

Grand Opera

April 17, 2018

Grand Opera – Taruskin pp. 574 ff

- ▶ “The hugest theatrical spectacles ever attempted anywhere.”
- ▶ New (huge) opera houses
 - ▶ *Paris Opera, Theatre Italien, Opera Comique*
 - ▶ “State-supported grandiosity” – Paris Opera seats 2000, gas lights, electricity at 1849, stage machinery, etc.

Figures in Parisian Grand Opera

- ▶ Daniel Francois Esprit Auber
- ▶ Eugene Scribe
- ▶ Jacques Fromental Halevy
- ▶ Giacomo Meyerbeer

Features of the Grand Opera

- ▶ Size
- ▶ Five acts, including some ballet
- ▶ Less “aria time,” fewer “numbers”
- ▶ “Historical, heroic, and tragic” subject matter, drawn esp. from relatively recent history: “Audiences saw history staged” (576)
- ▶ Gov. subsidy: “for all its size, the Paris Opera was in 1821 still a government-subsidized enterprise that, while encouraged to recoup its expenditures, did not have to do so.” (Taruskin, full)

La muette de Portici

Scribe, librettist

Auber, composer

Act I: Alfonso, Elvira and Fenella (borrowed from Walter Scott novel)

Act II: The Fishermen

Act III: Popular revolt!

Act IV: Drama of Act I joins political drama

Act V: Vesuvius erupts, more political upheaval, ending with noblemen retaking the city.

Act II: Amour Sacré de la patrie
Libretto

Jane Fulcher on *Grand Opera*

The depiction of the people was the work's most gripping aspect: the people depicted as grand and heroic, through most of the work, on the first royal stage. . . . The blocking of the crowd scenes presented them as an active and self-assured group, now themselves in a position to inspire fear and awe in the authorities. Moreover, their choral scenes, by far the most musically powerful parts of the work, similarly projected a sense of dignity and pride that clashed openly with what occurred at the opera's end.

Jane Fulcher, *The Nation's Image: French Grand Opera as Politics and Politicized Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 40–41.

La Muette in Brussels

Taruskin:

By the end of the fourth act, most of the audience had left the theater and had joined the crowd, which swept into and occupied the offices of the main Brussels newspaper, the city courthouse, and the Hôtel de Ville, the seat of government. The decisive moment came with the storming of the municipal armory and the distribution of weapons to the rioters. Over the next few days the revolt spread to other cities. Unable to contain the crowds, the Dutch forces withdrew. By the next year, with the connivance of the anti-French coalition of "powers," Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (uncle of the soon-to-be-crowned Queen Victoria of England) had been elected King of the Belgians. His descendants reign to this day.

Halevy, *La Juive*, (1835)

- ▶ Act I: Eleazar finds a girl, names her Rachel, raises her as a Jew(ess). Prince Leopold disguises himself as a jew, falls in love with Rachel.
- ▶ Act II: “Samuel” celebrates Passover with Eleazar’s family. Leopold’s wife shows up, looking to buy a jewel from Eleazar.
- ▶ Act III: The truth outs. Rachel, Eleazar and Leopold placed in jail.
- ▶ Act IV: Eleazar vows revenge...complicated...turns out that Rachel is actually Christian, the daughter of a Cardinal.
 - ▶ “Rachel, quand du Seigneur”
 - ▶ Text (in french)
- ▶ Act V: Eleazar and Rachel about to be boiled alive. Eleazar reveals to Cardinal that Rachel is his daughter, just before they both get burned alive.

Jakob Liebmann Meyer Beer, 1791-1864

- ▶ Meyerbeer never converted; a mark of his family's distinction and the new opportunities available to “emancipated” Jews of the 19th cent.
- ▶ 1816-1824 in Italy. Successul. Changes name to Giacomo (from Jakob).
- ▶ 1826, finally gets commission in Paris – by then the “Mecca” of opera. *Robert le diable*
- ▶

Meyerbeer, *Les Huguenots*, 1836

- ▶ Raoul and Valentine, star crossed lovers, in context of Reformation.
- ▶ [Complete performance...sample it](#)

Taruskin:

They meet their doom in the course of the infamous St. Bartholomew's Day massacre of 1572, in which many hundreds of Huguenots (French Calvinists) were shot dead in the streets of Paris at the behest of Catherine de' Medici, the Italian-born queen mother. The entire fifth act of the opera was given over to a reenactment of the horrible event, at the end of which the auditorium famously reeked of gunpowder and buckshot, adding yet another sensory element to the media-saturation for which the grand opéra was famed. Like La Juive, which preceded it by a year, Les Huguenots is an indictment of religious fanaticism and an implicit declaration of bourgeois liberalism.

Two important scenes in *Les Huguenots*

Act IV, atypical small-scale, tender love duet: *Tu m'aimes...tu l'as dit*

Conjuration et bénédiction des poignards – Conspiracy and Blessing of the Daggers

Meyerbeer, *Les Huguenots*, 1836

- ▶ Taruskin: “Also closeted a liberal bourgeois plea for religious tolerance in unbelievable splendor.”
- ▶ George Sand: “new liberal theory of history according to which, far from being the exclusive property of revolutionists, terrorism was attributed primarily to the aristocratic nobles, kings, princes and gentlemen.”

Reception: Wagner, *Das Judenthum in der Musik*

Taruksin:

(Wagner refers to) “a far-famed Jew composer of our day” who “has addressed himself and his products to a section of our public whose total confusion of musical taste was less caused by him than exploited by him to his profit.” This charlatan “writes operas for Paris, and sends them touring round the world.” His is an art designed to titillate “that section of our citizen society whose only reason for attending the opera is utter boredom.” His success, Wagner argued, is “proof of the ineptitude of the present musical epoch,” since “the Jews could never have taken possession of our art until our art began to show signs of what they have now demonstrably brought to light—namely, its inner incapacity for life.”

Reception: Wagner, *Das Judenthum in der Musik*

Taruksin:

To clinch the point, Wagner triumphantly asserted that “so long as the art of Music had a real organic life-need in it, down to the epochs of Mozart and Beethoven, there was nowhere to be found a Jew composer,” just as “at the time when Goethe and Schiller sang among us, we certainly knew nothing of a poetizing Jew.”²¹ In other words, Wagner claimed, it was not a change in the legal and social status of affluent Jews (their so-called emancipation) that made possible their participation in the arts, but rather the degeneration of the arts themselves, which had degraded them to a level susceptible to Jewish infiltration.

Reception: Robert Schumann

The horrible is Meyerbeer's element.

And, quoted in Taruskin:

"I am no moralist," Schumann wrote, moralizing "but it enrages a good Protestant to hear his dearest chorale shrieked out on the boards, to see the bloodiest drama in the whole history of his religion degraded to the level of an annual fair farce, in order to raise money and noise with it." And even more pointedly, "one is often inclined to grasp one's brow, to feel whether all up there is in the right condition, when one reflects on Meyerbeer's success in healthy, musical Germany."