

Daniel-François-Esprit Auber

Daniel-François-Esprit Auber:
The Man and His Music

By

Robert Ignatius Letellier

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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Daniel-François-Esprit Auber (c. 1835)

Auber—a composer who is not...without many considerable merits. Like all good composers of the French school, Auber stands out for the elegant clarity of his harmonization, an abundance of delightful and rhythmically striking melodies, sensible moderation in the use of outward effects, and for his beautiful instrumentation. What you cannot expect to find in Auber, though, are passionateness, moments of tempestuous yearning and powerful inspiration. In his works he appears before us as the same smart, cheerful, intelligent and well-bred Frenchman that he was in real life.

—Peter Illych Tchaikovsky, 1872

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FOREWORD

Remembering Daniel-François-Esprit Auber is a bittersweet delight. The charm and elegance of his music used to be recalled in his overtures, but these sparkling masterpieces are no longer heard on the radio, and record companies will not even re-issue CDs of once popular LPs. If there is no one to carry the good news, it cannot be made known. This book is an opportunity to make Auber present to a modern public in one way or another, however modestly. But in the end it must be the music itself that wins hearts, and the inestimable comic charm of *Fra Diavolo* and *Le Cheval de bronze* will work their own magic on audiences if only those who run the opera houses would show a little more imagination and daring.

Auber is a composer of Classical control and detachment, yet one whose works are filled with Romantic sensibility and delicate colouring. His uneventful life, spent entirely within Paris, the city he loved, was one of complete dedication on every level—in his loving care of his blind mother, in his unswerving attachment to his natural artistic partner, the famous dramatist Eugène Scribe, and in his total commitment to his refined and gracious art. Auber's professional obligations at the Paris Conservatoire made heavy demands on him, yet under these conditions his fertile invention worked ceaselessly between 1811 and 1869, creating a multifarious musical-dramatic world of some 50 stage works, all full of romance and tender human insights. Auber's famous dry wit, the complete mutuality of his working relationship with Scribe, and his relentless focus on his art, emerge from the handful of letters between them that survive. These letters, presented here translated into English for the first time, hold up a mirror to Auber's suave, precise and defined self, and help to bring this extraordinarily close and sustained artistic relationship, with its delicate understated friendship, into affectionate focus.

The record of the operas relates the circumstances of their creation, the ingeniously varied nature of their stories, and tries to give a hint of their musical character. The surprisingly rich iconography that survives, not least from the wonderful engravings in Scribe's complete works, further helps to illuminate this forgotten world of operatic creation in early 19th-century Paris, dominated by its two great opera houses of grand and comic purpose. The reception history of the operas is a remarkable record of

fame and universal appreciation that can hardly be apprehended today by a public which has not even heard of Auber (other than as the name of a central metro-station in Paris). It is also most remarkable to note how very popular Auber was in the Northern countries of Europe (Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Russia, Poland), as though something of his refined and detached nature struck a sympathetic chord in the national sensibilities of those regions. The ubiquity of Auber's music is also reflected in the many arrangements of his music made in every form until that great watershed in the historic self-consciousness of Western society, the First World War.

Let us hope that the dearth of new ideas in the world of dramatic music, and a weariness with the stultified repertory of the international opera scene might lead to fresh discovery of Auber's bright and refreshing music—not least in his native country.

My special thanks go to the late Charles Oxtoby, a wonderful broadcaster and friend of my youth; at my request he prepared a programme on Auber for broadcast in South Africa that brought out so many charming aspects of the composer. I would also like to thank Robert Holmin, Edward Klingspor and Göran Grahn of the Nydahl Collection in Stockholm, who provided me with some of Auber's music not among my own scores; Gareth Burgess of King's College Library in Cambridge who likewise found me music from the Rowe Collection there; and Janet Snowman of the Royal Academy of Music in London who made unknown pictures and letters by Auber available to me. Marco Pellegrini of Milan has sent me invaluable recordings and images, as has Jeff Stephens of Austin, Texas. Amanda Millar has exercised skill and patience in the compositing of this work (especially with the extensive iconography). Elaine Thornton has been a devoted assistant, checking and rechecking, and working with unstinting dedication on the index. I am so grateful to all of them.

The musical examples and the images are from my own collections of Auber's and Scribe's works.

—Robert Ignatius Letellier
Cambridge
20 November 2010

INTRODUCTION

Daniel-François-Esprit Auber, a beautiful name to conjure with, the composer of *La Muette de Portici* and *Fra Diavolo*, was once one of the great figures of music, a staple of the operatic repertoire in France, and indeed around the world.

It is now almost impossible to understand the enormous extent of his once universal fame, his influence on French and foreign contemporary composers. His operas were in the theatre repertoires of the world until the 1920s, and innumerable arrangements of them were published and sold everywhere. The ubiquity of his overtures, once as popular as those of Rossini and Suppé, and the influence of his melodies and dance rhythms on piano and instrumental music, and on Romantic comic opera, especially in Germany, was overwhelming.

Now he occupies a shadowy niche in the general consciousness as the name of the metro station nearest the Palais Garnier—itself no longer one of the centres of the operatic world. His operas were loved in his native France until the years before the First World War, with *Fra Diavolo* and *Le Domino noir* last performed at the Opéra-Comique in 1909. Reactions to Wagner, Impressionism and the Neo-Classicism of the Diaghilev-inspired Ballet Russe meant that there was no longer any interest in the ancient traditions of *opéra-comique*, with its charming plots, melodic directness and rhythmic *élan*. Boieldieu, Hérold, Adam and Auber were relegated to the dustbin of history, along with the 'unspeakable bombast' of *grand-opéra* and its chief protagonist Meyerbeer, whose name was virtually unmentionable in aesthetically respectable circles. Only in Germany (where Meyerbeer was still performed until the rise of Nazism) did the genre of *opéra-comique* continue to flourish, with the kinship between the French and German traditions of nineteenth-century comic opera remaining something to be cherished. Auber's most enduring work is still performed there.

Only now, thanks to the wonderful work of conductors like Jean-Pierre Marty (*Le Cheval de bronze*, Paris 1979; *Manon Lescaut*, Verona 1984), and the late Pierre Jourdan at the festival of Compiègne, has France made a gesture towards its abandoned heritage, with revivals of *Gustave III* and *Les Diamants de la couronne* in 1991 and *Haydée* in 2004. The Opéra-Comique itself has been a stranger to its own traditions for a century. In

1989 there was a gala concert of Donizetti's *La Fille du régiment* for the re-opening of the Opéra-Comique Salle Favart in Paris, with June Anderson, Rockwell Blake, and the Orchestra of the Opéra National de Paris. In 1990 there was a one-off revival of Auber's *Manon Lescaut* (conducted by Pierre Fournillier). Only now is this venerable institution becoming more cognizant of its own past, with revivals of *Zampa* in 2008 and *Fra Diavolo* in 2009.

During his lifetime, Auber achieved the greatest success and recognition. Six biographies appeared contemporaneously¹ with another six appearing posthumously in the period up to 1914.² In the interwar years, so dark for France's operatic traditions, there were some reflective considerations of the phenomena of the changing aesthetic.³ But after 1945, any notion of research and reassessment was left to English-speaking and German scholarship.⁴ The research has been continued in the magisterial work of Karin Pendle,⁵ and especially in the definitive studies by Herbert Schneider, who has assembled a record of all the musical publication associated with Auber's operas⁶ and collected the extant correspondence between Auber and Scribe.⁷ Other major works on *opéra-comique* as genre within historical context have added to the texture of the scholarship (Bara, 2001).⁸

The situation with Scribe has followed an analogous pattern. The famous playwright and librettist was acknowledged as a crucial cultural influence in the late nineteenth century.⁹ But the scorn and disregard that has subsequently obscured his name has been relieved only by contributions from American scholars during the twentieth century,¹⁰ in addition to the work of Pendle. It was only with the millennium that a French study of proportionate import appeared—by Jean-Claude Yon.¹¹

Over the past twenty years the impossible has occurred, and the serious works of Rossini have been revived with enthusiasm all over the world, the conventions of florid *opera-seria* and the attendant casting problems notwithstanding. Many of these are now regular features on international stages. Yet Auber remains unknown and neglected still (apart of course from *Fra Diavolo*), although his impact on the nineteenth-century operatic theatre was just as great as Rossini's, and perhaps even more widespread—as Herbert Schneider has pointed out. However, scholarship in the last decade has entered a new phase in a process of revaluation and reassessment of the operatic culture of early- to mid-nineteenth-century France, particularly the hugely significant role of *grand-opéra* as musical and social phenomenon. The *Cambridge Companion to French Grand Opera* (ed. David Charlton, 2003)¹² established a reference point and set the tone, with analysis of the grand operas of Rossini, Auber, Meyerbeer

and Halévy within the context of the struggle for national self-determination, and examination of the exploitation of the great skills of the Parisian stage-designers and artists. Studies, like that by Anselm Gerhard (German 1992, English 1998), involving literature, sociology and historiography, as well as music, have shown in great detail how between 1820 and 1860 tragic opera in Paris on a grand scale took on the definition and social concern that is now taken for granted since the later works of Wagner and Verdi.¹³ Other works have adumbrated further aspects of the social force and implications of the operatic genres, and the extraordinarily influential role of Auber's first two *grand-opéras* in the process. Jane Fulcher (1987)¹⁴ explored this genre as politicized art, as an integral aspect of wider government policy and social manipulation. In her view, the theatre could even be understood as part of a process of restraint in influencing and covertly controlling bourgeois reflection on recent and current history and as a restraining influence on consequent political aspirations. Others have emphasized the importance of the past on the artistic pursuits of composers, painters, writers, and the relatively new profession of history in the first half of the nineteenth century, all within the perspective of contextualizing *grand-opéra* as integral to the larger cultural movements in France. This helps one to understand the popularity of its genre during the July Monarchy (Anna McCready 2003,¹⁵ Maribeth Clark 2006,¹⁶ Sarah Hibberd 2009¹⁷ and Mark Pottinger 2009¹⁸).

The time has surely come for Auber's life and work, especially in association with Scribe, to be reassessed; perhaps then the world will begin to hear more of his elegant gracious, life-affirming music. As long as charm and beauty, romance and transcendence have a part to play in the meaning of art and life, then his operas will be found to contain a wealth of untapped treasure.

The aim of the present study is to offer an overview of the life and work of Auber by close examination of his forty operas, with consideration of origins, casting, plot, analysis of dramaturgy and musical style, and reception history. This is presented in the context of Auber's relationship to the dominant genres of early nineteenth-century French culture:

—*opéra-comique* (as the equal of Boieldieu in *Le Maçon*, as his successor in *Fra Diavolo*, and as innovator in his own right in *Le Domino noir*);

—*grand-opéra* (as a founder figure with *La Muette de Portici* and as imaginative contributor to the ongoing development of the genre, historical in *Gustave III*, fantastic in *Le Lac des fées* and Biblical in *L'Enfant prodigue*).

The three evolving periods of Auber's unique involvement with *opéra-comique* are of principal concern.

This analysis of the operas is made in the context of Auber's crucial working relationship with Eugène Scribe, who provided 38 of his libretti. Their cooperation is unique and of great importance on several literary, musical and cultural levels. The nature of their interaction and personal friendship is assessed by a translation of the extant correspondence between them, some 80 letters that have not appeared in English before.

The analysis of each opera is illustrated by musical examples from all the scores, prints from the complete works of Scribe and other theatrical memorabilia. This adds an important iconographical aspect to the general place and relevance of these works in nineteenth-century operatic culture, and is supplemented by reference to Nicole Wild, *Décors et Costumes du XIXe siècle*¹⁹ and Sidney Jackson Jowers, *Theatrical Costume, Masks, Make-up and Wigs: A Bibliographical Iconography*.²⁰

The bibliography focuses on the life, providing a list of books and articles on Auber, Scribe, the French opera, pertinent musical and theatrical studies, and some relating to contemporary French theatre and culture. There is also a discography of recorded works.

Notes

¹ Eyma 1841, Loménie 1842, Fallouard 1857, Mirecourt 1859, Deléhelle 1861, Jouvin 1864.

² Legentil 1875, Pougin 1873, Carlez 1875, Blaze de Bury 1879, Kohut 1895, Malherbe 1911

³ Julien Tiersot, "Auber." *Revue musicale* 14 (November 1933): 265-278.

⁴ Ray Morgan Longyear, "Daniel-François-Esprit Auber (1782-1871): A Chapter in French Opéra-Comique", phil. diss., Cornell University, 1957, and Börner, W., "Die Opern von Daniel-François-Esprit Auber", phil. diss., University of Leipzig, 1962.

⁵ Karin Pendle, "Eugène Scribe and the French Opera of the 19th Century." *The Musical Quarterly* 57 (1971): 535-561, and its expansion into the book *Eugène Scribe and French Opera of the Nineteenth Century*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1979.

⁶ Herbert Schneider, *Chronologisches Verzeichnis sämtlicher Werke von Daniel François Esprit Auber* (AWV) 2 vols. Hildesheim, Zürich, New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1994.

⁷ Herbert Schneider, *Correspondance d'Eugène Scribe et de Daniel-François-Esprit Auber publiée par Herbert Schneider*. Sprimont-Belgique: Pierre Mardaga, 1998.

⁸ Olivier Bara, *Le Théâtre de l'Opéra-Comique sous la Restauration: Enquête autour d'un genre moyen* (Musikwissenschaftliche Publikationen). Hildesheim: