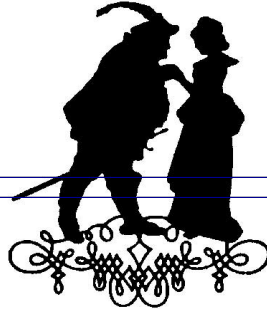


# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## Opera Lafayette's Inventive *Silvain*

### A Southwestern Take on Grétry's *Opéra comique*

With its spring Festival in Washington, DC, and New York City, the intrepid Opera Lafayette initiated its ambitious three-year venture to examine various facets of 18<sup>th</sup> century French music. Each festival focuses in turn on the era of a single influential woman. The first, this year, was on Marie Antoinette (1756-1793), wife of Louis XVI and Queen of France. Succeeding years will feature Madame de Pompadour, mistress of Louis XV, and then Madame de Maintenon, the second wife of Louis XIV.

#### Festival 2022:

#### The Era of Marie Antoinette '*rediscovered*'

As Founder and Artistic Director Ryan Brown explains in his introduction to this year's comprehensive 110-page program book, "adding 'rediscovered' to the end of our Festival title suggests our intent to reexamine an era which is both

fraught with easy stereotypes and ingrained judgments." For revolutionists of the day, Marie represented everything wrong with the abusive, self-interested monarchy; but what Opera Lafayette gives us is the other side of the coin, a glimpse of the woman herself, her musical interests, and her influence on performance and composition.

One of these programs was an enticing concert titled "The Musical Salon of Marie Antoinette," which alas I was unable to attend. But I was able to attend *Silvain*, the principal focus of this three-day Festival at El Museo del Barrio in New York. The delightful *opéra comique* by André Grétry had been written in 1770, the same year as the wedding of the Dauphin to the 15-year old Marie Antoinette; later, as queen, she appointed Grétry her personal director of music. Although the queen eventually fell victim to the guillotine in 1793, Grétry narrowly kept out of trouble, careful to cultivate the right people. Indeed

the prolific composer wrote some sixty operas before his death in 1813, the majority of them, and the best of them, in the period of Marie's reign.

*Silvain* was one of André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry's biggest early successes (and interestingly, the first real opera presented in the USA, in New Orleans in 1796). As a popular hit that Marie attended many times, it became one of her favorite operas. So it is worth a pause to emphasize the leading position in France Grétry occupied during the twenty years of Marie's patronage. One tends to label this period "The Era of Mozart," but the era could also rightly be called "The Era of André Grétry." Most of his lively and tuneful operas were hugely successful and played all over Europe; his contemporary Mozart might well have envied the international success of these works.

As for subject matter during this period, in his pre-opera lecture (and fine program notes) graduate student in historical musicology Callum John Blackmore pointed out that Pastoralism, the idealism of simple life with its connection to nature, was beginning to permeate every facet of artistic life in France in the 1770's. In support of this movement, Marie was certainly attracted to *Silvain* as much for the characters' deep relation to the land as for the delightful music.

The plot fits the mold of a typical *opéra comique* of the day, centering on Silvain who works as a poor farmer, having been disinherited by his rich father for marrying a woman beneath his position. When a new landowner accuses Silvain of poaching, his wife and daughters plead for mercy. Soon Silvain recognizes the landowner as his own father who, eventually won over by Silvain's daughters, relents and the family is reconciled. The opera ends with the maxim: "simple virtue holds more weight than good birth."

## A Historical Perspective

Looking at the era of Marie Antoinette and André Grétry, it is interesting to juxtapose his early opera against two of his later, post-revolution works - *Pierre le Grand (Peter the Great)*, 1790, and *Guillaume Tell*, 1791. I managed to catch both of these some years ago, the first in Moscow in 2005 at the internationally renowned Helicón Theatre, the second in Liege, Grétry's birthplace, an Opéra Royal de Wallonie production at the Théâtre Royal in 2013. The first was clearly an opera for the new post revolutionary era, showing a king as a man of the people, laboring with his hands as a disguised carpenter to learn how to build ships. Like Silvain, he falls in love with and marries a peasant girl, Catherine (later the Empress Catherine I). For Grétry and his librettist (Jean-Nicolas Bouilly), Tsar Peter was intended to symbolize King Louis XVI and Catherine is Marie Antoinette – the pair depicted as ideal figures, deeply concerned for the welfare of the common people. Marie Antoinette attended just one performance, where spectators sang the famous couplet at the end comparing Peter the Great and Louis XVI, shouting "Vive la Reine!" and "Vive Grétry." Eventually, of course, in spite of Grétry's brave efforts, Marie succumbed to the radicals; Grétry, although on thin ice, survived.

As for *Guillaume Tell*, we have the same familiar theme as Rossini's later work, the masses rising up to purge the land of tyranny in the name of liberty- the heroic struggle of Swiss patriots led by Tell against the oppressive Austrians under Guesler, the local governor. The work, not surprisingly, was a triumph, performed frequently throughout the Revolutionary period. Have we strayed far from *Silvain*? Not really. For one thing, both works open with lighthearted scenes of peasant harmony, in the later work rather bloated with festive antics, but in

his early work, admirably succinct, as with Opera Lafayette's commensurate production. More important, as Mr. Blackmore explains in his notes:

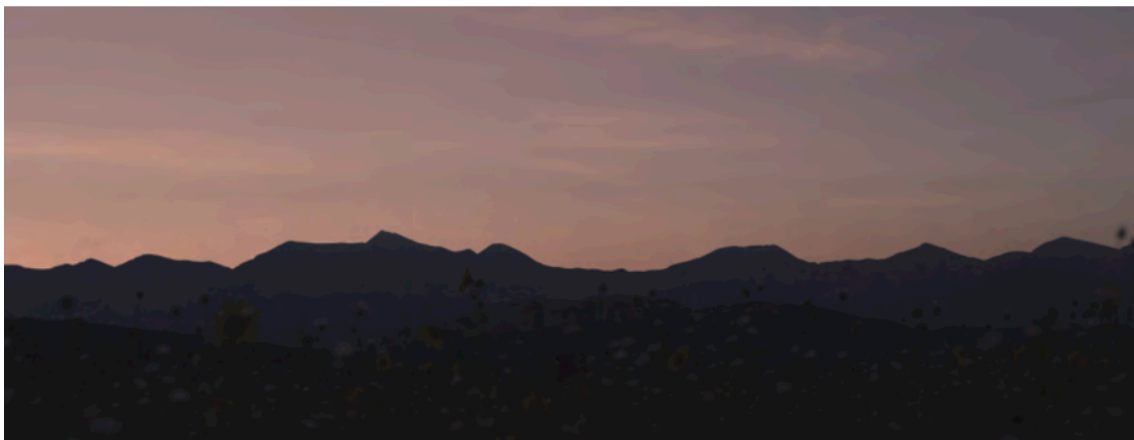
*Marmontel [Grétry's librettist for *Silvain*] depicts a rustic idyll threatened by authoritarian forces. He paints the French peasantry as browbeaten by the restrictions imposed on them by absentee landowners, their livelihoods curtailed by harsh feudal laws governing the use of rural land.*

### From France to the American Southwest

This unusual aspect of an otherwise archetypal *opera-comique* libretto of the period becomes the linchpin for Ryan Brown's inventive take on Grétry's opera, picking up on a libretto that goes much further in both advocating for social equality and also defending the rights of peasants against the encroachment of landowners. In a carefully considered and indeed inspired connection, Ryan Brown has his Opera Lafayette production take us from rural France in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the American Southwest in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – specifically to a large expanse of land where questions of legal land rights remain to this day, the expansive high-altitude plateau of San Luis Valley of southern Colorado, bounded on the east by the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

If all this sounds like an excursion into *Regietheatre* – outlandish modern directors' concept opera – it was far from it. Mr. Brown, a resident of Colorado as well, assembled a distinguished array of scholars and artists to pave the way. During a one-month residency in May at the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation of New Mexico in Taos, Opera Lafayette broadcast three online seminars with the title "*Silvain*, Live from Taos." In them, informative interviews examined all aspects of the project and the transplanted production itself. A frequent visitor to the Southwest and to the Taos pueblo, I watched these programs with much interest, especially as someone long sympathetic not only to the indigenous people's historic struggles over land rights in the southwest, but also with their deep and respectful relationship to the land.

Among the participants, Sylvia Rodríguez, a native Taoséna and anthropologist and Maria Mondragon-Valdez, resident and descendant of prior residents of the Sangre de Cristo Land Grant also spoke as part of the pre-opera program in New York City, further emphasizing past and present land rights issues and European colonization of the southwest. Important was the historical research into the life of Charles H. Beaubien, a Quebecois farmer and trapper who settled in Taos in 1824, the subject also of a comprehensive essay by Ms.



Sangre de Cristo Mountains – *Silvain* Still. Reproduced with permission of copyright holder (Tania Hernández Velasco)

Mondragon-Valdez in the program book examining his responsibility “for the emergence of French colonial long-lot land allocation in the uplands of southern Colorado... the land granting policy rooted in Old World Feudalism.”

Mr. Brown also introduced his fortuitous choice for Stage Director, the young Mexican filmmaker, Tania Hernández Velasco. In the production her striking visuals from Taos and the San Luis Valley were an integral part of the staging. Most impressive was the frequently viewed panoramic background of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains (see photo on p.3). In the foreground, amidst partial curtains of shimmering cords, kaleidoscopic visuals of nature, often-colorful flowers, complemented the stage action, almost overwhelming at times perhaps, but consistent with the theme that nature comes first.

And so it was from the first notes of the overture, when Maestro Brown led his period instrument orchestra into the bucolic world of Grétry’s mellifluous score. As Ms. Velasco said in her program note, “we seek to transport you to a sensorial and lyrical experience that, hopefully makes you long for the warm touch of earth in your hands.” An initial visual shows content bovines munching peacefully on this earth, and soon a silhouette captures peasants digging, hoeing in the earth, wonderfully backlit by Lighting Designer A. J. Guban - a stunning image modeled after Jules Breton’s 1868 painting “*The Weeders*,” a painting illustrated in Opera Lafayette’s program book.

### A Talented Cast Takes Over

With the tone thus established, and the majestic distant Sangre de Cristo mountain range setting the locale, the talented young cast took over to execute Grétry’s careful character delineation. The cast sang in the original French, but used idiomatic English by



Camille Ortiz, Elena, and Victor Sicard, Silvain  
Photo: Jen Packard

Linn Cary Mehta for the spoken dialog. French Baritone Victor Sicard and Puerto Rican Soprano Camille Ortiz made a sympathetic and loving pair as the lead couple, Silvain and his wife, Elena, content in a simple peasant life in the first half of the opera. They become distraught in the second half of the opera as their lives are torn apart by Silvain’s forbidding father. Mr. Sicard’s plangent and wide-ranging baritone accommodated all needs, also blending easily with his equally traumatized wife in their extensive duet, “*Dans le sein d’un père*,” as the drama unfolds.

As for Ms. Ortiz, fresh off a stunning success as Oriana in Handel’s *Amadigi di Gaula* with Boston Baroque, she brought all her Handelian beauty of tone and expressiveness forward in the service of defining a woman caught between the extremes of familial bliss and heart-wrenching inner turmoil. A highlight of the evening comes when, just after the duet, she steps through the hanging cord/curtains defining indoor and outdoor space. Isolated in a

The Cast of *Silvain* when Silvain is arrested

Photo: Jen Packard

stark light she sings with impassioned legato phrasing the most expansive aria of the score - a heartfelt prayer followed by a fiery “cabaletta” of strength and determination, reinforced by an obbligato oboe.

The couple’s two daughters were aptly contrasting sopranos, colorfully clad like their mother in dresses designed with a festive Mexican flare by well-known fashion and textile designer Patricia Michaels of Taos. Teresa Castillo injected spirited high notes as the flirtatious Lucia, teasing

her betrothed older sister, Paulina, the slightly darker toned Samantha Louis-Jean. Their early duet was charming. Later Paulina’s fiancé, Bazil, Puerto Rican tenor Jehú Otero, added a nice touch with an unscripted romantic serenade on guitar of this duet. But the light-voiced tenor really needed no such aid in his entrance aria, “Tout le village me l’envie,” begun off stage with clarion high notes. All three were a delight in the opening scenes depicting their rustic joy and harmony.

The upheaval in this bucolic life comes with the arrest of Silvain for poaching, precipitating Grétry’s dramatic octet as guards come to arrest him – “an ensemble of staggering complexity,” as Mr. Blackmore describes it. Another important highlight of the opera is the energized trio of the two sisters with Sylvain’s father, sturdy bass-baritone Nathan Berg, just before the opera’s denouement. With sprightly playfulness, they entreat him (again in Mr. Blackmore’s words) “to stay with them a while and to experience the love and warmth of a kindhearted rustic family.” Their light-hearted brio helped solidify this penultimate number as the essential lesson of the opera – simple virtue unifies all.

Nathan Berg, Dolmon père; Samantha Louis-Jean, Paulina;  
Teresa Castillo, Lucia

Photo: Jen Packard

My own idea of Grétry's music from past experience was that he wrote beautifully for solo voice but was less accomplished in ensemble writing. This all changed hearing this early work. But even more, the ensemble spirit of the whole enterprise cast an enticing spell, so compelling because it was approached with the unity of vision and purpose of a good ensemble. The result was not only in the sheer joy of this wholesome taste of "Pastoralism," but also in the production's empathy for indigenous peoples, their landscapes and rights, and "the warm touch of earth in your hands."

### Epilogue

Just down the road from Taos, amidst the southern reaches of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, the equally right-minded Santa Fe Opera now posts the opening greeting nightly on the surtitle screen at each seat:

*Santa Fe Opera acknowledges and pays deep respect to the people, elders and ancestors – past, present, and future – of our neighboring Pueblos whose lands provide the beautiful setting for tonight's performance.*

Thanks to Opera Lafayette for projecting this same interconnected vision and sentiment. Indeed this production, in addition to its stellar music values and emphasis on issues of rightful land use, became an ode to pastoral sanity, a testament to a harmonious relationship with nature too often missing in today's world.

.....



The Cast of *Silvain*, peace and harmony at last.

Photo: Jen Packard