

Elisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre's Opera Loss

Megan O'Dell

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Elisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre was an inspiring female musician and composer in the late 17th century in France. She was a talented harpsichordist, singer, and composed many works of different varieties. She is credited as the first woman to write an entire opera and have it performed on the stage. However, her work, *Céphale et Procris*, was found fruitless and unpopular when it first premiered in Paris. Many critics have called the opera unsuccessful, as it was only premiered five or six times on stage when first released. Jacquet de La Guerre's opera lost popularity because of the time period it was written in, not because of her skills as a composer and how she created her opera.

One factor that may have alluded to why Elisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre's Opera was considered a flop is the fact that her Opera premiered several years after the death of Jean-Baptiste Lully. Lully was well loved in the world of French music during his time period. As a young man, Lully showed to be extremely talented and eventually came under the employment of King Louis XIV as a dancer, ballet director, orchestral conductor and eventually court composer. ¹ The King was very pleased with Lully's work and praised his operas. Overtime, Lully became the famous opera composer that all in France looked to for Opera style and grandeur. In a study on Lully and his rise to fame, Albert Borowitz shares the following:

Somehow, Lully became convinced that he should acquire the Perrin privilege and fashion a wider musical monopoly for himself. It is not clear whether the idea originated in Lully's own ambition... or Louis XIV himself. Lully always attributed the idea to the king, and it would certainly have been consistent with the king's belief that each

¹ Albert Borowitz, *Musical Mysteries: From Mozart to John Lennon* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2010), 900-901

important task of the nation, whether political or cultural, should be exclusively committed to trusted hands. ²

Lully's operas were in *parodie* style, which is described by French Opera scholars as a theatrical adaptation of different stories, especially Greek myths. ³ By the end of his career, Lully was the master of opera and the people of France knew it. In the article "Seventeenth Century Parodies of French Opera", Donald Grout shares about the public's reaction to Lully's Operas:

[Lully's] popularity surpassed anything ever before known in Paris. The composer's position of favor at court, the force of his own personality, and the enthusiasm of the public for the new and fashionable operatic entertainment, combined to make the appearance of each new work a major event, signalized by glowing press notices and followed usually by a swarm of epigrams. The public crowded to the opera house and listened with rapt concentration to its favorite dramatic scenes.⁴

Elisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre's opera, *Céphale et Procis*, premiered seven years after the death of Lully, but his influence on music still held in France and in Europe as a whole at the time, especially in the realm of Opera. The people may have seen this new opera by Jacquet de La Guerre as lesser than what it actually was because it did not compare in their eyes to the work of Lully. His monopoly on the genre of opera lasted beyond his lifetime. Lully's influence lasted

² Albert Borowitz, *Musical Mysteries: From Mozart to John Lennon* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2010), 900-901

³ Derek Conon, "Atys Burlesque: Parodies De L'opéra De Quinault Et Lully à La Foire Et à La Comédie-Italienne, 1726–1738," *Modern Language Review* 108, no. 2 (April 2013): 645-646

⁴ Donald J. Grout, "Seventeenth-Century Parodies of French Opera—Part I," *The Musical Quarterly* XXVII, no. 2 (April 1941): 211-219

for many years, making it hard for other opera composers to rally what they may consider success.

Another factor that may explain why *Cephale est Procis* was not successful is the time period in which the opera was first premiered. At the time, the Paris courts were focusing more on sacred music. This, according to Celia Porter, author of the book *Five Lives in Music: Women Performers, Composers, and impresarios from the Baroque to the Present*, is attributed to Louis XIV's mistress De Maintenon who stressed the importance of the grand motet.⁵ Also, *Cephale est Procis* came out in the year 1694, which was in the middle of the Nine Years War between France and many united European countries. War is very taxing on a country, especially when it comes to finances and general public morale. It would seem that this would make it more difficult for the people to have the desire to spend money to attend and enjoy a performance such as an opera while this great and wearisome war is taking place.

Lastly, this is still during the time period when male composers are more common and accepted than female. Elisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre had great talents and connections, especially with King Louis XIV. Mary Cyr's book describing the life of Elisabeth explains that she spent many years performing for the King at court and gained his favor. She married famous composer and organist Marin de La Guerre, giving her more of a foot into the world of music and performing.⁶ Even though she was blessed with this very great opportunity to create a living off of music, very few female musicians had this chance during this time period. Cecelia Porter

⁵ Cecelia Hopkins Porter, *Five Lives in Music: Women Performers, Composers, and impresarios from the Baroque to the Present* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 65

⁶ Mary Cyr, "Elisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre: Myth or Marvel? Seeking the Composer's Individuality." *Musical Times* 149, no. 1905 (Winter 2008): 83-84

said in regards to Elisabeth that “even after marriage, Jacquet de La Guerre’s career as a harpsichord performer, composer, and keyboard teacher continued to grow—not the typical case of women musicians of her times.”⁷ For this reason, it may be plausible that the people were prejudiced against the opera because of the gender of the composer. This may not however hold a very strong argument because Jacquet de La Guerre does find great success in other realms of her composition.

Though the opera may have been considered a flop, it is not because of the skills of Elisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre as a composer. Before writing this opera, she was a very successful composer, especially for her harpsichord works.⁸

In many ways, her opera was formulated after the great Operas by Lully, which were considered to be foundational for all Operas. Donald Grout shares the following about the features found in Lully’s operas:

There is always a prologue devoted chiefly to singing the praises of Louis XIV and often containing allusions to contemporary events. The opera is divided into five acts. The subjects are drawn from ancient mythology or medieval romance, and many of the settings are of a pastoral character. The action is developed by means of recitative.... dialogues, duets and ensembles of various kinds are common.⁹

⁷ Cecelia Hopkins Porter, *Five Lives in Music: Women Performers, Composers, and impresarios from the Baroque to the Present*

⁸ Mary Cyr, “Elisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre: Myth or Marvel? Seeking the Composer’s Individuality.” *Musical Times* 149, no. 1905 (Winter 2008): 83-84

⁹ Donald J. Grout, “Some Forerunners of the Lully Opera,” *Music and Letters* XXII, no. 1 (January 1941): 1-25

Céphale est Procris has five acts, including the prologue devoted to the King. For the prologue, de La Guerre praises and glorifies King Louis XIV, which was crucial at a time of war when morale was low. The main characters, Cephalus and Procris, are from a Greek myth. There was a five-string orchestra present, and the majority of the Opera was recitative, with “*air de cour*” or vocal solos interspersed throughout as well as dances, choruses, and instrumental songs.¹⁰ With a similar style, setup and extravagance, it would have fit right into the style of Opera popular at this time, meaning Lully’s style.

Unlike Lully’s opera, de La Guerre ends her opera with an aria which really adds to the mood of the opera since it has such a tragic ending. This adds a new flare, since typically Lully’s opera would end with a large chorus number.

¹⁰ Cecelia Hopkins Porter, *Five Lives in Music: Women Performers, Composers, and impresarios from the Baroque to the Present* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 65



1. Elisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre, *Céphale est Procis* (Paris, France: Christophe Ballard, 1694)

Some claim that the opera was unsuccessful and disliked by the audience because of the Libretto, not because of the composer and the music she created. The librettist for this work was Duché de Vancy. Cecelia Porter describes his work for *Céphale est Procis* in the following way:

Duché de Vancy's text even included subplots of his own creation unfolding in complicated twists and artificial effects— also his own— that interrupt the story's

dramatic tension rather than intensifying it. Problems such as these in the libretto possibly failed to ignite Jacquet de La Guerre's gifts for "musical invention."¹¹

But despite the lack of clarity in the lyrics and interrupted plot, the music is still a success. Porter argues that "All in all, Jacquet de La Guerre created a drama of imposing psychological depth, the characters' unusually lengthy airs giving vent to overwhelming human emotions."¹²

Elisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre's opera, *Céphale est Procis*, was unsuccessful in Paris, but not because of the music she wrote. The libretto, the time period it premiered in and the circumstances of the time added to the ultimate downfall of her opera. Despite the immediate failure she saw, her opera did find favor outside of Paris. A man named Sébastien de Brossard, "a composer music theorist, lexicographer, and collector...performed the prologue to to *Céphale est Procis* at Strasbourg's Académie de la Musique between 1695 and 1698".¹³ The opera found a lot of success with the people in Strasbourg. Thankfully, the opera did not diminish Elisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre's desire to continue composing.

¹¹ Cecelia Hopkins Porter, *Five Lives in Music: Women Performers, Composers, and impresarios from the Baroque to the Present* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 65.

¹² Cecelia Hopkins Porter, *Five Lives in Music: Women Performers, Composers, and impresarios from the Baroque to the Present*

¹³ Cecelia Hopkins Porter, *Five Lives in Music: Women Performers, Composers, and impresarios from the Baroque to the Present*

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