

La Mort d'Abel by Rodolphe Kreutzer

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First performed at the Académie Impériale de Musique on 23 March 1810, *La Mort d'Abel*, a *tragédie lyrique* in three acts (two in the 1825 revival) to music by Kreutzer and a libretto by Hoffman, is a work that is fascinating both in itself and in the aesthetic and literary context to which it belongs. Indeed, during the Empire, the period of imperial rule in France from 1804 to 1815, an important musical event had had considerable repercussions. The performance by more than five hundred musicians of *La Création du monde*, a French adaptation by Daniel Steibelt of Joseph Haydn's *Die Schöpfung*, had fired great enthusiasm at the beginning of the century. An impressive oratorio, presented on stage at the Opéra was in fact perfectly in keeping with the new sensibility which characterised that period: a taste for a sort of musical neo-Classicism that was grandiose and at the same time moving, readily comparable to the Jacques-Louis David school in painting. That experience with Haydn (the work was performed several times) brought a new genre into fashion, the most famous example of which is Méhul's *Joseph*. To which must be added *Saül* and *La Prise de Jéricho* by Kalkbrenner, *La Mort d'Adam* by Lesueur, *La Mort d'Abel* by Kreutzer and *Moïse et Pharaon* by Rossini.

Several interrelated issues made the writing and performance of those works more difficult; they even pose a problem for their rehabilitation today. The oratorio by Kalkbrenner, for example, consisted intentionally of a pot-pourri of religious and secular works, including a famous *O Salutaris* by Gossec and a number of contemplative pieces by Mozart. Despite its heterogeneity, it was none the less very popular at that time,

precisely because of the variety in its colouring. The question of representing biblical characters on stage at the Opéra was more delicate, because of censorship. Even Napoleon would have objected to the performance of Kreutzer's *La Mort d'Abel*, had not rehearsals been at such an advanced stage when he was informed of the content of the work by the Opéra's committee. He wrote to the superintendent of theatres 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.' But the works by Lesueur and Kreutzer feature Satan in person (or one of his acolytes, Anamalech, in *La Mort d'Abel*), characters that, within the context of purely religious compositions, would not have made a good impression either. The appearance of these malevolent characters are the most immediate expression of the emergence of Romanticism, nourished by the sensational and based in part on the transformation of the *merveilleux* (the marvellous, the magical, the supernatural), found in the stage works of Rameau, into the *fantastique* (the fantastic element) of Weber. For although the Hell scene is a *topos* of the old Baroque *tragédie lyrique*, the embodiment of the Devil was to be at the heart of many controversies in the nineteenth century, even as late as 1859 and the première of Gounod's *Faust*.

Kreutzer's work was premièred in 1810 in a three-act version. Overshadowed by the successive and lasting triumphs of Spontini (*La Vestale* in 1807, *Fernand Cortez* in 1809), and by the picturesque effects of exotic works such as Catel's *Les Bayadères* (1810) and Cherubini's *Les Abencérages* (1813), *La Mort d'Abel* nevertheless reappeared fortuitously on the bill at the Opéra in 1825, two years after the première of Kreutzer's last opera *Ipsiboé*. The 1825 revival of *La Mort d'Abel* retained only two of the original three acts, eliminating altogether the episode in Hell, which was central to the 1810 version. The cut, considered 'indiscriminate' by some, was so radical that it made a complicated rewriting of the remaining two acts unnecessary. The truth is that the drama gains in concision, and the presence of Anamalech, more discreet and more disturbing, makes his character all the more mysterious. It was after a performance of this second version that Berlioz wrote to Kreutzer: 'O genius! I succumb! I die!

Tears choke me! *La Mort d'Abel!* Ye gods! What a wretched public! It feels nothing! What would it take to move it? [...] Sublime, heart-rending, pathetic! Ah! I can bear it no more: I must write! To whom shall I write? To the genius? No, I dare not. I will write to the man, to Kreutzer. He will laugh at me. What does it matter? I would die if I were to remain silent. Ah, if I could only see him, speak to him; he would understand me, he would see what is in my lacerated soul; perhaps he would restore to me the courage I lost at the sight of the insensibility of those feelingless beggars who barely deserve to hear the buffooneries of that buffoon Rossini.'

The work begins with a surprisingly elaborate overture, conveying perfectly not only the calm of the night but also the tempestuous recriminations that are to come from Anamalech and the demons. It is above all in the long coda evoking daybreak that this orchestral piece moves away from the conventional processes that were only very rarely eluded by composers of Kreutzer's time. In order to be able to go systematically straight to the point later on, the 'obbligato' airs in the exposition scenes are entrusted successively to each of the secondary characters: Adam, Eve, then Mahala thus use various different modes of expression – note in particular the vehemence of Adam's *Allegro ma non troppo*, 'Ô mes enfants', and the poetry of Mahala's *cantabile* 'J'attendais que l'aurore...'. The entrance of Cain and his agitated ('agitato') air, 'Quoi, toujours ton image est offerte à mes yeux!' engage the action immediately and irrevocably in a pathetic and heroic vein, in which henceforth there is to be no real respite. Of course, the final 'Ô moment plein de charme' with its gentle and regular lilt, seems for a moment to settle the conflict between the brothers Abel and Cain, but no sooner have they sworn 'lasting' and 'unwavering' peace than the terrible curse, uttered by a voice from Hell, throws the frightened, imploring assembly into confusion and terror. The *Allegro vivace* 'Quels accents, quelle voix terrible' takes the finale of the act into an escalation of grandiose effects, playing notably on the alternation of the two choruses, that of the demons and that of the children. This is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful 'religious' moments in the score, before the final chorus. Abel's poetic arioso, 'Mon Dieu, de l'amour le plus tendre, mon frère a resserré les nœuds', adds

to the Romantic colouring of the work and prepares effectively for the curtain to fall on a scene of general consternation. While Cain curses 'Heaven and earth', the other character try to calm him: a perfect example of the assimilation of the experiments of Gluck, at the same time announcing the climactic finales of operatic acts of the Romantic age, in which one character is in conflict with all the other protagonists.

The prelude to Act II contains delightfully tormented harmonies, creating an impression of wandering, rambling, representing the distraction of Cain. Fleeing from his family, he finds himself in 'a wild and arid spot', where, though confused and agitated, he falls asleep (*cantabile*: 'Doux sommeil, dans ce lieu paisible'). This *air de sommeil*, the only truly serene piece in the work, is another outstanding example of a mixture of styles, a tribute to the great 'sleep scenes' of Baroque inherited from Lully, a perfect adaptation to the modern Classical style (we are reminded here and there of the sonorities of the woodwinds in the trio 'Soave sia il vento' from *Così fan tutte*), and an ideal transition to the most Romantic passage in the score: the infernal vision instigated by the Devil himself. The appearance of Anamalech, who conjures up various terrible dreams ('Vois à quel prix tes fils couvriront cette terre'), calls to mind some of the processes that had been very much in favour during the previous century, but the concision of the 1825 version leaves no room for an extended divertissement with dancing (which existed however in the 1810 version). Cain's awakening (his furious rage culminates in the symbolical and impressive sound of an anvil being struck, preceded by an equally startling blow on a tam-tam) and the arrival of Abel seal the brothers' terrible fate (*Allegro non troppo* 'Tremble, tremble indigne frère'), despite Abel's soothing entreaties (in an *Andante* 'Cède à l'amitié d'un frère' very reminiscent of Gluck, then a more incisive *Allegro assai* 'Viens dans mes bras'). The finale of the work, shorter than that of Act I, presents some fine dramatic situations and culminates with an angels' chorus which, exceptionally, makes use of the heavenly strains of the harp.



Henri-Montan Berton, Kreutzer's colleague, had a similar institutional career. Collection of the Geneva Conservatoire.

Henri-Montan Berton, collègue de Kreutzer, suivit le même parcours institutionnel que lui. Collection Conservatoire de Genève.