

## INFLUENCE OF GUISEPPE AND CARLO BIBIENA ON SWEDISH SCENOGRAPHY OF THE 18TH CENTURY

When working on a catalogue raisonné of the surviving scenery of the 18<sup>th</sup> century from the court theatres of Drottningholm and Gripsholm in Sweden, I have come across both, Guiseppe and Carlo Bibiena. It goes without saying that the influence of the Bibiena family during the first half of the 18th century was still solidly established in Europe. During the travel tours made by young aristocrats fulfilling their education in France and Italy, important contacts were taken. This was the case especially for architects and craftsmen in general who made European journeys sometimes for several years in order to learn and improve their skill. When it comes to European court culture the ties within the royal families played an important part as intermediary for new impulses.

The Prussian princess Lovisa Ulrika became queen of Sweden in 1751. In 1744 she had married Adolf Fredrik of Holstein-Gottorf, the successor to the throne. Lovisa Ulrika was number 10 in the circle of 13 brothers and sisters and accordingly, one of Wilhelmine's younger sisters. She was very well educated, brilliantly intelligent and also ambitious for power. Her skills and contacts made her a regenerator of the Swedish court life not least in connection with theatre, opera and architecture. In what way could then the influence of Bibiena be carried on in practice? I like to give you a couple of tangible examples:

In the early 1750s the Royal Palace in Stockholm was almost ready but with ongoing interior furnishing. The court theatres of Ulriksdal and Drottningholm were in the planning state. (There had also been a wish to construct a theatre within the Stockholm palace and drawings by Francesco Bibiena were delivered for this purpose. However, the plans were changed and unfortunately the Francesco-drawings are lost since long.)

In order to gather information and collect and purchase models, graphics and drawings that could be useful in connection with the intended work, three men went for a journey to Europe. The costs involved were paid by the state but also by Lovisa Ulrika herself. She writes in a letter to her brother in Berlin: "Je fais voyager un dessinateur à présent, sur mes propres dépens, avec un peintre. Ils iront en France et en Italie et passeront par Berlin."

"Le dessinateur" was Jean Eric Rehn, also a prominent architect and soon to become supervisor and supplier of models or designs to stage decorations at the court theatres. The painter was Johan Pasch, who was a guild painter making interior decorations but also stage sets. The third person was Georg Fröman, a master builder who, compared to Rehn, socially ranked far below. Perhaps that is why Lovisa Ulrika does not mention the third member in the group. Fröman's task was to gather information on technical devices and for all constructive details in stage machinery. Thanks to Fröman and the diary he kept, a lot of details of the journey are known.<sup>1</sup>

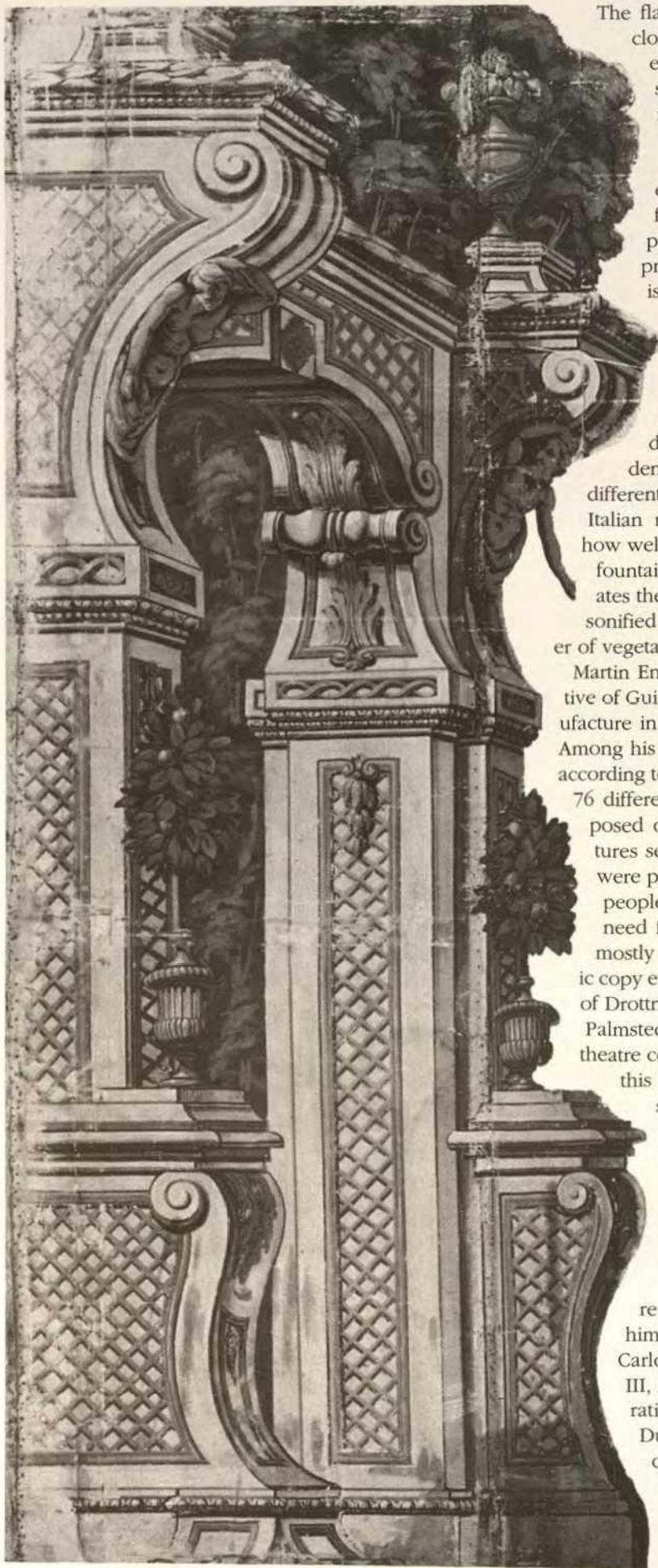
All three travellers were very skilled in their professions and both Rehn and Pasch had already made long time studies in Europe. The tour started in June 1755 and passed through Germany with a stop in Berlin between July 20 and August 5th. Afterwards, the tour went to Dresden, Prague, Vienna, Venice and Rome where the stay was extended to six months. After Rome the route included Naples and Herculaneum. The way home went through Turin, Paris (summer 1756 was spent in the French capital), the Netherlands and Denmark.

Thanks to Frömans' diary we know that during the stay in Berlin, a visit to the opera house was on the schedule and that several named artists were called on and among those also "Bibienna, dessinateur". The first name is not given, but there should be no doubt that the Bibiena in question was Guiseppe who worked in Berlin since 1751, where he died in 1757.

We do not know what came out of the meeting with Giuseppe, whose work was well known at that time, not least through graphic media. Considering that both Rehn and Pasch were occupied in furnishing two theatres with stock sceneries, the meeting with Guiseppe must have been inspiring. Perhaps did they discuss one of Guiseppe's operatic garden compositions?

At Drottningholm you still find five pairs of flats to a garden scenery with obvious connection to Guiseppe. The scenery is listed in an inventory of 1809 and at that time the scenery was still complete is described as follows: "A garden, representing a host of pavilions in so-called Italian style, a lot of hedges and trees. (A host of yellow squares everywhere on the Scenery are to make up the building of which the pavilions are composed;) – 10 Flats, 5 on each side." This scenery is among the oldest preserved in the Drottningholm Theatre which means that it was painted at the latest in 1766. The painter could very well have been Johan Pasch and the one to decide on the motive was most likely Rehn, who had been engaged as a kind of director of the court theatres stage decorations. Whoever he was, the artist who painted the scenery had obviously at his disposal an original or some sort of model deriving from a composition by Guiseppe. Possibly the original was a print by Andrea Pfeffel included in 'Architettura e prospettiva...', published in 1740 and featuring, among other things, stage designs produced by Guiseppe in Vienna during the 1720s. A further, conclusive link between the Drottningholm garden and Giuseppe's, with its distinctive garden pavilions and Neptune fountain, is the description of the backcloth, no longer existent, listed in the inventory:

"A Backcloth, representing three Pavilions, and in the middle one a figure of Neptune with a Trident/old Inscription The Brown Garden/"



The flats have elements of design which come very close to the Bibiena scenery, but there are differences: Bibiena's garden flats all have a voluted socle projecting against the stage floor supporting a figurative sculpture. There are no traces of this motif in the Swedish garden, but this does not rule out the existence of similar projecting elements of scenery. Conceivably they took the form of detachable set pieces which were placed on the stage floor adjacent to the appropriate flat. The third pair of flats of the garden set is another deviation from the Bibiena version. Instead of trellis pavilions, they depict sculpted fountains. This departure from the original can be seen as a deliberate modernisation from the very outset. By now, some way into the 1760s, Giuseppe's scenery, with its strict linearity, doubtless seemed old-fashioned, and there is no denying that the inclusion of a pair of flats for the different motif helped to relieve the monotony of the Italian master's composition. In addition, one notes how well the odd pair of flats thematically – through its fountains and the Ceres figure – picks up and accentuates the symbolic meaning of the Bibiena garden, personified by Neptune, the ruler of the waves and promoter of vegetation and rebirth.

Martin Engelbrecht also exploited the same garden motive of Giuseppe in his industrial graphic production manufacture in Augsburg that was going on at least till 1756. Among his graphic prints he also produced dioramas and according to a list from his shop there existed not less than 76 different scenes or "Presentationen", everyone composed of six sheets each. Among those diorama-pictures several represented opera scenes. The dioramas were probably very popular and reached a great lot of people all around in Europe, appeasing a general need for pictures. Probably the printed sheets were mostly delivered coloured, but never cut out. A graphic copy emanating from Giuseppe's garden in possession of Drottningholms teatermuseum once belonged to Eric Palmstedt, the architect of the well-known Gripsholm theatre constructed in 1784. It is interesting to know that this kind of pictorial representation was part of his surroundings, stimulating his imagination. The inventor of the garden diorama is indicated to be Jeremias Wachsmuth (1711-1771). Wachsmuth's rights in this connection must be that he did transform or adjust a drawing or a graphic print originally by Giuseppe into another media.

A different kind of influence – so to say it more directly – could be manifested by the artist himself being on the spot. That was the case when Carlo Bibiena was summoned to Sweden by Gustaf III, king since 1772 to assist with the festival decorations for the nuptials in 1774 of the Duke and Duchess of Södermanland. Södermanland is a duchy or landscape south of Stockholm. The duke, named Carl, was Lovisa Ulrika's second

*Fig. 1. Court theatre of Drottningholm, side wing of garden scenery*

son. He was marrying Hedvig Elisabeth Charlotta of Oldenburg-Delmenhört. The festivities included spectacles in the Great Gallery (the State Hall) of Stockholm Palace on 8th June 1774, when A. F. Gyllenborg's verse drama 'Birger Jarl' was performed with numerous changes of scenes and entries. At Drottningholm one scenery except for the roofs is still in existence that can be tied to the commission of Carlo. In the inventory of 1809 the set is called "An Ionic Temple" and is consisting of seven pairs of flats, four frames or shutters and a practicable staircase composed of three set pieces. The description in the inventory reads: "An Ionic Temple, with floral bands round the Columns, 14 Flats high." The four shutters are described to represent "Architecture of Ionic modern Composition; attached at the back constituting wall covering." In addition to the seven surviving pairs of flats and the four shutters, the inventory also lists the then existent roofs: "6 roofs, namely 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 painted with Architecture and Garlands, apparently for the Ionic Temple M. The Old Inscription is: Wibiena, to go in the attic cupboard on the right."

The scenery having first been painted for the State Hall at Stockholm Palace is an assumption corroborated by the fact of the backcloth, contrary to the usual practice, being fixed to four frames which are intended to be put together and braced, not to be flown – for, needless to say, the State Hall had no flies, since this stage was a temporary and a moveable one. The provenance of the palace can be discussed and that the scenery had a history before being brought to Drottningholm is sure. It has also been suggested that the scenery be used for the third act of the opera 'Silvie', in which it represented the interior of the Temple of Diana. 'Silvie' was performed at the Bollhus-theatre, the opera of Stockholm, on 13<sup>th</sup> July as part of the ducal wedding festivities. The 1774 stage directions in the script give us the setting, not only the interior of the Temple of Diana, but also – in the closing scene of the last act – the Temple of Amor.

The back arrangement, with its adjustable frames or shutters, certainly argues in favour of the scenery originally designed for the State Hall and in the absence of more detailed evidence concerning the number of sets which Bibiena actually produced, the possibility of the set or at least the frames having been used in the State Hall cannot be ruled out. Admittedly, the motif does not fit in with the requisite scenery for 'Birger Jarl', but when that play was performed in the State Hall, it was interspersed with diversissements. In-between the second and third acts a performance was given of 'Aegle', a so-called opera-ballet, featuring the temples of Fortune, Amor and Destiny. For 'Silvie' and its performance at Bollhusteatern, on the other hand, a suspended backcloth would have been the natural recourse, and so it is interesting to note that, in the 1809 inventory, there is also a backcloth listed incontrovertibly associated, if not with the Ionic temple, then at least with Bibiena. The inventory gives us the information that an old inscription once said that the backdrop did belong to "Wiibiena's Palace set". It represented a Palace "painted

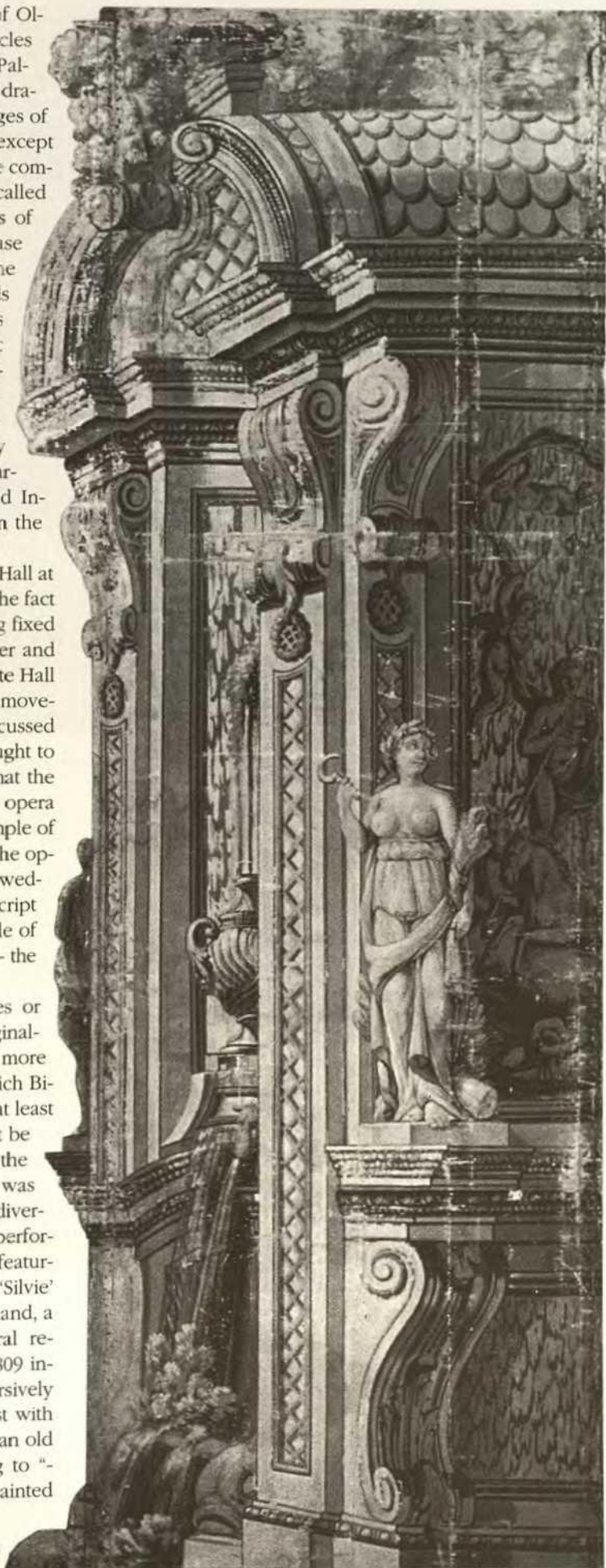


Fig. 2. Court theatre of Drottningholm, side wing of garden scenery representing a fountain and a Ceres sculpture



Fig. 3. Print by Andreas Pfeffel 1740, inv. Giovanni Bibiena

grey, with Columns and Pilasters of Corinthian order and Garlands on."

In view of the different orders – one Ionic and one Corinthian – we may assume that Drottningholm once had remnants of two Bibiena palaces. But the inventory also mentions: "Five Roofs and Two columns Roofs, belonging to the palace in Birger Jarl, marked H: all rotten except for just one." Perhaps these rotted roofs belonged to yet another Bibiena set, namely that occurring in the first and third acts of 'Birger Jarl' and, according to the stage directions, is representing a "Drawing room, splendidly adorned in the Gothic taste. The backcloth ends with a roundel, with three doors opening on to the courtyard."

Undeniably, the "Ionic Temple", as the inventory calls it, has a previous history and this Bibiena scenery was not originally produced for the Drottningholm Theatre. This is hinted at, for example, by the revised numbering of the flats, from which we can see that at least three pairs of flats were added to the set. One can also see that different hands were involved: there are considerable variations in the brushwork and colouring. Probably, and even if certain parts of it were originally made for the State Hall, this set touched down at the Bollhus-theatre. Later, to make it fit in

at Drottningholm, additions were made to the temple and, judging by the changes in the numbering, these additions comprised the first pair of flats and the two furthestmost.

We know that Jean Eric Rehn was affronted by the summoning of Carlo Bibiena since he was the one who would normally also have been responsible for theatrical festivities in connection with the wedding. Carl Christoffer Gjörwell, a well known publicist and librarian, writes in a letter of 28<sup>th</sup> March 1774 to his friend Jonas Alströmer, a manufacturer living in the town of Allingsås, that rehearsals are in progress for 'Silvie' and 'Birger Jarl', "a magnificent play to be performed at the nuptials". He continues: "But we have also received from Vienna an Italian called Bibiena, he is supposed to be a great master at both building and decorating a theatre. Night and day he sits at the Palace, painting for the new plays which are to be performed at the nuptials. I fancy Your Lordship can hear all the way to Allingsås how Master Rehn, who has hitherto decorated Bollhustea-tern and intended building the new theatre, a man great both in skill and vehemence, walks cursing down the palace corridors."

He returns to the same subject in his next letter, dated 25<sup>th</sup> April 1774: "The Italian Bibiena is painting the temple of

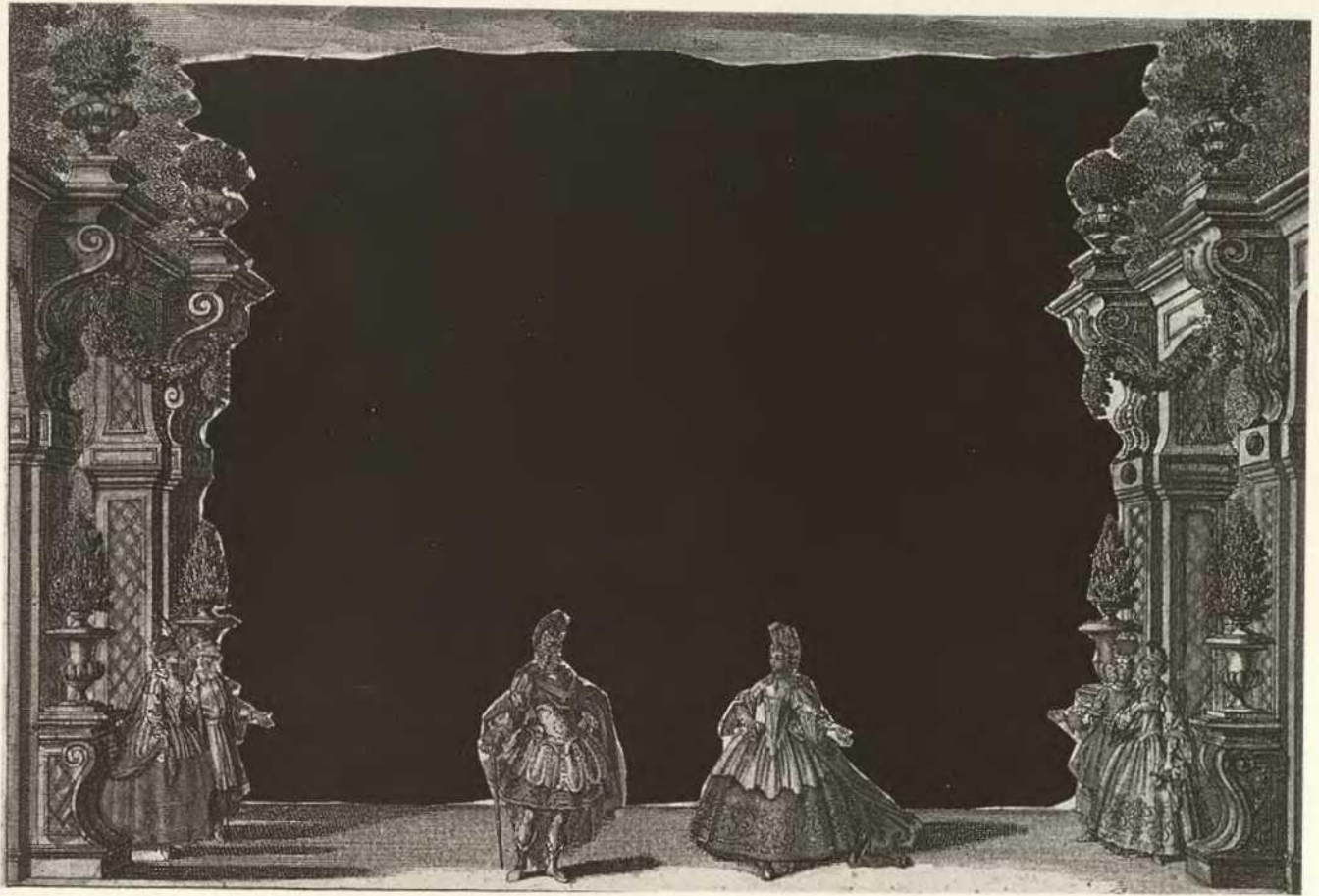


Fig. 4. Print by Martin Engelbrecht, Augsburg, 1<sup>st</sup> sheet of diorama scene

Amor for Silvie, and Rehn curses, loudly called him a charlatan. He has travelled the length and breadth of Europe and came here this year from Copenhagen, where he did not prosper either. It seems likely, though, that if he had any superior talent he would not need to come here to the north and offer his art. We will see before long how good he is. However, Mr Surveyor Rehn ought not to vent his wrath on the fellow, since he is working at the King's command. It would be annoying, though, if the foreigner is a mediocre fellow and were to take away work for both, our skilful scenery painters Bolander [pupil of Pasch] and Sundström."

By 1774 the style of the Bibienas was out of fashion and replaced by French neo-classicism. In Sweden Rehn continued to be the one in charge with the sceneries of both, the court theatres and of the Royal Swedish opera as long as it was situated in the old Bollhouse building. A new opera house was inaugurated in 1782. In order to renew the stock of scenery that would fit the new stage, Gustaf III. sent for designs from Jean Démosthène Dugourc in Paris. A couple of years later Louis Jean Desprez arrived in Sweden and the art of scenography turned into something new and different, heralding the Romantic period.

#### NOTES

- 1 Agne Beijer, Theaterzeichnungen im Reisejournal des Schloßbaumeisters Georg Fröman von seiner Reise nach Dresden und Wien im Jahre 1755, in: Bühnenformen – Bühnenräume – Bühnendekorationen, Editors Rolf Badenhausen and Harald Zielske, 1974.

▷ Fig. 5. Court theatre of Drottningholm, Carlo Bibiena, one of four shutters to the temple scenery

