

THE IMPACT OF FRENCH GRAND OPERA ON VERDI & WAGNER – 2

Talk by Robert Gay for WSNSW – 18 September 2022

FEATURES OF FRENCH GRAND OPERA

- **Historical events** used as **scenarios** for dramas in **five acts**
- Themes of **religious intolerance** or **rebellion against oppression**
- **Historically and geographically accurate set and costume designs**
- **Massive choral groupings**, often of opposing **nationalities** or **beliefs**
 - Scenes and acts ending with impressive **formal tableaux**
- Spectacularly staged **marches and processions** – also **rituals and ceremonies**
 - **Dramatic interruptions** of said processions
- **Obligatory ballet *divertissement*** in either the **second or third act**
 - Action culminating in a **spectacular final scene** depicting a **major disaster or cataclysm**

■ PARIS OPÉRA = **Salle Le Peletier** (cap. 1,900) – opened **1821**, burnt down **1873**

Scenic designer: Pierre-Luc-Charles **Ciceri** (1782-1868) – eruption of Vesuvius (!), etc

Spectacular new **scenic device:** the moving **panorame**

Composer honorarium per performance, on top of a generous fee!

MEYERBEER'S & HALÉVY'S FRENCH GRAND OPERAS

Meyerbeer's ***Robert le Diable*** (Scribe) – Opéra, **1831**

Meyerbeer: 1791-1864

Halévy's ***La Juive*** (Scribe) – Opéra, **1835**

Halévy: 1799-1862

Meyerbeer's ***Les Huguenots*** (Scribe) – Opéra, **1836**

also Donizetti's ***La Favorite*** (Royer & Vaës) – Opéra, **1840** – vocal score by **Wagner**, aged **28**

Halévy's ***La Reine de Chypre*** (Saint-Georges) – Opéra, **1841** – vocal score by **Wagner**

Meyerbeer's ***Le Prophète*** (Scribe) – Opéra, **1849** – **Wagner** to Paris in November to see it!

Meyerbeer's ***L'Africaine*** (Scribe) – Opéra, **1865** – posth. premiere

VERDI'S 3 FRENCH GRAND OPERAS

● ***Jérusalem*** (Royer & Vaës) – Opéra, **1847** – a rewrite of ***I lombardi*** (1843) – **33** perfs by 1900

● ***Les Vêpres siciliennes*** (Scribe) – Opéra, **1855 (Expo)** – **62** perfs at Opéra by 1900

[***Le Trouvère*** in French, with **added ballet** – Opéra, **1857** – over **200** perfs at Opéra by 1900]

[***Violetta*** in French, no added ballet) – Théâtre Lyrique, **1864**]

[Revised ***Macbeth*** in French, with **added ballet** – Théâtre Lyrique, **1865**]

● ***Don Carlos*** (Méry & du Locle) – Opéra, **1867 (Expo)** – **43** perfs at Opéra by 1900

[*Aida* (Cairo/Milan, 1871/1872) – sets & costumes for **Cairo** made in **Paris!**
Paris Opéra premiere, in French as *Aïda* – March **1880** – in new **Salle Garnier** (see below)

- Triumphal Scene's **dance** is extended by **90 bars** of new music
- Judgement Scene rituals

More than **200 performances** at the **Opéra** by the end of the century!]

[*Otello* in French, with **added ballet** in Act III – Opéra, **1894**]

WAGNER'S WORKS STRONGLY INFLUENCED BY FRENCH GRAND OPERA

Rienzi (text by Wagner, in German) – **Dresden**, Semper Oper I, **1842** – processions and ballet

Tannhäuser (Wagner) – 'Dresden version', Semper Oper, **1845**

- Entry of the Guests (Act II) – Procession of returning Pilgrims (Act III)

Tannhäuser (revised & translated into French) – 'Paris version', Opéra, **1861** – ballet in Act I

Lohengrin (Wagner) – delayed prem. in **Weimar**, **1850** – cond. **Liszt** (39)

- fanfares, double chorus (men), wedding procession interrupted, twice! (Act II)

1849 / 1850 Wagner's concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is explicated in two Zürich articles: *The Artwork of the Future* and *Opera and Drama*

Siegfrieds Tod (later *Götterdämmerung*) – libretto by Wagner – written autumn **1848** !!

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg (Wagner), Munich **1868** – procession to end all processions!

The **Festspielhaus** in **Bayreuth** – Wagner's perfect theatre – opened **1876**
– amphitheatre-style seating – double proscenium arch for added depth – hidden orchestra !

Der Ring des Nibelungen tetralogy premiered August **1876**

Das Rheingold – balletic aquatic scene ?

Die Walküre – aerial procession through the skies ?

Götterdämmerung (completed 1874)

- Hagen calls the Vassals & 'trio' (Act II) – final cataclysm (Act III)

Also, Ponchielli's *La Gioconda* (Arrigo Boito [Tobia Gorrio], modelled on Scribe!) – Scala, **1876**
– ballet: *La danza delle ore* (Act III)

Parsifal (Wagner) – Bayreuth, **1882** – acoustically designed for Festspielhaus – **panorame**
– processions to Grail Hall – 'ballet' of Flower Maidens – scenes of 'religious' ritual

■ **PARIS OPÉRA = Salle Garnier** (cap. 1,979) – opened **1875**

- designed by **Charles Garnier** – situated on the new **Place de l'Opéra**
at the end of Haussmann's new **Avenue de l'Opéra**