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

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Public Identities: To See & Be Seen

Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *La Loge*, 1874

Mary Cassatt, *At the Opera*, 1879

Louis Beroud, *The Staircase of the New Opera House* (19th Century)
Research Questions

1. What is the cultural and social significance in constructing l’Opéra Garnier?

2. Who are the musical giants represented and what musical tastes are celebrated? How are their sculptures rendered?

3. Who is the audience that the Palais Garnier facade caters to and who has agency in determining what music is worthy of representation?

Aime Millet, Apollo, Poetry, and Music, 1860-69
19th Century France: Building an Empire

Jacques-Louis David, *Napoleon Crossing the Saint Bernard Pass*, 1801-02
War of 1812

July Revolution 1830

Les Poires
France Under Napoleon III

- Nephew of the First Emperor
- Reigns as president beginning 1848 & establishes the Second Empire in 1852
- Calls upon Baron Haussmann to bring...

“... air, light, and cleanliness...”

Camille Pissarro, L’ Avenue de l’Opéra, soleil, matinée d’hiver,
L’Opéra Garnier

- Commissioned by Napoleon III
- International competition
  - Winner: Charles Garnier (b. 1825-98)
- Built 1861-1875
- Located at the Place de l’Opéra in 9th arrondissement in Paris
- ~2,000 Capacity
- Cost 36 million francs

Achille Quinet, *Le Nouvel Opéra* (1860)
“... public monuments sought to locate and embody national and imperial identities and meanings in key metropolitan locations”

Walter Benjamin,

“Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century” (1969)
The Facade

Photograph, L'Avenue de l'Opéra, 1905
19th Century Music Culture in France

- Rise in **capitalist market**
- Development of the **public sphere & privatized social groups**
  - Public concerts replicated through memory in **private homes**
  - Places for **intellectual exercise**
- **Musical hierarchy**

The Main Facade
Composer Canonization: Mozart & Beethoven Busts

- **Commodification** of music’s ephemerality
- Equated to **relics**
- **Symbols** of social status
- Confirm composers as a **national heroes**
Death Masks

Asserting Beethoven’s genius and immortalizing his legacy within public memory through architecture, not as an individual but a musical icon.

Franz Klein, *Beethoven’s life mask, 1812*

Carl and Josef Danhauser, *Beethoven’s death mask, c. 1827*

Louis Félix Chabaud, *Beethoven, c. 1869*
Public Voice: Carpeaux’s *La Danse*

- *La Danse* (1868)
- Starkly contrasts the other groups
- Citizen threw ink on it
- Letters and recipes flooded the Opéra for cleansing
- Officially ordered removal
- Restored and replaced by copy

Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, *La Danse*, 1986 copy of 1868 original

cf. Eugene Guillaume, *La Musique instrumentale*, c. 1869
“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.”

from Christopher Mead’s Charles Garnier’s Paris Opéra (1991)
Conclusion

The dense representation of musical motifs publicized by the main facade on the Palais Garnier reflects the musical and artistic taste of the 19th century Parisian bourgeois elite.