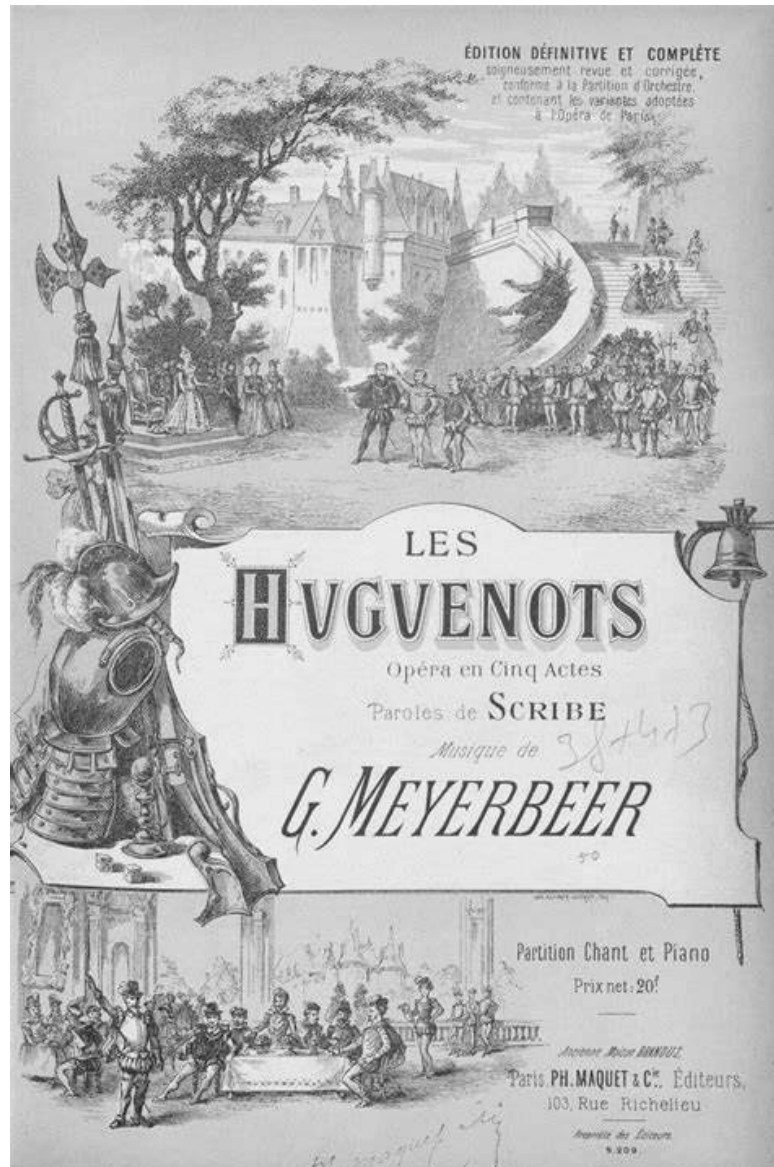


# Music on the Stage



## 7. An Extravagant Art

October 30, 2024

## 7. An Extravagant Art

BY 1830, PARIS HAD BECOME THE OPERA CAPITAL OF THE WORLD, largely through the ability of its theaters to mount productions with striking scenic effects, and provide the large orchestras, choruses, and ballets required to put on an impressive show. The form that emerged, *grand opéra*, was largely the creation of one man, **Giacomo Meyerbeer** (1791–1864), yet his example immediately attracted similar works by Rossini, Donizetti, and others, and would have a lasting influence on Verdi, Wagner, and opera in general through the end of the century.

The first hour will consist of an overview of Meyerbeer's masterpiece, *Les Huguenots* (1836), which happens to be the one opera of the period available in a production that comes close to the original in style. In the second hour, we look at two characteristic aspects of *grand opéra*—ballet and pageantry—to see how they surfaced again in operas by Wagner and Verdi, and how they are treated by modern directors working in an era when stylistic expectations have changed so completely! *rb.*

### A. Meyerbeer's *Huguenots*

The full story of the opera is unduly complicated, depending upon a series of coincidences and misunderstandings that occupy three of its five acts; I will distribute the Wikipedia synopsis as a separate document. But its essence is this: the Protestant **Raoul de Nangis** has rescued an unknown lady from highwaymen and fallen instantly in love. She is **Valentine de Saint-Bris**, from a prominent Catholic family. But by the time he is able to be alone with her, she has married someone else. Hiding behind a curtain, he hears Valentine's father plotting the **Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre**, an historical event from 1572 involving

the mass slaughter of Huguenots (French Calvinists). Valentine declares her love and goes with Raoul to warn the others, but they are too late.

**Meyerbeer:** *Les Huguenots* (1836), scenes from Acts III, IV, and V (Australian Opera, 1990; c. Richard Bonyngé, d. Lotfi Mansouri; Amanda Thane, *Valentine*; Anson Austin, *Raoul*; John Wegner, *Saint-Bris*; Clifford Grant, *Marcel*. Note that this production was the farewell gala for Australian soprano **Joan Sutherland**, but her scenes are peripheral to the plot, and will not be included.)

## B. Wagner's *Tannhäuser*

Early in his career, **Richard Wagner** (1813–83) admired Meyerbeer greatly. Though utterly German in subject, his *Tannhäuser* (1845) is full of *grand-opéra* spectacle. Though when he tried to add a ballet for a Paris production in 1865, the result was not a success.

**Meyerbeer:** *Robert le Diable*, Act II (London 2010, Laurent Pelly)  
**Wagner:** *Tannhäuser*, Entry of the Guests (Met 1977, Otto Schenk)  
**Wagner:** *Tannhäuser*, Venusberg ballet, opening (Met 1977)

## C. Verdi's *Vespers*

**Giuseppe Verdi** (1813–1901) had great success adapting his operas for presentation with French text and added ballet in Paris, though *Les vêpres siciliennes* (The Sicilian Vespers) was the first he wrote to a French libretto. It has a half-hour ballet sequence right in the middle of it. We look at what happens when a director decides to turn this from an opera *with* ballet to an opera *using* ballet as its central metaphor.

**Verdi:** *I vespri siciliani*, Act III ballet, ending (La Scala)  
**Verdi:** *Les vêpres siciliennes* (Royal Opera 2013; ballet excerpts)  
**Verdi:** *Les vêpres siciliennes*, Act V *boléro* (as above; Lianna Haroutounian, *Hélène*; Stefan Herheim, *director*)

## D. Verdi's *Aïda*

Written for Cairo at a time (1871) when Egypt was under French control, Verdi's *Aïda* is a French *grand opéra* in everything but language. The Act II triumphal scene is the *ne plus ultra* of operatic processions, and the ballet in the middle of it (the third dance sequence in the opera) pays absolute homage to the French tradition. We look at the ways these elements have been treated in Verdi's time and in our own. The clips shown come from the following productions, listed by original date, place, and director:

- **Barcelona**, 1945 (Josep Mestres Cabanes)
- **Metropolitan Opera, NYC**, 1988 (Sonja Frisell)
- **Bregenz**, 2009 (Graham Vick)
- **Paris**, 2021 (Lotte de Beer)
- **Royal Opera, London**, 2022 (Robert Carsen)
- **Verona**, 2023 (Stefano Poda)

The course website is [www.brunyate.com/MusicStage](http://www.brunyate.com/MusicStage)  
I will always respond to mail at [rogerbrunyate@gmail.com](mailto:rogerbrunyate@gmail.com)