

THE IMPACT OF FRENCH GRAND OPERA ON WAGNER & VERDI

A talk by Robert Gay for the Wagner Society of NSW – 20 February 2022

Wagner to King Ludwig in praise of Paris – July 1867

You are going to Paris It occupied so important a place in the development of my relations with the outside world that, whenever I think of such things, I invariably find myself remembering my experiences there As the world now is, Paris forms the culminating point: all other cities are simply stations along the way. It is the heart of modern civilisation, drawing in the blood before sending it out again to the limbs.

When I decided to become a famous opera composer, my good angel sent me straight to that heart: there I was at the source, and there I was able to grasp at once things which at the wayside stations would perhaps have taken me half a lifetime to learn

FEATURES OF FRENCH GRAND OPERA

- **Historical events** used as **scenarios** for dramas in **five acts**
- Themes of **religious intolerance** or **rebellion against oppression**
- **Historically & geographically accurate sets & costume designs**
- **Massive choral groupings**, often of opposing **nationalities** or **beliefs**
 - Scenes & acts ending with impressive **formal tableaux**
- Spectacularly staged **marches & processions** – also **rituals & 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

THE FIRST FRENCH GRAND OPERAS

PRECURSOR: Spontini's ***Fernand Cortez*** (rev. version) – previous Opéra (Salle Louvois) **1817**

Auber's ***La Muette de Portici*** (revised by Scribe) – Paris Opéra, **1828** – features ***pantomime***

Rossini's ***Guillaume Tell*** (Jouy & Bis) – Paris Opéra, **1829** **Eugène Scribe:** 1791-1861

Auber's ***Gustave III, ou Le Bal masqué*** (Scribe) – Opéra, **1833** **Auber:** 1782-1871

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

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

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

VERDI'S ACTUAL FRENCH GRAND OPERAS

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

Les Vêpres siciliennes (Scribe) – Opéra, 1855 (Paris Expo) – 62 perfs by 1900

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

VERDI'S VIRTUAL FRENCH GRAND OPERA

Aida (Cairo/Milan, 1871/1872 in Italian) – sets & costumes made in Paris!

Paris Opéra premiere, in French – March 1880 – in the new Salle Garnier, opened 1875

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

WAGNER'S WORKS STRONGLY INFLUENCED BY FRENCH GRAND OPERA

Rienzi (text by Wagner, in German) – Dresden, Semper Oper I, 1842

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

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

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

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

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

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg (Wagner), Munich 1868

1876 The Festspielhaus in Bayreuth, Wagner's perfect theatre, opens
– amphitheatre seating – double proscenium arch for added depth – hidden orchestra

Parsifal (Wagner) – Bayreuth, 1882 – acoustically designed for Festspielhaus – *panorama* ?