Daniel-François-Esprit Auber's *Les Chaperons blancs*

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Edited by

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Fig. 1 Frontispiece: Daniel-François-Esprit Auber (1835). Lithograph

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Life

Birth and Revolution

To discuss Daniel-François-Esprit Auber (1782-1871) can only be a pleasure. He was, by all accounts, a delightful person. The writer in the first Grove's Dictionary described his habits as "gentle and benevolent",[1] and all one reads about him conveys the impression of a gifted, witty but modest musician. He came into the world under rather strange conditions, being born in a stage-coach when his mother was travelling through Normandy, and in the depth of winter (29 January 1782). His constitution does not seem to have suffered from his rather unusual entry into the world—he lived to within a few months of his ninetieth birthday **[Fig. 1 Frontispiece]**.

The world of music saw a great many changes during those 90 years. When Auber was born, the sons of J. S. Bach, Wilhelm Friedemann and Carl Philip Emanuel, were still living; when he died in 1871, Wagner had completed *Tristan und Isolde*, and Verdi's *Aïda* had been given its first performance in Cairo. These great changes in musical style were in some measure a reflection of even more violent changes in the material world. We think we live in troubled times, but really, poor Auber must have felt that he was living in a mad world. He was only 7 years old when the French Revolution broke out and his family had to go into hiding, to escape almost certain death. Then when things settled down for a little, along came the Napoleonic Wars, and after them a succession of upheavals, such as the 1848 Revolutions, the Crimean War (1853-56), and in 1870, the Franco-Prussian War. It is said that Auber's death was hastened by the terrible events of the Paris riots which followed this last war, riots which ended in the deaths of thousands of Parisians, men, women and children during this socialist dictatorship (the Commune). When Bizet heard of Auber's death he said, "He just couldn't survive the destruction of everything that was his life".

By a strange twist of fate, Auber himself was largely responsible for a revolution in Europe—one with far reaching consequences. Most of Auber's dramatic works belonged to the type known as *opéra-comique* but he was also one of the creators of the more serious form of French *grand opéra*, which with the librettist Eugene Scribe he redefined with his epoch-making work *La Muettte de Portici* (also called *Masaniello*) in 1828.

The plot is founded on an actual historical event, the 1647 revolution in Naples. (Incidentally, typical of the use of spectacular scenes in grand opera of the period is the introduction, at the climax of the opera, of a representation of the 1631 eruption of Mount Vesuvius. The heroine actually jumps to her death in the lava flow of this volcanic inferno.) The revolutionary scenes in the opera are stirring and spectacular, and when it was performed in Brussels in 1830, it set the spark to a popular uprising which resulted in the separation of Belgium from Holland and its establishment as an independent state. What could Auber's feelings have been when he realized that his opera had been the cause of one of those grim upheavals such as dogged him all his life?

Style and Overtures

Another strange thing is that, although turmoil and change surrounded Auber throughout his long life, his own music changed very little. Essentially a composer for the theatre, he turned out opera after opera, year after year, each filled with charming melodies, piquant rhythms and old-world sentiment. His last opera *Rêve d'Amour* (1869) was produced when he was 88. The operas themselves have virtually passed out of the repertoire, but their overtures live on, and sound as fresh and charming as their evocative titles—*The Bronze Horse*, *Masaniello*, *The Crown Diamonds* to *Fra Diavolo*, *The Black Domino* and so on. The delightful music from *The Bronze Horse* is irresistible.

It is interesting to note that the plot of *The Bronze Horse*, written over a hundred-and-eighty years ago, has a distinctly modern science-fiction ting about it—it concerns a magic horse, cast in bronze, standing on a rocky cliff near a Chinese village. The horse transports a number of people to a strange fairyland on the planet Venus. Alas for our illusions! Such is the inhospitable surface of Venus that could one step out of a spaceship on to it, one would be suffocated, corroded, scorched and crushed.

---

[1] Grove, George (ed.). *The Grove Dictionary of Musicians*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1879, 1880, 1883, 1890; 1:252-55.

As Composer

Auber's composing career began early in life. He was writing ballads and romances at the age of eleven, some of them achieved considerable popularity. And yet he maintained that he did not want to be a composer. So many famous compeers had to battle against parental opposition in order to study music—Johann Strauss, Handel, Berlioz and Delius for instance. Auber, although his father wished him to follow a career of music, asked to be trained as a bank clerk and man of business! Admittedly, it did not take many weeks in an office to convince him that commerce which he practised in London until the Treaty of Amiens (1802) was not really a congenial world for him.

There were many strange sides to Auber's genius, like his method of composition for example. Although he wrote over forty operas, it could hardly be said that he set the librettos to music. "It was his custom", wrote one biographer, "to conceive his music independently, and very often in advance of the words it was to accompany". His brilliant librettist would then provide words tailored to the metre and rhythm of the music!

A contemporary declared, "Monsieur Auber in general draws little inspiration from his subjects. His ideas, most of the time, come to him unpremeditatedly, while he is riding in the woods. He notes them down on bits of paper, and all find a place one day in some score". Scribe, the famous librettist, who wrote thirty-eight librettos for Auber, was apparently quite used to this strange method of writing operas, in which the words were fitted to the music rather than the music to the words.

Unusual Habits and Humour

One must allow for a certain amount of journalistic exaggeration in some of these reports, but even so, one has to admit that Auber had some unusual habits.

Most surprising of all was his firm refusal ever to conduct, or even attend, a performance of any of his own works. When asked why, he replied that if he did so, he would never write another note of music! On one occasion he went to the theatre expecting to hear an opera by one of his contemporaries. However, the programme had been changed, and one of his own operas substituted. As soon as Auber realized this, he walked out of the theatre. The usual explanation is that Auber was an abnormally shy and diffident man, but whether that is the whole truth or not is doubtful. After all, he was the Director of the Paris Conservatoire, a position which no abnormally shy person could have held, as Auber did, for nearly thirty years. Moreover, as one of the most influential musicians of his day, he was continually involved in public matters and functions—again hardly suggesting that he shunned contact with his fellows. Auber was, in fact, a highly successful artist.

His amiable nature enabled him to rub shoulders with fellow composers without his feeling either resentment or envy, a rare quality in those days. When Rossini settled in Paris in 1855 he was naturally not exactly welcomed by the resident composers of the French capital. But Auber seems to have accepted the Italian master with genuine admiration. When they first met at a friend's house, Rossini was persuaded to sing the "Largo al factotum" aria from his opera *The Barber of Seville* to his own accompaniment. Auber was ungrudging in his praise. He wrote:

> *Rossini avait une fort belle voix de baryton.… Quant à son art d'accompagner, il était merveilleux ; ce n'était pas sur un clavier, mais sur un orchestre que semblaient galoper les mains vertigineuses du pianiste. Quand il eut fini, je regardais machinalement les touches d'ivoire ; il me semblait les voir fumer. En entrant chez moi, j'avais grande envie de jeter mes partitions au feu. "Cela les réchauffera peut-être" me disais-je avec découragement. À quoi bon faire de la musique quand on n'en sait pas faire comme Rossini?*[2]

> "I shall never forget the impression I received from that dazzling performance. Rossini had a most beautiful baritone voice. And as to his art as an accompanist, it was marvellous: his hands appeared to gallop not over a piano but over an orchestra. When he had finished, I mechanically looked at the ivory keys: I thought I saw them smoking. On returning home, I was sorely tempted to throw my scores on the fire. 'That would perhaps warm them up,' I observed, discouraged. What point is there in writing music if one does not know how to do it like Rossini."

Perhaps one thing that endeared Rossini to Auber was the dry sense of humour which they both shared. Auber asked him once what he thought of Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. "Ah!" said Rossini, "This is music one must hear several times. I am not going again."

Eugène Scribe

It would seem that Auber's success as an opera composer was, at least, partly due to his collaboration with Scribe, who was an extraordinarily gifted librettist and who was famous enough to have one of the streets adjoining the Paris Opéra named after him **[Fig. 2]**. The two worked together for forty years and their names became as linked in the

[2] Benoît Jouvin, *D. F. E. Auber, sa vie et ses œuvres (*Paris: Heugel, 1864), p. 29.

French musical world as did those of Gilbert and Sullivan across the Channel.[3]

Scribe himself was an unusual person. He was the librettist for several composers, including Meyerbeer; his published writings filled 76 volumes. His genius lay in careful selection of collaborators. One man would be engaged for the story, another for the dialogue, a third for the humour, a fourth for the lyrics, and so on. Scribe was, in fact, as much an agent as a writer. It is pleasant to record that he was scrupulously honest in his dealings. Many unknown writers received cheques from him as "Payment for copyright in ideas" though they themselves were quite unaware of the plagiarisms.

A small correspondence between them survives. Three incidental letters, written between the creation of *La Muette de Portici* (1828) and *La Domino noir* (1837), reveal something of the restrained cordiality of their collaborative friendship.

Fig. 2 Augustin-Eugène Scribe. Lithograph

[3] Robert Ignatius Letellier, *Daniel-François-Esprit Auber. The Man and His Music* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), p. 5.

Fig. 3 Jean-Baptiste Chollet as the Count of Flanders (coloured engraving, Hautecourt-Martinet) (1)

Scribe to Auber 1828 [concerning the creation of *Masaniello*]

> My dear Friend
>
> What has become of you? No news is good news, I suppose. It means that you are working. On Saturday I am leaving at 6 o'clock for Madeleine where I will spend a fortnight. The Delavignes have almost persuaded me to hope that you will come with me. Is this true? If it is, then I will offer you a place, not very attractive, it is true, if the weather is bad, but wonderful if it turns out good. This will help you, distract you, and not hamper you from working, because there we will all be at work, and you will be able to devise a good opera with us. Today and tomorrow I will be in Paris. Let me have a little word of response, but if you are not able to come, I would like to have your manuscript to show to the Delavignes and to ask their advice. Unfortunately, we do not have one. Should you decide to come, that will be quite a different matter, and you will bring it with you in any case. But please do come. It is only for 8 days, and 23 leagues are a small matter. There is a diligence for only 5 francs 50 centimes.
>
> Yours E. Scribe

Scribe to Auber 1835 [concerning *Actéon* and *Les Chaperons blancs*]

> My dear Friend
>
> You know that tomorrow, Sunday, we are reading our two operas to our directors at the Opéra-Comique—we will read *Actéon* at 9.30 before lunch, and *La Flamande* [*Les Chaperons blancs*] afterwards. For this, would you please bring the manuscript of the three acts. I have only the rough copy.
>
> Yours E. Scribe

Scribe to Auber c. 1837 [concerning *Le Domino noir*]

> My dear Friend
>
> On reflection, I feel there are too many uncertainties for me to accept the invitation of Madame Baudin. It is such a rare pleasure to have an enjoyable engagement that I would not want to miss it for the world, but what will suddenly happen for sure is that on that evening there will be a performance, or at the very least, a general rehearsal.
>
> Yours E. Scribe

A Laconic Character

When one considers how much work was involved in the writing of Auber's many operas, one has to smile at his oft repeated remark: "I'm terribly lazy—I'm interested only in women, horses and the boulevards". Equally exaggerated was his claim to be excessively bored. "My happiest ideas", he told a friend, "were created between yawns".

Perhaps there was a grain of truth in all this. Bizet, one of the few people not charmed by Auber (his senior by 56 years) said of him, "He is never very deeply affected by anything. He never has any passions, but simply preferences, and those never very strong". Bizet was exaggerating. Auber certainly seems to have had a passion for horses. He kept a stable of twelve, and even when in his eighties used to get up at six in the morning to choose the particular horse he wished to ride that day.[4]

There can no doubt Auber was far removed from the passionate, often high-strung artist exemplified in Wagner, Tchaikovsky, Berlioz, Liszt and others of his contemporaries. But what he lacked in passion he made up in wit. Examples of his rather wry sense of humour are legion. When he was nearing ninety Auber attended the funeral of an acquaintance.

A friend asked him how he was feeling. "Not too good", was Auber's reply, "I think this is the last funeral I shall attend as an amateur".

General Conclusion

It is interesting to see something of Auber's achievement from the eyes of a famous contemporary. From the beginning of Giacomo Meyerbeer's (1791-1864) career in Paris, he was in regular contact with Auber. The latter's close association with their shared librettist Scribe, meant that Meyerbeer met them inevitably and often. While initial meetings show no signs of particular personal friendship, later involvements, especially after the troubled management of Léon Pillet at the Opéra (1840-47), reveal a cordial social intercourse which was to last until Meyerbeer's death in 1864.

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[4] Delphine Mordey, "Auber's Horses: *L'Année terrible* and Apocalyptic Narratives". *19th-Century Music*, 30:3 (Spring 2007): 213-29.

The famed elegance and *esprit* of Auber's operas remained a source of exquisite pleasure for Meyerbeer, a predilection more clearly voiced in the 1850s when Auber's inspiration showed itself undimmed by encroaching years, and Meyerbeer himself was caught up in the genesis of his own *opéras-comiques*.

Meyerbeer's dairy of the theatrical works he attended provides perspective on the nature of the mid-nineteenth-century operatic and theatrical repertoires. It reveals that there was widespread popularity for the works of Auber—in Paris, but also interestingly, in the German-speaking countries where the composer was enthusiastically received for over a century. While *La Muette de Portici*, Auber's chief *grand opera*, was at the heart of his fame, the ubiquity of his *opéras-comiques* is a striking aspect of this reception history. Meyerbeer's close contacts with Auber over thirty years, as illustrated in his diaries, suggest the immense variety, fervour and richness of operatic creativity in Paris (and and the German-speaking countries) during the middle decades of the *ottocento*.

The performance statistics of Auber's works seen by Meyerbeer throughout his life and as recorded in his diaries, makes for impressive reading. It is full of surprises.

1. The Auber opera most often seen was neither *Fra Diavolo* nor *La Muette de Portici,* but *Haydée* which Meyerbeer attended 10 times between 1848 and 1863.

2. Then comes *La Muette de Portici* with 9 performances between 1831 and 1863.

3. The third highest rating goes to *Marco Spada* with 7 performances in the year 1852-53.

4. Next comes *La Part du Diable* with 6 performances between 1847 and 1858.

5. This is followed by 5 performances each of:

- *L'Ambassadrice* (1847-56)
- *Le Domino noir* (1841-63)
- *Fra Diavolo* (1849-62)
- *Le Lac des fées* (1847-56)
- *Le Maçon* (1849-58).

6. There are 4 recorded attendances at *Manon Lescaut* (1856).

7. The operas he saw 3 times are:

- *Les Diamants de la couronne* (1842-59)
- *Gustav III, ou Le Bal masqué* (1849, 1860)
- *Le Philtre* (1847, 1848, 1852)
- *La Sirène* (1844-49).

8. The operas seen twice:

- *Actéon* (1847,1852)
- *Le Cheval de bronze* (1857)
- *Le Dieu et la Bayadère* (1831)
- *La Fiancée* (1847, 1849)
- *Le Serment* (1841).

9. One performance or reference is made to:

- *La Barcarolle* (1847)
- *L'Enfant prodigue* (1851)
- *La Fiancée du Roi Garbe* (1864)
- *Zerline* (1851).

The total is 23 out of Auber's 40 operas.[5]

[5] Robert Ignatius Letellier, *Le Rayonnement de l'Opéra-Comique en Europe au XIXe Siècle. (Prague, 12-14 May 1999)* (Prague: Koniasch Latin Press, 2003) pp. 131-32.

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LES CHAPERONS BLANCS

Opéra-comique en trois actes (AWV 27). Librettist: Eugène Scribe. First performance: Opéra-Comique (Salle de la place de la Bourse/Salle des Nouveautés), 9 April 1836. In repertoire 1836 only. Number of performances 12.

Cast

Louis, Count of Flanders (Jean-Baptiste-Marie Chollet)
Gilbert, a grand equerry (Henri)
Vanderblas, a perfumer (Ricquier)
Gautier, his apprentice (Étienne-Bernard-Auguste Thénard)
A lord (Génot)
Berghem (Deslandes)
Victor, a soldier (Arnoult)
Petterson, an apprentice armourer (Léon)
Marguerite (Geneviève-Aimeé-Zoé Prévost)
Ursule, the wife of Vanderblas (Mlle Mousel)

The Overture (1836) (B-flat major 4/4)

The scenario, set in late medieval Ghent, describes how the humble Marguerite and her kindly guardian Vanderblas, a successful perfumer, save Count Louis of Brabant from a conspiracy hatched by the secret society calling themselves the 'White Hats'. This was one of Auber's least successful works (with only 12 performances). The score contains a single piece that became famous: the Act-3 polonaise. Full of verve and spirit, this is one of the most charming pieces that the composer ever wrote in the comic mode.

The overture highlights the aria which the Count sings in Act 3. Blaze de Bury thought that there was nothing better in *La Muette de Portici* or in *Gustave III* (with their important tenor leads) than this piece: "The phrasing is simple and touching, the feeling real, and Chollet performed it marvellously". The phrase produces a better effect in the overture, where the pathetic and vibrant tone of the attacking cellos conveys the melody most effectively.[6]

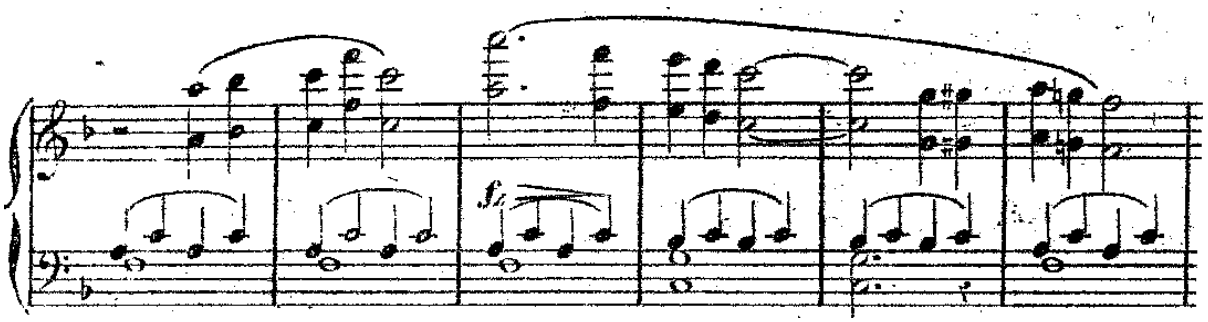
The overture can be structured as follows:

Introduction
First Subject A
Second Subject (B^1 & B^2)
Binary Central Section
    C^1 & D^1
    C^2 & D^2
Coda (twice)

The piece begins with an arresting dramatic figure for full orchestra in g minor: Marguerite's cry of betrayal in Act 2. This is followed by an *Andante* in hushed and serene mode in B-flat major, reflecting the deep attraction between Marguerite and Count Louis in their Act-2 duet which follows [A]. A gesticulatory figure leads precipitously into the traitor Gilbert's polonaise from Act 3, in the subdominant of E-flat, an open key appropriate to the gallantry of this swaggering theme much loved by the composer himself. The whole melody is repeated by the full orchestra, and undergoes a truncated development before the flow is brought to a halt, and by way of a dramatic *Andante* transition, with descending cello [B^1 & B^2]. This leads into the third major theme (in the relative minor c), where a smooth melancholy melody unfolds, both under and over an agitated semiquaver string ostinato, full of unease, depicting the conspiracy against the Count [C^1]. A fourfold repetition of the theme leads into a dramatic climax with full statement of the melody, culminating in a smooth seven-bar transition of sustained semibreves that leads into the third major theme, the Count's Act 3-aria (in the dominant F major) [D^1]. The beautiful, serene theme over a measured crochet arpeggio, conveying an aspirational quality in its melodic ascent, is tinged with sadness, and imparts an almost mystical apprehension **[Ex. 1]**. It is repeated thrice with truncated development to an impassioned highpoint on a sustained high octave A (A5 & A6), all very wistful, descending into the sudden resumption of the c-minor Conspiracy Music [C^2]. This recapitulation is again briefly developed, with allusive hints of the aria, before the transitional bars that this time smooth the aria into the tonic B-flat major [D^2]. The melody is once more unfolded

[6] Robert Ignatius Letellier, *The Overtures of Daniel-François-Esprit Auber* (Newcastle: CSP, 2011), p. xxi.

three times before descending directly into an extended binary coda for the full orchestra taken from the end of Act 2, all in very broad chords and much chromatic inflexion, and moving into a peroration on the repeat, to conclude in the home key.



Ex. 1 From the Overture

Plot and Musical Analysis

The scene is laid in Ghent in 1383.

Act 1. The apprentice Gautier loves Marguerite, the ward of the rich perfumer Vanderblas. She in turn loves a mysterious young man whom she saw at a recent fête. The grand equerry of Count Louis, Gilbert, brings her a message that she is to be the lady-in-waiting of the Duchess of Brabant, and is to report to a deserted tower in the city at midnight. A group of conspirators (led by Gilbert) unhappy with the Duke's leadership, plan a coup d'état. They identify each other by their *white hoods*. Gilbert hopes to use the Duke's amorous interest in Marguerite as a decoy and hence a means to their political ends.

1. Introduction ("Chez elle encore")

The opening scene provides a piece of classic comic opera, based on the traditions of the *opéra-comique*: a domestic scene of confused situations and intentions, as Ursula manifests jealousy over her husband's interest in his ward, and he mistakes his apprentice's aspirations for Marguerite as interest in his wife. The revelation that Gautier's aspirations may not be possible because of Marguerite's infatuation with a handsome stranger intensifies the comic patter. Their bustling trio is full of movement and chatter, a scene that is suddenly altered by the entrance of Marguerite herself, where her special bearing and charm cause admiration. The music alters in tempo and tone (from E-flat to the mediant G), and becomes a reflective quartet with Marguerite expressing herself in far more elaborate and vocally demanding style, characterized by vocal virtuosity. The more serious situation is suggested also in the four-part harmony of the vocal parts and enriched orchestral accompaniment. The comedic domesticity resumes in the reprise of opening, with Marguerite sustaining a long top line over the patter of the other three. The exposition continues with the entry of the hero Count Louis disguised as the youth Marguerite has observed in the street **[Figs.3-4]**. There is another change of tempo and style (to E major), more confusion as they try to ascertain his intentions, but he responds with his own entrance aria, small *couplets* with his own philosophy of life ("Dans cette vie où le hazard me guide", a minor-C major, with its own distinctive high bright ritornello in thirds and dotted rhythms, and optimistic ascending vocal line). Like Marguerite, his vocal style is more complex and demanding, and distinctly in the *bel canto* manner. The advent of Louis causes reflection on the part of all present as the main theme of the ensemble is resumed, this time as a quintet. It is dominated by Marguerite's top line which is expanded over the essentially homophonic patter of the other four. The writing requires long sustained notes over many bars, and eventually a sequence of *fioriture* as she decorates the top of the stave with bright runs, and the whole movement precipitates itself to a breathless vivacious conclusion. The model is the brilliant quintet in Act 1 of *Le Cheval de bronze* (1835).

2. Air (Marguerite) ("Moi? Tu me connais mal")

The heroine's brave and modest character is further developed in her B-flat aria. The Italianate style of Rossini is still in evidence in this small gentle piece. The dotted chords lead straight into the rocking arpeggios that buoy up the vocal line. This is extensively embroidered from beginning to end, and particularly in the cabaletta that develops seamlessly out of the cavatina (with busy staccato treble figuration in thirds), and makes virtuoso demands on the soprano as Marguerite celebrates and affirms her greatest blessing despite her orphan status and poverty—her liberty. This style of writing was tailored to Sophie Prévost who created the prototype of this specialty of Auber in Zerline, the heroine of *Fra Diavolo* (1830). Countss Stella in *La Cheval de bronze* is of the same lineage.[7]

[7] Betty Lucia Kirk. *The Role of Zerline in Auber's 'Fra Diavolo': A Mirror of Her Age*. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 1982.

3. Trio (Gautier, Vanderblas, Gilbert) ("Tiens, vois-tu, la violà")

The very effective trio captures the moment after Gilbert has delivered the message to Vanderblas that Marguerite is summoned by the Duchess of Brabant. Vanderblas is ignorant (as are we all) of Gilbert's engagement with the rebellion against the Count; Gautier is unaware of both Vanderblas's position and that of Gilbert. Gilbert is frustrated by Vanderblas's mercantile attitude to the Count who encourages trade. But he is astonished to see Gautier wearing a white hood, which he takes from the wearer, and whom he now regards as a fellow conspirator. Both Vanderbas and Gautier are taken aback at Gilbert's sudden change of demeanor towards Gautier. The conversational piece has some dominant writing for the *basse cantante* (Gilbert), and also, in the second half, in the new themes for the second tenor or *Trial* (Gautier) who reacts with astonishment to Gilbert's appropriation of the white hood. It is a moment of symbolic importance for the scenario. The score is full of imaginative touches, as in the balladesque "Mon chaperon blanc qu'au hazard il prend": Auber's response to the words gives an instance of his stylistic variety, as his common usage of the four-measure phrase gives place to a grouping of six bars:

Mon chaperons blanc qu'au hasard il prend,
est un talisman pour lui tout puissant.
Ah! c'est surprenant, Ah! c'est desolant!
En le regardant soudain il se rend.

My white hood that he takes by chance
is for him a powerful talisman.
How astonishing! How distressing!
While looking at it he suddenly submits.

The theme, in its ascending dotted rhythm and descending measured crochets, is the source of the Conspiracy Theme revealed in Act 3.

4. Duo (Louis, Gilbert) ("Seigneur et noble Comte")

The duet marks the moment of active betrayal as the Count, all unawares, awaits Marguerite, while Gilbert begins to advise him into fatal alliance. The music is notable for its recurring dotted motifs in the accompaniment, with a sense of enduring unease induced by the long pedal notes in E and in A sustained over many bars at a time, that suggest an invidious infiltration of Gilbert's advice, as he reads his conspiratorial letter of instructions to himself. The Count, thinking of his love affair, shows again a vocal line of *bel canto* conception particularly in the *fioriture*, turns and runs, especially the ascending series of quaver triplets that return periodically. The brief cabaletta has the typical unison singing of tenor/baritone duets, the two together but each caught up in his own thoughts.

5. Final (Le Comte, Gautier, Vanderblas, Gilbert, Arnoult, Choeur) ("Oui, Malheur au premier qui sortira d'ici")

The finale is divided into five sections, beginning with an *Allegro* in E major, the 3/8 metre initiating a rapid motor rhythm, this contrasting with the reading of Gilbert's letter of conspiratorial instructions over a sustained pedal note on D, like an ear-worm suggesting deception. The second section changes to C major as the Count hears of the plot to abduct Marguerite, and then in the third section to b minor, over calming four-part harmonies the young man seeks to reassure Marguerite. The fourth part sees the key return to E major and the metre change to common time, as in a smooth crochet theme the Count promises Marguerite that she will be taken into the service of the dowager Grand Duchess of Brabant in the Château Livgard at midnight. In the fifth section (C major, 3/4) Ursule and Vanderblas express their delight, while Gilbert and Gautier promise to deliver Marguerite safely to the château. The Count expresses his happiness and anticipated pleasure in another measured crochet melody with his characteristic upward ascent, and then wide downward intervals of sixths and sevenths adding to the affecting mood as he anticipates amorous success ("Dans mon coeur je rêve d'avance au bonheur que je me promets"). Marguerite, all unawares, joins in this melody and the two voices join in unison in a beautiful duo culminating in the rising crochet figure (F5 to C6). The Count is touched by Marguerite's simple integrity and begins to renounce his amorous project. The whole becomes a fast moving ensemble of ironic cross purpose as the chorus, the conspirators and the soloists sustain the melody to the quickening brilliant conclusion of farewell and new adventure (rather like Raoul leaving to meet the Queen at Chenonceau at the end of Act 1 of *Les Huguenots*).

Act 2. Gilbert leads Marguerite to the tower. After she leaves, Gilbert and Gautier reveal themselves to Vanderblas as members of the "White Hats", a conspiracy against Count Louis. After they depart, the 'Duchess' enters and converses with Marguerite, but soon throws off her disguise; Marguerite's young man, the Duchess, and Count Louis are one (a triple *quiproquo* of disguised identity). Fearfully, she checks Louis's advances by threatening to leap from the window. He apologizes and invites Vanderblas, Gilbert, and Gautier in for supper. His hospitality is repaid with treachery when Gilbert leads in the conspirators, who take the Count prisoner.

Fig. 4 Jean-Baptiste Chollet as the Count of Flanders (coloured engraving, Hautecourt-Martinet) (2)

Entr'acte

The act is introduced by a succession of contracting treble triads over C-major bass octaves, and interspersed by tremolo passages, creating a sense of unease as we enter the heart of the action.

6. Couplets (Gilbert) ("J'arrive et voici bien le rendezvous")

Gilbert's binary entrance song as he arrives at the old château is suitably bumptious in the dotted rhythms of the opening section (observing the Count's ignorance of the plot) and the more lyrical second section (*Allegro vivace alle breve*) in which he professes bold confidence in his insurrectional conspiracy. The vocal line is almost consistently doubled by the orchestra with relentless arpeggiated figures in the bass.

7. Air (Le Comte) ("Majesteux remparts")

The Count has his big solo moment in this extended scena with introduction, ternary aria (A-flat major), *tempo di mezzo* (B-flat minor), and cabaletta (A-flat) (ABCBDEFE). The perky dotted rhythms are softened by the arching melody over rocking arpeggios and lyrical vocal line with its very considerable demands on the singer—consistent *fioriture* and the Count's characteristic ascending quaver figures rising in alt. The Count asks for his Great Aunt's help in his impersonation, warns the object of his interest (in the minor key, 3/4) that Love is lying in wait for her, and celebrates Spring and Marguerite's rose-like freshness (*Allegro non troppo*, 3/4) in the tonic A-flat, the ecstatic tension developed in the sequence of treble quaver figurations in thirds that characterize the increase in cadential tempo and concluding excitement.

8. Quatour (Marguerite, Louis, Vanderblas, Gilbert) ("Que sa demarche est belle")

The quartet is very beautiful, and situated at the centre of the act, is the emotional heart of the whole opera. It underscores the dramaturgical principle of subterfuge which is central to the story (the Count's initially duplicitous desire to seduce Marguerite, and the conspiracy among his most trusted courtiers). It begins with an *Andantino* movement (F major, 3/4) with a running accompaniment by way of a dotted melodic figure, as Marguerite, Vanderblas and the Count admire the poised figure of the supposed Grand Duchess, while Gilbert mutters in disgust at the Count's trickery ("…va gaiment pour elle, pour perdre sa liberté"). The second half is *Allegretto*, and unusually in the tonic f-sharp minor, as if to underscore the darker motives underlying the action. The apparent 'Duchess', over sustained harmonies, sings a rich rising phrase in smooth crochets that resolves into an arching quaver figure, this sustained in the accompaniment and rising in treble octaves. The 'Duchess' requires that Marguerite stay with her always, and the others sing in unison over staccato figures in fifths and thirds, then join in this wish for a "douce espoir" in unison, finally dissolving into disparate overlapping lines, as the piece draws to a reflective end in a wish for peace ("...que rien ici ne trouble"). The last bars of the vocal parts present a rare example of Auber's sparing use of non-imitative counterpoint. A brief postlude sees the dotted figures return.

9. Duo (Marguerite, Le Comte) ("Ah! Ô trahison!")

The revelation that the youth and the Duchess are really the ruler in disguise initiates the core duet for Marguerite and the Count. Marguerite expresses shock and betrayal in her outcry of fear (*Allegro assai*, c minor, 4/4), leading into an agitated movement accompanied by tremolo figurations with recurring diminished sevenths and descending staccato quaver figures (D5 to D4). Her threatened suicide is given a pulsating nervousness by reiterated crochet beats in the bass, largely on F4. This gives way to a very emotional *Andante* (B-flat major, 3/3), a sense of stillness and intensity achieved by a diastolic interplay of B-flat triads rising and falling by semitones and reducing to single notes on B4 and A5 as she expresses her fearfulness and he his repentant supplication and love. She forgives him in a strong recitative. In the E-flat *Allegro* cabaletta that ensues both share a strong melody, restrained within five tones, she on the lower stave, he on the higher, with a very full four-part accompaniment, and leading into a stretta (*Allegro assai*) as they pray in fervent unison for a return to honour and virtue, he affirming his protective guardianship as ruler.

10. Final (Marguerite, Le Comte, Gautier, Berghem, Vanderblas, Un seigneur, Gilbert, Choeur) ("Pour célébrer ici ma nouvelle victoire")

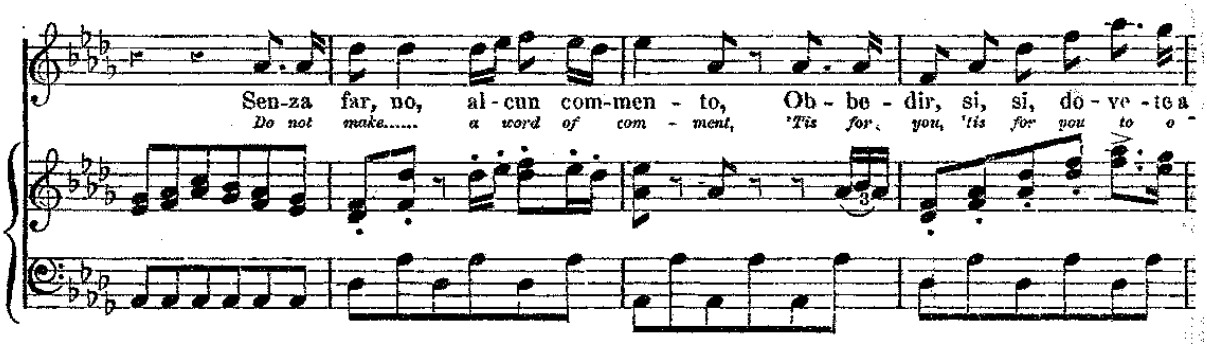
The finale falls into two parts: an extended celebration dominated by a jaunty dotted melody with an alluring demisemiquaver skip. One of the rare instances of a polka in Auber's music occurs in the intercalated *ronde* "Le plaisir n'a qu'un jour" (A major, 2/4) as the Count invites all to his celebration. The rising quaver theme is typical of the Count's melodic profile, and the unison treble accompaniment in thirds adds to the joyous lift of this typical drinking song, which also celebrated the Count's love for Marguerite. The second part of the finale is ushered in by a distant horn call, and abrupt change to the relative g minor as Gilbert suddenly reveals his true intent and the reality of the conspiracy. The confusion is reflected in the outburst and the dramatic accompaniment of arpeggiated treble staccato chords over reiterated plunging semiquaver figures in the bass. The Count denounces the treacherous courtiers (rather as Rigoletto does later in Verdi's opera, 1851) and has impassioned exchanges with Gilbert, all sustained in the very lyrical treble octave line in the orchestra. Marguerite and Vanderblas are of necessity obliged to

appear to be with the conspirators but in asides make their loyalty to the Count clear. All is repeated leading to a 6/8 stretta which in turn returns to 2/4 with motor figures in the orchestra, to bring the whole to a breathless conclusion. The last section of the of the Act-2 finale also contains the most imitative passage in any of Auber's *opéras-comiques*. Given that this turned out to be one of his least successful works, it is interesting to note that the composer observed: "Counterpoint makes the symphony live, but it kills the opera".[8]

Act 3. Marguerite and Vanderblas plan to get Louis released from the dungeon in which he has been confined. Vanderblas takes a potion which will give him the appearance of a corpse for an hour. Gilbert and Gautier, who enter Vanderblas's shop to confiscate his assets, think him dead. His apparent resurrection demoralizes them to the extent that Count Raymond, Louis's brother, can lead troops into Ghent and retake the city.

11. Entr'acte et Morceau d'ensemble (Marguerite, Gautier, Choeur de soldats) ("Moi je connais une maîtresse qui jamais")

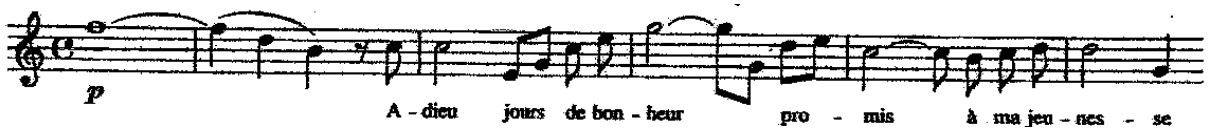
Act 3 powerfully reflects the implications of the drama in structural terms. Both the Polonaise and the Trio present situations where the main flow of the action is interspersed with deeply emotional asides: as Gilbert and his conspirators carouse **[Ex. 2]**, Marguerite reflects sadly on the situation of the detained Louis's bitter desertion, affirming her devoted loyalty and determination to help the Count. Her intention is asserted in vocal embellishment where the descending roulades are not so much decorative as affirmation of intent. The highly attractive and rather bumptious nature of Gilbert's celebrations (B-flat major) is effective contrasted by Marguerite's sad asides in the tonic minor of g.



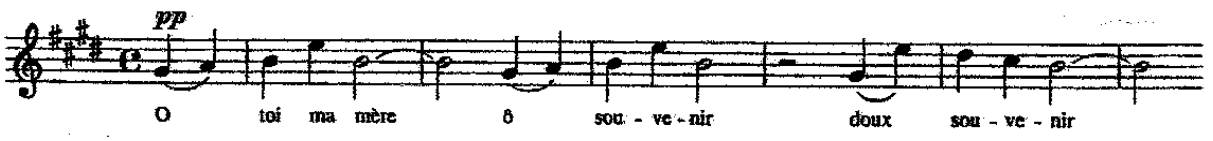
Ex. 2 Act 3 Gautier's polonaise (as used in Act 1 of the Italian *Fra Diavolo*)

12. Trio et Morceau d'ensemble (Marguerite, Le Comte, Gilbert, Choeur de soldats) ("Quoi ce traître Gilbert")
Andantino (Romance) (Le Comte) ("Adieu jours de bonheur")
Cavatine ("Ô toi ma mère, ô souvenir")

In the trio and ensemble that follows we are at the heart of the drama: the reality of the conspiracy of the White Hats against the Duke, the resolution of his persecutors, are contrasted by the loyalty of Marguerite who sings over the differing observations Louis and Gilbert (c-sharp minor). As the inevitability of death confronts him, Louis sings the first part of his moving reflection and farewell to life (C major). The conspiracy proper is unfolded in the sinister music first heard in the overture, with its relentless string ostinato and menacing creeping melody (now in e minor), and provides the medium of the second of Louis's intercalated sad lyrical reflections, this time in E major **[Ex. 3 & 4]**.



Ex. 3 Act 3 The Count's romance ("Adieu, jours de bonheur")



Ex. 4 Act 3 The Count's cavatine ("Ô toi ma mère")

[8] Charles Malherbe, *Auber* (Paris, 1911), p. 106.

13. Final (Marguerite, Gautier, Berghem, Gilbert, Vanderblas, Le Comte, Les Chaperons) ("Déliberer est de saison")

The Finale sees the murderous intentions of the White Hats gaining in intensity, until interrupted by the appearance of the procession with Vanderblas's ostensible corpse. The morbid apparition casts a pall, with both dread and superstition taking hold, only to explode with the appearance of Vanderblas as *revenant*. The music is suitably spooky, with long sustained bass minor seventh chords, with slow descending string figures in the treble (on flattened fifths), and portentous chords in dotted rhythm. The sound of trumpets announcing the arrival of Count Raymond at that very moment, provide the denouement in the manner of Beethoven's *Fidelio* (1805/1814), and the Count is saved. The dispatching of the conspirators and the reestablishment of the Count's sovereignty is dealt with at speed, but not without the loving exchange with the faithful Marguerite. The last pages are devoted to hymn-like praise of saving Providence, the couple, their bravery and their imminent marriage **[Fig. 4]**.

Commentary

Auber revealed considerable inspiration in his score, despite awkward situations presented in the somewhat melodramatic scenario. The overture was encored. The whole of Act 1 reveals remarkable qualities, particularly the *couplets de table* sung by the tenor Chollet, the lovely Act-2 quartet "Que sa démarche est belle" and the duet "Ô trahison! Ô perfidie!" sung by Chollet and the soprano Mlle Prévost. Act 3 contains Gautier's striking polonaise ("Moi je connais une maîtresse"), while the Conspiracy Scene and the finale are also noteworthy.

The tradition of the rescue opera, popular since the French Revolution, also features in the storyline, as does the motif of apparent-death through soporifics, so memorably used by Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet* (1594). Scribe would employ the idea again in *Guido et Ginevra* for Halévy (1838). The leading characters were created by two great stars of the Opera-Comique, Jean-Baptiste-Marie Chollet (1798-1892) and his wife Geneviève-Aimeé-Zoé Prévost (1802-61), both of whom had brought into life the leading roles in Auber's most famous comic creation, *Fra Diavolo* (1830).

A perceptive contemporary review was provided by Henri Blaze de Bury:

> In general, the admirers of Auber's talent seem to me to have been unjust with regard to *Les Chaperons blancs*. On the whole, I perceive that those who proclaim *La Muette de Portici* an exceptional masterpiece—and here one is talking about the genius of Auber—become angry about this inoffensive score and refuse to recognize it as a sister of the other operas. But we who have always considered this grand matter rather coldly, find that M. Auber remains in this work, as he always has, a musician of wit and good taste, whose thoughts are always lively and bouncy, rarely original, never profound, who entertains by the neatness of his composition and the coquetry of his phrases. All this music abounds in light and gracious motifs. The introductory trio is catching in its verve and spirit: this is without doubt the most charming piece that M. Auber has written in the comic mode— the most difficult of all musical styles. And there is nothing better in *La Muette* or in *Gustave* than the aria which the Count sings in Act 3. The phrasing is simple and touching, the feeling real, and Chollet performed it marvellously. Nevertheless, this phrase produces a better effect in the overture: where, despite the fleeting nature of its rapid appearance, the pathetic and vibrant tone of the attacking cellos conveys the melody most effectively. Whatever it may be, *Les Chaperons blancs* is worthy of a better fate.[9]

The worth of the Act 3-Polonaise was certainly grasped by the composer himself who introduced it into the 1857 Italian version of *Fra Diavolo* where it became famous all over the world as a trio ("Del capitan, alla salute!"). It also features prominently in the score of the ballet *Marco Spada* (1857). The tenor aria that Blaze de Bury so admired ("Adieu jours de bonheur promis de ma jeunesse") is indeed of remarkable beauty.[10]

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AWV 852-866; Börner 157-160; Jowers 1818A, 1831.
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The Singers

Jean-Baptiste-Marie Chollet (Paris, 20 May 1798–Paris, 10 January 1892) was a French singer (baritone then tenor) and musician who also composed a few romances and nocturnes **[Fig. 5]**.

[9] Werner, Hans [Ange-Henri Blaze], "Revue musicale". *Revue des Deux Mondes* 6 (avril-juin 1836): 374-375.
[10] Robert Ignatius Letellier, *Daniel-François-Esprit Auber. The Man and His Music*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), pp. 300-301.

Fig. 5 Jean-Baptise Chollet, tenor

Chollet studied at the Conservatoire de Paris at the age of eight, learning solfège and violin, graduated with a prize in solfège in 1814, and began singing as a high baritone in the church choir at Saint-Eustache where his father was choirmaster. In 1815 he also became a chorus member at the Paris Opéra, then at the Théâtre-Italien, and finally at the Théâtre Feydeau, where he remained for two years.

In 1818 he assumed the stage name Dôme-Chollet and joined a troupe of comic actors. In 1823 he was at the Théâtre du Havre, where he took on parts written for the singers Martin, Lays and Soulié. He continued to play these roles during a one year engagement at the Théâtre de La Monnaie in Brussels (1825) where he had great success in Boieldieu's *La Fête au village voisin*. In 1826 he rejoined the Théâtre Feydeau and became a *sociétaire* of that company (1827), but from 1828 its fortunes took a turn for the worse, and the Salle Feydeau closed the following year.[11] He married the singer Geneviève-Aimé-Zoë Prévost and their daughter Caroline Chollet became an accomplished soprano under the stage name Mademoiselle Monrose.

In the meantime Chollet had trained his voice upward into the tenor range, and now sang higher roles, as in Boieldieu's *Le Petit Chaperon rouge*. Hérold wrote two fine tenor parts for him: in *Marie* (1826) and in *Zampa* (1831). The latter became Chollet's most famous role and his own particular favourite. The tenor leads in Auber's *La Fiancée* (1829) and *Fra Diavolo* (1830), and in George Onslow's *Le Duc de Guise* (1837) were also composed for him. But he still occasionally sang baritone parts, notably Gasparillo in *Le Portefaix* by José Melchor Gomis (1835).

The closure of the Salle Feydeau allowed Chollet to resume touring. He spent a month in Belgium in April 1832, starting in Brussels and also singing first tenor in The Hague. After an absence of four years, he returned to Paris and re-joined the Opéra-Comique in 1835, where he had great success in some of the most famous operas of the time: Adolphe Adam's *Le Chalet* (1834), Fromental Halévy's *L'Éclair* (1835), Adam's *Le Postillon de Lonjumeau* (1836), and also in the less enduring *Le Perruquier de la Régence* by Ambroise Thomas (1838).

Chollet went back to The Hague to direct the theatre there, and also visited London before finally returning to Paris, where in 1854 he was engaged for the reprise of *Le Postillon de Longjumeau* at the new Théâtre-Lyrique. He appeared on 3 November and the critic Gustave Hécquet wrote that

> Chollet has lost nothing of his talent from the old days. He still has his figure, his comic gestures, his delivery clear and energetic … You can imagine how he was received in the role in which he always triumphed. It was like a family gathering, a return of the prodigal son…[12]

However, the revival was not successful enough to sustain Chollet's career. He was now more appreciated abroad than in Paris, though still admired his "strong and sweet" timbre. However, because he had never fully perfected his vocal technique and had performed too much without measured breaks, his singing began to decline, and was characterized by a rasping tone in the 1850s. His defects were similar to those of his famous predecessor and model Jean-Blaise Martin—abuse of fermatas, jerky roulades and a certain strain in the vocal projection. Chollet retired after 1853 and after that disappears from the written record.[13]

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[11] Frédéric Jules Faber, *Histoire du théâtre français en Belgique des origines jusqu'à nos jours*, 1879.

[12] T. J. Walsh, *Second Empire Opera: The Théâtre Lyrique Paris 1851–1870* (New York: Riverrun Press, 1981), pp. 30–31.

[13] Jean-Blaise Martin (1768-1837), a bass with an unusually flexible voice. Martin sang the role of Lafleur in Halévy's *Les Souvenirs de Lafleur* (1833), with a freshness and charm marvellous for his age. He had great success with his big aria, so well conceived by the composer, and adapted to the particular talents of the singer. An excellent actor, he was applauded in the scene where Lafleur declares to his master that his imagination has in no way diminished, and that he will know how to pull his nephew out of difficulty. Martin was already 65. There is no example of such a long career in the theatre (Thévenard who sang in the operas

Geneviève-Aimé-Zoé Prévost (Paris 1802–Paris 1861), the French soprano, also known as Zoé Prévost **[Fig. 6]**,

Fig. 6 Geneviève-Aimé-Zoé Prévost, soprano

studied singing at the Paris Conservatoire and made her debut at the Opéra-Comique in 1821.[14] She specialized in this genre of opera (light in tone, with spoken dialogue between the musical numbers), and took part in the first performances many such works, including the title role in *La Marquise de Brinvilliers* (1831, a collaboration of nine composers), and also in operas by Fromental Halévy and Ambroise Thomas. [15] As an artist, Prévost was admired not only for her excellent singing technique, but also her unaffected stage presence, her personal charm and manner, her skills as a comic actress.[16] She created the leading soprano roles in two of the most famous of all *opéras-comiques*: Zerline in Daniel Auber's *Fra Diavolo* (1830) and Madeleine in Adolphe Adam's *Le Postillon de Lonjumeau* (1836).[17] In the latter work, as in several others, she appeared opposite her husband, the esteemed character tenor Jean-Baptiste Chollet. They had one daughter, Caroline, who became successful in her own right as the soprano Mademoiselle Monrose. Prévost also appeared in other French and Belgian opera houses. Her younger brother, Eugène, was a composer and conductor.

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of Lully and Rameau for forty years, retired at 62). Halévy composed charming music for this opera, instrumented with elegance and discretion so as not to cover the voice of this doyen of French singers. Martin at the beginning of his career had neglected no opportunity to show off his fioritura.

[14] Geneviève-Aimée-Zoë Prévost. *data.bnf.fr. Bibliothèque nationale de France* (2016).

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[17] Kirk, Betty Lucia. *The Role of Zerline in Auber's 'Fra Diavolo': A Mirror of Her Age*. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 1982.