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Mystery Music Stops Paris Opera

By ALAN RIDING

Phantom of the opera? Maria Callas returning on the 25th anniversary of her death? Perhaps not, but strange voices could be heard in the Opera Garnier on Monday evening as a production of Handel's "Giulio Cesare" opened the 2002-3 season. With the public soon becoming restless, a voice from the audience finally asked loudly, "Can't someone stop that?"

Mark Monkowski, who was leading the orchestra of the Paris National Opera, called for a break and requested silence so the mysterious sound could be located. He smiled when he recognized it as a recording of the very opera he was conducting, and he decided it was a version led by René Jacobs. "Now you can compare us," he said.

Still, the source of the music could not be traced. With the culture minister, Jean-Jacques Aillagon, and other senior politicians in the audience, the house management grew nervous. Its relations with house unions have been historically stormy, and although no labor negotiations are currently taking place, administrators understood that the production was a victim of sabotage.

After the audience was asked to leave the auditorium for an unscheduled intermission, a tape recorder with two small speakers was found in the upper reaches of the theater, above the public area and accessible only to technicians. Hugues Gall, director general of the Paris Opera, promised to ask the police to investigate. The performance then resumed.

Today a spokeswoman for the Paris Opera said that no explanatory statement was planned, but she conceded that the culprits had not been found. "All we can say is that it was not after all René Jacobs's version," she said. "It was certainly 'Giulio Cesare,' but we have not identified the recording."

Correction: September 20, 2002, Friday An article in The Arts yesterday about mysterious recorded sounds that stopped an opera performance in Paris misspelled the name of the conductor who called for an unscheduled intermission so the problem could be investigated. He is Marc Minkowski, not Mark Monkowski.

Correction: October 4, 2002, Friday An article in The Arts on Sept. 19 about mysterious recorded music that stopped a performance of Handel's "Giulio Cesare" on Sept. 16 at the Opera Garnier in Paris misidentified the live orchestra at the performance. It was Les Musiciens du Louvre-Grenoble, not the Paris National Opera orchestra.