Clio's Songs

History as Opera

COVER IMAGE

Clio

Oil painting on canvas | 56.4" x 45.2" | 1689 | Pierre Mignard (1612–1695)
Currently on display at the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, Hungary

Clio's Songs

or

History as Opera

An Overview of
French Grand Historical Opera
with the Author's Personal Views on
History as Represented in the Opera

Manuel Márquez-Sterling

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To my wife Gloria

For her profound love for me, and her firm courage and care in the face of my ailments.

—MMS

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Acknowledgements

I want to recognize here **Ms. Ruth Harlow,** retired faculty of Holderness Elementary School, New Hampshire, who was kind enough to read the manuscript to purge out my frequent "Spanishisms." Ms. Harlow was a very loyal student in my community course "Are You Afraid of Opera?", missing only one or two semesters in thirty years.

My recognition also goes to my colleague, **Herbert Otto,** Professor Emeritus, Plymouth State University, New Hampshire, for his learned observations, and his useful diagram, which completes the roster of the eleven iconic operas.

And finally, I would like to thank my book designer, **Lisa Lundari,** who made possible the wonderful cover of Clio, and the other details that enhanced this effort of mine so much.

Begin thou unforgetting Clio, for all
the ages and all the storied annals
of the past, are in thy keeping.

—Statius, Thebaid 10.630

When I hear music… I am related to the
earliest times and to the latest.

—Henry David Thoreau

I do not believe in operas based on gods
and myths… It is metaphysical music—
it is philosophy. What [I] want are plots,
which give rise to characters of flesh and
blood, with human emotions and human
passions. Music should speak to the heart
and not to the head.

— Sir Arthur Sullivan

OVERTURE

This book is neither addressed to the expert musicologist nor to the professional historian. To the first I must declare that my exposure to music was limited to a year of piano, and a smattering of poorly learned theory, which I hardly remember today. Thus, some of my comments on how certain musical passages affect or inspire me may draw from them a forgiving or condescending smile. If that would be the case I don't worry much, for we must remember that the composers did not write their music for the musicologists, but for us the laymen and lovers of their creations.

Concerning the second, the professionals or academic historians, I am almost certain that the historical information provided here with each of the operas featured in this handbook would be too basic to interest them. However I don't discount the possibility that they may profit from the reading of how historical episodes have inspired the great and not-so-great composers. I must add here that while writing and researching this manual, I discovered that it could be used as an effective tool for teaching history, especially, if one of your aims is to get your students motivated and interested in the subject. When you have a bunch of those freshmen enrolled in a cold eight o' clock morning class, you need all the help you can summon.

Now I want to stress the point that this handbook was written and put together as simply as possible. In it there are no academic or scholarly pretenses at all. Absolutely! None. I aim it for conversational purposes with the legion of opera lovers and the cadres of history buffs who may be interested in knowing what kind of history we do get in the opera house, and what can music possibly do for us in understanding an event, or a historical character.

Concerning the awakening of the learner's interest in history, my book, perhaps, could be of some value. Frustrated by the lack of any enthusiasm

by my students for the rise of civilization in Mesopotamia and on the banks of the River Nile, a subject that usually evokes curiosity and, alas! even excitement among them, I decided that something really radical had to be done. One morning, I availed myself of a CD player with a powerful set of speakers, and a recording of Philip Glass's opera ***Akhnaten.*** I trekked to my classroom where I for many years had lectured regularly. At that time we were studying Pharaoh **Akhnaten** and his monotheistic religious reforms.

First, I provided them with a handout of ***Akhnaten's*** "Hymn to the Sun," and asked them to read it quietly, just for themselves. After that, I briefly lectured on Egyptian polytheism and on Pharaoh Akhnaten himself. In reality I was making time for the sun rays to come from behind the hills facing the building and to illuminate the classroom. Room 342 was located in a lofty third-floor room with big windows open toward the East where, just past eight o'clock, the rays of the sun would fall on the classroom's walls. When that happened, I made one of the freshmen read aloud ***Akhnaten's*** "Hymn to the Sun." No sooner had she read it that I began to play that part in **Glass's** opera. In no time there was perfect concentrated listening to that aria. When it finished, after a few seconds of charged silence, the class broke the spell with an ovation that lasted until I signaled to stop it. The students had been completely captivated by **Glass's** music, and they began to ask me a series of questions that indicated, at last, they had understood the meaning of that moment in history. They comprehended that **Akhnaten's** prayer signified the moment in history when a human being, in their polytheistic planet, was making, for the first time, the passage from a polytheism concept of the gods to monotheism.

Class over, while I was picking up my stuff for my next lecture, a student approached me. She wanted to tell me that right there she had decided to become an Egyptologist. To this day, I don't know if her enthusiasm lasted long enough to carry her impromptu decision to fruition. But also, from that moment on, I knew that my handbook had a didactic value. Didactic, as defined by my fifty-year-old dictionary as, *tending to give instruction or advice, even when it is not welcome or needed,* to a group of first year students taking a course at eight o' clock in the morning! Ever since this learning experience until my retirement years later I used this technique, not very orthodox—I know—but with very fruitful, and unexpected results, such as

that one case, when one of my students was so captivated by the music that he told me he was going to change majors from history to music, something that the chair of my history department did not find very amusing. Perhaps by now you may be wondering how I came to opera and history. Surprisingly I was very young, perhaps ten or eleven years old. How? In my school I was learning about the Ancient Egyptians and I was absolutely enthralled by the subject of mummies, pyramids, and colossal temples. It so happened then that **Verdi's *Aida*** was to play in our town's opera house and my parents decided to tow me along with them. They were completely convinced that I would be soundly asleep, by the end of the second act at the longest. Three or four hours later, I was still very much awake and practically mesmerized by the spectacle of Radames and Aida dying in a tomb covered with Egyptian paintings, which I already had seen in the pages of my school book. My parents were completely surprised, but happy with my reception of the spectacle. You must remember that in those days there were no subtitles, so I had to figure out what the characters were singing to us.

That night, right there in that opera house, I had become an addicted opera fan. Some seventy plus years later, I still love ***Aida,*** and never tire of listening to it, always discovering new beauties in that opera. My gratitude to my parents continues to this day and never stops growing. I want you to know that in very trying and really dangerous circumstances in my life, when there were no hopes of surviving the raging storms of this ocean we call "life", opera has always been my constant companion, one from which I have drawn the strength, the inspiration, and hope, to again grab the rudder and keep steering toward new safe havens. My gratitude for this also extends to those great and no-so-great music makers, which I always have called *life's mocking birds.* Among them I have two or three that are my utmost favorites. You will get to know them as you read this handbook.

History? I don't really remember when I came to history. It may have been about the same time I discovered opera. However, I do know why to this day I love it, even after forty years of teaching it. My love for it is because of the natural drama history is. I was so fascinated by it that I decided to make the study and the teaching of it, something that became a forty-plus-year career.

I am very hopeful that by reading this handbook, and by playing the selections suggested in each chapter, the reader will increase his/her

enjoyment of both opera and history. What is contained in this handbook are essentially some of my favorites. What opera does to history, in the words of **Peter Sellars**, is "to deepen meaning and often add, an awareness that cold facts don't reveal." More recently, **Anthony Tommasini,** writing in the *New York Times* about **John Adams**' opera, ***The Death of Klinghoffer,*** and the acrid polemic that its presentation by the **Metropolitan Opera House** engendered for its perceived anti-Semitism, corroborates **Sellars'** point of view by saying that, "of all the arts, opera can use the subliminal power of music to explore motivations, including seething hatreds."

So happy and fruitful reading and listening,

Manuel Márquez-Sterling
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I

History and Opera

The Ancient Greeks, who knew a thing or two about human nature, put **Clio**, one of their nine muses, in charge of History. This may have been because the Greeks understood that the record of the past is a powerful force in defining who we are. It is in History where we find our noble and heinous deeds, our successes and failures, and the values giving meaning to the unintelligibility of our existence in those two enormous voids we call time and the universe.

The preservation and recall of our historical past has been such a relentless dedication that I would risk saying that it seems to be a quasi-instinct with us humans. This may be so, because we instinctively feel, or suspect, that History is among those few and unique knowledges that without them we run the risk of regressing a few steps back toward some kind of subhuman form of existence. No wonder in the last one hundred years or so, the totalitarian regimes the world has suffered and endured, have tried to strictly control the knowledge, the writing and the teaching of History. Deprived of knowing their true past their populations can be reduced to some of the conditions existing in the herd or the beehive.

But besides being in charge of History, **Clio** also knew how to play the lyre so as to entertain Zeus with her songs during the god's long and weary hours. Soon, however, when the clever muse found out that music, and the intrinsic drama that dwells in History were made for each other, she

began to pluck the strings of her lyre as she recalled epic battles, wars, and ancient and medieval heroes like, Achilles, Roland, or El Cid. For the sake of edifying her audiences—and to drive a point home—**Clio** embellished her songs with her inventions as well as recruited the help of her sisters, Euterpe, Calliope, Terpsichore, Melpomene and Thalmia, the muses of music, poetry, dancing, tragedy, and comedy. In so doing **Clio**, to her delight, discovered that more people would listen to her historical songs than would read of the events in the old dusty tomes. She rejoiced in the fact that for centuries, when most people could not read or gain access to books, she had for herself alone a truly captive audience.

The First True Historical Opera

Thus it was inevitable, or rather irresistible, for **Clio** not to get on the operatic stage a few years after the Florentines of Italy had invented opera at the turn of the sixteenth century. **Clio** had her first opportunity in 1632, with the opera ***Il Sant Alesio*** by **Stefano Landi** (1587–1639). After Landi, came **Claudio Monteverdi** (1567–1643) who in Venice, in 1643, unveiled ***L'Incoronazione di Poppea****, (The Coronation of Poppea)* considered by all as the first true historical opera, because it had what **Landi**'s ***Il Sant Alessio***, didn't: an incisive and realistic character study of the Roman emperor Nero, his wife Poppea, his teacher-philosopher Seneca, and a view of the debauchery that Imperial Rome was under during the reign of this profligate emperor.

Yes! **Clio** really went overboard with this opera, inspiring **Monteverdi** to craft a work that has proven to be an ageless masterpiece of "History as Opera" and one that remains as popular today as it was four centuries ago.

The 17th Century: Historiography and Opera

The history that we find in the Opera is, of course, contained in the libretto for which the opera was composed. Therefore, almost always, the libretto reflects the historiography and the philosophical point of view of the contemporary historians. In the times of **Monteverdi**, in the seventeenth century, he used a libretto based on the writings of **Tacitus**, the Ancient

Roman historian, whose writings were very popular among the aristocratic elites who sponsored and attended the operatic performances. We can also read in this opera's libretto, albeit in paraphrases, the Stoic philosophic tenets of **Seneca**, who in those days had also become a favorite ancient writer.

The 18th Century: Opera Seria

Monteverdi's opera blazed a trail soon to be followed in the eighteenth century by many composers. History and its famous characters and episodes continued being sung in the operatic stages of most European countries, albeit, now under the strictures of the so-called **Opera Seria,** a style of opera developed in Naples by the musical reforms of **Alessandro Scarlatti.** Usually, however, **Opera Seria** is more identified with **George Frideric Handel** (1685–1759), who is, perhaps, the grand master of the genre.

In general, **Opera Seria** dealt with classical themes and mythology, the *lingua franca* of the aristocracy. However, highly fictionalized historical themes were also its frequent subjects. The two basic characteristics in **Opera Seria's** structure were its long *recitatives,* and its equally long *arias da capo.*

The *recitative* was the result of combining speaking and singing. Its purpose in the opera was to move the action and pass information of a factual nature to the listener. The *aria,* on the other hand, was a developed melody, used by composers to let us know what are the emotions stirring in the minds or hearts of the characters. The *aria* is truly an epiphany, that is, a revelation that stops the action, which is only resumed after it is done and, of course, the listeners have rewarded the singers and the composers' creations with their ovations or boos of disapproval. In modern times it happens that while the audience of an old **Opera Seria** waits impatiently for the *aria* to begin they, or on the contrary, wait impatiently for the *recitative* to be over. In all of the history of opera, I can assure you, no one has gone to the opera to listen to the *recitatives.* Although you may think that all *recitatives* are of the same boring nature, there are different types according to what the nature of the situation in the plot is. Thus you could have them fast or slow, accompanied by the orchestra or by just one or a few instruments, and the so called ***secco***—which literally means dry—or unaccompanied.

Here you may be wondering why then the *recitative.* As we said above, the *recitative* moves on the action, but it also has another very important role to play. Realize that once we start listening to an opera we have left behind the world we live in to enter one created by music. This world is mysterious and unreasonable for we don't go around singing in the real world. Once the composer has gotten you in that mysterious world he doesn't want you to return to the regular world, because if you do, all the mystery created by music ceases almost instantly and, lo and behold, you fall back to the "real," to the prosaic. The solution to this was to keep you for a while in that mysterious world of music until the *aria* begins, that is, in a kind of limbo, a waiting tank, to unleash on you the epiphany, the revelation of something he wants you to hear. The *recitative* is neither music nor the spoken word. It is something in between. Like the waiting room in a train station for the arrival of the train, which is the *aria,* the epiphany.

The typical **Opera Seria** aria was divided in three parts, A-B-A, which composers used to depict the characters' moods and passions. For instance, the A section presented a theme, the second, B, a complementary one, and the third one, A, a return to the first. That is why this type of aria is known as *da capo,* or literally "back to the head or the top". In the return there could be many elaborations and embellishments, which are for the singers to invent so they could show their extensive vocal prowess. This, and the many subplots with their own arias make these operas long enough and for some exasperating, but as you may remember **Opera Seria** was for the aristocrats who could spend long evenings into the nights at the theater.

Concerning the chorus in **Opera Seria** it was sparsely used and usually left for the finale so they could moralize about the plot, or sing the praises of the main protagonist.

During the High Baroque period **Opera Seria**, was the main operatic spectacle of the European **Enlightenment** also known as the *Age of Reason.* In this period we find a cluster of influential thinkers, writers, philosophers, and historians who saw history as a cyclical development beginning with a *Golden Age* in Greece and Rome. These intellectuals and the aristocracy who avidly sought out these spectacles were animated by a rational thrust. One of them, **A.R.J. Turgot** (1727–1781), said that, "History [was] a steady

march through alternating periods of calm and excitement, good and evil… toward a greater perfection." If you follow the plots of many of the operas from this period you will soon find that **Turgot's** idea of history was very well reflected in their plots. The so-called "emplotment" of the eighteenth-century historical operas usually was one of constant ups and downs with a not very reasonable ruler or historical characters acting arbitrarily or not motivated by rationalistic considerations. Then, after a very long series of arias and episodes the ruler was duly enlightened at the end, in which a chorus sang his or her praises. In other words, do you see it?, A rationalistic progression that goes from darkness to the light of a golden age.

Opera Seria went through many reforms such as eliminating the unaccompanied recitative, giving a more prominent role to the orchestra and the chorus, cutting back the vocal excesses of the singers, reintroducing the ballet, which had been pushed aside, and melodramatic endings as well. These reforms reached a culmination with **Christoph Willibald Gluck** (1714–1787) who aimed to forge a synthesis of Italian and French traditions.

The great librettist of **Opera Seria** was **Pietro Metastasio** whose librettos were used time and again by many different composers. **Mozart**, for instance, in his ***La clemenza di Tito***. By the beginning of the nineteenth century **Opera Seria**, although becoming more spectacular and dramatic, and picking up some of the elements of the new Romantic opera, now exploding on the operatic stages, **Opera Seria** seemed to have reached its point of total exhaustion. Its *coup de grace* was the social and political upheavals unleashed by the French Revolution.

The 19th Century: Romanticism

In the nineteenth century the literary movement called **Romanticism** came to alter all of this radically. **Romanticism,** like a rampaging swollen river soon went over its banks from its original literary cradle in Germany, to radically influence the rest of the arts in most of Europe.

The Romantics were reacting against what they saw as the cold and arid rationalism and intellectualism of the eighteenth-century **Enlightenment.** Against reason Romantics emphasized intuition, imagination, emotions,

and feelings. It could also be said that **Romanticism** was an escapism to past ages as a refuge from the present realities of the Industrial Revolution with its pestilent slums, and factories with their asphyxiating smoking stacks. The Romantics favorite period in the past seems to have been the **Middle Ages,** which contrary to the **Enlightenment,** they contemplated it through a thick nostalgic veil. It goes without saying that the Romantics rejected the **Enlightenment's** cyclical theory of history. For them history, with all of its ups and downs was not cyclical, but a straight relentless march toward the future with each age, including the medieval period, making their contributions to human progress. With **Romanticism** it can truly be said that history in the opera reached, if not its highest point, at least a very high one.

The 20th Century: Marching to Your Own Drum

Things in the twentieth century changed a lot from the canons of the previous century, especially after the brutal and senseless **First World War** (1914–1918). People lost much of their confidence, if not all, in History and its professional practitioners. It was thought that historians with all of their pontifications, old documents and dusty tomes had failed to predict the catastrophic war that had rendered Western Europe prostrate, and with a peace treaty that in the minds of many augured another conflict of bigger proportions. Many were those who said that History had no meaning at all, that it was useless. Perhaps none other than the self-made man, **Henry Ford,** who put it in clear terms for the layman when he said that "History was bunk". Others said that History had a deleterious effect on people, because it only served to make nations arrogant and vainglorious. No wonder then that political scientists, economists, sociologists and even anthropologists, began to take over the big and prestigious government positions formerly carried out by **Clio's** disciples.

This disillusion extended as well to all things and institutions and art forms long established before the War, and opera being one of them did not escape it. In the opinion of many intellectuals and artists, even including musicians, who to show how serious they were about their art, made it known, with pride! that they had never written an opera. Opera for them was a shabby spectacle and as an art form it was finally dead.

However, the report of both history and opera's demise, thankfully, proved to be, as the saying goes, *greatly exaggerated*. After the **Second World War** (1939–1945), albeit in transitional form, opera made a vigorous comeback, and history, as an academic discipline, an even stronger one. The net result of these two *resurrections* has been the composition of some powerful and insightful historical operas destined, I am sure, to take their place alongside the best the genre had produced in the previous centuries. And this comeback has been so strong that it has boiled over to the formerly flighty world of the operetta and musical comedy—*Evita, 1776, Les Miserables* and others to wit.

Finally, if the operas of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were almost totally influenced by the ideas of the **Enlightenment** and **Romanticism,** respectively, the twentieth century operas seem not to be so clearly unified in regards to the influences from their contemporary historiography. By want of ascertaining a trend, I would risk saying that it appears that composers and their librettists seem to have been attracted to explore or fathom the nature and character of leadership in their nations. The operatic stage has recently been populated by the likes of **Akhnaten, Luther, Mirabeau, Rasputin, Lindberg, Mao, Nixon,** and a few others. Perhaps this may be a reaction to having witnessed and lived under such brutal individuals as **Mussolini, Lenin, Stalin** and **Castro,** just to mention a few of their ilk. These characters were not members of the well-educated and sophisticated ruling elites, but by dint of their own raw will, cunning and crude demagoguery, captivated and convinced highly civilized peoples to commit and condone the most heinous and horrendous crimes ever experienced by mankind.

Perhaps the lack of a unified influence on the operas in this period may also be a result, first of another large proliferation of not only academic or professional historians, but also of the so-called serious amateur practitioners of the discipline. These so-called amateurs have used a wide variety of subject matter, and their ways of dealing with it. We must keep in mind that in the two previous centuries there were relatively fewer historians than now, and that these now want to march to their own drummer. No one put this situation better than the historian **Samuel Eliot Morrison** who said of his historical profession, that he "belonged to no school, neither liberal nor reactionary… romantic, deterministic or cyclical."

The Nature of History in the Opera

It has been adequately said that opera *is an imitation of human willfulness and that the quality common to all great operatic roles is that each is in a passionate and willful state of being.* Because of this, historical events in the opera are almost always provoked or determined by the play of individuals' basic feelings, which in action create a clash of wills. Therefore, historical opera does not look for what we usually find in our contemporary history books and textbooks. In those, the individuals have been diluted to almost non-existence by the oceanic tides of the underlying structures of society, economy, government, religious, or secular explanations. In more ways than one, history in the opera has been how history used to be learned, written, and taught a long time ago. That is along the belief that the acme and reason for all that had happened in the past, was mostly determined by individuals at the helm of empires, nations and institutions, and those who opposed them.

Also, and most importantly, History in the opera house is fictionalized History. Opera is a theatrical art form, where the authors use a fictional or invented dramatic element to make their point of view, and this invention, inevitably, has to take precedence over the cold and exact representation of facts. And what I am saying here is not unique to opera alone, because it also applies to other forms of artistic creations that deal with History like literature, painting, cinema, etc. Cold and exact facts by themselves —and by their own nature—are sterile and lack the inner life to survive for too long, leaving behind hardly any traces in time. They rapidly disappear in the void of time and existence. An operatic scene, such as the historical confrontation of Pope **Leo I** and **Attila** in 455, treated by **Verdi**, over and beyond the cold facts reported in the laconic contemporary chronicles, excite the imagination and contributes to the episode's continued life existence. And this is so because, as it has been correctly said that, *human beings cannot exist unless they can use their imagination to create and invent*, and I would also add, be receptive to others' creations and inventions.

More recently composer **Philip Glass** had to grapple with this issue of *historical validity* vis-à-vis theatrical demands when writing his opera ***Akhnaten.*** Aware that a connection of Oedipus' myth and Akhnaten had a tenuous historical connection but that it makes perfect sense, because it

makes the subject able *to stand up to the scale of music theater,* he decided to let others squabble over the possible or impossible situation. Instead he followed his theatrical instincts that allowed him to put **Akhnaten** out in front of the audience under another light not explored by the students of a history, such as that of **Ancient Egypt**, that only offers minimal and sketchy information. Like **Schiller,** more than a hundred years before, **Glass** availed himself of History to hang his portrait of a pharaoh who lived about 3500 years ago.

Now before you cry out in despair and reach for the hemlock cup because it looks like I am crucifying historical truth, you must know that invention, or what has been called *truthful invention,* can be accepted for a variety of reasons including the pursuit of the truth. However, such inventions must be subjected to certain rules or limitations among which the most essential is that they cannot be *incompatible with the temper of the age, its morals, and its psychology,* and must be within the established macro facts of history. In other words, the temper complex of the age, such as the Middle Ages, for example, cannot be transferred intact to the nineteenth century. As long as the creator observes and keeps his inventions within these parameters he has many tools at his disposal, such as *compression of time, telescoping* or *conflation of characters,* and *implied situations*. **Historical Fiction**, if seriously practiced and pursued under sound research, in all of its forms and shapes, is nothing more than another point of view about what factual history has not, or failed to explain, or elucidate the many whys that dwell in the halls and temples of history.

Compression of time is routinely used in historical opera, because it is an absolute necessity. The author must make his point in two, three, or more acts. A good example may be found in **Wagner's** opera ***Rienzi***, based on the life and exploits of the Italian fourteenth-century **Cola di Rienzo.** We know that Rienzi staged two successful revolts against the Roman rogue nobility in 1347 and 1354. **Wagner** ends his opera in 1347 entirely for dramatic purposes, because he knew he had already made his point about power and its corruptive nature. Rienzi's return in the opera would have been like just one of those television replays, but without adding anything new and making a very long opera even longer. Here **Wagner**'s *compression of time* stays true to the spirit of the facts.

Telescoping or *conflation of characters* is also a convenient and frequently used tool, albeit with a greater propensity of incurring in falsifications that may be of such a nature as to cast a pall of disbelief over the entire work. A good example of conflation of characters is in **Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots.*** The fictional character Saint-Bris is a conflation of the Duke de Guise, the mother, queen Catherine de Medici, and the king, Charles IX. All in all a picture of bigotry at its worst.

The *implied situation* is the one that, although the episode or whole event never happened at all, the authors implied it as having taken place by extracting it from solid extant evidence from factual historical events. Perhaps the most famous and successful example of an *implied situation* is the confrontation scene between queen **Elizabeth I** of England, and **Mary Queen of Scots**, in **Donizetti's** opera, ***Maria Stuarda.*** This formidable scene, which speaks volumes about the character, temper of an age, and attitude of the two famous queens, was taken from **F. Schiller**'s drama of the same name. **Schiller** made his theatrical scene from the letters written by them, and by what the involved third parties thought of the two queens. Referring to his historical dramas **Schiller** once said—and he has been misinterpreted—that, "history was the nail from which he hung his portraits." There was no frivolity or an easy off-hand dismissal of criticism in such an assertion, but a succinct definition of what historical fiction is all about. What is, after all, for example, a portrait if not a study of the subject's personality or character obtained by the artist painter from the expression of the eyes, the mouth, and often, from the subject's coloring and mien in general?

When dealing with fictionalized history one must always keep in mind that the nineteenth-century **German Historical School** tenet, that history could be an exact science, has been rejected a long time ago. That was a noble attempt that after the experiments and the writings of the twentieth-century psychologists about us humans, historians rapidly retreated and abandoned it. Human nature and the functioning of our thinking processes, even if we try very hard, cannot be totally objective in writing about history, or even in the simple reporting of an event. If History is our collective memory, we must always have present what today some of the research about our individual memory has discovered: *that every time we recall an event memory*

it's vulnerable to change. With each recall… the process is affected by our biases, by what is retained from the past, by our current situation. It's a complex dance between the past and the present—some aspects of the memory are reinforced while others fade.

And because of this realization, fictionalized history today has gained a respectability it never had before. Serious and well-researched historical fiction is born *out of the shortcomings of factual history,* and these shortcomings, believe me, are aplenty. Fictionalized history, as we said above is—or ought to be—another point of view of an incident or a historical episode. After all, the fact of the matter is that it is not rare to find fictionalized history even in scholarly treatises, only that in those it often appears under the name of *educated guesses.*

The professional historian today does not reject serious historical fiction because he or she sees it as a useful tool, as a viaduct leading us toward explaining what has not been possible to explain. It has been rightly said that *"artists,* [in our case librettists and composers], *intentionally contrive situations in order to dislocate our minds into awareness."* Also, it was the famous—or to some infamous—operatic director **Peter Sellars,** a *dislocator-in-chief,* if I may say so, who adroitly said what fictionalized historical opera can do to history, which is "to deepen it and move [us] into its more subtle, nuanced, and mysterious corners," corners that often—if I may add—a cold and well calculated research is incapable of reaching for clarification.

Thus in the face of a fictionalized historical account in the opera house people and friends often ask me the same question: *Did it really happen like that*? To these good people, and to those others who appoint themselves as the stern guardians of factual truth in the discipline of Herodotus, I always answer by saying: *Bravo! I see that the author with his inventions has alerted your awareness.* Your question, however (and the pun *is* intended), is truly inoperative. The operative interrogation must be: *Why, or for what purposes or reasons the artist changed the facts and the situations?*

Characters and Their Voices in Historical Opera

Opera's principal media of transmission is above all through the singing range of the human voice, and how it affects the listener. The tenor range, because of its fresh, strong and young sounding voice doesn't go with old sages. In historical opera, heroes and heroines are almost always tenors and sopranos. Rarely a king, an emperor, or a ruler, sings history in the vocal range of a tenor, more so, if it is a lyric tenor. Villains and bad guys, especially if you are dealing with Verdi's operas, are almost the sole possession of baritones, basses and mezzo-sopranos. In regards to the chorus, before the nineteenth century they had very little participation, which usually was at the beginnings and or at the end of the opera to close the action with some words of rejoicing or wisdom. However, with the arrival of historical opera in France in the nineteenth century, the chorus (the people), was promoted with great effect, to the role of another important character, even at times actively participating in the action, and frequently interacting with the main protagonists. This promotion and their interactions opened the way for the exciting *sound tableaux,* the *concertatti*, and the dizzyingly fast act-ending *strettas,* which hit a chord with audiences, especially the Parisians, who had either witnessed the turmoil of events of the recent past or had actively participated in them.

And, of course, we won't forget the voice of God, for which different composers have used different instruments, like trombones, harps, a thunder noise, and many other combinations of instruments. Trombones also, alas! have been used to announce the presence of the devil, as it is in ***Robert le Diable's*** overture, and later on to take us to the underworld in the famous ballet of the penitent nuns.

II

FRENCH GRAND HISTORICAL OPERA

Paris and Opera in the Early 19th Century

By the first quarter of the eighteen hundreds, it appears that the city of Paris was fast becoming *the capital of the European nineteenth century.* This is well attested to by the comments and observations penned down by the famous and not so famous observers, French and foreigners alike.

In 1814, a British journalist, **John Scott**, with ancient Athens in mind, said that Paris gave to the visitor an idea of the glories of that city. **Goethe** in 1837 called Paris a "universal town where every step one takes recalls a great past," and **Gibbon**, of Roman historiography fame, rued the fact that, "had he been rich and independent [he] would have fixed [his] residence in Paris." And **Saint-Beuve** expressed the aspirations of many other geniuses. This was, to live and die in the city on the banks of the Seine.

There is no question at all that most of these praises came from excited minds, for there were few if any, mentions, of some of the realities in the city with its narrow, winding, and unhealthy streets. That it took many more years before the architect **Haussman** would, under the orders of the so-called third **Napoleon**, widen them so as to put an end to revolutions by barricade, and make life in the city healthier.

One of the major forces in this Parisian phenomenon was the onrushing wave and reception of the literary romanticism that had recently originated in Germany. As far as opera was concerned, this is particularly true from the 1820s to the 1880s. The catalogue of new operas written with history as a subject matter by a legion of great and as well as lesser composers is simply extraordinary. In fact, some critics consider those years an operatic golden age.

With seven or eight opera houses, a few concert halls, several museums, academies, and libraries, Paris was supplanting Italy as the capital of opera, and becoming a true magnet that attracted from the provinces and from other countries both the established composers, and the young and aspiring ones. It was none other than **Frederick Chopin** after his arrival in the French capital, that left these words for posterity explaining the appeal it had for young musicians like himself: "I like what I see in this city—the best musicians and the best opera in the world." And from down south in Italy, the birthplace of opera, **Giacomo Meyerbeer,** who had triumphed with a string of successful Italian style operas, wrote to the famous French bass **Nicolas P. Levasseur**, in a letter dated in 1823 that, "it would be a great honor for [me] to write for the French opera, because where else but in Paris can one find the immense resources that French opera offers to the composer who longs to write truly dramatic music…[with] wonderful librettists… [and] audiences that show an interest in all types of music?"

But conquering Paris and the Parisians was not easy pickings, as Meyerbeer also appears to have been aware in his letter to Levasseur. "French opera," he wrote, "[was] fraught with difficulties and a composer… usually [had] to wait years before coming out with an opera."

Meyerbeer's misgivings were certainly very real. The Parisians now sat at the top of the European operatic pyramid. They considered their opera houses almost as sacrosanct temples where a complex of artistic and overarching administrative traditions, etiquette, conventions, and other reasonable and irrational demands, had to be observed and followed in order to have a chance to get an opera heard and performed. However, in spite of this, because opera lovers were now tired of the usual old repertory, the opportunities to come up with new subjects and a new musical style and be successful at it were real. Audiences were yearning for new operas with a

style both responsive to what their experiences in life had been during the few tumultuous years before, and based on the literature they now were avidly reading in the new exciting **Romantic** mode, like in the historical, and popular novels of **Walter Scott**. Satisfying these new artistic yearnings, which really depended on the successful translation of the literary **Romantic** style into a new musical language, guaranteed a composer a triumph in Paris, and with it instant fame and fortune.

In Paris the musical atmosphere was one of expectation with both critics and the public in general. They were becoming aware that the old world of the staid Italian **Opera Seria** was dead, or quickly dying. An exciting new genre with its new basic characteristics—albeit still in inchoate form—was beginning to emerge and, most importantly, audiences were reacting favorably to them.

One contemporary critic incisively remarked that the age of "classical severity" with its legions of mythological characters had come to an end, and that the gates had been flung open for the people, the new middle classes, to come in and occupy the domain formerly enjoyed by a decimated aristocracy who now were in full retreat.

This augured that the old world of opera was about to experience the storming of its musical Bastille. Most of the new opera audiences and their immediate descendants had gone through the tumultuous upheavals of the last fifteen or twenty years. They had seen the sinister Madame La Guillotine, sever the heads of thousands, including those of their own monarchs, ending thus a dynasty that was centuries old. Many had been terrorized by the howling bloodthirsty mobs, sacking and torching their ancestral country estates, or had watched in paralyzing horror in their cities, how the mobs pillaged their town houses, and dragged through the dirt the bloodied corpses of their family members. Others still remembered the rantings and ravings of the fearsome **Robespierre**, and how they had proudly rubbed elbows with the likes of **Marat, Danton**, and **Demoulins.** Thousands of them had defended "la patrie" in levied armies and had marched with their emperor from sunny Spain to the burning sands of Egypt and the remote frozen steppes in Russia while singing, with real fervor, a new rousing and unifying song of the militias issuing forth from Marseille.

Romanticism and French Grand Historical Opera

Romanticism ushered in a rapid proliferation of new universities and centers of learning dedicated to the study and teaching of History as a serious academic discipline. More libraries and archives were open to the public at large, and more than ever before professionally trained scholars in the discipline of history were at work. Some have called the nineteenth century "The Golden Age of History," and this claim appears to be correct. History at that time had certainly acquired an importance, which it never had before and does not even hold today. **Paul Robinson,** perhaps with more precision, points out that "history [was] the most pervasive assumption of European intellectual life in the nineteenth century, finding expression in philosophy, science, political theory, literature and…*music.*" (Emphasis mine). Of what we can be sure is that history had been wrested from being the avocation of a coterie of aristocrats and enlightened courtly dilettantes to be the vocation and the career of new, true professionals. **Romanticism** created the professional historian and he became a well sought out and highly regarded individual. Many were those who thought that with the knowledge of the past the historian could help rulers and governments to foresee and even predict the future.

Also, because of its passion for history, **Romanticism** created a new demand for more authenticity on the stage. In the eighteenth century the singers who represented Greek, Roman and other exotic characters of the past, did it in European contemporary Baroque costumes, and with a style of music that made no attempt to create *local color.* For the new audiences this was an intolerable anachronism. Now costume designers, set and lighting experts, stage directors, writers and composers, more and more, would endeavor to infuse their works with an aura of realism and local ambiance never before experienced in the opera house. As **Hervé Lacombe** notes in his book, *The Keys to French Opera in the Nineteenth Century,* "the importance accorded to splendid stages is one of the most characteristic elements of nineteenth-century French opera…" **Romanticism** impressed in the opera world a ravenous hunger for History." **Allevy** describes this insatiable appetite saying that,"nature was called upon to provide its locales, peoples their customs, history its monuments; all the sciences—topography, ethnology and archeology—were employed in re-creating that 'color of the times.' No matter what the subject, there was a quest for verisimilitude…"

The tasks of creating the illusion of a revived past ambiance, or local color, however, were harder for the composers. Most of the time they had to work without the benefit of having extant music samples from past cultures or civilizations. In the absence of that resource many experimented with elements that articulated the historical narrative of the characters by sudden changes in the tonal language, orchestral texture, busy counterpoint, choral polyphony, modal writing, distinct vocal style and thematic recognition.

But for those who would count on authentic musical examples from the past **Meyerbeer** had a caveat, that the recreation of the past local color did not simply depend on an exact observation of past usages and customs, but rather on something indefinable, which we could put in the terms of a correct instinct by the composer. One of the best examples of this instinct is in **Verdi's** ***Aida***. With no sources of Egyptian music Verdi musically invented for us the Egyptians and their world. No wonder he once wrote, agreeing with Meyerbeer's warning that, "to copy reality [was] a good thing, but to invent reality [was] better, much better." **Victor Hugo** in his preface to his play ***Cromwell*** indicated that the local color was not to be on the surface of the drama, but, "deep down in the very heart of the work where it should spread outward," which in opera and in musical terms would be not making an exact musical quotation but applying to the samples extant subtle modulations and variations. **Meyerbeer's** ***Les Huguenots*** is a fine example of the recreation, or invention, of the courtly life in the sixteenth century, which one perceives as truly emanating from *deep down in the very heart of the work.*

The Romantic composers and all of those who worked in the crafting of an historical opera aimed at creating the illusion that, you were there, something that before was never seriously attempted by the composers. This is one of the reasons why today I find deplorable, even repellent, the change of venue of opera plots from the past ages to ours. By putting, for example, ***Faust*** in an atomic laboratory with Marguerite ascending to her redemption in heaven by an outside fire escape ladder is making a mockery of the entire ambiance of Gonoud's opera, or putting ***Rigoletto*** in the twenty-first century in, of all places, Las Vegas!, abolishes thus the local color which Verdi, a romantic, imparted his work. The music for sixteenth century courtiers does not go with twenty-first century gambling and the croupiers. This abominable

practice creates an irreconcilable clash that undermines the integrity of the piece and drives many in the audience, as I have seen here and in Europe, to retreat to simply enjoying the singing with their eyes shut as though listening to a CD. Why then would you go to the opera house when you could stay comfortably at home and hear it better? This fashionable fad—we hope it is a fad—commonly and correctly known as Eurotrash for its original birthplace, would be the equivalent of dressing up the nakedness of Michelangelo's statue of David in Florence, with a swimming suit so as not to offend some observers, or donning a baseball hat on his Moses so he would look in tune with our times. To me, there are only two words to qualify these desecrations: artistic vandalism, perpetrated because the authors cannot defend their works. One shudders with the thought that the paintings of Botticelli's *Venus* or Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* may one day be subjected to these indignities. Are we destined to see the façades of the great architectural masterpieces of the past covered in neon lights so they can blend with the modern surroundings? Let's hope *what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.*

Literary romanticism also helped to bring about in a more personal basis a new understanding of the past, its events, and the characters who had made history. This is well attested in Walter Scott's (1771–1832) historical romances, in the writings of Francois Chateaubriend (1768–1848) and especially in the works of Jules Michelet (1798–1874), the foremost Romantic historian of this period. In the works of these writers and the legions of their imitators, composers and librettists found characters that had depth, had been endowed with feelings and emotions: Halévy's Eleazar and Rachel from his ***La Juive;*** Meyerbeer's Valentine and Marcel from ***Les Huguenots;*** and Verdi with Aida and Amneris to wit.

From the power charged historical writings of Michelet the composers had a rich quarry of examples that could be transferred to the opera and translated into musical terms. And they were. Michelet's hero was the anonymous people of France, which the opera composers soon turned into the chorus representative of social classes, political groups and religious faiths. It only takes a quick reading of some of Michelet's passages, like the following, describing the people's sudden and unexpected storming of the Bastille to bring to mind the great tableau scenes with their ending "strettas" in the opera. Observe how the pulse of Michelet's paragraph parallels the musical *strettas* as it explodes after the first two lines:

> With daylight one idea dawned upon Paris and all were illumined with the same ray of hope. A light broke upon every heart: 'Go thou shall take the Bastille!' That was impossible, unreasonable, preposterous. And yet everybody believed it. And the thing was done.

This is also a fine example of how French Grand Historical Opera brought together the two trends of romantic historiography: that which depicted the grandeur of past splendors, and that which described the sufferings of the oppressed popular movements, and mighty struggles—picturesque history on the one hand, and dramatic history on the other.

The Romantic impact can also be detected easily in the historical operas in their "mode of emplotment," which librettists and composers imported from the Romantic literature into their operas, both historical and non-historical. The Romantic emplotment was a drama of self-identification symbolized by the hero's [and heroine's] transcendence of the world of experience, [their] victory over it and [their] final liberation from it" which often was death. Among so many fine examples of this transcendence or final liberation from the conflict between the personal and her religious duties is the case of Valentine in Meyerbeer's ***Les Huguenots.*** In the opera's grand finale, while the Huguenots are being massacred in the streets of Paris by a mob led by her father, Valentine abjures her Catholic faith to become a Huguenot and die with her lover, the Huguenot Raoul. Valentine has finally self-identified herself and this is quickly followed by her transcendence of the world where she has lived to find her liberation, and final victory, dying together with the man she loved. Her action also exemplifies the Romantic view of history: a constant progress with all ages, making contributions to human progress and betterment. Valentine has made her contribution by giving up her life so people like her recalcitrant, bigoted father, who unsuspectingly had given the order to the murderers to shoot her, can see the evilness and the sterility of prejudice.

Roots of French Grand Historical Opera

Like most everything else in this world the new grand opera genre was not to be born suddenly in a mythological fashion like Athena did from the head of Zeus. The formation of French Grand Historical Opera had

a gestation process whose early roots can be found in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in what the French called the *tragedies lyriques* of Jean Baptiste Lully (1632–1687) and Jean Philippe Rameau (1683–1764).

The *tragedies lyriques* were overblown courtly spectacles sponsored by the royal courts, especially that of Louis XIV (1643–1715) who loved them, and actively participated in their performances like an avid and, as has been told, an accomplished dancer. Actually opera in France was born together with the art of dance or ballet. This relationship of singing and dancing was destined to become a strong tradition among opera lovers in this country where composers like Wagner, who defied the tradition of putting the ballet in the third act in his ***Tannhauser*** (1845) were rewarded with a brutal rejection. Also from its very beginnings one of the early characteristics of the **French Grand Historical Operas** was that their fans demanded language well sung, and easily understood by the audience. This characteristic should not be dismissed as pedantry because **French Grand Historical Opera** in many ways had many connections with the literary old epics via Corneille and other less famous writers.

Another future characteristic of this genre, was its grand magnificence. Hence its name "Grand." In France, after all, it had emerged in the royal courts and it was made to reflect the splendor and grandeur of the monarchy. Expensive effects, striking costumes, stage machinery, and all of this with a flare never before seen or experienced in France, or for that matter, in any other European country.

But not all the roots of the new gestating genre were grand in fashion. **French Grand Historical Opera*** also borrowed from the *opéra comique*—a more intimate and modest size spectacle—the use, albeit not too frequently, of the technique of the melodrama in which the text at times was recited to a musical accompaniment. *Opéra comique*, contrary to what its name may indicate to English speaking peoples, was neither comic in its subject matter nor in its music.

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* This new operatic genre was simply called French Grand Opera. However as the grand majority of operas this new genre were based on a historical episode I decided to name them as French Grand Historical Opera to distinguish them from those which are not.

Finally, in tracing the roots of **French Grand Historical Opera** we easily discover the strong influence from the large spectacles introduced during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic times staged more or less from 1789 to 1815. As it is evident, the French may have guillotined their king and the aristocrats in the public plaza, but they still kept alive their addiction for a sumptuous big show. These large and sprawling spectacles, as we are informed, were offered in order to keep the people happy, and to foster a feeling of unity and fraternity.

The "Founding Fathers" of French Grand Historical Opera

Not one single composer or librettist can claim the invention of **French Grand Historical Opera.** The creation of this genre in France is a process of accretion and apportion that, give or take a year or two, begins early in the nineteenth century and culminates in 1831 with Meyerbeer's ***Robert le Diable.***

The main contributors to this process were the French librettist **Eugene Scribe** (1791–1861), and four composers: the Italians **Gasparo Spontini** (1774–1851) and **Gioachino Rossini** (1792–1868); the French **Daniel Sprit Auber** (1782–1871); and the German by birth and French by acculturation **Giacomo Meyerbeer** (1795–1864).

Eugene Scribe, who was known as the master of the well-made play, of which he wrote some four hundred of them, came to the opera mostly via the *opéra comique*. In 1828 he wrote the libretto for Auber's notable success *La Muette di Porttici.* In this opera **Scribe** practically laid down a blue print for the future structure of **French Grand Historical Opera's** dramatic style and substance. He also was endowed with an ample dexterity on how to maintain the thrust of an opera on the stage. Notable was his able manipulation and management of its internal tension…to propel interest forward over a span of three to four hours of music—and most importantly—without boring or fatiguing the listener.

In launching the early structure of the **French Grand Historical Opera Scribe** may have been inspired by Etiene Jouy, who was Spontini's ***La Vestale*** librettist. Jouy in a well-known essay really ahead of its time, sketched some of the elements and nature of the **French Grand Historical Opera.**

He pondered about the possibility of a five act opera where the nature and majesty of the subject, might demand splendid civil and religious ceremonies, which necessarily, he also added, implied the participation of the role of the choruses. Jouy also prophetically added that this, would lift the opera to the level of epic quality. Indeed, **French Grand Historical Opera** is essentially the modern equivalent of the medieval epic poems. In fact, as noted above, some have seen in its librettos the last stand or refuge of epic literature.

Musically speaking this process begins with the Italian **Gasparo Spontini.** Early in his career in his native Italy, and after obtaining some success, Spontini, like two of his countrymen before, Lully and Cherubini, decided to migrate to Paris in 1803. What Spontini was looking for in the French capital was a more ample and richer environment to suit his many talents. He found it, and his career in Paris really took off. He was appointed court composer and became Empress Josephine's undisputed favorite musician. In 1807, with his opera *La Vestale,* he obtained his greatest triumph. Two years later, in 1809, his *Fernan Cortez* chalked up another success albeit, not as clamorous as that of *La Vestale.*

The nation, especially the Paris that Spontini discovered was awash in a revival of ancient Roman times, practically in all aspects of life, from fashions to architecture. Because of Napoleon and his military campaigns Paris was a place of frequent military parades, marches, and grand orchestral brassy sounds. The French were living in the intoxication, or reverie that they were the modern Republican Romans and their Napoleon as the greatest of the Roman consuls. It seems that Spontini saw in this atmosphere the opportunities for a success, which he obtained with his opera ***La Vestale,*** in 1807, based on an ancient Roman theme. This opera was destined to be an important foundation in the gestation of **French Grand Historical Opera,** and as such it influenced the likes of Rossini, Bellini, Verdi, Meyerbeer, Berlioz, and even none other than the acid-spewing Wagner, who later made good friends with the Italian.

The influence of Spontini on the future of **French Grand Historical Operas** can be seen in his use of a grand palette with which he musically painted a portrait of the ancient Republican Rome. His ample spatial, unadorned,

and neatly profiled melodies *a la* Gluck, albeit with more muscle, brings to mind the paintings of Jacques-Louis David, and once you have become familiar with *La Vestale's* music, the effect is then the reverse. That is, while viewing David's paintings—at least it happens to me—you can't help but hear in your mind *La Vestale's* music. The experience is like a musico-pictorial holograph.

Spontini also succeeded in creating the ambiance or local color with a brassy orchestral sound. In the scene of the triumphal return of the consul Licinio—a source of inspiration for the future one in **Verdi's *Aida,*** the eyes of your imagination cannot help but see and feel the Roman legions marching behind their chariots and standards engraved with their SPQR, which stood for the "Senate and the Roman People." *Senatus Populusque Romanus.*

In the development of the **French Grand Historical Opera** we cannot overlook Spontini's new ideas in orchestration, and his use and sound of his massed virginal chorus. Critics also point to Julia, the Vestal, for being, perhaps the first representative to suffer the internal conflict between her personal aspirations and her civic duties. This conflict was to become a regular element in the future of grand opera's heroines In fact, Patrick Barbier says that the make up of Julia's character was to remain a constant for the female opera protagonists during the first half of the nineteenth century. To this I would dare add that the traces of Julia's DNA can be detected in the Egyptian Aida and even in so many other heroines of a much later date.

Another important contribution by Spontini in the make-up of the future historical opera appears in his second opera *Fernan Cortez* which premiered two years later in 1809, to eulogize Napoleon's adventure in Spain. This opera is perhaps the first dealing realistically with a well-known historical figure and a specific historical episode, and also to use the chorus in the fashion that later figured in so many historical operas. Here Spontini concentrated more on the external and the collective presence of two different peoples: Aztecs and Spaniards, who clearly stood for two opposing historico-cultural complexes. This was an idea that did not go unnoticed to Meyerbeer in his *Les Huguenots* and to Halévy and his *La Juive,* Verdi's *Aida,* and other future composers including Wagner.

In spite of Spontini's striking contributions to the development of French Grand Historical Opera with *La Vestale* and *Fernan Cortez* he had to wait a long time to be recognized. It was finally in 1873 that a critic, in so many words, remarked that the suppressing of these two operas would have made the existence of Rossini's *William Tell* (1829) and Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* (1836) impossible.

Nowadays Spontini and his *La Vestale,* an opera full of beautiful music, are practically forgotten. Mention him, even among opera fans, and they would think you are talking about a brand of Italian flavored ices, or offering Spumoni ice cream for dessert. What a shame!

Character and personality wise **Daniel Auber,** another of the forerunners of French Grand Historical Opera, is perhaps the most modest composer in the history of opera. Because he was non-assuming, and self-effacing and self-deprecating he became the butt of many cutting remarks and jokes about him and his music. Rossini, a consummated master of irony and sarcasm said that Auber, wrote minor music as a major composer. Berlioz, not completely alien to jealousy said that, Auber's music was for milliners sung by grisettes and traveling salesmen. Outrageous! In the face of this patently envious widespread misunderstanding, in 1839, the famous writer and critic Théofile Gautier came to Auber's defense affirming that he was "an outstanding composer" with a style of his own which was the prime attribute of an artist, and that his wealth of motives and songs was a rarity… Amen!

Born in Caen, in Normandy, in 1782, Auber in spite of being a musically gifted child decided as a young man to pursue a business career in London. This may have been due to parental pressures. At length, it appears that his love for music never disappeared, for in 1804 we see him back in France as a composer of instrumental music. This wasn't really his vocation, because seven years later he wrote his first opera *Julie* which impressed Cherubini. Encouraged by the old master, who offered to oversee his musical studies, Auber finally obtained his first great triumph in 1820 with *La Bergere Chatelaine* becoming the star composer of *L'Opéra Comique.*

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Auber's first venture into grand opera was *La Muette de Portici* with a libretto by Scribe. Some critics say that Auber's opera is already a grand opera, while others see it as just the closest precursor of the genre. The former insist that this opera already has the five-acts structure, the ballet, spectacular marches and scenes and the Romantic emplotment. The latter point out that the local color is not really there and that it lacks a deeper and richer orchestra such as that of Meyerbeer, Halévy and definitely Berlioz, needed to attain the level of epic quality.

Precursor or already grand historical opera composer, Auber's *La Muette* whose subject matter is the Italians' revolt in Naples against their Spanish masters in 1647, is the only opera in all of the world's repertory to provoke an actual revolution. At a performance of his opera, at the Theatre de la Monnaie on 25 August 1830, a riot broke out. This became the signal for the Belgian Revolution that ended with their independence from the Dutch.

If Mozart was God's musician, **Gioachino Rossini** then was his roaring laughter. As long as humans love to sing Rossini's *Barber of Seville* (1816) and several of his comedies, opera will endure. After his enormous successes in Naples and reforming Italian opera, Rossini, in 1824, like so many before and after him, decided to take up residence in the musician's magnet that was Paris. However, unlike many others that had trekked to Paris in search of fame and glory, Rossini was already famous and not lacking in financial resources. Because of his tremendous popularity all over Europe he was appointed as the director of the Theatre-Italienne, and it did not take long for him to realize the musical furor that was gripping the capital in search of a new genre. He presented two of his old operas in French translation in 1820 and 1827, and even with a ballet. Although very well received, Rossini, after Auber's success with his *La Muette* in 1828, knew that his two Frenchified operas were not what the Parisians had really been looking for. He then wrote his *Guillaume Tell (William Tell)* in four acts in 1829. Many are those who say that *Tell* is one of the first grand operas while others in spite of his use of the chorus and the ballets consider it just a precursor at the gates of the temple. They see it still attached to the old Italian opera seria with its usual heaviness. At any rate, critics and the public at large recognized *Tell's* long Second Act as a masterpiece. It was said that years later when his friends and admirers visited to tell him they wanted to honor

and recognize him with a performance of *Tell's* Second Act. Rossini, much alarmed, asked: What, the whole of it? Well, that Second is a well where many other masters have come to drink.

After *Tell,* and until his death in 1868, Rossini never again wrote a new opera. As he never explained the reasons for this almost-forty-years' silence, the speculations about it have been multiple. Nevertheless, they all have failed to really satisfy this silence. Perhaps suspecting that the triumphant new genre of grand opera had ushered in a new wave in opera, and that it was not really to his liking at all, he decided to quit. Why write something he did not care for. Anyway, because he had made a huge fortune investing in the French stock market, and as he was a gourmet and a gourmand, and that his soirées at home spent with his friends and admirers became famous, he might have thought that was all that he now wanted to do. Bravo!

After Spontini, Auber, and Rossini, came **Giacomo Meyerbeer,** one of the operatic giants and reformer of the opera genre in the nineteenth century. If some sort of paternity is what we are looking for **French Grand Historical Opera,** it could be argued that Meyerbeer has perhaps the best claim to it. At any rate, if he was not the father of the new genre, he definitely was the great codifying architect who combined or encapsulated all the inchoate elements that were being essayed during the previous twenty years, and that he formulated and introduced new ones as well. Meyerbeer endowed the grand historical opera with a musical vocabulary and a necessary musical grammar of its own that made it capable of achieving the translation of the Romantic literary history into the Romantic historical opera, and with a highly distinct style capable of fulfilling the opera lovers yearning for it.

Meyerbeer at the same time showed opera lovers that the concept of grand opera was tied to the idea of the total spectacle which calls for [the participation of] the different components of artistic expression: music, decors, misee-en-scéne dramatics, choreography….Thus grand opera as a total work of art to function properly needs the closest and most intimate collaboration of the different arts involved. Yes, Wagner was not its creator. All he did was popularize the concept and came up with a name for it in German.

After Spontini and Auber had introduced in the opera a specific historical event, Meyerbeer went beyond fulfilling the Romantic passion for history,

together with all the gamut of feelings and emotions of the Romantics, and this juxtaposed and contrasting with each other that the literary romanticism had already displayed.

While his ***Robert le Diable*** in 1831 was a definite break with the past, ***Les Huguenots*** (1836), and ***Le Prophete*** (1849) are dissertations and variations on the themes of the literary romanticism translated into music for the stage: the contrasting parallelism such as, for example, light and shadow, evil and good, the beautiful and the grotesque, and so on. The literary "Romantic contrasting parallels in ***Les Huguenots,"*** as Lacombe, quoting from several authors says, "was Meyerbeer's perfect mechanism for producing effects that propelled the drama toward the violent clash of the final battle, in which fragments of the Lutheran chorale both energize and contrast with the other musical elements in ***Les Huguenots.***" Here, Wagner looking for a pithy expression to criticize Meyerbeer's music, came up with the *ad nauseam* repeat of effects without cause. He got it all wrong, though. Listen to the music Meyerbeer wrote for Marcel of ***Les Huguenots,*** mostly made of broken chords, and the many times he injects variations and modulations of the famous Lutheran chorale, "God is my Fortress," and you will clearly see the contrasts with the other musical elements that propel the drama to the climactic finale. Later, in ***Le Prophete*** the critic Fetis observed that Meyerbeer's technique would stand as a model of the art of stirring up the emotions, of stimulating them, of interrupting them, and of imperceptibly taking them to their limits to obtain, we may add, the effects he was looking for. Was not the stirring up of contrasting emotions part and parcel of the literary romantic creed? Meyerbeer effects had definite causes and they were put in to impel the audience to the grand finale.

The attitude of the romantic historians toward the past ages and their view of what history is, is very well reflected in the creations of Meyerbeer and also of Halévy. Romantic history was not cyclical, but a straight relentless march toward the future, strengthened and illuminated by the past, we find it well translated into musical terms in Meyerbeer grand operas. He constantly searched for historical material for his operas. For Meyerbeer, so well immersed in the Romantic mood, the use of historical material was an artistic progress that could, as it did, enrich his musical language. Herein, lies his tireless research of past musical styles with which to infuse

his scores. Compare the musical language in ***Les Huguenots*** with that of ***Le Prophete*** and you will see what we say. In the first Meyerbeer made use of a long forgotten instrument such as the viola d'amore to introduce Raoul's aria in the first act and conjure up an atmosphere of chivalric love, and with the banquet and the drinking to show how the Catholics were seen by their rival Protestants: debauched and hypocritical. In ***Le Prophete*** we have a pervading cold and dour atmosphere, which was the Catholic view of the Protestant reformation in general. It is because of this, as it has been correctly said, that each of **Meyerbeer's** operas dwell in a different and believable ambiance or local color.

Giacomo Meyerbeer was born in Berlin, Germany, into an affluent and educated Jewish family. At an early age he showed great promise as a pianist appearing as soloist in a performance of a Mozart concerto. Still in his teens, he began to write operas, his real love. As he only obtained mild successes in this field in Germany, one of his teachers-mentors recommended he spend time in Italy to master the art of writing for the voice, which he did in 1816. During the nine years he spent in Italy, the cradle of opera, **Meyerbeer** wrote several operas in the style of **Rossini** which were very well received by the public, especially the last one, ***Il Crociato in Egitto,*** which definitely showed evidence that he was beginning to explore musical formulas beyond **Rossini,** whom he had befriended. It has been pointed out that the opera fans in Italy formed two antagonistic rival factions: the Meyerbeerians and the Rossinians. This rivalry, however, never provoked a rupture of their friendship, which lasted until **Meyerbeer's** death in 1864. It appears that **Rossini,** after observing the triumphs of ***Il Crociato*** in 1825 in Venice, Florence, and London, invited Meyerbeer to present it, in Paris, fully aware that it had many of the characteristics the French audiences were looking for. This opera had an exotic setting, themes of culture clashes, spectacular costumes and all in all, an *epic quality*, and a wider range of musical theater effects than the usual Italian operas of those times had.

In 1827 **Meyerbeer** left Italy for France invited by his good friend **Rossini,** for the presentation of his last Italian opera ***Il Crociato in Egitto.*** Never to return to Italy and the Italian style, Meyerbeer spent the next four years in Paris studying and collecting scores from French composers from **Lully** and **Rameau** to **Gretry**. We are also informed that nothing about

French art, history and society failed to escape his inquisitive attention. These endeavors pursued with tenacity finally did bear fruit in 1831 with his first French opera ***Robert le Diable,*** loosely based on a legend about the turbulent, and to some fratricidal, eleventh-century Robert, Duke of Normandy, and the father of William the Conqueror. ***Robert le Diable*** signified a momentous event in the history of opera. The future course of this art had been changed forever. **Romanticism** had finally arrived in the opera house, not only for historical operas, but for *all* operas. **Meyerbeer's** opera became a blue print for all nineteenth-century Romantic operas, as the bass John Relyea, one of its recent performers, has adeptly stated. In ***Robert le Diable*** one can already hear **Berlioz, Gounod, Verdi, Donizetti,** and **Wagner,** and the entire European operatic future for a century to come. Some have even said that there are traces of **Meyerbeer** in **Strauss** operas. One can even detect, however distantly, his structural influence on Puccini's ***Turandot*** (1926) in Britten's ***Glorianna*** (1953) and even in **Adams'** ***Nixon in China*** (1987). In his study of ***Robert le Diable,*** Robert Ignatius Letellier, one of **Meyerbeer's** foremost experts says that, "***Robert*** represents a vivid and deeply influential realization of the Romantic ideal of sung drama. The lyrical requirements are as preeminent as the colorful music in bringing life to the intriguing supernatural elements of the rich and symbolically powerful plot."

Perspectives of French Historical Opera in Opera's History

Begun exactly in the first third of the nineteenth century, by the late 1880s, **French Grand Historical Opera** had passed its former heyday and popularity. People still went to see them, but their writing and composing was rapidly dwindling. Operatic tastes had definitely changed with the times. Now there was a retreat in interest from the events in the public square to the deep privacy in the individuals' minds. In Germany, Richard **Wagner** through the Nordic mythology took the audiences to explore the deep recesses of the human psyche, a trait that was later reinforced by composers under the influence of the psychoanalysts discoveries and theories. In Italy and in France to a lesser measure, the shift was toward putting aside the stories of kings, emperors and mighty lords to discover the feelings of the common or "little people" through a style that was called *Verismo,* an operatic version of naturalism or realism, as if this is even plausible in the opera, an art form, in which music makes the

listener enter a mysterious world, which is beyond the reality that surrounds us. We must also take into account that by then many of the characteristics of **French Grand Historical Opera** that had originally typified the style of its birthplace, had escaped from it and found useful roles for the new composers and their new opera styles. A good example of this is **Umberto Giordano's** ***Andrea Chenier,*** which classified as of the *Verismo* school, perhaps because of its style of singing, has, still many of the traits from the **French Grand Historical Opera** like a short ballet, several heroic arias, and a good dose of grand scenes with masses of people in the public places.

For quite a long time, more than a century or so, and until very recently, **French Grand Historical Opera** was dismissed by critics of a Wagnerian hue, as an empty or shallow form of entertainment worthy of the new nineteenth-century class, *the philistine bourgeoisie.* They said this class was made up of merchants, bankers, shopkeepers, grasping captains of industry, ruthless entrepreneurs and money grubbers, who had emerged in the France of the 1820s to the 1860s. This point of view was undoubtedly fueled by a good measure of snobbish, phony intellectualism, and Wagner with his fawning followers. It is necessary to point out that most of these critics had failed to study these operas, and that they based their judgments on *received criticism* handed down to them by preceding generations under the seal of an article of faith.

Recent research and scholarship, however, flatly rejects this opinion. Professor Sarah Hibberd, for example, has called our attention to an underlying complexity of the **French Grand Historical Opera** genre. For Hibberd this complexity is the result of the political meanings contained in the libretto, vis-à-vis the alternative subliminal messages that music and the visual dimension of sets, lighting, costumes, etc., were sending. This complex construct, she adds, emitted messages to a heterogeneous audience made up of different political affiliations and social classes. France at that time, was a mosaic made of many conflicting parts with roots in the several different social and political groups and events that had happened in the previous fifty years or so. It has also been ascertained that the people in attendance were not only members of the so-called *philistine* bourgeoisie, but also from other social classes, including aristocrats, whose descendants had somewhat reestablished themselves during the restoration of the monarchy, and under Louis-Philippe *the king of the French* and his *July Monarchy*.

In the face of all of this it is not possible anymore to sustain the shallowness of both the **French Grand Historical Opera** and its audiences. The huge success this genre enjoyed with the complexity of its message and its sophisticated mode of emplotment denies the shallowness of the audiences, as only capable of loving and understanding something lacking in true artistic and intellectual values and merits. The public who filled the theaters to hear the creations of **Meyerbeer, Halévy** and many other composers, had sufficient degree of sophistication to decode and understand the messages not only in the words, but also in what they were looking at in the stage, and in the music issuing forth from the orchestra pit. A careful listening and reading of their librettos these operas reveal many psychological messages and character depictions.

In this matter it is impossible to ignore **Wagner's** writings against **French Grand Historical Opera** and his putrid anti-Semitic writings directed particularly at **Meyerbeer.** These corrosive and vitriolic diatribes methodically repeated for years, and at length put together in two acid anti-Semitic pamphlets, *Das Judenin in der Musik* (1850), revised and expanded in 1868, and *Opera and Drama* (1851), give the inescapable impression of a life crusade to destroy both **Meyerbeer** personally and his art. And as **Wagner** and his musical style and theories triumphed about the time of **Meyerbeer's** death, **Wagner's** legions of fanatic disciples inflamed by the teachings of their maestro in which boils an envious rancor, became the guardians of the opera's *sacred* halls, and the judges of who should or shouldn't belong in them. It goes without saying that for these guardians of *opera's purity* **Meyerbeer,** who at one point had been Wagner's kind and generous sponsor, and who through his personal intervention made possible the premiere of **Wagner's** opera ***Rienzi,*** did not belong in them. From their publications and pedagogical positions and in charge of many of the opera houses repertories, they even censured other composers for writing in the style of **Meyerbeer**, and hurled at him and his art pejorative and false generalizations, which became articles of faith in the musical world. They so effectively demonized and character assassinated **Meyerbeer** and his music that it has taken almost a century for the author of ***Les Huguenots*** to start regaining his rightful place in the annals of great opera. It is only fair to mention those who rejected the Wagnerian campaigns like Edward **Hanslick** and later Gustav **Mahler** in Vienna, who continued championing his operas into the twentieth century. Unfortunately this was immediately squelched with the typical Nazi brutality when they came to power in 1933.

How sad is all of this! It looks like even today the Wagnerians suffer from what seems to be a psychosis or the fear of contracting a contagious disease that by liking **Meyerbeer** the opera aficionados may take **Wagner** down from the altars of music. Believe you me, this is not the case. I like most of the music from both composers. Anyway, to me this hatred is like the killing of a mocking bird to silence its songs, which only makes the world a poorer one. I may be wrong but this case of one composer actively and publicly dedicated to the artistic and even personal destruction of another is unique in the history of opera and music.

In the **Meyerbeer-Wagner** case, it is necessary to point out, the extreme instance of a negative attitude toward French opera. Hervé Lacombe in his interesting book on the subject has indicated, in his view, "the nineteenth century French opera has suffered on the whole from a poor reputation…" In approaching this subject, he adds, "we must discard critical assessments inherited from Germany during the era of triumphant Wagnerism and adopt a different criteria." In other words, don't let Wagner and the Wagnerians criticisms ruin Meyerbeer's works for you.

Fortunately, this prejudicial attitude is changing, albeit ever so slowly, thanks to the writings of a new cadre of musicologists who, like Robert Letellier, in the specific case of **Meyerbeer,** have extensively studied his music and written with real expertise on the subject. Here we also have to applaud the work of the scholars at the **Meyerbeer Institute** of Berlin and that of a couple of aficionados led by **Stephen Agus** and the author of these lines, who a few years ago established the international **Meyerbeer Fan Club** online. This has provided fans of **Grand Opera,** with what amounts to a clearing house for news and dates of performances, articles and everything relevant to **Meyerbeer** and **Grand Opera** in general. We must also mention **Patrick Barbier** who has published on the subject of opera in the Paris of the 1850s. Barbier has also said, in so many words, that "received" opinions, "should be fought and that [opera lovers] should be grateful to those recording companies and opera houses that are restoring the thrilling testimony of nineteenth-century musical sensibility."

Perhaps no one like Dean and Knapp in their study of Handel's operas put it better than when they wrote that, "the history of opera is the history of compromises evolved at different periods in different countries. It is not a

matter of one set of conventions being superior to another, though every opera-lover has a right to his preferences. Unless his outlook is hopelessly narrow, he will adjust himself according to whether he is attending a performance of *Le nozze di Figaro* or *Wozzeeck*. The world of opera has many mansions, and the listener who refuses to enter one (or more) of them is shortening his experience and depriving himself of enjoyment."

In his fascinating analysis, *The Creators: A History of the Heroes of the Imagination,* **Daniel J. Boorstin** seems to succinctly underscore the above observation by saying that, in the arts "there is no correct answer…(because the arts) is a story of infinite addition…" and that "each of us alone must experience how the new adds to the old and how the old enriches the new…." **Verdi** added to **Donizetti** and **Donizetti** enriched **Verdi,** or how **Wagner** adds to **Meyerbeer** and how **Meyerbeer** enriched **Wagner.** Indeed, as Schneider has pointed out that, "with Meyerbeer opera for the first time tends to become a total work of art at the service of an idea, incarnate in a narrative plot of a strong historical dimension," and from this fountain **Wagner,** undeniably came to drink, while at the same time we also find in **Meyerbeer's** ***L'Africaine*** strong hints of the **Wagnerian** opera style of the continuous melody.

Nature of French Grand Historical Opera

In a recent insightful article about **FGHO, Olivier Bara** hits the target in establishing the nature of this art form. Instead of cataloging its particular characteristics he rather does it by saying that **Grand Historical Opera** is "founded on an aesthetic of collage of varied musical numbers and on the articulation of 'wide-angle shots' and 'close-ups' with unity of perspective provided by the unleashing of powerful historical interests that crush the individuals' destinies."

What does he mean with 'wide-angle' and 'close-ups?' Simply because **Grand Opera** is a sequence of huge panoramas in four or five long acts, to capture these panoramas you must use your operatic wide-angle lens. But in these scenes there are also the protagonists from which you also want to capture their psychology, nature, and other internal details, you must, then, reach for the operatic close-up camera. Now, for the sake of unity

of the work, lest the whole thing would become incoherent, the powerful historical interests must come down to favor some of the characters and destroy others. Observe here that history is the one factor that decides the interaction of the wide and the close-up shots. The result of this interaction is what **Bara** calls a "collage" made up of musical numbers, of wide-angles of big panoramas, and of close-ups. Again, **FGHO,** is therefore, an aesthetic *collage.* And these *collages* impart to the work constant tensions throughout the opera leading up to a final denouement of the characters' destinies. The mechanics of these interactions forming this collage was sadly misunderstood by **Wagner.** They went over his head and the heads of his followers, calling them "effects without cause." These were not effects without cause. The causes were constantly activating effects that had a *raison d'être*: the final grand denouement in Act Four or Five.

It has also been said that Grand Opera, a product of **Romanticism**, was in essence *a drama of self-identification and it ended, most of the time, in the death of the characters.* Death here stood as a liberation, an escape from a personal conflict, and almost an indestructible predicament. As we said earlier, the conflict between the individual interests and the one coming from societal and political demands. A good example in literature is the case in Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities.* Unfortunately **Wagner,** we must say, wrote a lot of garbage and theoretical nonsense that even *he* did not understand well. And his followers, who also took it as the most profound wisdom ever uttered in the musical world, made it worse. The result is that it has taken more than one hundred years to see through most of this nonsense.

FGHO also elevated the Chorus who, like individuals, were made of people from different walks of life. Sometimes they reached the ranks of protagonists. For this reason **FGHO** meant a democratization of opera in general. In fact it can be said it was the daughter of the **French Revolution.**

The new operas also changed the **Ballet** to be integrated in the plot, and not as a simple *divertimento.* Another innovation was the **Tableaux** or **Sound Tableaux.**

This new style of opera was universally imitated and many of its characteristics were taken and integrated by many composers into their

works that were not **FGHO.** You only have to hear works by **Verdi, Donizetti,** and **Mercadante,** to name a few, to realize this. A case in point **Giordano's** ***Andrea Chenier,*** which although classified as of the **Verismo** school for its singing style, it has so many of the **FGHO** characteristics that it could easily be one.

Here are some of the structural essentials of **FGHO:**

- Four or five acts.
- The subject of the opera must have an *epic quality*, painted with a *grand palette.*
- Male leading characters seem to be hesitant and undecided.
- Characters represent different political, social, and religious groups.
- Choruses are elevated to prominent positions, and like individuals, represent different political, social, and religious groups.
- Ballets mostly dramatic and integrated in the plot.
- Impressive orchestral brilliance.
- Large complex scenes with embedded numbers.
- The use of grand Tableaux or Sound Tableaux.

Clio's Songs

"ICONIC" FRENCH GRAND HISTORICAL OPERAS

Listed by date of historical event upon which the opera is focused

	OPERA	CENTURY	EVENT	CLIO'S SONG
1	*Aida*	**BC**	1479–1425 BC (3500 years ago)	"Traditore, Traditore, Traditore"
2	*Robert Le Diable*	**11th**	Duke of Normandy	"Marchon!! Marchon!"
3	*La Juive*	**15th**	Council of Constance 1414	"Rachel Quand du Seigneur"
4	*Rienzi*	**14th**	Last of the Roman Tribunes	Darkness that envelopes men's souls
5	*L'Africaine*	**15th**	Vasco de Gama rounds the Cape of Good Hope 1487	"O Paradis!"
6	*Le Prophete*	**16th**	Religion Hipocrisy/Fanaticism, Holland, Germany 1536	(Coronation Scene)
7	*Les Huguenots*	**16th**	St. Bartholomew Massacre 1572	Blessing of the Swords
8	*Gustave III ou Le Bal Masque*	**18th**	Murder of Gustave III, Stockholm, Sweden 1792	The killing of Gustave III

Appreciation to Herbert Otto for compilation of the chart above.

III

ICONIC FRENCH GRAND HISTORICAL OPERA

I have designated as **Iconic** the following **French Grand Historical Operas** because they were the first to have success and to greatly influence the operatic world. For me these are the ones with the greatest impact. ***L'Africaine*** **(1864),** may seem to be too late, but because **Meyerbeer** intermittently began to work on it earlier than its debut indicates, and that it had a definite influence on **Verdi's** ***Aida,*** and on other major composers, I decided to include it as one of the **Iconics.**

THE "ICONIC" FRENCH GRAND HISTORICAL OPERAS

Robert le Diable (1831) ..... *Music: G. Meyerbeer* **|** *Libretto: E. Scribe*

Gustave III ou Le Bal Masque (1833) ..... *Music: D. Auber* **|** *Libretto: E. Scribe*

La Juive (1835) ..... *Music: F. Halévy* **|** *Libretto: E. Scribe*

Les Huguenots (1836) ..... *Music: G. Meyerbeer* **|** *Libretto: E. Scribe.*

Rienzi (1842) ..... *Music and Libretto by Richard Wagner*

Le Prophete (1849) ..... *Music: G. Meyerbeer* **|** *Libretto: E. Scribe*

L'Africaine (1864) ..... *Music: G. Meyerbeer* **|** *Libretto by E. Scribe*

Aida (1871) ..... *Music by G. Verdi* **|** *Libretto by A. Ghislanzoni*

Robert le Diable
Adolphe Nourrit in the title role of Robert.
Premiered at the Paris Opera (21 November 1831).
Costume design by Eugene Du Faget.

ROBERT LE DIABLE
— 1831 —

I. THE SETTING

Opera in Five Acts
Music.....Giacomo Meyerbeer
Libretto.....Eugene Scribe
Time.....The eleventh century
Place.....Palermo, Sicily

CLIO'S SONG
"Marchons! Marchons! Soi digne de la patrie."
"Let's March on! March on…! Be worthy of your homeland…!"

When on Monday 21 November 1831, at precisely seven o' clock in the evening, at the Academie Royale de Musique, in Paris, the conductor came out, bowed to the audience, and lifted high in the air the baton to get a brand new opera going, **Romanticism** had finally arrived at the world of opera. And it had arrived with a new operatic grammar and language inspired by the literary tenets of the new Romantic literature. The opera was ***Robert le Diable.*** The lyricist was **Eugene Scribe.** The composer: A young German musician whom the Parisians already knew. His name: **Giacomo Meyerbeer.**

A few hours later, when the conductor put down the baton amidst raving and thunderous ovations the world of opera had changed forever. A *new brave world* lay ahead for composers who would venture to travel in it. When this inauguration happened **Meyerbeer** was 36 years old; **Rossini** (39); **Bellini** (35)**; Donizetti,** (34)**; Verdi** (18); and **Wagner** (18). And **Puccini** who was born 27 years *after* ***Robert's***

premier appropriated, in his manner—and he wasn't the only one to do this—some of the items found in the rich warehouses of the **Grand Opera.** It really does not take a great effort to detect some of these borrowings in his posthumous ***Turandot,*** written almost a century after ***Robert le Diable's*** triumph.

With ***Robert le Diable*** the tenets of **French Grand Historical Operas** had been established. **Olivier Bara** has defined for us, in very sharp and precise terms, what was the aesthetics of this new art: "A collage of varied musical numbers on the articulation of 'wide-angle shots' and 'close-ups' with history…" imparting the work with "a unity of perspective."

It took the longest time for critics and *aficionados* to see and understand this nature.

Robert le Diable is an opera in five acts based on the medieval legend of **"Robert le Diable,"** the eleventh-century Duke of Normandy. The dramatic basis for the opera was a thirteenth-century romance. The legend has it that **Robert,** the son of the devil, after a career of wickedness and lawlessness repented and was reconciled to the Church. The opera chronicles some of his misdeeds in a highly fictionalized and romantic manner. But it can be truly said that what had been inchoate in the world of opera for years, finally fell in place under the genius of **Meyerbeer** and his librettist **Scribe.** The opera was a tremendous success making the year **1831** a milestone in the operatic world, because from now on opera would not be the same. Its high octane made ***Robert*** go around the opera houses of the world in no time. By the end of the nineteenth century, it had been staged some 500 hundred times in Paris alone. And its echoes have never really disappeared at all, for we found them in the most surprising places, such as in **Korngold's** opera ***Die Tote Stadt*** and in the cinema with the spectacular nun's ballet reproduced in a clever moving and stylized wall sculpture in **Al Pacino's** feature film, ***The Devil's Advocate.***

II. CLIO'S SONG IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Not much factual history is known of **Robert,** the eleventh-century Duke of Normandy. We don't know his exact birth date. But we, nevertheless, do know that he was the natural father of **William the Conqueror** with a local Norman washer woman. The contemporary chronicles say that as a **Duke of Normandy** Robert imposed a strong rule in a place where the feudal nobility usually spent their leisure time in savage petty feudal wars. We also do know that in 1027 Robert was asked to arbitrate a feudal conflict between the king of France, **Robert the Pious,** and the count of Blois. As this was successfully carried out, it gave Robert a lot of prestige among his restless feudal colleagues.

How did he become Duke of Normandy? Easy. In 1028 he invited to a banquet in his castle, his brother Richard III, the actual Duke, and a few of his most important barons. They were all poisoned. This act, of course, provoked an uprising among those Norman lords who were still alive, and a lot of blood was spilled from many severed heads, which was at the time, I presume, *par for the course.* Referring to all of this historians say, in a laconic fashion, that Robert and the Norman feudal lords *filled France with the noise of their ambitions and their wars.*

Apparently Robert was all business in the arts of war, for we read that he crushed the rebellion and emerged as the non-contested sovereign of Normandy. Now at his pleasure he could, and he certainly did, interfere in the affairs of all of his neighbors. In the face of all of this, the opinion of some of his vassals, those who benefited from **Robert's** cooking arcane culinary arts, he was the "**Magnificent,**" For others that he was just the "**Devil.**" You choose, but the last sobriquet stuck.

It seems that the crime of his brother's poisoning never ceased to fester in the depth of his conscience. Apparently he had one, because we are informed that in 1035 he announced his decision of seeking peace of mind as a pilgrim in **Jerusalem**. His decision, as you may suspect, fell like a bombshell in Normandy.

His astounded loyal vassals begged him not to leave Normandy, for they needed him to keep the peace of the land. What else could they do?

Others were outraged, especially those who had risked everything—life, limb, and property—in helping him to build his power up and, of course, for having defended him for his horrendous fratricide. With this pilgrimage Robert had put them on the spot. Now it was tacitly evident that he had perpetrated the crime. Because, after all, no one went to Jerusalem in those days to atone just for a traffic misdemeanor on the Norman roads, or for a bad *crème brûlée* in the local inn. However, his loyal vassals' pleadings were to no avail. Robert ordered a red cross stitched on one his tunics'—-de rigueur in those crusading days—and when his "destrier" and other appurtenances were ready, he left on what turned out to be a one-way trip, for he never returned to Normandy. There were reports that he died, or was killed, on his way back, perhaps somewhere in Asia Minor, which is now known as Turkey.

In the opera, however, none of what we said above appears. **Meyerbeer** has Robert, installed in Palermo, Sicily, where the action of the opera and his adventures—or misadventures—took place, and also where he dishonorably failed to attend a tournament on behalf of his fiancé, princess Isabel. In the end **Robert** repents and obtains forgiveness from the church in a trio finale, gorgeous, destined to be very Catholic and of standard use for these endings. **Gounod** anyone?

III. CLIO'S SONG

ACT III, SCENE 6
"March On! March on!
Be Worthy of Your Homeland!"
Bertram and Robert le Diable

Meyerbeer always wanted to move to France. While successful in Italy he thought that Paris was where he could find all the operatic resources to unleash his talents. His dream was realized when his friend **Rossini,** who had triumphed in France, invited him to come to Paris to present his last successful Italian style opera.

This opera was also a success in Paris, and because of it he was asked to write a new one for the Paris Opera. **Meyerbeer** then spent his time in Paris studying French opera and music, and the French arts as well. He soon understood what the public really was looking for in new operas, as we have indicated before. This perception must have been confirmed in his conversations with his new librettist, the outstanding **Eugene Scribe** who was also aiming to give opera in France a new format, a new life, and a new style. Scribe as you may remember from previous pages, was also one of the founding fathers of **French Grand Historical Opera.**

It appears that the two gentlemen sat down to cobble together what turned out to be a resounding success in 1831. ***Robert le Diable*** was a new style of opera: the **French Grand Historical Opera.**

Robert le Diable, was practically born around the time when the last Bourbon king **Charles X** (1824–1830), was chased from the throne in 1830, by the actions of the people of Paris, indignant as they were with the king's arbitrary decrees and ordinances. They recognized that the King was encroaching more and more on their treasured freedoms, and it was not long before they took to the streets with a fury not seen since 1789. Thus, in just three days, in July of 1830, the king and his government were history.

In November of 1830 the painter, **Eugene Delacroix,** who had been involved in the street fighting at the barricades, and who is seen in his own painting ***Liberty leading the People,*** with a gun in his hand, exhibited in the **Salon** his formidable canvas. As **Delacroix's** painting dramatically depicted the furious fighting in the streets, the halls of the **Salon** were overrun by all of those who had participated—or not—in the struggle. Needless to say the emotions of the Parisians were again ignited with the recent memories of such a critical episode in their history.

It also appears to me that the formidable painting inspired both **Meyerbeer** and **Scribe** to write something patriotic into their

opera, to please and exult the audience, but mind you, without giving the impression of piggybacking on Delacroix's success for their own commercial gain. Another more powerful reason that drove the authors of the opera to include a patriotic flavored moment in their creation was the tremendous success **Auber** had with his opera ***La Muette de Portici,*** which contained the rousing duet "**Amour sacré de la patrie,**" which was, for a while, called a new **Marseillaise.** So the authors of ***Robert*** searched for a fitting place in the opera's plot to insert a patriotic reminder, and they decided it was to be Scene 6, in the Third Act.

In this scene both **Bertram,** who is the devil, or son of the devil, or something like that, convinces **Robert** to join in a visit to the dark and horrifying underworld, in the tombs of some of the sinful nuns of the past, in what once was **Saint Rosalie's** convent in Sicily. **Robert's** mission here was to get from Saint Rosalie's tomb a sprig of a magic branch. His reward, if successful, was unbound power over everyone and everything, riches, and immortality. Detecting in **Robert** a hesitation, **Bertram** wondered if he was afraid of doing that, to which **Robert,** indignantly, replied saying that the knights of his homeland, that is, of ***la patrie,*** were always ready to fight, even if it cost them their lives. After this they both exit the stage martially singing in unison "**Marchon! Marchon!**" and accompanied by the blaring of trumpets and the roll of military drums, as the fighters did in the Parisian streets a year before. This touch of patriotic bravado, albeit brief, is a very exciting moment in the opera. I have seen audiences who are not, of course, emotionally involved with a revolution in France, more than two centuries before, react with great enthusiasm to it. Imagine what it would have been in the minds of an audience who had been involved in the events hardly a year before. The patriotic words by **Scribe,** and the music by **Meyerbeer,** who wrote a little cocky, brassy, and *barricade-ish* march stirred all kinds of patriotic emotions. The effect must have been absolutely rousing. For those in the theater it was nothing less than Delacroix's painting come to life, in motion, in front of their eyes and yes, they were in the streets again!

Was this scene crafted to create a subliminal experience among the listeners? I don't have any doubt about it. This is, of course, my educated guess, because every time I listen to it, or watch it on DVD, or see it on the stage, my mind goes back to the painting. Did **Meyerbeer** and **Scribe** know about subliminal effects? I am sure they did but they did not have the terminology as we do, and read today about it in so many psychological tomes. They knew very well about effects, and what they could do for the audience in the arts, which is to split the mind into the conscious and the subconscious, with the second being more powerful than the first. This, and emotionally charged words like ***la patrie*** and **marchons,** reminds me what **Verdi** said to one of his librettist. That in charged moments, he wanted words which, above the sound from the orchestra, the audience could easily understand. Words such as *love, hate, war, death,* etc. In **Verdi's** mind that was all he needed, because his music would do the rest. And **Scribe's** words and **Meyerbeer's** music did it for themselves! Now in my own case whenever I see the Delacroix painting I begin to hum **Meyerbeer's** little march. And when I hear the march I see in my mind **Delacroix's** masterpiece.

So now avail yourself of a color illustration of **Delacroix's** painting and let your eyes concentrate on the canvas' perimeter while at the same time, with libretto in hand, play the scene in a recent quality CD of the opera, or in the recent formidable London DVD of it:

Marchons! Marchons! *je ne crains rien…*
Viens, sois digne de ***ta patrie…***

Now, how did that older patriotic song go?

Allons enfants de ***la patrie…***
Marchons! Marchons!...

IV. SO THEY SAY…

"The influence ***Robert le Diable*** had on all the nineteenth century was extremely important. I had not quite fathomed how important that influence was before rehearsals. [for the London performance in December 2012.] Suddenly one could hear a multitude of things, which were inspired by ***Robert le Diable***. One can hear Berlioz… Gounod. Offenbach made use of it. I was stunned and surprised… What amazes me the most is how all of this had an influence on the whole of the nineteenth century… And then it was rejected. I think the piece is still a victim of [prejudice]. There is a prejudice on ***Robert le Diable*** and there is a prejudice on Meyerbeer. His music is always described as heavy. I find him a composer who is very alive, brilliant, inventive, funny at times, powerful, extremely theatrical, and not at all boring."

—**Laurent Pelly,** *Director*

"In composing historical opera [Meyerbeer] was in effect writing world history, a history of the heart and feelings, breaking the bounds of national prejudices, destroying the narrowing limits of individual languages, writing the deeds of music."

—**R. Wagner** [On ***Robert le Diable***]

V. LITERARY SOURCES

Becker, Heinz & Gudrun. *Meyerbeer: A Life in Letters.* Oregon, 1981.
Grant, A.J. *The Huguenots.* 1935.
Letellier, Robert I. *Meyerbeer's* Robert le Diable, *the Premier Opéra Romantique.* Cambridge, 2012.

VI. RECORDINGS

AUDIO (CD)
Robert le Diable (2013)
Performers: Hymel, Defontaine, Giannatasio, Ciofi, Miles, *et al*
Orchestra: Salernitata
Conductor: Oren
Brilliant Opera Collection (3) 94604

Robert le Diable (2001)
Performers: Mok, Ciofi, Surian, Raspagliosi, *et al*
Orchestra: Internazionale d'Italia
Conductor: R. Palumbo
Dynamic Italy (3) 368/1-3. DDD

VIDEO (DVD)
Robert le Diable (2012)
Performers: Hymel, Relyea, Poplavvskaya, Ciofi *et al.*
Royal Opera Chorus/Orchestra.
Conductor: Oren
Opus Arte (3) OA 1106

Alice and Bertram
Act III, Scene 1
Théâtre de Scribe, tome 14, page 216. Illustration by Blanchard (1835).

Gustave III ou Le Bal Masque
Adolphe Nourrit as Gustave.
Académie Royale de Musique-Le Peletier (27 February 1833).
Costume design by Eugène Lami and Paul Lormier.

GUSTAVE III ou LE BAL MASQUE
— 1833 —

I. THE SETTING

Opera in Five Acts
Music.....Daniel Auber
Libretto.....Eugene Scribe
Time.....Late eighteenth century
Place.....Stockholm, Sweden

CLIO'S SONG
Act V
The Ballroom Scene

Daniel François Esprit Auber was born in Caen in Normandy, in1782. His father was a businessman who dealt in the print-selling business. He wanted his son to follow in his professional footsteps, and for that reason, when his son reached the age of 20, he sent him to England to learn new business practices. However it seems that **Auber** was more interested in music. As a child he had shown a decided inclination for this art for he had learned to play several musical instruments and dabbled in composition. Back in France, because a new legislation forced him and many others to do so, he again took in earnest his musical education. All along he was encouraged to take the road of composition, especially by the famous Italian composer **Luigi Cherubini,** impressed as he was by **Auber's** early compositional attempts. Both **Auber's** business failures and his father's death in 1819, convinced him to definitively make music his future career. After a couple of failures, he finally found real success with his opera in three acts, ***La Bergere Chatelaine***. This triumph led the way for a sequence of successes that culminated with ***La Muette de***

Portici **(**1828), considered, as we had already seen, as a huge step toward the creation of **French Grand Historical Opera. Auber** has been held by some as one of the *founding fathers* of that genre. Because of this success, the son of **Normandy** became the recipient of many awards and honors, and in 1829 he was elected a member of the **Institute de France.**

Through the following years the **Auber-Scribe** team produced a string of successful **Operas Comiqué**, which in reality was his forte. A few of them are still performed as classics of this delightful genre in which, as many critics say, one would find the true French musical soul. One of his most successful comedies, ***Le Philtre,*** was translated into Italian and as such, with music by **G. Donizetti,** became ***L'Elisire d'amore.*** **Auber's** musical fertility continued unabated with one success after another until just a few years before his death in 1871. Yet, in spite of all of his triumphs with the light operas, **Auber** continued to be interested in the big genre. In 1833 he came up with ***Gustave III ou le Bal Masqué,*** a **Grand Opera.** This was a tremendous triumph, which stayed in the repertories of many important opera houses until **Verdi's** version on the same theme appeared. **Auber's** fertile muse began to wane in the last ten years of his life. He died in Paris in 1871, but he remained a well-loved figure not only because in his music he had captured a big part of the French soul, but also due to his sincerity, modesty and personal generosity. The next time you visit Paris, don't fail to stroll by **Rue Auber** which leads to the Opera House and the nearest underground station, also called **Auber.** One of my most pleasant surprises in my trips to France was to find, in countless provincial towns, a street or plaza named after him.

II. CLIO'S SONG IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

If there ever was an historical character deserving to be portrayed in an opera, that was *Gustave III* (1746–1702), the enlightened King of Sweden. The king was a generous patron of the arts, especially of the opera.

After the reign of two German mock-kings, **Gustave III** *was the first monarch who was a native of the country and one who spoke to his Swedish*

subjects in their own tongue. He was kind and eloquent as no sovereign of that country had been within the memory of living man. Other historians add that he was cultured, charming, imaginative, and as we said above, an active patron of the arts. The king also was a playwright. In 1786, in collaboration with ***J.H. Kellgreen,*** *he wrote the libretto for an opera, nothing less than* ***a*** **tragedie lyrique Gustaf Wasa,** *whose author was the German composer* ***Johan Gottlieb Nauman.*** *No wonder his reign is considered as the* ***Gustavian Enlightenment.***

Nevertheless, his political life was stormy and with numerous conflicts with the Riksdag, the Swedish sort of parliament to which, as a king, he was subject to. Perhaps his somewhat proud and condescending attitude had something to do in this matter. But in spite of these scrapes the king was able to enact a series of reforms, like eliminating torture as an instrument of legal investigation, freedom of the press, religious tolerance, free trade, and the strengthening of the navy. Sadly enough, some of these reforms were later rescinded by the Riksdag.

Successful at times in his military campaigns against the Russians, he suffered treasons by his own officers on the Finnish front, and the entrance of the Danes in the conflict on the Russian side, which made things very sticky for him. He, nevertheless, was able to overcome a complete disaster on the Russian front by his outstanding naval victory in 1790, which allowed him to sign a peace treaty to end the costly war.

Most importantly, is that we have in his life the episode of an aristocratic conspiracy against him, which ended with the king shot dead, by a captain Jacob Johan **Anckarstrom,** while attending a masked ball at the opera on 16 March 1792. The reason or cause for this conspiracy remains somewhat uncertain, and as often happens, when history does not explain something to our satisfaction, a fictionalized version comes up with the answers. One of these versions presents to us **Anckarstrom** as a man seeking revenge because his wife was having an affair with none other than the king himself. This very well could be the answer to the mystery, since historians were startled with the fact that the assassin, *appeared to have no injuries to avenge, to have been no political or religious fanatic, no madman, but simply a cold-blooded murderer.*

Other rumors that have been circulating since the crime was committed, are on what happened to **Anckarstrom** and the conspirators. He was quickly sought out by the police, found, arrested, tried, and executed with incredible alacrity. Did they act under precise orders from higher echelons to avoid the man making confessions implicating others? Fingers have been pointed at the king's brother, because of his cold, almost indifferent conduct towards his brother's assassination. Also his accomplices did not suffer the extreme penalty, and some of them only suffered nominal punishment. This suspicion is not too far off the target. What is for sure, is that the assassin was not a cold-blooded murderer as suggested above. In fact, he may have been the opposite, an impulsive hot-blooded man who reacted with blind rage upon discovering the betrayal of his wife with the man he considered his true friend. It is known that he and the king were good and very intimate friends

Blind rage or cold and calculated action by **Anckarstrom?** There are other reports that this fellow was a *miserable man of muddled brain and ferocious perverted heart, impelled by the new revolutionary ideas then in vogue.* An English historian, R. Nisbet has said that *captain **Anckarstrom,** delighted in public executions and in horribly torturing animals* and that he was a *brutal husband.*

What a potage! Well what is for sure is that many courtiers were very disgruntled with the king's reforms, that there was a conspiracy, and that the king was killed exactly as the opera has it. What is not true is that Amelie, the wife of **Anckarstrom** existed, and that **Gustave III** died at the ball as we have noted above. In deference to good drama he died at the opera house. In reality he died some two weeks later of infected wounds. God only knows what the doctors did to save him. Eighteenth-century medical practices?

III. CLIO'S SONG

ACT IV
The Ballroom Scene

I have selected the entire **Fifth Act** because it is a text-book demonstration of what **Barda** was telling us about **Grand Opera's** nature. That it is a *huge panorama, a collage, to be captured with the interaction of "the wide-angle" lens and with the close-up range for the characters.* Judge for yourself how huge the panorama was from the following contemporary description:

> It was reported that for the performance nothing was neglected to make the ball scene a brilliant spectacle… The opulent scenery was set up so as to provide space for hosts of people: And innumerable candelabra illuminated the stage brilliantly… At least 1600 of them, and 300 dancers all dressed in different costumes… dancing six numbers. (Allemand, Pas de folies, Minuet, two marches, and the famous final frenzied gallop… The dances had a theme: the evocation of concepts of eighteenth-century courtly entertainment, an idealized concept of pastoral pictorialism and the hectic frenzy of carnival. And all of this with Auber's keen sense of energy, but with a rationalist Gallic discipline à la Lully, and a masterly instrumentation which impels the action toward the fateful appointment of king and assassins.

Grand Opera is accused of being a superficial show and nothing else. However, you better look again here, and perk up your ears to follow the composer's long **parlante*** style. No recitative style could have taken the scene to such dramatic heights. The days of **Opera Seria** were long gone. In spite of the tremendous total din on the stage, thanks to the **parlante** style you can hear and understand what the conspirators are saying. At a time two conspirators, one of them—yes you got it!—**Anckerstrom,** *approached King Gustave greeting him with,* **Bonjour, beau masque** while putting a *pistol up against the left side of the king's back and fired it.*

———

*A style of singing like ordinary speech. May occur in the middle of an aria.

In all operatic literature there are few scenes like this. Bravo!

In the opera King Gustave dies, of course, on the stage. In real life he was taken to his palace and died there several weeks later as a result of his infected wounds. In historical fiction this technique is called *compression of time* because to do otherwise would certainly be anti-climactic and not theatrically satisfactory.

It is very dramatic that the King, a real opera lover, who actually built the Stockholm Opera House would die in it? **Scribe** rising to this occasion put the following words in the king's last breath dedicated to his beloved **Sweden:**

Adieu Swede! Adieu gloire et patrie!
J'esperais mieux mourir! Mes amis mes soldats,
Entourez-moi! Qu'au moins j'expire dans vos bras!

[Farewell Sweden! Good-bye glory and fatherland!
I hoped to die better! My friends, my soldiers.
Gather around me! So at least I expire in your arms!

IV. SO THEY SAY

During his lifetime **Auber** was the subject of much jest and cutting remarks from his own colleagues. **Rossini,** who never missed a chance to satirize other musicians said of **Auber,** that "he wrote minor music, but as a major composer." **Berlioz,** who could not contain his jealousy for his successful French colleagues, said that **Auber's** "music was for milliners sung by grisettes and traveling salesmen," grisettes meaning, in his day, a young working-class woman who did not have a true understanding of what high music was. What snobbism!

Well, this comment, along with many others that **Berlioz** wrote in his critiques in the newspapers and magazines, made him many enemies who had their revenge by booing and sabotaging his own wonderful creations. Hey! The man owned a beautiful brassy orchestral sound, but

the ancient mythological Greek gods of his ***Les Trojans*** are to me aloof and uninteresting, and I think it is because **Berlioz** was trying to sneak in by the back door a modernized *tragédie lyrique,* which he loved.

If **Berlioz** was bad-mouthing **Auber, Berlioz** never heard a disparaging word from **Auber. Auber** was a modest and humble man with the honesty of even criticizing his own music. This self-criticism has been used against him as proof that even he didn't consider his music worthy enough, which is a misinterpretation of the very serious side of his character. This was, if you wish, a way of fending off hurt from people whom he knew didn't know personally and artistically his art or him.

Fortunately, in 1839, a famous and respected critic of the stature of **Theophile Gautier** put the snobbery in its rightful place. For **Gautier, Auber's** music was [from] "an outstanding composer…With a style all of his own… His wealth of motives and songs is a rarity in this day and age." And to add to this commentary, I would like to pose a question: Does all music we must hear have to come from the pen of the misunderstood long-haired and angry at society composer? Heavens forfend!

Trash **Auber's** music and you will be trashing **Verdi's** because the master of ***Aida*** took from ***Gustave III*** the ***parlante*** technique, **Auber's** dramatic innovation. Ask yourself this question: what speaks more about the character of the **French** in the nineteenth century, **Berlioz's** ***Damnation of Faust*** or ***Gustave III,*** or ***Fra Diavlo*** by **Auber?** Listen to **Gilbert and Sullivan** and you would connect with the **British** character in the nineteenth century. Or to **Francisco A. Barbier** and his ***Madrilean zarzuelas*** which with a single **Romanza** you touch the heart of **Spain** in that century. These composers, were not better than the French one.

Well, it appears that in the recent past there have been some stirrings in the rediscovery of **Auber** and his art. There are some new recordings of his music out there. And yes! In my book, **Auber's** ***Masked Ball*** version is miles better than **Verdi's. Verdi's** is colorless, drab. So for that reason **Verdi's** action could be happening in any place. In Boston, New Zealand, or for that matter in California. **Auber's** is a triumph

of ambiance. You feel transported to the eighteenth century. And the music for the Ball, while **Auber's** is truly the music of a royal court entertaining itself, **Verdi's** sounds drab in comparison, even somewhat tacky. But the opera companies do **Verdi's** and ignore the other denying the aficionados the pleasures that once captivated opera fans in the ninteenth century. Well, they are "taking care of business" as the song goes.

V. LITERARY SOURCES

Bain, R. Nisbet. *Gustavus III and his contemporaries, 1742–1792; an overlooked chapter of eighteenth century history.* 2 Vols. London, 1894.
Hennings, Beth. *Gustave III. A Biography.* Stockholm, 1957.

VI. RECORDINGS

AUDIO—CD
Gustave III ou Le Bal Masque (1993)
Performers: Dale, Tawill, Treguier, Lafon, *et al*
Orchestra: Orchestre Lyrique Français
Conductor: Michel Swierczewski
Arion (3) ARN348220

LA JUIVE
[The Jewess]
— 1835 —

I. THE SETTING

Opera in Five Acts
Music.....Fromental Halévy
Libretto.....Eugene Scribe
Time.....1414–1418
Place.....Constance, Switzerland

CLIO'S SONG
"Rachel Quand Du Seigneur"
Eleazar

Halévy wrote more than forty operas. Many were successful in their own time. Today the only one that is performed—and not as frequently as I would like—is ***La Juive, [The Jewess].*** What a shame! The Met seems not to favor this genre. Back in the '70s they put on a lackluster production of **Meyerbeer's** ***Le Prophete*** saved by Marilyn Horne's glorious art. Fortunately for us, it was captured on compact disc so we may treasure Ms. Horne's wonderful performance. I have been told it rivals those of the great mezzo-sopranos of the past. As it was only audio recorded, we didn't have to suffer the drabness of the sets and other idiosyncrasies that did not belong in it. And after this, another thirty-some years of silence until our grand company, in 2003, rented the Vienna production of **Halévy's** acclaimed masterpiece.

When asked about this reticence toward **French Grand Opera** they came out with the *usual suspect* answers; that they cost too much, that there are no singers capable of singing the roles, that people don't know them and

La Juive
Cornélie Falcon as Rachel in the opera by Halévy.
She performed in the premiere at the Paris Opera (23 February 1835).

abstain from spending the money, blah, blah, blah. Recently, in Europe, however, they have revived a few of these grand operas successfully, but the Met with all the resources it has or could command, still remains aloof to the genre. To show that they do grand operas they bring up as examples ***The Tales of Hoffman,*** and Berlioz's ***The Trojans.*** The first, which I love, is a glorified *opéra comique* which cannot resist pick pocketing the purse of ***Robert le Diable,*** particularly in the first act, but without that sense of classic tragedy intrinsic to the grand opera genre, and the second, another love of mine for the presence of Gluck in it, is a *tragédie lyrique,* a genre that Berlioz was passionate about and attempted, unsuccessfully, to revive in a more agile version. Let's hope that the revival of ***La Juive*** is a breakthrough towards a more ample policy toward **French Grand Historical Opera.**

My first contact with ***La Juive*** —like with many others—was when I was a child in the weekly opera *soirées* or *tertulias* as we called these affairs in Spanish, that were frequently held at my aunt's home, and which I never missed for anything in the world. One night my aunt, among a few others, played Caruso's rendition of the aria "**Rachel quand du seigneur**" in a primitive acoustic recording. Also, a friend brought the piano score of the opera and regaled the audience with several selections of it. I vividly remember that he had to give an encore of that aria. Some years later I returned to ***La Juive*** with a couple of vinyl LPs 33 rpm, that I bought, probably pirated recordings. These recordings had good casts, but were of such a poor technical standards that I decided not to listen to them, so as not to ruin what I remembered of the opera. Thus, when the Met announced that it was importing the Vienna production, I wasted no time whatsoever in ordering the tickets for my wife and myself—she always joins me in these operatic safaris. Finally my quest of sixty-plus years or more was fulfilled. The highly successful revival of ***La Juive,*** in Vienna and in other European venues, in the words of Peter Blaha, "contributed substantially to the rehabilitation of the genre… effectively overturning all the prejudices against grand opera."

II. CLIO'S SONG IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The plot of ***La Juive*** develops with the epoch-making **Council of Constance** (1414–1418) in Switzerland as a background. The times during which the Council assembled were those of widespread change in

social, political, religious, and even artistic ideas, which were beginning to bubble in Europe. Changing times usually stir up in people a sense of insecurity and anxiety in many quarters. What for centuries had looked to people to exist forever were now challenged or collapsing. Many were those who could not understand what was going on in their world.

Five hundred years ago not too many could even suspect that Europe had already begun its transition from the Middle Ages into the early modern European period. Not even the Church, the oldest institution in Europe at that time, seemed to escape this unsettled condition**.** Now there was not just one but three popes, and with each one claiming to be the true successor to the biblical Peter, and demanding, of course, from each Christian loyalty and with it, their taxes and contributions. This is what is known in history as the **Great Schism.**

The **Council of Constance's** most pressing business was, precisely, to solve first and foremost, this thirty-year papal mess by returning the papacy to Rome under one single head of the Church . The second item in the Council's agenda was the correction of the abuses and corruption in the church, which were by the truck load, and the third, the eradication of John Huss' heresy, an issue that had plagued the Church for sometime. The business of heresies were very hard to comprehend by the people at large, because those involved spoke and wrote in Latin about complex theological matters. In those days reading material such as ***Latin for Dummies*** or ***Theology for Dummies*** didn't exist. Not only that, but because those questions and debates were a dangerous activity, they frequently ended with those most outspoken roasting at the stake. The curious onlookers of these horrifying events were haunted for days by the smoky stench that hung on their woolen clothes. It also goes without saying that others, regardless if they were innocent or not, found themselves in prison for some time, not comprehending the Latin mumbo jumbo and giving the wrong answer at the trial.

Some time after the calls for attendance had been issued and reached the persons and institutions intended, the population of little Constance swelled up beyond all the early expectations, which tells us the enthusiasm, the interest, and the expectations the event had generated throughout Europe. We must presume that all, or most of the characters in the cast

of the opera, in one way or another, attended, some of the Council's sessions. To give you an idea of the mob that had congregated in little Constance, when the sessions officially began in October 1414, I include below a description, the number, and the make up of the attendance:

> Two patriarchs of Constantinople, twenty-nine cardinals, thirty-three archbishops, one hundred and fifty bishops, more than a hundred abbots, and fifty priors. But the majority of the members were representatives of the universities, which had been the real leaders of the church during the decline of the papacy. There were not less than three-hundred doctors and masters at Constance. The Council was also a political congress. All the sovereigns of Europe, save one, sent ambassadors. The prelates and princes were accompanied by soldiers. There came also merchants, clowns, jugglers, actresses, and curiosity seekers. At one time there were in the city three hundred conjurers and musicians, six hundred barbers, and seven hundred courtesans. The officials of Constance were at first hand alarmed at the task of feeding and lodging this vast multitude of people.

"The Swabians," wrote Huss, "say it will take thirty years to purify Constance of the sins which it had committed." And about John Huss we must also keep in mind that a few months later, on 6 July 1415, he was burnt for heresy, and that his words and thoughts must have been in the minds of many attending the Council, especially the Bohemians: "It is better," said Huss, "to die well than to live bad," and "In life eternal, there is perfect joy and light, without pain or torture, and there is communion with God himself and His angels."

If you wonder about the total of those congregated at Constance, there are a few estimates, which must be taken with a grain of salt, like all Medieval statistics. The science of polling was not in the universities' curriculum of those days. We can, nevertheless, say from sensible contemporary assessment that at any given moment there were in Constance and surrounding areas between 40,000 to 150,000. These people were uncomfortable and thereby irritable souls speaking all or most of the European languages, another irritating fact. And of course, there was crime, fighting, prostitution and all of those nasty scrapes that happen when you have so many people gathered in so little a place. So, again the mood and the temper of Constance was ripe for riots and injustice dictated by the Council.

III. CLIO'S SONG

ACT IV
"Rachel quand du Seigneur"

If the fictitious characters in the opera, like the Jew **Eleazar** and the others had really existed and were in Constance at the time, we can be sure that they were keeping abreast and supporting their favorite sides in the sessions, and what was happening in the town as well. This would be especially true for **Eleazar,** because of his condition of being a Jew and a goldsmith who sold his expensive creations, trinkets, and wares to members of the court and other aristocrats. At one point in the opera **Eleazar** can't help but scoff at how stupid the Christians were, because they could not tell the difference between junk and real precious jewels. And we must keep in mind, of course, the mood of cardinal **Brogni** who had to deal with the constant problems that often must have disturbed the peace of the town and its relations with the council.

Times of change, as we said before, are times during which people tend to be insecure, anxious, irritable, and angry with short fuses. Add to this the local conditions in Constance in those days, submerged as it was in a sea of strange people speaking different languages, moving all over the place, littering, sleeping, whoring, and sharing beds with strange partners in strange quarters, having to move around in dark and perilous streets or mews —still under the aroma left by their former equine tenants—and constantly in search of scarce food and drink that had to be bought at inflated prices, and you know the place could not be the happiest one at all. And don't forget the reports of how John Huss was hounded in his trial and burned at the stake. In a few words Constance was nothing but the devil's cauldron, and if you stirred into this boiling brew **Scribe's** libretto, as Batta in his splendid opera book describes as filled with "such abstract moral questions as revenge and reconciliation, pure love and devastating deception," you have the perfect recipe for a brutal denouement of the opera. Perhaps the most brutal of operatic endings that I know of.

Because of what I have just described, everyone who listens to this opera, in order to really understand why things happened the way they did has to constantly keep in mind that the people in Constance must have been on the verge of nervous breakdowns, angry, and ready to jump at the throats of each other. Yes, there were sticky social, ethnic, and religious causes heating up the cauldron, but these were not enough until we inject into it the personal factors. Observe, at the beginning of the opera how the crowd at one moment cries out, in exultation and joy, because Huss had been brought down. No less irritating was the inimical attitude toward the Jews, and **Eleazar** in particular who was saved from the enraged crowd by the calming intervention of the city provost, cardinal **Brogni**. This depiction was without doubt the doing of **Scribe** and his libretto. **Scribe** was a nineteenth-century liberal, a student of history, and sympathetic towards the oppressed and downtrodden. But credit, by all means, must be given to **Halévy** who wrote music perfect for this situation and the conditions existing there. His music "points" at what he wanted to highlight, with not too much of the flowery *bel canto* stuff.

La Juive is one of the operas more impacted by the historical moment in which the plot is set. This historical opera exudes historicism if we understand this as the theory that historical events are under natural laws that run away from the human control and this often is the result of the character make-up of the personalities in the cast.

What is happening in the opera at the moment of the singing of **Clio's Song** by **Eleazar** requires a brief explanation of the events that happened before the opera begins. The main fictional characters, before the curtains go up, come to the opera laden by brutal events that had deeply impacted their lives and that inexorably will determine their destinies. Because of it ***La Juive*** which is a drama, perhaps even a melodrama if you wish, inhabits, however, the atmosphere of a tragedy, and this atmosphere is enough to impart to the opera the sense of the ancient Greek theatrical grandeur.

So years before, when **Brogni** was not a cardinal but a soldier of some sort, he had burned the two sons of **Eleazar.** I imagine in a

pogrom. Later on, **Eleazar** rescued a little girl, **Rachel,** from a fire. **Rachel** was **Brogni's** daughter. **Eleazar** took **Rachel** home and raised her, as his own daughter, in the Jewish religion. **Eleazar,** however, kept all of this as a tightly guarded secret. No one but him knew anything about it. Years later **Brogni** became a Catholic cardinal but he never stopped looking for his lost daughter, because no human remains had been found in the smoldering ashes of his house. Then fate—or rather **Scribe** and **Halévy** if you will—brought together in Constance these two men with a past that inevitably led them to a fateful confrontation.

We soon find that in Constance **Rachel** and **Leopold**, a prince of the Empire, were having a secret love affair. The problem, and you would agree, a big one, is that **Leopold** was about to marry **Eudoxie,** the emperor's niece. **Leopold** has all along been masquerading as a Jew and telling **Rachel** that he had the intentions of marrying her which, at any rate he couldn't without breaking the laws about prohibiting interracial unions. When **Eleazar** and **Rachel** discovered that **Leopold** was not a Jew all inferno broke loose with **Eleazar** almost killing the impostor **Leopold. Rachel's** secret affair is also discovered by **Eudoxie** and the three of them, **Eleazar, Rachel** and **Leopold**, are put under the ferocious curse hurled at them by **Brogni**, and sentenced to be executed. **Eleazar,** in spite of being ignorant of **Rachel's** affair, is also sentenced for being an accomplice in the deceit. As **Eleazar** had told **Brogni** that he knew that **Rachel** was alive and well, and where she actually was, the Cardinal falls on his knees begging **Eleazar** to reveal where his daughter was. Then, with the trial over, and **Rachel** about to be thrown into the huge cauldron of boiling oil, **Eleazar** turns to **Brogni,** points to **Rachel,** and with a hair-rising growl screams: ***La voila!*** (There she is!). His daughter.

In **Clio's Song,** the heart-rending aria "**Rachel quand du Seigneur,**" **Halévy** transfers to the operatic stage from literary romanticism the *stirring up of contrasting emotions.* This is used between characters in opera, but here **Halévy** internalizes it within **Eleazar's** heart.

The aria begins with an orchestral introduction that to me comes through as a tender, albeit very sad, cradle song. Then after this introduction

Eleazar takes it and allows us to see his internalized emotions:

First contrasting emotion
Tender and filial

1

"Rachel, quand du Seigneur la grace tutelaire
A mes tremblantes mains confia ton berceau,
J'avais a ton bonheur voué ma vie entier—
Et c'est moi qui te livre a bourreau!

Rachel, when the Lord's saving grace
committed your cradle into my hands,
I made your happiness the avowed aim of my whole life—
and it is I who am sending you to your execution!

Second contrasting emotion
Vengeance

2

Mais j'entends une voix qui me crie:
Sauvez-moi de la mort qui m'attend!
Je suis jeune et je tiens a la vie!
O mon pere épargne votre enfant!

Et d'un mot arretant la sentence
Je puis te soustraire au trepas!
Ah! j'abjure a jamais ma vengeance,
Rachel, non tu ne mourras pas!

But I can hear a voice calling to me:
Save me from the death which awaits me!
I am young and I cling to life!
O my father, spare your child!

And by a word which will stop the sentence
I can rescue you from death!
Ah! I will give up my vengeance for ever,
Rachel, no you shall not die!

WOW!

IV. SO THEY SAY…

Halévy's great talent lies in orchestration, which here is rich and effective; his style, half French, half Italian is full of effects of a high order. Another critic says that **Eleazar** is **Halévy's** *most original creation, a man of genuine stature depicted in all of his complexity and with all his contradictory instincts.* [Contrasting emotions] *He is a fanatical rebel and an honorable rabbi, a clever businessman, and a concerned father.*

Neil Shicoff, Eleazar's greatest recent interpreter adds that "if you want to talk about intolerance and fanaticism, one could definitely accuse Eleazar of being a fanatic," which to me opens another question after carefully reading the aria's lyrics. Would **Eleazar** have reacted the way he did if he were in a more tolerant atmosphere and not in what the city of Constance was? Would he have been able to break the dilemma of which he was a prisoner: that he could not contemplate reconciliation? The question remains open. What do you think?

V. LITERARY SOURCES

Hamilton, James. *(The) council of Constance to the death of John Hus: being the Ford lecture delivered in the university of Oxford in lent term, 1900* New York and Bombay, 1900. New York & London, 1961.

VI. RECORDINGS

AUDIO (CD)
La Juive (2005)
Performers: Shicoff, Stoyanova, Ivan, Fink, *et al*
Orchestra: Chorus and Orchestra States
Conductor: Suteij
Producer: Staatsoper
Deutsche Grammophon (2) B0002UNQGS

LES HUGUENOTS
— 1836 —

I. THE SETTING

Opera in Five Acts
Music.....Giacomo Meyerbeer
Libretto.....Eugene Scribe
Time.....1572
Place.....Paris, France— La Touraine

CLIO'S SONG
"God Wills It!"
Catholic Conspirators

The libretto is after Emile Deschamps, freely based on Prosper Merimee's novel *Les Chroniques du Temps de Charles X.* For its many beautiful melodies, convincing color, and an *ambiance* that radiates from its inner core, and fine characterizations, this opera is considered **Meyerbeer's** masterpiece. While the sixteenth-century Catholic elite are painted as courtly, chivalric and frivolous, **Meyerbeer's** use of **Martin Luther's** famous chorale "*God is my Fortress"* with variations, modulations, and punctuating broken chords, and austerity, serves to define and contrast Huguenots and Catholics. These characterizations give the opera an intermittent, but steady tension as it leads up to the massacre of **Saint Bartholomew's Day, 24 August 1572.** Some insightful observers see **Meyerbeer's** use of this technique, in order to relentlessly keep suspense, similar in cinema terms to Alfred Hitchcock's repeated suspenses. As this is going all the characters are defined specifically, like *the dreamy idealist Raoul, the passionate and self-sacrificing Valentine, the fanatically implacable Saint-Bris, the rough, stolid Marcel, the elegant and capricious queen, and the somewhat flamboyant but always honorable Nevers.*

Les Huguenots
Act V
The climax—St. Bartholomew's Day massacre (24 August 1572)
in which lovers Raoul and Valentine are mistakenly shot by Valentine's father.
The illustration shows a production at Her Majesty's Theatre, London (1858).

I remember the first time I looked at the world of these characters. I felt that I had opened a panel in a drab wall and that suddenly, behind it, there was the real world of long ago in front of my very own eyes. I continue to feel this each time I listen to or watch any of **Meyerbeer's** operas. Perhaps no one like the critic **Ernest Newman** has expressed so well what I feel when he said that: "Meyerbeer gave his audiences the delighted feeling that they were being brought into touch with real life, and that the characters they saw on the boards were men and women such as they might meet any day themselves." No wonder that by the turn of the century ***Les Huguenots*** had played some fifteen hundred or more times in Paris alone. It wasn't until very recently that **Puccini's** ***La Boheme,*** broke this record. Could it be that **Puccini** also had **Meyerbeer's** gift of mastering psychological realism?

II. CLIO'S SONG IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

By the middle of the sixteenth century France was a tinderbox waiting for a spark to blow it up. The nation lived in a very tense situation between the growing centralizing powers of the monarchy, and the push back from the towns and provinces. Among the nobility the opposition to the monarchy was also mounting, because they refused to countenance any curtailment of their old feudal privileges. And cutting across these intense, intolerant forces, increasing the festering tensions, and making things more dangerous, was the religious conflict between the Catholics and the Protestants, known in France as Huguenots.

The **Catholic** faction was supported by the Valois ruling dynasty, by nearly half of the nobility, the intellectuals in the University of Paris: the large bureaucracy, the high courts known as the Parliaments, and by the majority of the peasantry.

The **Huguenots** constituted approximately 7% of the population, but they were a determined, aggressive, and well-organized minority made up from their local middle class congregations—lawyers, artisans, shopkeepers, and the other half of the nobility.

In 1562, fighting broke out among the **Catholics** and the **Huguenots**, and three savage and bloody wars ensued. Both sides committed atrocities and devastated large areas of France. Fighting was stopped, at least for a while, in 1570, by a peace agreement. To make the peace last longer France needed a strong leader on the throne. But it didn't have one. The king of France was the sickly and weak-minded **Charles IX** who was controlled and guided by his mother **Catherine de Medici,** known in **Huguenot** quarters as "**Madame la serpent.**"

Concerned with the very survival of the Valois dynasty, Catherine endeavored to make the shaky peace treaty stick. To that end, she arranged for the marriage of her daughter **Marguerite Valois,** a Catholic, to **Henry of Navarre,** a Huguenot leader, who also stood in line to the French throne. Some cynical observers called this move as keeping the peace by the bed. At any rate, the lavish marriage ceremony held on **22 August 1572,** was attended by a large number of **Huguenot** nobles and leaders.

With this strategy it appeared that the tensions had been relaxed. However, the fires of hatred still burned, as is so well portrayed in the opera's second act, set in the gardens of the **Chenonceaux Chateau**. Thus two days after the marriage, early on the morning of **Saint Bartholomew's Day**, 24 August 1572, the horrendous massacre broke out.

For the last four centuries students of history have been trying to ascertain if the massacre was premeditated or if it happened spontaneously because of the existing flammable animosity and hatred between the two religious factions.

What we know today for sure is that there was a conspiracy to murder the Huguenot admiral **Gaspard de Coligny,** and some other Huguenot leaders who had come to Paris to attend the wedding of princess **Marguerite** and **Henry of Navarre**. It's very well known that behind the conspiracy to kill **Coligny** was **Henry De Guise** leader *de facto* of the Catholics. **De Guise**, an unscrupulous and ruthless man, was also in line for the throne of France, and at this moment very anxious with the growing influence **Coligny** had over the weak **King Charles**. **De Guise** deemed the admiral as an obstacle to his own secret long held royal ambitions. Was the widowed queen mother privy or involved in the plot? There is no documented evidence—or a so-called *smoking gun*—to prove that she was. Only circumstantial evidence. But it is

well known that she, like **De Guise** was seething with **Coligny's** new influence over her son, the young and irresolute king. **Queen Catherine** felt supplanted by **Coligny** and this, she was convinced, could have serious consequences for the **Valois** dynasty.

At any rate, all of these hatreds and high-running ambitions are what brought the whole house down. The pent up hatred ignited furiously when the assassination attempt on admiral **Coligny** planned by **De Guise** was botched. **Coligny** simply suffered a hand wound. The Huguenot admiral and his companions demanded from **King Charles** an immediate investigation. **Charles**, under the strong pressure from his so called *father,* as the young king got in the habit of calling the admiral, agreed to this demand, and the ball got rolling into a sixteenth-century big "Watergate" case. **De Guise** who had to stop such an inquiry, called for a meeting of his faction to adopt whatever measures were required. As you may realize, those were not the times of the **Fifth Amendment** to hide behind. A simple investigation would surely not only implicate **De Guise** and his faction, but the mother queen as well. The ruling **Valois** house was in serious imminent danger. **De Guise** for certain would have at least life imprisonment. Time and ruthlessness were of the essence. The solution? The elimination of **Coligny,** and the other most important **Huguenot** leaders who were still in Paris. **De Guise** called for a secret meeting to quickly organize the killings. In the opera, remember, the fictitious character **Saint Bris** stood for **De Guise,** and also for the old queen.

However, before going ahead with such a terrifying enterprise the conspirators still needed the authorization from King Charles who, because of his feelings for the admiral, was expected to recoil in horror and refuse to grant such authorization. So they called on the mother, **Queen Catherine** who, as much as she distrusted **De Guise,** thought it was most important to first destroy the **Huguenots**, and later take care of the hateful **De Guise** and their followers. **Queen Catherine** then decided to go see her son to obtain his approval for the elimination of the **Huguenots**. There are several versions of **Catherine's** visit to her son. One of them has been reported thusly:

> *The king resisted for more than an hour and a half…* **Catherine** saw that he was panting and exhausted. Then she said to her son imperiously: *Sire, is it from fear of the Huguenots that you refuse?...*

He then arose and sprang forward intoxicated and furious saying: *By the death of God, since you think good to kill the admiral, I will have it so, but kill all the Huguenots in France as well, that there may not be left one of them to reproach me with it afterwards! By the death of God give the order promptly!* And he went out like one frantic.

III. CLIO'S SONG

ACT IV
The Blessing of the Swords

The Blessing of the Swords, as this scene is called in the opera, is one of the great triumphs of the lyric drama recognized by the likes of **Verdi, Wagner, Berlioz, Janacek** and others who stood in admiring awe at this Meyerbeerian *sound tableau.*

Before **Scribe** and **Meyerbeer** could put this scene on the stage they had to satisfy the objections of the censors who adamantly resisted having royalty, **Queen Catherine,** on the stage. As nothing would overcome the relentless objections of the officials the authors removed from the opera the queen and the lyrics she was supposed to sing. In the changes the authors help themselves to one of the old tools in the trade of historical fiction: the conflation of two or more characters into one. So when you play this scene don't go looking for the queen and **DeGuise**. They were conflated into a fictitious and very nasty one under the name of **Saint Bris,** who was in the opera the young lady **Valentine's** father.

With that taken care of **Meyerbeer,** the resourceful musical historical novelist, transported his listeners to Paris, on that fateful night of August in one of those sixteenth-century refined French palaces adorned with their ceilings of royal blue and gilded *fleur-de-lis* painted all over them. When you play your CD or DVD you are going to experience, during those few minutes what in reality was a micro-cosmos of much of our history on

this planet: the spectacle of we humans marching with symbols, doctrines and dogmas behind kings, emperors, tyrants, and those in power always so ready to persecute, destroy and exterminate other human beings who hold different beliefs, speak different languages, or are born with other pigmentations in their skins. In the opera it may be France in the sixteenth century, but in reality this scene is truly universal and sadly, timeless.

Meyerbeer, in the words of **Wagner**, is going to do something seldom successfully achieved in the opera, at least until that time. He will make the audience, literally, participate in the infamous massacre. Not through their own senses, but through those of the fanatics and the bigots assembled in the palace. Normally, composers would write horrible and ugly music to depict the hateful nature of the bigots and their cause. Not here, though. Here is where we see **Meyerbeer** genius at work. But let **Wagner** himself, before he became a prisoner of his raging anti-Semitism describe for us this scene:

> Who is not amazed at the conception and execution of this colossal number! Whence the composer draws the power of developing all through its astonishing length a continuous augmentation of effect which never wearies and which, after a tumultuous burst of the wildest passions, finally attains its uttermost height, the ideal ecstasy of fanaticism! And then, after thus exhausting the repulsiveness of this fanaticism, he fulfills the highest mission of art: he idealizes this tumult of passion—and impresses upon it the stamp of beauty. For who[is], at the close of this scene,… without feeling in his soul the thrill of sublimity rather than horror?

What **Wagner** is telling us is **Meyerbeer** is putting us, the listeners, in the minds of the bigots. What we are watching is horrible, but for the hooded bigot burning a cross on the lawn of someone he hates, or for the guard flipping the switch of the gas chamber is beautiful, is the *ideal ecstasy of fanaticism! … the stamp of beauty!.*

———————

I have done this test in my classes of fictionalized history. Without telling them anything about the music of this scene and the words. I played this scene and asked them to write what were their reactions at the end of it. Almost to a man or a woman, they voted that the music *was of a majestic nature, uplifting, sublime and inspiring.* Then I played that scene in the ***Les Huguenot's*** DVD and they were completely speechless, overwhelmed. Then, to reinforce the point I played my ***Rienzi's*** CD the part of that famous melody or note in "A" in the overture later sung by Rienzi. So majestic, uplifting, sublime and inspiring, and without giving them a second to react, I projected a newsreel from the 1930s of a Nazi rally in Nuremberg, with Hitler presiding over the thousands and thousands of spectators and with the same ***Rienzi*** music filling up the whole confines of the rally with a huge loudspeaker blaring it.

My demonstration over, I came back quickly saying: *There you are friends! All what Hitler and his message of hate and aggression represented for that huge mass of bigots was majestic, uplifting, sublime, and inspiring.*

———————

Now back to the opera. This formidable scene begins with the operatic **Saint-Bris,** exhorting the clandestine congregation with beautiful music that begins with the words

For this holy cause…

File this piece of music in your mind, for it is going to return transformed into a magnificent up-lifting hymn, the kind that makes people follow a procession. After this **Saint-Bris** begins to give his combat orders and assigns tasks to those present in the conspiratorial room. Yes, the signal will be the ringing of the bells of **St. Germain l'Auxerrois** answered by those in all churches and chapels. That was the signal to murder **Coligny**, the **Huguenot** leader. At this point, with an air of urgency **Saint-Bris'** words are dripping with hate, cruelty, and vengeance. They are the blood-curdling outburst of criminal madness. And while all of this is

going on, do not miss the sound of the tocsins pealing from the orchestra pit at intervals, as though summoning the conspirators to their murderous appointment. What suspense!

At this pregnant instant a few hooded and sinister looking monks enter. You can hardly see their faces. They are ushered in and trailed by a cold steely sound from the trumpets and tubas. **Glory to the great vengeful God!,** they cried out. Were not those the same people who burnt the young maid Joan of Domremy, or John Huss. Time and latitude doesn't really matter. Evil does not recognize geographical or time barriers.

Now, the solemn blessing of their fratricidal daggers and swords has just commenced, while the malevolent **Saint-Bris** and the rest of the conspirators distributing the white scarves and white arm bands, which will identify them as **the elect of heaven.** With just a few bars of music, a moment of great solemnity is established and is underlined all along by the trumpets with their piercing coldness, by the diabolic scales from the woodwinds, by the trombones and tuba grunting out a deeply felt intolerance.

It is a tense moment and the sinister congregation can't hold inside anymore what they feel in their hearts. Ferociously they break out, inciting each other to attack and to fall on their unsuspecting victims. It is terrifying. It's a wild cry that has resonated with the echoes of centuries in our world:

God wills it!...

And after it, in unison, with no harmonics or polyphonic embellishments, lest we may think that there are dissenters among the conspirators, **Saint-Bris** brings back his earlier exhortation. Remember it? **For this holy cause!...** The moment is an awesome abyss. The orchestra has become the angry oceans of history fluxing and refluxing its waves with the cymbals crashing in the climaxes. Think of this as the flow of history ever repeating itself with all of its past horrors.

You wonder now for how long and how much higher those voices and the orchestra are going to go on? At this point one may expect the entire congregation to march off the stage in a rousing ***stretta*** with everything joining in, bells and celesta, and drums, that audiences love so much. But not **Meyerbeer**. No. He would have none of that joyful finale. Why? Because, it's too dangerous to end the scene like that, lest the audience may get confused and entertain the idea that those people are heroic defenders of a noble cause. No! The moment has already come for us to retreat from the minds of that congregation. It is enough. The time has come for us to see the right vision, not theirs. Beautiful music aside, now we have to see what they truly are. At the climax of their *inspiring* hymn **Meyerbeer** suddenly and unexpectedly interrupts it, and makes the conspirators depart from the stage to accomplish their felonious appointment, like criminals, because that's what they are: **criminals.** They depart the stage in the dark of night, tip-toeing, whispering to each other the moment when they will strike their enemies. Heroes don't depart in that stealthy manner. Murderers do, and saying it with a whisper.

At midnight! At midnight!
Let nothing betray us
And may nothing warn them
Of their impending punishment…
At midnight…

Awesome!

I am always asked at the end of this opera how many people were killed in that fateful night? There are different assessments. It appears from realistic reports that in Paris three thousand perished sparing neither age, gender, nor condition. It looks like in the rest of France from fifteen to twenty thousand or so perished in this holocaust. There are reports that king **Charles IX** himself was indiscriminately firing /arquebus shots into the street from a palace window.

When daylight dawned the city was presented with the most appalling spectacle. Corpses were strewn all over the place, and headless bodies were thrown out from windows and balconies. You had to walk the narrow streets carefully, avoiding the bloody puddles. It has always been debated if the conspirators really meant a wholesale massacre or simply the killing of the **Huguenot** leaders in **Paris** only. If the latter is the case, as many historians believe today, years of hatred and fanaticism had exploded and quickly got out of control for reasons other than religious beliefs. Often occasions like these offer a welcomed opportunity to settle private accounts and grievances for the wolves that live among us.

IV. SO THEY SAY

Imagine an opera written in 1836 by a **German Jew in France,** a Catholic country, in which **Catholics** and **Huguenots** are at each other's throats and ending with the famous massacre of **Saint Bartholomew, 24 August 1572!** In spite of the opera's immense success, or perhaps because of it, bigotry reared its ugly head on both sides. The following excerpt is from a private letter by **Meyerbeer** referring to bigoted attacks hurled at him:

> This opera deals with a terrible fact of history… It is my opinion that the Protestant religion is painted in a most noble and positive light. For the Catholics, the entire St. Bartholomew affair was no more than a political event: history bears this out… And [Luther's chorale] is treated as a contrast to secular music… in a strict church style, as if it were a voice from a better world, a symbol of hope and faith in the face of threatening danger. It rings out in moments of most glorious inspirations, weaving a thread throughout the opera, but it only comes from the lips of…Marcel], who with his simple but unshakable faith could even be considered a martyr… I would consider its presence in this opera as a glorification rather than a desecration of church music.

> They said that one evening Wagner was dining with the parents of Princess Bulow in Italy… Wagner mentioned that he had been profoundly moved the day before, by an opera he attended and would long bear it in memory. To the question, what opera he had heard, he at first replied evasively, but finally spoke frankly saying. "I will let you know if you promise me not to

> speak about it. Now then—yesterday evening I was at *Les Huguenots*, and positively wrought up by that fourth act. I implore you not to let a soul know it—other-wise the Wagnerites will flay me alive."

And how about **Meyerbeer's** other competitors? Well they say that **Spontini** was driven mad with jealousy, and that it made **Rossini** fall into melancholy. Others marveled at how "luxuriantly polyphonic" was the music for the **Catholics** while in contrast the **Protestant** music distinguished for its noble and severe monophony. Some, like **Schuman,** had a bigoted tantrum for **Meyerbeer's** sacrilegious use of Luther's chorale… He never got over this the rest of his life.

They also said, that the French Protestants were known as **Huguenots** from a corruption of the German-Swiss word *Eidgenossen,* meaning oath-bound confederates. Others say it was because they used to meet secretly in the **Tavern of Hugues.**

V. LITERARY RESOURCES

Butler, A.J. *The Huguenots in America.* 1983.
Dunn, Richard. *The Age of Religious Wars: 559–1689.* 1970.
Grant., A.J. Grant. *The Huguenots.*
Rothrock, George A., *The Huguenots: A biography of a minority.* 1979.

VI. RECORDINGS

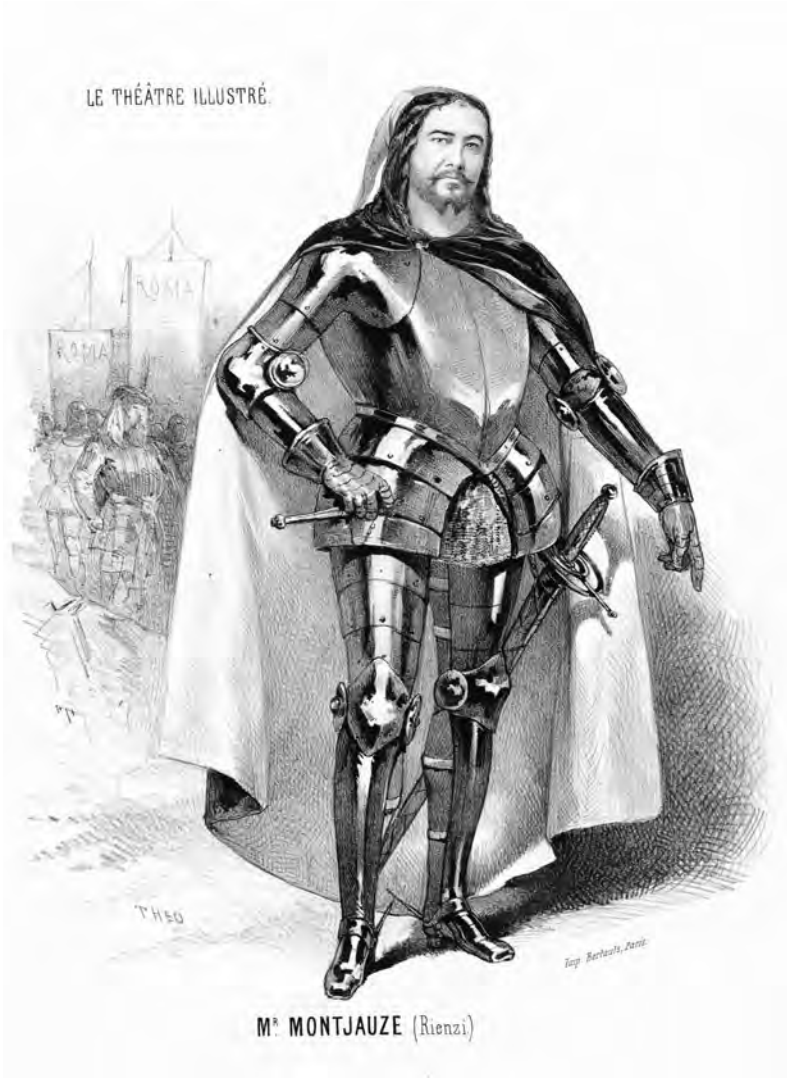
AUDIO (CD)

There are a few recordings of ***Les Huguenots.*** The one below is the most complete, and my favorite.

Les Huguenots
Performers: Sutherland, Arroyo, Tourangeau, *et al*
Baquier, Vrenios.
Orchestra: New Philharmonia Orchestra
Conductor: Bonynge
Decca (4) 430549-2

VIDEO (DVD)
Les Huguenots
Performers: Sutherland, Thane, Johnston, Austin, *et al*
Orchestra: The Australian Opera and Ballet Orchestra
Conductor: Bonynge
Kultur (1) DOO29

Plate 49
Richard Verstegan Desclée's *Theatrum Crudelitatum haereticorum.* Antwerp, 1587.
A representation of the atrocities of the heretics in England, France and the Netherlands.
Reissued 1588, 1592.



Rienzi
Jules Montjauze in the title role of Wagner's opera
as performed at the Théâtre Lyrique in Paris (April 1869).
Illustration by Theo.

RIENZI
— 1842 —

I. THE SETTING

Opera in Five Acts
Music and Libretto.....Richard Wagner
Time.....1347
Place.....*Rome*

CLIO'S SONG:
"The Darkness That Envelops Men's Souls"

Based on the historical novel ***Rienzi, The Last of the Roman Tribunes*** by Edward Bulwer-Lyttton. The historical character in Italian went by the name of "Cola di Rienzo." The plot is biographical or what today is known as "biopic." ***Rienzi*** is not often staged these days because of the immense resources it demands. The role of **Rienzi*** requires a **heldentenor**, a heroic tenor, which are in short supply today. ***Rienzi*** is an insightful essay on tyranny and a society in turmoil, as valid today as it was more than a hundred years ago when it was written. Hitler himself wrote that ***Rienzi*** inspired him to be Germany's future leader. In his opera, **Wagner** makes brilliant use of one of the techniques of historical fiction, which is not making a simple historical reenactment. He invented a character, which was based on **Rienzi,** the historical figure from the fourteenth century, and catapulted this one to nineteenth-century opera infused now with the radical contemporary thinking of **Wagner's** times. Among these ideas were those of **Bakunin's** classless society and the abolition of private capitalism. By doing this **Wagner** gives to the opera an intense

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** I have used for his name 'Rienzi' rather than Rienzo. That is to avoid* confusion.

dialectical climate between the known historical **Rienzi** and **Wagner's** invention. Years later, when **Wagner** was famous and admired by the social and artistic elites, he publicly disowned ***Rienzi.*** Was this because the ideas would not have had a good reception among the bourgeoisie, or was it because of his insane hatred/envy for **Meyerbeer** who had helped ***Rienzi*** be accepted by prestigious opera houses. Or because many critics and opera fans said, that his opera was too **Meyerbeerian.** After ***Rienzi,*** **Wagner** never wrote another **FGHO.**

What a pity! Because later in his career, a more matured and polished Wagner, would have written great historical operas. However, his ferocious, ungrateful, unjustified, and insane hatred for **Meyerbeer** made him choose another trail. And I say this, because with the way he could transmit power to an audience, which after all is the true stuff of history, together with his psychological insights, he would have composed exceptional historical portraits. Imagine if he had taken on, lets say, figures like **Caesar, Cromwell, Columbus,** and **Queen Isabella** and the problems of the natives in the New World.

II. CLIO'S SONG IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Rienzi is a superb essay on the character of dictators, tyrants, and a revolution in motion with its usual ancillaries of demagoguery, turmoil, the role of the masses, and the wild antics of factions vying for power. Also the study of ***Rienzi*** opens windows for the comprehension of how the masses react to propaganda, and how easily they are led *to applause be it spontaneous, caused by thoughtlessness, by fear, or by servility, and how they follow or faithlessly desert the leader.* This is so well captured in the opera, because Wagner himself went through a revolution in Germany with the uprising of the lower classes against those who ruled over them. Wagner succeeds by showing tyranny's archetype. The dictators and tyrants that in Latin America have followed the **Rienzi** syndrome are legion, and most have had the same ending. **Rienzi** was **Mussolini** before **Mussolini, Hitler** before **Hitler** and, of course, we must not forget that it was **Hitler** himself who after attending a performance of Wagner's opera in 1906, in Linz, said that right there [he] "resolved, to enter politics as a tribune of the people… I shall never forget. That was when it all began."

RIENZI

By the middle of the fourteenth century the city of Rome, once the mistress of the ancient world, was in a sad and sorry state. It was a place of ruins and broken down monuments. Amidst these ruins lived the self-seeking Roman nobility who with their petty struggles tore to pieces much of what was still left standing from the times of the ancient Caesars. Turmoil, robbery, murder and extortion were the rule of the day. Even the popes, busy with their schisms, quarrels and crusades abroad and at home, had to abandon the turbulent city for the safety of Avignon in southern France. Simply, Rome was not safe enough for them.

This was the world into which the eloquent, vehement and emotional **Nicolo "Cola" di Rienzi** was born in 1313. Rienzi became a notary by profession who read the old Roman historians, and it was common to see him wandering around the city admiring and studying the ancient relics and their still legible inscriptions. Soon he got involved in public affairs and became a champion of the people's rights. Infatuated by the glories of ancient Rome and its civilization, he vociferously thundered against the Colonnas and the Orsinis families, whom he held responsible for the sorry state of affairs in his idolized Rome. It is also reported that Rienzi's brother was murdered by one of the members of those families, something that constantly fueled his hatred for the elite classes.

Rienzi's popularity and ideas were noticed by the absentee Pope in Avignon who made him notary of the Apostolic Chamber at Rome. The Pope even promised that in due time he would return to the holy city, as Rienzi had so insistently pleaded. Rienzi's brilliant oratory also impressed the poet Petrarch who said that Rienzi's *voice was not that of a man, but of a god.*

Honors and praise fed Rienzi's capacity for self-delusion, fantasy, and his huge sense of self-importance. He began calling himself a *Roman Consul* and proclaiming that his mission was nothing less than the restoration of the Roman Empire. In 1347 he incited the people against the rule of the aristocratic nobility, which were driven out of the city. The common people then proclaimed Rienzi a *Tribune.* In ancient Rome the tribunes were the protectors of the plebeians' rights. They enjoyed the constitutional rights of vetoing legislation by the Senate deemed damaging to the plebeian rights.

Rienzi's human qualities have been assessed differently. Some say he was eloquent and an idealist, others said vain, unsteady, cowardly, and clueless about true human nature. **Wagner** looking at him through the lens of **Romanticism**, as depicted in Bulwer Lytton's novel, saw him as a figure right out of a Medieval or Renaissance epic poem, that is, a character tailor-made for the late Charlton Heston to have played.

Some historians say that the story of Cola di Rienzi *furnishes a… chapter in Italian history of a patriot and a reformer, whose early enthusiasm was not supported by true moral greatness and whose efforts were thus foredoomed to failure, after a momentary semblance of success.*

Rienzi managed to rise to power by a *coup d' etat.* At the beginning he ruled Rome well, albeit with extreme harshness. But as his powers increased his original idealism began to confuse his political duties with his personal ambitions, to the point that he could not distinguish one from the other. And so his flamboyant manners and his penchant for extravagant ceremonies made it evident that he was no longer the man who went around admiring the old ruins. At times he would appear clad like a Roman emperor preceded by blaring trumpets while his servants showered the adoring crowds with a rain of gold coins. This was a sure sign that his inner insecurity was impelling him to buy the love of the masses.

Self-deceived by this manufactured extravagant pomp, and convinced that the new Rome was ready to be launched, he invited other cities to send dignitaries to Rome and conferred citizenship on all of their inhabitants. He then arrested the Colonnas and the Orsinis so they would accept his rule. But instead of imprisoning or executing them, for their past crimes and offenses, he naively let them go on the promise that they would swear loyalty to the state, which in the end proved to be his undoing.

At this time the Pope in Avignon, alarmed with Rienzi's ambitions, realized that he had no more use or taste for the *restoration* of the Roman Empire, and that Rienzi could not be managed or controlled to serve personal or papal purposes. A papal bull against Rienzi was then issued from Avignon, which stirred the Colonnas to strike. Rienzi fled the city in exile .

Wagner's operatic adaptation of the novel completely cuts out the story of Rienzi's years in exile and his return to power. He felt that it was not necessary to buttress the points he had already made. The corrosive and corruptive effects power has on individuals, and how insidious is the process of the blending or amalgamation of individual noble aspirations and political ambitions, desires for adulation, honors, and the comforting isolation from reality that sycophancy produces.

History has it that in 1354 Rienzi managed to return and reestablish his former position. Now, however, the masses had abandoned him. People murmured that his character had changed, and that surrounded by wastrels in his palace he spent money like water. In other words, his previous mystique that had mesmerized the Romans had vanished, and the people were finally seeing him as he really was. It did not help that Rienzi was in poor health and that he cut a poor figure that trappings and expensive jewels could not disguise. In addition he had also developed an addiction for the bottle and had lost his brilliant and fiery eloquence.

Thus, unable to grasp how he and the situation in Rome had been altered from years hence, Rienzi pushed ahead with the executions of opponents and raising taxes to pay for his expensive habits. Finally a popular revolt broke out causing his final defeat and death at the hands of the unruly vengeful mob. History records that, after being forced out of Rome by the angry mobs, incited by the nobility, Rienzi was killed in 1354, in the most horrifying manner, and his bloody inert remains dragged and thrown into the waters of the Tiber. **Wagner**, to the relief of the audience, spared us all of the gory details. In the opera he has Rienzi perishing in a Capitol conflagration.

III. CLIO'S SONG

ACT V, SCENE 1
Rienzi's Prayer
"The Darkness That Envelopes Mens Souls"

Many operas have moving invocations to the Almighty. Most, if not all **French Grand Historical Operas** make use of such prayers. Wagner's ***Rienzi*** is no exception. I would rate **Rienzi's** prayer in the last act among those at the top of the catalogue. In my book, this Wagnerian broad melody, which he introduces for the first time in that splendid overture, is one of my favorites and, perhaps, I dare say, the best **Wagner** ever wrote. Also his overture makes a splendid concert piece.

In this prayer scene, **Wagner** draws for us an intense touch of introspection in an opera which, because of its nature, is intrinsically extroverted. Here in this scene, for the first and only time, we can catch a glimpse of what is deep in **Rienzi's** heart, and for that matter, what is also in the mind of the fallen and rejected Rienzis of the world. This is universal. You can be sure that among those thoughts of the fallen tyrants were the ones that, somehow, their people have failed them in their mission for not understanding their message. The tyrant never recognizes himself as the real culprit. The fault is always of someone else.

After a dark and brooding musical introduction, which feels as cold as the solitude of defeat, **Rienzi,** kneeling in front of an altar opens his heart to his god and the world:

"Almighty father…
Hear me as I plead in the dust!"

"Oh God, do not destroy what
had been erected in your glory…"

And then lowering his head in solemn reverence touching the ground he utters a heart-rending phrase, which seems to parallel that of the Christian redeemer on the cross: "*Father forgive them for they know not what they do…* **Rienzi's** paraphrase is:

"Dissolve the dark which envelops men's souls"

Yes,

They do not know what they do, because of the dark
Which envelops men's souls.

This is what Sellars meant with fiction "deepening history to move us into its more subtle nuanced and mysterious corners." Indeed, this fiction by **Wagner** projects a plethora of thoughts and ideas for the viewer, or the listener, to ponder and consider.

After this, the opera draws toward its ending with the mob torching the Capitol and with **Rienzi** perishing in the conflagration.

IV. SO THEY SAY…

The most beautiful [moment in the opera] *is the beginning of the Fifth Act, and this is the prayer.* ***Rienzi*** *prays to God and this for me, is the most beautiful part in the whole opera, which is not the revolution, or is not the people against* ***Rienzi****… There he is lonely, and he is speaking to his God.*

The way [**Wagner**] *wrote the opera was in the* ***French Grand Opera*** style. *Anxious to succeed he used a lot of musical styles from other composers. You hear in this opera, as Pinchas Steinberg says,* ***Meyerbeer, Mendelssohn,*** *and even then you still hear* ***Wagner*** *as well… In this way, I think, people did not associate* **Rienzi** *with* ***Wagner.***

Finally let me say this: Rienzi's prayer as **Clio's Song** is a good one, but please also listen to the **Act III, Chapters 4–8** on the **DVD.**

V. LITERARY SOURCES

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Kholer, Joachim. *Richard Wagner: The Last of the Titans.* 2004
Wright, John. *The Life of Cola Di Rienzo.* Toronto, 1975.

VI. RECORDINGS

AUDIO (CD)

Rienzi has not been lucky as far as recordings are concerned. There are two or three recordings of this opera. My choice is the one by Studer, Kollo, Jansen, Rootering performed at the Byerische Staatsoper.

Rienzi (1995)
Performers: Kollo, Studer, Staatsoper, *et al*
Orchestra: Bavarian State Orchestra
Conductor: Sawallisch
Orfeo (3) B0000044W7

VIDEO (DVD)

Recently two versions have appeared. I prefer this one conducted by Steinberg.

Rienzi (2013)
Performers: Kerl, Schönberg *et al*
Orchestra: Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse
Conductor: Pinchas Steinberg
CLC Productions - Théâtre du Capitole
Opus Arte OA1110D
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LE PROPHETE
— 1849 —

I. THE SETTING

Opera in Five Acts
Music.....Giacomo Meyerbeer
Libretto.....Eugene Scribe
Time.....1536
Place.....Germany, in and near Munster

CLIO'S SONG
Coronation Scene

After his triumph with ***Les Huguenots*** it took **Meyerbeer** thirteen years to come up with ***Le Prophete.*** As I stated earlier, he was a very deliberate composer. Because of his personal wealth, he was not in the need to come up with one opera after another. He studied, and analyzed different projects or alternatives. He looked for performers who were up to his high standards, and for singers, who with their different voice colors would fit the roles as he had conceived them. On many occasions he went back to his writer for additions or cuts and for more delineations of the characters in the opera.

With his new opera he didn't have to worry too much about format and structure, because with his own ***Robert le Diable*** (1831) and ***Les Huguenots*** (1836), and with **Auber's** ***Gustave III ou Le Bal Masque*** (1832), and **Halévy's** ***La Juive*** (1835), the topography and parameters of **French Grand Historical Opera's** terrain had been established already, and the audiences were by now fairly well familiarized with the new genre. Now, therefore, he could put all his compositional efforts into subject matter and portrayal of historical characters.

Le Prophète
Costume illustration for Paul Lormier as Jean de Leyden (1849)
Bibliothèque nationale de France

If **Halévy** in ***La Juive*** had issued a message of what intolerance can do for societies and mankind in general, then ***Le Prophete*** is a study about the character of messianic leaders who emerge among their peoples promising to lead them to earthly paradises, to the *millennium,* where all injuries, offenses, and humiliations—real or imagined—inflicted on them will be redressed, and where a utopia of a perfect and just society would be established forever. There are many unresolved questions about the character of these real messianic leaders. Were they conscious liars and frauds? Were they sincere? Or what is most difficult to ascertain: were they liars who ended up believing in their own lies? The sixteenth century produced quite a harvest of these characters. The twentieth century had its own with the types of Hitler, Mussolini, Lenin, Stalin, Castro and others. Among these messiahs or **prophets,** as they were called three or four centuries ago, was **Jean of Leyden,** a historical character, and the protagonist of this opera.

II. CLIO'S SONG IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It has been said that, *heresy was a plant of early growth in the Netherlands.* As early as the beginning of the twelfth century, in Antwerp, there were preachers attacking the authority of the pope, and scoffing at the ceremonies and sacraments of the Church.

By the middle of that century many Netherlanders had become converts to utopias until the appearance of Luther, who rose to challenge the Church's power. Clerical power was in decline, perhaps, because of its brutal methods for stamping out the multiplying heresies. One of these groups, the **Anabaptists** in Holland, who once they captured the city of Münster and installed in it their faith or utopia, broke all the records in madness, bloodthirstiness, violence, and cruelties against their fellow human beings.

The central issue, or concern of the **Anabaptists** creed, was the idea, or belief, that adults only, not children, were able to choose to enter a religious faith. They thought that Luther had not gone far enough with his ideas, so they also advocated for communal property, including women, and living according to the primitivism of the early Christians as the Bible portrayed them.

In 1530, the **Anabaptists** of Holland began to emigrate to Münster in Germany. Soon they constituted a huge and threatening group strong enough to persecute and expel from the city other Christians, and confiscate their properties, particularly from those that wouldn't accept the new **Anabaptist** faith. It goes without saying that they rejected the old government and took over the town. A season of terror and madness was about to descend on Münster. The **Anabaptists,** had announced and instituted polygamy. About this time, more or less, is when a tavern keeper, or a tailor, **Jean of Leyden** in the opera, was elected **Prophet** of **Münster…**

> Now the Anabaptists mastered over the city of Münster. They confiscated property, plundered churches, violated females, murdered men who refused to join… and practiced all the enormities which humanity alone can conceive or perpetrate… Polygamy being a leading article of the system… Jean of Leyden exemplified the principle by marrying fourteen wives… The contagious madness [in Munster] kept spreading… On a cold winter's night seven men and five women, inspired by the Holy Ghost, as they said, threw off their clothes and rumbled naked and raving through the streets, shrieking "Woe, woe! The wrath of God! When arrested they refused to put on clothing… In a day or two, these furious lunatics who deserved a madhouse… were all executed. The numbers of the sect increased with the martyrdom to which they were exposed, and the disorder spread to every part of the Netherlands. Many were put to death by lingering torments, but no perceptible effect was produced by their chastisement.

The city was then besieged by the forces of the former bishop and food, like magic, almost disappeared overnight so:

> To preclude any possibility of organized opposition… any man who was found to be plotting to leave the town or, criticized the king or his policy, was at once beheaded… These executions were mostly carried out by the king himself… Finally the prophet Jean was defeated by the forces of the bishop of Munster and his protestant allies…he was pinched to death with red-hot tongs.

None of these horrors, thank God!, appear in the opera, but we must be aware of them to appreciate more the cynicism of the three **Anabaptists**

in the opera who recruited **Jean** and later, when the movement was collapsing, they plotted and tried to abandon him.

In the formidable **Coronation Scene,** as Batta says in his book ***Opera:***

> …the two threads of the action come together, Jean, at the height of his powers, enters the cathedral of Münster in order to be crowned… [and] the ceremony is interrupted by the lament of [his] mother Fides. After this lyrical interlude, the conflict of [mother and son] rises to a climax. Jean's followers [the three sinister Anabaptists] who have supported and, most probably, helped underwrite Jean's career so far, seem to revolt against him. In order to keep them in check, he [Jean] must perform a miracle, which happens during the invocation scene. The invocation scene possesses a hypnotic power. Son and mother confront each other, two wills collide, and their dialogue is accompanied only by the mystic sound of the bass clarinets and the heavenly tones of the flutes. In my ledgers this is one of the most, if not the most, spectacular of operatic scenes.

The opera is, of course, more interested in the human side. So apparently, the prophet **Jean of Leyden** suffers a change of mind and held a big dinner [most probably an orgy for they were almost *de riguer* under his rule]. And while the party is going full tilt, Jean blew up the palace with barrels of dynamite that were stored, or hidden, under the palace.

III. CLIO'S SONG

ACT IV
The Coronation Scene

Hands down! Throw in the towel! Its over. ***Le Prophete's*** **Coronation Scene** is the greatest of all the sound tableaux ever written. And don't come to me with the *ad nauseam* argument that it is too bombastic and empty of psychological characterization from those who, in spite of never before having attended a performance of the opera, keep parroting old worn out criticisms. When F. Martens, in his book *A Thousand And One Nights of Opera* (1926), says of

this opera that it "strives for purely theatric effect and its character lacks of inner verity" pathetically reveals that he never saw or studied ***Le Prophete.*** This a perfect example of what Lacombe means when he says that French opera "has suffered on the whole from a poor reputation," and **Meyerbeer** in particular a worse one. "Approaching this subject… we must discard critical assessments inherited from Germany during the era of triumphant Wagnerism and adopt different criteria." Indeed! In his book, Mr. Martens goes through the entire world of opera armed with a Wagnerian yardstick, judging the compositions, not only those by **Meyerbeer,** but also by many others who did not conform themselves to the canons of his "Grand Maestro." Martens could get away with his prejudices back in 1926, but not anymore. That was an era when the last word in opera was that of **Wagner**, who had spread his musical theories packaged with the venom of his anti-Semitism. One must not let Wagner and the Wagnerians "listen" or criticize works for you.

This fourth act of ***Le Prophete*** is what Peter Sellars meant when he said what fictionalized historical opera could do to opera, "which is to deepen it and move [us] into its more subtle nuanced, and mysterious corners." This lighting-up of opera's mysterious corners also permits **Robert Letellier,** to appreciate the psychological portrait, or the make up of **Jean of Leyden** captured by Meyerbeer's music. Thus he says:

> In his own right [he is] an extremely interesting figure, spiritually speaking: he is a genuine man of faith, but also an impostor who is ruthless but not entirely despicable. The depth of his human dilemma is successfully realized. George Bernard Shaw described him as alive and romantic, and there can be no doubt that the composer succeeded in heightening the effect of the drama by his deepening of the hero's psychology. From the outset in his Dream Narrative, his music has a visionary quality; the remote shadowy story line, the strong religious *and* apocalyptic imagery, stimulated the composer to produce some of his most extraordinarily forward-looking inspiration.

I sincerely recommend you re-read this paragraph when listening to ***Le Prophete.***

This extraordinary fourth act begins with the famous and iconic **Coronation March,** which without any introduction explodes on the unsuspecting audience, like a flash of lightning coming through the baton of the conductor from an unexplored universe. The March is made of three parts: a noisy initial fanfare; a serene and inspiring hymn-like melody that ends in an ascending wild music, which is a recapitulation of the initial fanfare.

To me this March is a musical translation of **Jean of Leyden's** character as outlined in the previous quotation. I see the initial fanfare as corresponding to the quality of being "an impostor who is ruthless." What are fanfares if not for announcing an ostentatious event, which by itself alone has little merit or value. And the finale picking up some of the music from the fanfare points out that his fraud and pretense will end in a disaster.

IV. SO THEY SAY…

Some opera fans, if they have read a **Wagner** biography, know that during a performance of ***Le Prophete,*** **Wagner,** who was in the audience, at the moment when the **Prophet** harangued his followers to attack the city of Münster, while an electric sun rose up on the horizon illuminating the entire theater, stood up and left the theater. It was to the author of ***Rienzi*** and ***Tanhauser,*** a mini protest against what he considered a cheap scenic trick by **Meyerbeer.** However, it seems that he learned the lesson well that night, because years later when a king built a theater for **Wagner,** to his own specifications, he ordered all kinds of electrical paraphernalia built in, to make six or more hours of music, bearable

V. LITERARY SOURCES

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Letellier, Robert Ignatius. *An Introduction to the Dramatic Works of Giacomo Meyerbeer: Operas, Ballets, Cantatas, Plays.* Hampshire, England, 2008.
Letellier, Robert Ignatius. *The Operas of Giacomo Meyerbeer.* Cranbury, NJ, 2006.

VI. RECORDINGS

AUDIO (CD)
Le Prophete (2016)
Performers: Horne, Scotto, McCracken, Hines *et al*
Orchestra: Royal Philharmonic Orchestra
Conductor: Henry Lewis
Sony (3) B01AMWKIC0

L'AFRICAINE
— 1865 —

I. THE SETTING

Opera in Five Acts
Music.....Giacomo Meyerbeer
Libretto.....Mostly by Eugene Scribe based on parts from the Portuguese Epic Poem "Os Luisiads" by Luis Camoens
Time.....c. 1509
Place.....Lisbon, Portugal, Eastern African coast, and India

CLIO'S SONG
"O Paradis"

It took **Meyerbeer** more than 25 years of "stop and go" working to finish. First, he was a meticulous composer and second and, most importantly, on several occasions he had to stop composing to do other projects. In 1864, when he finally finished the writing and rehearsals had begun, he passed away leaving behind a few important things to be taken care of, like the sequence of a few scenes. This may be the reason for some inconsistencies in the plot, and the title of the opera, which has not much to do with the subject matter. In fact, Meyerbeer, much before passing away, always referred to this opera as ***Vasco da Gama.*** Among the inconsistencies, for instance, is that the heroine **Selika,** the "African Woman," was not African but a Hindu princess, who had been captured [I assume by slave traders] and had ended up together with her minister or counselor, **Nelusko,** in an African slave market. It appears that it was there where **Vasco** saw and bought her. In fact, there is a line, or two, in the libretto that tends to indicate this. It may be for these reasons that

L' Africaine
The principals in costume for the Paris premiere by the Opéra at the Salle Lepeletier in Paris (28 April 1865).

L–R: Emilio Naudin as Vasco da Gama; Marie Battu as Inès; Marie Sasse as Sélika; Jean-Baptiste Faure as Nélusko.

(Press illustration)

Meyerbeer decided to rename the opera ***Vasco da Gama.*** That made a lot of sense, because **Da Gama** was a well-known historical figure and he is almost constantly present in the opera. However Fetis, the musicologist who directed the group in charge of putting together the opera, decided to stick with the original name as it had been announced some twenty years before. Fetis said that if people and critics expected Africa and an African girl, so Africa and an African lady they got. It appears that the Aristotelian logic was then in short supply. Also the group in charge of cobbling together the final product did a series of ill-advised whimsical cuts and additions. It is a real miracle that the opera survived for as long as it did on the stages of the world. In fact, of all of the **Meyerbeer** operas the one that has suffered the least neglect, is ***L'Africaine.*** It has been observed that from the 1920s to the 1980s ***L'Africaine*** was staged around the operatic world some 20 or more times. It must be because the opera is so full of beautiful and inspired music, like Selika's *liebestod*, the truculent but brilliant ***March Indienne,*** and the grandest of grand tenor arias "**O Paradis,**" which besides its powerful and heroic music it is a mini crash-course on the psychology and mind of those discoverers, or **conquistadors,** of the sixteenth century, and for that matter, of all ages. This aria has become an archetype for heroic tenors.

By the way, I understand that very recently, in Germany, the opera has been restored as close as it is possible to ***Meyerbeer's*** conception, and properly renamed as: ***Vasco da Gama.***

II. CLIO'S SONG IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Late in the Middle Ages Portugal was a little isolated kingdom. To the west the Portuguese looked at the vast Atlantic Ocean, *the green sea of darkness*. In the east there were the pugnacious and expanding kingdoms of Castile and Aragon, which by now with the discovery of the *New World* in 1492, were beginning to amass immense riches. And to the southeast were the Muslim *Taifas* or kingdoms, which also stood in the Portuguese path to expansion to the southeast of the Iberian peninsula. In the face of these obstacles the Portuguese decided that their best move was to become a fully seafaring nation and turn to the southwest into the Atlantic Ocean, their gateway to power and greatness.

History reports that they successfully rose up to meet the challenge, something that would make historian Toynbee happy. They had the background to be successful, though by 1341 a Lisbon armada had reached the Canaries, and after their king, Henry *the Navigator,* established his school for sailors and cartographers at home, more achievements were not late in coming. In 1445 Portuguese sailors went beyond Cape Verde in Africa, and in 1487, five years before Columbus bumped into the New World, Bartholomew Dias had cautiously gone around the very end of Africa which he named the Cape of Good Hope.

As you may have already suspected, the Portuguese had an agenda beyond that of a simple expedition of discovery. What they were really reaching for was to take over the Muslim or Moors' trade with India; break the Italian commercial monopoly in the Mediterranean; attack the *Moors* by the back door; and all before any other European nation would, or could do it. Some historians have suggested that the Portuguese, who kept their secrets tight to their chest, knew more than they revealed: the existence of vast lands in the southwest of the Atlantic.

That was indeed a lot on their plate. Remember they were a little nation with a small population. However, as it happens in history so many times, they had most of the elements required, and the man ready for it: a terrific sailor by the name of **Vasco da Gama,** the hero of Meyerbeer's opera. Born in 1460 into a noble family, **Da Gama** entered the king's service as a young man. He did well, since in 1497 we see him as an official agent for the crown with instructions to carry out plans, some of the items included above, mainly to break into the Muslim trade with remote and mysterious India. For this reason, many see **Da Gama's** enterprise as both an armed commercial expedition and a voyage of exploration and discovery.

Be that as it may, **Da Gama**'s voyage, following in the steps of **Dias** around Africa, continued sailing up north to reach India, which no European had been able to do. This is one of the most spectacular adventures ever recorded in the annals of mankind's seafaring.

Leaving Portugal on July 8, 1497, **Da Gama** reached Saint Helena Bay, in South Africa, 96 days and 4500 miles later. In the process, instead of following the path of previous Portuguese expeditions, that of slowly

tacking down the western African coast, **Da Gama** made the bold decision to sail southwest into the unknown on the Atlantic Ocean, until he reached the latitude of the prevailing westerly winds where he sharply swung to the east. By doing this he established a permanent and faster route from Europe to the Cape of Good Hope. When we look at the map, and at all the places they navigated and reached in their little floating nutshells they had for vessels, these fifteenth- and sixteenth-century sailors were indeed amazing. One wonders what were they eating at home for breakfast and dinner that fueled their energies and with such a display of "the devil may care".

At any rate, **Da Gama,** after going around the Cape, sailed up north and ventured to where no European eyes had ever seen before. On his way to the north he made contact with the first Muslim colonists and heard reports about **King Solomon's** vessels laden with ivory and gold, which as you may expect, whetted his appetite for the riches of this part of the world. He reached **Mozambique, Mombasa** and **Malindi** and had nasty troubles with the Arab merchants, which required from the Portuguese, a quick display and effective use of their artillery. This worked since in Malindi the Portuguese were well received. **Da Gama** then was able to replenish his low supplies and, most importantly, secure the services of an expert sailor for the long haul across the fearsome empty vastness of the Indian Ocean.

After 23 days more ,with no land in sight, **Da Gama** found and skirted the **Laccadive Islands,** and finally, to his relief, he sighted the **Malabar Coast of India** on 18 May1498. All in all, it had taken almost a year for the Portuguese to set foot in India. **Da Gama's** adventure had been as spectacular, if not more so, than that of **Columbus.**

After this voyage and his triumphant return to Portugal, the King made him a count with all the revenues attached to that honor. But don't close the books on Vasco yet, because the old sea-wolf, like Columbus and a few more of these incredible men, still had more meaningful sailing to do. In **1524** he was made a Viceroy and he returned to the scenario of his now legendary triumphs in India, though he never came back to Portugal. Fate, which always has a way for making our plans go awry, had it that he would die there, on **24 December 1524** in, as he sings in the opera his *paradis surging from the waves.* Indiana Jones anyone?

III. CLIO'S SONG

ACT II, SCENE 1
"O Paradis"

The plot of ***L'Africaine/Vasco da Gama*** although having **Vasco** as the principal character makes little, if any, contact with factual history. What we have here besides Vasco, the protagonist, are characters who simply represent different cultural, social and political or religious institutions. In other words, text book specimens of **French Grand Historical Opera.**

If we keep in mind that **Meyerbeer,** a real aficionado, and an avid reader of history for sources of inspiration, and for his own pleasure too, this opera's light brush with factual history was, in my understanding, intentional. I am convinced that after having fictionalized a few grand historical episodes, like the **Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre,** and the antics of **Jean of Leyden** in **Münster, Meyerbeer,** late in his career on the threshold of his eternal departure, wanted to round up his opus with a kind of return to the ***Robert le Diable*** days. Remember, **Robert** in history was a powerful historical character while in the opera he is at the center interacting with an entirely fictionalized cast. The same with **Vasco.** Why? Because, as I see it, it would give him a wide-open field to deal with ideas, ideas to be observed, studied and expounded upon. That is why the character **Vasco da Gama** appears in a milieu of almost pure invention. ***L'Africaine/Vasco Da Gama*** is truly an opera of ideas about the sixteenth-century discoverer/conquistador, and the new relationships with the new country's natives, with those of his homeland and the clashes these contacts produced. By having a libretto open and mostly free of historical episodes to deal with, **Meyerbeer** threw the doors open to present his listeners with the clash of ideas such as innovation versus calcified traditions, open-mindedness versus intransigence, etc. The nineteenth century, as it has been said, was the century of ideas and opera. So it appears, to me, and other observers, that

Meyerbeer wanted to do that in an operatic milieu. The master of grand historical opera had not forgotten his ***Robert le Diable*** days when he presented, with a minimum of historicity, the clash between evil and goodness, grace and repentance and the cult of the virgin Mary as incarnate in the characters of Princess Isabel, and Robert's sister Alice, the devil, and hell and heaven. **Wagner** for once in agreement with **Meyerbeer,** and before his anti-Semitism blinded his reason and intellect, had it right when he said that **Meyerbeer** had written the history of emotions.

In ***Les Huguenots*** and to a point in ***Le Prophete,*** **Meyerbeer** was the historical chronicler who, with the help of music, costumes, sets and other visual and auditive means, taught us a historical episode. In ***L'Africaine/Vasco,*** however, as he is dealing with ideas more than with events, he becomes the pensive philosopher of history. In ***Huguenots*** and ***Le Prophete*** he gave us information about the **when**, the **where,** and the **how** of the historical episodes treated, while in ***L'Africaine/Vasco*** he is more interested in the **why?**

L'Africaine/Vasco is in many ways an expose of colonialism and its sequel of Imperialism, and of how these two forces function and act vis-à-vis the peoples who have been subjected to them, or even worse, made into slaves. At one point in the plot when the character **Nelusko, Selika's** minister or advisor-protector of some sort, is asked from what country he came and he angrily replies with the answer that has resonated throughout history among those under the yoke of colonialism and imperialism: *When you purchase an ox for the plow, if he be of fitting stature, and strong enough to bear the yoke what do you care of his country? Why do you ask… from one who will merely be a beast of burden?* Bingo! No wonder it was reported that emperor **Napoleon III** and his wife **Eugenie de Montijo,** did not like the opera very much. There are reports—not true, perhaps—that say she turned his back to the stage. Another detail that should not go unappreciated is the relationships in the triangle of Vasco-Ines-Selika. Here we have a mini crash course in Imperialism and Colonialism. Observe that in his adventures every time **Vasco** gets in trouble he runs to **Selika,** but once he is out of the squeeze, he returns to **Ines,** the Portuguese lady. This situation

reminds me of the British-Hindu relationship during the Second World War when England, for obvious reasons, had to maintain India's loyalty with promises of independence.

But of all of the comments about colonialism and the mind of the sixteenth-century European conquistador in the opera, I have selected as **Clio's Song, Vasco's** aria "**O Paradis!**" Wow! This one is at the top of the ranks for what it says, which as I said before is a two- or three-minute crash course on the subject of what was the frame of mind of those men who had gone down in the history books as discoverers and conquistadors. They have been extolled as heroic and their careers worthy of being put next to those of the mythological Greek or Roman characters. Others detest them for their cupidity and rapacious attitude. Some say that they were only after glory for their deeds, which was a Renaissance virtue, while many more recoil back in the face of their cruelty and wild savagery. Well, as we shall see from the lyrics below, I stand in awe in front of **Meyerbeer's** portrait of them, because this aria covers the many shades of all those powerful agents of history.

From the first time I heard this aria, a *million* years ago, its musical introduction struck me as establishing a sense of mystery, as **Vasco** and a handful of his companions approach the glistening white sands of a beach in front of the green rows of coconut trees. In my imagination I could hear the sailors whispering to each other so as not to disturb the view in front of them. Vasco who couldn't hold this spell any longer says: "Wonderful country," and in complete ecstasy: *Jardin fortune.* And hardly containing his emotion any more cries out:

O paradis sorti de l'onde
Ciel si bleu, ciel si pur,
Tu m'appartiens!

Of course it had to be pristine this new land… A ***paradise!*** Think from where these sailors were issuing forth: an overcrowded Portuguese sea-port with narrow and pestilent streets and a waterfront dirty with foul smells.

But the moment of wonderment of **Vasco** is soon interrupted by what is welling up from his innermost desires, the reason why he decided to lead this expedition to uncharted lands and seas. Yes! the skies were truly blue and pure but, **Tu m'appartiens! You belong to me!**

Now, the minute he said that, he quickly reconsiders lest some of the sailors tell the court back in Lisbon what are his true hidden expectations: **You belong to me!**... Did I say that!

O nouveau monde
Don't j'aurai doté mon pays!

[Oh New World
I will give to my country]

But here the streak of conquest and feelings of possession in him are so powerful that instead of saying that all of the wonderment in front of his eyes he will give to his country he nevertheless says **ours.** Observe:

***Ours** the fresh plains,*
***Ours** this rediscovered Eden!*
O enchanting treasures
O wonders, Hail!

And then a return to the first person pronouns **me, mine:**

New World you belong to me,
Be mine then, O beautiful country!

Bravo **Scribe**! Bravo **Meyerbeer**! Perfect psychological portrait in less than four minutes!

There is another interesting aspect contained in ***L'Africaine/ Vasco,*** which has puzzled more than a few opera lovers. This is all about style. Certainly while listening to ***L'Africaine/Vasco da Gama*** you begin to notice, or detect, that musically this work is

somewhat different from his early grand operas. Very early in my musical listening experiences, I strongly felt this. As Letellier says in "***L'Africaine/Vasco da Gama*, Meyerbeer** is saying adieu to the glorious traditions of grand opera and the mellifluous style of the bel canto that had served him in all his artistic career." If it is true that ***L'Africaine/Vasco da Gama*** does not lack the grandeur of statement and the thrilling climaxes we all associate with **Meyerbeer** now**,** however**,** the emphasis is of *intimacy*. It has been observed than in this opera the maestro was moving away from "numbers opera" to a continuous flow of music *a la* "Wagnerian". Also some of his melodies in his last opera *have a dignity and serenity rarely present in his scores of the French period.*

IV. SO THEY SAY…

If ***Aida*** was a revelation to a boy of barely 10–11 years old then ***L'Africaine*** was the clincher for a lifetime of opera addiction for me. I came to know this opera through my father's one-sided 78-rpm shellac record collection. If I remember well, it was the aria "O Paradis," sung—if my memory does not betray me—by Gigli. [He also had the Caruso interpretation, which I played on and on to compare these two great tenors of the past.] I played them, and other ***L'Africaine*** selections on one of those RCA Victrola contraptions—today when you see one they are in a museum, or in an attic (which is the same thing, but smaller in size and private). I am referring to those with a Terrier dog stamped on a huge horn in the shape of a flower, or something like that, from which the sound imprisoned in a shellac flat disk emerged. The sound was the result of the friction made by a needle—more like a glorified nail—screwed onto the end of a pickup arm.

And to think we listened for hours to those records, which were so tough they could have been used in the Olympic Games discus throwing competition. But we did not know anything about high fidelity, stereo and all the paraphernalia that along the years have surrounded us. We survived that stone age and, like in my case, millions of listeners were made fans for the art of opera. We became opera junkies. And for it a

Bravo! Bravo for the one-sided shellac records, and the glorified nails on their pickup arms.

V. LITERARY SOURCES

Cliff, Nigel. *Holy War: How Vasco Da Gama's Epic Voyages Turned the Tide in a Centuries-Old Clash of Civilizations.* New York, 2011.
Jayne, K.G. *Vasco Da Gama and his Successors: 1460–1580.* Whitefish, MT, 2010.
Marques, Oliveira H.A. *History of Portugal.* London/New York, 1972.

VI. RECORDINGS

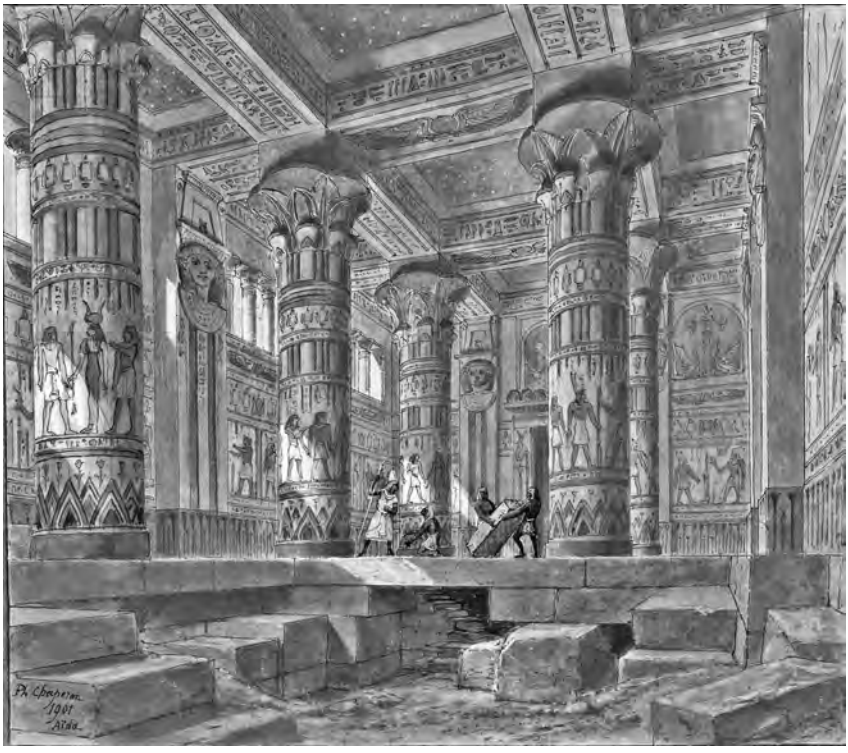
AUDIO (CD)

There are several pirated or amateur CD recordings of this opera.

VIDEO (DVD)

Fortunately there is a professionally made DVD.

L'Africaine (2001)
Performers: Domingo, Verret, Diaz, *et al.*
Orchestra: San Francisco Opera
Director: Brian Large
Image Entertainment (1) B00005NG0W



Aida
Act IV Scene 2
Palais Garnier production, Paris (1880)
Set Design by Philippe Chaperon

AIDA
— 1871 —

I. THE SETTING

Opera in Four Acts

Music.....Giuseppe Verdi

Libretto.....Antonio Ghislanzoni

Time.....Ancient Egypt c. 1479–1425 BC, during the reign of Tutmose III of the New Kingdom (1540–1069 BC)

Place.....Memphis and Thebes

CLIO'S SONG

"Traditore, Traditore, Traditore"

(Traitor! Traitor! Traitor!)

Egyptian Priests

Aida, in my book, if not the greatest of the **French Grand Historical Operas, is** at least one of the top three in the genre. I have classified it as **French Grand Historical Opera** for the following reasons: It has most of the basic features, like a hesitating hero, a sumptuous ballet, a super powerful *concertatti* that becomes an act-ending **stretta**, and a triumphal iconic march. This march soon went around the world several times. Also ***Aida,*** because of its compactness, the plot moves fast compared to others of the genre. This, I suspect, is a big plus in our world with its short attention span.

In the department of *ambiance* or local color, ***Aida*** has no rivals. As there were no extant examples of Ancient Egyptian music, **Verdi** sought his inspiration by observing Egyptian illustrations of their instruments, and guessed how they may have sounded. He even had the horns for the March made and tuned to specifications, so as to make his

audience feel they were really back in the time of the Pharaohs. And **Verdi** was able to translate the monumentalism of Egypt into music. All of this was so successful that some observers have said that **Verdi,** in the absence of the real thing, invented the Ancient Egyptians for us. The story that Mariette, the famous Egyptologist, gave to **Verdi's** team of writers and poets must have inspired the great composer.

With ***Aida,*** his third or fourth try at true **French Grand Historical Opera, Verdi** finally hit it right. The ***Sicilian Vespers*** and ***Don Carlo*** are to me clunky and very slow moving, and that is why they were not totally successful in France at that time. They couldn't be, since the **French** audiences had been raised listening to the productions of **Halévy** and **Meyerbeer,** and many other masters of the **Grands**. Please, before you hurl lightning bolts at me and cry out *blasphemy!* I will say, play **Halévy's** ***La Juive,*** or **Meyerbeer's** ***Les Huguenots,*** and you will see what I mean. Many people today have not seen the operas of those two composers, so they have no idea how fast they could move under a smart and knowledgeable baton. These may be because of **Meyerbeer's** so-called **mosaic style.** In those mosaics there are not enough spaces to have two long arias, where **Verdi** was great. And, for heaven's sake, let's not talk about the inescapable or unavoidable ballets in the **Grand Operas. Verdi's** ballets—and he said he hated writing them—are the clunkiest things, with the exception of ***Aida's.*** To me they always sound like something written *pro forma,* and nothing to write home about. Have you ever seen the ballet music from ***Don Carlo*** performed independently from the opera? And with this I am not saying that those two composers were better or worse than the others, because it was, and still is, a matter of style and temperament. **Meyerbeer** apparently was born to write **Grand Operas** and **Verdi**, again with the exception of ***Aida,*** was not. On the other hand, even if **Meyerbeer** had lived five times he could not have written a ***Rigoletto*** or ***La Traviata.*** To each his own.

II. CLIO'S SONG IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT.

By the year 3100 BC, the early independent farming communities along the rich and fertile banks of the River Nile, in the northeast of the African continent, had been unified into what later became a

powerful kingdom. Impressed by the importance the Nile had for these communities, Herodotus, the Ancient Greek historian, adroitly called Egypt the *Gift of the Nile*. Well, this was nothing the Egyptians ignored, because centuries before they had written and dedicated poems to the river. One of them says: *Hail to you O Nile! Sprung from earth come to nourish Egypt! Food provider, bounty maker who creates all that is good!*

Time in Egyptian history is so long that in order to encompass it, historians measure it not in years but by centuries and by long rosters of dynasties. If Mariette did not give us the historical specifications of when the plot of ***Aida*** develops we can safely put it as at least 35 hundred years ago, and played against the background of one of the many historically authentic wars between Egypt and Nubia, which in the opera is called Ethiopia. A little research will reveal that **Aida, Radames,** *et al*, if they had actually existed, would have lived in the New Kingdom c.1550 BC. These were the years during the exciting eighteenth dynasty, which because of its wars of expansion, its religious turmoil, and plundered wealth, is recognized as the last great period in the long history of that nation.

Located in the southern borders of Egypt, **Nubia** was rich in gold, copper, and semiprecious stones. The place was also the gateway to the important trade routes in Africa with its coveted ivory, ebony, and the *usual* slaves. It was a common practice for the Egyptians in their wars with Nubia to bring back with them a few important hostages so as to guarantee the behavior, and the ever so fragile loyalty to Egypt of those left back home seething with hatred.

The splendor and power of **Egypt** and its conquests and hostages is very well represented in the second act during the triumphal return of **Radames** from the Nubian campaigns. Dragging behind his war chariots we usually see a bunch of defeated hostages among which is their leader or commander, none other than the incognito king, Amonasro, Aida's father.

Now Egyptian history tells us that under their great pharaoh, **Thutmose III,** the so-called "Egyptian Napoleon," there was a major attack on Egypt by the Nubians which indeed, as we see in the opera, threatened

Thebes. It appears that this attack put in danger the very existence of the kingdom. The sources also indicate that this pharaoh repelled it and when the Nubians tried again, as it also happens in the opera, they were decisively defeated and expelled beyond Egypt's southern border.

Because of his successful military campaigns, not only in Nubia, but most importantly in the Middle East as well, the reign of **Thutmose III** was one of the most splendid periods in Egyptian history. The plundered wealth from these campaigns made possible the building of many new temples and Thutmose's III own lavish tomb in the **Valley of the Kings.** This tomb, with its decorations resembling a written papyrus, is one of the most impressive sites in all of Egypt. In the opera this opulence is magnificently portrayed in the celebrations of the second act climaxing with dances, processions, and of course with the iconic Triumphant March.

Thus, from what history tells us, and from the scenario by **Mariette**, it is safe to assume that the pharaoh portrayed is **Thutmose III.** Also, a few sources, like panegyrics written or carved on the walls of Karnak's temple dedicated to him, leaves very little doubt about this. One of them precisely reads that the god Amun had come to him [**Thutmose III**] *so he would crush the barbarians of Nubia.* No wonder **Thutmose III** for his achievements soon after his death was regarded as a hero of a romance, like **Khufu** (2589–2566 BC), the builder of the Great Pyramid of Giza, during the fourth dynasty, and **Usertsen I** of the twelfth dynasty, who was described as a *lion who strikes with his claws.* Be that as it may, of one thing I am sure, **Thutmose III** in his wildest dreams, could not have imagined himself singing in an opera, and that **Verdi** made him a bass to boot. I have always wondered if he would be content with that range of voice. Tenors, after all, are more flashy and in the end they usually get the girl. So next time you see or hear ***Aida,*** remember that **Thutmose III,** for all of his past historical importance, only appears in the cast simply identified as *the King.* What disrespect! Didn't they know that he is known as the Napoleon of Egypt? The guy had quite a history behind him.

Finally it appears that the rest of ***Aida's*** characters are simply fictional. I say, "it appears" because you never know what they will find in a dusty tomb. Perhaps even **Aida** or **Rahdames**.

III. CLIO'S SONG

ACT IV, SCENE 1
The Trial of Radames
A Hall in the Royal Palace

From the many wonderful scenes in this opera I have selected as **Clio's** best song an entire scene: **The Trial of Radames,** a super gem of historical fiction and, in my book, one of the best pieces **Verdi** ever wrote. In the Second Act he showed us the power and the grandeur of the Egyptian state. In the Trial Scene in the Fourth Act **Verdi** will go from the macro display of grandeur to the micro individual tragedy. With this he was making a striking point of how brutally a primitive totalitarian state can put all its powers in motion through its legal system, in order to crush the individuals that have defied the laws and the national traditions.

So it happens that **Aida,** a Nubian princess held in Egypt as a hostage, and **Radames,** a victorious Egyptian commander are secretly in love. They agreed to meet at night on the banks of the River Nile. Previous to their encounter **Amonasro, Aida's** father, who is an incognito King of the Nubians captured in the last war by the Egyptians, comes to see his daughter. He wants **Aida** to make her lover reveal the Egyptians' plans for their impending war campaign. Father and daughter have an ugly meeting in which the father tells **Aida** a few nasty things. After **Aida** relents, her father hides behind some nearby bushes. **Radames** comes in and after **Aida** convinces him, saying that in Egypt their love has no future, they agree to escape. How? Where the Egyptian troops are stationed for an attack. But, Lo and Behold! **Amonasro** whom, you may remember was hiding nearby, utters a savage cry of victory and flees the place. **Radames,** as you may suppose is stunned, but before he can react **Amneris,** the daughter of the king, who was praying in a nearby temple, breaks in on the scene. She also loves **Radames** but he does not correspond, and she has also heard the fatal revelations. **Radames** now knows he is lost and as **Aida**

disappears, he surrenders his sword to the soldiers accompanying **Amneris.** This is a high voltage scene, but what is about to follow will burn the cables. Fasten your seat belts!

At this moment, you may be wondering what kind of a legal system the Egyptians had, and how was it represented in the opera. This is not an easy task, because what we know on the subject are bits and pieces extant in the fragments of other records and narrations. We know for instance, that justice in Ancient Egypt, together with all of its aspects of life and social interactions, were under the principle of the **Ma'at**. *Ma'at* was the concept of truth, balance, order, law, morality, and justice. Egyptians had a abhorrence for disorder and chaos, and by going against the virtues of what the ***Ma'at*** represented you would put in danger the entire order of the world. *Ma'at was* immutable and universal, thus it applied to all classes and individuals including the pharaoh and his family.

Egypt didn't have a judicial system, like the Romans did, as a separate entity from the government. No department of justice existed, and no code or compilation of that could be applied from previous cases and incidents existed. However, in spite of lacking a unified organization in charge of justice as such, in important legal matters and legislation, the pharaoh functioned as the ultimate legislator and guarantor that justice would be disposed honestly, equally, and under the *Ma'at.* This indicates that there were no professional judges like the *praetors* in Rome who had their books of collected jurisprudence, which later became the body of their legal philosophy. It appears that in Egypt's legal disputes anyone could function as a judge, or rather arbiter, but again, always under the spirit of the **Ma'at**, and make decisions based mostly on common sense.

During the New Kingdom, when the plot of ***Aida*** seems to have taken place, there was the **Kenbet,** a **Council of the Elders,** where small claims and minor disputes were handled. More serious cases, like murder, transactions and plundering of the tombs which were considered horrible and despicable crimes, were handled by a **Great**

Kenbet, which on certain occasions would be presided over by the pharaoh himself, but more often by a grand provincial vizier. Oracles, that is someone considered to be a source of knowledge, wisdom, or having the gift of prophecy, as well as priests were allowed to intervene in dispensing justice. Because of this, in the trial in the opera, **Ramfis,** the Highest priest of the kingdom, could very well have been that oracle that we hear in the opera, conducting the procedure.

High crimes, such as murder were punished by execution, which was carried out in a variety of ways. Decapitation seems to have been applied often. I, however, do not know if, as in the opera, treason was penalized by being buried alive. We have to presume that for the gravity of the crime, which put the kingdom at risk, it would be applied, Of one thing we can be sure: **Radames** would not be mummified. Why? Because it would make it impossible for him to obtain immortality, a horrifying thought for anyone in that ancient society. Also because of the grave nature of the crime the participation and the prosecution by **Ramfis**, the High Priest, is completely warranted just as the opera has it.

Nothing is really known about Egyptian procedural law, so we cannot determine if the accused appearing before the court was already presumed guilty or not. In the opera the whole procedure sounds inquisitorial which seems right for the times of the plot. **Radames** simply refused to challenge the accusations, maybe because he knew they were true, and that without **Aida** it didn't matter if he was found guilty. Life wasn't worth living without her. Usually in a state such as Egypt, which was pro-totalitarian, I am convinced the trial was inquisitorial. We can surmise this from the way charges were presented by **Ramfis** as a prosecutor, and mostly by the absence of an independent defender.

Now, observe that in the trial there are three accusatory questions, three remarks by the priests, three desperate reactions by **Amneris** while she is listening outside the court hall, and at the end of the scene, after **Radames** has been found guilty, and the priests say the word ***Traditore,*** [traitor] three solemn times.

Some critics have explained this by saying that **Verdi** wanted to convey to the listener the formal rigidity of Egypt's theocratic state. That may very well be the case, but to me, after having taken a course on the history of law and legal institutions, **Verdi's** use of the concept of the **triad** goes far beyond and deeper than a theatrical tool. I am convinced that **Verdi** wanted to expose his audience to something archetypal in such a critical moment in the opera. The symbol and significance of the **triad** have existed over an immeasurable time in history, and it is found throughout the world's cultures. In the Egyptian religion the triad signified the completeness of a system, or a ***sacred oneness,*** and in their mythology, it is said that the god **Thoth** was described as the thrice-great god of wisdom.

In ancient Israel we have an example of a **triad** in the book of the prophet **Isaiah.** In a narrative of his own vocation Isaiah, with a vision of the hosts of heaven, as he worships the Lord cries out, "**Holy, Holy, Holy**"…This thrice repetition was not a simple poetic construction, but a superlative of **oneness**. But in reality we don't have to go so far back in time to see the use of this symbolism since in the present, millions of Christians believe in the concept of the Holy Trinity, which for them is a form of **sacred oneness.** Again, **Verdi** was looking for something archetypal something to knock out his audience, something that once it was emitted from the orchestra pit would go right to the listener's deepest region of his subconscious.

Let's keep in mind that poets and artists, since times immemorial, have used symbols and their meanings to encapsulate and convey secret meanings. And if **Verdi** himself was not aware of this, I am sure that **Ghislanzoni,** the librettist, passed this on to him, and the maestro who knew a thing or two about theatrical devices, after reading Ghislanzoni's words, pounced on them crafting one of his most dramatic and suspenseful pages.

The triad concept in the Trial scene is a very rich tool for **Verdi** to use. He even saved its use for **Amneris,** so we could see her under

a completely different light besides that of a harpy. All through the opera he portrayed **Amneris** as a rancorous spitfire, a totally spoiled brat that, being the daughter of the Pharaoh she was, as I see her, under a kind of ancient *fatal obsession.* Her attitude, no matter what the consequences would be for **Radames** and Egypt, was to force him to marry her. Well, at the end of her ferocious interview with **Radames,** who totally refuses to even consider her pleas for his love, **Amneris** collapses to the ground when finally he is taken to be judged. At this point she has finally realized that it was precisely her wild passions for him, and her arrogant cruelty for **Aida,** which had put **Radames** at the mercy of the *blood-thirsty judges,* as she called them. And sobbingly she adds: *I sealed his fate… I curse my jealousy, vile monster,* that *has doomed him, and me to everlasting sorrow.*

I have always seen this moment as nothing more than a sincere confession and a repentance welling up from the bottom of her heart for her sin of mad jealousy. So dolorous is her realization that **Verdi** reading these lines in the libretto, while writing the music, seems to have broken down and written for her, only for her to hear, a brief melody, but alas! so beautifully forgiving a melody, born by the strings of the cello, and repeated, of course you guessed it, three times, and every time more poignant and sadder than the one before. **Verdi** here, after having drawn a very negative and nasty portrait of **Amneris** through most of the opera, reaches now for the **triad** trying to awaken our subconscious awareness that, after all, she was just a woman in love. Nothing more. This fleeting, but deep moment never fails to make my eyes misty. In spite of everything **Amneris** had done, and she did plenty, now I feel sorry for her. That is just the power of music. That is the nature of opera as Andre Bishop said, "Opera was clearly the only art form left where something that is larger than life can simultaneously be so human." I know that here **Verdi** is asking us, the audience, to pardon her, and to sincerely pity a poor, desperate woman. After so much grandiose and powerfully dramatic music, I consider this profoundly sad moment of a minute or so as a treasure trove in ***Aida.*** I wouldn't exchange it for ten Triumphal Marches. A

moment like this is what separates the operatic geniuses from the music hackers, and for it I stand up and say, Viva **Verdi!** and **Viva la Opera!** [Some conductors do not emphasize this moment in their performance of the opera, robbing us of one of the most beautiful two or three minutes in *Aida*.]. And they say **Grand Operas** don't have subjective moments.

IV. SO THEY SAY…

Aida's libretto is based on a scenario by the famous nineteenth-century French Egyptologist **F. August Mariette.** He actually said his scenario was put together from a true episode in the history of Ancient Egypt, although when he was asked to reveal the provenance of such incident, he never revealed the names of the protagonist and other historical details. Was he then fibbing? I also heard that when the envoys from Egypt visited **Verdi** the maestro was adamant in his refusal to compose the opera, and that definitely he was not disposed to travel to Cairo as the Egyptians wanted. But when the envoys told him they were going to visit **Gounod** and **Wagner, Verdi** immediately changed his mind. Was it because of the French, or more so, I suspect, because of the German? You tell me.

Also not too well known is the story about the tuning of the trumpets used for the **Triumphal March** in the **Second Act.** Perhaps the story is apocryphal, but I thought you would like to know. As you may have heard, **Verdi** studied the instruments depicted in Egyptian illustrations. He then decided on what key they were tuned and what kind of metal alloy the ancient Egyptians had used to make them. As such instruments did not exist at all in **Verdi's** time, he gave careful instructions and specifications to the instrument makers in Milan, who were skeptical about the project on how the trumpets had to be tuned. Some fifty years later when the Englishman **Howard Carter** discovered **King Tutankhamun's** tomb they found trumpets in it. When they played them they found that they were tuned *exactly* in the key **Verdi** had specified. Talk about an *educated guess!* So it is true what someone said about **Verdi:** *he invented the Egyptians for us.*

V. LITERARY SOURCES

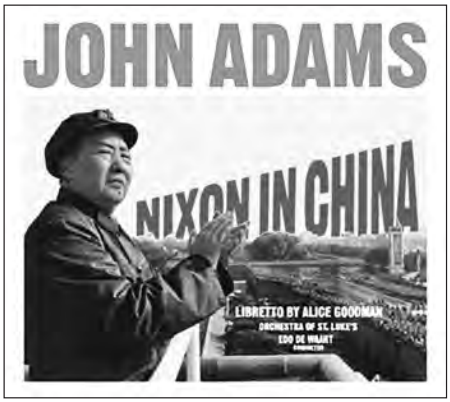
Monserrat, Dominic. *Akhenaten. History, Fantasy and Ancient Egypt.* London, 2000.
Strudwick, Helen. General Editor. *The Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt.* London, 2006.
Stierlin, Henri. *The Pharaohs Master Builders.* Paris, 1995.

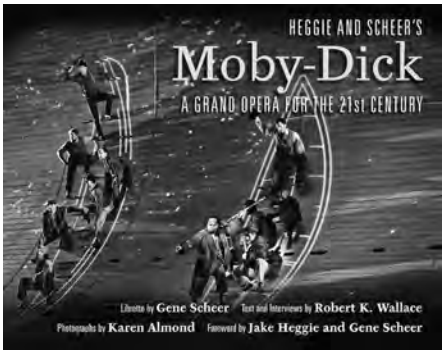
VI. RECORDINGS

There are a slew of ***Aida*** recordings on both CD and DVD. The two below are my special favorites.

AUDIO (CD)
Aida (1991)
Performers: Millo, Domingo, Zajick, Ramey, Levine *et al*
Orchestra: Metropolitan Opera and Chorus
Conductor: James Levine
Sony Music Entertain (3) B0002B6SYY

VIDEO (DVD)
Aida (2000)
Performers: Millo, Domingo, Zajick, Milnes, Burchuladze *et al*
Orchestra: Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus
Conductor: James Levine
Deutsche Grammophon (1) B000050X2Z





Cover art for ***Akhnaten*** CD box set (2). CBS Records, 1991.

Cover art for ***Nixon in China*** CD box set (3). Nonesuch, 2011.

Book cover ***Moby-Dick: A grand Opera for the 21-st Century,***
a 240-page look behind the scenes of the production.
University of North Texas Press, 2013.

IV

"NEO"-FRENCH GRAND HISTORICAL OPERA?

I would like to end this handbook with what I see currently happening in the field of **French Grand Historical Operas.** If you, like me, read opera magazines and bulletins, and keep abreast of what operas are being written and performed around the world, you'll be somewhat surprised by the number of new ones that have many of the characteristics from the "old" **Grand** style. Their revivals, as well, seem to be more frequent than twenty or thirty years ago. Three or four giants of the past have been successfully revived, and new ones, albeit with the mannerisms and formulae of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, have been written, and from what I hear and read, very well received, by audiences that seem willing to look into the **Grand** genre of the favorites of yesterday.

But what would be most interesting to me is to know if the new authors have consciously gone to the past for the old solutions, or if they simply and automatically have come to them. There is a phrase in an interview of John Adams, which gives the impression that he knows he was working with some of the **Grand Opera** formulas. By the same token, those spectacular projections used in **Heggei's** ***Moby-Dick*** must have taught him that once you take the trail of **Grand Opera** you are not in the small world of a touring group in the Italian provinces. In other words, that the masters of **Grand Opera** knew the grand effects were a necessity to the genre and not the caprice of meretricious composers in search of easy ovations from a "philistine audience," as they were so mercilessly called and criticized.

Following **Wagner** with his famous phrase of "effects without cause" the critics only showed their supine ignorance. What those **Grand Opera** composers were doing is intermittently exciting and preparing the audience towards a grand and superb finale. In a five-act opera they had to frequently startle their audiences to avoid boredom. This same technique was used in the cinema by Alfred Hitchcock.

Of these new operas, I have selected three by three new composers, because of the many characteristics their works have taken from the old ones. For these reasons I decided to call their works **Neo-French Grand Historical Operas.** These composers, which I admire, are **Philip Glass** with his ***Akhnaten*** (1983), **John Adams** with ***Nixon in China*** (1987) and **Jake Heggie's *Moby-Dick*** (2010). I am sure there are more, of course, but these three seem to be better known as they have been recorded a few times thus allowing us a greater facility for studying them. I must add that I have been fortunate to see all of them performed.

"NEO"-FRENCH GRAND HISTORICAL OPERAS

Akhnaten (1983) ..... *Music and Libretto by Philip Glass*

Nixon in China (1987) ..... *Music by John Adams | Libretto by Alice Goodman*

Moby-Dick (2010) ..... *Music by John Heggie | Libretto by Gene Scheer*

AKHNATEN
— 1983 —

I. THE SETTING

Opera in Three Acts

Music.....Philip Glass
Libretto.....Philip Glass
Time.....c.1350 BC (18th Dynasty)
New Kingdom c.1567–1085 BC
Place.....Ancient Egypt—Thebes and Akhetaten

CLIO'S SONG
"Hymn to the Sun"
Act I

Philip Glass, drew the libretto from ancient writings adapted, when necessary, to modern music. The only exception to this is ***Akhnaten's*** **"Hymn to the Sun"** which, as **Glass** recommends, should always be sung in the language of the audience. The central theme of this opera is the spectacular introduction of **monotheism** by Pharaoh **Akhnaten** to a massive **polytheistic** people in ancient **Egypt,** who were reticent or against its acceptance. The plot, which is very simple, is developed, by biographical musical vignettes done in **Glass's minimalist music,** which **Glass** has mastered**.** The score exhibits a dark, somber character to effectively create the mysterious atmosphere **Ancient Egypt** always provokes in its observers. You cannot help feel this sensation from the very first notes. However, for all of its modernity in the music, or avant-garde style, ***Akhnaten*** displays many of the elements taken from the old and inescapable **French Grand Historical Opera traditions.** If **Verdi** crafted a successful monumental, and sincere music for his ***Aida,*** then **Glass** triumphs by going the other way with his **minimalist style.**

Akhnaten
Coronation Scene—English National Opera production at the Coliseum (2016)
Anthony Roth Costanzo as Akhnaten with members of the company.
Photo: Robert Hubert Smith

Akhnaten
"Hymn to the Sun"—English National Opera production at the Coliseum (2016)
Photo Robert Hubert Smith

Like **Meyerbeer's** ***L'Africaine/Vasco da Gama, Akhnaten*** is an opera of ideas. Here the main idea is, as noted previously, the epoch-making revelation of **monotheism** by Pharaoh **Akhnaten.**

The opera also has other essential features taken from the nineteenth-century genre's warehouse, such as the funeral procession in **Act I, Scene 1,** a short ballet in **Act II, Scene 3** which, by the way, with no offense to **Verdi** is closer to the reality existing in 1500 BC than that of ***Aida;*** a superb **Coronation Scene** that the masters of **Grand Historical Opera** would have loved, and one that for its beautiful starkness and eloquence brings to my mind passages from the **Castilian** medieval classic of the ***Poema del Cid.*** Remember what we said above, that **Grand Opera** has taken the place of the old epic poems?

II. CLIO'S SONG IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

For centuries **Amon-re** was the preeminent god in Egypt. His priests enjoyed an ever-growing unique power and privileges. Then in 1365 BC, a new Pharaoh, **Amenhotep IV** of the **New Kingdom** (c.1567–1085 BC), turned his back on **Amon-re** and Egypt's ancient **polytheism**. In spectacular fashion the new pharaoh fully embraced the cult of **Aten,** which according to some sources, had been introduced to the court by his mother, **Queen Tiy.** The mother Queen was not Egyptian, but from the Near East, which opens many speculations, such as to her place of origin. Had she come to Egypt already believing in some kind of **monotheism,** which then influenced her son **Akhnaten?**

Shortly after ascending the throne **Amenhotep IV,** ordered by royal decree that **Aten,** the sun, now must to be exulted and worshiped by his people as Egypt's great unique and sole divinity, which is to say **monotheism.** And to let his subjects know that he meant what he preached, the new king even changed his name to **Akhnaten** or *Pleasing to Aten.* After this, **Akhnaten** also proclaimed himself to be the son of the new god, ***he who came from his body.***

Akhnaten had great plans to establish his newly embraced faith. He even founded a new capital city, which he called **Akhetaten** or **Horizon**

of Aten. Built in the middle of nowhere at the desert's edge, the new city virtually became the center of what was quickly becoming a religious revolution. From here, together with his wife, the serenely beautiful, **Nefertiti,** of whom, we are told also played an important role in this religious upheaval, **Akhnaten**, in total isolation, aspired to develop the new theology.

Akhnaten was a true religious visionary, who going against the grain of a millennia conceived what appears to be the first known version of **monotheism** in civilization. He was also a good poet, but alas!, a bad and weak leader, who enraptured with his newly found god, neglected to govern his country efficiently. During his reign he lost Egypt's possessions in **Asia Minor,** which had a disastrous impact for the kingdom's economy. And lacking in leadership other than a religious one, at one point Egypt's internal order finally disintegrated. The military became restless with his faltering foreign relations, and the priests of **Amon,** who were persecuted and repressed, hated him and his new cult. The common people at large despised him for the **androgynous** ways he was depicted in his statues, temples, and monuments. One only has to observe how imposing his forerunners on the throne had been portrayed to realize the scorn he may have provoked among his subjects. **Akhnaten** ordered his artists to depict him in a naturalistic way, including his own body with pendulous breasts, which has led some scholars to believe that the pharaoh may have been a hermaphrodite.

Akhnaten and his faith finally collapsed when he, after a 17-year reign, died or even possibly was murdered in 1350 BC. His cult's public displays were quickly and ferociously chiseled off the temples' walls by the old **Amon** priesthood. So much was the pent up anger against him, that it has taken **Egyptologists** years and years of searching for his mummy. They have only found what may be pieces from his sarcophagus, and more recently his skull, in good condition. It seems that the old priests wanted to destroy all of his statues to deny him immortality. The disappearance of his mummy may have been due to the wrath of the priests of Amon. To secure immortality one had to be mummified.

III. CLIO'S SONG: "HYMN TO THE SUN."

ACT II, SCENE 4
"Hymn to the Sun"
[In the suggested recording, play CD 2, Track 3]

Why do I declare that this opera is a **Neo-French Historical Opera?** Because, as just described, it has a powerful **epic quality.** You can't help see and feel it all throughout the opera.

As a direct reference to **Akhnaten's** attributed hermaphroditic nature **Glass,** for an effect, makes **Akhnaten** a countertenor. This voice range straddles those of male and female and it never fails to startle the audience, especially those who have not been exposed to his story. We, of course, do not know the vocal range of the real **Akhnaten**, so **Glass** was free to make him a countertenor, but not solely for the sake of just an effect, but in order to make him unique and stand out from the cast, as he must have appeared to the Egyptians in history.

Now, before you play the indicated CD and track number, a little tip about how to listen to **Glass's minimalist** music. To fully enjoy it you must be totally passive. If it is at night, I recommend listening to it in the dark of your room. Mind you, it won't be too long before you notice the endlessly repeated, but not fully developed melodies, with their unchanging pulse and fluctuating keys. They will have a hypnotic effect on you. As such, they will transport you across the time barrier of some three thousand years to arrive at **Akhnaten's** Egypt.

Now you are ready to play the selection. Here are the lyrics:

Thou dost appear beautiful
On the horizon of heaven.
Oh living Aten!
When thou hast risen on the

Eastern horizon
Thou are fair, great, dazzling
High above every land
To the very end of all Thou hast made.

Thou sole god
There is no other like thee,
Thou didst create the earth
According to thy will.
Being alone, everything on earth
Which walks and flies on high…

Akhnaten's lyrics, beautifully caressed by **Glass's** minimalist music reveal to us his monotheistic faith based on the divine powers of the sun as sole creator of the universe.

While playing the "**Hymn to the Sun**" I do hope that toward the end of the piece, you will have detected a distant chorus, who in total ecstasy seems to be acknowledging **Akhnaten's** beautiful oration. They represent the ancient **Hebrews** singing in their ancient language their Biblical Psalm 104, which as many observers say, is derived from **Akhnaten's,** which predates the Psalm by some 400 years. With this **Glass** seems to be underscoring the millennial heritage of the **Hymn.** From the dawning of history the idea of **monotheism** was first born and expounded in **Egypt** and then introduced to Christendom via the Hebrews. Of all the historical operas featured in this handbook, I consider this one the most spiritual, and as done by **Glass,** with the greatest simplicity, as it should.

IV. SO THEY SAY…

Glass's historical evocation is a real triumph. He puts us there at one of civilization's greatest turning points: the parting of the waters between polytheism and monotheism. As **Glass** and **Goldman** say in the booklet that accompanies the opera disc set, ***this is a moment of deeply personal religious emotion…[Akhnaten] clearly was expressing his innermost thoughts, which with Thomas Mann in mind, were thoughts said in the deep, of the well of the past, which is bottomless.***

Although after **Akhnaten's** death the priests restored **Amon's** cult, the world would not be the same anymore. The stage was already set for the ***introduction of Aten as the manifestation of the supreme power of the universe.*** As the saying goes, Akhnaten's revelation was a new idea that had arrived without the faith of superstitious converts, but by the power of reason applied to a pantheon replete with deities, often grotesquely depicted. Reason? Sooner or later, we had to reject polytheism and its impossible gods. This moment was also a flash of universalism. The sun, after all, shone in the firmament for all of its creatures on earth, and all of its nations, making it possible for all on the earth to exist.

As pointed out before, by destroying **Akhnaten's** mummy, the priests of Amon tried to deny him his immortality. Immortality, however, has many different ways of asserting itself. When the archaeologists, after millennia of oblivion, retrieved **Akhnaten's** memory, he was returned to us in all of his beguiling and enigmatic presence. He not only captivated the scholarly Egyptologists, but scores of writers and artists as well.

The historian **James Henry Breasted** called him "**the first individual in history,**" a claim that may conflict with that of **Gilgamesh; Petrie** referring to his religion, affirms that there is "**not a rag of superstition in his cult.**" Others say that ***he is the first example of the scientific mind*** or that he in reality was aiming ***at the centralization of his powers as a divine monarch.*** And those that study the nervous system and our mental problems tell us, that **Akhnaten's** revelations came from **epilepsy.**

The novels and plays written about him make for a long bibliography. Perhaps the most popular, is **Mika Waltari's** ***The Egyptian*** translated

from the Finnish into more than ten languages including, English, in 1949. Later due to this novel's popularity it was turned into a Technicolor **Hollywood** epic feature film with a cast—or miscast—of a few first-rate stars.

Thus **Akhnaten** got his well-deserved immortality in spite of the priests, who, by the way, no one cares to remember today, anyway. If immortality for humans means to be identified and not forgotten, as an **Egyptian** saying has it, then the joke, after all, has been on the anonymous priests. One wonders how many times a day the movie ***The Egyptian*** appears on the world's television screens.

VI. LITERARY SOURCES

Glass, Philip. *Music by Philip Glass.* New York. 1987.
Montserrat, Dominic. *Akhnaten: History, Fantasy and Ancient Egypt.* New York, 2000.
Strudwick, Helen, General Editor. *Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt.* London, 2006.
Waltari, Mika. *The Egyptian.* New York, 1949.

VI. RECORDINGS

As far as I know, there is only one complete recording. This one has been reissued under different labels. Check it out.

AUDIO (CD)
Akhnaten (1990)
Performers: Vargas, Liebermann, Hannula, Holzapfel, *et al*
Orchestra: Stuttgart State Opera Orchestra and Chorus
Conductor: Davies
CBS Record Masterworks (2) 42457

NIXON IN CHINA
— 1987 —

I. THE SETTING
Opera in Three Acts
Music..... John Adams
Libretto.....Alice Goodman
Time.....1972
Place.....*Beijing, and the Great Wall of China*

Nixon in China is about **President Richard M. Nixon's 1972 visit to China** with the purpose of "**opening China.**" In reality this was the laying down of all the future steps for full diplomatic relations with that country. The visit was very successful for both countries.

Nixon in China was the first opera by composer **John Adams. Adams** is a New Englander and critics say that you can hear New England in his music. Be that as it may, what is certain is that from his childhood **Adams** was interested in music. By the age of 13 one of his compositions was performed. Later on he earned two degrees in music from Harvard, a BA in 1969 and a MA in 1971. **Adams** tells us that "in the house where I grew up we had Mozart and we had Benny Goodman on the record player, and I was not raised to think there was a difference." Bravo!

Although I am not a musician I can say the same for myself, for I was raised in the same manner, and I am grateful to my parents. In music they made me very ecumenical—With very few instances.

What makes ***Nixon in China*** a real interesting case in opera is that, in spite of its minimalist music and other important features, taken from

Nixon In China
Robert Brubaker, center, as Mao, and James Maddalena as Nixon
in the Metropolitan Opera production (2011).
Credit Sara Krulwich/*The New York Times*

Nixon In China
"Flesh Rebels" excerpt from the final dress rehearsal of the
Metropolitan Opera's production (31 January 2011).

the grammar book of the *avant-garde,* it still is, at its core, a **French Grand Historical Opera,** in contemporary twentieth-century stylistic garb. One wonders if Maestro **Adams** studied that old genre in music school or if it came to him as a natural, inevitable phenomena dictated when writing historical operas. In other words, is what we call the historical genre ruled by some kind of unavoidable strictures or principles? This twentieth-century opera, like a **French Grand Historical Opera** of the nineteenth century has spectacular ceremonial scenes, ballets, heroic themes, and other characteristics from that old genre.

The main thrust of the music here is minimalist, after Philip Glass's style, which inspired **Adams.** Nevertheless, it also contains other musical styles, like a dash from **Wagner's,** and even from **Rickard Strauss.** The listener may also be surprised at times to discover some of the 1930's **Glenn Miller Big Band** sound which, reportedly, **President Richard M. Nixon** used to enjoy and dance to when he was much younger. It seems to me that this was the way for **Adams** to create a local *ambiance* for his opera, as the masters of the genre always did, or tried to do, more than a hundred years ago.

Also, another very important point to underline here is that, contrary to many contemporary composers, **Adams's** music is accessible to the regular listener. That seems to be a characteristic of his art, because as he says, "something tremendously powerful was lost when composers moved away from tonal harmony and regular pulses." Otherwise, among other things "this signifies, as it often happens to me, and to a lot of the audience, that, I feel lost and feeling that I have been put down by the composers." Another important point is that **Adams's** success owes a lot to a well-written libretto by **Alice Goodman. Goodman,** with wonderful, insightful phrases, takes the listener into the minds of the main characters. This is patently demonstrated in the formidable scene of **Nixon** and **Mao Tse-Tung** meeting in the **First Act.**

II. CLIO'S SONG IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It is a fact that for all of his manifested anticommunism, early in **Nixon's** political career he, under the counseling of his advisers, realized that

improving and even restoring diplomatic relations between the **United States** and the **People's Republic of China** could be advantageous for our country in the **Cold War** with the **Soviets. President Nixon** at heart was not an ideologue, but a pragmatic politician. At that time, as the **Soviets** and the **Chinese** were at odds with each other, the president's move represented a golden opportunity for the **United States,** to pit its enemies against each other.

We now know that early in his first term as president, **Nixon** and National Security Adviser **Henry Kissinger,** began to carefully prepare the terrain by hinting to **Beijing** the possibility of warmer relations. Many overtures by both governments were made, and a few secret diplomatic missions to **Beijing** were sent across the wide **Pacific Ocean**.

The secrecy of these missions ended on 15 July 1971, when **Nixon** formally announced that he and a team of advisors would visit **China** the following year, which amidst many expectations became a reality on **21 February 1972.** Because of the animosity that had existed between the two nations for some 25 years before, the announcement fell like a bombshell in the midst of the American public opinion, and in the whole world as well. The **Soviet Union's** leaders, as might have been expected, were not too happy about it. Undoubtedly President **Nixon** with this move scored a few points in the **Cold War** strategy. That day of 21 February is the day that **Adam's** opera plot begins in a rather spectacular way with ***Air Force One,*** named for this occasion, ***The Spirit of 1776,*** with President **Richard Nixon,** his wife Pat, and his team of advisers aboard landed on the runway of the **Houston Grand Opera House.**

III. CLIO'S SONG

ACT I, SCENE 3
Nixon and Mao's Meeting

Nixon in China was unveiled in October 1987, in Houston Texas. On its 25th anniversary the critic **Richard Scheinin** of the ***San Jose Mercury News*** sat down with the composer for a long interview

about the opera in particular, and also opera in general. From this revealing article the reader can easily see why **Adams** was so attracted to write this opera. About this Adams said: "I am drawn to opera, because it is such a large canvas. [And] I think that themes deep in the psyche of a nation can be addressed in a way that no other art can quite do it …" Remember what Etienne Jouy said more than a century before? That opera should be a five act affair where the nature and majesty of the subject could be realized. Isn't this the *large canvas* that attracted **Adams?**

"The thing about opera," adds **Adams,** "[is] the mixture of poetry and really good music, and imaginative scenery… You take those very potent art forms and you mix them together. And if it is done well, which it is rarely, it has the potential of raising the imaginative realm to a very high level. And **history has that in it…**"

Later on in this interview **Adams** added that the core of his opera, "Nixon's meeting Mao,… represents a collision of the two competing visions of how one might live one's life… Nixon with capitalism [and] its unregulated freedom to make one's freedom; and on the other hand, Mao representing communism and socialism, where in its best form, in its most idealism, comes with—tyranny and control and violence."

Much of the *epic quality* of an opera, we may point out, depends on these collisions. It was **Gasparo Spontini,** author of the opera ***Fernan Cortez,*** under the influence of **Jouy,** who clearly presents, perhaps for the first time in the opera, the confrontation of the collective presence of two different peoples, **Aztecs** and **Spaniards.** In true **Grand Historical** fashion these two peoples, through the choruses, clearly stood for two opposing historic-cultural complexes.

I do not know how **Adams** discovered what he says. Perhaps it was in the music school, by reading lots of old scores or perhaps by intuition. His librettist, **Goodman**, says that **Adams—**and herein may be the answer to the question—"loves music and [his] knowledge [of it] is encyclopedic." Was **Adams** aware that he was

in the world of **Grand Historical Opera**? I definitely think so. At any rate whatever way **Adams** came to these conclusions it tells us about his stature in the world of music. I do hope that he keeps writing these operas, because this one is the harbinger of great portraits in music of famous people and crucial moments in history

Nixon in China contains many penetrating psychological pages. One comes to my mind immediately: Pat Nixon's soliloquy about the meaning of, and the transcendence of, her husband's mission in **China**. Here we have a needed reflective moment in an opera that tends to be extrovert. This alerts the listener to the complexity of the opera. If you listen carefully to the many historical operas on CDs and DVDs or in the theater, you soon will find these introspective moments, which next to grandiose pages make these works what **Baral** sees as the interplay of the wide panoramic lens and the "close up" or portrait one. I could cite a few, but for the sake of brevity I must single out, above all, the outstanding rendition of the meeting of the **American president** and the **Chinese Prime Minister.** This scene, once you get accustomed to the minimalist style of music, which for some listeners is so strange, you will see that the scene can stand next to those of king Philip II of Spain and the Grand Inquisitor, in **Verdi's** ***Don Carlo,*** or to **Meyerbeer's** ***L'Africaine/ Vasco da Gama,*** when he was facing the Inquisition panel, that was to decide on giving the famous navigator the green light for his exploration of Eastern Africa and India.

The success of these scenes cited above, and **Adams's** grand meeting scene in his opera, depends on the composer yielding the field to the writer. In other words, in this type of confrontation music must cede the space to the words, which should not be liquefied by the music into a tuneful passage, not even in the shape of an *arioso.* Here the role of the music is to underline, to support expressions that are almost declaimed. Opera composers have known this at least since the seventeenth century. A fine example that I never get tired of listening to is **Monteverdi's** confrontation between Emperor **Nero** and his tutor and counselor **Seneca** in the opera ***The Coronation of Poppea*** **(1643).** This type of scene must be more

theater than is usual in a regular opera, and for this you must have a good director familiar with the requirements or demands of opera acting which, although theatrical like the spoken theater, has its own characteristics, similar or dissimilar to it.

I think it is pertinent here to ask what kind of a man was the **Mao** who met with **Nixon?** Not much for sure was known about **Mao's** personality and intimacy back in **1972.** Only the barbarities he committed against his own people that painfully filtered to the rest of the world. However, we know that those who were present at the meeting were very impressed with the physical impact of the man. One of them has left some incisive comments: *the man,* he said, *projected toughness and ruthlessness, as he came from a peasant background and stock. He had to be tough after enduring years and years of struggle for power. The condition of ruthlessness oozed from him who was credited with the death of thirty million of his compatriots. These had served him as stepping-stones in his road to conquer total power, and to keep it.* It also has been said that he was an autodidact and wrote poetry, and that he made China puritan in spite of him being and an inveterate womanizer.

There are moments here in this scene intended to show that Mao is under a great emotion in the presence of **Nixon,** like when they see each other for the first time and shake hands. At this moment **Mao** says:

I can't talk very well...

Would this insensitive and brutal man, responsible for millions of deaths of innocent victims be so moved in the presence of just another regular **American** president as **Nixon** was at that time? I could understand that intense emotion that almost would not let him talk if it was in the presence of, for instance, a **Roosevelt** or an **Eisenhower** who had been one of the heroes in the same wars in which **Mao** had been involved. But **Nixon?** Because of this I interpret in Goodman's libretto, the intention to show us **Mao's** devious attitude, so as to prepare the terrain for changing

directions later, and for laying traps in order to put the president at a disadvantage in deciding what kind of a man was **Mao**.

There is another priceless moment of Oriental subtlety inserted here. This is when Goodman makes **Mao,** following the inveterate **American** trait for breaking the ice and putting the other person at ease by telling a joke or two. This is when he says:

Our common old friend Chiang Kai-shek
With all his virtues would not look
Too kindly on all this.

This apparently simple, innocent joke is loaded with irony and designed, as we said, to put **Nixon** psychologically on the defensive, for the United States had supported **Chiang Kai-shek** in China's civil war. **Mao** thus has reminded **Nixon,** with great subtlety, that the **Americans** had been on the wrong side and lost, and that although it happened two decades ago, defeats have consequences and that joke is intended to take command over the talks. Goodman here hits the target. In other words, the psychological tone has been set. That this phrase about **Chiang-Kai–shek** hits **Nixon's** psyche becomes patently evident later in **Act I, Scene 3** when, carried away by the many expressions of fraternity, or the many toasts offered to the new Sino-American fraternal friendship, he offers the lamest of apologies, *I am sorry:*

Everyone listen, cries out Nixon, let me say one thing.
I opposed China. I was wrong.

This statement, or better, confession, reveals a side of **Nixon's** character that he was weak and insecure. Was it director **Sellars** who said "that of all the arts opera can use the subliminal power of music to explore motivations, including seething hatreds?"

Now what kind of a man is **Adams's Nixon?** Some people felt let down by the opera because they expected a **Nixon** as some kind of a comic, even a buffoon. Fortunately enough for the opera, and for

us, the listeners, the maestro avoids ridiculing **Nixon** by not taking his initial naiveté to extremes. Here **Nixon** is not at all a buffoon. He, in reality, was a very complicated character, with many different and contrasting facets which historians will study for years and years in the future. At times, when he was not under undue pressure, which made him look and act nervous, **Nixon** could look the ideal image of what a president should be. A **Rossinian** character he was not. Perhaps a better fit would be the **Doge Francesco Foscari** or **Simone Bocanegra** by **Verdi.** From the beginning of creating ***Nixon in China,*** **Adams** declared to his team that this opera was to be a **Heroic Opera,** and the characters eloquent, something that **Goodman** his librettist and **Sellars** the director, understood very well. To inflict buffoonery on this opera, which is really a **Neo-French Grand Historical Opera,** in contemporary garb, would have destroyed its credibility

There is another wonderful twist in Goodman's libretto. Since the Meeting scene is the pitting of two very different cultures or civilizations it would have been easy and tempting for the writer to bring up the old wisdom of ***West is west and East is east, and they shall never meet.*** Not so here, though. Moving away from that petrified cliché **Goodman** has the brilliant idea of making **Mao** speak in ***philosophical apothegms, unexpected political observations, and gnomic jokes,*** that most of the time flew above **Nixon's** comprehension, who was only capable of speaking in ***staccato, nervous phrases.*** In this awkward situation I am completely sure, given **Nixon's** personality, what was running through his mind: I bet he was thinking in these terms: *We came here to talk turkey and this old ridiculous gizzard, all he is doing is wasting my time… God forbid we head back to Washington without some kind of —at least— good looking agreement.*

You may remember that at the beginning of this handbook I said that history as opera could be used as a didactic tool. Well I did use this scene with tremendous success. I put my students to researching **Nixon's** trip to **China,** then played the scene on a huge TV screen and thoroughly discussed it. I must say it was a success and they

learned what they normally don't do by reading a book, and much less from a lecture. Of course, it took me a long preparation with background guides about the characters, the country, and all of that sort of stuff. But I had never enjoyed a teaching experience like this so much in all of my career of 40+ years and so did my students. A bonus to this experience was that I made two or three new fans for the opera. Try it and you'll see. But a warning. This involves a lot of extra work in the preparation that may require a short presentation of what is an opera, etc. Perhaps you should use a summer ahead for the preparation of a few of these scenes. Do not just go into the classroom, and say: *Hey! This is what we are going to study today and blah, blah…* Give these presentations the rank they demand. In fact include them in your course syllabus and warn them about it at the very beginning of the semester. And by the way, If you need any help, just give me a buzz.

IV. SO THEY SAY…

*"**Nixon in China*** is a Great American Opera… I am certain that it is one of the small handful of operas that will survive."

—Critic Patrick J. Smith

"The music of ***Nixon*** catches in your ear; I find myself singing it while whizzing along the freeways."

—Ann Holmes, *Houston Chronicle*

"The opera has little chance of survival once the initial public attention ends."

—Peter G. Davis. *New York* Magazine

"There are only three things wrong with ***Nixon in China.*** One, the libretto; two, the music; three the direction. Outside of that, it is perfect."

—Marvin Kitman, television critic

V. LITERARY SOURCES

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Drew, Elizabeth, *The American Presidents.* New York, 2007.
Kirk, Elise K. *American Opera.* Chicago, 2001.
Valentino, Benjamin A. *Final Solutions: Mass Killings and Genocides in the 20th Century.* Ithaca, NY, 2003.
Warrack, John. *The Oxford Dictionary of Opera.* New York, 1992.

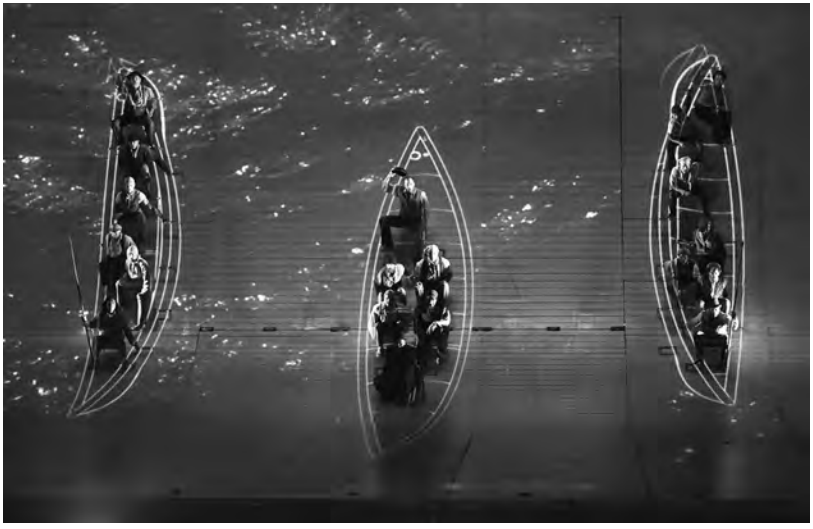
VI. RECORDINGS

AUDIO (CD)
Music from Nixon in China (1988) Highlights
Performers: Maddalena, Page, *et al*
Orchestra: Orchestra of St. Luke's
Conductor: Waart
Elektra/ Nonesuch (1) 979193-2

Nixon in China (2011)
Reissue of 1998 Grammy Award Winning recording
Performers: Maddalena, Page, *et al*
Orchestra:Orchestra of St. Luke's
Conductor: Waart
Nonesuch (3) B000005IYW

VIDEO (DVD—Blue Ray)
Nixon in China (2013)
Complete Recording
Performers: Maddalena, Kelly, Brubaker, *et al*
Conductor: Adams
Orchestra: The Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, Chorus and Ballet
Nonesuch B01GWCOOZG

Moby-Dick
Ben Heppner as Ahab and Morgan Smith as Starbuck in the "Symphony" scene of the Dallas premiere of Heggie and Scheer's opera (April 2013).
Photo by Karen Almond.



Moby-Dick
Projection of the whaleboats of the *Pequod*—LA Opera production (2015).
Photo by Craig T. Mathew

MOBY-DICK
— 2010 —

I. THE SETTING

Opera in Two Acts

Music.....Jake Heggie
Libretto.....Gene Scheer
Based on Herman Melville's novel
Moby Dick or *The Whale*
Place.....Aboard the oil whaling vessel *Pequod*
Time.....c.1830

Jake Heggie is an American composer of operas, vocal, orchestral, and chamber music. He may not be as well known as **Glass** or **Adams,** but he is on his way to attaining widespread recognition for his many works, and for his latest great operatic success: ***Moby-Dick.*** Born in **West Palm Beach** his musical education began with piano studies when he was a boy. This was later continued with two years in Paris, France, and with a graduation from the University of California, Los Angeles. **Heggie** became a **Guggenheim Fellow** and he has served as a mentor for the **Washington National Opera,** and is a frequent guest artist at universities, conservatories, and festivals in the **United States** and **Canada.**

Among his operas the most outstanding are ***Dead Man Walking, Three Decembers*** and now the phenomenally successful ***Moby-Dick.*** As in the case of **Adams** with his ***Nixon in China,*** we don't know if **Heggie** had studied the musical world of **French Grand Historical Opera** or if when composing the opera the inescapable and essential elements of the genre began to appear to him. For instance, the striking projections that make a tremendous contribution to the opera's ambiance. These projections are the equivalent of Grand Opera's stage machines.

It is **Heggie** himself who tells us some of his motivations for writing this opera. He says that the first impulse came from the "charged lyricism of Melville's writing [which] is deeply influenced by Shakespeare, and that there was theatricality. The characters themselves are Shakespearean and the events so epic they seem biblical. The drama could certainly fill an opera house, and it struck me that the music was already there. I could hear musical textures, rhythms, orchestral and vocal colors as I considered it. The hardest part was to craft a workable stage-worthy libretto." This line of thinking reveals to us that he probably was in tune with the masters of the **French Grand Historical Operas** of the nineteenth century, especially the remark about *theatricality*. To be something extraordinary, and to live on, this genre has to have theatricality. That is part of the genre's soul. **Shakespeare, Verdi, Halévy, Meyerbeer** and others knew this too well. And they had to put their creations together without visible seams, Those composers were aiming at the total work of art.

As an important piece of information here, the **total work of art,** or the so called ***Gesamtkunstwerk,*** was not a **German** invention, or creation. It rather was a **French** concept arrived at and used by **Meyerbeer** and the masters of **French Grand Historical Opera** of the nineteenth century. **Wagner** or his followers just gave the concept a specific name, and used it.

That ***Moby-Dick*** and his authors are in so many ways a throw back to the hey-day of the **FGHO** certainly seem not to have escaped the keen eyes and ears of **Barry Singer** of ***Opera News*** when he, in so many words, says in an article of October 2012 that "Moby-Dick, is that rare example of an opera collaboration where all hands… pulled as one: Folia's staging stirs together Robert Brill's deconstructed set design, Jane Greenwood's evocative period costumes, and Don Holder's spectral lighting, deploying projections and other complex contemporary technologies, yet keeping them in service to the story, [and] alternating visual grandiosity that ***Moby-Dick*** demands, with a theatrical intimacy that keeps the performers and their characterizations close to the audience's heart." This is, indeed, a rare example in our day and age, but it wasn't back in the days of **French Grand Historical Opera.** It

is well-known how the masters of this genre, especially **Meyerbeer,** worked tirelessly to achieve this collaboration. Music score and pen in hand he had long sessions with the stage maker, the set designer and all of those that had "put their hands in the project to capture, in their respective arts, what was in the mind of the creator. And this, so as to achieve a whole greater than the sum of its parts, and that the dynamic tension between all parts of the artistic structure made it analogous to an organism. That is to say, the dynamic tension between the components was the source of the life of the organism."

"I believe," says **Keith Cerny,** general director and CEO of Dallas Opera, that "[this collaboration in *Moby-Dick*] can be credited to four primary factors: a compelling libretto with multi-dimensional characters; excellent vocal and orchestral writing that builds to a powerful climax; a memorable subject based on a classic American novel; and innovative use of stage special effects seamlessly integrated into the production… The authors here make an excellent case for re-imagining a great work in order to provide fresh insights into important underlying truths." Again, as you can see, the **total work of art.**

We know that the nineteenth-century masters of **Grand Historical Operas** didn't always succeeded, but when they did, as in the **Iconic French Grand Historical Operas,** that we considered earlier in this book, they left a rich legacy for the future composers and audiences to mine. **Glass, Adams, Heggie** and others are today, under different circumstances and conditions, practicing the art of **Grand Opera.**

Also, it appears that **Heggie/Scheer, Adams/Goodman,** and **Glass,** have come to understand the structural role that historical fiction in an opera can play. This is noticeable in the way Heggie decided to put the novel's first words "Call me Ishmael,"at the end. According to **Heggie,** this gave him and his writer, *enormous freedom to move events around, to create moments and dialogs that aren't in the book, but are in the spirit of the book, and would work well on the stage.* This freedom, as we have seen before, is an essential element in historical fiction, especially in **Grand Historical Operas.**

II. CLIO'S SONG IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

There is enough evidence indicating that by the dawning of the **Neolithic Period,** some eight or ten thousand years ago, men were already hunting what seems to be whales in the **Mediterranean** sea and by the shores of the **Atlantic**. It is a certainty that the **Basques**, in northern Spain, were already hunting the big sea mammals in an organized fashion. Why did they do this? Because the whales provided them with many valuable articles. It was not only the oil they obtained from their blubber which they used for lighting candles, burning torches and also as lubricants. Another interest was for their bones with which they made a wide variety of necessary objects, such as ladies' corsets

In the 1700s, the **American** colonists began developing their whale fisheries in **Nantucket** as in many other sea ports dedicated to this industry. It also appears that they were already doing it in their vessels in the open seas. The whale they hunted for was the sperm whale from which they not only extracted the oil, but also the unique substance **spermaceti,** a sort of waxy oil found in an organ inside the massive head for which these whales were famous.

By the early 1800s many whaling vessels were already venturing away from **New England** into the **Pacific Ocean** in search of the dwindling supply of the sperm whales in the Atlantic. It appears that, as we see in the opera, some of these whaling voyages lasted for years. Thus the personal relations between the sailors and the captains of the vessels would be very close, and the success of the operations would very much depend on that tight integration. Life aboard one of those vessels was nothing if not difficult and dangerous. Total loyalty and trust in the captain was in so many ways absolutely essential for success and survival. That, perhaps, explains why the sailors had to put up with a lot under his absolutist and even tyrannical rule. Thus, harsh and complete discipline was rigorously enforced. It is said that because of it ***whaling seemed to possess its own self-contained society.*** Captains preferred a diverse crew and, because of that many blacks and Native Americans were active in it. It has been reported that one black sailor reached the rank of captain of his vessel.

After the 1850s oil whaling began its decline because of the on-land oil wells, which had made the extraction of oil cheaper and easier to refine, and was closer to its markets.

It is well-known that ***Moby Dick,*** **Melville's** novel, is based on a factual episode: the 1820 sinking of the whale ship ***Essex*** in the **Southern Pacific Ocean** by a sperm whale. The survivors were adrift for 95 days. Two of them, a cabin boy and the first mate, wrote accounts of the disaster and the long odyssey in the ocean where they actually cannibalized some of their fellow sailors.

III. CLIO'S SONG

ACT I, SCENE 9
"Captain Ahab? I must speak with you."

The reader must know that our commentaries below are about ***Moby-Dick*** the opera by **Jake Heggie** and not the novel ***Moby Dick; The Whale,*** as **Herman Melville's** novel was originally titled. It is a well-known fact that when a classic—be it a novel, or a play—is transferred from one genre to another, in our case, literature to opera, the new home *per force* imposes its natural characteristics of form, its personages, and even a little bit alas! the subject matter on the transferee. These changes must be carefully done to avoid denaturalizing the original newcomer as to make it unrecognizable. This is not the case of this opera. Much to the contrary. The creators, **Heggie** and the librettist **Scheer**, who had the daunting task of transferring a novel of hundreds of pages into two acts of music, have revealed to us a few of their novel ideas.

Also bear in mind that the most difficult transfer is, without doubt, that of literature into opera, because, as you may remember, *people do not sing, but talk.* But music has the power to take us into mysterious landscapes and situations beyond which literature cannot. In the specific case of ***Moby Dick*** the difficulty is doubled, because **Melville** often created passages and moments on which

experts on his book are still in disagreement. It took a composer and a writer a lot of inspiration to discern what situation, or even what phrase, could be enhanced by music. Definitely, as expressed by many of those who have studied **Melville's** book, the novel is a mystery unto itself and mystery is a welcome mat for points of view, and for **e**nhancing, or stressing passages and episodes by music that would connect with the listener. Listening to it, I felt that the authors, most of the time, did this expertly.

As you perhaps know, the novel is a narration by a member of the crew, **Ishmael**, who signed his name on what he thought, like the rest of the crew, that the sailing experience was to be a routine whaling oil hunt. Soon, however, he discovered that **Captain Ahab** was not interested in chasing the common oil whales, but a quasi-mythical one named **Moby Dick,** who in the past, in a ferocious fight, had torn off one of the Captain's legs.

Once the vessel ***Pequod*** leaves harbor, **Ahab** orders the crew to gather on the deck to hear what he has to say. There with his flaming biblical style oration—superb in the opera—he let them know the real purpose of this sailing, which was to find and kill **Moby Dick.** Obsessed as he was with his thirst for revenge, and by dint of his magnetic personality and the offer of a **Spanish** gold doubloon intended, no doubt, to appeal to the crew's greed, he nails the coin to the main mast for all to see. The deal was that the first one to discover **Moby Dick** swimming in the waters would own the **Spanish** gold coin. The crew roared back their assent in joining the captain in his unique personal crusade. Only one sailor, **Starbuck**, remained aloof and unconvinced as to the merits of the captain's quest.

Heggie's opera contains many of the elements that **Jouy,** a hundred years before, as you may recall, declared were essential to make an opera of **epic quality,** that is **Grand Historical Opera.** In ***Moby-Dick*** the **epic quality** is evident throughout the opera. The seven seas of the world provide the element for this, and the language spoken by the actors is peppered with biblical quotes and by being largr than life! This is the case of **Captain Ahab,** who with his spear

in hand cannot help but bring to mind—even if subliminally — the spector of the *Iliad*, and many of the biblical prophets.

What ***Moby-Dick*** may be missing from the genre is that it doesn't appear to have the collective presence of two different historic and cultural complexes facing each other. I have given this much thought. In the opera, with the experience of the last century and a half, couldn't the figure of Ahab be seen as a twentieth-century totalitarian dictator in his struggles to dominate, an historic-cultural complex that he wants to eventually destroy? His harangue, and the nailing of the Spanish coin on the mast, doesn't it stand for the paradise that all these dictators promise to their people? And his artificial leg, doesn't it stand for the wounds that culture and society inflicted on them at an early stage of his life? Wasn't that the case of Hitler? Can Hitler be equated to Ahab? Didn't Hitler pit against each other two, or more, of the German historic and cultural complexes, which in his mind were responsible for his own personal condition? Also, didn't Hitler pit against the German historico-cultural complex the Semitic complex?

Isn't Fidel Castro an Ahab? What was Castro's peg leg made of? What made him pit against two, or even three, historic and cultural complexes in a struggle to the death? Castro was a natural son, not legitimized, of a half literate Spanish immigrant who had come to Cuba to fight against the Cuban rebels, who aspired to separate Cuba from Spain.

After the war Castro's father, thanks to many shady deals, made a fortune big enough to send his son to the best Jesuit schools in Santiago de Cuba and Havana, and later buy a car for him. The students there, the scions of the Cuban middle and rich classes never let him forget, by so many different ways, his non-legitimate condition. Also from his father, the Spaniard, he was exposed to his hatred for the Americans, founded on the fallacious myth that had they not intervened in the war, Cuba would have remained part of Spain. And **Castro** was also exposed to the American attitude toward the Cubans, which in their clubs and societies were segregated unless they were wealthy.

That's what **Castro's** peg leg was made of. And then, like **Captain Ahab,** he had a whale to make it pay for its perceived aggressions from the Cuban society and the American businessmen residing in Cuba. Unlike **Ahab** in **Melville's** story though, **Castro** has completely destroyed the Cuban Society and inflicted on the hated **Yankees** many damages to their prestige in the world**.**

Now before you listen to the opera I take the liberty of recommending you to go to **Act I, Scene 9,** the chosen **Clio's Song.** Listen to the aria sung by Morgan Smith (first mate, Starbuck] a couple of times to get familiar with it. Why? Because from the very beginning the composer has used this melody in different forms, variations and modulations, hoping that they will be registered in your mind. By the time you get to Scene 9 where you will hear the song in its complete version, you will be ready to really enjoy it to the fullest. It is a melody that seems to be rising from the deeps of the ocean and using Starbuck as its human speaker. Remember, **Starbuck** was the only one who opposed **Captain Ahab's** obsessive madness of chasing the whale. Don't miss the deepest woodwinds in the orchestra caressing the melody, and **Starbuck,** who is ready to kill **Ahab**, pondering the ethics of killing one to save many. Here comes to my mind **Melville's** dictum that, "We are all killers, on land and on sea."

The melody keeps playing through the ending of **Act I** to become a formidable prelude to **Act II.** To me this is the magic of opera, a form of art that, however being larger than life, could at the same time be so grippingly human. And moments like these are what separate the great composers from the big heap of them.

IV. SO THEY SAY

"Earlier this month I saw the future of opera. It is ***Moby-Dick*** at Dallas…"

—John P. Greenan, *City Walk Talk*

"I believe… ***Moby-Dick*** will become the most popular opera written… so far during our young century.

—William, operawarhorses.com, 30 April 2010

"**Heggie's** great achievement in ***Moby-Dick*** is to write melodies that are memorable… "

—W. Burnett

"It is glorious and it is gripping; it is Grand."

—Wes Blomster, *Opera Today*

"Moby-Dick is a textbook example of current, cutting-edge, Grand Opera style. But so what? It works."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

What **Damon Mathews** wrote of **John Huston's** film ***Moby Dick,*** **could** be said of **Heggie's** opera: "[it didn't] butcher Melville's *Moby Dick* but adds to its power."

V. LITERARY RESOURCES

Chase, Owen. *The Narrative of… the shipwreck of the whale ship* Essex. London, 1999.

Delbanco, Andrew. *Melville, His World and Work.* New York, 2005.

Robertson-Lorant, Laurie. *Melville: A Biography.* New York, 1996.

VI. RECORDINGS

If you are considering investing some money purchasing the ***Moby-Dick*** DVD, or getting tickets for a live performance, don't hesitate at all. Go, get them! I understand your hesitation because we have seen so many new operas that after you have listened to them for the first time, you know you will never return to them. I call this the **Rossini Syndrome.** They say that a group of **Rossini's** friends convinced him to go and hear **Wagner's** ***Lohengrin.*** After much pleading, **Rossini** decided to do so. When the opera was over his friends besieged him as he was rapidly leaving the theater, to know what he thought about

the opera? After a second or two **Rossini** replied: "It's really unfair to ask me what I think about a work that is so complex after only one hearing… But believe me, I have no intentions whatsoever to listen to it again." I am sure this will *not* be your reaction to Heggie's opera.

Heggie's opera is not one of those usually aridly academic American operas that contemporary composers write to impress their university colleagues and critics. ***Moby-Dick*** has its twenty-first century American operatic mannerisms, but above all, it is listener friendly with music and harmonies that you can own and take home to enjoy for a long time. And the bonus is that the more you listen to it, the more you discover the riches that both the musician and the writer built into the score. I do hope that **Heggie** will continue on this track.

VIDEO (DVD)
Moby-Dick (2012)
Performers: Morris, Costello, Smith, Lemalu, Trevigne, *et al*
Orchestra: San Francisco Opera, Chorus, and Dance Corps
Conductor: Summers
Euro Arts (1) B00FABG42W