

French Travelling Theatre Troupes and the Creation of Regional Theatrical Communities, 1824–1864

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In the summer of 1852, director Joseph Hermant's decision to drop opera from his repertoire unleashed an administrative tussle for regional theatrical control between two French prefects: Paul Féart of the department of Gers and Adolphe Fournier of the neighbouring Basses-Pyrénées.¹ Hermant managed the 16th *troupe d'arrondissement*, a theatre company that toured between the southwestern provincial towns of Auch (Gers), Pau (Basses-Pyrénées), Bagnères-de-Bigorre and Tarbes (Hautes-Pyrénées), towns of varying sizes and socio-economic importance but each without a residential theatre company.² As part of the French government's infrastructure for overseeing provincial stage culture during the first half of the nineteenth century,³ *troupes d'arrondissement* were established across the nation between 1824 and 1864 to perform sung and spoken repertoire to a mandated cross-departmental region (the *arrondissement*).⁴ As a result, spectators and critics in towns such as Auch and Pau found themselves beholding and responding to the same troupe while these towns' officials juggled the shared responsibility of overseeing directors and their repertoires. In 1852, this responsibility provoked tensions between southwestern prefects: Féart, supported by the mayor of Auch (Jean-Paul Soulier), wanted to strip Hermant of his contract, going as far as to request that the Minister of the Interior, Victor Fialin, step in to secure opera for Auch with a new director.⁵ Fournier, by contrast, feared the cost of opera and argued that it was more important to keep Hermant on as a trustworthy director, regardless of genre.⁶ The result of the tussle demonstrated that there were inbuilt hierarchies in this provincial theatrical region. Due to the economic importance and larger

¹ Archives nationales de France (AN), F/21/1278, letter from Paul Féart to Victor Fialin [Minister of the Interior], 30 April 1852; letter from Adolphe Fournier to Victor Fialin, 16 June 1852. Christine Carrère-Saucède, *La direction de troupe de province au XIX^e siècle: une fonction polymorphe*, in *Directeurs de théâtre, XIX^e-XX^e siècles. Histoire d'une profession*, ed. by Pascale Goetschel/Jean Claude Yon, Paris 2008, pp. 31–45.

² On the contemporary municipal theatrical system: Katharine Ellis, *French Musical Life*, Oxford/New York 2021.

³ On the larger ministerial theatrical system established between 1806 and 1864: Cyril Triolaire, *Tréteaux dans le Massif. Circulations et mobilités professionnelles théâtrales en province des Lumières à la Belle Époque*, Clermont-Ferrand 2022; Triolaire, *Le théâtre en province pendant le Consulat et l'Empire*, Clermont-Ferrand 2012; Romuald Féret, *Théâtre et pouvoir au XIX^e siècle. L'exemple de la Seine-et-Oise et de la Seine-et-Marne*, Paris 2009.

⁴ *Collection complète des lois*, Paris, Vol. 15, p. 457; Vol. 16, pp. 137–142; Sophie Horrocks, *Performing for the Provinces. Touring Theatre Troupes and the French Political Imaginary, 1824–64*, PhD thesis, Durham University 2024.

⁵ AN, F/21/1278, letters from Féart to Fialin, 30 April, 6 June 1852.

⁶ AN, F/21/1278, letter from Fournier to Fialin, 16 June 1852.

population of the spa town of Pau compared to Auch and others,⁷ the Prefect of the Basses-Pyrénées had the final say in approving directors' plans submitted to the Ministry in this situation and throughout the century. In 1852, Fournier thus dismissed the Gers officials' preference for opera and renewed Hermant with his vaudeville and spoken-play repertoire,⁸ a scenario which repeated biases favouring the Basses-Pyrénées against other towns in this region evident at least as early as the 1830s.⁹ As this incident shows, being a French provincial town within a theatrical network such as an *arrondissement* involved the negotiation of cross-regional power dynamics that had the potential to fundamentally determine local stage practices.

In this contribution I investigate how itinerant stage culture fostered theatrical relationships between the provincial towns joined in an *arrondissement* not only for administrators but also for many agents involved in local theatrical life between 1824 and 1864. Expanding on the administrative tensions mentioned in my introduction, in the following I concentrate on the writings of journalists from different towns in the 1st, 6th and 16th *arrondissements* in the north, west and southwest of France.¹⁰ These critics' discussions of touring troupes, like the correspondence produced by their administrative counterparts, reveal the ways through which journalists constructed a regional theatrical framework for their readers, who, in these small towns, doubled as the core audience in the *salle de spectacle*. Drawing especially on the period 1824 to 1846, where sources are most abundant, I argue that, within these writings, the regional community became a significant and recurring topic that was key to these historical agents' understanding of the socio-political context of local theatrical life.

I suggest that the region was in itself a socio-political topic through which administrators, critics and their readers/spectators engaged with various aspects of small-town theatrical culture, including the movements of companies, appraisal of actors, sharing of theatrical territory and the negotiation of repertoire. I will show that the critical refraction of the regional theatrical community in newspaper columns both fostered a strong sense of collective identity through stage culture while also promoting a level of competition and inter-town hierarchy at a journalistic, as well as administrative, level: a natural by-product of the shared *arrondissement* system. Moreover, in thinking regionally in this way, I offer a way of complicating the local specificity traditionally associated with the conditions

⁷ Abel Hugo, *La France pittoresque ou Description pittoresque, topographique et statistique des départements et colonies de la France*, Paris 1835, Vol. 2, pp. 52, 56; Vol. 3, pp. 14, 16.

⁸ AN, F/21/1278, letter from Fournier to Fialin, 16 June 1852.

⁹ AN, F/21/1277, letter from the Prefect of the Landes (Toussaint Curel) to Fialin, 10 May 1839, complaining of the dominance of Bayonne.

¹⁰ 1st *arrondissement*: Nord, Pas-de-Calais; 6th *arrondissement*: Morbihan, Finistère, Côtes-du-Nord; 16th *arrondissement*: Gers, Landes, Basses and Hautes Pyrénées.

of nineteenth-century provincial theatre:¹¹ the *arrondissement* environment naturally draws attention to how the socio-political function of local theatre was conceptualised through regional connectivity both by members of administrative bodies and the small-town presses.

Collective theatrical experience

The regional sphere loomed large in local journalists' accounts of stage culture across the French *arrondissements*, and it largely had the power to shape theatrical experience in a more positive manner than in administrative matters. A town journalist's primary role was to report on local performances, yet this work nearly always involved some level of comparison made between their locality and the *arrondissement*. Critics not only reviewed performances in their town but also reported on the troupe's travels across the *arrondissements*,¹² printed reviews of performances in neighbouring towns¹³ and transmitted accounts of troupe incidents, from the mundane to the eventful.¹⁴ Take examples from the 1st and 16th *arrondissements* in 1844: two critics in Valenciennes published accounts of the "stormy" reception of director Guillaume Bertéché's troupe in Dunkerque that led to the departure of the tenor Alphonse Grousseau,¹⁵ while a Pau journalist dedicated a long column to a review of Hermant's troupe's regional premiere of Gaetano Donizetti's opera *La Favorite*¹⁶ in Tarbes, critiquing the troupe's first excursion into large-scale opera from afar.¹⁷

It was not just that journalists, and by extension their readers, cared about the fate of troupe performers and developments in troupe repertoire beyond their town walls but also that, through columns, the press underlined that no local performance existed in a vacuum. Indeed, cross-*arrondissement* reporting evoked the constant connectivity of theatrical networks, firstly by tracking companies' physical movements. In the 16th *arrondissement*, for instance, the writer for the *Mémorial des Pyrénées* described how Hermant's troupe had come to the Pau *foire* after performing in Tarbes in June 1844, just as, in the 6th *arrondissement* in Brittany,

¹¹ Seen in local monographs such as *L'opéra de Rennes. Naissance et vie d'une scène lyrique*, ed. by Marie-Claire Mussat, Rennes 1998; Marie-Odile Jubert-Larzul, *Le théâtre à Toulouse au milieu du XIX^e siècle*, in *Annales du Midi* 109/217, 1997, pp. 53–69.

¹² *Le journal des comédiens* (Paris), 3 March 1833, p. 7, printing a column from *Le mémorial des Pyrénées* (Pau).

¹³ *Les petites affiches de Valenciennes*, 10 October 1827, p. 819, 19 July 1828, p. 286; *Le courrier du Nord*, 22 July 1834, pp. 1f., 22 October 1858, p. 2, 17 February 1861, p. 2. These terms were also used in national reports of the troupes, for example in *La Gazette des Théâtres* (Paris), 20 May 1832.

¹⁴ *Le mémorial Artésien* (Saint-Omer), 9 September 1841, p. 5, 24 May 1845, p. 6, 1 November 1856, p. 2.

¹⁵ "Tempétueuse", *L'Écho de la frontière* (Valenciennes), 2 November 1844, p. [527]; *Le courrier du Nord*, 7 November 1844, p. 2.

¹⁶ Libretto by Alphonse Royer, Gustave Vaëz and Eugène Scribe.

¹⁷ *L'Observateur des Pyrénées* (Pau), 24 July 1844, p. 2.

the reviewer for the *Abeille de Lorient* looked onwards to Alphonse Seymour's troupe's Vannes visit after it left his town of Lorient in December 1842.¹⁸ Columns referencing the theatrical network enabled readers to follow the travelling troupe's journeys throughout the season from the comforts of their own home via the newspaper page.

Secondly, press columns established an important pan-provincial theatrical frame of reference within which information about and opinions on the *troupes d'arrondissement* were constantly linked to the regional community. In the 1st *arrondissement*, for example, the journalist for *La Feuille de Saint-Omer* published a report in June 1829 of the *troupe d'arrondissement* while they were absent from his town. Drawing on statements from the *Journal de Dunkerque* and *Feuille d'Arras*, the critic gave his readers an account of *arrondissement* director Henri Delorme's new troupe debut in Cambrai, the particular success of two opera singers and news of the *troupe ambulante* – a different roving company headed up by director Antoine Pétrin *dit* Tony – as it travelled to Valenciennes.¹⁹ In some columns, town journalists spoke directly to the *arrondissement* public at large, emphasising the regional importance of their opinions of a local event. In June 1845, for example, the *Mémorial* critic wrote that he would “abstain” in this edition from publishing critiques of Bertéché's performers, whom he had not yet had time to fully review in Saint-Omer, because his lack of a firm opinion of their talent “without holding any importance for us could, however, have importance for these artists in other towns in the theatrical *arrondissement*.”²⁰ The journalist here implied that an incomplete critique of performers whom he had only heard a handful of times might give other towns a false impression of their talents, having a knock-on effect on their regional reception. Not only did the Saint-Omer writer see his role as a reviewer as integral to the theatrical discourse of the entire *arrondissement* in this column, but his words also confirm that it was normal practice for provincial audiences to build up their assessment of a troupe from a distance through the words of critics – here all looking towards Saint-Omer while the troupe was not in their town.

Updates about the troupe's travels and travaux across the theatrical network allowed commentators to conjure a virtual sense of yearlong theatrical provision when their inhabitants were without a physical troupe. This connectivity offered *arrondissement* spectators a taste of what it would be like to live in a larger provincial town with a year-long company.²¹ At the same time, by conjuring for the reader a sense of being vicariously involved in a troupe performance far from their locale, *arrondissement* reporting allowed writers to smooth over some of the tensions inherent in the shared itinerant season that were central to administrative

¹⁸ *Le mémorial des Pyrénées*, 27 May 1844, p. 4; *L'Abeille de Lorient*, 25 December 1842, p. 2.

¹⁹ *La Feuille de Saint-Omer*, 6 June 1829, p. 15.

²⁰ “sans importance pour nous-mêmes, pourraient cependant en avoir pour les artistes dans les autres villes de l'arrondissement théâtral.” *Le mémorial Artésien*, 4 June 1845, p. 7.

²¹ For example Lille or Rouen.

tussles such as that between the Gers and Basses-Pyrénées prefects with which I opened this chapter. Moreover, these journalists' comparative descriptions of troupe performances exhibit the formation of an imagined community made tangible for readers through their engagement with print capitalism, Benedict Anderson's concept here configured at the *arrondissement* level.²²

The imagined *arrondissement* community invited readers to critique and comment on performances at a distance, thus having a direct impact on local assessment of the work of travelling troupes. Indeed, due to inter-*arrondissement* reporting, troupes lived their successes or failures across the itinerant network. This could work in troupes' favour: the arrival of new repertoire in one locality, for example, was often framed by reports of its regional success. In 1829, the Valenciennes journalist for *L'Écho du nord* announced the director Guillaume Dellemeance's²³ troupe performance of Georges Ozaneaux and Ferdinand Hérold's *drame Le dernier jour de Missolonghi* by underlining the acclaim that the piece had generated in Arras, Lille and Douai,²⁴ a strategy to arouse public interest – and ticket sales – through regional comparison. Similarly, some artists were defined by *arrondissement*-wide accomplishments. As an actor, Bertéché was described by critics in Saint-Omer and Valenciennes with similar phrases emphasising his region-wide success, as a figure “deservingly appreciated in all of the *parterres* of the 1st *arrondissement théâtral*.”²⁵ These comments instilled local confidence in a director by invoking the shared judgement of the *arrondissement's* combined audiences.

More generally, journalists' depiction of the *arrondissement* community also benefited troupes by magnifying local successes on a regional scale. In the 1840s, a Valenciennes column announcing the arrival of Bertéché's opera troupe advertised how the troupe “seemed to please the inhabitants of Cambrai, where they have been for a month.”²⁶ A reporter for the Saint-Omer journal similarly told its readers that, according to reviews from Valenciennes, Bertéché's troupe was this year superior in talent, with a young, talented tenor.²⁷ In the Breton 6th *arrondissement*, the Vannes columnist also described how, in September 1844, “a good reputation preceded Mr Seymour's troupe; we hasten to say that the artists in this

²² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised and extended edition, London 1991, pp. 6f.

²³ Dellemeance was the stage name for Guillaume, Baron de Navailles. See Auguste Philibert Chaalons d'Argé, *Histoire critique et littéraire des théâtres de Paris. Année 1822*, Paris 1824, pp. 216f.

²⁴ *L'Écho du Nord*, 21 March 1829, p. 99.

²⁵ “[...] apprécié à si juste titre de tous les parterres du premier arrondissement théâtral [sic].” *Le courrier du Nord*, 25 January 1834, p. 3. See also *Le mémorial Artésien*, 11 December 1844: “M. Bertéché est toujours l'excellent acteur apprécié et aimé à Saint-Omer comme dans toutes les villes de l'arrondissement théâtral”. Bertéché held the position of director between 1835 and 1848 before handing over the title to his son Prosper.

²⁶ “[La troupe] a paru faire plaisir aux habitant[s] de Cambrai où elle vient de donner des représentations pendant un mois.” *L'Écho de la frontière*, 4 June 1840, p. [927].

²⁷ *Le mémorial Artésien*, 17 May 1845, in advance of the town premiere of *La juive*.

troupe have victoriously justified this [reputation]”,²⁸ a comment that underlines again just how frequently opinions from across the theatrical network were read, assessed and justified by other critics. These intra-*arrondissement* reports primed audiences to receive troupes and specific pieces in a positive manner far before performers had even set foot in a new locale.

Of course, attention to performances across the *arrondissement* could also be detrimental. Companies could have future stops on their itineraries marred by transmitted accounts of their past failures. In 1824, for instance, an anonymous journalist in Valenciennes warned readers that director Alexis Dupré-Nyon’s 1st *troupe d’arrondissement* “marching towards us is not escorted by an excellent reputation”.²⁹ As this quote demonstrates, the *arrondissement* grapevine had the potential to prime the audience to be wary of upcoming performers, especially since local columnists went as far as to anticipate poor troupe standards from regional silence about directors’ successes. Writing about Dellemece’s troupe in 1829, for example, another Valenciennes critic wrote that:

Dellemece’s opera troupe must be making very little impact in Arras because this town’s newspapers do not mention their performances. *Le journal de Cambrai* has announced that Dellemece is doing everything to avoid going to the latter town, where he never makes enough profit.³⁰

From journalistic silence, the Valenciennes’ critic inferred the artistic weakness of Dellemece’s troupe and, from Dellemece’s avoidance of Cambrai, further assumed mismanagement of the troupe. These two elements prepared a lacklustre reception for the group’s initial Valenciennes performances, although the troupe was found to improve as their shows continued.³¹ The fate of travelling troupes in one locale could therefore easily be affected by the reported successes and failures of their recent *arrondissement* history since ephemeral and geographically distant performances could be preserved for posterity through connected and comparative press reports.

Overall, the typical journalistic practices of small-town critics offered a sense of communal theatrical membership that encouraged readers to transcend the limitations of the shared itinerant system by participating vicariously in the theatrical season taking place across the *arrondissement*.³² By situating performances,

²⁸ “Une belle réputation avait précédé la troupe de M. Seymours; hâtons-nous de dire que les artistes qui la composent l’ont victorieusement justifiée.” *Le journal des théâtres* (Paris), 18 September 1844, p. 3.

²⁹ “[La troupe] qu’on nous annonce ne marche point escortée d’une excellente renommée.” *Les petites affiches de Valenciennes*, 20 November 1824, p. 380.

³⁰ “Il faut que la troupe d’opéra de M. Dellemece fasse bien peu de sensation à Arras, car les feuilles de cette ville ne rendent point compte des représentations. *Le journal de Cambrai* annonce que M. Dellemece fait tout son possible pour ne pas aller dans cette dernière ville, où il ne fait pas d’assez bonnes recettes.” *Les petites affiches de Valenciennes*, 11 February 1829, p. 53.

³¹ *L’Écho de la frontière*, 14 March 1829, p. [90].

³² *Le Morbihan* (Vannes), 24 June 1843, p. 3.

performers and spectators within an imagined *arrondissement* community, critics placed provincial connections at the heart of local performance culture.

Self-definition through the community

Journalists' articulation of an *arrondissement* community had a decided effect on how readers understood the socio-political context of hometown stage cultures. On many occasions, the regional framework was used by local critics to consider the place of the local by outlining *arrondissement* comparisons and subsequent hierarchies. In this vein, several northern critics used the issue of taste to discuss the regional status of their towns. In 1848, a Saint-Omer journalist writing about the upcoming town premiere of Fromental Halévy's *Charles VI*³³ referenced inter-town competition when stating that the *grand opéra* "will not be less attended in Saint-Omer than in Arras, in Cambrai, in Valenciennes, in Dunkerque, or, in fact, anywhere Mr Bertéché has given this opera."³⁴ A few years earlier, the same journalist similarly included a review of the same troupe's Dunkerque premiere of Vincenzo Bellini's *Norma*,³⁵ declaring that the piece in his town would "attract all those people who like music and have an interest in art to the theatre next Tuesday."³⁶ In both of these columns, the critic made it known that his locality valued musical art by boasting that Saint-Omer audiences would match their compatriots in other *arrondissement* locales, but, in doing so, also voiced a call for his inhabitants to step up and buy tickets to prove said advertised artistic intelligence. In the case of Saint-Omer, these statements also formed a way of justifying the town's place in the artistic network of the north at a time when the town was the Auch to the Pau of Dunkerque and Valenciennes: Saint-Omer received far fewer *troupe d'arrondissement* visits per year than the rest of the regional network due to its smaller population and the lack of space and decors in its *salle de spectacle*.³⁷

Across France, theatrical resources were other key features through which journalists charted *arrondissement* dynamics, most often negative ones. The journalist A. B., writing in the Vannes paper *Le Morbihannais* in August 1841, for one, emphasised the discrepancies between troupe performances in his hometown and Lorient:

there [Lorient] are the decors, there is the [music] library, there the *magasin*, there the orchestra. [...] The voices that cannot make themselves heard here, the orchestral ensemble that

³³ Libretto by Germain et Casimir Delavigne.

³⁴ "Charles VI ne sera pas moins bien venu à St.-Omer qu'à Arras, à Cambrai, à Valenciennes, à Dunkerque, que partout enfin où M. Bertéché a donné cet opéra". *Le mémorial Artésien*, 26 January 1848, p. 3.

³⁵ Libretto by Felice Romani.

³⁶ "attirer au théâtre [de St.-Omer], mardi prochain, toutes les personnes qui aiment la musique et qui portent intérêt à l'art". *Le mémorial Artésien*, 11 January 1845, p. 7.

³⁷ AN, F/21/1235, Itinerary (Bertéché), 16 March 1840.

we are searching for, and the interpretation that comes with it will no doubt also be found there.³⁸

The comparison between Lorient and other towns was an ongoing concern in Brittany as, two years later, A. B. once more complained about the inferiority of Vannes versus Lorient, calling his hometown, along with the nearby small town of Quimper, the “thorn in the crown of the poor director”.³⁹ Similarly, in an 1842 account of Bertéché’s troupe performing Friedrich von Flotow’s opera *Le naufrage de la Méduse* (1839)⁴⁰ in Saint-Omer, journalist Georges Fleury described that the stage effects depicting a foundering boat appeared lacklustre: on their stage, “the storm reigned on one side of the waves, and calm on the other”.⁴¹ The writer could not help adding that this effect had been more convincingly executed on the larger Dunkerque stage, where the “audience’s impressions were entirely in contrast to ours”. Indeed, he reported that Bertéché’s performance there had led to an emotional connection with the audience (“everyone was moved”). For Fleury, Dunkerque’s more expansive theatrical resources allowed troupe performances to offer a deeper level of artistic expression than was available in Saint-Omer. This is demonstrated in the reporter’s statement that the moving effect allowed Dunkerque spectators to make a connection between the onstage portrayal of sailors drowning and their lived experiences of similar events in their coastal town. This emotive reaction was, the journalist implied, a far cry from the “unflattering” reception by spectators in Saint-Omer. Theatrical resources thus led to differences in the profundity of performed experiences offered across an *arrondissement*. In their comparison of the theatrical resources and consequential audiences reactions of Breton and 1st-*arrondissement* towns, A. B. and Fleury both outlined a clear pecking order: Saint-Omer and Vannes were seen as satellites of Dunkerque and Lorient due to their lesser resources and the resulting differences in spectators’ experiences, charting a clear provincial hierarchy within the region.⁴²

Simply pointing out the power dynamics caused by theatrical culture was not the point of such columns. Rather, they were usually a means to a particular end: bettering the town in question and potentially changing readers’ conceptions of existing power dynamics. An 1839 column written by journalist Alphonse Thinius for *L’Industriel alsacien*, a paper from industrial Mulhouse, exemplifies how theatrical relationships were used to reflect more widely on the regional status of

³⁸ “là en effet est la subvention, là sont les décors, là la bibliothèque, là les magasins, là l’orchestre [...] là aussi se trouveront sans doute les voix qui ne peuvent parvenir à se faire entendre ici, l’ensemble que l’on cherche, l’intelligence qui viendra”. *Le Morbihan*, 28 August 1841, p. 2.

³⁹ “pas la seule épine de la couronne de l’infortuné directeur”. *Le Morbihan*, 24 June 1843, p. 3.

⁴⁰ Libretto by Auguste Pilati.

⁴¹ “La mer n’avait pas assez de répétitions, la tempête régnait d’un coté sur les flots, le calme de l’autre [...]. A Dunkerque [...] les impressions des spectateurs ont été toutes contraires aux nôtres; là tout le monde était ému”. *Le mémorial Artésien*, 27 October 1842, p. 5.

⁴² Critics also highlighted the differences in decors provided for troupes in Cambrai versus Valenciennes, using a comparison to call for municipal investment. See Archives départementales du Nord, 1/T/222, IN, 10 September 1860.

provincial towns. Thinus stated that music was an educational art from which he believed many Mulhouse families had turned away, although without describing why. The critic, however, saw the work of the *troupes d'arrondissement* as a means to revitalise “the taste of the city for singing and theatre in general”. Crucially, Thinus envisaged the development of Mulhousian taste as essential to wider civic development. Once Mulhouse had regained the title of “an artistic city”, he argued, it could then become “a big town, benefitting from all the advantages of real civilisation.”⁴³ Once regional hierarchy was defined through theatre, journalists could also refer to the *arrondissement* community to train local readers’ and audiences’ theatre-going behaviours. For example, references to other towns’ appreciation of certain performers could be used to model appropriate local behaviour towards singers. In the Saint-Omer journalist’s review of 1st-*arrondissement* soprano Athénaïs Lefèvre in 1845, he wrote: “M^{me} Lefèvre deserved to be recalled; she was [recalled] twice in Dunkerque and will be, we predict, in all of the towns of the 1st *arrondissement*.”⁴⁴ Here, the Saint-Omer critic reported the Dunkerque audience’s praise of Mme Lefèvre as a way of guiding his own populace’s reaction to the singer: by emphasising the artistic intelligence of the Dunkerque audience in applauding her, he suggests that this reaction to her singing was the gold standard for the *arrondissement*, implying that other audiences of similar good judgment – namely Saint-Omer – would be expected to repeat it.

In the 6th *arrondissement*, positive comparisons of spectatorship practices between Saint-Brieuc and Lorient audiences were also invoked by the critic from the former town to affirm his local audience’s appraisal of troupe members Guillemain (tenor)⁴⁵ and Ferdinand (baritone) in 1844. Writing as if he were talking directly to these singers, the journalist stated that “you are precious acquisitions for a director, and you contribute to an ensemble that will be heartily appreciated in Lorient, our principal town, where we don’t doubt our judgements shall be confirmed.”⁴⁶ In this statement, the Saint-Brieuc writer sought to capitalise on the established cultural hierarchy of the 6th *arrondissement*, leaning on Lorient’s reputation as a place of artistic importance to confirm the judgement of the Saint-Brieuc populace. In this way, regional critique in both the 1st and 6th *arrondissements*

⁴³ “Mulhausen n’est pas encore une cité artistique. [...] Ainsi se formerait sans doute et se développerait le goût de la cité pour le chant et en général pour le théâtre ; [...] et Mulhausen ne tarderait pas à prendre place au rang des grandes villes et à jouir de tous les avantages d’une véritable civilisation.” A. Th. [Alphone Thinus], Mulhausen sur le point de devenir grande ville, in *L’Industriel Alsacien* (Mulhouse), 29 December 1839, pp. [417]f., here p. 418.

⁴⁴ “M^{me} Lefèvre a mérité d’être rappelée; elle l’a été deux fois à Dunkerque et elle le sera, nous le lui prédisons, dans toutes les villes du premier arrondissement.” *Le mémorial Artésien*, 15 January 1845, p. 4. Mme Lefèvre married and from 1845 was subsequently known as Mme Charton. *Écho de la frontière*, 21 January 1845, p. 1 [33]. See also AN, F/21/1236, troupe list (Bertéché), 1845/46.

⁴⁵ Also spelled “Guillemin”, Archives départementales du Morbihan, 1/Z/197, Prospectus, 24 September 1844.

⁴⁶ “[...] vous [êtes] de précieuses acquisitions pour un directeur, et vous contribuez à un ensemble qui sera vivement apprécié à Lorient, votre ville principale, où, nous n’en doutons pas, nos jugemen[t]s seront confirmés.” *Le journal des théâtres*, 11 July 1844, p. 4.

could help to shape the direction of local audiences' taste and engagement with troupes by creating a sense of communal, approved reactions to certain singers. In other words, what was artistically correct would, in these critics' eyes, be confirmed and maintained through imitation between towns within the *arrondissement*.

It is, of course, possible to see the reverse happening too: regional comparison could be used to promote differences in the artistic-judgement practices of *arrondissement* spectators and, in turn, to distinguish the behaviours of towns' inhabitants. Indeed, the writer from the *Écho* in Valenciennes was at pains to emphasise that his town's spectators did not accept the new tenor Allard as warmly as those in Dunkerque in 1845.⁴⁷ Several town newspapers had previously reported Allard's success in Dunkerque,⁴⁸ but once the *Écho* writer had heard the tenor in Valenciennes, he judged Allard as "unremarkable".⁴⁹ Subjectivity aside, the *Écho* critic's reference to the *arrondissement* was significant in this review. The commentator wrote that "we were wrong to boast so much about the troupe's new acquisition" although he had earlier repeated the Dunkerque paper's praise for Allard;⁵⁰ he thus framed the local reception of this performer as a rejection of the artistic taste of the Dunkerque public.

In the same theatrical season, a comparison of the reception of soprano Pauline Gourdon in different towns also allowed Saint-Omer critic Georges Fleury to similarly establish his public's taste versus the *arrondissement* community. Discussing Bertéché's troupe's production of Halévy and Scribe's opera *La juive* in Valenciennes in March 1845, Fleury criticised this town's audiences for having celebrated M^{me} Gourdon's singing. He described that the Valenciennes audience's behaviour "mislead the director. [...] recalling M^{me} Gourdon, who has no voice nor does she understand what is required of her role type, is wrong."⁵¹ By redefining M^{me} Gourdon's talent through the eyes of the Saint-Omer public, Fleury reflected on the Valenciennes audience and denigrated their opinions, thereby establishing the superior artistic tastes of his local populace. Comparative reviewing in this vein thereby allowed critics to impose their own regional hierarchies within the *arrondissement* based on the reception of troupe members.

Regional comparisons were also employed didactically as a means of bettering local spectators' judgements. In 1828, for instance, a Valenciennes journalist compared their town's appreciation of singer M^{me} Dellemece (the director's wife) with recent reports that her performance in *Zaire* in Dunkerque had been

⁴⁷ *L'Écho de la frontière*, 25 January 1845, p. 1 [41].

⁴⁸ *Le courrier du Nord*, 16 November 1844, p. 2.

⁴⁹ "On a eu tort de vanter outre mesure cette nouvelle acquisition de la troupe; si on n'eût parlé ni de son talent ni de ses appointements, M. Allard eut passé inaperçu." *L'Écho de la frontière*, 25 January 1845, p. 1 [41]. See also *L'Écho de la frontière*, 21 January 1845, p. 1 [33].

⁵⁰ *L'Écho de la frontière*, 11 November, 1844, p. 1 [531]

⁵¹ "Voilà comme le public égare le directeur. [...] redemander M^{me} Gourdon, qui n'a ni la voix, ni l'intelligence de son emploi, c'est un tort." *Le mémorial Artésien*, 1 March 1845, p. 5. The term *emploi* referred to a role type, applicable across different pieces and genres (i.e. the ingenue, comic male etc.) with specific vocal and physical characteristics. Each performer was hired to fill one or two *emplois* within a provincial troupe.

“whistled and jeered at [...], those people there are not po...polite at all.”⁵² Not only positioning his populace as superior to their Dunkerque counterparts, the critic implicitly advocated for a correct type of behaviour that he wished to instil in his local audience by insulting the Dunkerque towns’ audiences and underlining the Valenciennes’ correct – in his eyes – reaction to the actress. Through these types of comments, journalists suggested that there was a golden standard of artistic judgement and behaviour that only *their* town embodied, once again affirming their central position within the *arrondissement*. Especially in smaller towns such as Saint-Omer such comparisons made between audience behaviours formed a potential strategy for surmounting the peripheral nature of the town in material terms, such as the aforementioned poor theatrical resources or fewer troupe visits. The *arrondissement* community as articulated through these newspaper columns thus hinged on a paradoxical axis: it created both a sense of collectiveness that combatted some of the absences and fluctuations of the itinerant system, but the shared readership and spectatorship of this community also encouraged the press’s formation of different hierarchies and power dynamics between members.

Community, hierarchies and repertoire

I have argued so far that the process of sharing a troupe across a provincial network of towns during the mid-nineteenth century resulted in the critical articulation of the regional as an important sphere for the mediation of the everyday socio-political function of the theatrical life of small French towns, including the voicing of competitive tensions about power dynamics and hierarchies across the region. Crucially, theatrical competition and comparison on a regional level could be used productively by town critics to reflect on and define cultural behaviours and identities in their locale, as shown in the work of critics from Mulhouse and Saint-Omer. As I hope to have shown, acknowledging the interconnected nature of local theatrical life in these provincial environments offers an important way to reconceptualise the broad and relationally-dependent ‘local-ness’ of the socio-political topicality of repertoire, performance practices and theatrical life as a whole in small French towns between the 1820s and 1860s.

Moreover, I wish to conclude by suggesting that the process of defining the local through regional connectivity was none the more pressing than in discussions of the socio-political function of one specific repertoire and its regional place. It was the provision of opera – and not just theatre in general – that was central to the Prefect of Gers’ complaints about the influence of his colleague over Hermant’s troupe in 1852, just as it was most often operatic pieces, such as *La juive* and *Le naufrage de la Méduse*, that revealed the discrepancies in theatrical resources or differences in regional taste outlined above. The potency of the regional theatrical

⁵² “Mad^e Dellemeence aurait été sifflée et huée [...], ces gens-là ne sont pas po...polis du tout.” *Les petites affiches de Valenciennes*, 20 December 1828, p. 499.

community was thus expressed most strongly in provincial operatic conditions, yet so were the community's limitations. The sharing of operatic troupes, for example, was apt to escalate the largest regional tensions. In Valenciennes, a critic writing on 29 April 1834 described an increase in visits from a variety of itinerant companies that came to this corner of the north. He relayed his disappointment, though, that a rise in performances did not mean a rise in opera: "[T]his year we are favoured a little more, but by the *comédie troupe*".⁵³ The 'but' indicated the journalists' distress at the lack of opera in Valenciennes, confirmed later in the column as he stressed the anticipated delights provided by the *troupe d'arrondissement* who *could* provide this repertoire, including the local premiere of Giacomo Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable* (1831).

Critics such as this Valenciennes writer not only distinguished the local worth of two genres but communicated a clear delineation of artistic hierarchies that were aligned with the performing troupe presenting the genre. The *troupes d'arrondissement*, the groups that I have mentioned throughout this chapter, were the only type of itinerant company that attempted, in varying levels of frequency across France, to stage *opéra-comique*, *grand opéra* and French translations of Italian operas. By comparison, provincial towns at times also hosted *troupes ambulantes*, a smaller type of itinerant company which concentrated on vaudeville and spoken plays and which was ranked underneath the *arrondissement* performers in the government's 1824 legislation.⁵⁴ Crucially, at times, the troupes' differences and genres were reflected hierarchically onto the *arrondissement* community. This is exemplified in an 1827 article by a different Valenciennes reviewer discussing L. Dumanoir's *seconde troupe ambulante*:⁵⁵ "Perhaps the size of our *salle* is not aligned with the level of talent of some of the troupe's artists, who will no doubt be better appreciated in Saint-Amand, Bavai and Bouchain."⁵⁶

In his column, the critic used a comparison of the metaphorical size of traveling troupes' talent to make a wider social comment about the differences between Valenciennes and three much smaller northern villages without a dedicated theatre building. The *ambulante* company was not talented enough for Valenciennes, with its sizeable *salle*, the critic suggested, but was appropriate for the scale of the other towns' poky, temporary stages and, by implication, their limited understanding of artistic talent. In addition, the column inferred an unspoken comparison of place through repertoire: the *troupe ambulante* did not produce opera and, the journalist implied, the inhabitants of Saint-Amand, Bavay and Bouchain could therefore not expect to measure up to the regional artistic importance of

⁵³ "Cette fois nous sommes un peu mieux favorisés, mais par la troupe de Comédie". *Le courrier du Nord*, 29 April 1834, p. 3.

⁵⁴ Horrocks, *Performing for the Provinces*, pp. 7, 48f.

⁵⁵ The *seconde troupe ambulante* was the third troupe working in the northern region, alongside the *troupe d'arrondissement* and the *première troupe ambulante*.

⁵⁶ "Peut être que la dimension de notre salle n'est pas en rapport avec le talent de quelques uns des artistes qui la composent, qui seront sans doute mieux appréciés à St Amand, Bavai et Bouchain." *Les petites affiches de Valenciennes*, 9 May 1827, p. [598].

Valenciennes. This short column therefore acted as a multi-layered metaphor in which the journalist cuttingly used the *troupe d'arrondissement* and its operatic fare to position Valenciennes as a town of greater regional importance and artistic taste than its neighbours.

Given the stakes for regional comparison and self-definition through the performance of operatic repertoire, it is unsurprising that many municipal councils also used the genre to attempt to shift their town's place in regional hierarchies. Councillors in Vannes, Lorient and Tarbes began to fund their *troupe d'arrondissement* for certain seasons between 1824 and 1864 as a strategy to ensure that directors would visit more regularly.⁵⁷ This move attempted to outmanoeuvre other towns by dangling a financial carrot in front of self-supporting directors, and in all of these cases, the municipal councils demanded that the *troupe d'arrondissement* guarantee operatic productions.⁵⁸ Attempts to become a more dominant centre in the theatrical network were therefore strictly tied to the local promotion of opera. Such moments reveal that it was the act of choosing operatic talent and repertoire, of defining themselves regionally through the operatic troupe and of competing with other provincial centres through opera that mattered most to critics and administrators at the local and regional level. To be part of a regional framework for theatre was, for many administrators and critics, thus primarily the experience of belonging to a shared operatic community, and issues of *arrondissement* hierarchy were determined most significantly through this high-art lyric genre.

⁵⁷ Archives municipales de Vannes, 1/D/1/8, municipal council minutes, 17 November 1835; 11 September 1839; 17 February 1862.

⁵⁸ AN, F/21/1250, letter from the Prefect of Morbihan (Édouard Lorois), 9 April 1841; F/21/1277, council minutes, 27 November 1841.

