

The Grand French Opera Part I  
1830 to 1870

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## **The Grand French Opera Part I 1830 to 1870**

- **Like the cinema in Hollywood's golden age, the Grand French Opera in the middle of the nineteenth Century, made significant contributions to the artistic activity of its day.**
- **A fusion and union of spectacle, drama and music.**
- **The Grand French Opera combined the French affection for theatrical splendor with the Italian love for beautiful singing.**
- **It reflects the romantic urge to unify everything and had the large voices who today sing Wagner.**

## **The Grand French Opera continued**

- **It combined a large orchestra with innovative orchestration for example the voices having a duet with the orchestra or specific instruments.**
- **Elaborate scenic effects by Duponchel and Cecari**
- **Libretti by Eugene Scribe, a superb dramatist, who wrote the libretti of almost all the Grand French Operas.**
- **Characteristic also was a Grand Ballet in the second or third act, which was demanded by the supporters of the Opera**

## **Giacomo Meyerbeer 1791 to 1864**

- **Born Jacob Liebman Beer into a wealthy, cultured Jewish family in Berlin.**
- **He was a childhood protégé, received instructions from Court pianist Franz Lauska and Muzio Clementi.**
- **He studied with Abbe Vogler as a fellow student of Carl Maria von Weber and Carl Zelter who was also Mendelsohn's teacher.**
- **In 1815 Salieri suggested he should go to Italy to learn to write for the voice.**

## **Giacomo Meyerbeer continued**

- **In Italy he italianized his first name to Giacomo and changed his name to Meyerbeer using part of a relative's name.**
- **In the following years Meyerbeer wrote six successful Operas in the Italian style, the last one *Il Crociato in Egitto* in 1824 led to an invitation by Rossini to come to Paris to supervise a production of his opera at the Theatre Italienne in 1825.**
- **In the next six years Meyerbeer studied the Grand French Opera and became friends with the librettist Eugene Scribe, which led to his great**

### **Giacomo Meyerbeer continued**

- **Success with his first French Opera *Robert le Diable in 1831.***
- **This opera started his unprecedented success as an opera composer and brought him the name “the opera pope”.**
- **In 1842 to 49 Meyerbeer held the position as Prussian General Music Director in Berlin.**
- **Meyerbeer’s fame rests with his French operas. He preferred to live in Paris and visited his family frequently in Berlin or at one of the German Spas.**

### **Giacomo Meyerbeer continued**

- **In 1826 he married his cousin Minna Mosson. They had three daughters.**
- **Meyerbeer had a close relationship with his mother Amalia who often came to Paris for the premieres of his operas.**
- **Meyerbeer was a sensitive, neurotic man who was generous to fellow artists who needed his financial help like Richard Wagner and Heinrich Heine. Both exploited him and Wagner’s jealousy of Meyerbeer’s success let him to viciously denounce him.**

## **Giacomo Meyerbeer continued**

- Meyerbeer died in Paris in 1864 during the supervision of the rehearsals of his last opera L'Africaine.

## **Giacomo Meyerbeer's French Operas**

1. Robert Le Diable 1831
2. Les Huguenots 1836
3. Le Prophete 1849
4. Dinorah or Le Pardon de Ploermel 1859
5. L'Africaine 1865

## **Giacomo Meyerbeer's French Operas**

- **All except Dinorah have a libretto by Eugene Scribe. Meyerbeer found in him his ideal partner.**
- **Characteristic for Meyerbeer's Operas is their meticulous preparation and careful rehearsal.**
- **It took Meyerbeer 27 years from signing the contract for L'Africaine with Scribe in 1837 to the rehearsal period during which he died, which postponed the premiere to 1865.**
- **Meyerbeer's orchestration is innovative for example the voices may have a duet with the orchestra.**

## **Meyerbeer's French Operas continued**

- **Meyerbeer's operas demand large dramatic voices, now a days found in Wagner's operas, as well as coloratura reminiscent of Rossini and Bellini.**
- **Les Huguenots is also called the evening of the seven stars.**
- **Meyerbeer is a master of ensembles and the chorus in his operas moves the drama forward in the story.**
- **During rehearsals meticulous notations were made about the changes and incorporated in the score.**

## **Meyerbeer's Operas continued**

- **Although Meyerbeer's scores do not tell all, they include more information on performing style than any major composer had done hitherto before.**
- **All the great opera composers of the Nineteenth Century are indebted to Meyerbeer both the French from Berlioz to Gounod, Bizet and Massenet to the foreign ones Verdi and Wagner.**

## **Robert le Diable 1831**

- **The production of this opera in Paris was such a sensational success that it made the Paris Opera a fortune.**
- **The story of the opera is freely adapted from the medieval tale of Robert Le Diable and represents the eternal struggle between good and evil, the price being a human soul (Robert), who is at the mercy of an evil being Bertram (his father, none other than the Devil). Robert is saved by women by Alice and Isabelle at the same time.**
- **Here are parallels to Goethe's and Gounod's Faust**

## Robert le Diable continued

- And Wagner's Tannhaeuser.
- The voices have breadth and intensity through large powerful sound qualities which were not yet known in the French School of singing.
- One of the spectacular scenes is Bertram's invocation of the buried nuns to rise and dance in the graveyard; a great triumph of the famous ballerina Taglioni.
- There is so much great music it is difficult with our time limitation to make a selection..

## Robert Le Diable Music selection

- Opening scene of Act 2, Tract 13  
Princess Isabelle who loves Robert and Robert's foster sister Alice trying to save him  
*Cavatina, Isabelle*  
Vain is my hope for a happy future; Sweet illusion, dreams of love, you are gone forever.  
Lulled by hope, the tender dream has come to an end like a beautiful day.  
*Scene 2 Isabelle, Alice and Chorus of maids*  
Let us approach her without fear! Grant your help to those who suffer, generosity is in your heart.

## Robert Le Diable Music selection continued

- *Alice*

How daring I am! But many a princess, with  
gratitude, has received in the past similar pleas!  
Let us make our attempt! Grant your help to those  
who suffer, generosity is in your heart.

*Isabelle*

Listen my young friend, come here! My soul is  
touched, the man who is filing this petition can  
claim rights to my heart. My happiness is  
complete! Come Robert, my love!

## Robert Le Diable Music selection continued

- *Alice and maids*

O dear princess! Your soul is touched. The man who  
is filing this petition can claim rights to your heart

*Isabelle*

Leave me alone for a few moments

8'06" stop at applause

## **Les Huguenots 1836**

- **The story of the opera deals with the religious wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and the events of the Bartholomew's night Massacre of the Huguenots in 1572.**
- **The Huguenot Noble Raoul de Nangis is in love with Valentine, the daughter of the Catholic Noble Le Conte de Saint Bris, who however had pledged his daughter to the Catholic Noble Nevers.**
- **Queen Marguerite de Valois, Reine de Navarre is trying to unite the warring factions by offering a marriage between Raoul and Valentine and**

## **Les Huguenots continued**

- **Asking her to beg Never to release her from the marriage contract to which he consents.**
- **Raoul inadvertently observes this meeting from a distance and concludes that his beloved is unfaithful and refuses her hand when the Queen offers it. Her father gives Valentine in marriage to Nevers.**
- **This starts the war again. The Catholic factions plot the massacre of the Huguenots which is overheard by Raoul and Valentine.**

## **Les Huguenots continued**

- **Nevers refuses to participate in the planned massacre and dies actually defending Raoul's faithful Huguenot servant Marcel.**
- **At the end Valentine gives up her faith to die with Raoul after having been blessed by Marcel.**
- **The opera contains glorious grand duets between Queen Marguerite and Raoul, Raoul and Valentine and Valentine and Marcel.**
- **Meyerbeer used the Huguenot Hymn: "Ein feste Burg" in several parts of the opera as a Leitmotiv for the Huguenots.**

## **Les Huguenots Music selections**

- **You will hear in succession**
  - 1. Chapter 14**  
**Queen Marguerite opening the second act with a praise of the beauty of the land of Touraine**  
**stop about 6'28 at applause**
  - 2. Chapter 33 and 34 Finale**  
**The dramatic death and martyrdom of Raoul, Valentine and Marcel, about 17', stop at applause and credits**

## **Le Prophete 1849**

- **The story of the opera deals loosely with the uprising of the Anabaptists in 1534 to 35 in Dordrecht, Holland and Muenster, Westphalia.**
- **Jean de Leyden joins the uprising of the Anabaptists after his bride Berthe has been abducted by the tyrant Count Oberthal and Jean had to sacrifice his bride to save his mother Fides.**
- **The Anabaptists use Jean's resemblance to the picture of King David in the Cathedral of Muenster to persuade him to lead them as the Prophete against the tyrants.**

## **Le Prophete continued**

- **In Fides Meyerbeer created his most memorable character, the loving and long-suffering mother, portrayed at the premiere by Pauline Viardot.**
- **Jean was crowned in Muenster. The magnificent Coronation March is often heard as a concert piece and is also as often used in school graduations as Elgar's Pomp and Circumstance.**
- **The German Emperor Charles V promises the Anabaptists a pardon if they betray Jean.**

## Le Prophete continued

- **Berthe, Jean's former bride kills herself when she realizes that her former fiancée and the Prophete are the same person.**
- **She sets a fire that ignites the powder magazine in the dungeon of the castle and blows up the castle and with it the Anabaptists, Jean and Fides.**
- **Aside from the Coronation March, the opera is famous for the skating ballet, a unique Meyerbeer invention where roller skaters are simulating ice skating in the third act.**

## Le Prophete music selection

- **Meyerbeer gave Fides three grand arias of which the third in the 5<sup>th</sup> act is the greatest.**

**You will here two selections**

- 1. Jean and a soldier chorus, Jena's great prayer in the third act**

**CD 2, Act III Tract 11**

***Jean (Nicolai Gedda)***

**Eternal One, God, savior in the dust my brow is  
lowered, God, Thou seest us all on our knees!**

## Le Prophete music selection continued

*Soldiers*

*Miserere, miserere nobis!*

*Jean*

For thy support...

*Soldiers*

..has been taken from me!

*Jean*

Have pity! Have Pity! Lord, hear my prayer!

Lord temper thy wrath! Forgive thy strayed people,

Thy people. Merciful God have pity! 3'49"

## Le Prophete music selection continued

2. Fides aria and Cabaletta "Pretres de Baal"

CD3, Act V, Tract 8

*Fides (Marilyn Horne)*

O priest of Baal, where have you brought me?

What! The walls of a dungeon! Ah My footsteps are  
restrained when Berthe wants my sons death!

My son! He is that no more! He denied his mother!

On his guilty brow may Thy wrath burst, strike,  
strike, Thou who punish all ingrate children!

No, no, no mercy, mercy on him!

O you who abandon me, my heart, my heart is  
appeased.

## Le Prophete music selection continued

### *Fides weeping*

Farewell, farewell my poor child, my beloved, be forgiven! I gave you my heart, I gave you my vows, and now, now that you be happy, that you may be happy, I give you my life, and my rapt soul will await you in the heavens!

### *An officer*

Woman, prostrate yourself, prostrate yourself before your divine master! The Prophete King is going to appear before your eyes!

## Le Prophete music selection continued

### *Fides*

He is going to come!..I am going to see him!.. Alas! Very guilty perhaps! God! God! Like a thunderbolt plunged into his soul, strike my son, O truth, with my flame!

Strike my son.. Let him be tempered like brass by the fire! Ah! Like a thunderbolt..Celestial flame, touch his soul at last!

Holy host, give him back his angel, divine spirit, descend, conqueror! Holy Ghost..

## **Le Prophete music selection continued**

- **With thy shafts pierce his heart, his heart; and, before his footsteps, let crime's black abyss not open! I am leading my child back, my child to God the savior, to God the savior!**

**9'34"**

## **Dinorah 1859**

**Libretto by Barbier, Carre and Meyerbeer**

- **This is a pastoral opera composed for the Paris Opera Comique and based on a Breton legend about a lost treasure which will kill the first person touching it.**
- **The role of the unhappy goat shepherdess Dinorah who goes mad when her fiancée Hoel leaves her to find the treasure was created by Adelina Patti.**
- **Hoel finds his way back to his real treasure Dinorah and the opera ends happily.**

## **Dinorah music selection**

- **The opera is known for its wonderful melodies. The most famous one is Dinorah's shadow dance and coloratura showpiece. The coloratura is not just embellishment but represents the unsettled mind of Dinorah.**
- **I selected the comic duet between Hoel and Correntin in which Hoel tries to persuade Correntin ,the other shepherd, to go into the ravine first to get the treasure.**

**Chapter 17, stop after 8 ' when they face each other and bud their heads together**

## **L'Africaine 1865**

- **Meyerbeer considered this opera his master piece.**
- **The story is loosely base on the voyages of discovery of Vasco da Gama.**
- **Vasco da Gama comes back to Portugal with two slaves Selika (unbeknown to him a queen in her native country) and Nelusko. They are the only survivors of the shipwreck of the explorer Bartholomew Diaz.**
- **His rival Don Pedro prevents him to head the next voyage of discovery and sends him and the slaves to prison.**

### **L'Africaine continued**

- **Selika is in love with Vasco and watches over him but is in despair that his love belongs to Inez, who is also desired by Don Pedro.**
- **Inez purchases Vasco's freedom through her own sacrifice in marrying Don Pedro.**
- **Both Don Pedro and Vasco are in pursuit of the discovery to find the way to India.**
- **A violent storm breaks out and the ships are driven onto a reef.**

### **L'Africaine continued**

- **The ship is taken by the natives who welcome back Selika as their Queen. Vasco finds himself in a tropical paradise and sings the beautiful aria "o Paradis".**
- **Selika saves him from the natives protesting he is her husband.**
- **Vasco suddenly hears Inez's voice and his passion for her revives.**
- **Selika forgives the lovers and sacrifices herself.**
- **She persuades Nelusko to give them the ship to escape.**

## **L'Africaine continued**

- **She watches the ship to sail away and commits suicide by inhaling the poisonous perfume of the Mancanilla tree. When Nelusko finds her dead, he seeks death beside her under the branches of the fatal tree.**

## **L'Africaine music selection**

- **You will hear three selections in succession**
  - 1. Selika's aria in the second act , watching over Vasco. The voice is echoed by the orchestra, a unique invention of Meyerbeer**  
**Act 2 Chapter 9 about 8' stop when she kisses him**
  - 2. "O Paradis" Vasco's 4<sup>th</sup> Act aria**  
**Act 4 , Chapter 20 about 3'30" , stop at applause**
  - 3. Duet Vasco da Gama and Inez followed by confrontation of Inez and Selika**  
**Act V, Chapter 26 about 9' , stop at applause**