

La Mort d'Abel at the heart of a controversy

Alexandre Dratwicki

When the 1825 revival of Kreutzer's opera justified the reprinting of the libretto (the text of the omitted second act was nevertheless included for reference purposes) a curious Foreword was added. Anecdotal at the time, it now affords a precious glimpse behind the scenes in a scandal that reveals the importance of modernity in French opera under the Empire as a means of ensuring success and posterity in the history of the arts.

This Foreword shows how important in the final act of *La Mort d'Abel* was the representation of the opening of the heavens and the ascent of Abel's soul to Paradise. Imagined by Hoffman at the very beginning of the nineteenth century, the idea of this apothe-osis was plagiarised by the composer Lesueur for *La Mort d'Adam*, first performed at the Paris Opéra in 1809, i.e. almost a year before *La Mort d'Abel* was staged there. The issue between the two librettists (Hoffman and Guillard) and the two composers (Kreutzer and Lesueur) rested on elements that were strategic for Hoffman: he claimed he was the first to have had the perfectly Romantic idea of creating parallels between literature and music (he had already brought *Medée* to the stage at the Théâtre Feydeau for Cherubini in 1797) and that he was one of the first to champion a new, 'fantastic' type of décor on the Opéra stage, since his 'Paradise' broke with the traditional neo-Classical representations of Mount Olympus. He feared furthermore – which is exactly what happened – that audiences in 1810 would believe that he and Kreutzer had plagiarised the opera

by Lesueur and Guillard. With *Abel* performed a year after *La Mort d'Adam*, how could people be made to see that the former was the more innovative of the two? Especially since Lesueur had gone to great lengths to have an almost phantasmagorical set designed, which projected the audience into a world far more spectacular than the one it discovered in the closing scene of Kreutzer's opera. Here then is the Foreword to the 1825 libretto. †

FOREWORD

Although it had been received long before the opera *La Mort d'Adam*, the opera *La Mort d'Abel* was not performed until a year later. The performance of the former led Monsieur Hoffman to lodge a complaint, which we quote below, for its possible interest in the history of literary disputes. Each of the authors claimed the invention of the apotheosis, and several articles were published, both for and against each of the claimants. After the first performance of the opera by Messrs Guillard and Lesueur, a jester improvised the following lines. It is to be taken that the speaker of these lines is the author [Guillard]:

*Ma pièce, je l'avoue, est d'un ennui mortel ;
Mais au séjour de l'Éternel
(Si beau qu'on n'a rien vu de tel)
Je transporte à la fin Adam avec Abel,
Et je réüssis, grâce au ciel !*

† The correspondences for the years of the Republican Calendar mentioned in the text may be useful:

Year III: from 22 September 1794 to 21 September 1795
Year V: from 22 September 1796 to 21 September 1797
Year VIII: from 23 September 1799 to 22 September 1800
Year IX: from 23 September 1800 to 22 September 1801
Year X: from 23 September 1801 to 22 September 1802

*My play, I confess, is deadly boring,
But to the abode of the Everlasting
(So beautiful that no one has ever seen the like)
I transport at the end Adam with Abel,
And I am a success, thanks be to Heaven!*

La Mort d'Abel did not owe all its success to the apotheosis; several well-written scenes, the whole of the second act based on Milton, and the music of Monsieur Kreutzer, contributed as much as the sets to the success of this opera, which – ballets having become an essential part of performances at the Académie Royale de Musique – has now been reduced to two acts. However, we present the libretto as it was first given, in the belief that the reader will find enjoyment in the Hell scene.

Response to Messrs Guillard and Lesueur.

Paris, 21 March 1809.

Messieurs, since you wish me to set forth the charges I have just cause for making against you, and to explain all the facts, I shall state them clearly; but do not forget that this was your request.

The opera *Abel*, of which I am the author, was received [by the Opéra] at the beginning of Year III. I was the first to have the idea of combining Milton's Pandaemonium [in *Paradise Lost*] with the episode from Genesis, and my work ends with a kind of apotheosis of Abel, wherein is found what you saw fit to add, a year ago, to your *Mort d'Adam*. Monsieur Lesueur, who had in his hands and read my *Abel*, in Year III, has remembered its contents only too well. I shall give you the proof of this.

In a one-hundred-page pamphlet that Monsieur Lesueur had published in Year X under the title *Letter to Guillard*, he gave a scene-by-scene analysis of *La Mort d'Adam*. This analysis appears between pages 17 and 25 inclusive. Monsieur Lesueur traces all the *tableaux*, explains all the situations, and yet there is no mention either of demons or of an apotheosis; and Abel, who is mentioned a great deal in this exposition, is not a char-

acter in the play. Now, Messieurs, you have made significant changes to your work, you have included demons as in *Abel*; you even present Abel as a character, and you conclude your opera with the magnificent spectacle of an apotheosis like the one that comes at the end of my work: thus you deprive me of the only new element I was able to introduce into such a subject, and you appropriate everything that provided me with the brilliant conclusion I needed for the stage of the Opéra.

In Year X your ending had no apotheosis, no devils, no Abel, and 'the last action of your Adam was to bless mankind, as he died standing against a rock, which shatters just as the sun disappears beyond the horizon and night falls. Nature is in mourning.' These are Monsieur Lesueur's very words in his *Letter to Guillard*, page 25, line 3 onwards.

I know only too well that a good dénouement and a fine spectacle are responsible for more than half the success of the finest operas, and all the success of ones that are indifferent; since I have every reason to believe that mine is among the latter, it is likely that you have taken everything away from me, while your work, which is already so interesting and rich in its effects, could have done without what for me was necessary.

I have just proved by what Monsieur Lesueur himself has written, that his work has not always contained what has always been in mine; I shall now prove by something else Monsieur Lesueur himself has written that his play was not submitted [to the Opéra] eighteen years ago, as has been falsely stated in a public paper. In another pamphlet, entitled *Memorandum for J.F. Lesueur*, the back of the first sheet bears the words: 'I affirm and guarantee the accuracy of all the facts contained in this Memorandum. Signed Lesueur.' We can therefore consider what we find in this pamphlet to be true, since Monsieur Lesueur is incapable of lying. But I read on page 93, line 10, this sentence, which decides the issue: 'It was only after the performance of *Les Mystères d'Isis*, towards the end of Year IX, that, tired of suffering so many injustices, he thought seriously of claiming the rights of *La Mort d'Adam*, RECEIVED [by the Opéra] FOUR YEARS PREVIOUSLY, etc. ...' So there you have a positive admission that the opera was not received until four years before the end of Year IX, that

is to say, towards the end of Year V. Mine, however, dates from the beginning of Year III, as I have shown Monsieur Guillard in the presence of witnesses: so what are we to think of the eighteen years that has been boasted since I made my claim? Let us not forget, above all, that I am only using against Monsieur Lesueur the writings of Monsieur Lesueur himself, or ones guaranteed by him and signed by his hand.

Now let us take a look at my first libretto, received at the Théâtre Feydeau in Year III; or the copy thereof conveyed to the Opéra in Year VIII; or the second copy thereof, which, after checking, was received by the Opéra in 1806; or – which will be a more respectable authority – another copy that Monsieur Kreutzer had the honour of presenting to Her Majesty the Empress, in 1805, and which Her Majesty wished to keep; you will see the same libretto, with nothing altered, nothing added, and you will find there-in everything that Monsieur Lesueur has added in the past year to his own work. You requested an explanation, Messieurs; there you have it. You had an opportunity to avoid this scandal. Monsieur Guillard being at my home with Monsieur Nicolo, composer, and Monsieur Rolland, an artist of the Théâtre Feydeau, I told him that I would not call upon the newspapers, were he prepared to declare publicly and personally *that he recognised that my work was written first, and that I could not therefore have plagiarised his own*. I was easily satisfied no doubt; and Monsieur Guillard replied: ‘This is so true that if Lesueur does not do it, I shall do it myself, upon my word of honour!’ I summon Messieurs Nicolo and Rolland to declare what they heard. Despite his *word of honour*, Monsieur Guillard has refused to write: I am therefore no longer the aggressor, but am simply defending myself against the suspicion of plagiarism.

Here this ridiculous quarrel will end, unless these gentlemen deny both what they have said and what they have written. Moreover, Monsieur Lesueur is too formidable for me to wage war against him for long. He has told the whole of France, in a voluminous pamphlet, that he has always had quarrels, and has always been right; that he had a particularly fierce one with the canons of Notre Dame, but the canons were wrong, and he was right; that he had a scandalous one with the Conservatoire de Musique,

but the whole of the Conservatoire was wrong, and he alone, Monsieur Lesueur, was right. Now I, who hitherto have never had a quarrel with anyone, cannot hope to win my case against a man who is always right. I therefore declare myself defeated: he is the victor, and as proof of his victory, he carries off my spoils.

HOFFMAN.
