

# Unintended consequences: Theatre deregulation and opera in France, 1864–1878

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**Abstract:** The French legislation of 6 January 1864 which deregulated spoken and lyric theatre nationwide showed little sensitivity to the distinctive financial ecology of regional theatre. Its effects were precisely the opposite of those its architects intended, and caused most disruption to the very constituencies the legislation was intended to help. Comparative analysis of the immediate aftermath of this ‘liberté des théâtres’ reveals a state of near chaos across France. Town councils oscillated between abandoning to the market their traditions of theatre as artistic social service, and pouring in yet more taxpayers’ money just to maintain the status quo. Opera, as the most expensive art form, was the immediate casualty, ceding considerable ground to a vigorous entertainment sector based around the operetta repertory (including *opéra-bouffé*) and the café-concert chanson.

The story goes that after decades of lobbying from playwrights, composers, professional associations and publishers, the 1864 legislation deregulating the French stage was eventually catalysed by Napoléon III’s personal experience.<sup>1</sup> This, at least, is how Marseille’s readers of the weekly news-sheet *La Publicité* would have understood it if they had read the ‘Liberté des théâtres’ anecdote it published on 7 January – the day after the law was passed.<sup>2</sup> The scene takes place in the far south-west. Visiting Biarritz, the emperor is appalled to find the theatre – that key provider of educational entertainment – closed. The mayor explains that the company licensed to serve the area is playing elsewhere, and that Biarritz’s two-month turn will come around again in the winter. The emperor’s follow-up question is logical, though perhaps startlingly uninformed: why can’t other companies use the theatre in the meantime? And so we read of how the mayor of Biarritz apparently described to his emperor how French theatre managers were licensed by the state, in contract with town councils, to run their companies as business monopolies in major urban centres, in secondary towns grouped into defined areas (*arrondissements*), or as travelling companies serving even smaller communities; and how the licences for resident company managers traditionally offered them the territorial right either to stifle competition by keeping their own venues closed out

<sup>1</sup> This essay is a complement to two others: ‘Systems Failure in Operatic Paris: The Acid Test of the Théâtre-Lyrique’, in *Music, Theater, and Cultural Transfer: Paris, 1830–1914*, ed. Mark Everist and Annegret Fauser (Chicago, 2009), 49–71; and ‘Funding Opera in Regional France: Ideologies of the Mid-Nineteenth Century’, in *Art and Ideology in European Opera*, ed. Clive Brown, David Cooper and Rachel Cowgill (Woodbridge, 2010), 67–84. Its research was aided by an AHRC Small Grant in the Creative and Performing Arts and a British Academy Research Development Award. I am also grateful to the British Academy and to the Research Committee of Royal Holloway, University of London, for funding my attendance at the American Musicological Society Annual Meeting, Washington 2006, where I shared this work in its first incarnation.

<sup>2</sup> *La Publicité: revue immobilière, industrielle, commerciale, critique et théâtrale*, 9, no. 369 (7 January 1864), [2].

of season, or to tax competitors by taking a cut from their ticket revenues as they passed through town. (Presumably he did not dwell on the fact that the system was, in essence, the creation of the emperor's uncle, Napoléon I.<sup>3</sup>) The anecdote follows Napoléon III back to Paris, where he fumes at the idea that private individuals could deprive his provincial subjects of theatre for most of the year, and not only demands a deregulation bill but rejects the first draft as too conservative. What is needed, he says, is a liberalising measure that simply renders theatre 'an industry like any other', with managers operating in open competition.<sup>4</sup>

Whatever the veracity or otherwise of its detail, this account points to a paradox at the heart of the 1860s deregulation story: although it may have been sparked by an experience that involved regional France, its effectiveness was fatally undermined by misunderstanding of regional difference and regional complexity. For the tale implies that the Emperor of France made three assumptions: that the challenges of providing theatre in a smallish town served part-time by a local company – a *troupe d'arrondissement* – were identical to those in metropolitan centres where a resident company served more than one theatre; that a single law would work in Paris and the regions alike; and, implicitly, that the current system of town-council subsidies was unnecessary. If those were indeed his views (assuming he thought that far), he was misguided in ways that merit our attention. For when national legislation fails locally, as happened here, one can learn a great deal: about common but usually unremarked practices; about expectations and aspirations; about relationships within and between regions; and, in the case of France, about centralist/decentralist tensions. When such failed legislation is well-meaning and seems to respond to public demand, one arguably learns even more; and the Second Empire's 'liberté des théâtres' did indeed enjoy enthusiastic support. In this article, which concentrates on major metropolitan centres with resident companies – in other words, those that could stretch to grand opera – I analyse how what was, broadly speaking, a privatisation law, clamoured for in the capital but viewed with more circumspection in the regions, helped change the map of theatrical France in unintended, unwanted and largely uncontrollable ways.<sup>5</sup>

### The allure of 'liberté'

Napoléon III's legislation was long-awaited, prepared following national consultation, and (according to those who actually drafted it) intended to inject France with artistic vitality by removing longstanding obstacles to theatrical expansion. Audiences were to benefit from a proliferation of good theatre, and artists eager to cement their careers with success in Paris sensed the arrival of opportunities

<sup>3</sup> For an insight into the Napoleonic system in force from 1806 (repealing the 'liberté' of 1791), see Howard Bould, 'The Lyric Theatre in Provincial France (1789–1914)', Ph.D. diss. (University of Hull, 2005), 61–71.

<sup>4</sup> 'une industrie comme une autre'. *La Publicité*, 9, no. 369 (7 January 1864), [2].

<sup>5</sup> On debates prior to the 'liberté', see my 'Funding Grand Opera'. For an analysis of its effects in smaller towns working the *arrondissement* system, see Romuald Féret, 'Le décret du 6 janvier 1864: la liberté des théâtres ou l'affirmation d'une politique culturelle municipale', in *Les Spectacles sous le Second Empire*, ed. Jean-Claude Yon (Paris, 2010), 51–60.

they had long been denied under a system so rigidly compartmentalised, genre by genre, that it hindered both opportunity and experiment.<sup>6</sup> Now, with the exception of the national flagships in Paris – the Opéra, the Opéra-Comique and the Théâtre-Lyrique – France’s theatres were to be run essentially as private enterprises. New venues could be built and operated with a minimum of official intervention (mainly involving censorship), and they could each put on a variety of genres, including experimental ones. From idealist, centralist and Parisian perspectives the legislation offered everything: a catalyst to creativity, an end to the repressive monopolies that bedevilled regional theatre provision, and the opening up of new performing spaces for classic and popular masterpieces some of which had hitherto been cooped up in national theatres where they took up space that could be given over to living artists. What could possibly go wrong?

Admittedly, the prospects for the regions looked less immediately rosy, but that was in part because they were almost all in a financially parlous state. Municipal theatre managers had long considered bankruptcy an occupational hazard, and across the country and the century large numbers of them terminated their contracts just before the bailiffs arrived. The costs of grand opera in particular were now breaking the back of even the largest regional companies, and the genre was far beyond the capacities of their smaller, travelling cousins, for which vaudeville was the most complex musical genre they could usually mount. Opera seasons had begun to shrink as early as the late 1840s as a way of saving money, leaving many orchestral musicians with lean weeks either side of the summer spa season. Meanwhile, in the interests of social justice town councils routinely specified the ticket prices their contracted theatre managers could charge in each section of the theatre, and in the interests of their members’ livings composer and author unions raised their royalty rates. Regional managers had to pay the Poor Tax out of their takings, too – usually around 10 per cent and to be paid irrespective of whether they broke even. Even with subsidies, which rose inexorably from the 1830s onwards, they struggled to balance the books. This was the side of the often strained town council/theatre manager relationship on which *La Publicité*’s anecdote did not elaborate: the fact that although theatre managers enjoyed and sometimes abused monopoly rights, they were all too frequently reduced to begging the council for bailouts. Something had to change.

Support for liberalising measures was fuelled considerably by widespread suspicion of those vestiges of ‘feudalism’ and ‘privilege’ embodied in the role of the municipal ‘Directeur des théâtres’. The middle of the century is replete with tales of licensed managers restricting access and muzzling competition, not only, as in Biarritz, by effecting temporary closures during a company’s absence, but, in larger centres, by refusing on purely economic grounds to run all the theatre

<sup>6</sup> First, there were not enough theatres for them in Paris, and second, those theatres could present only their contractually allotted genres (which meant those genres were effectively pre-defined). Even with the advent of the much more flexible Théâtre-Lyrique in 1851, the supply of young opera composers outstripped the capacity or willingness of the capital’s theatre managers to stage their works. It was hardly a recipe for innovation. See my ‘Systems Failure’, *passim*, and ‘Funding Grand Opera’, 68.

buildings they controlled.<sup>7</sup> And this despite the notion that theatre was a right and not a pleasure. In other respects, consumer power prevailed in ways which probably encouraged indirect support for deregulation because they focused on the ‘them’ and ‘us’ relationship created by the manager’s privileged position. While the passive protest of staying away from the theatre was open to everyone, the only moment at which audiences could actively and collectively influence artistic standards was via the annual public auditions for principals – ‘débutés’ – with which the manager accountable to his local audience was duty bound to start the season. Ticket holders were, after all, indirectly paying his council subsidy via their taxes, as well as directly via the box office. Those with season tickets had even more cause. Here was their opportunity to hold their licensed manager to account, and they took full advantage of it with shouting, whistling and occasionally missile-throwing. Precisely because such evenings could become riotous, préfets, who represented the State at regional levels, and commentators mindful of their town’s national image, tended to favour abolishing the débutés system. For very different (selfish) reasons, the vast majority of theatre managers would have voted the same way.<sup>8</sup> Mayors, who needed to demonstrate accountability to their tax-paying residents, tended instead to favour reforming the existing system.<sup>9</sup> Among journalists and pamphleteers a general (and erroneous) assumption existed that a ‘liberté des théâtres’ would make ‘débutés’ redundant because it would sever the link between privilege and accountability.<sup>10</sup> This, too, seemed a good reason to support it.

<sup>7</sup> The most famous manager of the period, Olivier Halanzier-Dufrenoy, was especially energetic in neutralising competition, both in Rouen in 1860 and (with less success) in Marseille six years later. Arch. Dépt Seine-Maritime, 4 T 99 (Rouen) and Arch. Mun. Marseille 77 R 37. See also the battle of 1862–3 between Biche-Latour, manager at the Grand-Théâtre in Bordeaux (who sought to establish a café-concert as a complementary business), and Martial Légglise, director of the well-established Alcazar café-concert on the other side of the river (Arch. Dépt Gironde 167 T 14, folder Correspondance 1863). From 1859 to 1864 successive directors of the Théâtre Graslin in Nantes successfully blocked the running of the Théâtre des Variétés, despite the building being privately owned (Arch. Dépt. Loire-Atlantique 177 T 8).

<sup>8</sup> Halanzier was an exception: for him the débutés season was a cornerstone of his business plan because it was so popular that ticket revenues gave him a financial buffer for the rest of the season. See his open letter of 27 August 1863 printed in the *Sémaphore de Marseille* the following day (36, no. 10,900 (28 August 1863), [2]). Halanzier’s case compares usefully with that of Raphaël Félix, brother of the tragic actress Rachel, whose disastrous tenure at Lyon ended in riots in September 1865 after he persuaded the préfet and the council to abolish the requirement for ‘débutés’ on the basis of both the 1864 legislation and the new designation of the Lyon theatre as ‘Impérial’. He saw this priceless new title as indicating that Lyon should now take its cues from Paris, where different traditions prevailed. See Archives Municipales, Lyon, 88 WP 006 (folder 20). On Lyon more generally, see Malincha Gersin, ‘Les Spectacles à Lyon sous le Second Empire: stabilisation locale et débat national sur les “débutés”’, in *Les spectacles sous le Second Empire*, ed. Jean-Claude Yon (Paris, 2010), 290–302. Gersin sees widespread ‘stabilisation’, in the form of downsizing of various kinds, as characteristic of regional provision, but does not link the acceleration of such downsizing to the perverse effects of a ‘liberté’ promulgated to do precisely the opposite.

<sup>9</sup> The mayors usually won: in various guises, regional débutés survived the legislation by at least fifty years in most of the major French towns, often being voted on by secret committee ballot rather than by an entire audience.

<sup>10</sup> Discussed at length by A. Lomon in *La France musicale*, 26/1 (5 January 1862), 2–3.

Proposals for reform in the guise of pamphlets, articles and petitions landed on the desk of the *Ministre des Beaux-Arts* regularly during the first half of the century, resulting in two abortive attempts at new legislation in 1848–9 and 1853 – the latter specifically targeted at the problems the regions faced.<sup>11</sup> The process began again with a similar ministerial consultation document of 8 September 1862 from the comte Alexandre Colonna-Walewski, *Ministre d'État et des Beaux-Arts*, asking regional representatives for diagnoses of the problems and advice on how best to proceed, but dwelling especially on the public order problems of the existing 'début' system.<sup>12</sup> This time there was a following wind: a major press campaign in favour of liberalisation doubtless helped demonstrate the extent of support for a reform Napoléon III apparently desired, and Walewski showed considerable determination to ensure the draft legislation's successful progress, even though during 1863 the theatre's portfolio passed out of his hands and into those of the *maréchal Vaillant* at the *Maison de l'Empereur*, and even though there was resistance to the new law among civil servants.<sup>13</sup>

### The devil in the detail

When the law was finally passed in 1864, it made no distinction between Paris and the rest of the country. Therein lay its fatal flaw, for from a regional perspective there was indeed plenty to go wrong. Anyone with knowledge of the complex financial ecology of regional theatre would have recognised that onto an already deficit-ridden system it imposed extra costs that someone – entrepreneurs, municipalities, consumers or a combination thereof – would have to bear. In short, Napoléon III's overturning of the repressive theatre system instituted by Napoléon I did not facilitate artistic expansion, grandeur or originality in the newly liberated private sector; it did precisely the opposite both in Paris and the regions. As my closing example will illustrate, its consequences were decisive in freeing up a commercial entertainment sector whose drive and popularity left the legislation's intended beneficiaries – spoken theatre and opera – in considerable difficulty. Indeed the unexpected reversal of opera's fortune in favour of *opéra-bouffé*, operetta and music-hall *chanson* was such that one theatre manager quipped despairingly that it should have been called the 'liberté des cafés-concerts'.<sup>14</sup> Central to the

<sup>11</sup> A good sample of such pamphlets is collected in Archives Nationales (henceforth AN) F<sup>21</sup> 954 and 955.

<sup>12</sup> By far the most detailed response was unofficial: the Rouennais Antoine-Louis Malliot's *La musique au théâtre* (Paris, 1863), which responded clause by clause to the consultation document, recommending continued opera subsidy, expanded educational opportunity, and state funding for regional theatres. On Malliot, see my 'Funding Grand Opera', 80–3.

<sup>13</sup> Albert Delpit, 'La liberté des théâtres', *Revue des deux mondes* (1 February 1898), 601–23, at 602. Delpit names Camille Doucet, then overseeing theatre regulation at the *Maison de l'Empereur*, as fighting courageously against the legislation, but he is most likely mistaken. It was Charles Blanc, *Directeur des Beaux-Arts*, who is reported in 1864 as having opposed it (anonymous mention in *Le Messager des théâtres*, 2/92 (29 January 1849)).

<sup>14</sup> Report of 5 December 1878 from Ch. Pottier, manager of the Grand-Théâtre in Bordeaux, on the consequences of the *liberté*. Arch. Dépt. Gironde 167 T 15. Despite the obvious benefits

legislation's failure across France was the one-size, regions-blind nature of its text. And yet for other reasons – mostly to do with the belated timing of its arrival – it failed in Paris too.

Signed by maréchal Vaillant, and in accordance with Napoléon III's apparent wishes, the legislation's opening article read that as of 1 July, any person of acceptable moral standing could, having made a declaration to the authorities, build or manage a theatre at their own risk. At a stroke, this sentence seemed to sweep away all monopolies, contracts and privileges together with the limitations on venues and repertory that went with them. While it did not mean that all repertory was openly available (censorship remained in place, the national theatres had to adhere to their allotted genres, and author and publisher permissions were still required before recent works could be staged), the theatre world's feudalism and its enforced compression in an environment of urban expansion were at an end. Moreover, and despite the pervasive rhetoric of theatre as art and education in government and journalistic documents alike, the legislation indirectly recognised that French theatre was a competitive industry that could and should operate as independently of government restriction as possible. Hence the emphasis on 'liberté'.

Deregulation was warmly welcomed in the capital as an end to privilege, repression, and an outdated system of royal or imperial patronage. In the regions, too, and especially among those wishing to starve opera in order to regenerate good drama, it commanded strong support.<sup>15</sup> And the very word 'liberté' appeared intoxicating.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the legislation did not enforce and was not intended to imply an entirely free market. In a dilution of the long-standing requirement (dating from an *Ordonnance* of 8 December 1824) that municipal councils with resident companies should support them financially, Vaillant mitigated the impact of the opening sentence with the suggestion that: 'Theatres that appear especially worthy of encouragement may be subsidised, either by the State or by communes'.<sup>17</sup> As worded, this sentence contained neither a recommendation nor a requirement: it simply outlined the existence of a legitimate exception to the norm. Vaillant's introduction to the decree as published in the *Moniteur universel* offered a partial gloss: such theatres would be models, raising artistic standards within the new legislative framework. There was, however, no further detail. Once again Paris and the regions were treated as one; moreover there was no acknowledgement that adequate subsidy was precisely what town councils were

of using nuanced generic terminology to identify the various forms of light opera, for the remainder of this essay I follow the majority of 1860s and 1870s commentators and simply use the term 'operetta' (*opérette*).

<sup>15</sup> See my 'Funding Grand Opera', 71–7.

<sup>16</sup> One Toulousain supporter signed off his theatres review in blind faith: 'On this question as on all others, let's trust fearlessly in Liberty's beneficial inspiration.' [Sur cette question comme sur toutes les autres, confions-nous sans crainte au souffle bienfaisant de la Liberté.] 'E. V.' of the *Revue de Toulouse et du Midi de la France*, vol. 19 (1864/1) [February 1864], 153–8, at 158.

<sup>17</sup> 'Les théâtres qui paraîtront particulièrement dignes d'encouragement pourront être subventionnés soit par l'État, soit par les communes.' Decree of 6 January 1864. Article 1, paragraph 2, given in *Le Moniteur universel* (7 January 1864), n.p.

currently struggling to provide. Finally, there was no hint as to whether monies might now flow outwards from Paris, with the State supplementing municipal support. In August, when Vaillant spoke about the legislation at the Paris Conservatoire's annual prize-giving ceremony, addressing musicians and actors together, he revealed a still narrower vision, applauding its potential to support artistic expansion and regeneration in spoken theatre alone:

In abolishing privileges and monopolies, in giving to all theatres the right once reserved exclusively to the Comédie-Française and the Odéon, to mount freely the masterpieces of the old repertory, the new legislation was aimed at elevating French artistic and literary standards still further.<sup>18</sup>

In practice, the 'subsidy clause' allowed the national theatres in Paris to pursue business as usual, their managers working to a contract in return for state funding. And it was intended to suggest the same to the mayors of town councils as they and their colleagues pondered the appropriate response to the new Paris legislation. Yet it did not – or at least, not consistently – which meant that Vaillant had belatedly to make his meaning explicit in a circular of 28 April 1864 to préfets in which he wrote, unconvincingly, that he was trying to 'foresee the difficulties which implementation of the decree of 6 January last might raise', and in which he enjoined the préfet of each Département – governmental supervisors to the country's mayors – to ensure that town councils not only maintained subsidies, but added new ones.<sup>19</sup> Even as it broadcast 'liberty', then, the legislation created a potential division between regulated and deregulated areas of theatrical activity, and outside Paris the boundaries were left for individual councils to decide. The result was a period of chaotic experimentation, with U-turns aplenty leading to short-termism and planning blight. The results, duly inherited by the Third Republic, left the reformist Agénor Bardoux, Ministre des Beaux-Arts, preparing to redraft the legislation yet again in 1878, in the face of demonstrable failure in the capital and (as he discovered in light of regional consultation) worse consequences everywhere else.

The free market/public subsidy division sparked impassioned debate, even within constituencies one might expect to show solidarity. The most immediately affected were the professional associations that supported authors – playwrights and composers alike. In responses that provided an uncanny mirror of Vaillant's (and Napoléon III's) lack of understanding of regional pressures, the Société des Compositeurs drafted complaints to the Senate about the unfair competition which the subsidised sector, meaning the Paris flagship theatres, represented for those out in the cold:

<sup>18</sup> 'En supprimant les privilèges et les monopoles, en donnant à tous les théâtres le droit exclusivement réservé naguère à la Comédie-Française et à l'Odéon, de représenter librement les chefs-d'œuvre de l'ancien répertoire, la législation nouvelle a voulu encore élever en France le niveau artistique et littéraire.' Speech of 4 August 1864, cited in Constant Pierre, *Le Conservatoire national de musique et de déclamation* (Paris, 1900), 965.

<sup>19</sup> 'prévoir les difficultés que pourrait soulever l'application du Décret du 6 Janvier dernier'. The new circular was widely published in the press and is also conserved in AN: F<sup>21</sup> 1330 'Circulaires'.

In effect how can one hope, realistically, to establish free ventures, in competition with those which are so generously subsidised? [...] It is a formal abrogation of the true economic principles of commercial equality, of free competition... [...] By subsidising a single businessman, you instantly destroy all other ventures in the same area.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, Jules Ruelle, editor of the *Messager des théâtres* and a staunch supporter of the legislation on behalf of the royalty collection societies his paper represented, gladly inferred from the legislation's text that for the regions full municipal underwriting – *régie* – would become the default guarantor of artistic standards, with each council owning its opera house, paying a full staff, maintaining its own wardrobe and scenery store, and engaging a salaried administrative manager instead of contracting with an entrepreneur.<sup>21</sup> Everything depended on where one wished to find the legislation's point of balance between competition and protection – and for whom.<sup>22</sup> In short, the law had been badly drafted. Interpretations of its text, its implications and its strengths and weaknesses, were to vary wildly. Vaillant's initiative of 28 April was a vain shutting of the stable door.

### Consequences

Disruption was prolonged, for in raising the question of subsidy by mentioning it as optional within an act of deregulation the legislation had problematised it anew. This was as true in the capital as elsewhere. In 1866 Gustave Bertrand argued, as part of an extended essay on how to fund the Opéra and the Opéra-Comique, that not all 'industries' were equal, and that in this regard theatre was comparable to artisanal concerns such as the Gobelins tapestry workshops and the Sèvres porcelain factories, which still benefited from government money. He found the alternative unacceptable:

I cannot imagine the complete abdication of the state [i.e. subsidy] without seeing art venturing into an ocean full of reefs and strong currents, doubtless never destroyed, but frequently brought low, suffering extensive damage. Certain genres would surely perish, and they would be the noblest and loftiest ones. Everything would tend towards making itself small or medium-sized, the better to accommodate the needs of general taste.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> 'Comment espérer en effet, qu'il puisse se fonder sérieusement des exploitations libres, en concurrence avec celles qui sont si généreusement subventionnées? ... – C'est une dérogation formelle aux véritables principes économiques de l'égalité commerciale, de la libre concurrence, récemment consacrée, même pour nos relations avec l'étranger, par les derniers traités de commerce. – Subventionner isolément un industriel quelconque, à l'instant vous annihilerez toutes les autres exploitations de la même industrie.' Draft letter of 1864 or early 1865 to Senate: Arch. de la Société des Compositeurs de Musique (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Musique, Rés. 995).

<sup>21</sup> *Le Messager des théâtres*, 17/4 (14 January 1864), [3]; and (more explicitly), 17/7 (24 January 1864), [1].

<sup>22</sup> With the benefit of some fourteen years of hindsight, Agénor Bardoux's consultation document of 1878 in preparation for new legislation would make explicit that he sought to support three distinct interests: art, the public and artists (AN F<sup>21</sup> 1330 'Circulaires'). The 1864 legislation demonstrated no recognition that these interests might exist, still less that they might conflict, and in different ways in different parts of the country.

<sup>23</sup> '[J]e ne puis penser à l'abdication complète de l'État, sans apercevoir l'art aventuré dans un océan plein d'écueils et de courants inconnus, jamais détruit, sans doute, mais souvent ravalé,



Such *embourgeoisement* – recalibration of the monumental to a domestic scale – was anathema to him, as indeed it was to other supporters of subsidy, who invariably adopted a version of Vaillant’s ‘model theatres’ argument. National disaster, however, made downsizing a distinct possibility given the financial exigencies of defeat by Prussia. In the early Third Republic, when disparagement of Second Empire frivolity was at its height and when one might assume the state anxious to preserve the highest standards at its model theatres come what may, subsidy for the Paris flagships had to be defended vigorously. In 1873, for instance, *L’Art musical* reported the annual discussions at the Commission des Théâtres:

There was animated discussion about abolishing the subsidy to the Opéra-Comique.

It is truly regrettable that the subsidy accorded to our national theatre should be challenged year on year. It seems to us that given the invasion of operetta, which is the scourge of music, it would be more logical to *increase* the Opéra-Comique’s subsidy than to abandon it.<sup>24</sup>

Beyond questions of national pride, the background to such debates was that for those who expected operatic regeneration, the medium-term Parisian experience of deregulation was harsh. No new private venture succeeded in creating and retaining a new audience for opera or in providing the new operatic opportunities the legislation seemed to offer to living composers. In addition, deregulation could not stem the tide of public opinion in favour of operetta and the café-concert. Bertrand, for instance, would surely have felt both depressed at and vindicated by the Parisian operatic map during the Exposition Universelle year of 1867, which saw Offenbach’s *opéras-bouffes* occupy three deregulated Paris stages while new large-scale opera was available on subsidised ones only.<sup>25</sup> It must also have been galling for French opera composers to see that the monumental new work the Opéra staged during the Exposition was by an Italian, albeit with French librettists (Verdi’s *Don Carlos*), while during the same period the unmissable musical comedy was by a German (Offenbach’s *La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein*). But to make matters worse for opera professionals, café-concert legislation was progressively breached after 1864 and liberalised under the theatres administrator Camille Doucet on 31 March 1867. With costumes and props now officially sanctioned, these popular entertainments came ever closer to sung theatre while remaining resolutely entertainment-centred.<sup>26</sup> They seemed, in other words, to represent

sujet à des avaries sans nombre. Certains genres périraient assurément, et ce seraient les plus nobles et les plus relevés. Tout tendrait à se faire petit ou moyen, pour mieux s’accommoder aux besoins du goût général.’ Gustave Bertrand, ‘Études d’économie théâtrale. Les théâtres lyriques de Paris, I,’ *Revue moderne*, 36/1–2 (1 January–1 February 1866), 93–105; vol. 37/2 (1 May 1866), 299–318, at 102.

<sup>24</sup> ‘La suppression de la subvention de l’Opéra-Comique a été vivement discutée. Il est vraiment regrettable que tous les ans le subside accordé à notre théâtre national soit remis en question. Il nous semble qu’en présence de l’envahissement du genre opérette, qui est un fléau pour la musique, il serait plus logique d’augmenter la subvention de l’Opéra-Comique que de la supprimer.’ *L’Art musical*, 12/50 (11 December 1873), 397–8. Unsigned.

<sup>25</sup> *Orphée aux Enfers* (Bouffes-Parisiennes), *La Vie parisienne* (Palais-Royal), *La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein* (Variétés). For more detail on Paris, see my ‘Systems Failure in Operatic Paris’, 64–9.

<sup>26</sup> F. W. J. Hemmings, *Theatre and State in France, 1760–1905* (Cambridge, 1994), 202.

the best of both worlds: theatre without didactic intent or artistic stuffiness, and comprising everything from the noble or gracious sentiments of the aria to the raciest *double-entendre* of chanson lyrics that could be got through the censors' office. Belatedly, what composers and opera critics saw as the consequences of deregulation in Paris was the squeezing out of 'independent' opera between cushioned but generically restrictive national theatres on the one hand and a dynamic entertainment sector on the other.

But what of the regions? It is worth turning back to *L'Art musical*, a publisher's journal which, like Jules Ruelle's *Messager des théâtres*, backed deregulation to the hilt. On 28 April 1864 – the very day of Vaillant's attempt to shut the stable door – its readers would have found the following front-page editorial.

Every coin has a reverse: there is no excellent measure which does not at first present dangers, inconveniences ... We were among the first to congratulate ourselves on the salutary and providential initiative taken by the emperor on the subject of theatrical deregulation, the first to applaud sincerely, unreservedly, an idea of such liberalism which, rendering all citizens equal in the face of art, abolished at a single stroke the alien custom of licences and monopolies, incompatible with our age ...

But can this symphony of praise remain unanimous if, in leaving the capital for a while we start to examine the fate – already sad and discouraging – of our departmental stages, notably the operatic ones ... without wishing for a moment to cast blame on the new measure, we shall try to indicate briefly how it might become injurious to the art if significant intervention does not come soon to mitigate its effects.<sup>27</sup>

This was neither an over-reaction nor the misreading of a blip as a sign of long-term difficulty. Almost a year later even the official line as presented to members of the Chambre des Députés in February 1865, in the *Exposé de la situation de l'Empire*, read like an exercise in the lowering of expectation:

If, in the Départements, the theatrical situation has worsened somewhat, it is because there, especially, a complete transformation was necessary and because the 5 [6] January decree can only with time produce the positive results that the Administration has every right to hope for.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> 'Il n'est pas de médaille sans revers; il n'est pas d'excellente mesure qui ne présente au prime-d'abord quelques dangers, quelques inconvénients ... Nous avons été des premiers à nous féliciter de la salutaire et providentielle initiative prise par l'Empereur au sujet de la liberté des théâtres, des premiers à applaudir sincèrement, sans restriction, à une idée aussi libérale, qui, faisant tous les citoyens égaux devant l'art, abolissait d'un seul coup l'étrange coutume des privilèges et des monopoles, incompatible avec notre époque ... Mais ce concert de louanges pourrait-il être aussi unanime si, en quittant un moment la capitale, on se prenait à examiner le sort déjà dès à présent assez triste et décourageant des scènes départementales, notamment des scènes lyriques ... Nous le croyons pas; et sans essayer un seul moment de blâmer la nouvelle mesure, nous tâcherons d'indiquer brièvement en quoi elle pourrait être nuisible à l'art, si une puissante intervention ne venait à la mitiger par son application.' 'RALPH' (*pavillon neutre* used by Léon Escudier, Mark de Thémines/Achille de Lauzières and Gustave Chouquet) in *L'art musical*, 4/22 (28 April 1864), 169.

<sup>28</sup> 'Si, dans les départements, la situation des théâtres a reçu quelque atteinte, c'est que, là surtout, une transformation complète était nécessaire et que le décret du 5 janvier ne peut produire qu'avec le temps les heureux résultats que l'administration est en droit d'en espérer.' Cited in Pierre Bossuet, *Histoire des théâtres nationaux* (Paris, 1909), 482.

In early 1864 the most immediately serious problem was twofold. First, incumbent regional managers were either resigning or demanding enhanced terms that would fill the funding gap the government had just created by abolishing their right to tax competitors. Second, councils in major operatic centres were adhering to the letter of the legislation's 'subsidy' clause rather than to its spirit. And while I have found no hint that any council with a resident company discussed the logical free-market extreme of selling off its municipal theatre buildings, sacking its permanent staff and casting its theatrical responsibilities to the winds, sub-committees were routinely reconsidering subsidy policies *ab initio*, and councils were not all making the Paris-approved decision. These latter events, rather than the personal stories of resignation and financial brinkmanship, were what reached the papers first, helping spread a sense of panic. As reported with horror by 'RALPH', by March 1864 the councils of two contrasting theatrical towns – Marseille and Le Havre – had already interpreted the legislation as indicating that a free market should reign. They had abolished their subsidies, with the result that no grand opera company could be hired for the 1864–5 season.<sup>29</sup> The manager of all three of Le Havre's theatres from 1859, the seasoned François-Jules Juclier, had responded to the 'liberté' legislation by expressing the wish to run just the two secondary theatres, the Variétés and the Théâtre-Napoléon.<sup>30</sup> In turn, and in a move signalling rejection of an outmoded age of public accountability, the town put the Grand-Théâtre's management up for auction to the highest (sealed) bidder, precisely in the manner of entertainment venues such as the bullfighting arenas in the Midi.<sup>31</sup>

Yet it was the Marseille decision that was the most shocking, not least because with a subsidy of 220,000 francs, it was on paper the most heavily council-supported theatrical venture in regional France. A dispatch from the Marseille correspondent for the *Messager des théâtres* simply said – perhaps directed at Ruelle himself – 'it's a measure I leave you to ponder'.<sup>32</sup> At *L'Art musical*, 'RALPH' feared a domino effect: 'It is to be presumed that other provincial town councils will imitate that of Marseille'.<sup>33</sup> His concern was not for disappointed local audiences: it was for composers deprived of their royalties by the shrinking of the opera market at the very moment when it was supposed to expand. (And if it was Escudier writing, it was also doubtless to do with the prospect of lost revenue for his publishing house, for which Verdi – much-loved in Marseille – was an

<sup>29</sup> *L'Art musical*, 4/22 (28 April 1864), 169–71 at 170.

<sup>30</sup> Juclier had a long and successful association with Bordeaux from 1848 to 1855, starting with his establishment of a co-operative in the wake of the February revolution. But in the absence of municipal subsidy the 1864 legislation was, for him as for Halanzier, a step too far. Arch. Dépt. Seine-Maritime 4 T 93, folder Juclier.

<sup>31</sup> The highest bidder withdrew at interview; the eventual winner of the contract was bankrupt within weeks. Arch. Dépt. Seine-Maritime 4 T 94.

<sup>32</sup> 'c'est une mesure que je vous laisse apprécier.' Report from G. Duchemin, *Le Messager des théâtres*, 17/29 (14 April 1864).

<sup>33</sup> 'Il est à présumer que les municipalités des autres villes de la province imiteront celle de Marseille.' *L'Art musical* (28 April 1864), 170.

operatic money-spinner.) Quite apart from the imprecise wording of the legislation, its timing actively invited the feared ‘domino’ effect. The period December to March was the traditional time for town councils to advertise for new managers and to debate and revise their theatre contracts, subsidy levels included. Vaillant’s announcement of November 1863 had given every council in the country the opportunity to change its provision in time for the coming season. In the medium term, as managers’ contracts came up for renewal, copies of municipal *cabiers des charges* were swapped between towns as mayors and préfets wrote to each other, asking ‘What do you do normally?’ and, more important, ‘What are you planning to do now?’ In the coming years, all the major towns with resident theatre companies would experience agonised municipal council discussions about different forms of subsidy, or whether to award it at all. The pattern that emerged was absolutely consistent: no subsidy, no grand opera company. Regional managers could survive on ticket revenues if they put on plays, operetta, vaudeville and fairytale spectaculars (*féeries*). They could usually manage old-style *opéra-comique*. But France’s flagship genre was out of the question, as was *bel canto* opera, and even the more expansive of recent *opéras-comiques* could pose difficulty.<sup>34</sup>

For town halls part of the ‘liberté’ problem was that initial decisions made on finances meant nothing as the theatrical season progressed. However generous the agreed budget line for the new theatrical season, more likely than not managers would be pleading for concessions by New Year, at which point councillors had a gun to their heads not only because of public demand and the need to see public investment rewarded by artistic success, but because the livelihoods of lowly theatre workers for whom they had moral and/or legal responsibility depended on the theatre remaining open.<sup>35</sup> As Hemmings indicated for Paris: these latter workers were the real casualties of deregulation because before 1864 their pay was guaranteed either by the state/municipality or by the incoming manager in the event of a bankruptcy cutting a season short.<sup>36</sup> It is hardly surprising, then, that where theatre finance was concerned, council meetings were protracted, that the same arguments kept reappearing in new guises, and that councils occasionally took a hard line from the outset. In 1865 one Marseille critic described subsidy, in their brave new world of deregulation, as ‘a favour’;<sup>37</sup> but Lille had, even before 1864, worked on the basis that a grand opera season was the exception not the rule; its subsidy allocations were therefore only occasional.<sup>38</sup> The more representative pre-1864 scenario, however, is provided by Toulouse, which during the July

<sup>34</sup> For an attack on the way cultural pride caused secondary towns to take on ‘*grands airs*’ by aspiring to present genres that were beyond their capacities, see Pierre-François-Adolphe Carmouche, *Le Théâtre en province* (Paris, 1859), 20, 24. By contrast he recommended that theatre directors be required to present spoken theatre (*ibid.*, 33).

<sup>35</sup> There was also the question of wasting considerable investment, which was the argument Marseille councillors used when acceding to Husson’s request in May 1875 to receive advances on his 1875–6 subsidy. Meeting of 27 May 1875, Arch. Mun. Marseille, 77 R 38.

<sup>36</sup> Hemmings, *Theatre and State*, 174–5.

<sup>37</sup> ‘une faveur.’ L. G. G. in *La Publicité*, 10, no. 455 (9 November 1865), [1].

<sup>38</sup> Letter of 11 December 1864 from mayor of Lille to mayor of Nantes. Arch. Mun. Nantes, 2 R 584, folder ‘Question théâtrale, 1824–1932’.

Monarchy was accustomed to a year-long lyric season but whose council had seriously considered ending all subsidy on principle, and therefore all hope of opera, as early as 1845. In a decision that took three meetings to reach and in which they debated everything from municipal *régie* at one extreme to abandonment of all financial aid at the other, councillors finally decided instead to overturn their theatre committee's recommendation, to double the 1845–6 subsidy of 25,000 for 1846–7, and to preserve their opera company.<sup>39</sup>

In 1864 itself the legislation's effects were almost immediate, bringing the *Messenger des théâtres* a steady stream of unwelcome news. Ruelle had not only written in praise of liberalisation but had frequently, in the period between January and March 1864, poured scorn on the fears of others. He fell silent on the subject of 'liberté' as news of spreading chaos emerged week by week, especially as the new autumn season started up. Avignon had cut its subsidy and was trying to import whatever opera it could on a temporary basis.<sup>40</sup> Rouen was 'cut off from good music' at the Théâtre des Arts until the council reconsidered its decision.<sup>41</sup> From Dijon, correspondent Nicholas Fétu was disillusioned at the results of the council's lowering the subsidy by 5,000 francs, writing 'Here, as doubtless elsewhere, theatre deregulation has simply signalled backwards movement'.<sup>42</sup> Toulon's correspondent, B. Pietra, captured the sense of desperation brought by uncertainty and planning blight: 'As you know, my dear director, this year we nearly had no opera, and nearly no theatre, even; the subsidy was first abolished, then restored, then abolished again, then restored permanently. Oh, the fragility of council affairs!'<sup>43</sup>

The towns mentioned above would have counted as 'secondary' within France. Among most of the metropolitan centres – Lyon, Bordeaux, Toulouse, Rouen, Lille and (at a pinch) Nantes – the situation was a little more stable. In 1864 Lyon's manager Raphaël Félix was mid-contract and the council did nothing immediately (although Félix, in common with so many of his colleagues, began a campaign of special pleading for enhanced terms). Lille retained its subsidy. Toulouse likewise, but the debate was fractious, with some support for a subsidy-

<sup>39</sup> Arch. Mun. Toulouse 2 R 173. By 1847 the lyric season had been reduced to nine months; financial exigency in 1848 reduced the subsidy back to 25,000 francs, with no genre beyond vaudeville contractually required. *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Report from J. Dumas, *Le Messenger des théâtres*, 17/82 (20 October 1864), [3].

<sup>41</sup> 'sevré de bonne musique.' Report from Amédée Gaucher, *Le Messenger des théâtres*, 17/84: 27 October 1864, [2]. As discussed below, the Rouen situation was complicated because although the subsidy of 60,000 francs was not initially withdrawn, it proved insufficient for intending managers, and the council ended up letting the theatre without subsidy, and therefore without including opera in the contract. The following week Gaucher reported that even the tiny operetta company at the theatre had failed (*Le Messenger des théâtres*, 17/87 (6 November 1864).

<sup>42</sup> 'La liberté des théâtres n'a été ici, comme ailleurs sans doute, que le signal d'un mouvement rétrograde.' *Le Messenger des théâtres*, 17/92 (24 November 1864).

<sup>43</sup> 'Vous le savez bien, mon cher directeur, nous avons failli, cette année, ne pas avoir d'opéra, et partant ne pas avoir de théâtre; la subvention a été d'abord supprimée, puis rétablie, puis supprimée encore, puis rétablie définitivement. Oh! fragilité des choses municipales!' *Le Messenger des théâtres*, 17/84 (Th 27 October 1864).

free period of experimentation.<sup>44</sup> Nantes heard and rejected an impassioned plea for a return to *régie* from councillor J.-B. Guilley, but also voted for the status quo.<sup>45</sup> While such decisions to maintain subsidy levels might seem to bode well, they did not, for the simple reason that the end to privilege had brought with it an end to a manager's rights to tax artistic competitors via the traditional percentage cut of their ticket revenues. To the combination of subsidy and cross-subsidy there entered, then, a third form of necessary or at least desirable support: cash compensation to bridge the gap.<sup>46</sup> Only Bordeaux, it seems, responded decisively to such an idea, estimating at 24–25,000 francs the loss that its next manager would suffer as a result of being unable to top-slice rival entertainments, and raising its subsidy accordingly.<sup>47</sup> Its council debated its theatre contract early, on 18 January, at which point Marseille had not made its shocking decision. To the delight of the préfet of the Gironde, the newly elected and opera-loving mayor G. Henry Brochon persuaded colleagues that the decision other towns had before them was whether to maintain or to raise their subsidy level, and that 'no one is dreaming of reducing it'.<sup>48</sup> The atmosphere at Marseille a month or so later was very different, and the 'liberté' question was turned on its head as councillors – in contrast to those in Bordeaux – began to think the unthinkable.

### Marseille I: crisis

A word on Marseille's particular character is in order here, for although it was France's second operatic city in the mid-1860s, the foundations of its operatic prestige were shakier than those of either Lyon or Bordeaux. Its status rested on two things: it invariably topped the league tables of municipal subsidy, and its theatres were being run by the bullish and seemingly invincible Olivier Halanzier, the most capable regional theatre manager in the country. In the short term, neither of these aspects of its reputation would survive the 'liberté'. Though comparable

<sup>44</sup> Toulouse council meeting of 15 February 1864. Arch. Mun. Toulouse, 1 D 61, f. 15r–16r. The council did not raise the subsidy, but retained the principle of a single manager for both its theatres, explicitly so as to enable cross-subsidy between them (*ibid*).

<sup>45</sup> On Guilley's recommendation, Nantes had tried *régie*, at unacceptable cost, in 1857–61. See Étienne Destranges, *Le Théâtre à Nantes depuis ses origines jusqu'à nos jours, 1430?–1893* (Paris, 1893), 317–31. (The question mark of the title was removed for the second edition of 1902, which extended the narrative to 1901.) The question resurfaced in December 1863, with straight subsidy voted after the decree became law (mayor to préfet, 16 February 1864). Arch. Dépt. Loire-Atlantique, 177 T 8.

<sup>46</sup> This was precisely Félix Raphaël's complaint, although his 1 February 1864 estimate of a loss of 60,000 francs in tax revenues is probably an exaggeration. Like Halanzier, in the wake of the decree Félix considered resigning on grounds of 'force majeure'. Arch. Mun. Lyon 88 WP 006, folder 20. In Toulouse, the 'tax' shortfall was noted as an unwelcome consequence of the decree that would likely mean that the subsidy had to be increased. Council meeting of 15 February 1864. Arch. Mun. Toulouse, 1 D 61, f. 15r–16r.

<sup>47</sup> By contrast, the Strasbourg council decided that the more serious threat (and it was indeed a threat) was the recent hike in royalty levels demanded by the Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques. Mayor of Strasbourg to mayor of Nantes, 15 January [1866], Arch. Mun. Strasbourg 180 MW 35.

<sup>48</sup> 'personne ne songe à le réduire.' Bordeaux town council minutes, 18 January 1864. Arch. Mun. Bordeaux 12 D 47, f. 76v.

to Bordeaux in many ways, Marseille lacked the operatic pride that came as much from the architecture of Bordeaux's incomparable eighteenth-century theatre building as from its musical tradition. And unlike Lyon which had the huge Célestins theatre as well as the Grand-Théâtre, Marseille had only one building large enough to mount the most prestigious operas. Moreover (and this was unusual in France), the council did not even own the Grand-Théâtre building. In addition, council decision-making was volatile, with debate on anything from schools to cemeteries routinely more explosive than in either Lyon or Bordeaux. As Halanzier well knew, at budget-setting time nothing was ever guaranteed.

Having seen the theatres bill as submitted to the Conseil d'État, Halanzier submitted a pre-emptive resignation (pointedly, effective 1 July 1864) as early as 18 November 1863. Once it was made law he restated his intention and argued that his position as the licensed manager of Marseille's theatres had been rendered null and void by 'force majeure'.<sup>49</sup> He would have had in mind Article 7 of the legislation, which stated that 'Current theatre managers, apart from those of the subsidised theatres [meaning the state theatres], are and remain released from all the clauses and conditions of their contracts with the Administration, to the extent that they are contrary to the present decree.'<sup>50</sup> On 4 March the town council debated the legality of his resignation in light of that very Article, and discussed the question of subsidy. It decided, against the wishes of the mayor (whose predictions of artistic doom had in any case been cast aside by the consultative committee), that the spirit of the 6 January decree was to let market forces dictate the theatre industry. Accepting Halanzier's resignation, it decided to withdraw all subsidy to its theatres beyond payment of the rent for the Grand-Théâtre, the Salle Beauvau, which was not council property. The incoming mayor Bernex, who made the closing substantive contribution, summed up the cumulative logic of the meeting:

The dominant thinking in the decree of 6 January ... is that of freedom and release. By contrast, a subsidy, whatever its form and rationale might be, would clearly be in opposition to this generous thinking. Let us accept the position we have been given, without for the moment worrying about the consequences which it might have; let's not go looking for problems and difficulties from which the decree is intended to release us. When the government wants to offer freedoms and liberties to its towns, let us, its representatives [i.e. of the town], welcome them gratefully, and let's be careful, in applying them, not to diminish their salutary effects.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Letters of 14 and 26 January; 16 February 1864, cited and discussed in Marseille town council minutes of 4 March 1864 (copy in Arch. Mun. Marseille 77 R 35). This account gives the lie to Combarrous's narrative of Halanzier's resigning because the council cut his subsidy (Combarrous, *L'Histoire du Grand-Théâtre de Marseille, 31 octobre 1787 – 13 novembre 1919* [1927] (Marseille, 1980), 105). He was not a victim: resigning so early, and successfully citing 'force majeure', meant not only that he could retain 100 per cent of his security deposit but also that he was maximally flexible whatever the council decided.

<sup>50</sup> 'Les directeurs actuels des théâtres, autres que les théâtres subventionnés, sont et demeurent affranchis envers l'Administration de toutes les clauses et conditions de leurs cahiers des charges, en tant qu'elles sont contraires à ce décret.' Law of 6 January 1864, Article 7.

<sup>51</sup> 'La pensée dominante du décret du 6 janvier ... est une pensée de liberté et d'affranchissement. Or, une subvention, quelles que seraient la forme et le motif, serait évidemment en opposition

Tellingly, the Secretary General of the Bouches du Rhône, acting on behalf of the sénateur (préfet), approved the decision relating to Halanzier but not that relating to the subsidy cut – although the latter went ahead anyway.<sup>52</sup>

Marseille was journalistically well prepared for the council's decision. The main Republican daily, the *Sémaphore*, was consistently blunt, for Gustave Bénédit, who was one of the most ardent supporters of deregulation as a test of market equilibrium, was also its regular music critic. Within his music column Bénédit had spent much of 1863 and the early part of 1864 diagnosing the ills of the privilege system, collating and critiquing the writings of other interested parties in Nantes, Lyon and Rouen, and laying much of the blame for regional decadence on greedy tenors whose salaries absorbed inordinate amounts of subsidy and who needed cutting down to size. Remove the subsidy, he wrote, and the market will regulate the problem.<sup>53</sup> To an extent he even predicted – with equanimity – the likely outcome, although he thought it would be only temporary. Marseille's grand opera tradition would be halted:

Accordingly what is needed is for the artists of the principal opera houses, young and intelligent men who, after all, have wits and good sense, to judge the situation for themselves and to contribute together to its prompt regularisation through a few sacrifices. What would they say, for example, if (and it will happen) provincial towns, forced to spend their tax income on urgent works, could no longer support opera?<sup>54</sup>

To members of a council in a port with commerce at its core, this kind of argument made sense. Writing anonymously in 1863 to press for full deregulation in response to the Walewski consultation, Marius Roux – councillor, future collaborator with Zola on *Les Mystères de Marseille*, and critic of opera's parasitic hold over spoken theatre – looked forward to a system in which 'the manager's role would

avec cette généreuse pensée. Acceptons la position qui nous est faite, sans nous préoccuper, pour le moment, des conséquences qu'elle pourra avoir; n'allons pas à la recherche d'embarras et de difficultés dont le décret a voulu nous affranchir. Quand le Gouvernement veut bien accorder aux villes des franchises et des libertés, sachons, nous, ses représentants, les accueillir avec reconnaissance, et gardons-nous bien, dans leur application, d'en amoindrir les salutaires effets.' Marseille town council minutes of 4 March 1864 (copy in Arch. Mun. Marseille 77 R 35).

<sup>52</sup> Marseille town council minutes, 4 March 1864. Secrétaire général Fanjoux's annotation of 23 March reads: 'Vu et approuvés, mais seulement en ce qui concerne la démission de M. Halanzier.'

<sup>53</sup> Bénédit was not against opera *per se*, or in dispute with the then director of Marseille's theatres. Indeed, he dedicated his pamphlet *Quelques réflexions relativement à la liberté des théâtres en province* (Marseille, 1864) to Halanzier as an 'affectionate souvenir'. His view that the abolition of subsidy would slow the rise in singer salaries was one shared by the Strasbourg council, which hoped to benefit indirectly from the consequences of other councils' decisions to abolish. Strasbourg raised its subsidy from 58,000 francs to 68,000 francs, but with the extra funds targeted at skilled staff among the permanent workforce at the Grand-Théâtre. Council minutes 20 May 1864. Arch. Dépt. Bas-Rhin, TP 7/2.

<sup>54</sup> 'Il faut donc que les artistes des principaux théâtres lyriques, jeunes hommes d'intelligence et qui, après tout, ont de l'esprit et du sens, jugent bien la situation et contribuent ensemble à la régulariser le plus promptement au moyen de quelques sacrifices. Que diraient-ils, par exemple, si les villes de province (et la chose arrivera), forcées de consacrer les deniers des contribuables [aux] travaux urgents, ne pouvaient plus désormais soutenir le genre lyrique?' Gustave Bénédit, *Sémaphore de Marseille*, 37, no. 11,034 (3 February 1864), 1–2, at 2.



be restricted ... to the pure and simple presentation of what we shall allow ourselves to refer to as their *merchandise*'.<sup>55</sup> The moral: because opera is business, not art, market failure is an invitation to replace it with something more saleable. Without sharing the foreboding of those who saw the Italian system imploding following unification, Bénédit looked to Florence for a model and inferred that a major cause for the French crisis was nothing other than public apathy. A letter of 2 June 1864 to the mayor of Lyon explained that he had always been against subsidy because if a small Tuscan town with barely 60,000 inhabitants could sustain a dozen unsubsidised opera houses he did not see why Marseille could not succeed proportionately if it was what its inhabitants truly desired.<sup>56</sup>

### Adaptive behaviour

Traditional modes of regional organisation ensured that the disruption brought about by the 1864 deregulation extended beyond subsidy. The new encouragement for competition within a single town meant that one of grand opera's supporting props – cross-subsidy from a second theatre specialising in drama and vaudeville – was removed.<sup>57</sup> Under the licensing system a single manager in a two-theatre town could use the profits from plays at one venue to cross-subsidise opera at the other. Separating two theatres in order to break up a monopoly simply increased the chances that the opera house manager would run into financial difficulty, or that no aspiring manager would risk putting together an opera company. In February 1864, Rouen council, which owned none of the town's theatre buildings, suffered a setback similar to that at Le Havre. It found that the secondary buildings had been let for the coming season, but that even with its customary subsidy the jewel in the crown, the Théâtre des Arts, had no takers: without the element of cross-subsidy in addition to previous subsidy levels, no manager would touch the opera house deal.<sup>58</sup> Another supporter of deregulation, editor of *L'Univers musical* Louis Roger, reported on the Rouen council's embarrassment; but he had no answer to a conundrum on which the free market had silently

<sup>55</sup> 'Le rôle des directeurs se bornerait ... à la présentation pure et simple de ce que nous permettrons d'appeler leur *merchandise*.' (Original italics) Un ancien amateur, *Marseille. Notice historique sur ses théâtres privilégiés* (Marseille, 1863), 128.

<sup>56</sup> Arch. Mun. Lyon, 88 WP 006, folder 20.

<sup>57</sup> That said, where other kinds of props were concerned the dependency could work in reverse, with the legislation leaving a supposedly independent secondary theatre without any call on the scenery it had routinely borrowed from its mother opera house. The Variétés at Toulouse was a case in point, as explained by the mayor to the council in a speech arguing for the retention of the status quo – including the running of the two theatres together. Given in *L'Univers musical*, 12/7 (18 February 1864), 50–2, at 51–2.

<sup>58</sup> The need for such cross-subsidy was explicitly referred to in correspondence between the mayors of Rouen and Nantes in which the mayor of Rouen lamented the ecological destruction wrought by the legislation, especially in relation to opera. Letters of 21 March and 13 December 1864; the repeat of the problem of a vacant Théâtre des Arts in 1866 is reported in a letter of 12 January. Arch. Mun. Nantes, 2 R 584, folder 'Question théâtrale, 1824–1932'.

pronounced, noting with a humility unusual among journalists: 'For my part I must say I have no idea how one can get out of this hole. It requires thought.'<sup>59</sup>

Such problems encouraged two divergent forms of adaptive behaviour. The first saw entrepreneurs running for municipal cover, taking refuge in pro-rata salary systems in which expenditure would by definition never exceed revenue, or shifting financial responsibility elsewhere. Strasbourg's councillors, for instance, received seven applications to run its main theatre in 1864–5, among which were two requests for municipal *régie* (not a good sign among supposed entrepreneurs) and one for an artists' co-operative (signalling a fundamental lack of financial confidence).<sup>60</sup> The following year the new manager – who had agreed to run the theatre on the standard model of the 'financially liable manager' (*directeur responsable*) – asked the council to take over the salaries of the chorus, thereby transforming them into municipal employees.<sup>61</sup> At the other extreme, managers engaged in collusive practices aimed at effecting a return to something approaching older monopolies.

There was nothing in the legislation, beyond an appeal to the spirit of competition and encouragement to break from past practices, to prohibit the monopolistic running of theatres; but the ambiguity signalled another flaw in the legislation's design, and councils anxious to ensure that they were not indirectly subsidising entertainment rather than art tended to support generic separation as per Paris, with one manager per theatre. In Lille during an exceptional season (1867–8), the council authorised two partner managers, Briet and Bertrand, to run the Théâtre de Lille and the Théâtre des Variétés in tandem. Their subsidy – a considerable 66,000 francs which rose to 80,000 once benefits in kind were added – raised expectations, which they amply fulfilled with reprises of *L'Africaine*, *Les Huguenots*, *Les Martyrs* and *Norma* and new productions of *Mignon* and *Roméo et Juliette*, together with Offenbach's *La Grande-duchesse* and *Jean qui pleure*. They put on forty operas and eighty-three dramatic works during the season, reaping healthy profits. The following year, however, the council decided to separate the two businesses while maintaining the operatic subsidy. Briet was to stay at the Théâtre de Lille; Bertrand was to run the Variétés alone, without subsidy. Nevertheless, the two men decided to continue as before. As related with sang-froid by the local historian Léon Lefebvre in 1903, the results mixed the farcical with the artistically catastrophic:

In effect, a single company serviced both the Variétés and the Grand-Théâtre, where the artists often performed on the same night. Carriages transported them from the one to the other – but not always in time, which caused interruptions and delays about which there were frequent protests.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>59</sup> 'J'avoue, pour mon compte, que je ne sais pas trop par quel moyen on pourra sortir de ce mauvais pas. Cela demande réflexion.' *L'Univers musical*, 12/7 (18 February 1864), 50–2, at 51.

<sup>60</sup> Arch. Dépt. Bas-Rhin TP 7/2: copy of municipal council minutes for 20 May 1864.

<sup>61</sup> Request of 21 January 1865 from Amable Boige Mutée to extend his contract, Arch. Dépt Bas-Rhin, TP 7/1. He also asked for the opera season to be reduced from eight months to seven on the same subsidy.

<sup>62</sup> 'En effet, une seule troupe desservait simultanément les Variétés et le Grand-Théâtre, où les artistes jouaient souvent le même soir; des voitures les y transportaient *vice-versa*, mais pas

*footnote continued on next page*

What happened in Lille in 1868–9 was not an isolated occurrence, and it reflected the very same recognition of the need for subsidy *and* cross-subsidy that had caused such embarrassment in Rouen in the wake of the legislation's promulgation. In preparation for his second managership in Lyon, in 1869, Halanzier negotiated council and prefectorial approval for a similar arrangement, bidding to run the Grand-Théâtre and the much larger Célestins together, with an associate.<sup>63</sup> The only other system that seemed to offer any hope – touted by Bordeaux as a sign of success because it had enabled it to run for twelve years without a managerial bankruptcy – was the traditional 'emergency measure' of a performers' co-operative working on pro-rata wages.<sup>64</sup>

Amid such evidence of scabbling to stay afloat, the broader irony here is that the story of the 'liberté des théâtres' is more complex than one of brute Parisian blindness to regional difference, just as it is more complex than the Biarritz mayor's tale of theatre managers whose privileges worked contrary to the good of society. Walewski's consultation process of 1862 was thorough, its questions taking nothing for granted save that the regions needed a cure and that both diagnosis and prescription were best provided by those who inhabited them. But the legislation's move from Walewski's office to that of Vaillant, and its progress towards Napoléon III's stated aim of free competition, signalled a move away from regional sensitivity and towards a vision centred much more closely on the shape of theatrical provision in the capital. In the process, Vaillant seems to have misjudged several things. In his zeal to improve the dissemination of classical plays he underestimated the importance of opera, and therefore made inadequate provision for sustaining it within a new theatrical order. He underestimated the power of municipal free-marketeters who sought to stop local opera productions from haemorrhaging public money by stopping opera production altogether. And finally, he assumed that under deregulation public taste would remain wedded to traditional modes of educational entertainment rather than migrating to operetta, to the café-concert, and to other forms of musical spectacular. A closing return to the story of Marseille, the catalyst for the capital's shocked re-evaluation of deregulation, graphically illustrates the impact of these interlocking phenomena.

### Marseille II: the 'experiment'

With Halanzier gone, the musical content of the 1864–5 season at the Grand-Théâtre under a new manager was dominated by sixty consecutive performances of *Peau d'âne*, a Perrault-based *féerie* in which lavish scenery and costumes dazzled capacity audiences. Neither of the two main papers – the *Sémaphore de Marseille* and

toujours en temps voulu, ce qui amenait des interruptions et des longueurs contre lesquelles on manifesta fréquemment.' Léon Lefebvre, *Histoire du Théâtre de Lille de ses origines à nos jours*, 5 vols. (Lille, 1901–7), IV (Lille, 1903), 223.

<sup>63</sup> Louis Charles Alfred Mangeis, *dit* d'Herblay, was Lyon's sole Directeur des théâtres from 1866, contracting a profit-share with Halanzier to start in 1870. Arch. Mun. Lyon, 88 WP 006, folder 23.

<sup>64</sup> A. S., *La Question du Grand-Théâtre à Bordeaux* (Bordeaux, 1886), 5.

*La Publicité* – condemned the subsidy cut or its immediate consequences. There was a tone of regret in the latter; but no outrage.<sup>65</sup> The town was conducting an experiment with the new legislation, and it had to be given time to reach its conclusion. In fact, Marseille did not go entirely opera-less during 1864–5, but opera came at a high aesthetic and reputational price. Visiting companies played at *both* the city’s theatres – from Italy, doing a few weeks of Italian opera in January and April, and from Toulon at the Grand-Théâtre, doing *Guillaume Tell*, Halévy’s *Les Mousquetaires de la reine* and *La Juive*, and Boieldieu’s *La Dame blanche*. The Toulon company gave two performances of the Rossini, and the other operas each for one night only.<sup>66</sup> Accordingly, a city renowned for its French grand opera enjoyed just three nights of it during the entire season, borrowing it from a second-tier company along the coast. In Marseille, despite high ticket prices (or perhaps because of them), neither Italian visit broke even. Bénédit was disappointed, but took the opportunity to lecture his readers on the fact that expensive singers had to be paid for – by someone – and it seemed fair enough to expect audiences to bear the brunt.<sup>67</sup> Even he, though, seems to have acknowledged by the summer of 1865 that the experiment had yielded unintended and unacceptable results: in particular, deregulation was now affecting spoken theatre adversely, with ribaldry replacing delicacy and good taste.<sup>68</sup> The municipal council, temporarily chastened by the year’s events, voted in its highest subsidy to date (250,000 francs) for 1865–6, and restored both the ‘débuts’ system and price-capping. As the mayor of Marseille wrote to his opposite number in Nantes in 1866, ‘A year’s experiment has been proven sufficient.’<sup>69</sup> Bénédit went silent, even omitting to report on the opening of the new theatre season. Meanwhile, Halanzier returned in triumph having made his point via his own brand of silence, and grand opera came back as though nothing had happened.<sup>70</sup>

Yet a mere two years later similar destabilisation occurred, and with consequences that illustrated the increasingly powerful presence of operetta and the café-concert at opera’s expense.<sup>71</sup> Marseille was not alone here: the impact of deregulation on the relationship between opera and its entertainment-sector cousins was swift in France’s other major urban centres – principally Lille, Lyon and Bordeaux –

<sup>65</sup> The most Ad[olphe] Royannez expressed was disappointment that musically the new company would be limited to doing operetta, or the simplest *opéra-comique*. *La Publicité*, 9, no. 402 (1 September 1864), [1].

<sup>66</sup> Combarrous, *L’Histoire*, 106.

<sup>67</sup> *Sémaphore de Marseille*, 37, no. 11,306 (23 December 1864), [1]. Combarrous’s account of these visits is more sanguine (*L’histoire*, 106); but it should be noted that he hides a great deal in his account of the mid-1860s.

<sup>68</sup> *Sémaphore de Marseille*, 38, no. 11,503 (17 August 1865), [1].

<sup>69</sup> ‘Cette expérience d’une année a été jugée suffisante.’ Letter of 17 January 1866. Arch. Mun. Nantes, 2 R 584, folder ‘Question théâtrale, 1824–1932’.

<sup>70</sup> Combarrous glosses over this episode as a mere ‘interregnum’, which is not how it appeared in Marseille at the time. Combarrous, *L’Histoire du Grand-Théâtre*, 105–7.

<sup>71</sup> As early as 20 February 1864 the préfet of the Bouches-du-Rhône complained to the mayor of Marseille that he had been swamped with expressions of fear and foreboding relating to the new legislation and its potential effect on the relationship between theatre and entertainment (Arch. Dépt Bouches-du-Rhône, 4 T 72, folder ‘Liberté théâtrale’).

which also had thriving café-concerts in working-class areas. And while operetta could, in the early years after deregulation, be neutralised from the point of view of competition between theatres by being absorbed into the diet of a town's Grand-Théâtre, there were municipalities where artistic pride blocked such moves (Rouen, for instance, banned it at the Théâtre des Arts until 1890).<sup>72</sup> And with the liberalisation of cafés-concerts themselves in 1867 the number of potential venues for the operetta repertory expanded quickly.

Marseille's opera crisis of 1867 saw Halanzier in the middle of the fray once more. His contract having technically finished in May 1867, mayor Bernex tried to lure him back for the 1867–8 season.<sup>73</sup> But Halanzier's attempt to put together a company over the summer failed for want of a heroic tenor of high enough quality, and after July, when he decided not to sign any contract with Marseille after all, the council bargained so hard over subsidy with potential managers – eventually cutting it entirely – that the Grand-Théâtre remained closed for the first ten weeks of the season.<sup>74</sup> Marseille's chaos was humiliating: opera lovers would have to travel to Aix-en-Provence, reported one of the latter's journalists gleefully, to feed their habit.<sup>75</sup> The fallout was reported week by week and from multiple perspectives by the news-sheet *La Publicité*. It was a picture of institutional breakdown combined with solutions offering dangerously creative precedents. The conductor was reduced to advertising private music lessons<sup>76</sup> and the orchestral musicians gave impromptu concerts.<sup>77</sup> But, and with the blessing of the préfet, the core members of the Grand-Théâtre company were offered work elsewhere in the city: the corps de ballet (and the chorus) were to be found on stage at the two largest cafés-concerts, the Alcazar and the Casino.<sup>78</sup> This new ecology broke down genre barriers that opera's providers badly needed to be kept intact. In short, it offered swift proof of the mobility of singers and dancers from high to

<sup>72</sup> Not so Toulouse, where in 1872 the halting of Offenbach's *Orphée* at the Variétés (a singer became ill mid-performance) saw audience members rushing to catch its conclusion at the Grand-Théâtre, where it was playing the same night. Lucien Remplon, *Gloire immortelle ... du Capitole: Histoire de l'art lyrique au Théâtre du Capitole de Toulouse, 1880–1995* (Toulouse, 2003), 32–3. The weakening of the Rouen council's defences against operetta came with the argument that some operettas had enough artistic merit to be considered 'works in the nature of an *opéra-comique*' (pièces assimilées à l'opéra-comique). Predictably, semantic arguments ensued over what counted and what did not – relating in particular to *opéra-bouffe*. Council meeting of 11 April 1890. Arch. Mun. Rouen, 2 R, folder 'Campagne 1890–91'.

<sup>73</sup> Bernex to Halanzier, 17 May 1867. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Opéra, Dossier d'artiste Halanzier.

<sup>74</sup> This narrative, supplied by a broadly supportive Bénédict (*Sémaphore de Marseille*, 40, no. 12,135 (11 September 1867), [1]) fills in the 'hole' in Combarnous's history whereby the 1867–8 season simply starts, uncommented, in December. Combarnous, *L'Histoire du Grand-Théâtre*, 112.

<sup>75</sup> Alphonse d'Este, *La Publicité* 12, no. 530 (24 October 1867), [2]. A long way down the operatic hierarchy, Aix was the home base of the 18th *arrondissement* company, which had started doing opera only in the early 1860s. Arch. Dépt. Bouches-du-Rhône, 4 T 75 (Théâtre d'Aix, 1861–1914).

<sup>76</sup> Unsigned, *La Publicité*, 12, no. 525 (12 September 1867), [2].

<sup>77</sup> Karl Schmidt in *La Publicité*, 12, 529 (17 October 1867), [1].

<sup>78</sup> Exceptionally, these two cafés-concerts had been allowed to take around sixty employees from the non-functioning Grand-Théâtre. H. Bondilh in *La Publicité*, 12, no. 529 (17 October 1867).

low theatrical genres, especially given that some of those who had moved to the cafés-concerts stayed there once the Grand-Théâtre was finally in possession of a manager, Husson, and had to be replaced.<sup>79</sup> Mobility in this direction provided one of the most disturbing lessons of deregulation: that musicians and dancers on whom the French state and its municipal representatives had bestowed free education could just as easily find work in the entertainment sector as in that of high art, thereby giving the state and its taxpayers nothing in return for its investment. Such was, at least, the widely held view among regional officials and municipal theatre managers by the time of Agénor Bardoux's 1878 review of the French theatre industry.<sup>80</sup>

However, among those with less to lose the same signs could be interpreted differently. The hybridity of Marseille's theatrical map in 1867 prompted H. Bondilh, one of *La Publicité*'s writers, to call for a permanent end to subsidy at the Salle Beauvau on the basis that public support was an outdated and elitist phenomenon. Instead, he argued, cafés-concerts should be allowed to become full cafés-théâtres doing operetta for the 'real public' – the working classes. Operetta had proved its worth in similar circumstances at the Alcazar in Paris, he wrote; an extension of the official liberality shown in the present crisis would allow the same in Marseille, where the two main cafés-concerts were supplemented by around ten smaller venues, each of which also stood to benefit from such opening-up of the theatre market.<sup>81</sup> It is hardly surprising that he also reiterated a view increasingly present in town council discussions across the country: that municipal taxes should not be levied indiscriminately when they helped subsidise a luxury industry in which poorer taxpayers had no interest and which they had too little spare cash to enjoy.

The opposite view rested on an identical diagnosis: create an operatic vacuum and operetta will fill it. Whether that operetta was mounted at cafés-concerts or at secondary theatres such as Marseille's Gymnase was immaterial. In any case it was hardly prophecy to utter such thoughts, since it simply described what was happening in Marseille during the 1867 interregnum at the Beauvau. In a lead editorial for *La Publicité*, which presented both sides of the debate, the critic Karl Schmidt launched an attack on the genre that had, over the previous several weeks, swamped the town's musical life. His confidence bolstered by the belief that the Grand-Théâtre managership had finally been settled, he wrote:

People are quite right to say that what is good for some always brings problems for others. There will be people who will not cheer [at the news of opera's return to the Grand-Théâtre] – the good Mr Bellevaut, for example, who benefited at the Gymnase from the

<sup>79</sup> Karl Schmidt in *La Publicité*, 12, no. 534 (21 November 1867), [1].

<sup>80</sup> Within the reports préfets gathered in order to respond to Bardoux's consultation document, two themes dominate: laments about aspiring artists leaving their training early in order to make easy money, and complaints about the growth of the café-concert sector more generally.

<sup>81</sup> 'le vrai public' – H. Bondilh in *La Publicité*, 12, no. 529 (17 October 1867), feuilleton. The article was pointedly entitled 'L'Art pour le peuple' (the Beauvau being for the *dilettanti* – although to be fair its prices were organised to attract a wide spectrum of Marseillais).

lack of opera and who saturated and even super-saturated his subscribers to his heart's content, with no competition, with Offenbach's eternal orchestral skipping ... Offenbach's music (if it is indeed music) was beginning to fatigue us and was insufficient for an audience not yet completely *Gérolsteinisé*.<sup>82</sup>

The anticipated manager Albert Vizentini would return the singers, dancers and musicians currently exiled to the Alcazar and the Casino, to their rightful place; the Marseillais, claimed Schmidt, were metaphorically shouting 'No more Offenbach!'<sup>83</sup> Schmidt, as it happened, was mistaken twice over: Vizentini's contract fell through and it took until December to install Husson; and, as we have seen, not all the musical 'exiles' wished to return.

The slippage in *La Publicité* between the satirical or risqué chanson of the café-concert, and the genres of *opéra-bouffe* and operetta, is significant: all were threats if one believed in a musical hierarchy topped by opera, because all appealed more to pleasure than to edification, could attract larger audiences than opera, and could also (as they did in Paris) tempt traditional opera-goers away from their once-favoured haunts. Audience behaviour was changing, and while state intervention served to maintain the operatic status quo in the capital, the refusal of central government to support the regions financially left them alone in uncharted waters. The regions were always fragile, but it was deregulation that fatally unbalanced its ecosystem, brought everything into question, and provided no answers beyond those that individuals, or individual municipalities, carved out for themselves. At a time when the chanson and the café-concert were becoming ever more theatrical, it exploded the idea that large-scale opera had universal appeal and that its civilising force – as implied in the 1824 legislation that had seemingly presaged the rise of grand opera – brought with it unquestionable rights to subsidy in the name of the general populace. With such subsidy now a 'favour' at most, suddenly, rudely, opera was brought face to face with market forces.

### The lessons of 1864

If deregulation taught both Paris and the regions one thing, it was that it takes a single breach of a dam to flood an entire landscape. In the end, the Marseille crises of 1864 and 1867 were not so much about the provision of subsidy to keep grand opera healthy, as about its capacity to hold in check a vibrant commercial sector ready to overwhelm it with related, and hugely popular, modes of entertainment. The national experiment with deregulation took no time whatever to demonstrate that a free market would lead in precisely the opposite direction from

<sup>82</sup> 'On a bien raison de dire que le bonheur des uns fait toujours le malheur des autres; il y aura des gens qui ne jubileront pas; ce bon monsieur Bellevaut, par exemple, qui bénéficiait au Gymnase du manque d'opéra et qui saturait ses abonnés à loisir, sans concurrence et jusqu'à plus soif de l'éternel sautellement orchestré d'Offenbach, qu'on est convenu d'appeler musique bouffe! ... La musique d'Offenbach (si musique il y a) commençait à nous lasser et ne pouvait suffire à un public pas encore tout-à-fait *Gérolsteinisé*.' Karl Schmidt, *La Publicité*, 12, no. 531 (31 October 1867), [1].

<sup>83</sup> "'Plus d'Offenbach!'" tel est le cri général.' *La Publicité* (31 October 1887).

that which Vaillant intended. And yet its failure on its own terms as a specifically artistic and educational measure prompted no attempt at corrective government intervention until 1878 – the other side of a lost war and amid a succession of unstable national administrations. Moreover, that intervention – yet another request for information from préfets, mayors and theatre managers – was never acted upon, interrupted as it was by yet another change of government. Agénor Bardoux, whose ministerial portfolio combined education with the arts, regarded the ‘liberté’ as a national cultural disaster, and framed his supposedly disinterested request for information with unprecedented frankness about theatrical ‘decadence’ across the country. How, he asked, could the interests of art, of the public, and of artists be best served? How could the lowering of standards in theatre, noted by ‘lots of excellent minds’ and attributed to the 1864 decree, be reversed?<sup>84</sup> In Republican France the answer was not obvious: as the mayor of Bordeaux put it, repeal of such a hard-won ‘liberté’ was politically unthinkable, however ill-conceived one might consider the original legislation.<sup>85</sup> With a double-whammy of theatrical ‘liberté’ in 1864 and café-concert liberalisation in 1867, in terms of highbrow art the regions had been left to fend for themselves.

It is hardly surprising, then, that it should have been Bardoux’s consultation document that prompted a wave of calls for a step-change in investment in French theatre from both local and central government. The proposed solutions coming from around France ranged widely but represented a concerted move away from trust in the individual financial responsibility of the entrepreneur. They included municipal *régie* to cover permanent theatre workers such as chorus, orchestra, corps de ballet and backstage staff, with a pro-rata system for principals;<sup>86</sup> full municipal *régie*;<sup>87</sup> closer policing of theatrical competition at ministerial, rather than prefectorial, level;<sup>88</sup> and, at the extreme, central government subsidy. Where there were mixed messages, public money still loomed large as part of the solution: a response from Toulouse which started by acclaiming deregulation in principle nevertheless called for either *régie* for each town’s Grand-Théâtre (to make each municipality function like a mini-Paris) or state funding (to assimilate theatre to the status of the great French museums).<sup>89</sup> Where new music was concerned, the idea of state funding was seized upon most creatively by the theatre commission at Lyon – which had already raised a decentralist flag in July 1865 when it became the only regional theatre to secure the title ‘Imperial’. This time, the commission, whose membership included the Wagnerian Henry Coutagne,

<sup>84</sup> ‘[b]eaucoup d’excellents esprits.’ Consultation document sent in November 1878. Undated copy in AN Paris, F<sup>21</sup> 1330, folder ‘Circulaires’.

<sup>85</sup> Mayor of Bordeaux to préfet of the Gironde, 17 December 1898. Arch. Dépt. Gironde, 167 T 15, folder ‘Conséquences du décret du 6 janvier 1864’.

<sup>86</sup> Response from Nantes in Arch. Mun. Nantes 2 R 584, folder ‘Question théâtrale, 1824–1932’.

<sup>87</sup> Response from Director of Grand-Théâtre, Bordeaux, in Arch. Dépt. Gironde, 167 T 15, folder ‘Conséquences du décret du 6 janvier 1864’.

<sup>88</sup> Response from Director of Théâtre-Français, Bordeaux, in Arch. Dépt. Gironde, 167 T 15, folder ‘Conséquences du décret du 6 janvier 1864’.

<sup>89</sup> Response signed Th. Omer, 28 November 1878, in Arch. Dépt Haute-Garonne, 8 T 5, folder ‘1878–9 Enquête sur les résultats de la loi du 6 j. 1864 sur la liberté des théâtres’.



decided at a meeting of 29 November 1878, in response to Bardoux's consultation, that the failure of the new Théâtre-Lyrique in Paris was an opportunity for the diversion of part of its subsidy to Lyon in return for the mounting of new works at the Grand-Théâtre.<sup>90</sup> It was an audacious call, but it worked, and it brought them 20,000 francs to support the world premiere of Saint-Saëns's *Etienne Marcel* in 1879. News of the grant spread quickly, with the sous-préfet of Blaye knowing about it even before the official news was relayed to Lyon on 20 December.<sup>91</sup> To a decentralist such as him it seemed like a sign of genuine progress, and one of the few ways of counteracting the 'scourge' (*plaië*) of the café-concert. In something approaching a turning of the tables, his response to Bardoux's consultation boiled down to the notion that since it was central government that had made a chronic problem acute, it was the responsibility of central government to bankroll the remedy. It was only a short step to the project outlined to Bardoux the following year – the year he left office – by a certain L. Fabert, who advocated a special 'Regional Theatres' service run out of the Ministry itself.<sup>92</sup> It is of course somewhat ironic that calls for centralisation and decentralisation alike should be predicated upon financial backing from Paris.<sup>93</sup>

For all that it was never intended to bring about the full industrialisation of theatre, deregulation wrenched operatic France into a commercial age from which the war of 1870 and its economic aftermath ensured it would not be able to return. Especially given the bankruptcies that followed the sudden expansion of the theatre industry after the original 1791 deregulation, we might ask whether it could ever have worked in opera's favour; but in 1864 there was certainly too much momentum behind operetta and the café-concert for opera not to suffer in comparison. Moreover the interpenetration of genres – with operetta routinely presented on subsidised regional stages and, after 1867, in cafés-concerts too – was a further blow. As for the Classical theatre that Vaillant had championed so effusively at the Paris Conservatoire in 1864: regionally, it was left for dead. Finally, the war of 1870 simply secured what 1864 had established, because for all the rhetoric about turning away from frivolity, in straitened times during the early Third Republic operetta thrived not just because it was popular, but because it was cheap.

<sup>90</sup> Minutes: Arch. Mun. Lyon, 88 WP 010 folder 'Demande de participation au reliquat de la subvention accordée en 1877 au Théâtre Lyrique'.

<sup>91</sup> Sous-préfet de Blaye to préfet de la Gironde, 3 December 1878. Arch. Dépt. Gironde, 167 T 15, folder 'Conséquences du décret du 6 janvier 1864'.

<sup>92</sup> L. Fabert, *Mémoire sur la nécessité de rattacher au Ministère de l'Instruction Publique et des Beaux-Arts le service des théâtres des départements et sur la création, à l'Administration des Beaux-Arts d'une Inspection et d'un Bureau spéciaux à ce service* (unpublished, Paris, April 1879). AN F<sup>21</sup> 954.

<sup>93</sup> Neither was the idea of central government funding new: it had been the cornerstone of Antoine-Louis Malliot's doomed petitions of the 1860s to the French Senate, rebuffed as 'centralist' by Baron Haussmann. See my 'Funding Grand Opera', 80–3. In addition, it is notable that this shift of the 1870s is presaged by the highly ironic post-1864 'Stateism' which Féret detects within the *arrondissement* system, where municipalities that had never had to supervise their theatre closely because itineraries were pre-set at Départemental level, found themselves suddenly taking ownership of and subsidising theatrical affairs, in 'decentralised' fashion because there was no one else to do it. See Féret, 'Le décret', 59–60.

Yet if operetta and the *double-entendre* of the café-concert chanson were generic threats in terms of ticket sales and municipal artistic pride, they were, in financial terms, only the most visible part of a complex problem many aspects of which either lay beyond municipal and entrepreneurial control, or involved hidden costs some of which municipalities resented having thrust upon them by central government in the name of ‘freedom’. Ironically, the newly optional ‘artistic’ subsidy lay at the heart of such costs: but the minimum level at which it could reasonably be set had to take into account shifting inter-relationships between a manager’s taxation and cross-subsidy rights, his liabilities in respect of the Poor Tax and author royalties, an ever-shortening operatic season leaving ‘municipal’ theatre workers unoccupied but still requiring payment, and the need to ensure that the theatre was widely accessible across social classes, that recruited artists were acceptable to the public, and that repertory underwent regular renewal.<sup>94</sup> There is no hint in the legislation or the documents accompanying it that maréchal Vaillant took account of any of these concerns in 1863. Those which were unique to the ecology of the regions seem to have escaped his Parisian mindset entirely. Among short-term consequences we can cite endemic destabilisation allowing entertainment genres to break through barriers that were supposed to keep them at bay; among medium-term consequences we can point to enduring weakness in the regions’ capacity to effect a much-desired artistic decentralisation towards the end of the century in several major cities – among them notably Rouen (the first officially ‘national’ regional theatre since Lyon in 1865) and Lyon itself (often dubbed the ‘French Bayreuth’).<sup>95</sup> While the national theatres could expect a measure of continuity, metropolitan France knew only uncertainty and perennial change. And while neither subsidies nor grand opera disappeared for good in the wake of 1864, the consequences of deregulation rendered France’s most prestigious musical genre vulnerable as never before.

<sup>94</sup> The consolidation during the later nineteenth century of a ‘guest star system’ among singers did nothing to curtail salary levels; when publishers began hiring rather than selling the orchestral parts to old and new music alike, financial pressures would worsen still further.

<sup>95</sup> On Rouen, see Clair Rowden, ‘Decentralisation and Regeneration at the Théâtre des Arts, Rouen, 1889–1891’, *Revue de musicologie*, 94 (2008), 139–80.