

OPERA PRODUCTION

his own life is forfeit. **His return from the underworld is witnessed by Alice, Robert's former foster-sister and the main force of good in the story. To keep her from revealing his true identity, Bertram hypnotizes her into submission** before his meeting with Robert, in which he tells him that the only way to win Isabelle's love back is to steal a sacred branch from a ruined convent by moonlight.

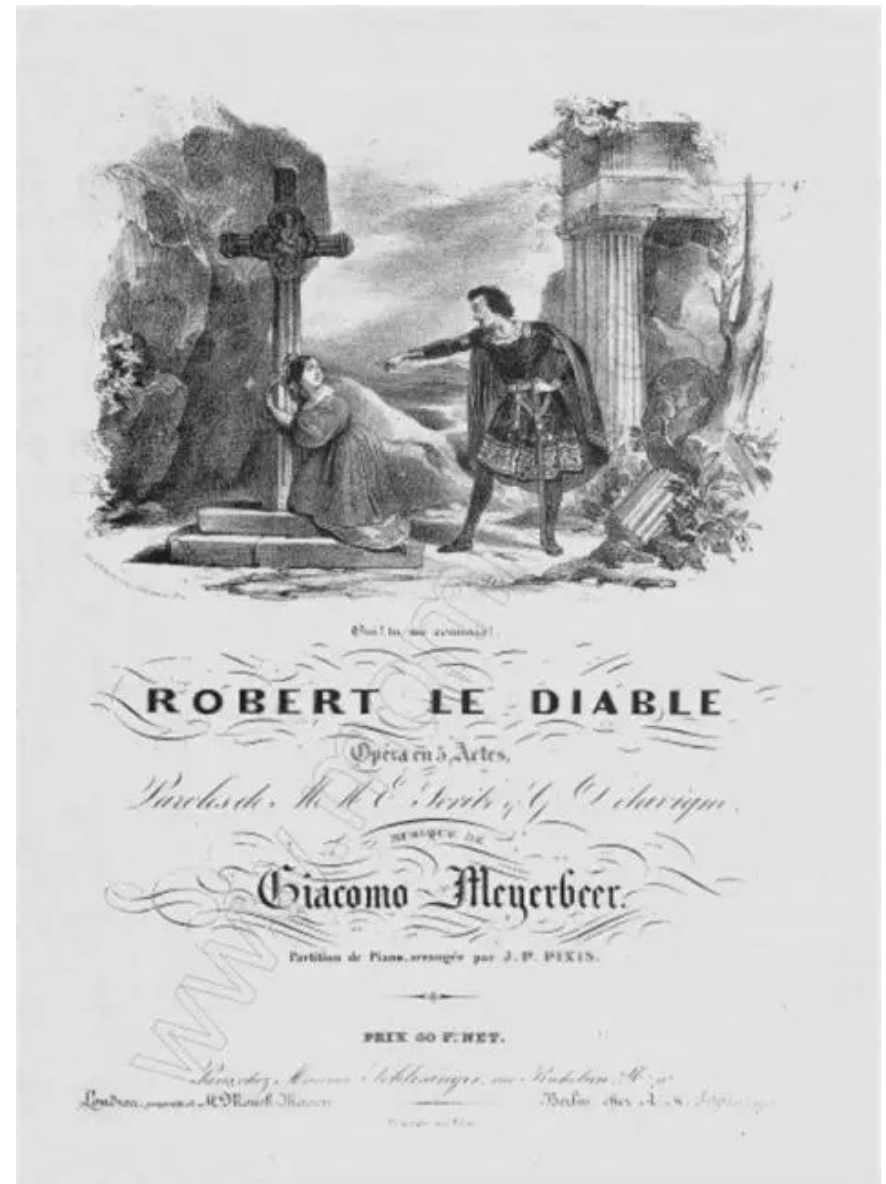
Meyerbeer: *Robert le Diable*, scenes as shown (production as above, with Patrizia Ciofi, *Isabelle*, and Marina Poplavskaya, *Alice*)

C. BACK TO BALLET

To see the work of Pelly's other collaborator, choreographer **Lionel Hoche**, we end with the ballet scene as we began. **The convent ruins are inhabited by the ghosts of former nuns who have betrayed their vows of chastity. Under Bertram's direction, they engage in a bacchanale then seduce the reluctant Robert into stealing the branch.**

Meyerbeer: *Robert le Diable*, convent scene (almost complete)

In Act IV (not played) Isabelle's attendants are horrified by Robert's sacrilege and drive him out. So he begins Act V thoroughly compromised and apparently easy prey for Bertram to deliver to Hell. But Alice enters with a letter written by his dying mother; armed by that and her fervent prayers, Robert renounces his father and marries Isabelle.



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9. MEDIEVAL MAYHEM

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LAURENT PELLY, THE DIRECTOR OF THE 2010 LONDON PRODUCTION of Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* that we will sample today, said "In my view, there are two types of opera. There are ageing works that need a new reading to clear the dust off, to make them accessible to an audience of today. Then there are masterpieces which don't need a new reading because the work is strong enough in itself." *Robert* is definitely the former, an opera that was once one of the most popular in the world, only to vanish completely at the end of the 19th century and not be revived until the end of the 20th.

A director is only as good as his collaborators. This class will focus on the work of two of them: set designer **Chantal Thomas**, and choreographer **Lionel Hoche**. As two of the factors that made *Robert* such a success in 1831 were its notorious *Ballet of the Nuns* in Act III and magnificent scenic spectacle throughout, these artists had their work cut out for them. That they succeeded so magnificently and created such a fresh new style in the process, resounds to the credit of the director, as Collaborator-in-Chief. *rb*.

A. THE VANISHING OPERA

The 1831 premiere of *Robert le Diable* was attended by just about everyone that mattered in the arts at the time. It launched the French genre of *Grand Opéra*, which would dominate the field for half a century. It springboarded its composer from local celebrity to international star. At least two generations of composers—among them, Donizetti, Berlioz, Verdi, Wagner, Bizet, Gounod, and Offenbach—imitated its dramatic strokes and musical effects. Over the next 60 years, it clocked up 751 performances in Paris alone. And then it simply dropped out of the repertoire, hence my title "The Vanishing Opera." Its next production in Paris would not come until 1984, the first in almost a century. But it was a curiously antiquated production that merely

confirmed the work as a museum piece pulled down from some dusty shelf—a ghost opera. We will look at a brief clip from that before considering the hurdles that Laurent Pelly and his team had to jump in creating the first truly *modern* revival of the work in 2010.

Meyerbeer: *Robert le Diable*, Nuns' Ballet clip (Paris 1894; Thomas Fulton, conductor; Petrika Ionesco, director-designer)

Meyerbeer: *Robert le Diable*, opening (London 2010; Daniel Oren, conductor; Laurent Pelly, director; Chantal Thomas, designer; Bryan Hymel, *Robert*; John Relyea, *Bertram*)

B. PAINTED WORLDS

This section considers Pelly's work with designer **Chantal Thomas** in establishing notably different worlds for the first four scenes of the opera, referencing such obviously artificial media as collage, paper models, pop-up books, and 19th-century toy theater. All the remaining scenes to be played come from Acts II and III of the opera, given in **bold type** in the full outline synopsis below.

In Act One (already sampled), **Robert, Duke of Normandy, is drinking with other knights in Messina**, all of whom intend to enter the tournament the next day to win the hand of Princess Isabelle. Robert is accompanied by a stranger who apparently saved his life before the opera began. We know, but he doesn't yet, that this is **Bertram**, his own father, who has sold his soul to the devil, and is now intent on recruiting his son to the dark side also. Encouraged by Bertram, Robert gambles with the other knights, but loses everything, including his armor.

In Act Two, Robert confesses the loss to Princess Isabelle, whom he loves. She produces a new set of armor, so that Robert can fight after all. But Bertram sends Robert a message purportedly from a rival suitor, wanting to meet for a private duel in a distant place. **So the tournament (one of the main attractions of the original production—and of this one) takes place with Robert absent.**

Act Three opens in a rocky gorge, with a cave leading down to Hell, where **Bertram prepares to meet his master**. He is told that time is running out and that he needs to recruit Robert within 24 hours, or else