‘Le bon public de la Haye’. Local governance and the audience in the French opera in The Hague, 1820–1890

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Abstract: In nineteenth-century The Hague, the French opera performances in the Royal Theatre were the most important occasions during the winter season at which men and women from almost all social ranks experienced a strong sense of social cohesion in a common leisure pursuit, albeit one in which social hierarchies were clearly demarcated. This article analyses the changing social composition of the opera audience through analysis of subscription and admission records, and evaluates the changing composition of the audience in relation to changes in taste, theatre architecture and policy. Although it was almost impossible to exploit financially and was also a constant object of political, musical and moral criticism, the French opera succeeded in maintaining its central position in The Hague’s musical and social life throughout the nineteenth century.

Nineteenth-century The Hague – the royal residence and government centre of the Netherlands – was a city full of music. From the cheerful summer concerts in the so-called Hague woods, the local zoo and the nearby beach of Scheveningen, to the serious winter concerts of the aristocratic society Diligentia, the diligent middle-class amateur choirs and the light-hearted pleasures of the café chantants – music formed an essential part of The Hague’s many cultural and social attractions. A prominent chronicler of The Hague’s social life declared that a key characteristic of the city’s inhabitants was their ‘melomanie’.1

Unquestionably, the favourite musical entertainment for the well-heeled citizens were the thrice-weekly opera performances of the French theatre company in the Royal Theatre, well located in the heart of the city’s aristocratic and government quarter. Part of a long tradition with its roots in the late seventeenth century, the Théâtre français had always been substantially supported and even carefully managed by the stadholder.

and the local authorities to offer entertainment for the local elite of foreign diplomats, court officials, high military officers, civil servants and leisured nobility. In the course of the nineteenth century, the performances of the French theatre, with their compelling repertoire of grand opéra, opéra comique and vaudevilles and a decreasing range of dramas and comedies, increasingly united various classes in a unique moment of social cohesion, albeit with a clear demarcation of social hierarchy. What exactly was the political involvement of the local authorities in this major musical spectacle? What arguments did they use to legitimize the amazing amounts of public money spent on the French theatre? In what ways did urban policy regulate the social composition of the audience and stimulate processes of social integration and segregation in the auditorium? And what influence did the local authorities have on the selection of the repertoire and on the interaction between the audience and the performance?

In recent decades, the political, social and economical history of nineteenth-century European theatres has increasingly been explored, in the fields of theatre studies, history and art history. The genre of French grand opéra has particularly attracted a growing amount of interdisciplinary research, in tandem with its current rehabilitation in opera production. During the last couple of years, there has been increased interest in integrating various national findings into systematic comparative studies, and in focusing on transnational patterns of influence and appropriation that vitally structured the history of theatre in Europe and beyond. The history of the French theatre in The Hague – a surprisingly neglected subject in Dutch theatre historiography – offers an interesting case-study in this respect. In the Dutch residential capital, both the repertoire and most of the theatre directors and the singers were

Local governance and the audience in the French opera in The Hague

The king and the local authorities closely followed the French models of regulating the theatre and invested much more time and money in the Théâtre français than in the twice-weekly Dutch drama performances. However, as the city expanded from 42,000 to 156,000 inhabitants between 1820 and 1890 and became increasingly torn by social tensions between the fashionable elite centred on the court and government and the middle class of well-to-do manufacturers, shopkeepers and artisans, the prominent position of the Théâtre français in the city’s political social hierarchy did not go uncontested.

‘Enabling the rich to have a pleasant evening’

The Hague’s main theatre was established in 1802 as a private enterprise of about 130 aristocratic and patrician notables, aspiring to replace the city’s two small and badly located French and Dutch language theatres by a single, monumental and well-located theatre that would better reflect the status of The Hague as a court city and the status of its elites. Established in the former palace of a princely nephew of the last stadholder, this private enterprise was, however, from the start strongly supported by the revolutionary, pro-French regime of the Batavian Republic. Most of the initiators were active members of the new regime, notably as urban treasurers and tax collectors. Moreover, the new regime also substantially sustained the new enterprise by taking almost a quarter of the shares and by offering extra funds to keep up the French theatre in particular. The temporary president of the new regime even chaired the committee of notables that supervised the composition and the repertoire of the new commercial French theatre company.

After the end of the Batavian-French era in 1813 and the establishment of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands two years later, the new King William I actively took over the state support for the private theatre enterprise and the commercial French theatre company in particular. With a secret fund, he cleared the enterprise’s financial debts and granted the French director an annual subsidy, increased from 13,000 to 26,000 guilders, to keep the French company running. He also maintained the


strict supervision of a special royal commission that he appointed himself.9 In the 1820s, the local authorities started to support the French theatre as well, initially by paying the heating and lighting, by releasing the director from his obligation to pay additional poor rates and by granting him a small additional subsidy. In 1829, the local council took a more radical step. Responding to increasing tensions between the shareholders and the board of the theatre enterprise and escalating complaints about the artistic quality of the French theatre, the council bought the theatre for 130,000 guilders and offered the new French director free use of the building, granting him an extra annual subsidy of 6,000 guilders. King William I continued his annual subsidy of 20,000 guilders and offered the free use of his music chapel. Still, the municipal investment in the theatre, and the French company in particular, increased to an average of 30,000 guilders per year – approximately 10 per cent of the total local tax income and almost as much as the municipal spending on education or health care.10 Fortunately, the local authorities did not need to raise their subsidies even further. From 1830, the Théâtre français experienced the rise of the new genre of grand opéra: operas such as La muette de Portici, Guillaume Tell, La Juive and Les Huguenots, which lasted all evening, in which tragic heroes, heroines and choruses of the people get embroiled in compelling historical and psychological conflicts, adorned with impressive solo performances, magnificent ballets and spectacular visual effects. In The Hague, like in Paris and elsewhere in Europe, the genre of grand opéra became tremendously popular and resulted in an extraordinary increase in daily ticket sales in the course of the 1830s.11

In 1841, the new King William II took over the lead again. Not satisfied with the management by the local authorities, he bought the theatre from the municipality, and, with a personal loss of more than 100,000 guilders a year, heavily invested in the artistic quality of the French theatre, transforming it into one of the best opera houses in Europe – according to some even the best after Paris and St Petersburg.12 After his untimely death in 1849, his heir William III discontinued his father’s active and generous cultural policy, which had brought him to the verge of bankruptcy. Threatened by a forced closure, the local authorities bought

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9 Van der Riet, ‘De Haagse schouwburg’, 108; Royal House Archive (KHA), Archive Court Committee (AHC), inv.nr 41, Royal decree, 19 Sep. 1819; The Hague Municipal Archive (HGA), Archive Theatre Committees (ASC), inv.nr 5, Financial overview, 1829.
10 Van der Riet, ‘De Haagse schouwburg’, 118; HGA/ASC, inv.nr 7, Overview of income, 1830–53. Even in 1852, with a total expenditure of fl. 489,039, the local council invested only fl. 36,400 on medical care and fl. 50,000 on education. Verslag over de toestand der gemeente ’s Gravenhage over het jaar 1852 (’s Gravenhage, 1853), 16.
12 KHA, Archive of the Treasurer (AT), inv.nr 4, Overview of annual spending, 1841–52; HGA/ASC, inv.nr 7, Overview of annual expenditure, 1844–49; M. Briol, Grandeur et décadence du theatre français à La Haye, 10.
back the theatre and, with a royal annual grant of 20,000 guilders, agreed to bear again the main costs for the theatre building and the French company in particular.\textsuperscript{13} By the early 1860s, when the French theatre experienced a period of decline due to a dearth of successful new grand operas, the local council invested another 85,000 guilders in rebuilding the theatre auditorium and ran the French theatre for two seasons at its own risk, resulting in an additional loss of about 130,000 guilders.\textsuperscript{14} In 1865, the council appointed a new French theatre director and granted him an additional annual subsidy of 15,000 and later 8,000 guilders. With the exception of the years 1871–74 and 1884–87, this annual subsidy continued until the early twentieth century. Including all the maintenance costs, insurance, heating, lighting, staff and the furnishing of new decorations and costumes, the local council of The Hague annually invested a total sum of about 60,000 to 80,000 guilders in the French theatre alone – by 1880 about 9 per cent of the local tax income and still more than the municipal spending on medical care.\textsuperscript{15}

The massive public spending on the theatre and the French performances in particular was widely accepted, but also met with fierce resistance. How did the king and later on the local authorities legitimize their expensive cultural policy? From the start, the main argument was that The Hague as a court city was simply obliged to have a French theatre to offer the diplomats and court aristocracy a pleasant spectacle that appealed to their refined cultural taste. In 1818, a special court commission urged the king to grant the French director an extra allowance in order to avoid the liquidation of the theatre company in the winter season, ‘when the Majesties and the Princes of the Royal House, as well as foreign ministers, the Estates General and other persons of distinction will reside here’.\textsuperscript{16} In the 1860s, the local council still asserted that the court entourage as well as the city’s many civil servants, military officers and other ‘civilized’ inhabitants were ‘entitled’ to the refined entertainment that they had been used to for generations. Dominated by the local aristocracy until the end of the century, some council members even asserted that with all the tax money spent on poor relief, the richest inhabitants should also have their share in the public expenses. ‘Take the opera away from the residence, what alternatives would there be for us, the civilized people?’\textsuperscript{17}

However, the central political argument to legitimize public spending on the French theatre was increasingly found in the dogma that as

\textsuperscript{13} HGA, local council minutes, 18 Jan., 15 Feb. and 19 May 1853.

\textsuperscript{14} HGA/ASC, inv.nr 52, Accounts, 1863–64; \textit{ibid.}, inv.nr 53, Accounts 1864/65.

\textsuperscript{15} KHA/AHC, inv.nr 31, Rapport betreffende de door Z.M. Willem III aan de Koninklijke Fransche Schouwburg verleende subsidien, 1853–88; \textit{Verslag over de toestand der gemeente over het jaar 1880}, annex 13 and 14. In 1880, with a total expenditure of 3,1 million guilders, the local council raised fl. 865,000 in local taxes and invested fl. 247,161 on education and fl. 75,451 on medical care.

\textsuperscript{16} KHA/ASC, inv.nr 1, Rapport court committee to the king, 1 Aug. 1818.

\textsuperscript{17} HGA, local council minutes, 4 Feb. 1862.
a residential city The Hague’s economy was not based on production but on consumption. Anticipating present-day city councils which build magnificent opera houses and museums to rebrand our cities as cultural capitals to attract the creative class and to enhance the local business climate, from the 1820s The Hague’s city council was already asserting that investment in all sorts of polite urban pleasure – including the seaside resort of Scheveningen, concert associations and beautiful green walks – was the best conceivable policy for the economic prosperity of the city. A rich cultural infrastructure, they claimed, would stimulate the corps diplomatique, the local aristocracy and high civil servants and military officers to spend their money more freely. It would attract aristocrats and other persons of independent means from the provinces and the colonies to build up a pleasant life in the city and would also persuade tourists to extend their visits: developments that would greatly stimulate local retailing and industry, and would increase the city’s tax income.18

18 For the context of this cultural policy, see J.H. Furnée, The Hague, city of wealth. Urban government and culture in the nineteenth century’, in L. Lucassen and W. Willems (eds.),
Obviously, this political rhetoric offered the local authorities the means to argue that the huge spending on the French theatre not only catered for the amusements of the rich, but was primarily aimed at increasing the prosperity of the urban middling and working classes. ‘All the expenses for the amusement of the upper classes are difficult to legitimize for the lesser classes’, the mayor and aldermen wrote to the king in 1841, ‘whereas from the start it has only been our wish to maintain the profits for the lower classes that has inspired us to invest so much in the French theatre’.\(^\text{19}\) In 1852, the local authorities presented their decision to repurchase the theatre from the king as an inevitable fact instead of a political choice: ‘Everyone will understand that it is unthinkable that a residential city like The Hague should lack a French Theatre. The absence of the theatre would have a serious impact on the prosperity of the city, because rich and independent people would leave the city and foreign tourists would no longer extend their stay.’\(^\text{20}\) In general, the local press warmly supported this view: ‘We think that the council is obliged to do everything possible to maintain the French Theatre and to try to restore its reputation. The existence of a French Theatre in the city, as an assembly point for diplomats and tourists, is a sheer necessity in the city. Indirectly, the city and its inhabitants greatly profit from that.’\(^\text{21}\)

Apart from the repeated focus on the cultural and social demands of the aristocracy and the indirect benefits for the middling and lower classes, the local authorities incidentally legitimized the spending on the French theatre by addressing the special interests of the upper layers of the middle classes. From the early 1850s, the second gallery in the auditorium, intended for respectable families, appeared to be increasingly visited by elegant prostitutes. As a result, in 1863 the local authorities suggested that ‘almost the whole middle class’ (middendstand) or ‘the core of the bourgeoisie’ (burgerij) were being excluded from the theatre: they had escaped the morally infected second ranks, but could not afford the first ranks and did not want to lower themselves to the pit. According to the local authorities, the decreasing theatre attendance by the tax paying upper middle classes burdened them with a ‘serious moral problem’, because it would reduce their political support for the huge municipal expenditure. In the end, the local council used the political and moral need to recover the French theatre for the upper middle classes as their principal argument for a highly expensive rebuilding of the theatre auditorium, including the

\(^{19}\) KHA/AT, inv.nr 2, Board of mayor and aldermen to the king, 15 Jan. 1841.

\(^{20}\) HGA, local council minutes, 19 May 1853.

\(^{21}\) ‘s Gravenhaagsche Nieuwsbode (GN), 2 May 1852; cf. ibid., 27 Feb. 1852.
second ranks, and for taking the management – and the financial risk – of the theatre completely in their own hands.\textsuperscript{22}

Despite the general support for the rhetoric of the indirect economic benefits, municipal expenditure on the French theatre was increasingly contested. In particular, well-to-do shopkeepers, artisans and other members of the middling classes, who from the 1850s onwards emancipated themselves both politically and socially in contrast to the so-called ‘respectable classes’,\textsuperscript{23} embraced the issue as a stumbling block. ‘By subsidizing the theatre from the council cash box, to which the lesser classes have also contributed’, an indignant citizen wrote to the main local newspaper in 1863, ‘the local council enables the rich to have a pleasant evening. The more wealthy get – so to speak – a subsidy from the poor inhabitants to amuse themselves.’\textsuperscript{24} This class-based argument inspired some liberal councillors to insist that The Hague’s cultural institutions should not be organized by the municipality, but by rich citizens and private enterprise, just as in Amsterdam and especially in Rotterdam. Moreover, since the municipal income still mainly rested on indirect taxes, which were largely contributed ‘by the least well-off classes’, the council should not pay for amusements that ‘only serve to satisfy the most affluent classes’.\textsuperscript{25} Some conservative, mainly aristocratic councillors argued in defence that French, German and Belgian municipalities invested a lot more in local theatres. In response, some liberals adopted a nationalistic discourse, asserting that in those countries municipalities did not at least favour foreign culture above national culture, which was obviously the case in The Hague.\textsuperscript{26} The increasing critique had hardly any effect. However, the class-argument helped to convince the local authorities to make the French theatre more accessible for a larger audience.

Social exclusion and inclusion

So, who were the main patrons of the nineteenth-century Théâtre français? And what impact did the local authorities have on the long- and short-term development of the audience’s social composition? The handful of remaining subscriber lists, ticket sale registers and summaries of


\textsuperscript{25} HGA, local council minutes, 27 Mar. 1860; cf. \textit{ibid.}, 5 Feb. 1862 and 7 Jan. 1868.

annual income suggest that the average size of the audience varied quite significantly from season to season. The theatre auditorium, originally hosting about 700 and from 1863 slightly fewer than 1,000 seats, was organized in a classic way: a ground floor with a parterre, stalls and baignoires, surrounded by two balconies with first- and second-rank loges, and a third balcony with cheap benches and an ascending amphitheatre. Over the course of the century, the average number of seats occupied by annual and (three-) monthly subscribers and their families fluctuated between 170 and 70 – a proportion that is comparable to the number of subscribers even of the Paris Opéra and Théâtre-Italien.\(^{27}\) In addition, the well-preserved daily ticket sale registers for the 1830s and the seasons of 1850/51 and 1863/64 demonstrate that the average number of habitués and incidental visitors per performance fluctuated per annum from 150 to 300.\(^{28}\)

A substantial proportion of the subscribers of the Théâtre français belonged to the Dutch nobility. Among the subscribers, the proportion of nobles varied between 22 and 38 per cent. Members of the nobility were more likely than other groups to reserve two or more seats, so that noble families regularly occupied more than half of all the seats taken by subscribers. Royal and municipal interventions had a clear impact on noble patronage. During periods of artistic decline, such as in the late 1850s, the proportion of noble subscribers sharply decreased. In the early 1860s, when the municipality rebuilt the auditorium and took over the management, the interest of the nobility immediately peaked again. In the mid-1880s, their interest again decreased: not only because of the declining artistic quality, but also because the king had lost his interest in adding lustre to the French performances.\(^{29}\)

The subscribers of the French theatre consisted primarily of diplomats, distinguished state officials, higher civil servants, military officers, wealthy professionals and a growing number of persons of independent means. On the basis of their position, occupation and/or birth, almost all of them belonged to The Hague’s social elite of the ‘respectable classes’, that was structured around the city’s four main gentlemen’s clubs. As a court and government city, The Hague lacked a strong financial, commercial and industrial sector, so that the subscribers of the French theatre, unlike in Paris, included only a handful of bankers, merchants


\(^{28}\) HGA, Archive local council, 1816–50 (AS), inv. nr 861–71, Ticket sale registers, 1830–40; KHA/AHC, inv.nr 25, Ticket sale register, 1850/51; HGA/ASC, inv.nr 52, Ticket sale register, 1863/64.

\(^{29}\) See the sources mentioned in n. 27.
and manufacturers. The representation of rich artisans and shopkeepers was almost negligible. In the late 1850s, the subscription of a well-to-do bookseller, a wine merchant, a shopkeeper in fancy articles and two pharmacists seemed to reflect the growing emancipation of the ‘industrious’ middle classes (nijvere burgerij). However, a few years later this social group was again only represented by a single hairdresser and a tailor, and as late as in 1885 just by one hotelier. By this period, well-to-do artisans and shopkeepers were increasingly successful in transcending the social barriers of respectable cultural associations, including the highly exclusive concert society Diligentia. However, the subscribers of the French theatre clearly remained a very exclusively delineated group.30

In the Théâtre français, most of the subscribers were men. However, the number of women sharing in the subscriptions was quite substantial. About a quarter of the male subscribers signed up for two or more places in order to enjoy the performances with their wives and daughters, whereas all household members were free to use the subscriptions. In addition, an increasing number of unmarried and widowed women independently signed up for subscriptions themselves. In 1850/51, about 10 per cent of the subscribers were women; in 1863/64 their proportion dropped to 3 per cent, but in 1885/86 peaked to more than 30 per cent. Undoubtedly, this steep increase in female subscribers reflected the success of the municipal policy of governing The Hague as a city of wealth and pleasure. As the city increasingly attracted the Dutch nobility, pensioned civil servants, officers and persons of independent means from the provinces and the Indies, The Hague also turned into a fashionable residential centre for respectable widows and unmarried ladies. In 1880, already about a quarter of the 18,000 persons listed in the city’s address book were independent women.31

In contrast to expectations – and to some extent an unintended consequence of local policy – in the mid-1880s, the absolute number of subscribers fell significantly and the social circle of subscribers became even more exclusive. In the course of the 1870s and 1880s, successive French theatre directors raised their subscription prices abruptly by 50 to 80 per cent. Encouraged by modern theatre management in Paris and London, and seeking to augment profits in the higher price bands, they increased the annual subscription price for the first ranks from 165 to 220 guilders, for the stalls from 150 to 215 guilders for the baignoires d’avant-scène from 130 to 215 guilders and for the pit from 60 to 90 guilders. In


31 See the sources mentioned in n. 27. Groot adresboek van ’s Gravenhage en Scheveningen voor het jaar 1880–1881 (The Hague, 1879).
the case of many subscribers, this raised the prices beyond their annual personal tax assessment on external wealth.

The local authorities, who formally determined the subscription prices, did not protest. Responding to the swelling critique that the lower classes subsidized the amusements of the rich, they hoped that raising subscription prices would lessen the need for additional subsidies. Not surprisingly, the number of subscribers sharply declined, especially because, over the course of time, the number of performances included in the subscription had been reduced from 130 to 90. In the 1850s, the subscription had been cost effective if one only attended 50 per cent of the performances, but in the 1880s one had to attend more than 80 per cent of the performances to make the subscription financially attractive. The remaining subscribers were increasingly dominated by people of independent means: not particularly by aristocrats, but especially by wealthy pensioned civil servants and newly settled rentiers from the provinces and the colonies. Probably at the instigation of the local authorities, the large corps of active civil servants who worked at the ministries on relatively low salaries initially received some compensation for the rising prices with a special subscription tariff. However, when the local authorities completely cancelled their additional subsidy in 1883, this special arrangement was soon abolished, making it ‘almost impossible’ for civil servants to subscribe for the French theatre.32

In the 1870s and 1880s, the directors of the French theatre also significantly increased the prices of the single tickets for the higher ranks of seats and created some extra expensive ranks such as the loges aux salon and the baignoires d’avant scène.33 According to various contemporaries, this policy limited the accessibility of the French theatre even more, especially for what they regarded as the ‘middle class’ (burgerij). This was not just because of the rising prices for single tickets, but also because the theatre directors, partly at the instigation of the local authorities, gradually extended the number of expensive seats at the cost of less expensive ones. In the 1850s, the ground floor of the auditorium was still dominated by the traditional ‘pit’ audience of middling civil servants, shopkeepers and artists, with the only exception being two front rows designated for the aristocratic stalls. However, with the expansion of the stalls from two to four rows in 1863, and the addition of four rows designated for the fauteuils de parquet, the traditional visitors of the pit were, both literally and symbolically, pushed back. ‘In the course of twenty years’, a journalist protested, ‘the pit, formerly one of the most sought after seats for visitors of modest means, has gradually shrunk into three of four rows. The result

33 HGA/ASC, inv nr 34, Prospectuses, 1870–90.
is that the middle class (burgerij) is more and more alienated from the opera.34

In striking contrast to the growing exclusivity of the first ranks and the ground floor of the auditorium, in the course of the century the French theatre became much more accessible for the lower (middle) classes. Quite apart from their increasing spending power and the sheer growth of the population, this was clearly the result of a deliberate political decision to decrease the prices sharply for single tickets on the lower ranks of seats. In the 1830s, the local authorities deliberately kept the prices of the lower ranks very high, so that the well-to-do audience would not be too much disturbed by a rowdy gallery. From the 1840s, however, the king and later on the municipality increasingly tried to include the lower middling classes – not least, in case of the local authorities, to legitimize their huge spending on the theatre. Between 1830 and 1870, the price of single tickets in the third balcony gradually decreased from 75 to 40 cents, and in the third amphitheatre from 125 to only 25 cents – with military soldiers in uniform eventually paying just 20 and 10 cents.35 As the daily wages for skilled workers were about 90–120 cents, the lowered prices substantially enhanced the accessibility of the theatre over the course of time. An analysis of daily ticket sales demonstrates that in the 1830s the third ranks of seats attracted on average a mere 17 attendants. In 1850, this number more than doubled to 45, and in 1863 doubled again to 106 visitors per performance.36 In the 1870s and 1880s, the theatre directors maintained their prices for the third ranks, so that with sharply rising spending power the average number of visitors mounted even further. ‘corpulent saleswomen and music loving grenadiers and hussars, alternated with hawkers of fruits and food, usually occupy the paradise [amphitheatre] of the French opera, constituting the noisiest part of the public.’37

In the early 1870s, a member of the local council argued that the French theatre was still frequented by less than 2 per cent of the city’s population: ‘I do not exaggerate as I say that the number of regular and incidental theatre visitors does not normally exceed 2,000. I would even dare to assume that one can determine year on year in advance who will take their place in the boxes and stalls, so little do the personnel that visit the opera vary.’38 However, a few years later the local government deliberately expanded the theatre’s accessibility in an additional way. As early as 1865, some councillors had suggested organizing special opera performances on Sundays for a reduced tariff, ‘especially in view of the permitted amusements of the middle classes’ (middenstanden). Initially, the plan did

34 HGA/ASC, inv.nr 41, Rapport over den schouwburg, annex I and II; ibid., inv.nr 34, Prospectus, 1879–80; ibid., Archive Royal Theatre (AKS), inv.nr 7, Auditorium plan 1893; Haagsche prookkelen, UPSD, 16 Jan. 1888.
35 HGA/ASC, inv.nr 33, Prospectuses, 1853–64; ibid., inv.nr 34, Prospectuses, 1865–90.
36 See the sources mentioned in n. 28.
38 HGA, local council minutes, 30 Oct. 1872.
not work out because of religious protests against the desecration of the day of rest and the outspoken opinion of the mayor: ‘the lower burgher does not visit the French theatre’.\textsuperscript{39} However, in 1875 the local council agreed to organize special ‘popular performances’ (\textit{volksvoorstellingen}) on Sundays after all, on condition that they would start after church services. Within a few years, these Sunday performances became enormously successful and, according to a contemporary, substantially broadened the audience of the French theatre to the ‘very low middling class and workers’.\textsuperscript{40}

\textbf{Creating social hierarchy}

With various social classes sitting together in a relatively small auditorium, enjoying the same favourite opera performances, the French theatre united its audience in a welcome experience of social cohesion. Obviously, this did not mean that equality reigned. On the contrary, the meticulous arrangement of ranks and boxes, more than in other urban venues of fashionable recreation, expressed and reinforced The Hague’s strict social hierarchy and the almost unbridgeable boundaries between the various classes and c\^oteries. The regular presence of members of the royal family as well as of the local authorities – seated in the main box opposite the stage in the 1830s – reinforced and legitimized this social hierarchy even further. Yet the French theatre also allowed some notable transgressions and shifting social relations.

On the first ranks, the performance of social hierarchy was remarkably visible. A subscription list of 1850 demonstrates that the spatial distribution of the annual subscribers over the boxes followed exactly the same hierarchical order that was cultivated within the city’s upper circles. The first box next to the stage at the right wing of the first balcony (seen from the auditorium) was reserved for Prince Frederic, the brother of the king, immediately followed by a box reserved by three highly distinguished French and Spanish diplomats. In the next boxes, we find two rich members of prominent noble families, then a councillor of state without a noble title, and then two affluent persons of independent means whose reputation was based neither on birth nor position but solely on their capital. Three temporary subscribers – a prominent nobleman, a wealthy pensioned general and the city’s richest local manufacturer – distributed themselves among three larger boxes opposite the stage, carefully observing the same socio-spatial order. With the boxes of the king and the court officials situated at the left wing of the first balcony, all the male subscribers strategically seated themselves in the eyes of the royal family. Three

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\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 3 and 17 Jan. 1865.
\textsuperscript{40} Verslag over de toestand der gemeente over het jaar 1873, 83; ‘Haagsche brieven’, UPSD, 1 Nov. 1875; ‘Brieven uit de hofstad’, Arnhemische Courant (AC), 11 Feb. 1877. With ‘very low middling class and workers’, this chronicler most probably referred to people like clerks, petit artisans, shop servants, house servants and soldiers.
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independent ladies shared a box just next to the court box, keeping some distance from the rest of the subscribers – yet prominently in their sight.41

In contrast to the strict social hierarchy on the first ranks, the baignoires accommodated a surprising mix of various coteries and classes. In 1850/51 the small number of annual subscribers – the relative of a well-to-do artist, two non-noble ladies and a middle-class bailiff – clearly possessed a very different status than the aristocratic subscribers of the first ranks. However, in the course of the season various upper-class men joined their company: a well-known banker, a rich person of independent means and finally even eight noblemen, including the mayor. The explanation of this social rapprochement with the middle classes is obvious: the best seats on the first ranks were already occupied. For at least some noblemen, having a comfortable seat with a good view of the stage was more important than keeping a distance from the people of lower status.42 In the early 1860s, the expanded range of baignoires reinforced their reputation as a social space in which aristocrats, respectable civil servants and rich shopkeepers

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41 KHA/AHC, inv.nr 14, List of subscribers, 1850/51.
42 Ibid.
temporarily transgressed social boundaries and forged new social relations in a way that was still rather exceptional at that time.\(^{43}\)

The reinforcement of The Hague’s social hierarchy in the French theatre became more complex because of the declining reputation of the second ranks. Under the reign of King William II, the second balcony still counted as a ‘natural’ place for prominent citizens such as a former minister, a member of parliament, a magistrate, an admiral, a banker and several persons of independent means who lacked the noble titles, relations and wealth to seat themselves on the first ranks. However, the increasing presence of the *demi-monde* forced most of them to migrate with their wives and daughters either to the first ranks or to the baignoires.\(^{44}\) The expensive rebuilding of the auditorium and the temporary municipal management, which was explicitly aimed at clearing away the prostitutes, had barely any effect. In the couloirs of the second ranks visitors still stumbled upon ‘laughing, romping and sneering ladies and gentlemen’, barring the access to the boxes and illegally entering empty boxes with counterfeited keys. In 1865, the mayor acknowledged that the original goal of the renovation – ‘that the second rank would be rehabilitated, that we would no longer find the *demi-monde*’ – was not achieved.\(^{45}\) As a result, the second ranks never recovered their traditional position for hosting the city’s ‘second coterie’. Tellingly, in the 1870s and 1880s the prices of subscriptions and single tickets for the second ranks remained the same and even decreased: ‘In the French opera, a respectable “Hagenaar” can occupy no lower place than the baignoires, which cost two guilders per seat. At the second rank he may not show himself with his family, because little butterflies flutter here who cause more stir than is desirable.’\(^{46}\)

The problematic moral reputation of the second ranks obliged an increasing part of the city’s ‘respectable classes’ to settle themselves in the baignoires, the stalls and parquet, superseding – as we have already seen – the traditional middling-class audience of the pit. Interestingly, this process of social displacement made the ground floor of the auditorium at the same time increasingly accessible for women. In the 1850s, the pit was still an exclusively male domain that ‘is simply impossible for one to enter with ladies’.\(^{47}\) In the mid-1860s, the main local newspaper was already arguing that the new, expensive *fauteuils de parquet* should be made more comfortable to make them ‘suitable for women, something that would be very desirable’.\(^{48}\) By the 1880s, the stalls and *fauteuils de parquet* had finally been transformed into highly favoured ranks for respectable ladies,

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\(^{43}\) HGA/ASC, inv.nr 52, List of subscribers, 1863/64.
\(^{44}\) KHA/AHC, inv.nr 9, List of subscribers, 1847/48; *ibid.*, inv.nr 14, List of subscribers, 1850/51.
\(^{45}\) *DZHG*, 3 Sep. 1864; HGA, local council minutes, 17 Jan. 1865.
\(^{46}\) Gram, *s Gravenhage, 218.
\(^{47}\) *GN*, 2 Apr. 1852.
\(^{48}\) *DZHG*, 6 Nov. 1863 and 2 Sep. 1865.
including an independent female subscriber: the wife of a member of the Railway Board.\textsuperscript{49}  

To some extent, the spatial segregation of the audience reflected The Hague’s seemingly immutable social hierarchy. When in 1871 a newly arrived tax collector complained that the most beautiful places in the baignoires were invariably reserved for regular subscribers, the mayor feared that his solution of introducing a lottery-system would severely annoy the subscribers: ‘Every subscriber usually wants to keep exactly the same place from year to year.’\textsuperscript{50} Nevertheless, the creation of social hierarchy in the French theatre could also be more flexible than one would expect. On the popular Sunday performances, theatre lovers paid only half price for comfortable chairs in the first ranks, the stalls and the baignoires, which were normally well above their budget. As these special performances were not included in the regular subscription charge, a much wider audience could profit from about 200 of the best places usually occupied by the subscribers. Some chroniclers talked with a certain disdain of ‘so-called Sunday gentlemen, who for just one guilder adorn the armchairs of first ranks and stalls in all their glory’. As a result, the Sunday performances not only increased the accessibility of the French theatre for the lower orders, but also temporarily destabilized and rearranged the traditional social hierarchy between and within the city’s upper and middle classes.\textsuperscript{51} 

\textbf{Enjoying the performance}

Focusing on the social composition of the audience and their spatial distribution in the auditorium, there is a danger of forgetting that the various classes gathered in the French theatre primarily to enjoy spectacular opera performances. Yet, how important actually was the performance itself in their experience of visiting the theatre? And what role did the local authorities play in regulating the repertoire and the interaction between the audience and the performance? 

According to various journalists, the majority of the audience attached surprisingly little importance to the specific performances: ‘The audience of the French theatre mainly consists of regulars who kill their time . . ., that portion of the population that would not know how to spend their evenings otherwise.’\textsuperscript{52} Especially for subscribers, who could attend the performances three evenings a week, visiting the French theatre was often primarily a social ritual. Various novels describe how female patrons of the first ranks loved to make their ‘triumphal entry’ in the middle of the first or second act, deliberately catching the full attention of those

\textsuperscript{49} HGA/ASC, inv.nr 119, List of subscribers, 1885–86.

\textsuperscript{50} DZHG, 17 Jan. 1871; HGA, local council minutes, 24 Jan. and 16 Feb. 1871.


\textsuperscript{52} ‘Haagsche sprokkelingen’, \textit{UPSD}, 19 Apr. 1886.
present and greeting all their acquaintances in the auditorium. In *Eline Vere*, the first novel of the well-known Dutch author Louis Couperus, the female protagonist madly adores the baritone Fabrice in Gounod’s *Tribut de Zamora*, but barely follows the opera ‘without understanding much of it’. For many male subscribers, watching the public rather than the performance was no less pleasurable. In the 1880s, a male subscriber complained that the increasing habit of dimming the lights in the auditorium made it almost ‘impossible to distinguish each other’ during the theatre performances.

The relative lack of attention on the part of the subscribers for the individual performances should not surprise us. From the 1830s, about a third to one half of all performances were dominated by no more than ten famous grand operas such as *La Juive*, *Les Huguenots* and *Guillaume Tell*, each of them staged about three to five times per season – year after year. However, a systematic analysis of the daily ticket sales demonstrates that also for most habitués and occasional visitors the visit to the French theatre was primarily a social event. In the 1830s, in 1850/51 and in 1863/64 the average ticket sales were much higher in the peak of the winter season than during spring and summer. The performances on Saturdays on average attracted more than twice as many visitors as the performances on Mondays and Thursdays. These data suggest that most visitors did not visit the theatre primarily because of a specific preference for a certain play, but mainly because of the social rhythm of the calendar. In 1852, a local newspaper acknowledged that on Saturdays the French theatre functioned principally as a sort of social club, ‘a place of reunion, where one is certain that one encounters his friends and acquaintances’.

Nevertheless, the analysis of ticket sales also demonstrates that for habitués and occasional visitors the operatic genre certainly did matter. In the 1830s, in 1850/51 and 1863/64 the *grand opéra* attracted on average about twice as many visitors as the performances of *opéra comique* and spoken comedy and tragedy – to a great extent irrespective of the day of the week or the month. Interestingly, this taste preference was clearly structured by class. In Paris, the subscribers of the Opéra, with its monopoly on *grand opéra*, had on average a much higher status than the subscribers of the Opéra Comique. Yet in The Hague, the audience of the cheapest third ranks demonstrated a much stronger preference for *grand opéra* than the visitors of the first ranks. In 1863/64, the first ranks

54 *Het Vaderland*, 10 Jan. 1880.
57 GN, 2 May 1852.
even showed a modest preference for \textit{opéra comique}.\textsuperscript{58} For contemporaries, this was hardly surprising. In 1852, a local newspaper emphasized that spectacular genre of \textit{grand opéra} was much more accessible for lower-educated people than the more refined \textit{opéra comiques} and \textit{vaudevilles}:

To understand \textit{vaudevilles} and even \textit{opéra comiques}, one has to completely understand the language and comprehend every little subtlety to be able to enjoy the performance. The \textit{grand opéra}, on the other hand, with its great music, the beauty of the \textit{mise en scène}, the richness of the decorations, the simplicity of its dramatic action and its numerous cast, speaks to all eyes, to every heart, and is for all classes without distinction fascinating and striking.\textsuperscript{59}

In the local council, the staging of various operatic genres was a recurrent point of discussion. Both the king and the municipality usually demanded that the French theatre director should engage a \textit{tableau de la troupe} that would be able to perform \textit{grand opéra}, \textit{opéra comique}, \textit{vaudevilles} and \textit{comédies}. Obviously, the performance of \textit{grand opéra} was extremely expensive, due to the mass scenes, theatrical effects and the extra costs for the demanding \textit{premier ténor} and \textit{première chanteuse}. From the 1860s, some council members therefore increasingly made the case to abolish the \textit{grand opéra} and to concentrate only on \textit{opéra comique}, a genre that was better suited to the relatively small auditorium and their own aristocratic taste. However, for most councillors the idea of depriving the majority of the public of the \textit{grand opéra} was a bridge too far: ‘Seldom, have I met this speaker on such an aristocratic terrain as here. Who loves the grand opera most? Not the most educated part of the audience, as they prefer \textit{opéra comique}, but the lesser classes.’\textsuperscript{60} In the 1860s and 1870s, The Hague’s local authorities continued to support the \textit{grand opéra} and its successors by commissioning new decor and costumes for new operas such as \textit{Mignon}, \textit{Carmen} and \textit{Aida}. This was done not least to prevent the directors from becoming too dependent on Offenbach’s \textit{opéra bouffes}, which were held in low esteem by the authorities who deemed that they ‘belong more in a marionette show than in a decent theatre’.\textsuperscript{61}

In contrast to Amsterdam, where the staging of \textit{grand opéras} such as \textit{La Juive} and \textit{Les Huguenots} was often forbidden to avoid religious tensions, political censorship in The Hague limited itself to an incidental ban on Sarah Bernhardt’s performance of \textit{Tosca} in 1888.\textsuperscript{62} However, the local authorities were less reticent with respect to interaction between the audience and the performance. As early as 1819, the local authorities had published a official regulation stating that


\textsuperscript{59} GN, 16 Jul. 1852.

\textsuperscript{60} HGA, local council minutes, 7 Jan. 1868.

\textsuperscript{61} Verslag over de toestand der gemeente over het jaar 1868, 50; ibid., 1877, 91; ibid., 1878, 86.

Figure 3: (Colour online) The Royal Theatre, The Hague, c. 1900 (© The Hague Municipal Archive)

everything that leads to disturbing the required order and decent behaviour in the theatre, or that hinders the spectators, players or musicians by loud talking and stamping with feet or sticks, will be prevented by the police. Every communication between the public and the stage, including the reading of notes thrown on the stage, is forbidden.63

In the late 1820s, when aristocratic subscribers and habitués collectively disturbed the performances to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the quality of the main singers, the king forced the local authorities to quell every sign of opposition, even though the theatre was still the private property of the shareholders. In 1830, the local authorities appointed a formal jury to judge on the quality of the singers, consisting of four members from the municipality and three delegates chosen by the subscribers. In 1865, the subscribers were granted the formal right to judge the singers themselves, making the so-called débuts a favourite period in the theatrical season. They regularly forced the theatre director to replace ‘badly’ performing singers by new candidates imported from France. These direct elections, somehow anticipating our current television

63 HGA/ASC, inv.nr 4, Reglement van orde en politie, 1819.
format, were not very successful either. According to musical authorities, 
the majority of the audience simply lacked the aesthetic sensitivity to 
distinguish between pure quality and effect: "'Ce bon public de la 
Haye' sometimes reveals a surprising taste for the mediocré." 
In 1885, increasingly confronted with 'all the corruption related to universal 
suffrage', the local authorities reintroduced the jury system and, in 1888, 
finally deprived the subscribers of all their formal rights of participation. 
Many visitors kept on talking through the performance, but the local 
authorities had made a significant step towards silencing the audience.

Conclusion

In the course of the nineteenth century, the Dutch king and especially 
the local government of The Hague invested a surprisingly large amount 
of their budget in the French opera performances, staged in the Royal 
Theatre. The local authorities offered the city’s upper classes an amusement 
that catered to their cultivated taste and a desirable platform where they 
could not only demonstrate their hegemonic position in urban society, 
but also reinforce their internal social hierarchy. The growing proportion 
of male and female subscribers from the colonies and the provinces 
suggest that the continuously repeated political argument that investing 
in the French theatre increased the attractiveness and thus economic 
prosperity of the city was not completely beyond the point. However, 
the increasing complaints from the middling classes, who wanted to profit 
from public spending not only indirectly but also directly, encouraged the 
local authorities to rebuild the theatre auditorium; it did not, however, 
stop them from acquiescing with rising prices and the significant spatial 
reduction of the parterre. At the same time, the decision to expand the 
stalls and parquet at the expense of the pit increased the accessibility of 
theatre for respectable women, whereas the price reduction of the third 
rank and the establishment of popular Sunday performances allowed the 
lower (middle) classes to engage in the opera performances much more 
frequently. By facilitating and regulating the changing composition and 
the shifting spatial distribution of the audience in the French theatre, 
The Hague’s local authorities responded to but also stimulated significant 
social shifts in The Hague’s status and gender hierarchies.

Novels, newspaper articles and ticket sale registers support the idea 
that for a substantial part of 'ce bon public de la Haye', visiting the French

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64 Caecilia, 35 (1878), 107.
65 HGA/AS, inv.nr 287, Annexes to the minutes, 19 and 28 May 1828; HGA/ASC, inv.nr 111, 
Reglement 6 May 1830; ibid., inv.nr 117, Reglement, Aug. 1865; ‘Haagsche sprokkelin-gen’, 
UPSD, 7 and 28 Sep. 1885 and 12 Sep. 1888; J.H. Furnée, ‘De Fransche Schouwburg in Den 
Haag als politieke oefenschool, 1815–1890’, paper presented at the seminar ‘Theater en 
66 For a more elaborate account, see J.H. Furnée, Plaatsen van beschaafd vertier. Standsbesef en 
stedelijke cultuur in Den Haag, 1850–1890 (Amsterdam, 2012), ch. 6.
theatre was primarily a social convention. Nevertheless, the majority of the audience clearly preferred the spectacular genre of grand opéra over the generally more subtle opéra comiques. The audience also actively engaged with discussing the artistic performances of the main singers, especially during the so-called débuts. For future research, it would be interesting to combine detailed theatre-historical analysis of specific performances with the outcomes of this present study and with some fragmentary sources for audience responses, in order to explain the popularity of the favourite operas better and to grasp their (potential) meanings for various social groups in the theatre auditorium. For The Hague’s local authorities, the political, social, cultural and economical significance of staging French opera in the Dutch court and government capital was, at least, beyond dispute.