



Jean Baptiste Lully.

## Lully, Jean-Baptiste (1632-1687)

by Robert A. Green

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Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632-1687), although not the first to compose French opera, through his own works established its basic principles. His influence on opera throughout Europe was immense, but his career declined as the result of a homosexual scandal.

The son of Italian peasants, Giovanni Battisti Lulli was brought to France in 1646 as an Italian tutor for Louis XIV's cousin Anne-Marie Louise d'Orléans, known to history as "La Grande Mademoiselle." His musical and acting abilities soon distinguished him, and, after the exile of Anne-Marie in 1652, he entered the king's service. He and the king danced in court entertainments, establishing a privileged relationship that led to the musician's quick advancement.

In 1661, Lully became a French citizen and was named Master of the King's Music. The following year he married the daughter of Michel Lambert, a prominent singer and composer of vocal music at the French court. They had six children (three boys and three girls), and Lully seems to have been a good father and provider in spite of numerous extramarital activities with both men and women.

Lully collaborated with Molière, the greatest French comic dramatist, in creating plays with musical interludes and ballets. The two soon fell out, however, and Lully used his influence to prevent Molière from employing music in his works.

In 1673, Lully staged his first opera, *Cadmus et Hermione*. Fourteen more followed, including such works as *Armide* and *Acis et Galatée*; they established the pattern for French opera for decades to come.

Lully was ruthless in his pursuit of power and used his influence with the king to eliminate potential rivals through the establishment of monopolies over stage music. Perhaps as a result, his enemies spread stories concerning his sexual exploits. Almost certainly many of these stories were true, but Lully was discreet enough that the king could overlook his activities.

However, Lully's influence with the king evaporated in 1685 when he was involved in a scandal that the king could not ignore. The composer conducted an affair with a "music page" being trained in the royal service. This affair with a young man led to the composer's disgrace. Although he was not prosecuted, Lully not only was forced to break off the relationship but he also lost his standing at court.

Homosexual activity was a capital offense in seventeenth-century France, but the death penalty was only sporadically imposed. A number of the nobility at Versailles, including the king's brother Philippe, formed a homosexual subculture, and Lully had close ties with them. While the king disapproved of homosexuality, he loved his brother and was unwilling to exile, or otherwise punish, these nobles. At the same time, pressure was exerted by Louis's wife Madame de Maintenon and her priest to rid the court of sodomites.

Lully is said to have died by stabbing himself in the foot with a cane with which he was beating time at a rehearsal. The wound resulted in blood poisoning and gangrene. Beaussaint has argued that the story is

apocryphal and that the composer, already in ill health, in effect died as a result of the king's abandonment.

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