

Adam, Adolphe (1803-1856): summary of writings

A prolific composer and undisputed representative of French comic opera, Adolphe-Charles Adam (1803–1856) was the author of a substantial number of articles which are a precious trace of musical life during a time when specialist publications in Europe were beginning to blossom. Selected articles were compiled and published posthumously by Adam's widow (Chérie Couraud) in [*Souvenirs d'un musicien*](#) (1857) and [*Derniers souvenirs d'un musicien*](#) (1859). Their numerous reprints (up to 1884) testify to their continuing interest. Other non-public writings are still indirectly linked to the press, such as the letters by Adam, also published posthumously in *La Revue de Paris* (August-October 1903) and republished by J.-M. Fauquet (*Lettres sur la musique française*) in 1996. These were addressed to Adam's friend in Berlin, S. H. Spiker, editor of the *Spernersche Zeitung*, and contributed to France's cultural influence and popularity in Germany.

These three publications represent only a tiny proportion of Adam's writings and cannot eclipse the substantial number of his other articles which have not been republished. To speak in numbers, these are more than 380 articles, covering the period from 1833 to 1856, found in twenty-four periodicals in which Adam to gradually hone his style. He belonged to the editorial staff of the best-known journals, such as *Le Ménestrel*, *La France musicale* (1840-1850) and the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris* (1834-1856). Following the bankruptcy of the Opéra-National, which he had founded in 1848, Adam's energies shifted from media to financial concerns. He was obliged to "professionally" devote himself to criticism for *Le Constitutionnel* (48 articles from 1848 to 1852), replacing Fiorentino, and then at *L'Assemblée Nationale* (over 160 articles from 1849 to 1856), the new daily newspaper born in the Republican insurrection. This substantial body of work is complemented by a few scattered paratexts (prefaces to methods), but also letters to institutional figures (E. Perrin, T. Gautier, etc.). Taken together, they reveal an artist constantly drawn to his passion for music.

The sheer number of articles does not detract from their quality or their diversity of viewpoints: critical, historical or "reporting." While his accounts of Parisian lyric theatres is unsurprisingly predominant in the *Constitutionnel*, or as a "mardiste" at the Assemblée Nationale, he also takes an interest in other musical venues such as churches, orphéons, military bands, *bals de Musard*, salons, etc. The popularisation of "early music" culture (from Rameau to Sedaine), the composer's curiosity about his contemporaries and the pragmatism of the entrepreneur are the main themes running through this broad corpus. His relation with the social history of the musical world, both past ("Les théâtres lyriques sous la Ire République," 1848) and present, are those of an open-minded actor who was intuitively in favor of European free trade. His lively style spans from the novelistic short story ("La jeunesse

d'Haydn") to the piquant anecdote that keeps the reader on the edge of their seat — for example, the urgency with which he collaborated on the overture to Boieldieu's *La Dame Blanche*. From the report of his trip to St Petersburg and Berlin (1840) to organological innovations (saxhorns, the harmoniphon), from the backstage of theatres to the expectations of audiences, nothing escapes his observation.

While he did not shy away from confrontation with his counterparts in the press (Castil-Blaze), he remained lucid towards his fellow musicians with informed arguments and convictions steeped in Romanticism. This lucidity outlined the aesthetic framework of the "average genre" of opéra-comique (to use O. Bara's expression), which irreducibly opposed him with the artist and critic Berlioz. However, this lucidity was qualified by an unrestrained admiration for G. Rossini, G. Donizetti, D. F. E. Auber, G. Meyerbeer, J. Offenbach and cautious admiration for L. Cherubini, F. Halévy, and G. Verdi, with even a certain restraint towards H. Berlioz, who willingly criticised him in return. His benevolence towards younger composers such as A. Thomas, F. Monpou and his clear-sightedness with regards to Ch. Gounod's first steps reflect the adaptability of a former Second Prix de Rome who was quickly launched into a career. Lastly, Adam the shrewd entrepreneur did not forget to promote himself with a certain naivety, nevertheless associating himself with his partners such as the founders of societies ("Société des concerts de musique vocale, religieuse et classique du prince de la Moskowa," 1846), librettists, opera, and dance artists ("Représentation d'adieu de Mlle Taglioni," 1844).

During the Third Republic, Arthur Pougin included an anthology of Adam's columns as an appendix to his biography of the composer, summarising their spirit: "As a writer, he displayed precisely the qualities that distinguished him as a composer: a good-natured and unpretentious spirit, an easy (though less brilliant) style, movement, grace, and even that communicative emotion that captivates the reader as well as the spectator." (A. Pougin, *Adolphe Adam: sa vie, sa carrière, ses mémoires artistiques*, p. 264).

Adam's historical and social vision of music sets him apart from other French critics. Comparing his writings with those of Berlioz, Castil-Blaze, d'Ortigue and their colleagues would be a fruitful project in the history of musical taste.

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Further reading

Adam, Adolphe, *[Souvenirs d'un musicien](#)* (Paris : Michel Lévy frères, 1857).

Adam, Adolphe, *[Derniers souvenirs d'un musicien](#)* (Paris : Michel Lévy frères, 1859)

Adam, Adolphe, *Lettres sur la musique française (1836-1850)*, Joël-Marie Fauquet éd. (Genève : Minkoff éditions, 1996).

Cailliez, Matthieu, « Adolphe Adam (1803-1856) : inventaire et présentation de ses critiques musicales », présentation dans *Nineteenth-Century Music Criticism*, Centro Studi Opera Omnia Luigi Boccherini et Palazetto Bru Zane (Lucca, 2015).

Cailliez, Matthieu, « Adolphe Adam, porte-parole de l'école française" de l'opéra-comique. Inventaire et étude synthétique de ses critiques musicales (1834-1856) », dans : EVERIST, Mark, SALA, Massimiliano (éd.), *Music Criticism Network Studies*, n° 1 : *Perspectives on the French Musical Press in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Lucques, Centro Studi Opera Omnia Luigi Boccherini, 2018.

Pougin, Arthur, *Adolphe Adam : sa vie, sa carrière, ses mémoires artistiques* (Paris : Charpentier, 1877).

Teulon Lardic, Sabine, « [Adolphe Adam et l'Allemagne : allers et retours Paris-Berlin autour de l'opéra-ballet *Die Hamadryaden*](#) », Agnès Terrier & Alexandre Dratwicki éd., *Art lyrique et transferts culturels 1800-1840*, colloque de l'Opéra-Comique de Paris, 2011. Online on Bruzanemediabase.

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