

MUSICOLOGICAL STUDIES AND DOCUMENTS

25

LE BALET COMIQUE DE LA ROYNE

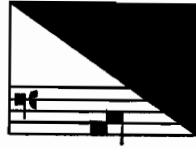
1581

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AND DOCUMENTS

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LE BALET COMIQUE DE LA ROYNE  
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## INTRODUCTION

October 15, 1581 is a significant date in the history of Western music because it marked the production in Paris of the *Balet comique de la Royne*, "the first genuine ballet de cour" and an important step in the development of opera. It is the first known work to intentionally combine dance, poetry, and music in a coherent dramatic whole.

This artistic event must be seen in its proper perspective, against the contemporary artistic, political, and social background. From the artistic and literary standpoint, by 1581 the Italian-inspired Renaissance had almost run its course; the great palaces in the Loire valley had all been built; the great masters of painting were turning more and more to expressive mannerism and the Baroque. In literature the members of the *Pléiade* were still alive and active, notably Ronsard, now an old man, and the protestant D'Aubigné, Antoine de Baïf, Pontus de Tyard and Antoine Jodelle. Their ideas, often derived from the Italians, were most influential in the literary and philosophical circles, especially their attempt to revive classical forms and techniques in the arts.<sup>1</sup> In 1581 the kingdom of France politically and economically was on the brink of chaos. The many years of recurring internecine warfare between the Protestants and the Catholics, culminating in the brutal St. Bartholomew's Massacre in 1572, had disrupted society and reduced the country to penury. The Protestant workmen, the wealth producers, had been driven into exile, so commerce and industry were greatly reduced. Then, too, the extravagance of the court under a succession of Valois kings was a prime factor in the economic *débâcle*. In 1581 the ruler was the incompetent Henry III, who was dominated by that strong-minded and not-too-subtle Florentine, his mother Catherine de' Medici.

This same year of 1581 saw a brief respite in the active fighting in France, and on the occasion of a state marriage the King, possibly at the suggestion of his mother, as Frances Yates guesses,<sup>2</sup> conceived

<sup>1</sup> Frances A. Yates, *The French Academies of the Sixteenth Century*, London, The Warburg Institute, University of London, 1947. 132 *et passim*. I have relied heavily on this work in my discussion.

<sup>2</sup> Yates, *op. cit.*, 258.

## TO THE KING OF FRANCE AND POLAND

SIRE, inasmuch as you, in handling the tiller of the French Empire, have achieved the two points of perfection of all human action — the practical and the pleasant — it seems more than just that your merits should be celebrated in both ways. For the practical, your conduct of armies, battles, engagements, sieges, taking of cities, trophies, journeys and sceptres, would be sufficient proof that Your Majesty has served the preservation, restoration, and grandeur of this crown. And in this regard, Sire, the history of France could provide you, not with equals, but with many seconds, kings, in truth, of great valor, honored by many fine conquests, and, after you, worthy of honor in all future centuries. But in the matter of pleasure — to have known how to temper this martial inclination with honest pleasures, delightful pastimes, recreation marvelous in variety, inimitable in beauty, incomparable in its delightful novelty — one will pardon me if I maintain that you have had no predecessor nor will ever have (as I believe) any successor.

Now as all these heroic facts may be devoured by inhuman Saturn with his teeth of oblivion, if they are not guaranteed by several defences and maintained by the protection of a noble account, likewise, all these delightful triumphs provided to give relaxation to your bellicose hand would return to their original obscurity and belittlement if they were not consigned to memory by discourse and pen. In dedicating this libretto to Your Majesty there is no more any need to state here, not the reasons but rather the necessities, than it would be to recount, in praise of the author of all things, these beautiful harmonies of the world that we see, these lovely variations the seasons produce, in short, all the happiness and contentment that we breathe in our low estate. Has Your Majesty wished to show how much sweetness, delectation and the good odor of peace you could shower on your people? Have you wished to refresh your nobility from so many military fatigues? Behold, a thousand pleasures and honest pastimes which appeared with dexterity, prompt to serve you, to make known to all neighboring kings, and to all more distant peoples, the loyalty and fertility and abundance of your kingdom, not only as to valiant men but also great and sensitive spirits. And after all your troubles you can amuse yourself among your subjects with more splendor and magnificence than other monarchs would have been able to do after a long peace and tranquillity. And as the excellent constitution and bearing of a person is seen, when, after some serious illness there still remains

## LA MUSIQUE DES TRITONS

$\flat = d$

Al - lons com - pa - gnes fi - dè - les, A - vec

Al - lons com - pa - gnes fi - dè - les, A - vec

Al - lons com - pa - gnes fi - dè - les, A - vec

Al - lons com - pa - gnes fi - dè - les, A - vec

Al - lons com - pa - gnes fi - dè - les, A - vec

des feuil - les nou - vel - les, De mau - ves blan - ches, de

des feuil - les nou - vel - les, De mau - ves blan - ches, de

des feuil - les nou - vel - les, De mau - ves blan - ches, de

des feuil - les nou - vel - les, De mau - ves blan - ches, de

des feuil - les nou - vel - les, De mau - ves blan - ches, de

fleurs, Que cha - cu - ne d'al - le - gres - se U - ne cou -

fleurs, Que cha - cu - ne d'al - le - gres - se U - ne cou -

fleurs, Que cha - cu - ne d'al - le - gres - se U - ne cou -

fleurs, Que cha - cu - ne d'al - le - gres - se U - ne cou -

fleurs, Que cha - cu - ne d'al - le - gres - se U - ne cou -

Read: al-lé-gres-se for al-le-gres-se

as it is described by Homer in Book X of his *Odyssey*, seems to refer partly to what is divine and partly to what is natural and moral. Circe, according to Homer, is a goddess and therefore immortal. She is daughter of the Sun and a sea nymph. The etymology of her name, which is Greek, comes from κερνάω (*kirnan*), which means "to mix", and it is true that everything is created from a mixture of the Sun, which causes all warmth, and the sea, which is the source of all humidity. The name of her mother is Perseis, and comes from the Greek περᾶν, which means "passing beyond", which is very suitable to the Sea, which ebbs and flows in perpetual motion from the banks and coasts of the earth, and by this movement preserves itself from dirt and infection. So we will assume that Circe, engendered by the Sun and the Sea, shares the qualities of both. The Sun by nature is the efficient cause of everything here below, with the help of moisture proceeding from the water which is in the veins of the earth. This same Sun signifies allegorically the clearness and light of the Truth and that Divine Spark which illumines our souls. The sea by nature nourishes and produces that which maintains and excites pleasure. For this reason the poets have pretended that Venus arose from the sea, and called her "aphrodite". Allegorically this may be taken for sensual pleasure, which frequently brings men to ship-wreck.

From these considerations it seems not unreasonable to take Circe for that desire in general which rules and dominates all living things and is a mingling of the divine and the sensual. It has very different effects, leading some men to virtue, others to vice. This is in agreement with the fact that she is called "Queen" and has at her service and in servitude to her nymphs and animals. By the nymphs, who are partly divine, are meant the virtues, and by the brute animals, vice and sensuality. For desire spurs to virtue those who are prepared for it by divine help; on the contrary, desire makes those who are destitute of good intentions and training into servants and slaves of vice. Circe's dwelling is a magnificent palace in a delightful place, a beautiful building, gilded and shining, which means that desire cannot be aroused without the appearance of beauty, either true or false. The person of this goddess is described as being extraordinarily