



Research Report

La Musique du Diable (1711)

An obscure specimen of fantastic literature throws light on the elusive opera diva Marie-Louise Desmatins (fl. 1682–1708)

Ilias Chrissochoidis

Music's inroads into Hell go back as far as Orpheus. His piercing of the veil that keeps our world apart from its unknown other has earned him popularity throughout the ages. So it is that the resurrection of ancient drama ca. 1600 was placed in his magical hands. In opera after 1700, however, practitioners of Orphean drama were often regarded as agents of the underworld: their descents into Hades appeared more like repatriation than reenactments of Orpheus' Mission Impossible. Thus can we account for the following statement:

De mettre une fameuse Actrice de l'Opera de Paris, [...] Libertine connuë, dans les Enfers; quel tort lui peut-on faire!
[what harm can be done by placing a famous actress of the Parisian opera [...] known debauchee, in hell!]

The passage concerns Marie-Louise Desmatins, an historically elusive star of the *Académie Royale de Musique*, and appears in the obscure novel *La Musique du Diable* from 1711. Very little is known about Desmatins, apart from the basic documentation of her career (1682–1708; her short entry in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* lacks a bibliography). The novel itself (LA | MUSIQUE | DU | DIABLE | OU | Le Mercure Galant devalisé. | [the zodiac] | A PARIS, | Chez Robert le Turc, ruë d'Enfer. | M. DCC. XI.) survives in only a few copies and is practically unknown in the musicological literature (although it is available as part of the microform series *Eighteenth Century French Fiction*). It merits attention not only for its references to Desmatins and Jean-Baptiste Lully, but also for the unusual light that it casts on French operatic culture at the dawn of *le siècle des Lumières*.

La Musique du Diable is a narrative of episodic structure, featuring sundry historical figures and their interactions with the underworld. Desmatins is the first such character, which suggests proximity between her death and the novel's writing, or at least the strong impact of her loss on Parisian society:

La mort de la belle *Desmatins* [...] chagrina entierement toute cette célèbre Academie de Musique, *Francine* [its director] en pensa mourir de douleur, [Jean] *D'un*, [Gabriel Vincent] *Thevenart*, & * * * * * s'en arracherent quelques cheveux, de desespoir; *Grouin* Garde du Tresor Roial, qui l'avoit si tendrement aimée durant plusieurs années, fut touché si vivement de la perte de cette belle fille, qu'il protesta devant un assemblée nombreuse, qu'il eut sacrifié tout son

bien & sa grosse fortune, pour racheter la vie à cette chere Amante, si ses Pistoles & sa Monnoie eussent étez de recette dans l'autre monde. (1–2)

[The death of the beautiful Desmatins [...] grieved entirely this famous Academy of Music, Francine thinking of dying of sorrow; D'un, Thevenart, & **** pulling out their hair in desperation; the Royal treasurer Grouin, who had loved her so tenderly for many years, was so deeply touched by the loss of this beautiful girl, that he protested before a numerous assembly, he would have sacrificed all his goods and his great wealth to buy back the life of this dear lover, had his pistols and money had any currency in the other world.]

Later in the book, we learn from Pluto himself that she died 'à la fleur de son âge, & dans un tems où elle plaisoit plus que jamais à toute la terre' (243) [at the bloom of her age and at a time when she would have pleased more than ever in the entire world]. Given her debut in 1682, this would make her around forty years old. Jérôme de La Gorce dates her birth to 1670 (La Gorce [ed.], Louis Ladvoat, *Lettres sur l'Opéra à l'abbé Dubos suivies de [']Description de la Vie et Moeurs, de l'Exercice et l'État des Filles de l'Opéra[']* [Paris: Cicerò, 1993], 13). How exactly did she perish? Readers outside Los Angeles may not believe what follows, but who dares to counter Pluto's word? Trying to cope with her weight problem, Desmatins had her excess fat removed by operation by a local butcher:

elle se fit tirer huit à dix livres de graisse, ce qui fut fait fort dextrement par un des plus habils Chirurgiens de Paris; mais le malheur voulut pour elle que six semaines après elle mourut de cette belle équipée, & voilà ce qui nous la conduit ici. (245)

[she had eight to ten pounds of fat removed, performed most dexterously by one of the best surgeons of Paris; but misfortune decreed that six weeks later she would die of this beautiful figure, & has directed her to us here.]

If this passage is true, Desmatins qualifies as the earliest martyr of liposuction in operatic history. But there is more, and things now turn macabre (parental discretion advised):

peu de jours après avoir été dégraisée, croiant être hors de danger, elle voulut un peu se divertir aux depens de ses meilleurs amis, elle fit faire de bons Cervelas, des Boudins, des Saucisses, & des Andouilles, dans lesquels, elle y dit mêler de sa graisse, & aiant employé un chaircutier à cette belle commission, elle en fit present à tous ceux à qui la fantaisie lui prit d'en envoyer, elle n'épargna pas même son cher Garde du Trésor Roial, non plus que ses plus fidels Amans, en un mot tous ceux qui en mangerent, demeurèrent d'accord tous d'une voix que de leurs vies, il ne leur étoit tombé de si frians morceaux. (245–46)

[a few days after she had her fat removed, thinking she was out of danger, she wanted to divert herself at the expense of her best friends; she had prepared fine saveloys, puddings, sausages, and andouilles wherein she said to mix her fat, & having employed a butcher for this noble commission, presented them to anyone that her fancy picked, not sparing even her dear Royal treasurer nor her most devoted lovers, in one word to anyone who upon eating them would unanimously agree that they had never come across pieces so tasty in their lives.]

Mixing our bodily fat into other people's food may not be the highest mark of friendship. Alas, Desmatins had little time to savor her prank:

dans le moment qu'elle commençoit à se promener dans sa chambre, que les Couturieres & les Tailleurs travailloient jour & nuit à lui faire des corps, & des nouveaux habits conformes à la beauté, & à la delicatesse de sa nouvelle taille, la mort impitoyablement nous l'envoia dans ces lieux, où elle jouit à present d'un bonheur, auquel elle ne s'attendoit pas, & qu'elle n'avoit pas lieu d'esperer. (246–47)

[at the moment she would begin to walk in her chamber, and dressmakers and tailors would work day and night to make models and new garments appropriate for the beauty & delicacy of her new body, death ruthlessly sent her to these grounds, where she presently enjoys a happiness, which she had not experienced and had not hoped for.]

What kind of creature was Desmatins? Hardly sympathetic, if we believe the charges she faces at the gates of Hell. She is accused of prostituting herself for financial gain, spoiling marriages, leading respectable merchants to bankruptcy, transmitting venereal disease to politicians, having acid thrown on a woman's face, contemplating the assassination of the director of the Academy, and the poisoning of two prelates and many fellow actresses (Moreau, Renaut, Deschares, Florence, Rochois, and Lemaire). In addition, she is charged with megalomania to the point of wearing her theatre costumes at home, and behaving like a princess; of neglecting confession for twenty-two years; and having abortions no less than four times (26–31). Unmoved by the gravity of accusations, Desmatins concedes that some are true, but protests 'je n'ai rien fait, que tout ce qu'une Fille de l'Opera passablement jolie comme moi, ai deù faire' (31) [I have done nothing that an opera girl as tolerably pretty as I should not have done]. Nay, she becomes bolder, claiming that responsibility for her actions should be placed on the devil who had possessed her: 'interoges le, & le punissez, car pour moy, je suis la douceur même, & la plus innocente créature qu'il y ait eu sur terre' (32) [interrogate and punish him, because as far as I am concerned, I am sweetness itself & and the most innocent creature that has existed on earth]. Condemned to be thrown into the Tartar, Desmatins is saved by a decree from Pluto himself. Calling her 'nôtre bien-aimée la *Desmatins*,' [our beloved Desmatins] the King affirms 'toute sa conduite n'a été réglée que par nos ordres, & que tant qu'elle a resté sur la terre, ce n'a été que pour la gloire & la propagation de notre Empire' (34) [all her behavior was regulated only by our orders, & so long as she stayed on earth, it was only for the glory and spread of our empire]; he orders her immediate transfer to his palace. There, Pluto receives her with the highest honors. The moral is hard to miss: the 'hell-of-a-life' that Desmatins had enjoyed as an opera diva earned her a 'glorious' life in Hell.

Bibliographic records describe *La Musique du Diable* as the 'Supposed adventures of Mlle. Desmâtins, of the Opéra, in the Inferno.' Actually, only a small percentage of the novel's three hundred and eighty-one pages focus on Desmatins and other musicians. Of these last, Jean-Baptiste Lully receives the most attention. No reason is given for his presence in Hell (he had been dead for some twenty years), but his song lures Desmatins to cross the gates ('voici [...] *Lulli* qui chante [...] est-il ici? [...] est-il possible que je retrouve ici mon cher ami *Lulli*, ha! que je suis hereuse,' 13,

14–15) [here is [...] Lulli sings [...] is he here? [...] is it possible that I find here my dear Lulli, ah! how happy I am]. In a subsequent episode, Pluto describes how Lully, himself waiting at the same place as Desmatins, taught Cerberus to sing in three parts (295–305). The most memorable scene, however, puts Lully at the center of a sadistic concert (curiously anticipating Monty Python’s ‘Musical Mice’). Pluto commands Lully to entertain his company, Desmatins included, with ‘un petit air diabolique’ performed by ‘tous des plus fameux Maîtres à chanter de la Musique du Roy’ [all the most famous singing masters of the King’s Music] now transformed into sea lions. Lully asks for a quarter of an hour to adjust his music for the ensemble, but is embarrassed to find that they cannot sing. To solve the problem, Pluto orders him to tune their voices by pulling on strings attached to their ears by fishhooks (53–58). This episode alone seems to justify the novel’s title and is depicted in the engraving opposite the title page.

How seriously can we take *La Musique du Diable*? Fictional accounts, especially those dealing with the underworld, have limited factual weight. However, given the paucity of documentary evidence on Desmatins, we should not be too hasty in dismissing the novel. While no one expects her infernal adventures to be true, the details of her earthly life are sufficient to intrigue the historian. Actually, the author himself describes his method as ‘les fixions mêlées agréablement avec le vrai-semblance’ (Preface) [fictions pleasantly mixed with likelihood]. The claim that Desmatins was mistress of the Royal Treasurer Grouin (‘vous faisoit douze mille livres de Rente, sans parler des présens perpetuels que vous receviez de sa part tous les jours, dont il vous accabloit,’ 18 [you would make twelve thousand livres, without speaking of the continuous presents you would receive from him any day you would meet him]) is too specific for the historian to ignore. Indeed, a contemporary satire recovered by La Gorce describes opera stars as prostitutes (‘Desmatins [le fait] pour de l’argent’, 93) [Desmatins [does it] for money].

Even if Desmatins’ crimes are fictional or wildly exaggerated, there still remains a core fact, which the author acknowledges:

tout ce qu’ils vont voir au sujet de cette fameuse Actrice si connue, n’est qu’une leçon qu’on donne à ceux, qui soit par leur tempérament naturel, le penchant qu’ils ont pour les femmes de Théâtre, le peu de comparaison qu’ils font du vice avec la vertu, & les enchainemens malheureux dans lesquels le commerce avec ces sortes de créatures les entraînent, les écartent furieusement du chemin du Ciel. (Preface)

[all that they are going to see about this so well-known, famous actress is only a lesson we give to those who by their natural constitution, the inclination they have towards women of the stage, the little comparison they make between vice and virtue & the unhappy chains that their conduct with this kind of creatures leads them, stray furiously from the divine path.]

This, then, is a cautionary tale against the perils of attachment to theatre: Marie-Louise Desmatins, the recently deceased priestess of French opera, became an ideal target for moral and social criticism against the institution and its culture. In oblique yet discernible ways, *La Musique du Diable* exposes the degeneration of the Orphean project that we call music drama, and aligns itself to contemporary criticism of opera in France and England (Boileau-Despréaux, Dennis, Steele, and Addison).