1 Politics, history and opera

> I hasten to proclaim the brilliant success of this opera: it is a real triumph for the new genre that is being created.[1]

The premiere of Daniel Auber's *La Muette de Portici* on 29 February 1828 was immediately recognised as an artistic and commercial success, and it heralded a new era at the Paris Opéra. Looking back from the vantage point of the opera's 1837 revival, the critic Edouard Monnier added some perspective:

> A new genre was introduced [to the Opéra]. Until then, we clung on to pure tragedy, in its nobility and classical severity: *Œdipe* and *La Vestale* represented the model from which only fairy-tale operas were allowed to depart. With *La Muette* forms were varied: drama became available to issues [both] great and small, to sad and joyful emotions, it ventured into territory populated by gods and heroes; with Masaniello, the people invaded the domain reserved for pontiffs and kings, nymphs and princesses … [Auber's] music is French music in all senses.[2]

For Monnier, the rather rarefied classical and mythological subject matter favoured by Gluck and Spontini had been decisively rejected, following on from Rossini's experiments in this direction with *Moïse* (1826) and *Le Siège de Corinthe* (1827). The dramatic techniques of melodrama and pantomime and the musical language of *opéra comique* and Italian opera had been embraced, and grafted on to the more traditional practices of *tragédie lyrique*, with ever more magnificent scenery and effects. This eclecticism and democratic approach to both subject matter and musico-dramatic language was seen to be not only an aesthetic strength, but also a new definition of Frenchness – a response to the romanticism of Rossini and Weber that was already impressing Parisian opera audiences.

More than that, however, as this book seeks to demonstrate, *La Muette* brought the Opéra into the heart of cultural and political activity of the period. Recent research into the Restoration and early July Monarchy has revealed a more diverse political discourse than previously acknowledged, one linked intimately with ways of thinking about the past – above all the Revolutionary period and its aftermath.[3] Contributing to this reassessment

of the Restoration in particular, further scholarship has begun to shed light on the precise ways in which cultural activity intersected with political – and recent historical – experience.[4] But there has been little scholarship examining grand opera in this redefined political context. This book seeks to build on this understanding of a complex, multi-vocal culture preoccupied with its past, in order to present a more nuanced assessment of the genre that takes historiography of the period as its starting point. By examining five operas, which each engage with history, the hitherto underappreciated elasticity of political meaning that individual works embraced is revealed, and the complex layering of aesthetic effects that characterised the genre and articulated its historico-political engagement is illuminated. These case studies trace the trajectory of grand opera through the July Monarchy, from its initially self-conscious, idealised notion of 'authenticity' and local colour, to a more rooted sense of historical and emotional realism informed by political experience. By analysing on the one hand the manner in which audiences and critics responded to these operas, constructing 'meanings' with reference to their personal and collective experiences and memories, and on the other hand the ways in which visual spectacle, music and text combined to bring the past alive, the central position that grand opera occupied in the *mentalités* of the period is revealed, and our understanding of the genre's aesthetic as well as political character deepened.

As has been observed frequently, grand operas created in the late 1820s through to the late 1840s for the Paris Opéra acquired recognition as a body of works more through the licensing requirements of the institution than by their specific dramatic content.[5] Anselm Gerhard has argued against 'grand opera' as a meaningful generic category altogether, but we might nevertheless understand it as a set of parameters inseparable from a particular social, political and cultural context, and from the expectations of its creators and audiences.[6] We tend to defer to a list of typical – though not essential, nor exclusive – characteristics of these operas: four or five acts; medieval or Renaissance setting; tragic ending; choruses of peoples in conflict; dramatically integrated ballet; mix of characters from different social backgrounds; impressive orchestral effects; melodramatic situations; tableaux; large scene complexes with embedded numbers; techniques and vocal styles influenced by French, Italian and German opera.[7] This list has been extrapolated by modern scholars from the half dozen or so core works that have come to stand for the genre (the majority of which have librettos written by Eugène Scribe) – Auber's *La Muette de Portici*; Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*; Halévy's *La Juive*; and Meyerbeer's *Robert*

le diable, Les Huguenots and *Le Prophète*.[8] Taking our cue from William Crosten's important 1948 survey of the genre, we have further refined our judgment to agree that the genre reached maturity – and perfection – with Meyerbeer, more specifically with *Les Huguenots* (1836), and taken the features of this work – notably its presentation of conflicting choruses as the principal protagonists – as a standard against which to judge other examples.[9] The opera's terrifying depiction of the processes of history unfolding through the confrontation of Catholics and Protestants in sixteenth-century Paris, and its impressive – even modernistic – musico-dramatic techniques and manipulation of temporal and physical space, have (rightly) been praised by contemporaries and by modern commentators alike.[10] However, the implication is that other composers – notably Auber and Halévy, who nevertheless created important successes – were unable to achieve such musico-dramatic sophistication, often relying on a simpler musical language, more suited to ballet or *opéra comique*, and on visual spectacle, while still lesser composers could not effect the careful entwining of private and public spheres, and social and political relevance, perfected by the German composer.[11] It is striking that in the most important and influential book on the genre to appear in the last ten years or so, Anselm Gerhard declares 'the essential qualities of works like Auber's *Muette de Portici* and *Gustave III; ou, Le Bal masqué* are sufficiently well displayed by analysis of their librettos, while Auber's regularly overrated music … [does] not contribute anything decisively new to conventions which originate in *opéra comique* or Italian music in the style of Rossini'.[12] While Meyerbeer gestured forwards to Wagner, Verdi and beyond, others – so the story goes – were mired in the lighter, specifically French style of the first half of the century. We have tended to use Meyerbeer's works as defining examples of a genre that is in fact much more heterogeneous.

Table 1.1, which lists the operas that premiered at the Opéra between 1826 and 1850, makes clear that for all their success, importance and number of performances, Meyerbeer's works formed only a part of the repertory. There are more than twenty-one two- and three-act *petits opéras*, and a small number of four- and five-act operas based on fairy-tale sources (e.g. Cherubini's *Ali Baba*) or adapted from pre-existing works (e.g. Weber's *Euryanthe*, Donizetti's *Lucie de Lammermoor*). Rossini's *Le Siège de Corinthe* and Chelard's *Macbeth* might be categorised as pre-grand operas.[13] The remaining four- and five-act works are what we might understand broadly as 'grand operas', and some of them enjoyed considerable success.[14] Among these, operas with groups of people in conflict at their heart – in the manner of *Les Huguenots* – are relatively scarce (though the

Table 1.1 Operas premiered at the Paris Opéra, 1826 to 1850.

Year	Opera (composer)	Number of acts	Hero (grand operas only)
1826	*Le Siège de Corinthe* (Rossini)	three	revolutionary
1827	*Macbeth* (Chelard)	three	literary
	Moïse en Egypte (Rossini)	four	biblical
1828	*La Muette de Portici* (Auber)	five	revolutionary
	Le Comte Ory (Rossini)	two	
1829	*Guillaume Tell* (Rossini)	four	revolutionary
1830	*Le Dieu et la bayadère* (Auber)	two	
	François Ier à Chambord (de Ginestet)	two	
	La Tentation [ballet-opéra] (Halévy and Casimir Gide)	five	
1831	*Le Philtre* (Auber)	two	
	Euryanthe (Weber, arr. Castil-Blaze)	three	
	Robert le diable (Meyerbeer)	five	legendary
1832	*Le Serment* (Auber)	three	
1833	*Gustave III* (Auber)	five	monarch
	Ali Baba (Cherubini)	four	
1834	*Don Juan* (Mozart, arr. Castil-Blaze)	five	
1835	*La Juive* (Halévy)	five	religious
1836	*Les Huguenots* (Meyerbeer)	five	religious
	La Esmeralda (Bertin)	four	outcast
1837	*Stradella* (Niedermeyer)	five	composer
1838	*Guido et Ginevra* (Halévy)	five	artist (fictional)
	Benvenuto Cellini (Berlioz)	two (four tableaux)	artist
1839	*Le Lac des fées* (Auber)	five	fairy-tale
	La Xacarilla (Marliani)	one	
	La Vendetta (Ruolz)	three	
1840	*Les Martyrs* (Donizetti)	four	religious
	La Favorite (Donizetti)	four	religious
	Le Drapier (Halévy)	three	
1841	*La Reine de Chypre* (Halévy)	five	monarch
	Le Comte de Carmagnola (Thomas)	two	
	Le Freyschütz (Weber, recits. by Berlioz)	three	
1842	*Le Vaisseau fantôme* (Dietsch)	two	
	Le Guerillero (Thomas)	two	
1843	*Charles VI* (Halévy)	five	monarch
	Dom Sébastien de Portugal (Donizetti)	five	monarch

Table 1.1 (*cont.*)

Year	Opera (composer)	Number of acts	Hero (grand operas only)
1844	*Marie Stuart* (Niedermeyer)	five	monarch (in waiting)
	Otello (Rossini)	three	
	Le Lazzarone (Halévy)	two	
	Richard en Palestine (Adam)	three	
1845	*L'Etoile de Séville* (Balfe)	four	soldier
1846	*L'Ame en peine* (Flotow)	two	
	Lucie de Lammermoor (Donizetti)	four	
	David (Mermet)	three	
	Robert Bruce [pastiche] (Rossini, arr. Niedermeyer)	three	
1847	*Jérusalem* [*I Lombardi*] (Verdi)	four	religious
	La Bouquetière (Adam)	one	
1848	*L'Apparition* (Benoist)	two	
	L'Eden [*mystère*: prog. music] (F. David)	two	
	Jeanne la folle (Clapisson)	five	legendary
1849	*Le Prophète* (Meyerbeer)	five	religious
	Le Fanal (Adam)	two	
1850	*L'Enfant prodigue* (Auber)	five	biblical

chorus is always an important element of an opera's colour, and conflicting elements of a society are often in the background). One can instead see a more pervasive feature running through the repertory: operas that feature *individuals* drawn from history – from the revolutionary heroes seen in the late 1820s, through the religious and artistic figures of the 1830s, to the monarchs and religious leaders of the 1840s.[15] In spite of the genre's democratic reputation and perceived political (usually Revolutionary) topicality then – deriving from the importance of choruses in such works as *La Muette* and *Les Huguenots*, and the role that *La Muette* allegedly played in the Belgian uprising of 1830 – audiences, as we shall see, were more likely to have accessed the past through the stories of individual heroes rather than through generalised representations of 'the people'.[16]

Grand operas, centring on the dilemmas of individuals, also have in common a tendency to combine historical subject matter (with a broader contemporary resonance) with spectacular visual effects. The former has traditionally been seen as symptomatic of the precariousness of post-Revolutionary monarchical legitimacy, and an attempt to come to terms

with the recent past; the latter has usually been interpreted as enhancing the prestige of the Opéra (and thus the regime) on one hand, and on the other as pandering to the unsophisticated tastes of the new 'bourgeois' audiences attending the Opéra in increasing numbers.[17] Wagner famously dismissed the genre as 'effects without causes', a definition that has dogged its reception ever since.[18] But it is precisely the relationship between these two attributes – the historico-political and the aesthetic – that will be the focus of this book: the layers of meaning both intended and read into the genre by contemporaries, and the complexity of musico-dramatic effect used to negotiate between different political and temporal planes.

Opera frequently offers multiple political perspectives simultaneously through visual, musical and textual means, and it even confuses, exaggerates and invents 'reality' for the purposes of aesthetic pleasure, rather than aiming at factual transparency. Nevertheless, scholars of grand opera have traditionally tended to focus on establishing an intended – singular – political 'meaning', reconciling any interpretative ambiguity. For Crosten, grand operas were devoid of any political ambivalence or intellectual content simply by the nature of their audience: Scribe and his collaborators were complying opportunistically with the bourgeois public's demand for pure entertainment; the operas were thus titillating rather than challenging or engaging.[19] Jane Fulcher has sought to re-engage with grand opera as a politicised genre, questioning Crosten's implication that the audience responded as expected, deriving an unambiguous meaning rooted in their own values.[20] She has endeavoured instead to reveal the dynamic relationship between institution, audiences and population at large, claiming that the Opéra sought to control interpretation by blurring boundaries between art and reality. But Fulcher overlooks diverse or conflicting voices among creators or audiences, claiming instead that grand operas were always pieces of propaganda – successful or otherwise.[21] With such works as Auber's *La Muette de Portici* and Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*, Fulcher claims, 'the theater was a subtly used tool of the state': the metaphorical significance of their plots was carefully chosen to help two precarious monarchies (those of Charles X and Louis-Philippe) consolidate power and legitimacy.[22] In a doctoral dissertation exploring allegory in musical works of the Restoration and early July Monarchy, Anna McCready has also provided relatively straightforward mappings of the present onto the past, focusing on the tensions between public and monarchy, and implying a unified response from audiences.[23] Anselm Gerhard has offered a much broader approach to the political, examining ways in which grand opera embodied social concerns and showing how its spectacle and appeal

to the senses were rooted in contemporary urban reality. However, he has suggested that by 1830 Scribe, the most prolific and sought-after librettist of the period, had 'opted for the complacent position of an "apolitical" citizen … seeking to persuade himself that business and the theater had nothing to do with politics'.[24] Even before that, he suggests, in their libretto for *La Muette*, Scribe and Germain Delavigne 'ensured a thorough-going depoliticization of the explosive material': the text is 'unambivalently anti-revolutionary' – to satisfy the censor.[25] As Gerhard acknowledges, the music injected a subversive element into the whole (as did the costumes and *mise-en-scène*), and so although the plot did – eventually – warn against popular insurrection, strong echoes of the idealism of 1789 were also felt. It is surely disingenuous, however, to conclude that the librettists would not have anticipated (perhaps even expected or intended) such mixed messages, and to believe that Scribe and his collaborators really sought to keep politics out of opera.[26]

It is only relatively recently that we have begun to explore whether ambiguity and multiple political and social 'meanings' might be embedded in the genre and its reception – whether complexity of historical metaphor might be viewed as a highly charged, but ambiguous, political device.[27] In her contextualisation of Halévy's *La Juive*, Diana Hallman has identified the 'hidden' complex attitudes to Jewishness in the opera, concluding not simply that two sides of an argument were presented to satisfy the government while appealing to audiences with an apparently subversive story, but that 'the balanced presentation [of Catholics and Jews] may also have been motivated by a desire to strike a *juste milieu* tone and to represent multiple points of view coexisting in the government and among the public'.[28] Hallman also provides a more nuanced assessment of Scribe's apparent indifference to politics, with reference to his education, friends and upbringing, which might encourage us to approach the apparently conservative 'messages' of his other librettos more cautiously.

Hallman foregrounds the impossibility of establishing a single response to an opera. Steven Huebner's study of opera audiences in Paris between 1830 and 1870 reveals important details about the composition of audiences and their habits that further encourages us down this path. Although a third of subscribers to the Opéra in the early 1830s had noble titles, the remainder comprised diplomats, military officers, lawyers, doctors, manufacturers and bankers. The names of non-subscribers were not recorded systematically, but Huebner speculates that 'prosperous members of the élites and perhaps some *petits bourgeois* such as modest *bouquetiers* could undoubtedly afford occasional attendance at opera performances,

[but] cost may have been a formidable barrier to the development of taste among the less fortunate'.[29] Contemporary documents – memoirs, novels, illustrations – and other anecdotal evidence suggest that students, writers, artists – the liberal generation of 1820 – were regularly to be found in the relatively cheap *par-terre* and amphitheatre.[30] While subscribers would frequently attend operas they might not otherwise have chosen to see, Huebner notes that repertory staples 'formed a quasi-ceremonial focal point of social life for *habitués*', which might also encourage us to speculate that individuals sought 'new' meanings in familiar works, given that the highly charged political environment was constantly in flux.[31] Of course, audiences attended other theatres as well: about a third of Opéra subscribers also subscribed to the Opéra-Comique (though few to the Théâtre-Italien), and boulevard theatres such as the Gymnase-Dramatique and the Porte-Saint-Martin were popular with the *classe privilégiée* (including the royal family) as well as with those further down the social ladder.[32] Some audience members no doubt also attended concert series and participated in singing clubs aimed at different social groups – from the elite through to the working classes.[33]

This complex profile of Opéra audiences drawn largely from the aristocracy and the wealthier middle classes has encouraged us to gravitate towards the (presumed) unified voice of the government and its censors for a work's 'message', a message either reinforced by the Opéra's traditional aristocratic audiences, or challenged by its new bourgeois constituency and/or librettists. Hallman and Huebner encourage us in different ways to question the degree to which Opéra audiences had a shared political culture or shared aesthetic expectations at all. We might instead understand these operas as embracing diverse political viewpoints and borrowing from a range of cultural sources.

The political subtexts of grand operas, then, have attracted a range of scholars, albeit in sometimes rather limited ways. But relatively scant attention has been paid to grand opera's second attribute: the manner in which the visual dimension went beyond merely enhancing political rhetoric – and indulging the palettes of 'unsophisticated' bourgeois audiences – and combined with the music and text to create 'meaning'. Louis Jacques Solomé was appointed director of the newly established *Comité de mise-en-scène* in 1827, in recognition of the new – more overtly dramatic – approach to staging.[34] Details about scenery, costumes and stage movement have become more easily available through the work of Marie-Antoinette Allévy, H. Robert Cohen, Karin Pendle and Stephen Wilkins.[35] The research of Roger Parker, Cormac Newark, Arnold Jacobshagen and

others on the production booklets is encouraging us to probe the relationship between stage movement and music, and appreciate the evolution of stage practice and its conventions through the nineteenth century.[36] More recently, Mary Ann Smart has analysed the relationship between bodily gesture and music in nineteenth-century opera, from the melodramatic synchronisation displayed in *La Muette* to a more transcendental, even psychic, fusion in Wagner.[37] Nevertheless, the end-of-act tableaux that were essential to the genre, and in particular the frequently cataclysmic conclusions in which musico-dramatic devices were borrowed and adapted from melodrama, have rarely been examined for their contribution to the political conception of individual grand operas.[38]

Analysis of the organic relationship between music, visuals, text and context in what follows will allow a more complete understanding of grand opera's political implications and aesthetic conception to emerge, one in which historical metaphor can be viewed as both a political and an aesthetic device. But before turning to the operas themselves, we shall consider briefly the political context in which they were created and received, and the manner in which written histories were beginning to engage with this new political culture.

Politics

The reluctance to acknowledge multiple – often conflicting – political meanings in grand opera has surely been encouraged by the relative neglect by historians of the Restoration and July Monarchy as periods worthy of critical study. The former in particular has frequently been presented as a reactionary or at best transitional period, with no clearly defined political or cultural identity: monarchy had become outdated, but republicanism had not yet matured. The Restoration has thus been seen as part of the narrative of the right – a return to the old regime – rather than as a period of emerging modern democracy.[39] Interpretations of the 1830 Revolution have also tended to look backwards rather than forwards: historians on the right have viewed it as a dangerous but contained resurgence of the spirit of 1789, arising from the incompetence of Charles X and his ministers; those on the left have tended to see it as a failed bourgeois revolution that achieved little in terms of social change for the masses. For both sides, the July Monarchy was essentially a continuation of the previous regime, and the 1848 Revolutions the inevitable result of class conflict.[40]

Robert Gildea has charted the way in which the political culture of nineteenth-century France, although defined by collective reminiscence, comprised parallel and competing memories, constantly being reworked and elaborated in the light of new events.[41] However, it is striking that although he homes in on the 'main axes' of political conflict ('revolution and counter-revolution, national identity and nationalism, centralism and regionalism, and Church and State')[42] – axes that were fought over throughout the century – Gildea barely touches on the Restoration or July Monarchy, periods that, as we shall see, displayed a complexity of political debate and remembrance of the past. Maurice Agulhon has identified the importance of the struggle between Revolution and counter-Revolution from 1789 to 1880, describing the two political movements as playing out through a 'counterpoint of conflicting symbols', but he too has focused on periods before and after the Restoration and July Monarchy.[43]

Such scholars as Pamela Pilbeam and H. A. C. Collingham have, however, begun to analyse the conflicted nature of political society during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, and to reveal its instability and fluctuating political allegiances. In so doing, they have opened the way for a more complete and nuanced understanding of the political conflicts identified by Gildea, Agulhon and others. As Pilbeam explains, when three days of street fighting broke out on 27 July 1830, an unlikely and precarious coalition of republicans, Bonapartists and constitutional monarchists, supported by volatile, disaffected workers, brought down the Bourbon monarchy.[44] But the fragile alliance without a political focus soon began to founder as different factions looked to specific moments from the past as a template for the nation's future. When, on the initiative of some liberal journalists, the duc d'Orléans, cousin of the deposed Charles X (and descendent of the Bourbon cadet line), was presented as the solution to an empty throne, his combination of royalist and Revolutionary credentials were crucial to his acceptance.[45]

Collingham has examined how, despite initial optimism, a split within the government about the path the new regime should take quickly became apparent. The conservative, centre-right, *résistance* group led by François Guizot believed that France had arrived at the perfect form of government and wanted little change; while the *mouvement* party on the left, under Adolphe Thiers, believed that they should build on the achievements of 1830, broadening the electoral base and reducing the power of the monarch. In 1840 Guizot's party finally gained the upper hand, and he remained prime minister until 1848. Collingham concludes that 'Order and Liberty' was the 1830 equivalent of the 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' of 1789.[46]