

THE FRENCH OPERA POSTER

The musical world of the late nineteenth-century France was a battleground on which romanticism and realism were only two of the opponents. Wagner, with his advanced harmonies and leitmotifs, was regarded with suspicion, derision and horror, and French composers were exhorted not to follow this madman. As usual, art and music strolled along together. While radical changes began to be felt in all of the arts, operas were still, for the most part, exotically set around myths, legends or love stories of the past, matching the Salon paintings whose plump pink and white nudes cavorted with cupids and gods in settings that never were.

The same time span, however, witnessed the golden age of the French operetta with the innovative works of Herve, the superb creations of Offenbach and the charming contributions of the younger composers. French operetta moved rapidly from burlesques of serious operas through a wide range of subjects and styles, until, by the turn of the century, it was often quite close to musical comedy.

During this period, most of the ballets produced at the Paris Opera were merely embroideries on the great Romantic achievements of the 1830's and 1840's. No basic innovations were in store until the impact of Diaghilev around 1910, but with its beautiful scores and brilliant choreographers and performers, French ballet remained an important part of the musical scene.

From the start of mass production in the late nineteenth century, enthusiasts collected posters by buying them, bribing the men who put them up for advertising or by sponging them off the walls. Because posters did not call themselves art, they could be enjoyed without the responsibility of judgment. They did their part in bringing new artistic movements to a far larger public than visits to museums and galleries.