

The fantastic genre at the Paris Opéra under Napoleon I

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What form did the fantastic genre take at the Paris Opéra in the early nineteenth century, or rather under the First Empire, the reign of Napoleon I? Those ten years, from 1804 to 1814 are important not only in the history of ideas, since they mark the turning-point in France between Classicism and Romanticism, but also in the history of the Paris Opéra, which, with the accession of Napoleon, received fresh impetus through greater means and privileges, in return for close and direct control by the emperor himself.

Despite the legendary red tape and sluggishness of its administration (only so-called 'occasional' pieces escaped the rule), the Paris Opéra – now the Académie *Impériale* de Musique – could not continue to ignore a number of themes that had by then been in vogue for almost thirty years. Indeed, from 1780 to 1800, literary production in France had been hit by a wave of horror, so to speak, with the arrival of Gothicism. For the record, the French translation of what is regarded as the first true Gothic novel, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), dates from 1767. The same phenomenon also reached the stage in Paris, especially at the Opéra-Comique. One cannot help drawing a parallel with the political situation in the years 1780-1790, which was a period of rapid change and upheaval, death and uncertainty. The Académie de Musique was not going to escape the diabolical imagery: Pierre Gardel's ballet *Psyché* of 1790 (to music by Ernest Müller) included the allegorical figures of fifteen demons, along with the allegorical figures of Hatred and Envy.

At the same time, and throughout the first third of the nineteenth century, another craze had fired the imagination: Ossianism, prompted by the publication of two epic poems, *Fingal* (1762) and *Temora* (1763), supposedly written by the legendary third-century Gaelic bard Ossian, and 'translated' by the Scotsman James Macpherson. A collected edition, *The Works of Ossian*, had appeared in 1765. That passion had affected not only France: Pierre le Tourneur had made the French adaptation (1777-84), but Ossian was also translated into Italian, German, Spanish, Danish, Dutch, Czech, Russian, Hungarian and Greek. Even Chateaubriand had been spurred to imitate Ossian, when he wrote as the bard of Combourg in his *Génie du christianisme* (*The Genius of Christianity*):

Four moss-covered stones stand amid the Caledonian heather to mark the tomb of the warriors of Fingal; Oscar and Malvina have departed, but nothing has changed in their lonely land. Still the Scottish Highlander loves to recite the songs of his ancestors.

Finally, the early nineteenth century had been affected by the return of Catholicism. It was Chateaubriand again who in the literary field had illustrated the new climate created by the Concordat of 16 July 1801, whereby the Catholic Church had been re-established in France. With *Le Génie du christianisme*, which had appeared on 14 April 1802, dedicated to Napoleon, then First Consul, the author defended the wisdom and beauty of the Catholic Christian religion, which had been so decried by the Enlightenment. The fantastic genre was not so far away, for Chateaubriand, in speaking of God, also reintroduced Satan, to whom he devoted several pages. And he evoked too the grandeur of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, which he was later to translate.

But let us return to the Paris Opéra at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when it was in the rue de la Loi (today's rue Richelieu). The German writer and dramatist August von Kotzebue hailed it in 1804 (*Erinnerungen aus Paris im Jahre 1804*) as 'the first theatre in the world. Orchestra, chorus, decorations, machinery and dancing, are nowhere to

be found equal to what is seen in this place'. Although there was no mention as yet of the fantastic genre, the Opéra was recognised as the theatre *par excellence* for the evocation, using the most lavish means, of illusion and magic. Indeed, the whole of its repertoire since its foundation had been based on the conjuring-up of the supernatural.

The borderline between the magical and the fantastic is not easy to define. But at the turn of the nineteenth century new themes slipped into the Opéra's usual repertoire in three works: *Ossian ou Les Bardes*, first performed on 10 July 1804, a few months after the coronation of Napoleon I, *La Mort d'Adam* in 1809 and *La Mort d'Abel* in 1810. The first two of these were composed by the emperor's protégé, Lesueur, and the third one by Rodolphe Kreutzer, the dedicatee of Beethoven's Violin Sonata no. 9 in A major, op. 47 (1803). *Ossian ou Les Bardes* was obviously part of the general fascination for the strange world of early Gaelic poetry as transmitted by Macpherson. *La Mort d'Adam* and *La Mort d'Abel*, with their very similar titles, belong to a magical genre that had not yet been employed at the Opéra: a magical *Christian* genre, in which characters straight out of the Bible exist side by side with angels and demons.

Nicolas-François Guillard's libretto for the three-act *La Mort d'Adam* takes as its starting point a biblical theme from Genesis that had also inspired the German poet Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock in the mid-eighteenth century. Guillard borrowed the main plot for his libretto (the account of Adam's last day on earth and his final redemption) largely from Klopstock's drama *Der Tod Adams* (1757), which had been translated into French by Abbé Roman in 1762. The story is very simple: the first man, Adam, with Eve, his sons and their descendants – i. e. the whole of mankind – is about to face the terrible unknown of death.

The plot was too simple, perhaps, and too austere to be accepted by the Opéra. So around 1800-1801 Guillard and Lesueur added an epilogue to the third act with the aim of making it more attractive for audiences. They entitled that epilogue 'Le Ciel d'Adam' (Adam in Heaven), an apotheosis representing the struggle between God and Satan: after the transfiguration of Adam, Satan, who has emerged from the 'bottomless pit',

surrounded by a chorus of demons, aspires to steal from God the soul of the first man to die. In 'Le Ciel d'Adam' Satan appeared for the first time on the foremost opera stage in Paris. This character, the real hero of the epilogue (Act III, Scenes 8-12), does not feature in Klopstock's drama. He comes from various texts, including Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Isaiah and the Book of Revelation (Apocalypse of John). It is Satan who brings the truly fantastic dimension to the work by Guillard and Lesueur.

After being pagan in *Ossian ou Les Bardes*, the fantastic element became religious, Christian, in *La Mort d'Adam*. One may be surprised to find the Paris Opéra, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, admitting – in what is a *tragédie lyrique*, not an oratorio – such an overtly religious theme. Indeed, since the Concordat, censorship, supported by the emperor, had been rigorously imposed to ensure respect for the Catholic religion, which was one of the bases of the new imperial society. Any signs of denigration in the theatre were mercilessly tracked down. Thus, on 21 July 1808, the censors allowed the revival of *Ninon chez Madame de Sévigné* at the Opéra-Comique only on condition 'that the Prior of Coulanges does not appear in clerical garb'. Likewise, for the revival of *Tarare* (Salieri-Beaumarchais) in 1808, the censors ordered the High Priests' maxims to be cut; these featured prominently in the libretto dating from 1787. Savary, Napoleon's minister of police, later summed up the general attitude towards religion of those in authority: 'Ministers of religion are too serious to be mocked and should always be presented as objects of veneration, not of ridicule.' (Quoted by Victor Hallays-Dabot in *Histoire de la censure théâtrale en France*, Paris, Dentu, 1862.) The censors even went so far as to prohibit the use of bells to announce a religious ceremony in *Monbars l'exterminateur, ou les derniers flibustiers*, a *mélodrame* about the exploits of a buccaneer. The Church, regarded as a factor of civil peace, to be preserved for the same reasons as the army, became untouchable.

With *La Mort d'Adam* the problem the censors found themselves faced with was quite different. In representing a passage from the Bible on stage, in showing Adam, the play was touching the very heart of the dogma. How can the committee's indulgence be explained? The censorship report of

12 April 1808 enlightens us: the work by Lesueur and Guillard has another meaning, apart from religious, the librettist having cleverly introduced in the third act a second layer of meaning, this time political, which the censors did not fail to notice:

It was the author's intention to devote the whole of this act to the glory of the Emperor, and he does so by two means: 1. He portrays the Emperor's soul as he supposes it to have been six thousand years ago. It appears as the conqueror, the predestined genius, the second saviour promised to mankind. 2. He makes known through the singing the prediction of the reign of Napoleon the Great, represented by several true and brilliant situations taken from the Hebrew books and proved by recent history.

Two characters in *La Mort d'Adam* belong to the fantastic genre. We have already mentioned one of them, the Devil, who occupies Act III. Another unreal character precedes him in Act I: the Angel of Death, who tells Adam that he is going to die. Each of the appearances of the Angel is reflected in a musical atmosphere intended to inspire terror, which is typical of the fantastic genre but not of the magical genre. The music expresses the terror of human beings faced with death. In a long recitative, Adam addresses his daughter Seth:

The hand of a mighty God shakes the Universe, the mountains quake, the lightning flashes, the thunder roars, searing shafts of light have set the air ablaze: the terrible angel is here, he advances, he stops, do you see him? do you see him?

The instrumental music accompanying the pieces sung by Adam and Seth represents the descent of the as yet invisible Angel and his sudden appearance. After the words 'Do you see him?', the composer causes a first shudder by the use of an agonising diminished seventh, repeated *fortissimo* by the strings, suddenly interrupted by rests. Lesueur then had the idea of plunging the stage into total darkness just at the point where his bright

and heavenly orchestration evokes the Angel's descent. Piccolos in unison double at the octave the melody played by the flutes and oboes, over tremolos from the strings, *forte* then immediately *pianissimo*. This downward motion in the melody in broken arpeggios unmistakably conveys the Angel's invisible descent. The repetition of the same motif at each of the Angel's appearances causes it to have an even greater impact on the listener. Finally, a drumroll from the timpani, the entrance of the brass and the noise of thunder announce the actual presence of the Angel on stage, in full light. The fantastic element resides not only in the words, but also in the sounds heard and in the visual aspect.

But it was above all in the apotheosis, from Act III, Scene 8 onwards, that Lesueur explored the fantastic vein to the full. Satan is about to make his entrance. As with the Angel of Death, the supernatural is announced first of all by the setting. Lesueur describes it as follows:

Nature goes into mourning, the clouds bank up more and more over the forest of cedars. The darkness becomes absolute; a deep and terrible silence is sometimes interrupted by a vague and distant moaning. As the stage grows brighter, we see on the proscenium the rocks that stand above the bottomless pit and from which the rebellious angels were cast.

After an invisible chorus, followed by an orchestral transition, Satan (bass) appears. Thanks to the costume designs by François-Guillaume Ménageot (preserved in the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra), we know what he looked like. Satan comes on stage dressed like an imaginary demon, with the serpent of temptation wound around his body, and wearing a black and red costume, the symbolism of which is clear. Lesueur described him as follows:

His countenance, stature and form, which have not lost their original nobility, must represent a former heavenly power, a courageous archangel who has been defeated. He is wearing the infernal diadem. His crown gleams with a sinister radiance. [...] His blackish face must appear to bear deep scars left by the wounds of thunderbolts, which Hell looks upon as signs

of glory. His brow full of audacity and pride must announce his intention of obtaining revenge.

In short, a representation of the Devil that may seem somewhat conventional to us today. After an unmeasured recitative comes an absolutely terrifying chorus for bass voices – the chorus of demons, Satan’s followers. The whole episode takes the form of a continuous scene, in which the soloist alternates with the chorus. Then comes an ‘infernal symphony’, to which the demons of war begin to dance. This symphony, according to Lesueur’s intentions, represents the final battle between Good and Evil. The trumpets of Hell are sounded (represented by the horns), summoning the demon warriors. The ‘seven thunders’ of the Apocalypse are represented by the timpani. The ascent to Heaven is conveyed by a motif in broken arpeggios.

Satan in *La Mort d’Adam* is quite a traditional demon. Goethe’s *Faust* Part I of 1808, which was translated into French the same year, presents a very different picture. While Guillard, like his model Milton, makes Satan into a ‘god of evil’, Goethe makes the Devil all the more terrifying in that he is close to us: the mirror effect is disturbing. Then we must mention the other face of Satan: the one proposed by the *La Mort d’Abel*, a three-act *tragédie lyrique* (reduced to two acts in 1825), music by Rodolphe Kreutzer, libretto by Hoffman, first performed at the Académie Impériale de Musique on 23 March 1810. Unlike *La Mort d’Adam*, which was accepted at the Opéra thanks to its propaganda mission, *La Mort d’Abel* had great difficulty in reaching the stage. The censors passed it on the grounds that it was sufficiently dignified for its subject, but it was Napoleon himself who expressed reservations in a letter to the superintendent of the-âtres on 13 February 1810:

Generally speaking, I do not approve of the performance of any work based on the Holy Scripture; such subjects are to be left to the Church.

Nevertheless, Napoleon authorised the performances in order to save money – ‘Since the opera *La Mort d’Abel* is ready, I allow it to be performed’ –

and later on in the same letter he affirmed a principle that had been all too soon forgotten by the superintendent of theatres: 'Henceforth, no opera shall be given without my order.' Apart from the reservations shown by the emperor, there was also a quarrel between the authors of *La Mort d'Abel*, Kreutzer and Hoffman, and those of *La Mort d'Adam*, Lesueur and Guillard. The playwright François-Benoît Hoffman had taken inspiration from the prose poem *Der Tod Abels* (1758), by the Swiss poet and painter Salomon Gessner. He was not the first to adapt that work for the theatre: Gabriel Legouvé had made it into a three-act *tragédie*, performed at the Théâtre de la Nation on 6 March 1792. Hoffman added to the original the figure of Satan, corruptor of the soul of Cain and of mankind.

Hoffman's Satan is an oriental fiend by the name of Anamalech. The first time he is heard in the opera (Act I, Scene 4) is particularly terrifying: as the two rival brothers swear henceforth to be at peace with each other, a voice from Hell suddenly disturbs the harmony of that moment with a resounding 'Peace! Never! No, never!' The voice of Satan. Cain: 'Do you hear this horrible monster? Do you hear it?' And all those present, except Adam, exclaim 'What tones! What a terrible voice! Horror seizes all my senses!' Adam proposes that they go and offer sacrifices to God 'in order to prove Hell wrong, confound its rage'.

How did audiences react to these three operas? *Ossian ou Les Bardes* was one of the great successes of that period until it was eclipsed by *La Vestale* (music by Gaspare Spontini, libretto by Étienne de Jouy, first performed on 15 December 1807). Neither *La Mort d'Adam* nor *La Mort d'Abel* was very successful. Only *La Mort d'Abel* had the benefit of a revival in 1825. The young Hector Berlioz was present on that occasion and in his enthusiasm wrote Kreutzer a letter that has since become famous. Although these three works use *topoi* of the Baroque *tragédie lyrique*, such as the sleep scene, the descent into the underworld or the fight against monsters, they are used here in a very different way. New thrills had reached the stage of the Paris Opéra! We have chosen to refer to them as 'fantastic', rather than 'magical'.

JOSEPH

OPÉRA EN 3 ACTES

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