Class 6: An Operatic Assassination

A. Two Germans in Paris

1. Class title 1 (Wagner and Meyerbeer)
2. Section title A (Paris, 1830s)

Richard Wagner (1813–83) came to Paris in 1839, in debt and fleeing from his creditors. The reigning monarch of opera at the time was **Giacomo Meyerbeer** (1791–1864), 22 years Wagner's senior, but German by birth, so there was a connection there. And the two men could write music that was surprisingly similar. Here are party scenes from two operas written in the same year, 1836: a scene from Meyerbeer's historical epic, *Les Huguenots*, and a song from Wagner's comedy, *Das Liebesverbot,* or "The Ban on Love," an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure.* Tell me what you think.

3. Meyerbeer/Wagner party music
4. — summary of the above

Did anything there surprise you? The Meyerbeer is not so different from the party music that **Verdi** would write in, say, *Rigoletto*, but the Wagner could almost be **Offenbach**! This is, of course, a comedy, but Wagner also had a serious purpose: that free love was infinitely better than repression and censorship. He would return to this with *Tannhäuser* and *Tristan und Isolde* and I suppose *Die Meistersinger*, but it is interesting to see it here. Wagner might have succeeded in Paris as well as Offenbach did a year or two later, but he had little interest in writing light opera. He paid court to Meyerbeer, who was very gracious to him (as he seems to have been with all his colleagues), and in fact it was due to Meyerbeer's recommendation that *Rienzi,* the opera Wagner finished while in Paris, and *The Flying Dutchman,* the opera he wrote there, got accepted at German houses, and Wagner finally returned to his own country.

5. Title for *The Flying Dutchman*

There is a party scene in *The Flying Dutchman* also, when the Norwegian sailors celebrate their safe arrival home after a stormy voyage. But it is darker, more wild. And this wildness, which we hear right from the first bars of the overture, will turn out to be far more characteristic of Wagner than any foursquare dance tunes. Here they are, back to back.

6. Wagner: *Der fliegende Holländer*, Act III chorus contrasted with overture
7. Meyerbeer, biographical facts

So who were these two men, at the time of their encounters in Paris? **Meyerbeer** had set his sights on Paris from very early days, and worked very hard to lay the groundwork for it. When one of his early operas failed in Vienna, he took the advice of our old friend **Salieri** to study in Italy, so he moved there,

writing no less than six operas under the mentorship of **Gioacchino Rossini**, who was a year younger but at this stage the more successful. The last of these, *Il crociato in Egitto* (The Crusader in Egypt), was a triumph in Venice and London, and gave him his desired entry into Paris. His next two operas there, *Robert le Diable* and *Les Huguenots,* cemented his reputation and virtually defined the form of French *grand opéra* for the next three or four decades. He was just finishing a fourth *grand opéra, Le prophète,* when Wagner arrived, but he refused to release it for performance until the opera manager gave up his desire to put his own mistress into the leading role, and instead accept Meyerbeer's choice, **Pauline Viardot** (whom we also met last week). The fact that a composer could make such demands and have the financial resources to ride out a stalemate that lasted eight years is a tribute to Meyerbeer's star status and considerable wealth.

8. Meyerbeer and Wagner, biographical facts

And what of **Wagner**? Unlike Meyerbeer, he was not a child prodigy; his first love was for the spoken theater, and he would have regarded his operas as a higher species of theater rather than a peculiar genre of music. After studying music at university, he took a number of opera jobs as choirmaster or conductor, at the provincial centers **Würtzburg, Magdeburg, Königsberg,** and **Riga**. But he built up such debts that he had to flee abroad to escape his creditors. He arrived in Paris with one unperformed opera and one failed one in his briefcase, half of another (*Rienzi*) already written, and ideas for a fourth (the *Dutchman*). Contrast Meyerbeer, who arrived on the cusp of success, with five other successful operas in his backpack. Meyerbeer was in a position to be generous, and indeed he not only encouraged his younger compatriot, but helped him out financially on more than one occasion.

B. Meyerbeer's Paris Premieres

9. Section title B (Meyerbeer's Paris premieres)

That was the most famous aria from Meyerbeer's final opera, *L'Africaine,* produced after his death in 1864. The words begin "O paradis!" but are translated as "O paradiso" when sung by an Italian singer like **Luciano Pavarotti** here. It is **Vasco da Gama** exclaiming over the beauty of a tropical island where he has landed after all the other members of his European crew have been massacred by so-called savages. It is not one of Meyerbeer's most convincing narratives, but a beautiful aria nonetheless. And it makes a good introduction to this second section, which is about what made Meyerbeer so popular. But that's not fair; I should say "what made Meyerbeer so good," for he was supremely good at what he did well.

10. Degas: Ballet of the Dead Nuns in Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* at the Opéra

And one of the things he was very good at indeed was giving the audience something to surprise them, something to make their jaws drop and eyes pop. You could say he was the **Andrew Lloyd Webber** of Grand Opera. All grand operas, virtually by definition, had to contain a ballet, and for *Robert le diable* he came up with a doozy: a ballet of dead nuns who have forsaken their vows of chastity. Here it is in a

painting by **Edgar Degas** (1834–1917), still going strong in 1871, 40 years after its 1831 premiere. But here I have to admit we run into a problem—the same problem that besets this course as a whole. The fact that so many of these composers have fallen from popularity means that videos that give some idea of the original performances are hard to come by, and in the rare cases where these works have been revived, we come to marvel at the skills of the later directors rather than reimagining the originals. That is absolutely true of this 2012 production at the Royal Opera House in London, with choreography by Lionel Hoche. It is very much for our modern age, and I suspect our tendency to laugh is not at all what Meyerbeer intended. You don't need to know much of the context: merely that Robert is charged with taking a sacred branch from the Abbess' tomb, and the Nuns are trying to seduce him to prevent it.

11. Meyerbeer: *Robert le diable,* ballet of the dead nuns.

Robert's father, **Bertram**, is in league with the Devil. He has just been told that his life will be forfeit unless he can recruit his son to the Dark Side. But Bertram (**John Relyea**) has been overheard by Robert's pious foster-sister **Alice** (**Marina Poplavskaya**), so he has to silence her by a mixture of threats and hypnotism. This is the same London production (by **Laurent Pelly**), but the sense of the whole show being in quotes, as it were (for example, the obviously painted scenery), does not interfere with the originality of Meyerbeer's orchestration; listen especially for his use of solo instruments. It is one of the most impressive passages in any of his operas that I know.

12. Meyerbeer: *Robert le diable,* Bertram/Alice duet
13. Costumes for *Les Huguenots*

Perhaps it was his Jewish background that enabled Meyerbeer to keep a detached distance from Christian sectarianism, but at least three of his operas—*Robert le diable*, *les Huguenots*, and **Le** *prophète*—deal with situation that show the violent or downright perverted aspects of religious fanaticism. In the case of *Le Huguenots,* the history is real: the **Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre** of 1572, when groups of Catholic vigilantes came out on the night of the 23/24 August to slaughter Protestants (Huguenots) all over France. In this particular case, I am able to show scenes from a 1990 production in Australia that makes some attempt to stay within the period style; by the same token, however, it is a grainy and rather faded video. I'll show two scenes, both from Act IV. In the first**, Saint-Bris** (**Clifford Grant**), a leading Catholic noble, leads some of his peers in an oath to wipe out the Huguenots; the situation is complicated by the presence of the hero **Raoul**, a secret Protestant, and Saint-Bris's daughter **Valentine**, who loves Raoul. We will then go on to the big ensemble scene in which the women hand out identifying scarves to Saint-Bris's men, and their daggers are blessed for their holy task. I played this in another course some years ago, and added brief musical notes in the corner. I have kept them in. Allowing for the old video, do you find any of this effective, and if so, why?

14. Meyerbeer: *Les Huguenots,* oath scene
15. Meyerbeer: *Les Huguenots,* blessing of the daggers.
16. — still from the above

So what did you think: does that work?

C. The Acolyte

17. Section title C

That was the big tune from *Rienzi*, the opera with which Wagner hoped, but failed, to conquer Paris. Since Meyerbeer was Monarch of the Opéra, Wagner wrote it to appeal to French taste in the Meyerbeerian manner; a later contemporary—a Wagnerite, naturally—quipped that it was the best opera Meyerbeer ever wrote. When he met with Meyerbeer on landing in Boulogne, Wagner was as obsequious as could be. I don't think this was only flattery; Wagner could certainly appreciate skill when he saw it; it is just that he saw his own goals as being pitched higher. Anyway, he enters this story as a Meyerbeer acolyte, and traces of Meyerbeer's manner are to be found, not only in *Rienzi,* which is seldom performed, but in *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin* also, which most certainly are. For example, he knew the power of large-scale spectacle; the second act of *Tannhäuser* provides that in spades, with the **Entry of the Guests** for the great song competition at the Wartburg, which is the centerpiece of the opera. Although I have at least two more modern productions, I am showing the old one at the Met by **Otto Schenk**, because it is in a style that Meyerbeer would certainly have recognized. [If we are short of time, I'll start two minutes into the scene; otherwise, it is complete.]

18. Wagner: *Tannhäuser,* Entry of the Guests, 1
19. Wagner: *Tannhäuser,* Entry of the Guests, 2
20. — still from the above

I could play several Meyerbeer scenes in audio to show you that Wagner was imitating his former mentor. I think you would hear the similarity, but find Wagner's concept broader and grander, his time-scale expanded. But to illustrate the kinship on video, I have to go back to **Laurent Pelly's** production of *Robert le diable*, and the scene where the lords and ladies arrive for the tournament in Act II. Musically, it is a close enough parallel: a splendid march as the stage fills up. But I know you will focus mainly on Pelly's brilliant picture-book approach to the costumes, make-up, and staging. But so be it; it is a fun scene, and I do want Meyerbeer to have the last word for now/

21. Meyerbeer: *Robert le diable,* tournament scene
22. Class title 2 (still from the above)

D. Is “pretty” such a bad word?

23. Section title D (Lisette Oropesa)

That was American soprano **Lisette Oropesa** as the Queen of France in a recent production of Meyerbeer’s *Les Huguenots* at the Paris Opera. What did you think of the music? And production? I use the word “pretty” in my title, because I think that is the answer to both questions. It is a graceful melody, gracefully sung, and a very pretty production. What’s not to like?

24. Act I set for *Robert le diable,* with an engraving of the Wartburg

Both engravings on this slide relate to the comparison we made at the end of the last hour. The lower picture is the set design for the tournament scene in *Robert le diable;* the upper one is the medieval castle of the **Wartburg** in central Germany, where there really was a singing contest among the knight minstrels in 1207—or at least, there really is a legend asserting that there was. Wagner, as we saw, was not averse to imitating Meyerbeer’s big stage effects. What got to him was that he did not feel they were about anything important. Robert is vaguely supposed to be an historical character—the father of **William the Conqueror**—but just about everything else in the opera is either legend or the invention of the librettist; the tournament is merely an excuse for pageantry. But whether there actually was a song contest at the Wartburg or not, the idea is significant. The castle is a symbol of national pride; the knights are symbols of chivalry and strength; and the idea of their song contest unites two important parts of Wagner’s personality: his love of country and his love of music. I imagine that many Germans, then and now, would have felt alike. But there was another difference between the two men.

25. Isabella Colbran and Jenny Lind

You remember these two from last week. On the advice of **Antonio Salieri**, the young Meyerbeer went to Italy to study vocal technique. He became close friends with **Gioacchino Rossini**, and would certainly have known Signora Rossini, the mezzo-soprano **Isabella Colbran**, the presiding goddess of *bel canto* technique. Years later, as you also know, he was to write a role for the other *belcanto diva* here, **Jenny Lind**. Meyerbeer went on writing beautiful melodies to the day he died; *L’Africaine*, his last opera, might also be called the **Last Bastion of Bel Canto**. Wagner, not so much. Not because he couldn’t, but because he felt that such obviously beautiful, well-shaped songs were excrescences, mere decoration, inorganic, not inevitable products of the drama. He had little time for prettiness. Whenever you get it in mature Wagner, there is usually a reason. With that in mind, watch the end of this duet for two sopranos in *Lohengrin.* The dark-haired one is **Ortrud** (**Evelyn Herlitzius**), who has been plotting against the innocent **Elsa** (**Annett Dasch**) accusing her of murdering her brother, the heir to the dukedom. But the Grail Knight Lohengin has come to her rescue, and they are to be married the next day. Elsa takes pity on Ortrud and invites her to be a train-bearer at the wedding. Ortrud goes along with it, but her thoughts are very different. Duets of any kind, where two voices actually sing together, are rare in Wagner, as is the outright beauty of Elsa’s singing and the radiant orchestral passage that follows it. So why does he do it here? The production by **Claus Guth** is a modern one, updated to Wagner’s own time.

26. Wagner: *Lohengrin*, Act II, end of Elsa/Ortrud duet
27. — still from the above

What was going on there, do you think? Elsa is so simplistic, so euphoric, so perfectly suited to the *bel canto* world. But the real interest is in the character of Ortrud, who is a study in jealousy. Now I am not for a moment suggesting that they represent Meyerbeer and Wagner respectively; Ortrud is the villain, after all. But Wagner did know jealousy. He had set his heart on a triumph in Paris, and failed. Why should this wealthy cosmopolitan have it all, and he get nothing? Yes, Meyerbeer had helped him, but didn't someone say that the quickest way to make an enemy is to do a favor?

28. The bit I can't show

Anyway, the Elsa/Ortrud duet provides a plausible cue to mention the elephant in the room. Wagner brooded for years on Meyrbeer's success and his own relative failure, and in 1850, after he had been exiled from Germany for his participation in the 1848 uprising, he wrote an essay, *Das Judenthum in der Musik* (Jewishness in Music), published it privately, and circulated it among his friends, many of whom were horrified. The essay attacked Meyerbeer under a thinly-disguised pseudonym; he republished the essay in an expanded, freely circulated edition 19 years later, in 1869, and this time there was no pseudonym; by then, Meyerbeer had been dead five years. Both versions also attacked **Mendelssohn**,

29. *Das Judenthum in der Musik*

Normally, as you know, I try to back up my points through music or art, but in this case I am stymied. For Wagner's blatant antisemitism is essentially irrelevant to his artistic production. I could show you characters from his later operas that are often understood to be Jewish caricatures, or productions that have made that point more than others, but it is all rather distasteful. The thing is, though, that Wagner had a point. Meyerbeer *was* more interested in effects than causes; his music *was* more decorative than substantial; he *did* have this enviable facility for giving the public what it wants—so have many other composers, before and since. But Wagner went further; he said that Meyerbeer was all these things because he was a Jew. And the moment you start talking about "The Jew" rather than an individual fellow artist, you have crossed a terrible line.

30. Paris Opéra statistics

I got these figures from Wikipedia; I have not checked them. Ten years before the end of the century, there were no Wagner performances at the Paris *Opéra,* but 32 by Meyerbeer, Two decades later, it was the other way around: 60 for Wagner, and only 4 for Meyerbeer. But WHY? Is it fair that the gracious and highly skilled Giacomo Meyerbeer should fall into obscurity, while the fortunes of Richard Wagner, who was an absolute shit, should rise? How much was this a result of Wagner's campaign against his former rival? Or was there something about Meyerbeer's music that gave it a sell-by-date that, for whatever reason, Wagner's does not seem to have had. What is it that makes people still flock to his operas, despite their toxic nationalism, despite their difficulty and length, while revivals of Meyerbeer are sill a rarity. Why?

E. When megalomania pays off

31. Section title E (The Ride of the Valkyries)
32. *Ring* DVD covers

Many people hate Wagner because he is big, bombastic, and nationalistic. But the secret of Wagner's ultimate triumph over Meyerbeer is because he thought bigger, much bigger, and he tied his work to something of great importance to him: the myths that defined a nation. This is true of all his mature work, but nowhere so much as in the four operas of *Der Ring des Nibelungen,* a project that occupied him a quarter-century between his first sketches for a single opera about the death of the German hero Siegfried to the completion of the four-opera cycle, beginning virtually with the creation of the world, which opened his purpose-built opera house in Bayreuth in 1876. Because of this scale, virtually any usable excerpt is too long to play as a mere illustration in a mixed class. So I am taking the scene that first converted me to the Wagnerian cause, playing the beginning of it in an old audio version, then cutting to the end in the most recent production at the Met.

33. Ferdinand Leeke: *Wotan's Farewell* (1909)

Brünnhilde, Wotan's favorite daughter, has disobeyed her father and spared the mortal woman Sieglinde, knowing that the child growing in her womb, Siegfried—incidentally Wotan's grandson—will grow to be the hero who will eventually bring an end to the old era and usher in a new. Though still loving her, Wotan is forced to take away Brünnhilde's goodhood by kissing her to sleep, but he honors her request to place her on a mountain surrounded by a ring of fire, so that only the bravest hero will dare to break through (and of course we know who *that* will be!). Wotan's song of farewell is too large to be called a mere aria, but it is utterly lyrical, and shows how Wagner, in rare moments like this, has not abandoned *bel canto,* but transformed it. I am continuing into the great orchestral interlude that follows, to show that Wagner is thinking like a symphonic composer, not as mere accompaniment to song. The singer is the Canadian-Russian bass-baritone **George London** (1920–85) and the conductor is **Hans Knappertsbusch** (1888–1965), whom I myself heard conduct at Bayreuth. The paintings, apparently, were produced by AI, which did a remarkable job of imitating the style of Wagner illustrations of the period, such as the one on the screen.

34. Wagner: *Die Walküre,* Wotan's farewell
35. Wagner: *Die Walküre,* old Met DVD cover

Given the topic of today's class, I wish I could have shown the end of the act in the old production by **Otto Schenk** at the Met, which was probably the last sustained attempt to recreate the period style. But the video is just too dark to use. So here instead is **Bryn Terfel** in the more recent (but soon to be retired) **Robert Lepage** production, which uses enormous stage machinery to create the various sets. Actually Meyerbeer might have approved; his final opera, *L'Africaine*, included an entire ship on the stage, rocked by dozens of stagehands in the basement as it is tossed to and fro in a storm!

36. Wagner: *Die Walküre,* Wotan's farewell

F. Back to Paris

37. Section title F (*Tannhäuser* poster)

Wagner finally got his desire to shine in Paris. In 1860, he gave two concerts of orchestral music from his operas that were well received by the French composers who attended and by poets like **Baudelaire**, who became his staunch defender. And in 1861, Paris got its first Wagner opera, *Tannhäuser,* at the request of **Napoleon III**, who had been persuaded by **Princess Pauline von Metternich**, wife of the Austrian Ambassador, confidante to the Emperor, and apparently a patroness of Wagner's. The premiere began well, but was interrupted by heckling in the later acts; in the second performance, the heckling began right at the beginning. Wagner withdrew the piece before there could be a third. I'll show two clips from a 1983 biopic of Wagner, with **Richard Burton** in the title role. It places the blame solely on Wagner's obstinate refusal to have the ballet in its traditional place in the second act, when the gentlemen of the **Jockey Club** could arrive after a leisurely dinner to see their *protégées* disporting themselves on the stage; as it was, they arrived late and missed the girls. You will probably find the dialogue at the start of this clip repellent; I know why the scriptwriter did it, but I very much doubt that Wagner was as offensive in speech as he patently was in print.

38. Film: *Wagner*: *Tannhäuser* in Paris,
39. *Tannhäuser* poster in flames

Just as the dialogue there was surely exaggerated for narrative purposes, so I think the *débacle* was oversimplified. A lot of the reaction may have been distaste for the pro-Austrian policies of the Emperor. And besides, Wagner himself was quite arrogant in what he chose to present in Paris. For one thing, *Tannhäuser* was a work in his old style and the changes he made for France really did not fit. And if he was doing it at all, he really might have paid more attention to what French audiences wanted. In fact, he really deserved to fall flat on his face.

40. *Tristan* and *Africaine* DVDs

However, I do not want to end on hybrid work. So let's contrast two love duets that come relatively close together in time. Two years before his Paris fiasco, Wagner premiered the opera I consider his masterpiece, ***Tristan und Isolde***. It too is based on medieval legend, but it has virtually no nationalistic content and, for that matter, very little action. **Tristan** has been sent by the widowed **King Mark** of Cornwall to fetch **Queen Isolde** from Ireland to be his new wife. But she and Tristan have fallen in love, although they do all they can to deny this. In Act II, they meet at night in the palace garden, although both realize that their love cannot be consummated outside of death. So this is half an hour of virtual *coitus interruptus,* far too long for me to play, but I'll give you the final two and a half minutes.

41. Wagner: *Tristan und Isolde,* end of love duet
42. DVD covers (*Tristan* focus)

I'm sure you could hear what I said about Wagner's mature writing being symphonic. There is not a trace of *bel canto* here; you could even debate which is more important, the voices or the orchestra.

Wagner had made new discoveries about harmony, too; he had developed a technique whereby each chord sounds as though it is going to resolve in a nice fat cadence, but never does; my remark about *coitus interruptus* was more than a quip.

43. DVD covers (*Africaine* focus)

The duet from ***L'Africaine*** I have chosen to end with is the opposite to Wagner in so many ways. I called it the last bastion of *bel canto.* While Wagner gets his effect by piling *crescendo* on *crescendo,* Meyerbeer's most beautiful effect is when the voices fade to a thread of suspended sound; there is nothing quite like this in any of his earlier blockbusters. On the other hand, *L'Africaine* shows some of Meyerbeer's worst qualities too. The story is a mishmash; at some stage in the development, the piece suddenly became an opera about **Vasco da Gama**, with the result that the island off the coast of Africa suddenly got shifted to India—no matter, as long as it had a suitably exotic flavor. And this is not really a love duet either. Vasco is really in love with a European woman, and has only agreed to marry the African/Indian to avoid getting executed. But there is nothing in the music to indicate that at all. Wagner was right about Meyerbeer: *effects without causes*. But those effects are really something!

44. Meyerbeer: *L'Africaine,* end of Sélika/Vasco duet
45. Class title 3 (Meyerbeer and his operas)