= Robert le diable =

Robert le diable (Robert the Devil) is an opera in five acts composed by Giacomo Meyerbeer from a libretto written by Eugène Scribe and Germain Delavigne . Robert le diable is regarded as one of the first grand operas at the Paris Opéra . It has only a superficial connection to the medieval legend of Robert the Devil .

The opera was immediately successful from its first night on 21 November 1831 at the Opéra ; the dramatic music , harmony and orchestration , its melodramatic plot , its star singers and its sensational stage effects compelled Frédéric Chopin , who was in the audience , to say , " If ever magnificence was seen in the theatre , I doubt that it reached the level of splendour shown in Robert ... It is a masterpiece ... Meyerbeer has made himself immortal " . Robert initiated the European fame of its composer , consolidated the fame of its librettist , Scribe , and launched the reputation of the new director of the Opéra , Louis @-@ Désiré Véron , as a purveyor of a new genre of opera . It also had influence on development of the ballet , and was frequently mentioned and discussed in contemporary French literature .

Robert continued as a favourite in opera houses all over the world throughout the nineteenth century . After a period of neglect , it began to be revived towards the end of the twentieth century .

= = Background = =

Giacomo Meyerbeer 's early studies had been in Germany , but from 1816 to 1825 he worked in Italy . There he studied opera , then dominated by Gioachino Rossini , and wrote his own Italian operas , which were moderately successful and also had some performances in other European countries . The success of Il crociato in Egitto (1824) throughout Europe , including at Paris in 1825 , persuaded Meyerbeer , who was already thirty @-@ three years old , to fulfil at last his ambition to base himself in Paris , and to seek a suitable libretto for an opera to be launched there .

Meyerbeer first mentions Robert le diable in his diaries in February 1827 . The Journal de Paris announced on 19 April 1827 that the libretto of Scribe and Delavigne had been passed by the censor and that ' the music is to be entrusted to a composer , M. Meyer @-@ Beer , who , having acquired a brilliant reputation in Germany and Italy , is extending it to our country , where several of his works have been already successfully represented.'

The libretto was fabricated on the basis of old legends about Duke Robert the Magnificent of Normandy , the father of William the Conqueror , alleged in some versions to have been the son of the Devil . The librettists padded out this outline with a variety of melodramatic incidents . The plot reflected ' the fantastic legendary elements which fascinated the opera public of 1830 ' , a taste which had evolved from the 1824 Paris production of Carl Maria von Weber 's Der Freischütz (in its French version Robin des bois) , which also features a doubtful hero befriended by a demon promising him success .

The libretto was originally planned as a three @-@ act opéra comique for the Opéra @-@ Comique theatre . Meyerbeer stopped work on the opera in 1827 when the theatre underwent financial difficulties . In August 1829 , the composer and librettists agreed to refashion the work in a five @-@ act form to meet the requirements of the Paris Opéra . This entailed some significant rewriting of the storyline , reducing the essentially comic role of Raimbaut (who vanishes after Act 3 in the final version , but whose antics ? including the spending of Bertram 's money ? continued throughout in the earlier libretto) . It also meant that the traditional ' pairing ' of lovers in opéra comique (Robert / Isabelle paralleled throughout by the ' lower @-@ class ' Raimbaut / Alice) was swept aside in favour of concentration on the more sensational story @-@ line of Robert 's diabolic ancestry .

The contract for the opera , specifying it as a " grand opera in five acts and seven scenes " , was signed by the then director of the Opéra , Émile Lubbert , on 29 December 1829 . Meyerbeer completed the composition of the work in Spa , Belgium in June and July 1830 . Its characterisation as a ' grand opera ' placed it in succession to Auber 's La muette de Portici (1828) and Rossini 's Guillaume Tell (1829) in this new genre . The composer undertook further work on the opera in early 1831 , converting spoken passages to recitatives and adding ballet episodes , including , in Act

3 , the " Ballet of the Nuns " , which was to prove one of the opera 's great sensations , and which Henri Duponchel had suggested to replace the original humdrum scenario set in Olympus . He also rewrote the two major male roles of Bertrand and Robert to suit the talents of Nicolas Levasseur and Adolphe Nourrit , respectively .

= = Performance history = =

= = = Premiere seasons in Paris = = =

The opera premiered on 21 November 1831 at the Paris Opéra . The success owed much to the opera 's star singers ? Levasseur as Bertram , Nourrit as Robert ? and to the provocative " Ballet of the Nuns " in the third act , featuring the great ballerina , Marie Taglioni .
The choreography for the ballet was elaborated by the ballerina 's father , Filippo Taglioni . The audience 's prurient delight in this scandalous scene is well conveyed by the reviewer for the Revue des Deux @-@ Mondes :
A crowd of mute shades glides through the arches . All these women cast off their nuns ' costume , they shake off the cold powder of the grave ; suddenly they throw themselves into the delights of their past life ; they dance like bacchantes , they play like lords , they drink like sappers . What a pleasure to see these light women ...
The set for the ballet was an innovative and striking design by Henri Duponchel and Pierre @-@ Luc @-@ Charles Ciceri . Duponchel had also introduced technical innovations for the staging , including ' English traps ' for the sudden appearance and disappearance of the ghosts . (Meyerbeer was led to complain that the spectacle was too much and was pushing his music into the background) . Taglioni danced the Abbess only six times in Paris ; she was replaced by Louise Fitzjames , (who danced the role 232 times) .
At the invitation of Nourrit , Cornélie Falcon made her debut at the age of 18 at the Opéra in the role of Alice on 20 July 1832 . The cast included Nourrit . Although suffering from stage fright , Falcon managed to sing her first aria without error , and finished her role with " ease and competence . " Her tragic demeanor and dark looks were highly appropriate to the part , and she made a vivid impression on the public , which included on that night Auber , Berlioz , Halévy , Maria Malibran , Giulia Grisi , Honoré Daumier , Alexandre Dumas and Victor Hugo . On hearing her in the role , Meyerbeer himself declared his opera at last ' complete ' .
By April 1834 the opera had received over 100 performances in Paris . Nourrit sang the role of Robert until 1837 , when he was replaced as premier tenor at the Opéra by Gilbert Duprez , whom , however , Meyerbeer did not like in the role ; nor did he approve of an alternative , Lafont . However , he was impressed by the newcomer Mario (Cavaliere Giovanni Matteo di Candia) , and wrote for him a new aria for Robert which was performed at his debut in the revival of the opera on 30 November 1838 . Mario 's debut was the launch of his very successful career . Others singing in the 1838 revival included Julie Dorus @-@ Gras (Alice) , Prosper Dérivis (Bertram) and François Wartel (Raimbaut) . By Meyerbeer 's death in 1864 the opera had been performed over 470 times in Paris alone .

= = = Early performances outside Paris = = =

A succession of representations throughout Europe and in the Americas launched Meyerbeer 's international fame . A version of the opera ? under the title of The Fiend @-@ Father , by Rophino Lacy ? was first presented in London at the Theatre Royal , Drury Lane on 20 February 1832 ; the original version appeared at the Haymarket Theatre on 11 June of that year . Lacy 's version was given in New York on 7 April 1834 . In 1832 the opera reached Berlin , Strasbourg , Dublin and Liège ; in 1833 Brussels , Copenhagen , Vienna and Marseilles ; in 1834 Lyon , Budapest , The Hague , Amsterdam and Saint Petersburg ; in 1835 (12 May) it obtained its first American performance in the original French at the Théâtre d 'Orléans in New Orleans . Italian versions were

given in Lisbon in 1838 , and in Florence in 1840 .

Meyerbeer took particular care over the first London and Berlin productions . He travelled to London to check the singers and production for the original version , and requested that the German translation for Berlin be undertaken by the poet Ludwig Rellstab , strongly recommending that Taglioni and her father Fillipo be re @-@ engaged , and that Ciceri 's sets should be reproduced . Although Taglioni danced and the sets were retained , the translation was eventually carried out by Meyerbeer 's friend Theodor Hell . Meyerbeer wrote additional ballet music for Taglioni for the Berlin production .

The Danish choreographer August Bournonville saw Fitzjames 's performance as the Abbess in Paris in 1841 , and based his own choreography , which was used in Copenhagen between 1833 and 1863 , on this . This choreography , which has been fully preserved , represents the only record of Filippo Taglioni 's original .

In 1847 Felix Mendelssohn attended a London performance of Robert ? an opera which musically he despised ? in order to hear Jenny Lind 's British debut , in the role of Alice . The music critic Henry Chorley , who was with him , wrote " I see as I write the smile with which Mendelssohn , whose enjoyment of Mdlle . Lind 's talent was unlimited , turned round and looked at me , as if a load of anxiety had been taken off his mind . "

= = = Twentieth century = = =

During the early twentieth century , Meyerbeer 's operas gradually disappeared from the stage , partly due to expense , partly due to their denigration by supporters of Wagnerian opera . In 1898 , George Bernard Shaw , in The Perfect Wagnerite , had already cast scorn on Robert and commented that " Nowadays young people cannot understand how anyone could have taken Meyerbeer 's influence seriously . "

Nevertheless , productions of Robert included those in New Orleans and Nice in 1901 , Paris (at the Gaité Lyrique) in 1911 , Barcelona in 1917 , at the Vienna Volksoper in 1921 and Bordeaux in 1928 . The first production after the Second World War was in Florence in 1968 , a shortened version with a cast including Renata Scotto and Boris Christoff . In 1984 the revival at the Paris Opéra with Rockwell Blake (Robert) , Samuel Ramey (Bertram) , Walter Donati (Raimbaut) , Michèle Lagrange (Alice) and June Anderson (Isabelle) was the first performance there since 1893 . In 1999 a new production was mounted at the Prague State Opera .

= = = Twenty @-@ first century = = =

A performance of a new critical edition of Robert le diable by Wolfgang Kühnhold was presented at the Berlin State Opera in March 2000 with Jianyi Zhang (Robert) , Stephan Rügamer (Raimbaut) , Kwangchul Youn (Bertram) , Marina Mescheriakova (Alice) , and Nelly Miricioiu (Isabelle) , conducted by Marc Minkowski .

A new production of the opera , directed by Laurent Pelly , was premiered at the Royal Opera House London on 6 December 2012 , the first time it had been performed there since 1890 .

= = Roles = =

= = Synopsis = =

The plot of the opera has been often cut or rearranged in various productions . The outline given below follows the description given in The New Grove Dictionary of Opera (1992) .

= = = Act 1 = = =

On the shore at Palermo

Robert and his mysterious friend Bertram are among a group of knights who are preparing to compete in a tournament for the hand of Princess Isabelle . They all praise wine , women and gambling (Versez à tasses pleines) . Robert 's attendant Raimbaut sings a ballad about a beautiful princess from Normandy who married a devil ; the princess had a son , Robert , known as ' le diable ' . Robert indignantly reveals that he is the son in question and condemns Raimbaut to death . Raimbaut begs for pardon and tells Robert that he is engaged to marry . Robert relents and relishes the thought of the droit du seigneur . Raimbaut 's fianceé arrives ; Robert recognizes her as his foster @-@ sister Alice and pardons Raimbaut . Alice tells Robert that his mother has died and that her last words were a warning about a threatening dark force (Va ! Va ! dit @-@ elle) . She offers Robert his mother 's will . Robert is too overcome to read it and asks Alice to keep it for the present . Robert expresses his longing for his beloved Isabelle and Alice offers to take a letter to her . Alice warns Robert to beware of Bertram but he ignores her . With Bertram 's encouragement , Robert gambles with the knights and loses all of his money , as well as his armour .

= = = Act 2 = = =

A room in the palace at Palermo
Isabelle is sad at Robert 's absence and expresses her unease that their marriage will never take place (En vain j ? espère) . She is delighted when she receives Robert 's letter . Robert arrives and the pair express their pleasure at being together again . Isabelle provides him with new armour for the tournament . Robert is preparing for the tournament when Bertram suddenly appears and persuades Robert to go to a nearby forest , claiming that the Prince of Granada , his rival for Isabelle 's love , wants to fight with him . When Robert has left , the court gathers to celebrate the marriage of six couples with dancing . The Prince of Granada enters and asks Isabelle to present him with arms for the tournament . Isabelle expresses her sorrow at Robert 's disappearance but prepares to open the tournament , singing in praise of chivalry (La trompette guerrière) .

= = = Act 3 = = =

The countryside near Palermo
Bertram meets Raimbaut , who has arrived for an assignation with Alice . He gives him a bag of gold and advises him not to marry Alice as his new wealth will attract plenty of women (Ah ! I ? honnête homme) . Raimbaut leaves and Bertram gloats at having corrupted him . Bertram reveals that Robert , to whom he is truly devoted , is his son ; he then enters an adjoining cave to commune with the spirits of hell . Alice enters and expresses her love for Raimbaut (Quand je quittai la Normandie) . She overhears strange chanting coming from the cave and decides to listen ; she learns that Bertram will lose Robert forever if he cannot persuade him to sign away his soul to the Devil by midnight . On emerging from the cave , Bertram realizes that Alice has heard everything (Mais Alice , qu ? as @-@ tu donc ?) . He threatens her and she promises to keep silent . Robert arrives , mourning the loss of Isabelle , and Bertram tells him that to win her he should seize a magic branch from the tomb of Saint Rosalia in a nearby deserted cloister . Although to take it is sacrilege , the branch will give Robert magical powers . Robert declares that he will be bold and do as Bertram instructs . Bertram leads Robert to the cloister . The ghosts of nuns rise from their tombs , beckoned by Bertram , and dance , praising the pleasures of drinking , gambling and lust . Robert seizes the branch and fends off the demons who surround him .

= = = Act 4 = = =

A room in the palace
Isabelle is preparing for her marriage with the Prince of Granada . Alice rushes in to inform her of what she has learnt about Robert , but she is interrupted by envoys of the Prince who enter bearing gifts . Robert arrives and , using the power of the branch , freezes everyone except himself and Isabelle .

Unsettled by the power he 's wielding , he confesses to Isabelle that he is using witchcraft , but begs her not to reject him . She expresses her love for him and implores him to repent (Robert , toi que j 'aime) . Robert breaks the branch and the spell it has created , and is taken into custody by Isabelle 's attendants .

= = = Act 5 = = =

Outside Palermo Cathedral
 A group of monks extol the power of the Church . Bertram has freed Robert from the guards and the two arrive to prevent the marriage of Isabelle to the Prince of Granada . Bertram attempts to get Robert to sign a document in which he promises to serve Bertram for all eternity . He reveals to Robert that he is his true father and Robert decides to sign the oath from filial devotion . Before he can do so , Alice appears with the news that the Prince has been prevented from marrying Isabelle . Alice prays for divine help (Dieu puissant , ciel propice) and hands Robert his mother 's will . Robert reads his mother 's message , in which she warns him to beware the man who seduced and ruined her . Robert is wracked by indecision . Midnight strikes and the time for Bertram 's coup is past . He is drawn down to hell . Robert is reunited with Isabelle in the cathedral , to great rejoicing .

= = Costume designs for the first production = =

The costumes were designed by François @-@ Gabriel Lépaulle .

= = Reception = =

 A number of factors influenced the opera 's very favourable reception . The initial cast contained leading singers of the period and , as it changed , equally brilliant stars (e.g. Falcon) were introduced as replacements . The sensational plot and the notoriety of the Nuns ' ballet ensured that the opera was a hot topic in journals and reviews . This was assisted by the marketing skills of the director Véron and the publisher Schlesinger . The scenery was of exceptional quality : " This was as much an opera to see as to hear , and it has been argued that the real hero behind Robert le diable was Cicéri , the designer . " Meyerbeer was keen to keep influential persons on his side . For example , he sent free tickets for ' a good box ' to Heinrich Heine . And of course the businessman Véron knew how to use (and pay) the claque and its leader Augustin Levasseur .
 But undoubtedly the novelty and colour of the music of Meyerbeer deserves major credit . The alliance of his German musical training , along with his study of opera for many years in Italy , was highly attractive to a Parisian audience which ' asked only to be astonished and surprised . ' The critic Ortigue wrote that Meyerbeer ' straight away [took] his position at the crossroads where Italian song and German orchestration have to meet . ' Meyerbeer paid close attention to unusual combinations and textures and original orchestration , examples being the use of low brass and woodwind playing chromatic passages associated with Bertram ; the use of a brass band and male choir to characterise the demons in Act 3 ; and so on . Hector Berlioz was particularly impressed ; he wrote an entire article in the Revue et gazette musicale , entitled ' On the Orchestration of Robert le diable ' , which concluded :
 Robert le Diable provides the most astonishing example of the power of instrumentation when applied to dramatic music ; ... a power of recent introduction which has achieved its fullest development in the hands of M. Meyerbeer ; a conquest of modern art which even the Italians will have to acknowledge in order to prop up as best they can their miserable system which is collapsing in ruins .
 The opera was perceived to have weaknesses of characterization . For example , Robert 's dithering behaviour led to one comment that " what is least diabolical in Robert le diable is Robert himself . " But the critic Fétis gave the consensus opinion : " Robert le diable is not only a masterpiece ; it is also a remarkable work within the history of music ... [it] seems to me to unite all the qualities needed to establish a composer 's reputation unshakeably . "

The success of the opera led to Meyerbeer himself becoming a celebrity . King Frederick William III of Prussia , who attended the second performance of Robert , swiftly invited him to compose a German opera , and Meyerbeer was invited to stage Robert in Berlin . In January 1832 he was awarded membership of the Légion d 'honneur . This success ? coupled with Meyerbeer 's known family wealth ? inevitably also precipitated envy amongst his peers . Berlioz wrote " I can 't forget that Meyerbeer was only able to persuade [the Opéra] to put on Robert le diable ... by paying the administration sixty thousand francs of his own money " ; and Chopin lamented " Meyerbeer had to work for three years and pay his own expenses for his stay in Paris before Robert le diable could be staged ... Three years , that 's a lot ? it 's too much . "

= = Influence = =

The success of Robert had profound consequences , for the institution of the Paris Opéra itself , for the music , staging and popularity of nineteenth century opera as a whole , and for ballet .

The fortuitous timing of the opera 's premiere , not long after the July Revolution , and its sensational and novel effects , meant that it was widely identified with the new , liberal , ideas of the July Monarchy . As Berlioz commented , Meyerbeer had " not only the luck to be talented , but the talent to be lucky . " Honoré de Balzac (in his novella Gambara) and Heinrich Heine (in his poem Angélique) are just two of the contemporary writers to express their fascination with the opera . Alexandre Dumas set a chapter of The Count of Monte Cristo between two acts of Robert ; and George Sand wrote about it at length in her Lettres d 'un voyageur . It is the only nineteenth @-@ century opera to have a rose named after it .

Also , the absence of starchy historical content in Robert doubtless played a part in attracting the bourgeoisie to the opera , until then regarded as primarily an aristocratic entertainment . The success of the opera also justified the government 's policy of ' privatization ' in selling the management to Véron , and this was a landmark in the dilution of state control and patronage in the fine arts . Although Véron had not commissioned it (having taken control only after the Revolution) , Robert was his first new production as manager of the Opéra , and its success underwrote his policy of commissioning similar works . These were to include Meyerbeer 's Les Huguenots , Fromental Halévy 's La Juive , and Daniel Auber 's Gustave III . However , while they used ' the same dazzling theatrical rhetoric ' as Robert , they led to ' uniformly horrific dénouements ' with ' gripping moral urgency ' , their more sophisticated plot @-@ lines reflecting the changes in taste of the new opera clientele . They established Paris as Europe 's opera capital , with the Opéra itself as its centre , in the period 1830 until 1850 .

The Act 3 ballet is regarded by some as the first of the ballets blancs (whereby the principal ballerina and the corps de ballet are all clothed in white) which became a favourite of the nineteenth @-@ century repertoire . Later examples include La Sylphide (1832) (also choreographed by Filippo Taglioni and danced by his daughter) , Giselle (1841) , Pas de Quatre (1845) and Les Sylphides (1909) .

Music from the opera became the subject of numerous virtuoso works of the time . The brilliant transcription of its themes (Reminiscences de Robert le diable) made by the composer and virtuoso Franz Liszt was so popular that it became his calling card : on more than one occasion he was forced to interrupt his programmed concerts to play it because of the demands of the audience . On the day of its publication by Maurice Schlesinger , the edition of 500 was completely sold out and it had to be immediately reprinted . Indeed , the success of Robert , whose score was also published by Schlesinger , was said to have saved him from bankruptcy . Frédéric Chopin and Auguste Franchomme jointly composed a Grand duo concertant on themes from the opera , for cello and piano , in 1832 , and the Italian pianist and composer Adolfo Fumagalli composed an elaborate fantasy on the opera for left hand alone as his Op. 106 .

Other pieces based on the opera included works by Adolf von Henselt and Jean @-@ Amédée Méreaux .

Edgar Degas painted the scene of the Nuns ' ballet twice . The earlier version (1871) is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art , New York . In 1876 Degas painted a larger version for the singer Jean

@-@ Baptiste Faure (who had sung the part of Bertram) ; this version is in the Victoria and Albert Museum , London .

The work 's popularity spawned many parodies and pastiches including one by W. S. Gilbert , Robert the Devil , which opened at the Gaiety Theatre , London in 1868 .

= = Recordings = =