

Giselle: ballet at the crossroads

By Michelle Potter

Giselle is an iconic work in the ballet repertoire: “a true masterpiece; a poem in dance”, wrote the dance historian Ivor Guest. Since its premiere in Paris in June 1841 it has had an almost unbroken tradition of performance around the world. It also holds a very special place in the history of the Paris Opera Ballet.

Giselle comes originally from an era when ballet and opera were close cousins. At the time of *Giselle*'s premiere, a ballet performed as a completely independent production was something unimaginable to theatregoers. Every performance at the Paris Opera, known then as L'Académie royale de musique, included both opera and ballet. There would always be a lengthy ballet sequence in every full-length opera; a ballet was never shown without being accompanied by a short opera, or part of an opera, before or after the ballet, and creative artists who were involved in the productions worked across both forms. The first performance of *Giselle*, for example, was preceded by the third act of Gioachino Rossini's opera *Moïse et Pharaon* and both works had their scenery designed by renowned French designer of the era, Pierre-Luc-Charles Cicéri. Patrons expected both singing and dancing when they visited the theatre and they were easily able to access detailed libretti for both operas and ballets, with the ballet libretti describing the action scene by scene in minute detail.

Ballet and opera of the period also shared many characteristics. Most importantly both told a story, usually of a complex and elaborate nature. The stories contained many subsidiary



characters, whose roles were intrinsic to the unfolding of the narrative, and the ballets always included a number of non-dancing scenes. The two art forms, grand opera and “ballet-pantomime” as it was called, also often drew on similar themes. In fact some aspects of the story of *Giselle* recall features of operas that were popular in Paris in the early nineteenth century. *Lucia di Lammermoor*, which was produced in Paris in 1837 and again in 1839, has a well-known mad scene that could easily have been a source for the moment when *Giselle*, surrounded by a group of horrified onlookers, loses her mind at the end of Act I of the ballet, and the opera *Robert le Diable*, which had its debut performance in

Paris in 1831, has a scene in which a group of ghostly figures emerge from their graves to dance, as happens in Act II of *Giselle*.

The *Giselle* we see today, however, has lost many of its nineteenth-century details, especially the more elaborate moments of storytelling. Some of the subsidiary characters have been eliminated; others have had their impact lessened. Much of the mime has been removed and the ballet has become far more abstract than nineteenth-century audiences would have known. But looking back at archival sources that remain today, such as composer Adolphe Adam's autographed score and the original annotated libretto, both of which have been analysed in recent historical investigation, it is clear that *Giselle* was part of the “ballet-pantomime” tradition and had close ties to the way operas of the day were presented.

But *Giselle* also belongs to a period of social and political change in France, and a period of change at the Paris Opera as well. The popular uprising against the conservative government of Charles X and the House of Bourbon in July 1830, which led to the establishment of the July Monarchy in France, saw Louis-Philippe proclaimed a constitutional sovereign, King of the French. It also saw the rise of an affluent middle-class, which became an important new audience for performances at the Opera. The Opera became a subsidised, private enterprise rather than the property of the royal court and the new director, Dr Louis Véron, knew that he needed to attract this new audience by moving the Opera into the modern world. His extensive research into the taste of this new





eminently Carlotta who is responsible for the unheard-of success of the ballet." But the work itself, with its contrast between the real and the mysterious, embodied all that was yearned for by those who supported change.

The original production of *Giselle* stood, then, at the crossroads between an old order and a new approach to ballet. Since 1841 the work has undergone many changes that have now made its early connections to grand opera hard to discern. But it has remained one of the great works in the ballet repertoire changing to accommodate new audiences and new approaches. With its origins deeply embedded in the development of French culture and society, and with its ongoing capacity to renew itself and absorb change, it is an essential component in the history and repertoire of the present Paris Opera Ballet.

audience indicated that they no longer were so interested in the classical tradition—it reflected the past against which they had rebelled—but yearned for what the blossoming Romantic Movement in literature offered: the imaginative, the picturesque, the emotive, the mysterious and the exotic. He also concluded that they wanted less complicated stories and dance that developed naturally out of the action.

The libretto for *Giselle* grew out of these Romantic ideas. The story was conceived by Théophile Gautier, French writer and critic and huge admirer of the ballet. It was based on two literary works, a poem by Victor Hugo called *Fantômes* (Apparitions) and a section from a work by the German poet Heinrich Heine, *De l'Allemagne* (From Germany), in which Heine discusses Willis, ghostly figures of brides who rise from their graves at midnight to dance. Gautier realised, however, that his original libretto was not suited to theatrical development—basically it lacked a strong plot—and he drew on the services of an experienced librettist, Vernet de St Georges to develop it further. Choreography was entrusted to the Opera ballet master Jean Coralli with significant contributions coming from dancer and choreographer Jules Perrot.

Giselle was a major success for the Opera and that success was due in part to the dancing of the original *Giselle*, Italian-born Carlotta Grisi. Her performances earned her the name "La Carlotta" and Heinrich Heine wrote: "It is pre-

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