

# French Connections



## 8. A Night at the Opéra

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THE 1831 PREMIERE OF GIACOMO MEYERBEER'S "ROBERT LE DIABLE" broke new ground in at least two ways. Its scale and complexity would set the seal on a new genre of Grand Opera, not only in France, but also as a blueprint for what later companies in the United States and elsewhere would be founded to perform. And its fourth-act Ballet of Fallen Nuns would open a new kind of Romantic dance that would travel to Russia and elsewhere in Europe, return to Paris, and thence spread around the world.

Meyerbeer came to Paris from Berlin via Italy, though he made his home in France and his name became indelibly associated with French music. Most other composers of *grand opéra* were also foreigners: Rossini, Donizetti, and Verdi among them. The classic Romantic ballets were created by Italians, Danes, or Russians—but all in Paris, which thus became the clearing house for ballet for more than a century.

All the items listed below are videos. Although many of the titles have been discussed before, the actual clips are all new. *rb.*

### A. How Grand Can You Get?

The Metropolitan Opera in New York opened in 1883 with a Gounod's *Faust*. Why that particular work, and what did it say about the place of opera-going in American social life?

**Scorcese:** *The Age of Innocence* (1993), opening

**Gounod:** *Faust* (London 2010, d. David McVicar), Cabaret d'Enfer

## B. Paris as Magnet

Beginning around 1830, the Paris Opéra attracted composers from all over Europe with the promise of a new form, *grand opéra*, conceived on a scale that only Paris could provide. Of course lighter fare was also acceptable at other theaters, and visitors wrote in that vein too.

**Meyerbeer:** *Robert le Diable* (London 2012, d. Laurent Pelly), Act III finale

**Meyerbeer:** *Robert le Diable*, Act IV finale (Bryan Hymel, *Robert*)

**Donizetti:** *La favorite* (Toulouse 2014), Act III aria (Kate Aldrich, *Léonor*)

**Donizetti:** *La fille du régiment* (Paris 2027), Act I duet (Natalie Dessay, Alessandro Corbelli; d. Laurent Pelly)

## C. French Masks

French composers were slower than foreign ones in responding to the new trends. But when they did, they produced operas as grand as any of them, plus other categories such as *opéra bouffe* or *opéra comique*.

**Offenbach:** *Orphée aux enfers*, Can-can (Natalie Dessay)

**Bizet:** *Carmen* (Paris 2014; d. Alfredo Arias), Act II dialogues

**Gounod:** *Faust* (Paris 2012; d. Jean-Louis Martinoty; Inva Mula, *Marguerite*; Paul Gay, *Méphistophélès*), scene from Act IV

**Gounod:** *Faust* (London 2010), recitative (Angela Gheorghiu)

**Julian Fellows:** *The Gilded Age* (HBO 2023), Christine Nilsson sings

## D. Wraiths and Wilis

Marie Taglioni's ability to float across the stage *en pointe* in *Robert le Diable* sparked a fashion for ballets about ghosts or otherworldly creatures.

**Bournonville:** *La Sylphide* (Paris 2024), opening of Act II

**Perrot and Coralli:** *Giselle* (London 2011), opening of Act II

**Gounod:** *Faust* (London 2010), Act IV ballet

**Andrey Klemm** class at the Paris Opéra

## E. Return from Russia

By the later 19th century, the French ballet tradition had largely relocated to Russia. Yet in the early 20th century it returned to Paris, in the sensational productions of Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*.

**Fokine:** *Le spectre de la rose*, excerpt (Nikolai Tsiskaridze, Zhanna Ayupova)

**Fokine:** *L'oiseau de feu* (Kirov 2018), defeat of Koschei

Adolphe **Adam** (1803–56, *French composer*), Georges **Bizet** (1838–75, *French composer*), August **Bournonville** (1805–79, *French-Danish choreographer*), Jean **Coralli** (1779–1854, *Italian-French choreographer*), Sergei **Diaghilev** (1872–1929, *Russian impresario*), Gaetano **Donizetti** (1797–1848, *Italian composer*), Michel **Fokine** (1880–1942, *Russian choreographer*), Théophile **Gautier** (1811–72, *French writer*), Charles **Gounod** (1818–93, *French composer*), Giacomo **Meyerbeer** (1791–1864, *German-French composer*), Jacques **Offenbach** (1819–80, *German-French composer*), Jules **Perrot** (1810–92, *French choreographer*), Marius **Petipa** (1818–1910, *French-Russian choreographer*), Gioacchino **Rossini** (1792–1868, *Italian composer*), Igor **Stravinsky** (1882–1971, *Russian-American composer*), Filippo **Taglioni** (1777–1871, *Italian-French choreographer*), Carl Maria von **Weber** (1786–1826, *German composer*)

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