Rousseau on stage

playwright, musician, spectator

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Following his opposition to the establishment of a theatre in Geneva, Jean-Jacques Rousseau is often considered an enemy of the stage. Yet he was fascinated by drama: he was a keen theatre-goer, his earliest writings were operas and comedies, his admiration for Italian lyric theatre ran through his career, he wrote one of the most successful operas of the day, Le Devin du village, and with his Pygmalion, he invented a new theatrical genre, the Scène lyrique (‘melodrama’).

Through multi-faceted analyses of Rousseau’s theatrical and musical works, authors re-evaluate his practical and theoretical involvement with and influence on the dramatic arts, as well as his presence in modern theatre histories. New readings of his theory of voice, developed in the Essai sur l’origine des langues, highlight the unique prestige of Italian opera for Rousseau. His ambition to rethink the nature and function of stage works, seen in Le Devin du village and then, more radically, in Pygmalion, give rise to several different discussions in the volume, as do his complex relations with Gluck. Together, contributors shed new light on the writer’s relationship to the stage, and argue for a more nuanced approach to his theatrical and operatic works, theories and legacy.

List of illustrations
Jean-Jacques Rousseau: a theatre and music chronology
Acknowledgements
List of abbreviations

Maria Gullstam and Michael O'Dea, Introduction: ‘La vérité est que Racine me charme’

Part I. Rousseau as theorist of theatre and opera

1. The anthropological foresight of the Lettre sur les spectacles, Felicity Baker

2. The dramaturgy of Rousseau's Lettre à d'Alembert and its importance for modern theatre, Patrick Primavesi

3. The voice of nature in Rousseau's theatre: reconstructing a dramaturgy, Jørgen Langdalen

4. Rousseau's Pygmalion and the limits of (operatic) expression, Jacqueline Waebre

Part II. Rousseau as playwright

5. Pygmalion’s power struggles: Rousseau, Rameau and Galathée, Maria Gullstam

6. Rousseau and his early comedies: the concept of the comic, Marie-Emmanuelle Plagnol-Diéval

7. Rousseau's Pygmalion and the theatre of autobiography, David Marshall

Part III. Rousseau's operatic and theatrical posterity

8. The melodic language of Le Devin du village and the evolution of opéra-comique, David Charlton

9. Rousseau’s ghost: Le Devin du village at the Paris Opera, 1770-1779, Michael O'Dea

10. A theatrophobic dramatist: J.-J. Rousseau’s position in theatre historiography and on today’s stage, Willmar Sauter

11. The judgement of Rousseau: Paride ed Elena by Gluck and Calzabigi (Vienna, 1770), Magnus Tessing Schneider

Summaries

Bibliography

Index

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380

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