

An overview of the work

Gérard Condé

An exceptionally precocious composer, awarded the Premier Grand Prix de Rome for composition just after his twentieth birthday, Fromental Halévy limited his ambitions to the production of light works (*opéras-comiques*, ballets...) for fifteen years before being catapulted to the heights of fame enjoyed by his elders, Rossini, Auber and Meyerbeer, by the premiere of *La Juive* at the Paris Opéra. The powerful subject and the quality of Eugène Scribe's libretto also played their part in this success, which was to last for a century; the subsequent fruits of their collaboration for the leading French opera house (*Guido et Ginevra* in 1838, then *Le Drapier* in 1840) did not enjoy such lasting popularity.

La Reine de Chypre almost suffered the same fate but, after a fairly lukewarm public reception at the Paris Opéra on 22 December 1841, the work became an established favourite, as can be seen by Berlioz's account in the *Journal des débats*:

On the first day, everything, in the score, seemed dull, muddled, uncertain; on the second day, the same listeners, who had remained unmoved and almost displeased to begin with, were filled with emotion when they acknowledged a host of striking ideas and even some wholly fine numbers which had, for them, gone unnoticed. Because Monsieur Halévy's music is not the kind that can be appreciated and judged at its true worth at first glance; it contains intimate, complex beauties – although its form, however, does not lack grandeur or its expression spontaneity – which can only be admired and enjoyed after careful examination.

This warning to listeners not to be too hasty in their judgement has lost none of its relevance since, although *La Reine de Chypre* falls within the category of 'historical French grand operas', it differs from them in many respects, like every exceptional specimen of the genre. The libretto by Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges undoubtedly obeys the tacit rule of bringing private plans into conflict with public interests (the marriage of Catarina Cornaro and Gérard de Coucy clashes with the desire of the Council of Ten to put a Venetian woman on Cyprus's throne). To this end, the author has played fast and loose with historic truth. However, when the curtain rises, the audience is greeted not by the expected chorus scene, but by the heroine who, standing on her balcony, utters a recitative phrase which is answered by her lover with the two *couplets* of a serenade... Spectators might be forgiven for thinking themselves in the middle of an *opéra-comique* after missing the first act.

Breaking too with the rule (less set in stone than has been claimed) of the third-act grand finale in which everything seems to have been resolved or lost, and the protagonists and choruses oppose each other or egg each other on at will, there is a magnificent, but intimate duet between the tenor and a baritone, a providential character about whom nothing is known, who has been introduced late into the action... The grand finale is postponed until the following act. Cut by half in later editions, it has been restored in its entirety (400 bars!) for this revival.

In the case of the ballet, despite a later move to make it a necessary feature of grand opera (even though it hardly appears in *Les Huguenots*, *La Juive* or even *L'Africaine*), it only occurs on three isolated occasions, which were obviously added to the manuscript at a later date and which have been cut from this production: a 'Pas de trois' in Act One then, in Act Three, a danced chorus and a 'Chypriote' in 6/8 probably taken, like the 'Pas de trois', from an earlier ballet and whose local colour is no more accurate than that of the 'Sicilienne' in *Béatrice et Bénédict*, described as a 'national dance' by Berlioz, who took the motif from one of his early *romances*.

More indispensable than the ballets, but not in the least specific to *grand opéra*, are the religious invocations, which abound in every possible

form: individual (stretta from Catarina's air in Act Two, 'Mon Dieu soyez béni'; Gérard's *con forza* recitative at the door of the church in Act Four, 'Seigneur, donne à mon âme'), as a trio in Act One (Catarina, Gérard blessing Providence, Andrea appealing to God) and, naturally, as a chorus: 'Reine des cieux' in Act One, 'Divine providence' in Act Four.

Typical of *grand opéra*, on the other hand, is the hasty set change for the last battle scene which only lasts a few minutes but whose appearance should elicit loud cheers and clapping worthy of the skill of the set designer, who has suddenly depicted 'the square and the port of Nicosia, seen by night. Fire has already destroyed several buildings'... The composer was obviously counting on extra applause to obtain a real climax of sound.



THE ORCHESTRATION

This does not mean, however, that the score of *La Reine de Chypre* can be criticised for an excessive use of brass and percussion. It would even appear that Halévy's desire to create an intimate atmosphere seemingly at odds with the huge auditorium of the Paris Opéra lost him favour with some of the audience. The review sent by Adolphe Adam to his friend, Samuel Heinrich Spicker, in Berlin described: 'Magnificent orchestration with meticulous attention to the smallest details and occasionally encompassing effects of great beauty'. Adam does not say anything more on the subject but he must have been aware, like Berlioz and Wagner, of Halévy's obvious desire to check the vulgar excesses of noisy orchestration by almost entirely denying himself the melodic and chromatic resources of the valve brass instruments which he had used more extensively in *La Juive* or *Guido et Ginevra*. However, Richard Wagner, while praising the results of this economy of means ('only those who abuse these methods find them inadequate') in the last three acts, pointed out that 'situations occur, in the first two acts, whose character called for a completely different instru-

mentation, I mean one that was “more modern”, in order to obtain the effect that he wanted to create; it follows that Halévy made the mistake of requiring from the clarinets and oboes, for example, an effect that can only be expected from valve horns and trumpets, and these passages certainly give the impression of a novice’s instrumentation’.

Wagner touches on a point here that was to mark a difference between French and German orchestration for half a century. Valve horns and trumpets, which had made an initial breakthrough in Paris during the 1830s, were to be pushed into second place by the continued use of the natural horn which boasted more varied colours and by the adoption of the cornet alongside (but not in the place of) natural trumpets. Across the Rhine, the opposite held true. The difference imposed on composers by this national specificity arose more from the medium than the colours, just as a painter uses gouache differently from watercolours.

Among the striking effects noted by Berlioz was this, in the finale of Act One: ‘a high pedal point, on the B struck in every bar by the violins, whose relentless reverberation has particular power and tragic resonance given that it continues to dominate the harmonic fabric for even longer. It is lovely! Very lovely indeed!’



THE MELODIC WRITING

In his review, Adolphe Adam deplored, on the part of a ‘man of great talent [...] the absolute lack of melody and straightforwardness, the excessive use of modulations, the convolutedness and affectation of the style [which] have stifled all that was good in the score’. Without sounding as categorical, it has to be said that there only are a few outstanding melodies and the majority adopt the same model: the initial phrase over the first line(s) is restated identically over the following line(s); a slightly modified reprise over other words modulates just enough for the last line(s) to be brought back to the central phrase, preserving the same melodic

and rhythmic pattern. Was this because, knowing his singers and audiences only too well, Halévy felt he had to keep going over the same ground to make it easier for them to grasp what they were hearing?

At least Adam, like Berlioz or Wagner, reserved high praise for Mocenigo's 'original *couplets*' in Act Three ('Tout n'est dans ce bas monde qu'un jeu') and the gondolier chorus. The omission, from this production, of this colourful chorus, so popular in its day, is more than made up for by the restoration of many passages that have 'traditionally' been cut.

Apart from his obvious desire to please the director, Léon Pillet, and the latter's mistress, Rosine Stoltz, Berlioz was fairer in his assessment. From the introduction onwards (since the complete overture, which exists in two later versions for concert performance, was not given in the opera house), he drew attention to 'the D minor phrase with its canonic imitations handled with great skill up to the entry of a theme in the major played in the upper register of the cellos. This is one of the most sophisticated and original melodies in the score'. In the grand duet between Gérard and Lusignan, which he regarded as 'the most important piece in the score', he considered that although 'the first ensemble, "Salut à cette belle France!", is full of chivalric feeling, the cantabile "Triste exilé", penetrating in expression, has greater melodic worth; it is even more original and more distinguished'.

Finally, Berlioz penned a memorable description of the duet between Gérard and Catarina in Act Five:

The abiding ardent love and secret sorrow of these two wounded hearts are exceptionally well portrayed. Gérard's solo in the minor, accompanied *pianissimo* by syncopated figures in the violins over a *pizzicato* in the basses, recalls, without echoing, a fine passage from the duet between Eléazar and the Cardinal in *La Juive*; this desolate song, over an orchestra in the grip of a suffering barely able to contain its cry, is, in my opinion, one of M. Halévy's most dramatic ideas.

Richard Wagner, who had a thorough knowledge of the work, having realised the vocal score, was no less complimentary about 'Triste exilé':

The most profound aspects of sensibility, the most virile and exalted aspects of knightly courage are combined here with matchless skill in a single melody, whose simplicity of method makes it even more deserving of merit.

Wagner had already stressed the power of this simplicity when referring to the conclusion of the duet between Gérard and Catarina in the first act ('Fleur de beauté, fleur d'innocence'):

With this graceful tenderness, even though it is perfectly clear and can be instantly understood, this melody is in every way free from all those fixed structures to which these sorts of motifs are habitually subjected by those of our contemporary authors who aim for popularity come what may; it is arranged in such a way that no one could ascribe any origin to it, whether French or Italian or any other nationality; it is independent, free; it is dramatic in every sense of the term.

While the many accolades published by Wagner in the columns of the *Revue et Gazette musicale* should be taken with a pinch of salt (given that its publisher, Maurice Schlesinger, also published Halévy's score), the remarks already quoted cannot be put down to mere flattery or indulgence. In his review for the *Abendzeitung* in Dresden (31 December 1841), in fact, which is more ironic in tone, Wagner takes exactly the same tack: 'What pleased me above all was a fine attempt at simplicity [...]; at the time when our German opera composers have just begun to imitate the luxury and pomp of French composers [...], Halévy has banished all those short artificial passages, all those intolerable *prima-donna* ornaments.'

This is Wagner's only, roundabout, reference to the singers. Certainly, he was examining the score several weeks after its first performance, but being aware of Rosine Stoltz's commanding position, his intention must have been to set her apart from other contemporary divas, who would have asked for and received ornamental roulades.



THE ROLES

Berlioz was to note: ‘Madame Stoltz rightly wears the crown. Her role is written in such a way as to showcase the highest part of her range without depriving her of the low *mezzo-soprano* characteristics which are hers, and without however having excessive recourse to the low notes which she puts to such good use.’ In the score, the role of Catarina is designated as a contralto. However, this is actually a role for a mezzo (from low A to high B) or a Falcon soprano, to use the French term, which is all the more appropriate because Rosine Stoltz had initially taken over from Cornélie Falcon in *La Juive*. For this production, an alternative unpublished version of the *Romance* from Act Five (‘Gérard, et c’est lui qui l’appelle’) – using the same words – has been chosen.

Written for Gilbert Duprez, the role of Gérard calls for a lyric tenor voice particularly comfortable in the upper register: not only is it strewn with the high Cs from the chest that he had made so fashionable but also, from the initial *Romance* onwards, an octave leap reaches high D flat (probably sung falsetto), and this is not the only one in the score. On the other hand, the listener is struck by a distinctive feature in the aria from Act Four pointed out by Berlioz:

The desire to allow Duprez to sing at the loudest volume, as often as possible, has forced the composer to place his principal phrases on the three or four notes of the middle register, returning them to that register as soon as they have strayed from it for a second; this bias has led to a certain inevitable monotony.

In duets with a mezzo, the balance is particularly in the tenor’s favour as he often appears to be singing higher, owing to the crossing of the voices. The three duets for Catarina and Gérard afford every desirable combination: in the duet from the first act, they are in sympathy with each other, in the duet in the second, they are forced into conflict and, in the

last duet – divided by the demands of honour – it is almost as if they are singing in asides.

Created by Eugène Massol, who was originally a tenor but then switched to baritone, the role of Mocenigo (notated in the tenor clef) is more declamatory than melodic: in the duets from Acts One and Two, the *recto-tono* writing, the leaps of octaves, fourths or fifths reflect the chilly intransigence of the envoy from the Council of Ten, which caused Berlioz to write: ‘Massol gives a fine portrayal of Mocenigo’s impassive, vile character to which his steely voice is, moreover, perfectly suited.’ The cynicism of his *couplets* in Act Three, which are more varied in melodic line (‘Tout n’est dans ce bas monde’), ties in with this; in Act Five, when unmasked by Gérard, he becomes more melodious: the threats issuing from his mouth are as sinuous as snakes.



RECURRENT MOTIFS

Another of Berlioz’s remarks opens up wider perspectives when he points out that, on Mocenigo’s entrance, ‘the orchestra takes on a mysterious, melancholy colour inspired by the character of the cruel Venetian senator. A phrase on the clarinets in the chalumeau register and the valve horns in the low register unfurls in the depths of the orchestra; this will then herald the presence or imminent arrival of Mocenigo until the end of the opera; and as soon as these lugubrious tones are heard, we must expect to see the scene disrupted by some tragic incident.’ This is actually not the case, because not only does this motif not reappear in Act Two when Mocenigo warns Catarina, it occurs only fleetingly in Act Three, when Mocenigo declares to the drinkers ‘Lorsque Venise ici vous offre de sa main’ (a passage cut in this production), and, even more unobtrusively, in Act Five in Catarina’s first recitative after ‘sur lui seule je veillerai’. Berlioz appears to have credited Halévy with a dramatic process which was still uncommon and which he himself was to use more in line with

this description in *La Damnation de Faust*, where the appearance of Mephistopheles is signalled by a brief recurrent brass motif. The fact that Berlioz (and Wagner to a lesser extent) had attributed such an innovative dramatic intention to Halévy probably has something to do with the care he took to exploit recurrent elements in the score as a whole.

The common mistake of citing the Wagnerian model as soon as a dramatic composer repeats a melody runs counter to the facts: this process, whose origins date back to the eighteenth century, was practically systematised by Eugène Scribe who, in many of his libretti, stipulated the reappearance of a significant motif. This is what was called a ‘reminiscent motif’; Wagner, who was to make exclusive use of this device until *Lohengrin*, proved to be a perfect disciple of Scribe. It was only in the *Ring Cycle* that the *Leitmotiv* appeared, supplementing the orchestral fabric to the extent of creating a parallel discourse. In *Guido et Ginevra* (1838), by Halévy, set to a libretto by Scribe, Berlioz had already noted:

When the delightful theme of Guido’s *Romance* is heard: from the quiver that runs through the whole auditorium, from the emotion that this simple motif arouses in all hearts, it can be seen that the spectators have realised that Guido is about to appear.

There is nothing as clear-cut as this in *La Reine de Chypre*, but there are various subtle attempts to make the orchestra ‘talk’ to avoid reducing it to an accompanying role and to structure the work. As a result, Mocenigo’s confrontations with Andrea (in Act One) and Catarina (in Act Two) take place against the backdrop of a brief, persistently repeated motif, more similar in spirit than form, written for low-pitched wind instruments in one case and for muted strings in the other. The orchestral setting creates a mood, a specific perspective.

Alongside these examples of what might be called ‘situation themes’ which set a scene, a more subtle concern for creating unity is apparent in other places. The first notes of Catarina’s gondolier song, at the beginning of Act Two, will later provide her with a point of departure for her

‘Cherchons encore’. Finally, when she thinks she hears Gérard’s gondola drawing near, this cell is first developed by a clarinet, then forms the subject of some increasingly closely-written reprises. In Act Four, the nervy motif – an ascending zigzag figure with a dotted rhythm – which opens Gérard’s *Scène et Air*, generates some varied reiterations which lead into the air ‘Sur les bords de l’abîme’. Finally, *stripped of its rhythm*, this motif accompanies Gérard’s movement to draw his sword against the King. Subtleties of this kind will be of more interest to the analyst than to the listener, unlike the device that needs virtually no signalling: in the last act, when Lusignan, dreaming, quotes the words of his duet with Gérard (‘Triste exilé sur la terre étrangère’). Saint-Georges is here reusing one of Scribe’s favourite techniques. However, Halévy treats it with a subtlety not indicated by the librettist: the King murmurs only the first few notes, leaving the violins to play the rest as he speaks the words *recto-tono*, as if in a melodrama, which derealises the vocal expression. The reappearance of this melody, which then vanishes like a ghost, is all the more poignant for being one of the most engaging and most beautifully written tunes in an opera whose forgotten qualities secured its success for so long and now make it ripe for rediscovery.

LA
REINE

DE CHYPRE

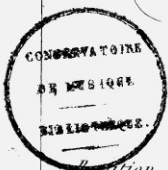
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