



REVIEW: EDITION

Philon und Theone

Georg Anton Benda (1722–1795), ed. Austin Glatthorn
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It is because he had to settle a debt that Georg Anton (Jiří Antonín) Benda (1722–1795) composed the score of the melodrama *Philon und Theone*. In 1779, stranded in Vienna, where he had unsuccessfully applied for the job of music director of the National-Singspiel, Benda found himself unable to pay for his travel back to Berlin. The glass-harmonica virtuoso Johann Ludwig Röllig lent him the money, asking him in return to compose the music for a libretto of his own, *Philon und Theone*, in which Röllig could showcase his ability on the instrument.

Philon is Benda's fourth and last melodrama, a genre he had tackled for the first time in 1775 with *Ariadne auf Naxos* (libretto by Johann Christian Brandes) and *Medea* (libretto by Friedrich Wilhelm Gotter), premiered respectively in January in Gotha and in May in Leipzig. Besides bringing Benda to the pinnacle of his glory, *Ariadne* and *Medea* launched the vogue for melodrama in German-speaking countries in the wake of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Horace Coignet's *Pygmalion* (Lyon, 1770). The impetus for melodrama persisted until the early 1800s, with over two hundred melodramas having been composed by that point. While a relatively ephemeral phenomenon, it was one that affected the development of opera in germanophone Europe. For further background see Wolfgang Schimpf, *Lyrisches Theater: Das Melodrama des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), Ulrike Küster, *Das Melodrama: Zum ästhetikgeschichtlichen Zusammenhang von Dichtung und Musik im 18. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1994) and Austin Glatthorn, 'The Legacy of "Ariadne" and the Melodramatic Sublime', *Music & Letters* 100/2 (2019), 233–270.

In 1779 Benda went back to the genre with *Pygmalion*, on Rousseau's libretto adapted by Gotter, and, a few months later, *Philon und Theone*. Less successful than its two predecessors, *Pygmalion* still managed to have a decent run in German theatres. On the other hand, *Philon* never graced the stage, as if the rather pedestrian circumstances of its genesis had cast a shadow over its fate, especially when compared to *Ariadne* and *Medea*: both works not only secured the perception of Benda as the 'father' of melodrama, in spite of its Rousseauian origins, but also reinforced his fame as a dramatic composer. His two operas, *Walder* and *Romeo und Julie* (both with librettos by Gotter, 1776, Gotha), were critically acclaimed. Yet there are excellent reasons that have led Austin Glatthorn to salvage *Philon* from near oblivion with a critical edition: not only does he reveal the afterlife of this unlucky work following its adaptation by Röllig in 1791 under the title of *Almansor und Nadine*, but he also sheds new light on the relationships between melodrama and opera in Germany at this time.

Benda's well-established fame as a dramatic composer may have explained why, in 1778, he surprisingly resigned from his prestigious duties as Kapellmeister in Gotha to try his chances the following year in Vienna. Instead, and much to the chagrin of Benda, who cannot have seen it coming, the job went to Ignaz Umlauf. It is in the direct aftermath of this episode that *Philon und Theone*

was composed: the circumstantial aspect of the work, and probably its rushed composition, may explain why Benda reused some music that he had previously composed for his *Pygmalion*. Röllig's libretto tells of the misadventures of a couple of lovers following their separation during a shipwreck caused by a storm. The drama starts on an island, with Philon searching desperately for Theone. Philon's is a spoken role, his monologues treated according to the melodramatic technique, alternating declamation and musical ritornellos. Theone's role, on the other hand, is entirely sung and reduced to one fairly short aria. The third character is the entity of benevolent spirits, rendered by a chorus. After the instrumental introduction, the first part of the melodrama presents the spirits, singing their reassurance to Theone, who is not present on stage. The second part is devoted to Philon's first monologue: alone on the island after the shipwreck, he expresses his sorrow at having lost Theone. The third part, introduced by the chorus, contains a brief spoken monologue by Philon, followed by Theone's sung intervention, accompanied by the chorus. Having successfully invoked the spirits, Philon hears Theone's singing voice, convincing him that she has survived the shipwreck and is somewhere on the island. The fourth part presents Philon's second main monologue, during which he implores the gods to lead him to Theone. This episode is the one introducing the glass harmonica, an instrument that Benda associates here with the supernatural: Philon identifies its ethereal, disembodied sounds as the voice of his beloved. Unable to locate her despite hearing her voice, Philon falls into momentary madness, during which he sees himself harassed by monsters coming from an abyss. At the end, Theone appears in a bright light and Philon can rejoin her in Elysium. The concluding, fifth part of the melodrama brings back the chorus of spirits, rejoicing over the reunion of the two lovers.

At first sight, *Philon and Theone* does not fit so easily into the mould heralded by *Ariadne* and *Medea*. Benda's first two melodramas have been, and continue to be, considered paradigmatic examples of the genre for the way in which they fulfil the conditions of the melodramatic plot: the action is restricted to a paroxysmal state of crisis, with an emphasis on monologue. Goethe experimented twice with melodrama, his libretto *Proserpina* having been set to music first by Karl von Seckendorff in 1778 and then by Carl Eberwein in 1815. For Goethe, German theatre could only benefit from such drastically reduced melodramatic plots, what he called 'concise tragedies' ('kurzgefasste Tragödien'), comparing the plot of his *Proserpina* favourably to those of *Pygmalion* and *Ariadne auf Naxos* (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 'Proserpina von Goethe: Musik von Eberwein', *Morgenblatt für gebildete Stände* 136 (8 June 1815), 544). Their librettos privilege the introspective mode of the monologue, a posture that has been identified and studied by Laurenz Lütteken as a defining aesthetic stance of the *Sturm und Drang* (*Das Monologische als Denkform in der Musik zwischen 1760 und 1785* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1998)). Hence the frequent label 'monodrama' given to these works at the time, with their librettos essentially structured as a series of monologues. Even melodramas referred to as 'duodramas' are conceived as neatly separated monologues for two different characters. Such is the case with *Ariadne*, the first part of which is a monologue by Theseus while Ariadne is asleep, and the second part of which is Ariadne's monologue after the departure of Theseus.

While melodrama is thought to distinguish itself from opera by the integration of spoken declamation in a musical environment, this is an aspect that Glatthorn is keen to revise, stressing that from the end of the 1770s many melodramas were actively seeking to integrate song with spoken declamation. *Philon und Theone* in fact departs from several of the supposedly paradigmatic features of the genre: it has a happy end, which was indeed unusual in the genre of melodrama, which largely privileged tragic endings, often with lethal consequences; further, it integrates song through the spirits' chorus and the character of Theone. However, other paradigmatic features remain: the monologic impulse still preponderates, as we never have a situation during which Philon and Theone interact directly with each other; and Philon has the lion's share of the play, his two main monologues fulfilling melodrama's introspective ethos. The action is also extremely compressed, as all the events up to and including the shipwreck have been excised.

Glatthorn presents *Philon und Theone* as an example of ‘reform melodrama’. This expression seems to have been coined by Wolfgang Schimpf in 1988 to refer to melodramas that, while keeping the essential features of the genre, notably spoken declamation, nevertheless incorporated operatic vocality (Schimpf, *Lyrisches Theater*, 64). To be sure, this establishes another level of differentiation between the ‘original’ melodramatic model conceived by Rousseau and its German acclimatization: while for Rousseau melodrama had been primarily conceived as a way to reject the operatic vocality that he loathed, its German counterpart adopted a less antagonistic stance in relation to opera, attempting to establish a more fruitful relationship. The solution of spoken declamation was largely received as a way to bypass the Italian style of recitative that would not have been so idiomatically suited to the German language. Mozart’s brief infatuation with melodrama in 1778, which convinced him that recitatives should always be done this way, ‘as if in an obbligato recitative’ (‘und die Musique wie ein obligirtes Recitativ ist’), was an opinion shared by other composers (letter to Leopold Mozart, 12 November 1778, in *Mozart: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen. Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Wilhelm Bauer, Otto Erich Deutsch and Joseph Heinz Eibl, seven volumes (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1962–1975), volume 2, 506, trans. Emily Anderson in *The Letters of Mozart and His Family*, third edition (New York: MacMillan, 1985), 631).

An essential factor for understanding the mixture of genres – melodrama looming towards the operatic – which is characteristic of a work such as *Philon* and more broadly of ‘reform melodrama’ is that the rise of the genre coincided with debates about the possibility of creating a truly German opera. In 1769 Herder had called for a proper German opera in his fragment ‘Ueber die Oper’; he created a model German operatic libretto in his *Brutus* (1772), in which the setting of prose would have required a musical treatment that moved away from the usual recitative–aria alternation. (*Brutus* was set to music by Johann Christoph Friedrich Bach and premiered on 27 February 1774 at the court theatre of Bückeburg, where Bach was Kapellmeister. The work was received with indifference, and Herder was disappointed by Bach’s setting, now lost.) Thus ‘reform melodrama’ may invite us to consider a teleological trajectory in which melodrama is subsumed into opera, or would have been able to ‘resolve’ its inherent hybridity into opera. This is what Goethe later summed up in 1815, stating that speech in melodrama had to be resolved into song, justifying his decision to have in his *Proserpina* a choir of Fates that ‘resolves rhythmically and melodically the whole recitative-like melodrama; for it cannot be denied that the melodramatic treatment must in the end be resolved into song and can only thus reach full satisfaction’ (‘Eine geforderte und um desto willkommenere Wirkung thut das Chor der Parzen, welches mit Gesang eintritt, und das ganze recitativartig gehaltne Melodram rhythmisch-melodisch abrundet: denn es ist nicht zu läugnen, daß die melodramatische Behandlung sich zuletzt in Gesang auflösen und dadurch erst volle Befriedigung gewahren muß’; ‘Proserpina von Goethe’, 543).

As Glatthorn has elsewhere observed, already by 1775–1776 ‘melodrama’s aesthetic pendulum was reaching its peak and began swinging back towards opera and Singspiel’ (*Music Theatre and the Holy Roman Empire: The German Musical Stage at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 213). This is supported by the increasing number of melodramas that included song: among such examples of ‘reform melodramas’ provided by Glatthorn, one is Anton Zimmermann’s *Zelmor und Ermide* (c1779, libretto by Johann Karl Wezel), explicitly referred to as a melodrama, in which spoken declamation coexists with solo sung passages. This work ‘makes room for song’ in order to ‘create and improve what many fashioned as a particularly German genre [melodrama]’ (Glatthorn, *Music Theatre*, 173). Such a stance prefigures the assimilation of the melodramatic technique – the use of spoken delivery within a musical environment – into nineteenth-century opera, a phenomenon that took place from the early 1800s. In that respect, *Philon und Theone* offers a perfect point of entry to this development – ‘ephemeral’, yet decisive in contributing to the integration of melodramatic technique into the genre of opera.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the number of melodramas in which song was required alongside spoken declamation remained low in the context of the total production of melodramas during the 1770s–1810s. The most widespread tendency observed in these ‘reform melodramas’ occurred from the end of the 1770s with the inclusion of a choir, thus restricting the use of song to a typically commentative moment that tended to be located at the end of a scene, if not at the end of the play itself. This choral function is certainly illustrated by *Philon*, in which the choruses are mostly framing the scenes. Philon’s two monologues (parts 2 and 4) are preceded and followed by choral interventions, and the chorus also bookends the entire melodrama. Part 3, the most intermixed section of the work, is made up of a brief monologue by Philon followed by Theone’s aria: each of these is introduced and concluded by the spirits’ chorus.

There are, however, a few reasons why Schimpf’s category of ‘reform melodrama’ is not fully convincing, first because it is grounded on a category that is notoriously difficult to grasp, that of melodrama itself. It is a term that is slightly anachronistic relative to the genre it originally described. (Rousseau himself never used the term ‘mélodrame’, except as a French equivalent for the Italian *melodramma*, in the sense of opera.) This is perceptible through the diversity of generic terms that were attributed to these works, *Melodram* not being the prevalent choice before the 1790s (*Monodram*, *Duodram* or *Drama zur Musik* were the most frequent terms). Outside this diffuse category, there were works actually meant to be operas, although driven by a reformist stance typical of the debates that took place towards the end of the eighteenth century about a valid model for German opera. Thus a further way to refine the term ‘reform melodrama’ would be to establish a distinction between operas incorporating melodramatic features and melodramatic works encroaching on the domain of opera. The former could be illustrated by Herder’s 1772 libretto for *Brutus*, even if the work predates the vogue for melodrama; the latter category includes works such as Benda’s *Philon und Theone* or Goethe’s *Proserpina* in Seckendorff’s 1778 version.

That being said, these ‘reform melodramas’ remain fascinating hybrids, highlighting a generic oscillation suggesting a general indecision between the realms of melodrama and opera. This is where Glatthorn’s edition comes into its own by showing the afterlife of *Philon und Theone*, one that finally granted the work a stage performance. Röllig’s original plans to have *Philon* premiered at the Viennese Kärntnertheater in the autumn of 1779 having failed, he substantially revised the score and libretto in 1791 for a performance in Prague. Renamed *Almansor und Nadine*, the libretto kept its basic tenet: both lovers have been struck by the same dire fate, except that now Almansor is helped more explicitly by another character with a spoken role, the queen Aglaya. There is also a disembodied voice, and the allegorical mute figures of Time, Constancy and the Future, who perform pantomimes at the end of part 3 (corresponding to part 3 in *Philon*). Röllig added dialogues between the characters, especially Almansor and Nadine, as well as much more detailed pantomimic actions. All in all, these changes testify to a desire to make the work more theatrical: in sum, to swing the pendulum back towards the field of opera.

Glatthorn’s edition, while intended more for the scholar than the performer, comes with clear explanations that invite the reader to navigate quite fluidly between the original *Philon und Theone* and *Almansor und Nadine*, allowing us to reconstruct the latter from the former. The volume is divided into two main parts. The first, preceded by a general introduction, is focused on *Philon und Theone*, with its complete orchestral score and its critical report, and the libretto with the English translation side by side. The orchestral score has been based solely on Benda’s autograph (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Mus.Hs.18521) in the absence of any other sources, notably those that could have emanated from performances. Röllig’s later emendations to the libretto and score (*Almansor und Nadine*, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Mus.Hs.18522) have been used for establishing the critical commentary on *Philon*, although only to determine if some of the markings in the original score were done by Benda or Röllig. Glatthorn’s thorough Introduction discusses Benda’s melodramatic output, then details the place of *Philon und Theone* within the genre. *Philon und Theone* had a complex ‘afterlife’ as *Almansor und Nadine*. In the

late 1790s the Viennese court finance minister Michael Bartenschlag had bought the revised score of *Almanson und Nadine* from Röllig, thinking that he had acquired the original score by Benda. Only after receiving Benda's autograph of *Philon* did he realize his mistake. Bartenschlag then sold *Almanson und Nadine* to the dramatist and publisher Joseph Schreyvogel, who published it in 1802, though no copy of this version seems to have survived. While the trajectory from *Philon* to *Almanson* is not an easy story to sum up, Glatthorn does a fine job, with his lively narration aided by Bartenschlag's own manuscript account of the fate of both scores, also kept at the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek.

The second part of the edition presents two appendices dedicated to *Almanson und Nadine*. Appendix 1 gives the complete libretto with its translation side by side (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, HAN.Cod.Ser.n.218, fols 17r–25v). Since this revised version of the libretto contains more scenes than the original *Philon*, Glatthorn's edition signals at the beginning of each scene which scenes of *Almanson* are original and which have been revised from *Philon*. As for all the revisions and additions made by Röllig to Benda's score, they are entirely gathered together in Appendix 2. There are, all in all, six passages in which revisions and/or additions have been made: a revised flute passage in the orchestral introduction; music inserted into part 3 (with its new text, presented in *Almanson's* libretto); Nadine's inserted aria and chorus in part 5; a revised ending for *Almanson's* second melodrama (part 6); interlude music played between parts 6 and 7; and the revised final chorus (part 7).

For the musical sections that have remained unchanged in *Almanson*, the main challenge consists in allowing the reader to place correctly the interpolated recited sections of the new libretto of *Almanson* within the score of *Philon*. Glatthorn has indicated in the libretto of *Almanson* the beginning and the ending of a spoken section by adding respectively at the beginning of its first word and at the end of its last word a subscript number that corresponds to the bar number in *Philon's* original score. In the few instances for which the recited text of *Almanson* corresponds to a revised portion of the score, the technique remains the same, except that the subscript bar numbers are preceded by the letter B, indicating that the reader must refer to one of the scores contained in Appendix 2. Altogether, and unless publishing a complete score of *Almanson*, which would not have made much sense as the revisions are not that numerous, Glatthorn has found a most practical and efficient solution.

In sum, this critical edition of *Philon und Theone* is a useful and welcome publication that sheds new light on the complex developments of melodrama and its interactions with German opera from the 1770s to 1790s. It also brings a new perspective to Benda's melodramatic output, moving away from the prolonged scholarly emphasis on *Ariadne* and *Medea*. To me, the richest contribution this edition makes is to document this 'confrontation' – in fruitful terms – of operatic song and spoken declamation, and show how it consolidated the fundamental basis on which melodrama could blossom in Germany, its success being also fuelled by debates that had been going on since the late 1760s regarding the issue of the recitative in German opera.

This review was commissioned before the current reviews editor assumed his post and was edited by others on the ECM team.

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