

## Étienne-Nicolas Méhul: *Adrien* (1791)

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*Adrien*, another composition of the same time, was in every way worthy of Méhul's creative power, with a multitude of new effects, admirable choruses and a recitative that was in no way inferior to Gluck's; but by some sort of ill fate, the various successive governments proscribed the work every time it was revived. (Fétis, *Biographie universelle des musiciens*.)

Born in Givet (Ardennes), Étienne-Nicolas Méhul received the first rudiments of his musical education from the German organist Wilhelm Hanser. Having arrived in Paris in 1779 with a letter of recommendation to Gluck, he continued his training with the Alsatian harpsichordist and composer Jean-Frédéric Edelmann, who most likely introduced him to the music of Mozart and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. During that time his first two sets of keyboard sonatas were published (1781). By 1789 Méhul had written his first opera, *Cora*, for the Académie Royale de Musique (the Paris Opéra), but after rehearsals were abandoned (the Opéra was going through financial difficulties at the time) he turned to the *opéra comique* genre at the Théâtre Favart, where his most important stage works were to be given. The first of them, *Euphrosine* (1790), was a new kind of *opéra comique* marked by the severe heroic style – Méhul referred to the latter as 'musique de fer', music of iron – and perfectly in keeping with the expectations of audi-

ences in those Revolutionary times. *Stratonice* (1792), *Mélidore et Phrosine* (1794) and *Ariodant* (1799) all broke out of the narrow confines of the old *comédie mêlée d'ariettes* (a form of French *opéra comique* consisting of a spoken comedy interspersed with short arias, which had developed in the mid-eighteenth century) and made *opéra comique* into the crucible from which the French Romantic opera was to emerge. Méhul's quest for ever-greater dramatic expressivity led him to experiment with orchestration: in *Uthal*, for instance, an Ossianic opera written under the Empire (1806), he replaced the violins in the orchestra with violas for a darker sound. Between 1808 and 1810 he composed his five symphonies. But it was his biblical opera *Joseph* that was to ensure his fame in Europe in the nineteenth century. Méhul, like the painter Jacques-Louis David, kept pace in his style with the many political upheavals of that period in France. Under the Restoration he composed *La Journée aux aventures* (1816), recalling in its style and plot the *opéra comique* of the Ancien-Régime. Méhul died in 1817 of tuberculosis.

Completed in 1791, *Adrien* (Hadrian), originally entitled *Adrien, empereur des Romains*, was to have a turbulent existence before it was finally performed at the Paris Opéra in 1799. Indeed, the work was banned by successive political regimes. The censorship committee condemned in particular the (a)morality of certain characters, especially the emperor Adrien, who they felt was depicted as either too weak or too despotic in his behaviour. Between the opera's completion and the first performance Méhul made many changes, not all of them in response to the censors' views. He emboldened his style and, like his colleagues (or rivals) Lesueur, Cherubini and Steibelt, he adopted the noble and pathetic style that was the hallmark during the Revolutionary period of the Théâtre Favart.

In its revised version (recorded here), *Adrien* begins with a grand overture borrowed from an earlier one-act opera, *Horatius Coclès* (1794),

that is nevertheless very appropriate to its subject; indeed, audiences of the time recognised in it now the solemnity of the emperor's triumph, now the sighs and tears of his captive, Princess Émirène. The classical structure of the piece naturally opposed two contrasting motifs, easily identifiable as contrary emotions that were relevant to both works.

The beginning of the opera contains long passages of mostly 'dry' recitative (i. e. with only a simple chordal accompaniment), which the modern listener may find somewhat disconcerting. Composers of that time were actively seeking new ways of modernising the declamation in operatic works, for indeed many critics and also some operagoers strongly objected to a musical style that made shouting obligatory for singers to be heard above the orchestra. Clearly Méhul chose to solve that problem by creating a freer vocal line, less subordinate to the instruments. Furthermore, dry recitative permitted greater freedom of expression, enabling the singers to lend more subtlety to the words of Adrien, Cosroès and Sabine, and bring out the underlying meaning by the use of pauses and however much *rubato* they deemed necessary; it also facilitated the expression of irony.

Spoken texts predominate in Act I, where they are used to establish the dramatic situation; but after that, the proportion of spoken and sung texts is reversed, with arias and duos providing a finer psychological perception of the characters. In Act I, there are only two sung episodes: a duo for Pharnaspe and Cosroès near the beginning and another one for Émirène and Adrien at the end. The dramatic progression of the latter results in a *finale d'acte*, a finale to the act, that looks forward to those of Meyerbeer, fifty years hence! There is no orchestral conclusion to encourage applause and the heated conversation between the emperor and his captive is interrupted by a chorus of terrified Romans as the Parthians attack the city. In the ensuing battle, the Parthians are put to

flight and the people acclaim Adrien, who has captured Pharnaspe. This scene, superimposing the contrary affects of five soloists and three choruses (chorus of priests and vestals; chorus of Roman soldiers, alternating, then simultaneous with the chorus of Parthians), attains a maximum volume that was unbelievable at that time, and the composer even indulges in the luxury of an amazing symphonic episode.

The heroic aspect of the work lies not so much in Adrien's bellicosity, vented whenever he feels humiliated and betrayed, as in the threats and invectives of Sabine and Cosroès, mostly in Acts II and III. Both of these characters feel bitter hatred towards Adrien, Sabine for reasons of love, Cosroès for reasons of power. Sabine's arias, especially 'De Rome, craignez la colère' (Act II), then the *stretta* 'Fuyons ces lieux que je déteste' (Act III), are perfect examples of pieces bordering on hysteria, at a time when the vocal style of the moment was moving towards 'Romanticism', but under the appellation first of all of 'Revolutionary' music. Tessituras broadened, high notes became more frequent, and the instrumental accompaniment grew denser and more agitated, notably through the use of tremolo and syncopation: clearly a transposition into the field of opera of the German 'Sturm und Drang', which had been brought to France by foreign composers such as Johann Christoph Vogel (his opera *La Toison d'or* is a good example). In the light of this, the battle scene at the end of Act I stands out as a vital link in the evolution of Classical opera at the time of Méhul. The instrumental writing goes much further in its frenzy than the storm scenes of the Baroque era, while retaining some of the expressions of the latter (the use of the piccolos to suggest lightning, for instance). This sequence is comparable to the fire that brings Cherubini's *Lodoïska*, also of 1791, to an equally dramatic end.

There is another captivating orchestral piece in the work, apart from the overture. It accompanies the scene in pantomime in which the

Parthian soldiers slay their adversaries and strip them of their weapons and clothing in order to disguise themselves as Romans. This purely musical episode – much longer than one might have expected – reflects the use at that time of the pantomime and gesture, both realistic and experimental, that had been developed in Paris since the 1780s within the context of the modern ballet, championed by Noverre and later Gardel. While dance played an important part in the divertissements of the *tragédie lyrique*, it was rare for the choreography in a work to be represented only by a pantomime scene. Concerning the first version of *Adrien*, it is difficult to ascertain whether or not there were ballets at the end of the various scenes in celebration of Adrien's triumph, but it is highly likely that the choruses at the end of Acts I and III were danced as well as sung. Furthermore, the marches that occur at several points in the work must have provided an opportunity for processions or spectacular theatrical actions. Why then did Fétis (born in 1784 and writing many years after the event) explain the work's short run as follows: 'While [Méhul's] *Ariodant* was being performed at the Opéra-Comique, the administration of the Paris Opéra finally obtained permission from the Directory to stage *Adrien*, a fine composition, severe in style, that was praised by the critics but which, devoid of spectacular qualities and dancing, was unable to hold the stage for long'? Perhaps the real explanation for the opera's only brief success was simply that too much time had elapsed between the work's composition and its performance: what had been modern in 1791 was no longer so, despite the changes the composer had made, in 1799, just before the dawn of the new century of Romanticism.

