Class 7 : An Extravagant Art

A. Meyerbeer's Huguenots

1. Class title 1 (*Aida* triumphal scene)
2. Section title A (*Les Huguenots*)

The picture, of course, shows the Triumphal Scene from *Aïda* at the Met. I will get to it after the break, but for now I want to explore how this idea of opera as a larger-than-life spectacle originated. Essentially with this man shown here, **Giacomo Meyerbeer** (1791–1864). Born **Jakob Liebmann Beer** to a Jewish family in Berlin, he studied composition in Germany, then spent several years in Italy, assimilating the vocal style of **Rossini** and others. So when he came to Paris in 1826, he was already a cosmopolitan figure, with several successful Italian operas to his credit. Settling in that city, however, he concentrated entirely on French-language operas, and indeed may be called the inventor of the particular genre of *grand opéra* that set the pattern for the next half-century, not only for French opera but many of those by **Verdi** and **Wagner** as well. They are the subject of my second hour.

3. Meyerbeer: *Robert le Diable* (1831)

You remember the brief clip of the ballet of dead nuns that I played in the last class? That was from Meyerbeer's first great Parisian success, ***Robert le Diable,*** in 1831. Even there, you saw several of the characteristics of *grand opéra:* a melodramatic plot based on often-obscure history, spectacular scenic effects, and lots of ballet; I almost called the class **History, Mystery, and Dance**. But you will also remember that the video I showed was decidedly modern and funky. And that's the problem. Although many of these early *grand opéras* are getting performed these days, the opera companies either don't believe that audiences would accept the original style of staging, or they cannot afford it. So all the good-quality videos are either updated or weird.

4. Dame Joan Sutherland as Marguerite de Valois, Sydney 1990

The only half-decent video I can find of a Meyerbeer opera with anything like its orginal staging, is fortunately his masterpiece, ***Les Huguenots*** of 1836, in a 1990 production from Sydney, to honor the farewell appearance of Australian soprano **Joan Sutherland**. The video is not the highest quality, but it does give me the opportunity of showing a major Meyerbeer work in something like the manner in which its original audiences would have enjoyed it. As it happens, I am not going to show Dame Joan at all. Her role as **Queen Marguerite de Valois** is vocally challenging, but largely symbolic; her main vocal appearances come in Act II. But I want to start with Act III, where the main plot kicks in.

5. Contemporary depiction of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, August 24, 1572

The history here is altogether more real than the semi-mythical *Robert le Diable.* On the night of August 23/24, 1572, a faction of Catholic nobles organized the targeted murder of French Calvinists, known as **Huguenots**. It started with the assassination of their leaders, who were gathered in Paris for a wedding, but it soon spread to the slaughter of men, women, and children in Paris and throughout the nation. This was the **St. Barthlomew's Day Massacre**. Modern estimates of the death toll go as high as 30,000.

6. Model for Act III of *Les Huguenots*, for the 1875 revival

The first time we see the overt antagonism between the two factions is at the start of Act III, which takes place in a Parisian square known as the *Pré-aux-clercs*. It set the pattern for Parisian crowd scenes that we would see again in *Manon* and *La bohème.* It is Sunday, but the Protestant soldiers on one side of the stage and the Catholic civilians on the other celebrate it very differently. I suspect the Sydney production is heavily cut, because the tension boils over much faster than I would have expected. Listen for the skill with which Meyerbeer combines the various strands. I am also showing the scene for the group of dancing gypsies that burst in at this point. It is the only ballet scene in the opera that is not cut, though I suspect it is shortened. I will devote the second hour to *grand-opéra* ballet and processions.

7. Meyerbeer: *Les Huguenots,* Act III opening
8. Costumes from the original production

I would like your comments on what you just saw. What especially impressed you? Do you have any questions? Meyerbeer realized that it was not sufficient to just show an historical even upon the stage; he had to have flesh-and-blood characters who would evoke our sympathies, and for whom the conflict would be personal. These are the lovers **Raoul de Nangis** (tenor), who is a Protestant, and **Valentine de Saint-Bris** (soprano), a Catholic. **Marcel**, the man on the right, is Raoul's retainer, and the solid embodiment of the Calvinist faith; he will come into his own in the last act. The page **Urbain** on the left—a pants role for soprano—sings only in the first two acts. I am omitting those acts and most of the third largely because they are wantonly confusing about the relationship between Raoul and Valentine. He has saved her from highwaymen just before the opera opens, and they have fallen instantly in love. But because of a misunderstanding, he rejects the opportunity to marry her in Act II—an act that might have symbolized a truce between the two factions—so when we see Valentine in Act IV, she has just been married to a nobleman of her own faith, the **Count of Nevers**.

9. Scene from Act IV

Raoul sneaks in to see Valentine one last time. But she hears people coming: her father, the **Count of Saint-Bris**, her husband, the Count of Nevers, and several other Catholic gentlemen. They have come, as you see, to plot the midnight massacre. It is a magnificent scene, and I wish I could play it all, but it is too long. But I do want you to hear how it starts, for the theme will come back later.

10. Meyerbeer: *Les Huguenots,* Act IV, Saint-Bris' oath
11. — still from the above

Let's jump to the climax. To his credit, Valentine's husband Nevers has opted out and has been placed under guard. Saint-Bris calls in fellow conspirators, some women who distribute the white scarves that will distinguish friend from foe, and three monks who bless the daggers they will use, saying it is the Will of God. The ensemble reaches a huge climax, then the conspirators disperse with the muttered words, "À minuit" (until midnight). Short though this clip is, see if you can analyze Meyerbeer's musical techniques that make it so powerful?

12. Meyerbeer: *Les Huguenots,* Act IV, climax of oath ensemble
13. — still from the above

So what are Meyerbeer's musical ingredients? One quality, that he virtually invented, is the use of short phases against a building rhythmic accompaniment—or a disintegrating one, in the "à minuit" section. Then there are those thumping scales in the bass underpinning the vast ensemble above. And then the unison return to Saint-Bris' tune we heard earlier. **Verdi** would learn a great deal from this, and when he writes a conspirators' ensemble of his own in *Un ballo in maschera* (1857), he tips his hat to Meyerbeer with an almost direct quote.

14. Meyerbeer's *Huguenots* and Verdi's *Ballo,* audio comparison
15. Illustration to Act IV

These two marchlike tunes with that prominent triplet are so similar—and in exactly the same context—that it can hardly be an accident. Yet I don't think Verdi is stealing from some lesser-known composer. *Les Huguenots* was one of the most famous operas in the world, and the younger composer is simply paying homage to the older master, knowing that everybody would recognize the reference.

You remember that **Raoul** has been hiding behind a curtain all the time. As soon as the conspirators leave, he wants to rush out to warn his fellow Protestants. But Valentine fears for his life and tries to hold him back; the illustration is from *The Victrola Book of Opera* at about the turn of the century. Their long duet (written for the stars **Adolphe Nourrit** and **Cornélie Falcon**) begins in Mayerbeer's patented mode of short urgent phrases. It will end that way too. But we will pick it up when Valentine tells Raoul that she loves him. And this inspires Raoul into a kind of singing that we rarely get from Meyerbeer: a melting lyrical melody in which time stands still. The Raoul here is **Anson Austin** with **Amanda Thane** as Valentine, Australian artists and very good ones.

16. Meyerbeer: *Les Huguenots,* end of Act IV
17. Philippe Chaperon: design for Act V of *Les Huguenots*, in the 1875 revival

In the original production, Act V begins with the historical grand ball in which the Huguenot nobles were alerted to the massacre outside. It is yet another opportunity for ballet, wisely cut in the Sydney production. So instead the curtain opens with Raoul and Valentine in the Protestant Cemetery, where they have fled for refuge. In a moment, they will be joined by the old retainer **Marcel** (**Clifford Grant**) who almost welcomes the idea of martydom. Valentine offers Raoul a white scarf so that he can pass as a Catholic, but he refuses to wear it. "All right," she says, "if you won't convert to my faith, I will take yours." Together, they ask old Marcel to marry them, not as physical man and wife, but linked by their faith of finding union in the world to come. Marcel was entirely Meyerbeer's invention, and in this scene he touches spiritual heights that are quite unlike anything being written at the time. The effect of the offstage Protestants singing **Luther's** hymn "Ein feste Burg is unser Gott" as the musket shots cut them down one by one is a suberb dramatic invention; **Francis Poulenc** will copy it a century later in *Les Carmelites*, as the nuns' hymn is reduced from 12 voices to one by the sound of the guillotine**. Charles Gounod** will adapt Marcel's vision of the other world opening to welcome them in the trio that ends his *Faust*. And to turn the tables, Meyerbeer took the final dramatic stroke—a father (Saint-Bris) discovering that he has killed his own daughter—from *La Juive*, the great success of fellow Jewish composer **Fromental Halévy** only the previous year.

18. Meyerbeer: *Les Huguenots,* end of Act V
19. Class title 2 (final scene)

B. Wagner's Tannhäuser

20. The "French" operas of Verdi and Wagner

The second hour will look at some of the ways in which French *grand-opéra* influenced th exact contemporaries **Giuseppe Verdi** (1813–1901) and **Richard Wagner** (1813–83). First, an overview. Verdi's ***Jérusalem*** (1847) is the first of several operas he translated from his Italian original, making minor revisions—generally the addition of a ballet; it was his first great Parisian success. Others followed, including commissions written from the start to French librettos, such as ***Les vêpres Siciliennes*** (1855) and ***Don Carlos*** (1867; the French version has an "s"). Verdi was a hot property, so both these were immediately brought home to Italy and presented in Italian versions, with further revision. Though written in Italian, Verdi's ***Aïda*** (1871) is his most French opera of all, as I hope to show. But this is not surprising; it was written for a French opera house in Cairo to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal, and it was based on a story by a French Egyptologist.

The Wagner operas paint a different picture. He admired Meyerbeer in his younger years. His early opera ***Rienzi*** (1842) was accepted for production at Dresden on Meyerbeer's recommendation, and Wagner mounted Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* in Riga. Though thoroughly German in subject, both ***Tannhäuser*** (1845) and ***Lohengrin*** (1850) have strong *grand-opéra* features, as I also hope to show. But when he had ***Tannhäuser*** translated into French and adapted it in 1865 to suit the French taste, it bombed. It was after this that he put his name to his previously-anonymous anti-Meyerbeer diatribe, *Jewishness in Music.* But let's start with *Tannhäuser,* when he was still emulating Meyerbeer, not despising him

21. Meyerbeer: *Robert le Diable,* Act I (Royal Opera)

One of the things about Meyerbeer that my *Huguenots* slection did not really show you, is his love of panoply and processions. This is the opening act of his first Paris opera, *Robert le Diable,* in a production from the Royal Opera House, London, that takes it all with a pinch of salt. These knights have all come for a tournament, and while drinking in an inn on the evening before, have parked their horses on a shelf. We see those same horses later when the tournament begins. Tongue-in-cheek or not, it is a splendid spectacle enhanced with stilling music.

22. Meyerbeer: *Robert le Diable,* Act II tournament
23. Wagner: *Tannhäuser*, Act II (Metropolitan Opera, Otto Schenk, director)

Wagner never did anything tongue-in cheek, but he loved those grand marches. This is a scene from the second act of *Tannhäuser* in the venerable 1977 production by Otto Schenk—a rare example of a director doing exactly what Wagner asked—rare then, and even rarer now. It represents the arrival of the guests for the song contest at the Wartburg, a medieval castle on a mountaintop in central Germany. It is splendid music; let's watch.

24. Wagner: *Tannhäuser*, Act II, arrival of the guests
25. Wagner: *Tannhäuser*, Venusberg scene from Act I (Met 1977, as above)

This is by no means the only scene of this kind in the opera, so you might have thought that the opera was a no-brainer for its Paris production in 1865. But of course, he had to add a ballet. The opera, which is about sacred and profane love, opens in the Venusberg, a grotto where Tannhäuser is erotic thrall to the goddess. What simpler than to extend the overture, and begin with all the ballet (and all the sex) that a Parisian audience might desire? Here is the opening at the Met.

26. Wagner: *Tannhäuser*, Act I, opening
27. Wagner: *Tannhäuser*, Venusberg scene from Act I (repeat)

So what was the problem? There are many reasons why Parisian audiences might have found Wagner unappealing; the less spectacular stretches of *Tannhäuser* can be prety hard going. And there is also the possibility of organized opposition by folks who wanted to keep French opera French. But the simplest explanation is simply that Wagner slotted his ballet in too soon. The members of the Jockey Club were used to having ballet in the *second* act, or later, and after a leisurely dinner would arrive late to see their mistresses perform (or perhaps pick out new ones).

C. Verdi's Vespers

28. *Les vêpres Siciliennes,* title slide

Verdi could hardly have paid a greater homage to Meyerbeer than in taking on *Les vêpres siciliennes* in 1853, directly after his trumphant trifecta of *Rigoletto, Trovatore,* and *Traviata.* Like *Les Huguenots,* it is about a massacre—this time by the Sicilians in 1282 against their French occupiers. It had the same librettist, **Eugène Scribe** (1791–1861). And it had a ballet just where it ought to be, right in the middle of the third act. Here the end of it, in an Italian-language production from La Scala:

29. *I vepri siciliani* (La Scala), ending of the ballet

This is no mere incidental dance number; the ballet, about the Four Seasons, is 31 minutes long! These *grand-opéra* ballets post a real problem nowadays. When the Royal Opera commissioned a production for the Verdi bicentetnary in 2013, they planned a joint venture with the Royal Ballet, who would perform this with their own choreographer and dancers, as a kind of sandwich double bill. But for various reasons, this fell through. The opera director, Norwegian **Stefan Herheim**, had the idea of inserting bits of ballet in all the other acts, using the idea of the ballet dancer as a symbol of male control—a pure white bird in a golden cage—a gender-based image that would in turn symbolize the political control inherent in colonialism. He explains this in an interview I'll post on the website, but you should get the point from the three clips that I'll show. First a section of the overture, in which French troops invade a ballet studio and molest the dancers.

30. *Les vêpres siciliennes* (Royal Opera), excerpt from the prelude

Next a section from one of the other dances—a Sicilian *tarantella*—that Verdi inserts into the score for local color. Herheim lets it start naturally, then adds the ballerinas, so that the predatory action seen symbolically in the overture now happens in real time. The former ballet-master is now the character Procida, who is acting as an *agent provocateur*, urging the French to commit atrocities that will trigger the Sicilians to rebel.

31. *Les vêpres siciliennes* (Royal Opera), Act II tarantella

Finally, the first verse of the *Boléro* in the fifth act, sung so marvelously by the Armenian soprano **Lianna Haroutounian.** It is Herheim's answer to one of the built-in problems of this opera, that the apparent happy ending comes an act too soon, at the end of Act IV. Act V ends in a massacre, but it begins in this lovey-dovey marriage mood; the dancers merely emphasize its artificiality.

32. *Les vêpres siciliennes,* Act V *boléro,* first verse

D. Verdi's Aïda

33. *Aïda* at the Met, scenes from Act II

The *grand-opéra* ingredients: ballet and spectacle. *Aïda,* the opera Verdi wrote in 1877 for the French opera house in Cairo, has three separate ballet sequences, the second of which is shown in the small picture, and the Triumphal March in the background is surely the *ne-plus-ultra* of operatic processions. The two scenes—the apartments of Princess Amneris and a public square—come back to back; the private-to-public contrast is just the kind of thing Meyerbeer would have done, and the Met goes to town on it, as you will see. Let's look at a tiny snatch of that first dance:

34. Verdi: *Aïda,* Moorish dance in Act II/1

I called this a private scene. Of course, Amneris is attended by handmaidens and dancers, and the wall goes right up into the flies. But it is pretty much at the front of the stage; though wide and tall, this setting is not deep. At the end of the scene, the Met pulls off a theatrical *tour-de-force.* The whole of this back wall sinks into the stage, revealing the Triumphal scene already set up *behind* it. Watch:

35. Verdi: *Aïda,* opening of Act II/2 (Metropolitan Opera)
36. Verdi: *Aïda,* Act II/2 (repeat)

I am sure that Meyerbeer—and Verdi too—would have jumped at this effect if they had had the technology, but it requires modern hydraulics that they did not possess. So what would that Cairo production have looked like? We don't know for sure, but we have Verdi's prompt books showing where people would have stood on stage, and we have many of the original designs. Not long ago, the opera in Barcelona mounted a production using its own original turn-of-the-century scenery, miraculously preserved, and keeping closely to Verdi's directions. It is probably as close to authentic as we could hope to get. I'll play the opening, then cut to the triumphal march—in which Verdi brings on two trios of onstage trumpeters, playing in wildly different keys (A-flat and B-natural), that miraculously combine at the end—then go on to the first section of the 5-minute ballet.

37. Verdi: *Aïda,* opening of Act II/2 (Barcelona)
38. Verdi: *Aïda,* triumphal march and start of ballet (Barcelona)
39. — still from the above

Considering that all that scenery is painted on paper, without a single solid element other than the throne and the wagons, it is pretty impressive. But I want to get on to the ballet. Verdi's music has a deliberate, though restrained, primitive effect. I have looked through 9 different videos: some, like Barcelona and the Met, emphasize the restraint; some go to town on the primitive; and some take a different tack altogether. I want to play parts of two productions from open-air stages. First, one from the Arena at Verona that plumps for the primitive. Next, one from the floating stage on Lake Konstanz at Bregenz, that more or less updates the setting, and treats the dance as sweethearts welcoming the soldiers back from the front. Let's compare them.

40. Verdi: *Aïda,* opening of ballet (Verona)
41. Verdi: *Aïda,* opening of ballet (Bregenz)
42. — stills from the above

So what did we think? Although it is fabric rather than paint, the Verona dancers seem awfully like blackface, and the whole thing is surely cultural appropriation run riot. I love the energy of the Bregenz one with all that jiving in the water (the director is the late Graham Vick), but I can see no connection between that and the strange figures on the main stage. He also ends very strangely, with the men dressing the women in hijabs then strangling them. I don't understand that at all, though I certainly see the drive to make the opera deal with something more relevant than Ancient Egypt many centuries ago.

43. Stills from the Paris and London productions

Depending on time, I want to end with two recent productions that dispense entirely with the Egyptian setting of *Aïda,* treating it instead as a reflection on war. They do it in totally opposite ways. The 2021 production in Paris by **Lotte de Beer** was filmed straight to video in the COVID pandemic; big crowd scenes being obviously impossible, she reduced it to a series of chamber images, playing against the history of European colonialism. Both the triumphal march and the ballet that followed were conceived as a series of *tableaux vivants*, as actors struggle to recreate some of the great images of war from the museums. **Robert Carsen's** 2022 production at the Royal Opera House is more radical still, removing the solace of exotic color and placing all the action in a series of modern military regimes (though rotating between them so as to avoid identification with any one); I'll post a documentary about this production on the website. If there is time after I have played them, I'd love to hear your reactions.

44. Verdi: *Aïda,* march and ballet (Paris)
45. Verdi: *Aïda,* opening of triumphal scene (Lonfon)
46. Class title 3 (contrasted Aidas)