Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*

Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*: An Evangel of Religion and Love

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Fig, 1 Giacomo Meyerbeer. Lithograph by Delpech after a drawing by Maurin (1835)

CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

Creators and Historical Background

Stage Designs

Singers
The Role Creators

Interpreters
Before 1940

After 1940

Iconography
From *Les Beautés de l'Opéra*

From the *Oeuvres Illustrées de Eugène Scribe*

Paintings by Roqueplan, Lemud and Dodge

The Liebig Cards

Appendices

Modern Productions

List of Musical Examples

The Love Duet

Themes from Act 5

INTRODUCTION

Les Huguenots

Opéra en Cinq Actes

Paroles de Eugène Scribe et Emile Deschamps
[Augustin-Eugène Scribe and Émile Deschamps (with additional ideas, revisions and words by Gaetano Rossi, Adolphe Nourrit and Giacomo Meyerbeer)]

Musique de Giacomo Meyerbeer

World Première

29 February 1836

Paris, Académie Royale de Musique [L'Opéra, Salle de la rue Le Peletier]

Marguerite de Valois ..... Julie Dorus-Gras
Valentine ..... Cornélie Falcon
Urbain ..... Louise Marie Flécheux
Raoul de Nangis ..... Adolphe Nourrit
Marcel ..... Nicolas-Prosper Levasseur
Le Comte de Saint-Bris ..... Jacques-Émile Serda
Le Comte de Nevers ..... Prosper Dérivis
Bois-Rosé ..... Pierre-François Wartel

François-Antoine Habeneck (conductor)

On 29 February 1836 *Les Huguenots*, a grand opera by Giacomo Meyerbeer (then aged 44), with words by Eugène Scribe (1791-1861) and Émile Deschamps (1791-1871), was performed for the first time, at the Paris Opéra. It was to be one of the most successful productions ever staged at the Opéra with 1,126 performances in Paris over the next hundred years, in the process breaking all box office records.[1] In the audience were Hector Berlioz and Harriet Smithson. It would become Meyerbeer's most performed work, with thousands of performances throughout the world. Berlioz called *Les Huguenots* a musical encyclopaedia with material enough for twenty ordinary operas.[2] It has been likened to a cathedral; it has been called "an evangel of religion and love" (by George Sand). It has been said to be "the most vivid chapter of French history ever penned". F. Stoepel, writing in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* (20 June 1836, 269) observed that "the opera is one of the most admirable creations of the human spirit. It depicts the fine arts of poetry, music and of painting in enchanting effects with the rich life of scenic presentation, enhanced by the fairy play of the dance and the dazzling finery of the costumes, all in the powerful process of seductive illusion".

Les Huguenots is a huge exploration of faith, tolerance, hatred, extermination, love, loyalty, self-sacrifice and hope in despair, the first panel of a central diptych on the Reformation, and the heart of the wider tetralogy of Meyerbeer's grand operas, where issues of power, religion and love are examined in a variety of modes. For five years after the sensational premiere of *Robert le Diable*, Meyerbeer was thought to be resting on his laurels. Instead, he was drudging over a gigantic drama, partly adapted by Scribe from Prosper Mérimée's *Chronique de Charles IX*. It was hardly believed possible that the earlier success could be repeated. Most of the vivid details, gleaned from every available document related to the time, were the composer's contribution to *Les Huguenots*.

> "Apart from his outstanding musical gifts, Meyerbeer possesses to the highest degree an instinct for the theatre. He is pervaded by the plot, he identifies himself with the meaning of the words, he adheres to the historic and local colour of the subject" (Théophile Gautier).[3]

All the features of Meyerbeer's art are illustrated definitively in his most famous score, *Les Huguenots*. As historical pivot Scribe used the massacre of St. Bartholomew's Night (24 August 1572). Around this he wove a story concerning a Catholic noblewoman, Valentine Saint-Bris, and a Protestant scion, Raoul de Nangis, who become key figures in Queen

Marguerite de Valois's plans for ending religious strife by arranging marriages between leading families of the opposing religious factions. By various misunderstandings, Valentine and Raoul, who love each other, are separated, and Valentine marries the honourable Catholic aristocrat Count de Nevers. However, Raoul learns of his mistake and comes to seek Valentine's pardon. In this way he unwittingly overhears the Catholic conspiracy to massacre the Huguenots gathered in the capital for the marriage of Henry of Navarre to Marguerite de Valois. When he seeks to warn his friends, Valentine tries to stop him from going to certain death by revealing her love. Their idyll of mutual recognition is broken in upon by the tocsin, and Raoul flees to warn his friends. In the last act, Valentine, after Nevers's murder, seeks union with Raoul in marriage, faith and death, amidst the carnage of the massacre.

Meyerbeer matches the text in drama, splendour and ceremony: it combines theatricalism with profound depths of feeling. Its gorgeous colouring, intense passion, consistency of dramatic treatment, and careful delineation of character, secured for this work vast fame and influence. It was an epoch-making opera, an enduring monument to Meyerbeer's fame. As Hans von Bülow said, "I consider *Les Huguenots* one of the greatest moments of my life."

The music for this sombre tapestry of the Saint Bartholomew Massacre springs from the core of the vivid action, and creates a panoramic alternation of moods, that capture the tragedy of religious intolerance and personal anguish in one of the most fraught events in history when some 30,000 French Protestants were murdered during the night of 24 August 1574. Meyerbeer's music rises to the occasion, and reaches sublime heights of music drama, especially in the fourth and fifth acts, with the Blessing of the Daggers—one of the most electrical scenes in all opera - the more powerful Love Duet, and the Trio of Martyrdom in the last moments of the opera. Spectacle was incorporated in the plot, in Meyerbeer's concern to conjure up the *couleur locale* of those heroic times. The evocation of Marguerite de Valois's court at Chenonceaux, the recreation of late Medieval Parisian life with its Gypsy revels and the religionists' riots in the Pre-aux-Clercs, the wedding fête in the Hotel de Nêsle, all grow out of the central idea. Meyerbeer was also very successful in his characterizations of individuals: the dreamy idealist Raoul, the passionate and self-sacrificing Valentine, the fanatical and implacable St. Bris, the rough stolid Marcel, the elegant and capricious queen, the somewhat flamboyant but always honorable Nevers. All come to life in this score.

The opera became enormously popular, its various arias a touchstone of operatic lyricism, and by 1936 it had been performed 1126 times at the

Paris Opera alone. In spite of its overwhelming dramatic power and the instrumental riches of the score, the most significant aspect of the work came to be regarded as the supremacy of the vocal parts. Performances at the Metropolitan Opera in New York during the 1890s were among the most famous in operatic history. Here performances attained a legendary status, as in the so-called *nuits des sept etoiles* ("the Nights of the Seven Stars"), 1894 with Nellie Melba, Lillian Nordica, Sofia Scalchi, Jean de Reszke, Edouard de Reszke, Pol Plançon, and Victor Maurel.

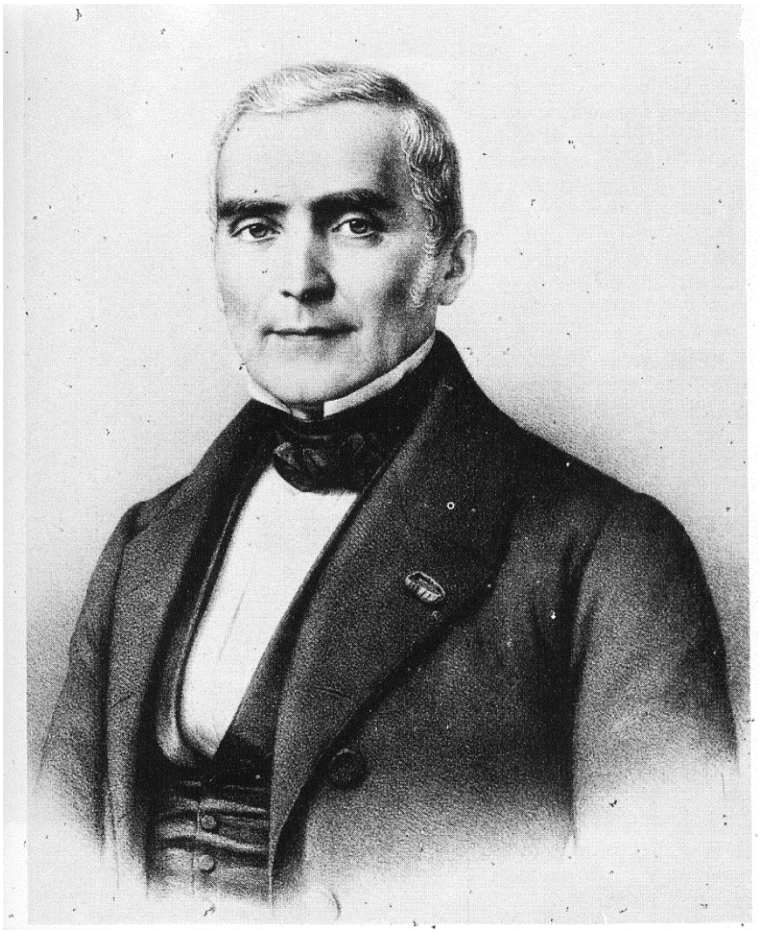

Fig. 2 Augustin-Eugène Scribe

Once again George Sand summed up, with incomparable insight, the essence of Meyerbeer's musico-dramatic achievement. "From stone floors that no Protestant knee ever warms, solemn voices seemed to resound, the tones of a calm, secure triumph and the expiring sighs and murmurings of a tranquil end, resigned, confident, without death-rattle or lamentation. It was the voice of Calvinist martyrdom, a martyrdom without ecstasy or delirium, a torment where suffering is stifled by austere pride and august certainty...These imaginary hymns naturally assumed in my mind the form of that fine canticle in your opera, *The Huguenots*; and, while I dreamt I heard the cries of Catholic indignation and a sharp volley of musketry outside, a tall figure passed before my eyes, one of the noblest dramatic figures, one of the loveliest personifications of the idea of faith that art has ever produced in our time: Meyerbeer's Marcel. And I saw that bronze statue standing clothed in buffalo hide, quickened by the divine fire the composer had brought down upon him. I saw him, Maestro, forgive me my presumption, just as he must have appeared to you when you sought him at the uncompromising and steadfast hour of noon under the glowing arches of some Protestant church, vast and luminous as this one. Though you are a musician, you are more a poet than any of us! In what secret recess of your soul, in what hidden treasury of your mind did you find those clear, pure features, that concept, simple as antiquity, true as history, lucid as conscience, strong as faith?..."[4]

The facsimile edition of the manuscript of this famous work, for so long kept private and then thought lost after the Second World War, enables lovers of opera to examine for themselves the compositional procedure of its great and often misunderstood creator. One can see the extent to which curtailment of the original conception was needed on the eve of the premiere: in the ensembles of both acts 1 and 3 Meyerbeer's complex developments had to be reduced. The ever present problem of censorship also meant that the original idea of depicting Catherine de' Medici on stage as the instigator of the massacre had to be radically altered and her role substituted by the Comte de Saint Bris. The famous viola d'amore accompaniment to Raoul's rhapsodic act 1 romance ("Plus blanche que la blanche hermine") was originally conceived for the cello. The extraordinary *Andante amoroso* for the central part of the love duet also indicates Meyerbeer's preparedness to act on a good idea: in this case, Adolphe Nourrit's suggestion that the cantabile be expanded. To see the MS of such a famous opera is both a moving and stimulating experience.[5]

Fig. 3 The Massacre of Saint Bartholomew's Day

1. THE ORIGINS

Soon after *Robert le Diable* (1831) Meyerbeer turned to his next operatic project. Several plans were considered and rejected, among them *Le Brigand* (text by Alexandre Dumas and Scribe), and *Le Portefaix* (Scribe). Eventually plans for a five-act *grand opéra* focused on the historical events surrounding the massacre of St Bartholomew's Night: *Léonore ou La St. Barthélemy*, the first panel of Meyerbeer's Reformation diptych, again by Scribe.

The first mention of what would become Meyerbeer's most famous opera is in a letter to his wife Minna dated 10 October 1832:

> Scribe has finished the first act: it is *gracieuse* and ingenious, but what he always misses, and this time particularly so, *consens* of the chosen epoch, is completely lacking.[6]

Meyerbeer had suddenly turned into a legend, and he was expected to demonstrate extraordinary powers in creating something new. Given his modesty and earnestness, the pressure entailed much suffering for him.[7] He was eager to merit the admiration lavished on him, and became increasingly painstaking, and even sceptical of his own ability. For five years after the première of *Robert le Diable*, he appeared to be basking in the fame of this opera. In fact he was earnestly applying himself to a great drama of the French Wars of Religion that Scribe was writing for him (*Léonore, ou La St Barthélemy*), partly adapted from ideas in the novel by Prosper Mérimée, the *Chronique du règne de Charles IX* (1829), already the basis of Hérold's *opéra comique Le Pré aux clercs* (1832).[8]

A contract was signed with the director of the Opéra, Louis-Désiré Véron on 23 October 1832, with production scheduled for the beginning of 1834. In 1832 the composer had visited London and Berlin to attend productions of *Robert le Diable* which had begun its triumphant round of the world stages. In early March 1833 his brother Michael Beer died tragically in Munich; he was in Berlin to comfort his mother, then in Dresden, in Frankfurt, and in September back in Paris to further his consultations with Scribe on the new opera *Les Huguenots* which was slowly taking shape.

After reading act 1, Meyerbeer raised objections to the text, on the grounds that it lacked the evocation of the authentic atmosphere of the

chosen epoch[9]. Already at the planning stage he had begun textual and musical studies of the historical milieu, an indication of the new qualitative way in which he intended to realize a historical opera. In the certainty that Scribe's text did not offer the requested options, he decided to break the composition, incurring thereby the financial penalty stipulated in the contract, and in October 1833 travelled to Italy.

The events of St. Bartholomew's Day had received several literary treatments over the centuries. In these earlier presentations, interest was focussed on the psychology of the characters, but, later, concern for the social and political constellation of the conflict came more to the fore. During the 1820s, the topic became almost a literary fashion. Novels, dramas, and essays were written about the event as an example in the controversy about the nature of the state and the issue of religious tolerance, so characteristic of the last days of the Restoration. Neither Scribe nor Meyerbeer made any precise allusion to the origin of the material. Scribe certainly used historical presentations as sources.[10] Typical of the contemporary practice of librettists, he also drew inspiration for certain characters and situations, as well as ideas for the *couleur* of the epoch, from literary sources, most especially Prosper Mérimée's novel *Chronique du règne de Charles IX* (which first appeared anonymously in 1829). The complex process of revision, however, increasingly distanced the opera from any historical and literary models, characterizing it as a deeply individual work of art in its own right.

Contemporary political events had furthermore made the religious issue topical. The strongly pro-clerical policies under Charles X in the 1820s had led to the backlash of the 1830 Revolution, and resulted in parallels being drawn with the great power granted to the Church under Charles IX in the late sixteenth century. By the mid-1830s, under the more liberal regime of Louis-Philippe, criticism of fervent Catholicism could now be read as a concern about the political power of the Jesuits and any tendency towards the fusion of state and religion. It had become popular to associate the Huguenots' battle for religious freedom with the French Revolution's struggle for political and social freedom.[11]

Meyerbeer's relationship with Scribe in this matter reveals important aspects of what was a highly important and effective operatic working partnership. Scribe suited Meyerbeer as no other librettist could. But this was not, as with Scribe's partnership with Daniel-François-Esprit Auber, a marriage of true complementary minds from the same family. It was more in the nature of that between producer and consumer. Filled with poetic instincts himself, the composer needed a gifted technician who could give the ideas he came up with the power of situation in the language of the

operatic stage. Scribe did not always grasp these ideas, or necessarily accept them: he might even have blunted their originality in his instinctively bourgeois perception. It was up to Meyerbeer, when he took over these ideas, to infuse them with his own particular energy.[12] This was very much the case in the famous Ballet of the Nuns in *Robert* where Scribe had originally proposed a formal classical idea, and was prompted into the famous Gothic scenario by the ideas of the composer and designers.

Meyerbeer took new notions of psychology further than Scribe in his adaptation of the Waverley hero. Certainly it is too facile to see Raoul as simply passive, and another instance of an indecisive and irresolute type of hero common in *grand opéra* since *La Muette de Portici*.[13] And before the composer attempted to embody this psychology in music, he made exhaustive researches into the historical period to be presented. Integral to this process was an involvement and experimentation with unfamiliar musical sounds and devices. Hence a comparison of Scribe's original text, preserved in his *Oeuvres complètes*, with the final version of the text used by Meyerbeer, shows that most of the vivid details, gleaned from many documents related to the time in question, were the composer's own contribution to *Les Huguenots*. The manuscript of the libretto retained among Meyerbeer's papers is 117 pages with intercalated rough pages. These contain alterations and new versions of individual passages and whole scenes in Meyerbeer's own hand, and especially that of the second librettist, Émile Deschamps, whom he employed to versify these new ideas.[14] This was with Scribe's full agreement.

Metastasio, who had been the most influential librettist of his time, had given all his attention to the form, the plasticity of the poem which was the frame or scaffolding of the composer's art. But with Scribe it was different. Here the situation dominates the form. The work sometimes appears to be minimal when it comes to style and color, but exceptional in apposite or stimulating situations, in providing material for contrasts, like a programme for the music. It is only to be understood what a stimulus to Meyerbeer's imagination such material could be. Scribe was an ideal collaborator for the composer's particular creative instincts.

The whole compositional process was interrupted in late 1833 by the illness of Minna Meyerbeer with a chest complaint following on her grief at her father's death. A visit to warmer southern climes was called for, and the composer paid the fine of 30,000 francs to Véron, the director of the Opéra, for violation of his contract. He took his wife over the Alps to Milan and Nice. In Milan he met up with his old friend and colleague the librettist Gaetano Rossi (who had provided three/four of Meyerbeer's six

Italian libretti[15]), in order to think through the whole project very thoroughly. During November of 1833 and in early 1834 he worked assiduously on the opera, and availed himself of the services of Rossi in developing his new ideas for the *Huguenots* scenario.

The most important result of their common deliberations was the transformation of the role of Marcel, whom Meyerbeer raised to the actual protagonist and idealist of the action. In this context, he decided to employ Martin Luther's famous Reformation chorale *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott* (1528) as the musical emblem of the epoch and its religious issues.[16]

On Meyerbeer's return to Paris at the end of September 1834, he was silent about Rossi's collaboration, and had the new Italian passages (which he presented as his own) translated into French. His friend and confidant the postal official Gouin put him in touch with the poet Émile Deschamps, who, on the basis of *Robert,* regarded Meyerbeer as a leading figure of French Romanticism.[17] He met with Scribe and Deschamps on 1 November 1834, presumably to discuss his wishes for the libretto. Scribe, who was working on *La Juive* with Halévy, presumably gave the go-ahead, and the composer's diary for the month records 11 further meetings with Deschamps, during which the latter attended to the changes and the new versification required. These included Raoul's romance in act 1, Marcel's duet with Valentine in act 3, parts of the Blessing of the Daggers and the love duet in act 4, and the trio in act 5. Of particular importance were the new ideas for the great scenes in act 4, where Meyerbeer was influenced by the "Guerra" chorus in Bellini's *Norma,* and he responded to the tenor Adolphe Nourrit's ideas about additions to the famous love scene, changes that would result in the middle *andante amoroso* section, possibly the most famous music that Meyerbeer ever wrote. The final form of the libretto is thus by Scribe, with additions and alterations by Deschamps after ideas by Meyerbeer, Rossi and Nourrit.

Meyerbeer continued to work further on the text with Deschamps, and an extant copy from the middle of 1834 indicates the composer's many changes, insertions and comments. Act 3 received a new first scene (that would be cut later) set in Saint-Bris's Paris hotel from which Valentine observes an attempted assassination of Admiral Coligny in the streets.[18] After signing a new contract with the Opéra on 29 September 1834, other alterations were made in response to suggestions from Edmond Duponchel who was to be responsible for the *mise en scène*. Because of the length of the work, Meyerbeer was obliged to cut out some three-quarters of an hour's music from three acts (cuts reflected in the autograph). Other changes were necessitated by the objections of the censor, and the suggestions of Adolphe Nourrit, the creator of Raoul, for the duet in act 4.

Fig. 4 Émile Deschamps

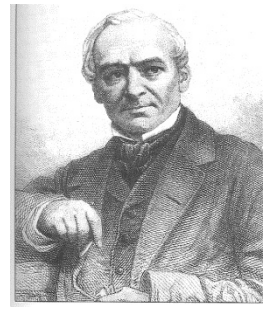

Fig. 5 Prosper Mérimée.

Fig. 6 Edmond Duponchel

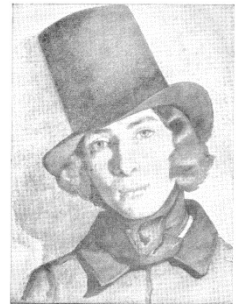

Fig. 7 George Sand

While Meyerbeer, after initial hesitation, went along with Nourrit's suggestion for a new version of the middle part of the duet, thereby deepening important musical and dramatic elements, he saw the intervention of the censor as threatening to the work. After wearying discussions, the censor insisted on a change of title and on cutting Catherine de Medici's part in the Blessing of the Daggers. Meyerbeer was obliged to redraft the role for a bass voice (Saint-Bris).[19]

The figure of the old retainer Marcel was particularly his concern, and with Rossi, he re-conceived the dramatic nature of this character completely. In a letter to Scribe (2 July 1834) he wrote that the librettist's idea of the role had not agreed with the composer's musical conception of it, and that he (Meyerbeer) had "rewritten the whole of Marcel's part for my musical needs".[20] The character as he emerged in this new guise presents one of the composer's most deeply felt dramatic creations, one, who in dramatic and musical conception, exemplifies an extraordinary political and religious engagement.[21]

It is interesting to see when the composer has required new words, or adjustment to the librettist's text. At the beginning of act 4, for example, Meyerbeer has used completely new words by Deschamps for Valentine's aria, presumably wishing for a more subtle pathos in Valentine's situation. Sometimes musical exigencies seem to need an expansion of the situation provided. Scribe's words for Raoul in the cabaletta of his act 2 duet with the Queen express his determination to be avenged on Valentine's apparent perfidy, and suggest an erotic charge in his reaction to Marguerite de Valois.

Scribe:

Oui, cette conquête	Yes, this conquest
Va par sa défaite	will, by her defeat,
Punir la coquette	punish the coquette
Qui trahit ma foi.	who betrayed my trust.
Une ardeur nouvelle	A new ardour
M'enflamme pour elle.	inflames me for her
Et mon coeur fidèle	and my faithful heart
Vivre sous sa loi.[22]	lives under her law.

Meyerbeer has had new words written for the first part. These provide opportunity for the musical conception of Raoul's response—which is not simply a melodic reprise, but a development of character. The words remove any sense of personal revenge and diminish sexual implication in Raoul's response; they also present him as nobler, more idealistic:

Deschamps:

À vous et ma vie et mon âme!	For you my life and my soul!
À vous mon épée et mon bras!	For you my sword and my arms!
À vous et ma vie et mon âme	For you my life and my soul,
mon épée et tout mon sang	my sword and my blood.
Pour l'honneur; pour son Dieu,	For his honour, for his God,
pour sa dame	for his lady
Trop heureux de braver le trépas![23]	More than happily to brave death.

Only in the repeat, when singing with Marguerite (and hence less audibly), does the erotic charge of the situation emerge in the resumption of Scribe's words. The aggrieved situation with Valentine is consigned to the end, and lost in the music.

Une ardeur nouvelle	A new passion
M'enflamme à jamais pour elle.	now inflames me for her,
Et mon coeur fidèle	and my faithful heart
Vivra sous sa loi, oui, sous sa loi!	will live subject to her, yes to her!