy but also the upper bourgeoisie.

Eighteenth-century opera theorists repeatedly argued that the spectators should be able to identify with the heroes and heroines on stage. Opéra-comique directly interacted with the spectators and appealed to their emotions. It thus offered a tool for the construction of identities and collective representations. Where serious opera had served to spur the aristocracy to heroic sacrifice and self-restraint, opéra-comique displayed models of virtue in everyday settings and on a broader social scale, even as audiences were still dominated by the wealthy elites. A lyrical counterpart to the sentimental novel, the *comédie à ariettes* reflected concerns and visions for social concord at a time when ‘the people’ were becoming a legitimate source of power and the relevance of birth was being dismissed by the *philosophes*. Together with the use of pathos and a stylistic register requiring no familiarity with the classics, the insistence on ‘true’ and ‘natural’, not to say naïve characters, underlined the democratic aspects of the genre. 

Many of the first opéras-comiques performed in French at the Scandinavian courts in the 1760s were pastoral comedies in the style of Rousseau’s *Devin du village* or Favart’s *Ninette à la cour*. The strong place of the pastoral in French-classicist literature explains the success of this early type of *comédie à ariettes* among the aristocracy, who eagerly performed them with courtiers dressed up (or down) as shepherds and shepherdesses. As shown in the previous section of this article, it was in such a milieu that the initiative for the first Swedish translation of an opéra-comique took place. In Denmark, the transition from court theatre to performance in vernacular had happened only some years earlier, in a similar context of enlightened amateurism.

The first *syngespil* in Danish – *Gram og Signe* – had been written by Bredal in 1756 to be performed by students. From the early 1760s, translations of plays by Favart to
music by composers such as Duni, previously performed in French at the Danish court, were produced in a milieu of intellectuals and amateurs close to the court. Biehl, the daughter of a secretary of the Royal Danish Academy of Portraiture, Sculpture and Architecture, had received a classical education. After some French comedies, she translated Favart’s *Soliman II, ou les trois sultanes* in 1763. When the Royal Theatre started to play opera in Danish in 1770, *Soliman II* was set to music by Giuseppe Sarti and Thomas Walter and performed. Eventually, when Bredal became co-director of the theatre, he translated up to eleven opéras-comiques between 1774 and 1778, six of which were by Marmontel and Grétry, and all of which were staged.55

Once translations started to provide the core repertoire of the Royal Theatre, opera translation offered opportunities for young writers. The translators generally represented a bourgeois milieu with academic connections. Particularly Norwegian intellectuals, whom there were many of in the conglomerate state’s capital, played a role. While the ‘father’ of Danish drama Ludvig Holberg had been a native of Bergen, Bredal was from Trondheim. Among his successors as translators for the Royal Theatre, Christen Henriksen Pram (1756–1821) and Johan Herman Wessel (1742–1785) were sons of Dano-Norwegian clerics. They belonged to the cultivated non-noble elites for whom formal education was a way of getting ahead in life.56

Furthermore, Bredal, Pram and Wessel were all members of the Norske Selskab, a Dano-Norwegian literary society founded in 1772, which recruited among civil servants, clergymen, officers, and students of divinity in Copenhagen. Like the earlier Swedish society Tankebyggarorden, where Creutz had debuted as a poet in the 1750s, it aimed at improving poetry and literature in vernacular. The Norske Selskab had been founded at a time of rather exceptional liberty of expression in Denmark. The formal organization of literary sociability in societies and academies was, however, not uncommon in even more rigid absolutist states, where public debate was restricted. Like any art form, literature had representative functions with political implications. In this respect, the Norske Selskab was a typical example of a literary cenacle with a patriotic aim. For its members, writing and translating could become a way to advance a career or affirm a cultural identity.57

With respect to what would, over time, become some of the *topoi* of the Nordic cultural identity, opéra-comique presents interesting features. The *comédie à ariettes* valued life in the countryside as well the ‘natural’ (*le naturel*) in character and behaviour. The models of virtue and simplicity promoted in pastoral operas by Duni, Monsigny and Grétry and in libretti by Marmontel and Sedaine, with their emphasis on equality and humanity, were not without parallels to the ideals of frugality and simplicity put forward in early-modern perceptions of the Nordic character. For the Dano-Norwegian translators and playwrights, an obvious parallel to Arcadia could be found in an idealized Norway with its strong and free peasantry. The symbolic role of Norway for the projection of ideals of virtue and liberty was not unlike that played by the Scottish highlands in British pre-romantic aesthetics, evoked also by Pram in his Macphersonian, Saxo-inspired play *Frode og Fingal*.58

The pastoral opéra-comique of the Enlightenment had utopian features. In particular, it provided models for harmonious relationships between the people and the mighty, between the subjects and their king, and between children and their parents. While heroines and heroes such as Lucile or Blondel could be commoners, they were nonetheless impersonations of the virtues necessary for life in society. Although the
heroes eventually would turn out to be of noble birth – as a consecration of virtue or as a symbol of equality and the universal nobility of mankind – the value of the individual generally prevailed over birth.\textsuperscript{59}

Correspondingly, it was rarely a revolutionary Arcadia that was presented in the opéras-comiques staged in Scandinavia, but one loyal to king and country, which made it possible to conciliate enlightened fantasies and the prevailing political circumstances. This consolidating function can be observed in the adaptations of Grétry’s works. \textit{Lucile}, in its 1778 Danish version by Bredal, was turned into a tribute to the Dowager Queen Juliane Marie, who \textit{de facto} ruled Denmark during Christian VII’s mental illness.\textsuperscript{60} Prologues and epilogues were similarly added to both Danish and Swedish adaptations of other libretti as well, such as Malmstedt’s version of \textit{Zémire et Azor}, which contains a prologue by Kellgren celebrating Queen Sophia Magdalena.\textsuperscript{61} The consensual function of comic opera is thus particularly strong for plays performed in vernacular.

If opéra-comique possessed such a capacity to shape collective identities, who were the participants of the community imagined by the playwrights, theatregoers and critics? Performances formed an exchange between the artists, the tone-setting elites and what could vaguely be called ‘the public’. However, there were limits to this exchange. The role models provided on stage were defined by the literary elite’s perception of the people and of citizenship, but if we look at the material conditions of theatregoing, there are reasons to doubt that ‘the common people’ were much present in the audiences.

In France, where the opéras-comiques were originally produced, theatre audiences reflected a ‘public’ defined as the politically active and self-conscious part of the population.\textsuperscript{62} In his \textit{Correspondance littéraire}, Grimm noted that in Paris, it was not the common people that went to the theatres, but:

\begin{quote}
[...] a particular coterie of \textit{gens du monde}, men of arts and letters, persons of both sexes whom rank or fortune has given the possibility to cultivate their intellectual dispositions: it is the elite of the nation, joined by a very small number of men who by their status or their profession belong to the people.\textsuperscript{63}
\end{quote}

According to La Dixmérie’s \textit{Lettres sur l’état présent de nos théâtres}, as quoted by Raphaëlle Legrand, a majority of Parisian theatregoers preferred the Comédie Italienne – where opéra-comique was performed between 1762 and 1791 – to the Comédie Française. The Comédie Italienne could contain up to 1 600 spectators before 1783 and more than 2 000 after it moved that year.\textsuperscript{64} The aristocracy and the diplomatic corps had their annual subscriptions. As for the rest and major part of the audience, it is impossible to grasp its exact composition, but as Jeffrey S. Ravel has shown, it covered ‘all sectors from the city’s population, save perhaps the manual laborers’, who only rarely had access because of the dress code and the early starting hour of the show. Standing tickets cost one livre, roughly a labourer’s one day’s wages, half as much as at the Opera, which supports the idea of opéra-comique as a less elitist genre than serious opera.\textsuperscript{65}

Although we do not have reliable figures for the Scandinavian theatres, we have some elements for comparison. In Stockholm, entries to Stenborg’s theatre cost 16 skillings for the ‘premières loges’ and 8 skillings for the ‘secondes loges’ in 1783, the latter ticket price corresponding nearly to a one-day wage of an unskilled labourer (9.3 skillings). Back in 1773, a performance at Stenborg’s had been described by young
nobleman Gustaf Adolf Reuterholm as ‘making the ladies flush’ with its coarseness and sexually explicit jokes. By the end of the 1780s, however, after the breakthrough of the comédie à ariettes, the theatre had become highly appreciated by the court aristocracy. All the same, as ‘young merchants and salesclerks’ were present also here, the theatre had not lost favour among the lower bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{66}

The moralizing comédie à ariettes attained new audiences also thanks to amateur performance. In the 1780s this practice, through which opéra-comique had once arrived at the courts, spread to wealthy merchant families occasionally putting on small comedies in their homes, such as the Alström and Hall families at Gothenburg.\textsuperscript{67} A ‘light’ and adaptable genre, opéra-comique was well suited for amateur performance. It resonated with the demands of urban audiences eager to follow the latest fashions and models for polite behaviour. In this process of social mimetism, performing comédies à ariettes or singing ariettas arranged for the fortepiano became means of distinction. Moreover, amateur practice had a civic dimension, since the formalized societies of dilettanti that appeared in Northern European cities at the end of the eighteenth-century fostered a culture of participation and self-governance. In the repertoire of these societies, the comédie à ariettes held a central role.\textsuperscript{68} By the turn of the century, opéra-comique had become fashionable throughout Scandinavia, and it had manifested a democratic potential and capacity to process concepts associated with contemporary philosophical and political debate.

\textbf{Conclusion}

This article has examined the political and social aspects of a cultural phenomenon, the fondness for French comic opera in late-eighteenth-century Scandinavia. It is an example of how a minor genre with popular origins was promoted by the elites to become one of the most widespread forms of entertainment of its time. Having achieved success among the aristocracies and urban elites all over Europe, opéra-comique and its derivatives ended up as a much larger phenomenon than a strictly French dramatic genre influenced by Italian music. Its universality in themes, plots, characters and musical style responded to the demands of cosmopolitan urban audiences eager to follow the latest fashions and models for polite behaviour. This flexibility made opéra-comique exploitable for various purposes, and it was appropriated by not only the ruling elites, but also by intellectually emancipated groups of citizens, to promote civic virtue, morality or even patriotism.\textsuperscript{69}

The flexible character of French comic opera was the result of a production process that involved playwrights, composers and performers collaborating with the literary establishment and the cosmopolitan aristocratic patrons setting the tone for ‘good taste’. This interplay had implications for how operas were adapted to new contexts. Many Scandinavian translations are examples of how dramatic literature was used politically as well as for the definition of social identity. The particularity of opéra-comique was that it represented a French set of references that enjoyed prestige among both the aristocracy and intellectuals. As the fancy for opéra-comique reached the cultivated bourgeoisie, amateur performances became playful ways of expressing the social and cultural ‘self’.

Thanks to diplomats and travellers, and helped by the status of French literature, the comédie à ariette reached the Scandinavian courts relatively early and was eagerly
received. It became part of the cultural politics of the Scandinavian monarchies and was soon also integrated into the repertoire of royal and privately run public theatres. Translations allowed new audiences to discover the works, which like *Lucile* or *Richard Cœur de Lion* gained new meanings as libretti were naturalized into new contexts of performance. Having arrived as an element of court culture, opéra-comique evolved to become part of the literary urban sociability that contributed to the development of the ‘public sphere’. While its audiences expanded from the exclusively courtly to the more inclusively bourgeois, the references and identity markers passed on by opéra-comique shifted from cosmopolitan to local and patriotic. Opéra-comique reflected many ideals of the Enlightenment, related as it was to contemporary drama with its sensibility to pathos, morality and justice. These features, added to the adaptability of the genre, contributed to its universal potential and success.

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**Notes**

2. Calhoun, ‘Foreword’, XXIV.
Malmstedt, ‘Företal’.


Hildebrand and La Blanchetau, ‘Gustaf Johan Ehrensvard’, 460.


Wolff, ‘Transfers culturels’, 347; Wolff, ‘La musique des spectacles’, 31. The libretti by Marmontel played in both Copenhagen and Stockholm were *Le Huron*, *Lucile*, *Silvain* and *Zémire et Azor*. Those by Sedaine were *Le roi et le fermier*, *Rose et Colas*, Félix ou l’enfant trouvé, *Le déserteur*, On ne s’avisé jamais de tout, Richard Cœur de Lion and *Le Comte d’Albert*.


Prologues, interimzi and unperformed works not included.


‘Orphée animé par l’amour, s’est ouvert les enfers: Les guichets de ces tours s’ouverront peut-être aux accents de l’amitié’; [Sedaine], Richard, 7; ‘Och hvad bör jag icke våga? Det är ju kärleken för min Monark, som uplifvar mig’, [Sedaine and Stenborg], *Konung Rikhard Lejonhjerta*, 7.


Skuncke, *Sweden and European Drama*, 122.


Thomas, *Aesthetics of Opera*, 201–64.


Marmontel and Bredal, *Lucile eller den forbryttede Datter*.


‘Ce n’est point le peuple qui fréquence chez nous les spectacles; c’est une coterie parti culière de gens du monde, de gens d’arts et de lettres, de personnes des deux sexes à qui leur rang ou leur fortune a permis de cultiver leur esprit: c’est l’élite de la nation à laquelle se joint un très petit nombre de gens du peuple par leur état ou par leur profession.’ Quoted by Legrand, ‘La scène et le public’, 201.


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