

## D. Is “pretty” such a bad word?

Dramatic construction was not the only key to Meyerbeer’s success. He also preserved the Italian art of *bel canto*—literally “beautiful singing.” Wagner’s conception of the voice was significantly different, which makes his rare flashes of *bel canto* especially interesting.

**Meyerbeer:** *Les Huguenots* (1836), Act II opening (Paris 2018; Lisette Oropesa)

**Wagner:** *Lohengrin* (1848), Act II Elsa/Ortrud duet, ending (La Scala 2012; Annett Dasch, Evelyn Herlitzius; Claus Guth, *dir.*)

## E. When megalomania pays off

Meyerbeer wrote long operas, but he did not think big. Wagner’s four-opera *Ring* cycle traces the birth of a nation from the creation of the world to the extinction of the old gods. Yes, he could be bombastic, but that symphonic scale is also the secret of his strength.

**Wagner:** *Die Walküre* (1856), Wotan’s Farewell, opening (audio with images; George London; Hans Knappertsbusch, *cond.*)

**Wagner:** *Die Walküre* (1856), Wotan’s Farewell, ending (Met 2011, Bryn Terfel, *Wotan*; James Levine, *cond.*; Robert Lepage, *dir.*)

## F. Back to Paris

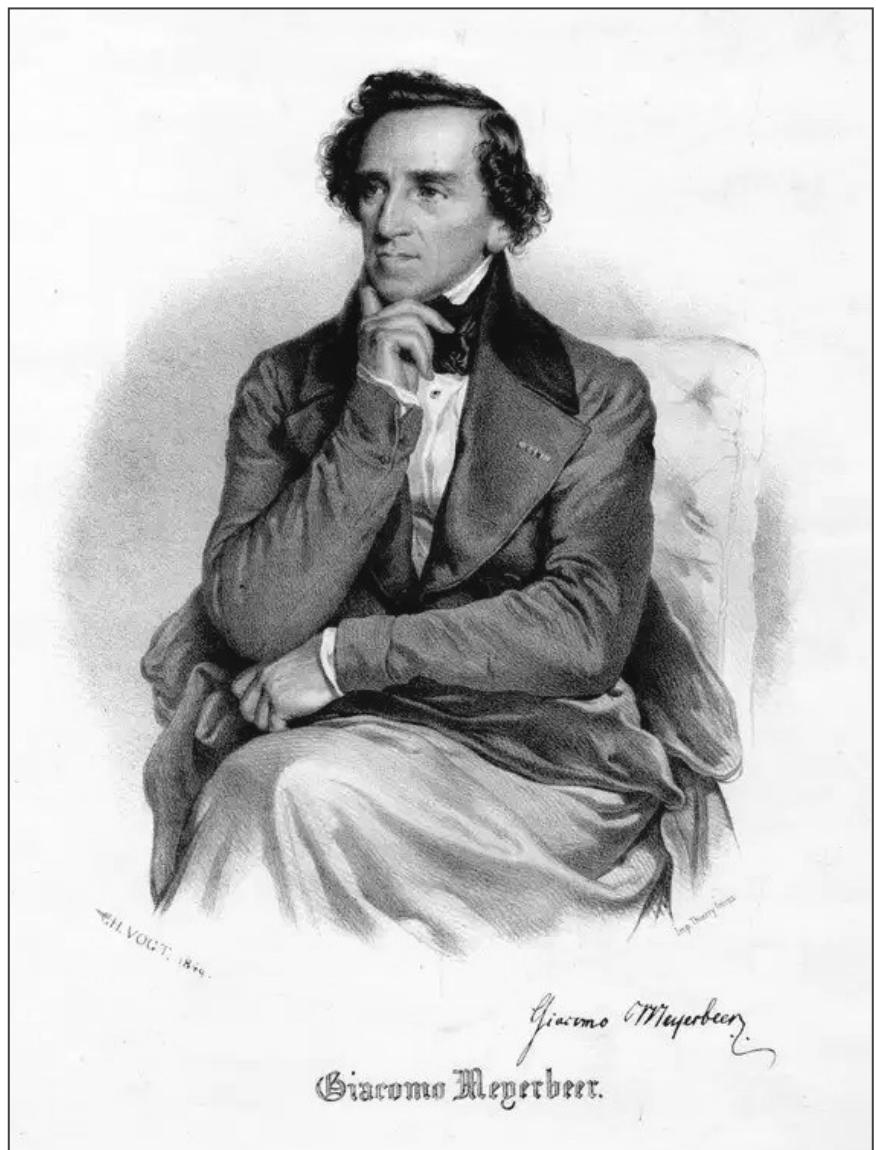
We look at the *Tannhäuser* debacle of 1861. However, we do not leave it there, but end with a comparison of two love duets from about the same time, letting Meyerbeer have the lovely last word.

**Film:** *Wagner* (1983), the *Tannhäuser* premiere in Paris (Richard Burton, *Wagner*; Tony Palmer, *director*)

**Wagner:** *Tristan und Isolde* (1859), Act II love duet, climax (La Scala 2007; Waltraud Meier, Ian Storey; Patrice Chéreau, *director*)

**Meyerbeer:** *L’Africaine* (1864), Act IV Sélika/Vasco duet, ending (San Francisco, 1988; Shirley Verrett, Plácido Domingo)

## Popularity... and then?



## 6. An Operatic Assassination

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THIS CLASS IS ABOUT TWO GERMAN-BORN OPERA COMPOSERS, **Giacomo Meyerbeer** (1791–1864) and **Richard Wagner** (1813–83). When they met in Paris in 1839, Meyerbeer was enjoying a fame comparable to that of an Andrew Lloyd Webber, and Wagner was his humble acolyte hoping for a similar breakthrough. That breakthrough never came, but Meyerbeer helped him achieve performances of his next two operas in Germany.

Fast forward to 1861. Meyerbeer is preparing his final opera, *L'Africaine*. Wagner has obtained the ear of the Emperor Napoleon III, who has arranged his long-desired Parisian debut, with a revised version of an older opera, *Tannhäuser*. It is an abject failure, and Wagner never sets his sights on Paris again. Yet by the start of the next century, Wagner's operas would fill the playbills in Paris as elsewhere, while Meyerbeer is more or less forgotten.

Is this fair? Why should such a generous man and talented musician as Meyerbeer fail to retain his hold on posterity, while Wagner, a personally loathsome individual who made his former benefactor the target of his virulent antisemitism, both in speech and in print, is regarded as one of the great operatic innovators to this day? There *are* reasons, and we will winkle them out—but that does not make Meyerbeer any less deserving of sympathetic reassessment. *rb.*

## A. Two Germans in Paris

At the time of their first meeting, Wagner and Meyerbeer were writing music that was surprisingly similar. Deliberately so in Wagner's case, although he would soon turn in a new direction.

**Meyerbeer:** *Les Huguenots* (1836), Act I drinking song

**Wagner:** *Das Liebesverbot* (1836), Act I party scene

**Wagner:** *Der Fliegende Holländer* (1841), brief excerpts

## B. Meyerbeer's Paris Premieres

Meyerbeer in fact wrote works for the stage in a variety of genres, but we concentrate now on the five-act dramas with which he virtually defined the form of French *grand opéra*.

**Meyerbeer:** *Robert le diable* (1831), ballet of the dead nuns (ROH, London; Laurent Pelly, director; Lionel Hoche, choreographer)

**Meyerbeer:** *Robert le diable* (1831), Act III, Bertram/Alice duet (production as above; John Relyea, Marina Poplavskaya)

**Meyerbeer:** *Les Huguenots* (1826), Act IV, oath and blessing of the daggers (Opera Australia; Clifford Grant, *Saint-Bris*)

## C. The Acolyte

Wagner wrote his seldom-performed *Rienzi* as virtually a Meyerbeer clone. But even after he returned to Germany, he was still imitating the older master in the construction of large scenes.

**Wagner:** *Tannhäuser* (1845), Act II, entry of the guests (Metropolitan Opera, Otto Schenk, director)

**Meyerbeer:** *Robert le diable* (1831), Act II tournament scene (production as above)