Venetian *terreur*, French heroism and fated love

Diana R. Hallman

The tales of history, so captivating to French readers and theatregoers of the early nineteenth century, flourished on the stage of the Paris Opéra in *grand opéra* portrayals of intimate tragedies set against events and conflicts of the distant past – from the 1647 revolt of Neapolitan peasants against Spanish rule in Daniel-François-Esprit Auber's *La Muette de Portici* (1828) to the 1572 Saint-Barthélemy Massacre of Huguenots in Giacomo Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* (1836). Fromental Halévy (1799 - 1862), a leading *grand opéra* composer who had depicted the historical Cardinal Brogni and Council of Constance of 1414 - 18 in Eugène Scribe's invented story of Jewish-Christian romance and opposition in *La Juive* (1835), would again be drawn to fifteenth-century history in his third *grand opéra, La Reine de Chypre,* written in collaboration with the librettist Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges (1799 - 1875). In setting Saint-Georges's reimagined story of the Venetian-born Cypriot queen Catarina Cornaro, Halévy undoubtedly sensed the theatrical appeal of Catarina's thwarted marriage, the conflicted rivalry of exiled French knights who claimed her hand, and the musical-dramatic colours promised by exotic, festive scenes in Venice and Cyprus. Moreover, he may have been touched by nostalgia for Italy, a country that he had enthusiastically explored during his early Prix de Rome years. But, according to the composer's brother, artistic partner and biographer Léon Halévy, an important inspiration for this opera of

1841 was the 'sombre et mystérieuse terreur' of Venice, an image that tapped into a rich vein of politically charged representations of the Venetian Republic that either alluded to or overtly condemned the secretive despotism of its early patrician rulers. Léon's reference to Venetian 'terreur' appears to signal a common view of the city's tyranny that was illustrated in plays, operas and histories of the period and that bore reminders of abuses of power closer to home.

As historian James H. Johnson has noted, an important drama of the long nineteenth century that helped to create the 'myth' of Venetian tyranny was Antoine-Vincent Arnault's *Blanche et Montcassin, ou Les Vénitiens* (1798), a drama with ideological links to Napoleon's revolutionary rhetoric and military actions to liberate Venice from the Council of Ten and State Inquisition during the Italian campaign of 1796-97. This political association, along with the play's dedication to Napoleon and his modification of its original happy ending to a tragic one, would lead to the banning of Arnault's work after the Hundred Days, the dismissal of the dramatist from the Académie française, and his exile from France until 1819. Arnault's drama clearly portrays an oppressive Council and depicts Blanche's father as a Council member who forces her to abandon her beloved Montcassin, a Norman, to marry a politically viable suitor. An opera based on the play, Gioachino Rossini's and Felice Romani's *Bianca e Falliero, o sia Il Consiglio dei Tre*, first performed at La Scala in 1819, obscures the Council's political despotism so evident in Arnault's work. The famed Romantic author Lord Byron, using rhetoric more sharply resonant with Arnault's messages, castigates Venice in his 1821 play *Marino Faliero* about the fourteenth-century Doge who was arrested and beheaded for his *coup d'état* against ruling aristocrats. In another treatment of Faliero's ill-fated tale, Gaetano Donizetti's *Marino Faliero*, an 1835 opera set to Giovanni Emanuele Bidera's adaptation of Casimir Delavigne's tragedy rather than Byron's play, offers little critique of Venetian institutions, but Giuseppe Verdi and Francesco Maria Piave would more strongly portray Venetian repressiveness in their reworking of Byron's play *The Two Foscari* as *I due Foscari*, first performed in Rome in 1844.

Corresponding with the politicised commentary of many of these Venetian dramas, as well as the anti-authoritarian bent of *La Juive*, *Les Huguenots*, and other *grand opéras* preceding *La Reine de Chypre*, the opera's retelling of Catarina Cornaro's history against the backdrop of Venetian-Cypriot alliances reverberates with similar images of Venetian tyranny. Napoleonic, or Revolution-inspired, ideology emerges in the opera's sinister portrayal of Pietro Mocenigo, a member of the Council of Ten who threatens the patrician Andrea with death if he does not follow Venice's command to prevent the marriage of his niece Catarina with the knight Gérard de Coucy. To convey Mocenigo's menacing authority, Halévy creates a recurring motive built on an ominous, repeated-note ostinato, first sounding in C minor in his *parlante* exchanges with Andrea, who is forced to revoke his original blessing of Caterina's and Gérard's betrothal as he gives her hand to the Cypriot king, Jacques de Lusignan, thus securing Venetian power in Cyprus. The parallel to Arnault's plot choice of a broken engagement and politically forced marriage strongly implies a source connection to his 1798 play, a possibility that becomes more probable if one ponders the close association between Arnault and Halévy's brother Léon, as well as the dramatist's renewed prominence in the Académie during the early July Monarchy. Also intriguing to consider is a possible subtextual allusion to France's own repressive acts in the previous exiling of Arnault and banning of his work.

The intent to depict Venetian *terreur* in *La Reine de Chypre* is made explicit by the printing of an historical excerpt in the preface to the libretto's first edition. Included is a passage from *Histoire de Venise* (1838), one of two published histories of Venice by Count Pierre-Antoine-Noël-Bruno Daru, a soldier and statesman who served as chief commissary in Napoleon's Northern Italian campaign. Reflecting Napoleonic views similar to Arnault's, Daru writes of Venice's power over the Cypriot king, a possible Venetian conspiracy behind his likely poisoning, and Catarina's courageous refusal to submit to Venetian control in the excerpt, and further emphasises the malevolent authority of 'the Council of Ten' in other passages of the *Histoire*, noting that 'that monstrous tribunal' closely monitored the populace and authorised public and clandestine deaths.

Daru's interpretation of the Council's absolute power and murderous conspiracies corresponds with both implicit and explicit references in the score and libretto. In addition to Mocenigo's recurring motive, Halévy creates authoritative, dotted-rhythm bass lines to symbolise Venice's threatening control, including a repeated motive of ascending octaves that includes the 'devil's interval' of a tritone in C minor at the end of Act Two, as Catarina falls to her knees at the anguish of rejecting Gérard and as Mocenigo gestures toward waiting assassins, reminding her of the threat to her lover's life. In Act Three's gardens in a Cyprus gambling house, Venetian lords taunt Cypriot revellers that Venice's enemies will face death or slavery and then sing, to the rising octave motive of Act Two: 'Venise de sa terrible voix domine l'univers!' In Catarina's poignant recitative of Act Five, she ruminates on Lusignan's succumbing to 'an unknown sickness' shortly after Mocenigo's sinister Act One motive is heard; later Gérard directly accuses Mocenigo of poisoning the King, and the Iago-like character admits, 'Yes, Venice has broken this rebellious instrument', but threatens to blame Catarina and Gérard for the crime. In the final scenes, the dying Lusignan revives to defend the pair and unite the Cypriots to fight for victory over an oppressive Venice.

Close in time to the creation of the five-act *La Reine de Chypre* and its premiere on 22 December 1841 at the Paris Opéra, a wave of Cornaro operas appeared in European theatres, all related to Saint-Georges's libretto but with some mitigation of its political elements. Even before *La Reine*'s first performance, Franz Lachner's adaptation, the four-act opera *Catarina Cornaro, Königin von Cypern*, had its premiere at the Munich Hofoper on 3 December 1841. A few years later, Alfred Bunn reworked the Parisian libretto for Michael William Balfe's *The Daughter of St Mark*, presented in 1844 at Drury Lane Theatre in London. In the libretto's preface, Bunn noted that he deliberately avoided following Saint-Georges's depiction of 'those fearful events' of the Venetian-Cypriot conflict 'too faithfully imitated on the Parisian stage,' knowing they would be 'repugnant to an English audience'. Despite shunning visceral confrontations, Bunn features Venetian oppression in his libretto: in Act One, Caterina's lover Adolphe sings that 'plots by tyranny at freedom hurled, / Have rendered Venice hateful to the world' and Caterina's uncle refers to the 'hated presence' of Moncenigo. In the same year, Gaetano Donizetti's and Giacomo Sacchèro's two-act adaptation, *Caterina Cornaro*, had its premiere at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples and, in 1846, Giovanni Pacini's and Francesco Guidi's version, the four-act *La regina di Cipro*, was produced at Turin's Teatro Regio.

Within a two-year period before *La Reine*'s premiere in Paris, Halévy's composition of the opera coincided with a crucial turning point in his career. In June 1840, five years after the triumph of *La Juive*, the composer resigned from his Opéra position as *premier chef de chant*, which he had held since 1833. Shortly before, Halévy had also relinquished his four-year position as assistant director at the Opéra under Edmond Duponchel, who was prodded to accept a short-lived co-directorship with Léon Pillet. Through press accounts, Halévy explained that he had stepped down to devote time to composition (not mentioning the mounting accusations that he had held too much power at the Opéra). With Pillet primarily in charge, Halévy undoubtedly lost the flexibility and influence that he had enjoyed under Duponchel, and, as he completed the opera, he was pressed to report to Pillet frequently and to apologise profusely for delays in the anticipated rehearsal schedule. In a letter of 24 May 1841, Halévy assured the director that he had finished most of the first three acts, and would soon meet with Saint-Georges about the final act. Less than a month later, on 22 June, he admitted that he had not yet given the Opéra copyist, Aimé Leborne, one number from Act Two nor the end of Act Three, and explained that Saint-Georges was too busy with the ballet *Giselle* to send him the remaining acts. More updates followed in Halévy's correspondence, along with placating reminders that he was at work on airs or duets that would display the talents of the mezzo-soprano Rosine

Stoltz, Pillet's mistress, who would create the role of the Cypriot queen. He also emphatically stated that 'never have I worked on a composition with so great a desire for a true and lasting success'.

Despite tensions and delays that surrounded the work's creation and six-month rehearsal period, the first production of *La Reine de Chypre* at the Opéra was a critical success. Many Parisian journalists who attended the premiere and early performances of late December 1841 effusively praised the opera's libretto, music and mise-en-scène. Although a few writers complained of Halévy's sombre, monotonous music, several critics labelled the beautiful, complex score a true 'sister' of his masterwork *La Juive*, while others believed that it surpassed the composer's earlier operas. In *Le Temps*, Paul Merruau lauded the 'ingenious, profound, learned and amiable' composer for 'the finesse and aptness of his ideas'. Admiration for his skilled and effective orchestration emerged in many reviews, even those that concentrated on details of the opera's plot. The critic for *Le Corsaire* ('A.') exclaimed: 'Never has M. Halévy, so prodigious an orchestrator, assembled more marvellous effects, bolder and more stirring combinations of instruments'. In *Le Journal des débats*, Berlioz described many nuances of orchestration as well as the formidable 'musical splendour' created by double orchestras in Act Four, with many instruments performing onstage. Richard Wagner, who arranged the opera's vocal score for publisher Maurice Schlesinger during his early Paris years, would praise Halévy's opera for its development of a richly diverse, path-breaking style in four articles published in the *Revue et Gazette musicale* of 1842.

Among the numbers that stimulated exuberant responses from critics and audiences was Act Two's opening *chœur de gondoliers*, a haunting barcarolle sung offstage by alto, tenor and bass soloists and chorus, introduced by a repeated six-note pizzicato descent in the cellos. J. Arago of *La Tribune dramatique* found the number 'ravishing in its originality'; Wagner went further in calling it 'one of the most original conceptions' written by the composer. The extended Gérard-Lusignan duet that ends Act Three, sung after the masked king has saved his rival and compatriot from assassins' swords, was another favourite – its effect on the audience was 'irresistible', wrote 'A.' of *Le Corsaire*. Particularly admired were the characters' patriotic salute to France and their shared melancholia as exiled Frenchmen 'in a foreign land' in the *Cantabile,* 'Triste exilé' (whose main theme returns in Act Five as the dying Lusignan recalls their bond). Berlioz lauded the *Cantabile*'s 'expression pénétrante', as well as the poignancy of the Act Two love duet of Catarina and Gérard, particularly Gérard's 'desolate song'. Like Wagner, Berlioz was deeply affected by the sublime beauty of the Act Five Quartet, stating that it placed the act next to *Robert le diable* and *Les Huguenots* 'in musical importance'.

Critics consistently applauded the early performances of the three leading singers, mezzo-soprano Rosine Stoltz (1815 - 1903), tenor Gilbert-Louis Duprez (1806 - 96) and tenor Paul-Bernard Barroilhet (1810 - 71). Stoltz, one of the most important French mezzo-sopranos before Pauline Viardot, had already performed in Halévy's *La Juive*, singing the role of Rachel (originally written for soprano Cornélie Falcon) at her Opéra debut in 1837; the mezzo-soprano would then create the courtesan roles of Ricciarda in Halévy's *Guido et Ginevra* in 1838 and Léonor in Donizetti's *La Favorite* in 1840. In *La Reine*, as the Venetian-born Cypriot queen who eventually resists Venice's dominance of her adopted island, Stoltz symbolises a French heroine fighting for freedom (less than two years later, she would portray the Joan of Arc figure of Odette in Halévy's thoroughly patriotic *grand opéra*, *Charles VI*). Although some critics bemoaned the lack of a soprano role, or a second principal female role that had come to be expected in French *grand opéra*, many admired the depth of Stoltz's characterisation and the beauty and power of her voice. Henri Blanchard praised Stoltz as 'the only operatic tragedienne of our day', designating her 'a new Desdemona reminding us of [Giuditta] Pasta and [Maria] Malibran in [Rossini's] *Otello*'. Several writers sensed that Halévy had moulded his writing to showcase her talents, tessitura and two-octave range, creating starkly unadorned melodic lines and giving her long passages of dramatic recitative, short rising phrases to agogic accents, and extended phrases in her chest voice. Critics remarked on her passionate and 'pathétique' expression, particularly in the second and fifth acts. One anonymous critic in *Les Coulisses*, however, objected to her 'angular' singing, which he likened to screaming.

In Duprez's performances as the French knight Gérard, critics found the tenor at the peak of his powers. The role came four years after Duprez's debut at the Opéra in 1837, when he first thrilled audiences with his 'ut de poitrine' (high C in chest voice) and dramatic singing that contrasted with the silvery tones of Adolphe Nourrit (Duprez's singing of Nourrit's roles in fact triggered his predecessor's departure from the Opéra). His appearance as Gérard followed his creation of Guido in *Guido et Ginevra* and Fernand in *La Favorite*. Attending *La Reine*'s premiere, a reviewer in *Le Charivari* declared that Duprez was 'the hero of the evening' and remarked that 'his voice had never been more beautiful, larger or more resonant'. Arago, in *La Tribune dramatique*, agreed that 'Duprez is at the height of his glory'. His voice was so suited to the role that a critic in *Le Corsaire* stated: 'It is even impossible for him to be understudied in this role, so marked is it by his voice, so imbued with the grandeur of effect that only he can attain.'

The baritone Paul Barroilhet, who had performed Alphonse in *La Favorite* and would appear, in 1843, as the poet Camoëns in Donizetti's *Dom Sébastien* and the mad king in Halévy's *Charles VI*, drew praise as both singer and actor. In *La Presse*, Théophile Gautier found his interpretation of Lusignan 'very fine' and Arago described him as 'a first-rate singer, a superlative tragedian'. Critics lauded his ensemble singing, especially in the Act Three duet with Duprez, with Gautier comparing their 'splendid singing contests' to those of the beloved Italian singers Giovanni Rubini and Antonio Tamburini at the Théâtre-Italien. Among other highlighted moments, Barroilhet's entrance in Act Five was deemed 'magnificent' by Auguste Morel in *Revue et Gazette des théâtres*. Of Barroilhet's fellow baritone, Eugène Massol (1802-87), Berlioz felt that 'his steely voice' matched 'the impassive, odious character of Mocenigo perfectly', while others found Massol's characterisation inadequate.

In the early critical reception of *La Reine de Chypre*, overall assessments of the opera's historical import were rare, although many writers briefly recounted Cornaro's history, with a few complaining of historical distortions in the libretto. Among scattered statements about the opera's political implications, Jean-Toussaint Merle, in the clerical newspaper *La Quotidienne*, chastised the Opéra for allowing 'the sacrilegious abuse' of Catholicism in *La Reine*'s 'parody' of religious ceremonies, as in *La Juive* and other operas of the 1830s. One writer did insist that the opera was 'too political'. The scarcity of such comments does not necessarily confirm that the opera was viewed through an apolitical lens, however. The straightforward descriptions of Mocenigo's sinister dealings, for example, might well suggest that operagoers accepted the validity of the Daru- and Arnault-inspired depictions of a tyrannical Venice, even conveying a re-embracing of the heroic tales of Napoleon's 'liberation' of Italy.

In *La Reine de Chypre*, the interweaving of actual historical events, a tragic tale of love and honour, colourful spectacle and intricate, haunting music clearly tapped into the period's fascination with history and grand, melodramatic expression. But, more pointedly, the opera served as a re-enactment of France's heroic past: in the patriotic oaths of exiled French knights, the Cypriot victory led by Catarina, the soundscape of ceremonial music – compared by Berlioz to 'the solemn noise of great national festivals' – and the emblematic use of 'trompettes antiques' that had been played in the procession for Napoleon's entombment at the Invalides in 1840. In 1841, at the beginning of the second decade of the July Monarchy, this historical *grand opéra* succeeded not only as a homage to French heroism, but as a reminder of the nation's triumph over, and continuing struggles with, the forces of tyranny and *terreur*.

Costume for Andrea Cornaro.
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Costume pour Andréa Cornaro.
Bibliothèque nationale de France.