

# La Mort d'Abel, 1810: the reception in the press

*Étienne Jardin*

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Abel is one of the finest works to have been given  
at the Académie Impériale in a long time.*

Although the 1825 revival of *La Mort d'Abel* did not generate much critical comment in the press, the première of 1810 occasioned, as always with new operas, a more finely detailed analysis. Some writers were interested above all in Hoffman's libretto: very critical of its form, they also questioned the propriety of presenting biblical characters on stage at the Opéra.



## AN AMBIGUOUS LIBRETTO, BETWEEN OPERA AND ORATORIO

'M. Hoffman will have wisely sacrificed the silent authority of grammar to that of a man who uses as he pleases the most terrible orchestra in Europe. [...] To be frank, there is merit in the words; but M. Kreutzer's music, alternately strong and melodious, is infinitely superior to the text, which, without it, might well be boring. It took at least a fine recitative no doubt to make lines such as these acceptable (Cain is the speaker): 'Je suis seul sur la terre, et mon cœur sans fierté / N'a plus qu'un sentiment,

l'insensibilité.' Apart from the fact that 'sans fierté' is a redundancy here, the likes of which one rarely encounters even in the worst operas, this paraphrase of a silly remark, "I feel that I feel nothing", can only be compared to the lines of Vadius and Trissotin [in Molière's *Les Femmes savantes*].' (*Journal de Paris*, 24 March 1810.)

'This opera, with its rather sad subject, began very gaily, and that gaiety turned out to be fatal: sometimes it is the small things that determine the greatest destinies! Abel's curly hair, when he appears in the second scene, put everyone in good humour; great bursts of laughter greeted the blond wig that turned Adam's son into a cherub and made him even more feminine, although he is not very masculine as it is. [...] I shall not repeat here what I have said already about the sorry sight of our first ancestors disguised as the heroes of opera. [...] There is much weakness in the versification, much negligence in the style. [...] A few good lines here and there prove that if Hoffman did not write better, it is because he did not want to go to such trouble. [...] It would have been better without so many devils and with more dancing.' (*Journal de l'Empire*, 26 March 1810.)

'Today we shall speak only about the author of the libretto, whose lines are sometimes prosaic and his style vulgar. He deserves praise for the scenes at the end of the second act and the whole structure of the third.' (*Courrier de l'Europe*, 24 March 1810.)



#### UNANIMITY FOR KREUTZER'S MUSIC

'The opera about Abel will add greatly to the reputation of Monsieur Kreutzer, who had not yet risen to such heights as a composer, and looks set to go even further when he applies himself to a happier subject.' (*Journal de l'Empire*, 26 March 1810.)

Reactions to the first act...

‘The first act is lively and interesting; the musician has captured everything indicated to him by the poet. The overture, which is gentle and fresh, expresses all the calm and innocence of man’s infancy; it captures the local colour of the subject. There is an enchanting duo for Adam and Abel: its success goes to show how a simple, natural melody can hold the attention of all who hear it. [...] No pieces exercise greater charm or are more generally pleasing: composers ought to think more often about what pleases everyone. The chorus of reconciliation is very expressive and beautiful in its effect. The terror inspired by the voice from Hell, the contrast between the fury of the devils and the piety and gentle peacefulness of Adam’s family, are depicted in the music both powerfully and realistically.’ (*Journal de l’Empire*, 26 March 1810.)

‘There is in the first act a charming duo, which is sung perfectly by Messieurs Derivis and Nourrit. It was much applauded, as was the sextet or ensemble piece from the same act.’ (*Courrier de l’Europe*, 24 March 1810.)

‘The introduction to the opera prepares the listener sufficiently for the opening of the scene, which represents dawn: Adam and Abel sing a beautiful duo, which the audience in general applauded with enthusiasm. The first-act finale offers striking contrasts between the pieces sung by our earliest forebears and the chorus of infernal spirits. This piece reveals a composer of the first order.’ (*Tablettes de Polymnie*, April 1810.)



THE ACT OMITTED IN 1825

‘The second act, the one that takes place in Hell, was less successful; the authors, who had thought it sufficient for it to contrast with the other two, had not taken into account the fact that the lack of contrasts within

the act itself would be wearisome to the audience. A whole act of barbaric music is more than the ear can stand. When Gluck presented the pagan underworld on stage, he interspersed its terrible songs with the melodious strains of Orpheus. In *Cortez*, the touching pleas of the Spanish prisoners likewise interrupt the ferocious cries of the Mexicans, but in the Hell of our religion such an alliance was impossible, which is why, even in the interest of the music, Hoffman should not have presented it to us.' (*Le Publiciste*, 25 March 1810.)

'The blame, moreover, should not be laid at [the composer's] door; the poet is entirely to blame for not providing him with the slightest opportunity for variety in an act in which there are only demons thirsting for blood. Furthermore, what efforts he had to make for his infernal choruses, throughout the duration of this act, to bear comparison with those of *Armide* and *Orphée*!' (*Journal de Paris*, 24 March 1810.)

'The musician nevertheless deserves praise for having risen to the heights of the genius of Gluck without bearing too close a resemblance to him: it was very difficult for him to depict the horrors of that dreadful assembly; he has gone to the trouble of providing music that is wild, barbaric, terrifying, worthy of the place where it is performed, and all that for nothing, because we are unable to endure music of the same colour for long without fatigue, especially when that colour is not at all pleasant in itself.' (*Journal de l'Empire*, 26 March 1810.)



#### AN EXEMPLARY CATASTROPHE: THE TRANSFIGURATION OF THE THIRD ACT

'The opera was successful; largely thanks to the third act, which is very beautiful in its dramatic action and especially in its musical effect. Monsieur Lainez showed his great skills as a tragic actor in the difficult scenes of

this third act. The apotheosis of Abel that brings it to an end is not as magnificent in its décors and in the grouping of the participants on stage as the apotheosis of Adam, but the spectacle is just as beautiful and just as religious. The administration [of the Opéra] has neglected nothing for the establishment of this work, and the machinery was used effectively.’ (*Courrier de l’Europe*, 24 March 1810.)

‘The music of the third act is much more varied and more melodious than that of the second. Cain’s monologue “Qu’ai-je vu? quelle horreur...” is most effective. One cannot help but shudder on seeing this unfortunate man, prompted by an irresistible force to commit the crime, pick up the fatal club as he cries with a terrible voice, “Ah! saisissons ce présent de l’enfer”. In the music for that scene there are effects worthy of the genius of Gluck, and that genius appears to have inspired Lainez as well, for he heightens the tragic force of the situation with a burning energy.’ (*Journal de Paris*, 24 March 1810.)

‘The third act opens with a monologue that is a bit long and much too weak for the character of Cain; this is the fault of the author of the text; but perhaps it required no less than such a monologue to send Cain to sleep. Cain’s dream is reminiscent of that of Ossian: it is full of dances, which retrace before the eyes of the sleeping Cain the misfortunes of his race and the happiness of the descendants of Abel. The airs are charming, the dances infinitely enjoyable: they were composed [choreographed] by Gardel, with his usual taste and talent; they are performed by Vestris and Mesdames Gardel, Millière and Bigottini. Therefore, might we venture to say that the dances are very little? But the greater the pleasure they give, the more one has the right to say there are not enough of them, and consequently, the more one is tempted to accuse the severity of Monsieur Hoffman, who no doubt felt he could not in all conscience include any more. I count for nothing the few leaps from the devils in the second act.’ (*Journal de l’Empire*, 26 March 1810.)

## PERFORMANCE

'The role of Adam is very well suited to the superb, imposing voice of Derivis; Nouris, as Abel, finds what he needs to cultivate all the melodiousness of his voice. Mlle Maillard brings a great deal of nobility and tenderness to the part of Eve. Mlle Himm plays Cain's wife, Mlle Emiline the wife of Abel: both are beautiful, both of them act and sing as well as one possibly can do in secondary roles. Abel's Paradise is not quite as bright and splendid as that of Adam; but it is a Paradise nevertheless; the elect must not be charmed by vain splendour, always preferring what has the most glitter.' (*Journal de l'Empire*, 26 March 1810.)

'Lainez, who took the part of Cain, played the murder scene with superior talent, and [...] Derivis and Nourrit sang the parts of Adam and Abel very well.' (*Le Publiciste*, 25 March 1810.)

'The invocation of sleep, before the dream in the third act, is very beautiful; unfortunately Lainez does not sing. The duo for Abel and Cain, when the latter is about to murder his brother, is very impressive; Monsieur Lainez has never acted better, never perhaps has he ever shouted so loud, it is a malady that is becoming widespread. Mlle Himm is not above reproach, she is all the more blameworthy since her voice is quite loud enough for her to be heard perfectly without her having to resort to means that destroy all the beauty of the part and all true expression. She sings the air in the first act too loud and without good articulation: either she has a malformation, or else she has not done all the work she should have done; this young actress leaves much to be desired in that respect. Derivis is very good as Adam; a Monsieur Duparc, or Duporc, a student of the recently defunct Opéra school, took the part of Anamalech and was unable to find two correct intonations throughout.' (*Tablettes de Polymnie*, April 1810.)

'To sum up, as regards the music *Abel* is one of the finest works to have been given at the Académie Impériale in a long time. It is regrettable that

Monsieur Kreutzer has been so poorly served by the subject he has had to deal with, by most of the singers, and even by the orchestra, which he conducts himself; it is not right that, with the first-rate artists there are in the orchestra, the music should be so badly performed.' (*Tablettes de Polymnie*, April 1810.)

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The Théâtre Feydeau (c.1791), for which Kreutzer composed his first operatic works. Private collection.

Le théâtre Feydeau vers 1791, pour lequel Kreutzer composa ses premiers ouvrages lyriques. Collection particulière.