

# An opera for the eyes

*Rémy Campos*

If we detach ourselves for a moment from the score of *Le Tribut de Zamora* to look at the spectacle as it was staged in concrete terms at the time of Gounod, we shall find we are likely to run into more than a few surprises: did the music critics of the time not debate the shape of Berber helmets, the riding skills of the baritone Lassalle or the correct way to hold a procession of a hundred virgins? Because it is no longer familiar to us, this bygone theatrical era requires, to be understood today, a substantial effort of historical imagination. Let us venture to provide some guidance.



## THE OLD ORATORICAL THEATRE

The suspension of the dramatic action for which the champions of aesthetic modernity criticised Gabrielle Krauss took place on the stage apron. In the auditoria of the period, the proscenium stood out even more clearly than today from the stage proper and allowed the singers to come forward above the orchestra, getting as close as possible to the audience. The apron had the best lighting: a ramp glittering with a thousand footlights that threw the artists' faces into the fullest relief. It was there that the soloists took up position for the duration of an aria or an ensemble, but it was by no means rare for the chorus to appear there too.

The frequent excursions of the singer-orators outside the proscenium arch to reach the stage apron which served as their tribune were justified by a conception of staging which saw in the dramatic action a discourse of convention (one sang instead of speaking) posed in front of painted canvas sets. Apparently, the division between the sung word and the visual component of the spectacle was clearly delineated. Things were more complex than that, however, since the operatic actor's art closely mingled diction, song and gesture.

For many critics, Gabrielle Krauss had all the qualities of an operatic orator: an excellent singer, of course, she was also a peerless orator. By all accounts, these combined talents worked to the benefit of several numbers in *Le Tribut de Zamora*. It was she who succeeded, in the third act, in highlighting the qualities of what Gounod hoped to transform into a memorable refrain: the 'national anthem' that the choristers had proved incapable of bringing to life in the finale of the first act. It was Krauss again who managed to save the conventional situation of the recognition scene:

Perhaps M<sup>me</sup> Krauss will make this precarious success last. She showed herself to be as admirable a tragedian as she was a great singer in a role of low melodrama; she rejuvenated it with her breath of inspiration and elevated it with her style. Dramatic life, poignant emotion, eloquence of gesture and attitude could not reach greater heights.

(*Moniteur universel*, 4 April 1881)

Singers' skills encompassed not only vocal technique but also the rules governing stage movement, arm movements and facial expressions. *Le Figaro* offers striking testimony of the way in which Gabrielle Krauss had composed her character of Hermosa:

Seeing La Krauss appear, concealed beneath her white burnous, a bush of black hair veiling her brow and floating on her shoulders, her eye fixed on an implacable distant memory, her physiognomy closed to the contingencies of present existence, the audience does not need this strange figure to

be given a name: the spectators' emotion, which is drawn to it, knows that it is called the fatality of the drama! It is really impressive to watch, on La Krauss's face, the smile of reason rending asunder the sombre mask of madness. Displacing art in order to enlarge it, the artist, no less learned than inspired, *plays* with her voice and *sings* with her gestures; her poses, her attitudes on stage, without ceasing to be the apt expression of nature and passion, always have the line, the volume or the harmonious contour of statuary. With the aid of an art parallel to her own, La Krauss, even in a beautiful silence, still knows how to be a great vocal tragedian.

(*Le Figaro*, 3 April 1881)

Over the course of this review, the writer sketches out the perfect ideal of a harmonious whole in which music and plastic art merge. The model is clearly that of the classical tragedian and, in the background, that of ancient sculpture, an inexhaustible source of graceful poses perfectly familiar to the spectators.

Almost nothing remains of the former stagecraft of singers: brief descriptions in the press, a few pages in rare manuals, engravings and photographs of artists taken in the studio in costumes and attitudes brought in from the theatre. In other words, frozen images of what was in essence perpetual movement. Transmitted orally and by imitation from generation to generation, the common stock of gestures did not survive the break with tradition in the last third of the twentieth century, when opera directors (mostly from the spoken theatre) also took it upon themselves to dictate acting styles.



## THE STAGING PROPER

In the theatre, a distinction was long made between facial movements and gestures, whose composition was left up to the individual actor, and stage movements, which were fixed by a group of professionals. Entrances

and exits, interaction between artists, processions constituted the specific domain of staging [*mise en scène*]. Installed in what was called a *guignol*, a kind of mobile shell set up on the proscenium with its back to the auditorium during rehearsals, librettists, composer, stage manager and director indicated to the singers the main movements: ‘enter stage left’, ‘approach such-and-such a person’, ‘cross to centre stage’, etc.

In the case of *Le Tribut de Zamora*, only two staging manuals [*livrets de mise en scène*] have survived, drawn up for provincial theatres. In these, the stage managers recorded plans of the set layouts and indications of movements and, every now and then, the arrangement of the characters at key moments in the piece. Thus, in the manual preserved from performances given in Brest in 1886, we read for the third act:

Hadjar makes a move towards Ben-Saïd, who stops him.

Manoël has gone back up near the soldiers to challenge them; they seize him while Ben-Saïd finishes his phrase.

Xaïma, who has entered through Entrance G, seeing the danger facing Manoël, moves sharply towards Window A, and climbs onto the top step to say: ‘Frappez, cruels!’

*Hadjar*

*Soldats*

*Xaïma*

*Manoël*

(three steps are drawn here)

(Charles Delaire, *livret de mise en scène* for *Le Tribut de Zamora*, Brest, 3 April 1886, Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris)

To imagine the final appearance of the production, we must assemble other pieces of the puzzle: models of sets and costumes, archival documents or the occasional engraving. Only at the price of a patient effort of reconstitution can one form an idea of the visual dimension of *grand opéra*. This process is all the more indispensable since the Académie de Musique (Paris Opéra), where the genre was born, attached great importance to the material dimension of performances. Hence the house specifications prohibited the reuse of sets and costumes. *Le Tribut de Zamora*

was the occasion for an incident caused by the reuse of eighty costumes taken from repertory pieces and by the poor quality of the material used to make the shields...

When a work did not remain in the repertory of the Paris Opéra, its sets were removed from the inventory rather than reused – to mention only works by Gounod, the sets of *Polyeucte* (premiered in 1878) suffered this fate in 1885, those of *Le Tribut de Zamora* (1881) as early as 1885, those of the revival of *Sapho* (1884) five years later. Naturally, the animation of these sumptuous decors was an element which the authors took into account during the composition of works destined for the Opéra. And it was expected by the majority of the spectators who came to the Palais Garnier to enjoy the various marches, parades, processions, picturesque crowd scenes, ballets, collapsing sets and fires on offer. *Le Tribut de Zamora*, obviously enough, is not exempt from these formulas:

What still needs to be praised is the extreme luxury of the staging: local colour, though absent from the score and the libretto, is magnificently deployed in the sets and costumes. The knightly and Muslim Spain of the ninth century comes fully alive again from head to foot in these four tableaux, with its grandiose and barbaric spectacles [*pompes*]. They may be counted among the finest that the Opéra has ever shown.

(*Moniteur universel*, 4 April 1881)

Let us open the libretto and the score. In the first act, we witness an entrance of Arab horsemen. In the second, a Moorish dance, a procession of a hundred virgins followed by a march of captives, and finally a picturesque scene – the auction of the prisoners. In the third act, we have a complete ballet and a duel scene. In the fourth... nothing special – a situation deplored by many commentators! The reviews printed after the premiere of *Le Tribut de Zamora* testify to the interest that could still be aroused, half a century after the creation of the *grands opéras* of Meyerbeer and Halévy, by what was called ‘la pompe scénique’:

Lassalle's entrance is superb. He arrives on horseback, surrounded by a brilliant retinue: horsemen sheathed in shining armour and bright fabrics, magnificent heralds, and Berbers dressed in white wool, spear in hand. There is an enormous number of Berbers in the new opera. It would appear that the extras fought over this job. Seemingly everyone wanted to be a Berber.

(*Le Figaro*, 2 April 1881)

The smallest details of the plot are pretexts for an incredible display of luxury, at a time when the Palais Garnier (inaugurated in 1875) gave employment to dozens of specialised professionals (tailors, wig-makers, shoemakers, etc.) and had considerable resources. With an informed eye, the journalist of *Le Figaro* gives further details of Lassalle's costume and the adjustments that had to be made to his helmet, copied from a historical original, to allow him to sing comfortably.

To reduce the splendours of the Opéra to a succession of derisory circus parades would be to misinterpret their function. Numerous spectators appreciated with a connoisseur's eye the details of the historical reconstruction, the craftsmanship of the sets and the quality of the arrangement of the tableaux vivants by the stage manager Adolphe Mayer. Many of them seemed to be strolling around a gallery of familiar images that paralleled the historical canvases of the Paris Salon de Peinture. In all the moments when the stage action takes over the leading role from the orchestra pit, Gounod's score is merely decorative. Indeed, the critic of the *Moniteur universel* quoted above even suggests, with his remark on the absence of local colour in the score, that this background music no longer needs to concern itself with rendering the time and place of the action.

Over the decades, *la pompe scénique* had become an artistic object in its own right, with its aesthetic rules, its memorable achievements and its failures, its technical know-how, and it was even parodied in lesser theatres. Composers in those days did not balk at taking a back seat in order to let the eye enjoy the expensive show. In 1881, Gounod – who was indis-

putably foremost among them – did not think for a moment of going against the established procedure.



#### THE TASTE FOR THE SPECTACULAR

In 1882, the administrator of the Théâtre-Français, Émile Perrin, faced a polemic launched by the famous theatre critic Francisque Sarcey, who criticised his production of Victor Hugo's *Le Roi s'amuse* for being too influenced by his experience as director of the Opéra and the Opéra-Comique. Perrin's reply is argued at length:

At the Opéra, in scenes where supernumeraries and choral masses must take part in the dramatic action, the music provides the stage director with invaluable aid. Rhythm and measure animate and support these masses, which are somewhat inert in themselves; the powerful sonorities of the instruments and the voices cover the inconvenient noises of the stage; everything becomes easy; even disorder itself is disciplined and regulated by the ample chords of the orchestra. At the Théâtre-Français, on the other hand, where speech must reign supreme, where the slightest noise is an embarrassment, where the slightest manoeuvre cannot be tolerated in the theatre once the curtain has been raised, the task is much more delicate and difficult. Even the composer often finds that the chorus moves too much. So what will the poet, who is his symphony all by himself, have to say if the extras thrash around while he expresses in the most noble language all the feelings that motivate the characters in his drama, while, penetrating the soul of each of them, he makes the tenderness of the father, the despair of the daughter, the fury of revenge, the unwitting or hideous crime speak in their turn?

(Émile Perrin, *Les Annales du théâtre et de la musique*, 1883, p. LXVI)

So, if one is to believe one of the most experienced theatrical figures of his time, the noble but fragile art of the spoken word is at the opposite pole from the crude, if not trivial, artifices of the operatic spectacle. Perrin's view, however, even steeped in his practical experience, is debatable. In recent years, historians have shown that what came into the category of the spectacular in the nineteenth century should be treated as an essential component of the stage aesthetics of the period. This observation holds especially true for opera, where expensive care and an almost maniacal obsession were lavished on the archaeological reconstructions in order to vie with history painting:

At first it was intended to give great importance to this procession of one hundred virgins. But M. Vaucorbeil, who has staged the new opera with an artistic taste that cannot be too highly praised, has eliminated the processions. It is true that the effect had been rather overworked in *Le Roi de Lahore*, *Polyeucte* and *Aida*. The procession of Spanish virgins is therefore of very little importance. On the other hand, it provides a lot of colour. At one point, in order to make it still more colourful, the Opéra discussed the idea of adding a few camels to the escort of the captives. But M. Régnier, who is not only a first-rate director but also a discerning scholar, came, his Buffon in hand,\* to prove that the Moors had never been able to acclimatise the camel in Spain. Moreover, camels had already been seen at the Opéra, in Grétry's *La Caravane du Caire*. Except that they were cardboard camels: one supernumerary in the back half, another one in the front. It was an immense success. Today we would probably be more demanding. (*Le Figaro*, 2 April 1881)

In 1881, *Le Tribut de Zamora* appeared at the moment of a conjunction of circumstances: the Parisian public's high expectations in matters of

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\* The reference is to the *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière* of the French scientist Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1707-88). (Translator's note.)



spectacle, a first-rate artistic and technical team, almost unlimited financial resources, and above all an aesthetic coherence in terms of staging that had been proven over several decades. It must be admitted that it is difficult to assess the suggestive power of this undertaking today. At least we have tried to give an idea of it here.



Charles Gounod.  
Leduc Archives.

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Archives Leduc.