

INTRODUCTION

Les Nopces de Village was performed on October 3, 1663, at the château of Vincennes, where the court had been staying most of the time since the end of August.¹ The *Gazette de France* of October 6 reported the performance in a very brief entry:

Le 2, Elles [i.e., Leurs Majestés] eurent le divertissement de la Comédie Espagnole: & le lendemain, celui d'un Balet, appellé les Nopces de village, composé de douze Entrées: où Sa Majesté, pour prendre quelque relache de ses grandes applications aux affaires publiques, dansa avec les Principaux Seigneurs de la Cour: qui admira d'autant plus ce Balet, qu'encore qu'il n'eust été concerté que peu de jours auparavant, il ne laissa pas d'avoir tout le succez qu'on en pouvoit souhaiter.²

No other performance is mentioned in the *Gazette*, and courtier Jean Loret, who reports the ballet by hearsay, also mentions only this single performance.³ No revival of the work is known to have been mounted.

The livret, published by Robert Ballard at the time of the performance, records that there was a cast of 61 performers—27 nobles and 34 professionals—in 76 different roles. According to Charles Silin, whose *Benserade and His Ballet de Cour* remains a valuable study of the genre, half of the noblemen dancing never performed in any other ballet by Benserade; in his opinion, this is yet another indication of the impromptu nature of the work.⁴

The title page of the livret calls the work a “mascarade ridicule,” a designation that distinguishes it in subject, and, to some extent, in form from other, more serious ballets of the period. The term *mascarade* was generally applied to relatively short ballets with light or comic subjects that did not require machinery or elaborate staging.⁵ This type of work had been in vogue at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and, although under Lully’s direction the fashion in court ballets shifted toward the magnificent, allegorical or mythological variety, the comic *mascarade* existed as a distinct genre throughout the reign of Louis XIV.

In the eyes of its aristocratic audience, the humor of *Les Nopces de Village* derived from its rural setting and its cast of stock comic characters. Many, if not all, of the dances have an overtly comic cast, and their effect probably owed more to pantomime than to balletic technique. The cast, including the bride, was entirely masculine; although male dancers of the period were often expected to perform serious female roles, it is virtually certain that in this case the cross-dressing would have been exploited for comic effect. Even the role of Hymen, notated in soprano clef, was sung by a man, presumably singing falsetto.⁶

In form *Les Nopces de Village* is a scaled-down version of the usual *ballet à entrées*: an opening *récit* is followed by a series of dances, each performed by a different group of characters; there is a second vocal number, then another series of dances, and the work concludes with a burlesque version of the traditional *grand ballet*. Instead of the usual set dances involving all the performers, the celebratory wedding dances turn into a gigantic free-for-all; this subversion of the conventions of the court ballet adds an element of artistic self-parody to the blatant social satire.

¹ The presence of the court at Vincennes is reported in the *Gazette de France*, issues of September and October 1663.

² “On the second, Their Majesties enjoyed the *divertissement* of a Spanish comedy, and the next day that of a ballet called *Les Nopces de Village*, made up of twelve entrées, in which His Majesty, in order to relax a bit from the demands of public affairs, danced with the principal lords of the court. [The members of the court] admired the ballet all the more since, despite having been arranged only a few days earlier, it nevertheless had all the success that one could wish.”

³ “Vers le milieu de la semaine / On Dansa, dit-on, à Vincenne, / Au grand Apartement Royal, / Un petit Balet jovial, / Qui d'une Nopce de Village / Etoit la Peinture, ou l'Image, / Qui fut des mieux exécuté, / Et dont étoit Sa Majesté, / Pluzieurs Seigneurs et quelques Princes, / Et d'autres Gens un peu plus minces, / Faute d'avis, venus à temps, / Je ne vy point ce passe-temps...” (“Toward the middle of the week, a little jovial ballet was danced in the large royal apartment at Vincennes. It was the picture or image of a village wedding and was very well executed. His Majesty was among the performers, along with several lords and a few princes, and other less important people. Lacking advance notice, I didn’t see this pastime...”) Jean Loret, *La Muze historique*, a series of rhymed reviews written between 1650 and 1665 and published in Paris starting in 1656; quoted from Charles Silin, *Benserade and his Ballets de Cour* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1940), p. 323, who based his reading on the nineteenth-century edition of *La Muze historique* (Paris: Jannet, 1857–1874), vol. 4, p. 110.

⁴ P. 323. Ten copies of the livret are known to survive; the lists of performers agree in every case except one. Among the “nobles et demoiselles” in the fifth entrée, the Marquis de Tilladet appears in nine of the livrets; in one copy the Marquis de Vaubrun is listed instead. Whether this difference is actually a hint that the ballet may have been performed more than once, or whether Ballard may have stopped the presses to enter a correction in the list of performers, is impossible to determine today.

⁵ For a brief discussion of the *mascarade* in relation to the ballet, see Victor Fournel, *Les Contemporains de Molière*, vol. 2 (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1866), pp. 179–80. The term was also applied to a short sequence of dances performed in costume at masked balls.

⁶ The singer, according to the livret, was Monsieur Blondel, probably the Jean Blondel who sang *taille* (tenor) in the royal chapel. (Simon Blondel also sang in the chapel, but what part he sang is unknown. For documents listing both singers, see Marcelle Benoit, *Musiques de Cour: Chapelle, Chambre, Écurie, 1661–1733* [Paris: Éditions A. & J. Picard, 1971], pp. 10, 21, 30, 40, and 41.) Monsieur Blondel sang in a number of other Lully ballets and comedy-ballets up to 1670, always as a tenor. Further on the singers, see Rebecca Harris-Warrick, “From score into sound: Questions of scoring in Lully’s ballets,” *Early Music* 21 (1993), pp. 359–62.

LIVRET

English Translation by Louis Auld

The French text presented below retains the orthography of the original livret, with the following exceptions: the use of *i/j* and of *u/v* has been modernized; apostrophes have been supplied where their absence obscures the meaning of a passage; the acute accent has been supplied where necessary to differentiate between stressed and mute *e*; punctuation has been supplied where lacking at the ends of sentences. (The texts underlaid with the music have been partially modernized for the convenience of readers unfamiliar with seventeenth-century French.) The English version of the livret provides, insofar as possible, a line-for-line rendering of the French; it is conceived not for singing but merely for the convenience of readers and performers unfamiliar with French.

Les Nopces de Village,

Mascarade ridicule

Dansé par sa Majesté à son Chateau de Vincennes

1633

Un Hymen vestu grossierement, à la mode du Village, fait le Recit; accompagné d'une harmonie rustique.

RECIT

A mon habit, à mon visage
Vous connoistrez facilement,
Que je ne suis qu'un Hymen de village;
Ceux de la Cour ont en partage
Plus de beautez & plus d'ajustement:
Mais dans ce paisible bocage
L'amour, l'honneur, & moy vivons plus seurement.
Tous les plaisirs du premier aage,
Veinrent en leur bannissement
Se retirer sous cet heureux ombrage:
Ceux de la Cour, &c.

5

L'Hymen, représenté par M. Blondel
Les villageois composant l'Harmonie rustique, Les Sieurs
Piesche, Descousteaux, Brunet, Destouche,
les quatre Opteres¹

PREMIERE ENTREE

Le Marié & la Mariée conduis par les violons & les hautbois,
se rendent les premiers au lieu de l'Assemblée.

Le Marié, M. Beauchamp
La Mariée, M. d'Heureux

II. ENTREE

Six vieillards oncles du Marié & de la Mariée les suivent de près, & arrivent à la Nopce chargez de toutes les ustanciles du mesnage qu'ils portent pour faire leurs presens.

The Village Wedding

Comical Mascarade

Danced by His Majesty in his Château at Vincennes

1663

A Hymen, coarsely costumed, in the rude village style, performs the récit, accompanied by rustic instruments.

RECIT

From my clothes and from my face
You can easily tell
That I am just a village Hymen;
Courtiers may have a greater share
Of beauty and more elegant fashions:
But in this peaceful glade
Love, honor and I live more peacefully than they.

10

All the pleasures of the first golden age,
Now banished, have retired here
In the shade of this happy grove:
Courtiers may . . . etc.

Hymen, played by Monsieur Blondel
The villagers of the rustic band, Sieurs
Piesche, Descousteaux, Brunet, Destouche,
and the four Optères

FIRST ENTREE

The bride and groom, led by the violins and oboes, are first to arrive at the meeting place.

The Bridegroom, Monsieur Beauchamp
The Bride, Monsieur d'Heureux

SECOND ENTREE

Six old men, uncles of the bride and groom, follow close behind them and arrive at the wedding burdened with all the implements of housekeeping, which they bring as their gifts.

¹ Opteres = Hotteterres.

OUVERTURE

Qu. 32

LWV 19/1

Dessus

Haute-contre

Taille

Quinte

Basse

Ds

HC

T

Q

B

Ds

HC

T

Q

B