French Grand Opera and the Historical Imagination

During the July Monarchy, French grand operas, with their plots drawn from historical events, tended to be received as metaphors for current political themes. Previous studies have usually underestimated the role of music and the visual dimensions in articulating an alternative message to that offered by the libretto, and have instead focused on single political interpretations. In this study, five operas – Auber's *La Muette de Portici* and *Gustave III*, Niedermeyer's *Stradella*, Halévy's *Charles VI* and Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète* – illustrate the complex, contested nature of political meaning during this period. By setting these operas in the context of the emerging liberal historiography pioneered by Jules Michelet, and analysing the manner in which audiences and critics constructed 'meanings' with reference to their personal and collective experience and memories, this study reveals the central position that grand opera occupied in the period, bringing the past alive.

SARAH HIBBERD is Senior Lecturer in Music at the University of Nottingham. She has contributed articles on French and Italian opera and music theatre to a variety of publications, and has worked as an editor for *The New Grove Dictionary of Music*. Her other research interests include eighteenth-century culture, French musical culture, melodrama and the role of music in early silent film.

French Grand Opera and
the Historical Imagination

SARAH HIBBERD
University of Nottingham

To Ian

v

www.cambridge.org

Contents

Illustrations

Musical examples

x   *List of musical examples*

Tables

Note on sources

I have indicated the primary published and manuscript sources for each opera in the bibliography. Generally, the published librettos (usually printed before the final rehearsals and first performance) contain lines that were subsequently cut; often, there is no sign that these lines were ever set to music (see comments in chapters on *Gustave III*, *Stradella* and *Charles VI* in particular). Although the *mise-en-scène* was sometimes published, this was not always the case, and there is no extant *mise-en-scène* for *Stradella* at all. The *mises-en-scène* are often undated, and although they generally include cuts made to the libretto before the first performance, they also often incorporate changes introduced in subsequent performances (that of *Charles VI* is a case in point).

Published vocal scores are available for all of the operas under discussion, though some were produced sometime after the premiere, and do not necessarily correspond with the first performance version. 'Fair copy' orchestral score manuscripts (including cuts), are available for all the operas under discussion, and seem to have been made shortly after the premiere; they often include cuts or extra performance markings in red or blue crayon and in some cases incorporate substantial changes introduced in revivals later in the century. They bear the date of the opera's premiere on the title page, and the stamp of the library (with their date of acquisition by the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra, 1854). The *matériel* boxes contain all the vocal and instrumental parts, and a *partition de chant*, for each opera, and they generally match the manuscript orchestral scores. Changes subsequently introduced in revivals (e.g. *Stradella*, reduced from five to three acts in 1840), are incorporated in the *matériel* parts – inserts, cuts, marks in red and blue crayon, and stitched-together pages – and it is often difficult to reconstruct the premiere, or specific subsequent performances.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the Department of Music, the School of Humanities, the Humanities Research Centre and the Dean at the University of Nottingham for institutional and financial support during the writing of this book, and the British Academy, the *Music & Letters* Trust and the Arts and Humanities Research Council for research funding. The staff at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris (especially the Département de la musique) and the Bibliothèque et Musée de l'Opéra provided valuable assistance on various occasions, as did the staff at the Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris, the Archives nationales, the British Library, University of London Library at Senate House and Cambridge University Library. I would like to thank James Williams for setting the musical examples. I am very grateful to the anonymous readers for their constructive comments, and would like to thank Rebecca Jones and particularly Victoria Cooper at Cambridge University Press for their support, enthusiasm and guidance during the writing and production of the book.

An earlier version of Chapter 5 appeared in *Music & Letters* 87/4 (2006), and Katharine Ellis provided insightful comments and suggestions as one of the readers. I acknowledge Oxford University Press for granting permission to reproduce part of that article here. An earlier version of Chapter 3 was presented at the symposium *The Institutions of Opera in Paris from the July Revolution to the Dreyfus Affair*, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and Duke University, 24–26 September 2004, organised by Annegret Fauser and Beth Bartlett. It is included in *Stage Music and Cultural Transfer: Paris, 1830–1914*, ed. Mark Everist and Annegret Fauser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), and I am grateful to those who attended the symposium for stimulating and friendly discussions. I acknowledge the University of Chicago for granting permission to reproduce part of that article here.

For a shared enthusiasm about the more obscure grand operas, and a supportive and generous interest in my own research, I am delighted to acknowledge Mark Pottinger, whose own work on – and conversations with me about – *Gustave III*, *Stradella* and *Le Prophète* in particular, and the historical imagination in nineteenth-century Paris more generally,

were inspirational at a time when I was formulating my own ideas in what I had thought was a relatively unpopulated area of research. His doctoral thesis, 'The Staging of History in France: Characterizations of Historical Figures in French Grand Opera during the Reign of Louis-Philippe (D. F. E. Auber, Louis Niedermeyer, F. Halevy, Giacomo Meyerbeer)' (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York), was completed in 2005, and he generously provided me with excerpts from it when I was preparing my own chapters. I also acknowledge Anna McCready, chapters of whose thesis I read and commented on at an early stage when we were doctoral students together, discovering the musical and political culture of 1820s Paris in the mid 1990s; her chapter on *Gustave III* helped to stimulate my own interest in the opera. Her thesis, 'Gilding the Lily: Music and Monarchy in Paris (1814–1833)' (Ph.D. diss., King's College, London), was completed in 2003. Detailed references to both theses are included in the relevant chapters.

There are three people whose support, and generosity of ideas and friendship, I would particularly like to acknowledge. Ben Walton has been a regular partner in crime in Paris over the past dozen years or so, and our conversations about the 1820s have been enormously good fun and inspiring. David Charlton has been a wonderful source of knowledge and ideas – and provided regular reminders that anything 'new' that happened in the 1820s had already been tried in the eighteenth century. Mark Darlow has added greatly to the pleasure of studying French culture, devoting enormous amounts of time to reading individual chapters, laughing at my translations and offering sage advice, particularly on matters Revolutionary.

I am grateful to a number of other people who have commented on conference and seminar presentations and early drafts of individual chapters, answered queries, or otherwise provided stimulating discussion and words of wisdom and support. In particular, I would like to thank Jane Alden, Jan Butler, Deniz Ertan, Mark Everist, Dan Grimley, Nanette Nielsen, Ingrid Sykes and Philip Weller. Finally, I would like to thank Ian, to whom this book is dedicated, with love.