

# Spontini's *Olimpie*: between *tragédie lyrique* and *grand opéra*

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Any study of operatic adaptations of literary works has the merit of drawing attention to forgotten titles from the history of opera, illuminated only by the illustrious name of the writer who provided their source. The danger, however, may be twofold. It is easy to lavish excessive attention on some minor work given exaggerated importance by a literary origin of which it is scarcely worthy. Similarly, much credit may be accorded to such-and-such a writer who is supposed – however unwittingly and anachronistically – to have nurtured the Romantic *melodramma* or the historical *grand opéra*, simply because those operatic genres have drawn on his or her work. The risk is of creating a double aesthetic confusion, with the source work obscured by the adapted work, which in turn obscures its model.

In the case of *Olimpie*, the *tragédie lyrique* of Gaspare Spontini, the first danger is averted easily enough: the composer of *La Vestale* deserves our interest in all his operatic output, even in a work that never enjoyed the expected success in France. There remains the second peril. *Olimpie* the *tragédie lyrique*, premiered in its multiple versions between 1819 and 1826, is based on a tragedy by Voltaire dating from 1762. Composed in a period of transition by a figure who had triumphed during the Empire period, it is inspired by a Voltaire play less well known (and less admired) than *Zaïre*, *Sémiramis* or *Le Fanatisme*. Hence Spontini's work, on which its Voltairean origin sheds but little light, initially seems enigmatic in

aesthetic terms: while still faithful to the subjects and forms of the *tragédie lyrique*, it has the reputation of having blazed the trail for Romantic *grand opéra*, so that Voltaire might be seen, through a retrospective illusion, as a distant instigator of that genre. Our ambition here is to reduce such complexity as much as possible: it is hoped that study of the operatic adaptation will illuminate each of the works concerned in their historical unicity and aesthetic specificity.



#### OLIMPIE AND ITS AVATARS: A TRIPLE CREATION

Faced with the tangled skein formed by the successive versions of *Olimpie*, in French and German, we will find it judicious, before anything else, to establish some simple factual elements. [NB: In certain contemporary sources, two spellings appear to distinguish between the two versions of the work. Hence we have chosen, in this volume, to use the spelling ‘Olympie’ for the 1819 version and ‘Olimpie’ for its 1826 counterpart.]\* *Olympie* was premiered at the Académie Royale de Musique on 22 December 1819 (and not 20 December, as the printed wordbook states). The text was written by Charles Brifaut and Michel Dieulafoy, the ballets were by Gardel, and the sets by Degotti and Ciceri. The opera called on some of the finest voices of the *tragédie lyrique* of those years: M<sup>me</sup> Branchu, Nourrit père, Dérivis. Despite the combination of these talents and the care lavished on the staging, the work only received seven performances. The box-office returns show a dangerous drop in attendance: from 7,836.40 francs for the premiere to 2,135.90 francs for the final performance on 12 January 1820. Before we go on to look more closely at the opera’s dramaturgy and aesthetics, how can we explain the relative failure of Spontini, his librettists and his performers? It is possible to suggest several elements, for the moment extraneous to the work itself. The

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\* Editor’s note

expectations built up by the long gestation of the opera and its no less protracted rehearsals provide an initial explanation: the press had the opportunity to circulate the worst rumours concerning this monstrous opera, with its supposedly colossal proportions. One may perceive the spite of a certain category of critics in this announcement of the premiere of *Olimpie* from the newspaper *Le Camp volant* dated 15 December 1819:

It is finally on the 20th of this month that we shall hear the fearsome music of *Olympie*. All the trumpeters of the army have been hired to play the *piani*, and amphitheatres are being erected on the boulevard de la Madeleine for listeners who are unable to get into the theatre. If, from out there, their ears do not suffer enough, it is said that they will be treated with a few pages of the verse that M. Dieulafoy has substituted for Voltaire's, and it may be guaranteed that the ear-splitting effect will become continuous.

This reputation as a noisy opera, established even before the premiere, continued to pursue *Olympie* thereafter. So much may be concluded from the show put on at the Théâtre du Vaudeville: a parody of *Olympie* initially announced under the title *Mlle Mal-en-Pis* and finally staged under the title *Ô l'Impie*.<sup>\*</sup> To have the honour of being pastiched is generally a good sign for a new play or opera. But it would appear that, in this case, the pastiche was a poor one and very ill-intentioned. According to the newspaper *Le Drapeau blanc* (12 January 1820), 'The criticism of *Olympie* is limited to a noisy combat between drums and trumpets'. It is all too easy to imagine the parodic spectacle, intended to pillory the supposedly plethoric orchestra of Spontini.

Another element that might explain the cool reception accorded to *Olimpie* is poor vocal performance, as was underlined by the same newspaper, even though it was favourable to the opera and to Spontini: while M<sup>me</sup> Branchu merited 'unreserved praise', the other performers were

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\* 'Miss Bad-to-Worse' and 'Oh, the Impious Woman', both sounding very similar to the title of Spontini's opera. (Translator's note)

found wanting. 'The actors disfigured with cries and bellows music that is already vigorous enough not to need support from the dangerous efforts of exhausted lungs', observed *Le Drapeau blanc* (24 December 1819). Nourrit, moreover, had the bad idea of choosing a white tunic embroidered in silver, so that at the marriage ceremony with Olympias, the press records, it was difficult to know which of the two was the bride. Both the costumes and the sets were also regarded as disappointing: the public had awaited the premiere for so long and expected such splendour that it finally found the decors 'no more than good' (*Le Drapeau blanc*, 24 December 1819).

But the explanation most frequently advanced concerns the historical event, a real and not merely operatic tragedy, that affected the Bourbons and the kingdom of France: the assassination of the Duc de Berry, stabbed by Louvel on 13 February 1820 at the door of the Académie Royale de Musique on the evening of a masked ball. To be sure, by that time *Olimpie* had already deserted the programme a month earlier, but it is certain that this attack dealt a fatal blow to Spontini's work. The opera house where the crime had taken place, and within whose profane walls the Duc de Berry had died, was not only closed but razed to the ground by decree of 9 August 1820. Moreover, a revival of *Olympie* in the new house, the Salle Le Peletier inaugurated on 16 August 1821, was unlikely to come about: both Voltaire's tragedy and Spontini's opera deal with regicide, more precisely the assassination of Alexander the Great. By an unfortunate historical coincidence, the murderous act of Louvel cast its shadow on the unwittingly guilty act of Cassander, the hero of the tragedy and the opera. It was in this political context that Berlioz later detected the reason for the 'failure' of the opera of Spontini, a composer he deeply admired:

Various causes combined by chance to halt its progress. Political ideas themselves waged war on it. The Abbé Grégoire\* was much spoken of. There were those who believed they saw a premeditated intention to allude to the famous regicide in the scene of *Olimpie* where Statira cries:

*Je dénonce à la terre  
Et voue à sa colère  
L'assassin de son roi.*

From then on the whole liberal party was hostile to the new work. The assassination of the Duc de Berry, which led to the closure of the theatre on the rue de Richelieu shortly afterwards, inevitably interrupted the course of its performances, and dealt the final blow to a career that was barely beginning, by violently distracting public attention from questions of art. (Hector Berlioz, *Les Soirées de l'Orchestre*)

Finally, a quite different reason, biographical this time, is thought to have precipitated the closure of the production of *Olympie*. When he premiered his opera in Paris, Spontini had already signed a contract for Berlin, where he was invited by the King of Prussia to become Generalmusikdirektor. The difficulties of the creation of *Olympie* and the attacks of the liberal press on this official composer of the Empire who had rallied to the cause of the Bourbons decided him to leave Paris: he moved to Berlin on 1 February 1820. Thus *Olympie* was premiered in the French capital by a composer about to desert the scene of his greatest successes and determined to relaunch his prestigious career elsewhere.

It was in Berlin that Spontini revised his opera, the German libretto of which was entrusted to E. T. A. Hoffmann. He not only translated it but also rewrote the entire third act, departing considerably from Voltaire's original. The new work, *Olimpia*, a 'grosse Oper' in three acts, was premiered at the royal opera house in Berlin on 14 May 1821. It was in this 'Hoffmannesque' version that the opera at last met with success and was disseminated in Europe. The revised version was then 'retranslated' into French for a new premiere at the Paris Opéra. It was first

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\* Henri Grégoire (1750-1831), the French cleric who was a noted figure of the Revolution and one of the signatories to a letter urging the condemnation of Louis XVI. (Translator's note)

heard there on 27 February 1826, with new singers: Adolphe Nourrit (son of Louis) and M<sup>lle</sup> Cinti (the famous Laure Cinti-Damoreau) in the title role. The premiere attracted a large and fervent crowd. But it did not come to applaud Spontini: M<sup>me</sup> Branchu, the creator of the role of Statira in the first version, gave on the occasion of this ‘revival’ of *Olimpie* her benefit performance, which was also her farewell to the stage. At the conclusion of the evening, she was crowned with laurels by Talma\* before a cheering audience. This recreation of *Olimpie* enabled M<sup>me</sup> Branchu to pocket a profit of 14,627 francs. For the following performance on 1 March, the Opéra’s profit was only 1,186.70 francs. Spontini’s work was given three more times, but cut and coupled with a ballet – proof that the title of *Olimpie* on the playbill did not attract much of an audience. In all, then, the third version of *Olimpie* was performed five times, after the seven performances of the first version. Yet Spontini’s previous two operas, premiered under Napoleon, had enjoyed incomparable success: *La Vestale* (1807) had run up 200 representations by the end of the Restoration; *Fernand Cortez* (1809) had had a total of 213. The reason for the second failure of *Olimpie* in Paris is perhaps to be found in the departure of M<sup>me</sup> Branchu, around whom the opera had been conceived. Such at least was the prediction, subsequently confirmed, of *Le Globe* on 4 March 1826:

What will the destiny of this opera be if Madame Branchu is no longer allowed to play Statira for us? It will be relegated for the second time to the packing cases of the Academy: the attempt to perform it on Wednesday justifies this prediction.

The explanation is insufficient, especially as the second French *Olimpie* had the benefit of a new cast that included some of the great names of the Romantic era. Another reason appears of more far-reaching import:

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\* François-Joseph Talma (1763-1826), the great classical tragedian.  
(Translator’s note)

Rossini's *Le Siège de Corinthe*, which was to be premiered on 9 October 1826 with Nourrit père et fils and Cinti-Damoreau, was already in the Parisian audiences' minds and was soon to open up new aesthetic horizons. *Olympie* might have seemed audacious in 1819; *Olimpie* certainly seemed anachronistic in 1826.



#### THE ACADÉMIE ROYALE DE MUSIQUE BETWEEN 1819 AND 1826

To appreciate the situation of the Opéra de Paris around 1820, it is useful to examine the appraisal of operatic creations under the Restoration established *a posteriori* by Charles Brifaut, Spontini's librettist for *Olympie*. In a text published in 1834, in volume XV of the famous collective publication *Paris ou le Livre des Cent-et-un*, Brifaut describes the state of lethargy in which the Académie Royale de Musique was languishing at the time:

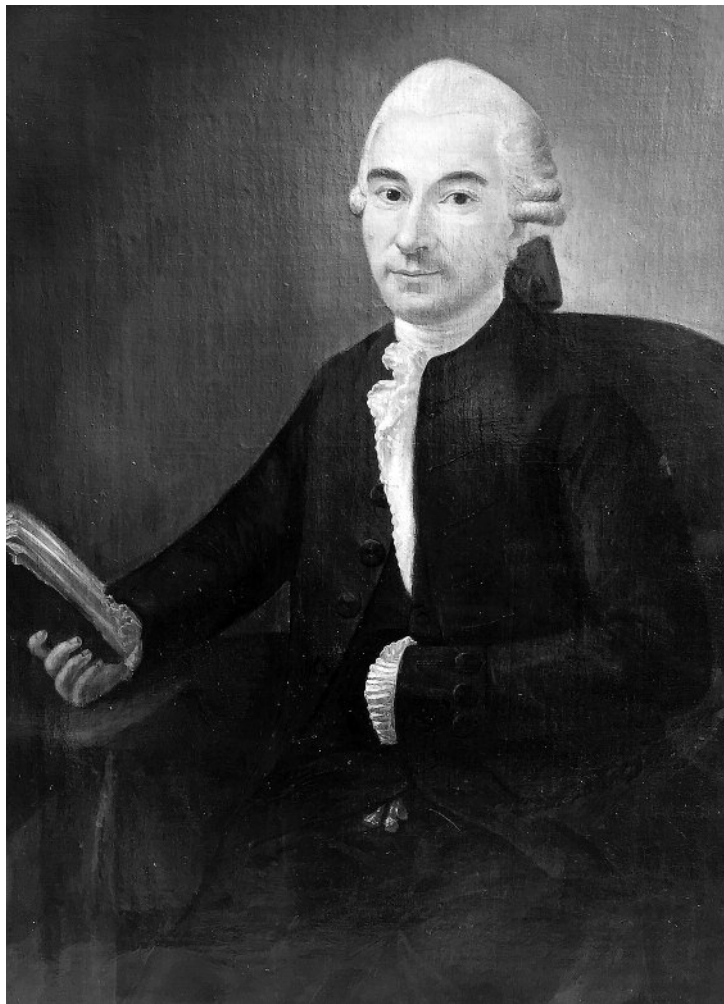
During the first years of the Restoration, it enjoyed no great favour; it was even regarded as in fairly good taste to speak ill of the Opéra at court in those days. Its artists were not outstanding, and almost all of them were nearing the end of their fame; youth was lacking, no new talent appeared; dance took on a position of superiority over music that the latter did not think of disputing. [...] The Opéra was dying of languor; it was sleeping on its subsidies.

The track record would be disastrous if the picture given by Brifaut did not brighten up when he discusses the end of the Restoration:

But at the very end of this period we find *Le Comte Ory*, *Guillaume Tell*, *Moïse* and *La Muette de Portici*, which through the sole rousing effect of its spectacle led to the Belgian Revolution, and the debut of M<sup>lle</sup> Taglioni.\*

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\* The dancer Marie Taglioni (1804-84). (Translator's note)



Portrait of the librettist Michel Dieulafoy.  
Private collection.

Portrait du librettiste Michel Dieulafoy.  
Collection particulière.



Music and dance, sets, costumes, the art of production and that of the machinist then marched at an equal pace towards those heights of perfection where we see them today.

Brifaut (who, be it noted, never mentions his own *Olympie* in collaboration with Dieulafoy and Spontini) has the merit of emphasising the aesthetic vacuum into which the Opéra de Paris slumped between the premiere of Spontini's eminently Napoleonic *Fernand Cortez* in 1809 and Rossini's *Le Siège de Corinthe*, whose success easily eclipsed the final version of *Olimpie* in 1826. Between the end of the Empire and the end of the Restoration, the only novelty to enjoy great and lasting success was Lebrun's *Le Rossignol*: this insignificant work had reached the total of 193 performances by 1830 thanks to its warbling duet for the solo flute and the leading soprano.

Thus *Olympie* appeared in Paris during a period of latency, between the exhaustion of *tragédie lyrique* in the Gluckian tradition and the birth of Romantic *grand opéra*. During the previous two decades, a whole generation of composers whose roots lay outside French culture, from Gluck to Spontini by way of Cherubini, Salieri and Sacchini, shifted opera towards tragedy; they simplified the plot and championed dramatic linearity at the expense of Baroque excrescences, in the name of greater emotional intensity. Berlioz, who admired Spontini and worshipped Gluck, still belongs to this tradition: that of a *tragédie lyrique* sober in its effects, concentrated on its musical and dramatic unity, and faithful to ancient history. In the meantime, the 'imperial' operas of Spontini, *La Vestale* and especially *Fernand Cortez*, had already interfered with the Gluckian model. These two works assumed a monumental dimension and adopted decorative options for obvious political reasons: the celebration of imperial power came at that price. But these changes are also signs that the ideal traced by Gluck's reform was running out of steam, undermined by a competition for the most spectacular effects that strained the expected dramatic unity. Not until the librettos of Scribe and the compositions of Rossini, Auber, Meyerbeer and Halévy in the set designs of Ciceri would there be the opportunity to discover new subjects drawn from medieval

and modern history, and to see the technical resources of the Opéra (under the influence of the secondary Parisian houses) and innovations in musical language radically transform the operatic spectacle. In February 1828, *La Muette de Portici*, foreshadowing *Guillaume Tell*, *Robert le Diable* and above all *Les Huguenots*, the peak of the genre, constituted an initial achievement of historical *grand opéra* in five acts. The *grand opéra* genre may be defined by ‘its aspiration towards an overall representation of social reality’ whose role was to reflect the contemporary situation in the Age of Revolutions. This social action, placed at a moment of historic fracture and powerful cultural or political antagonism, was to ‘constitute the cement that united the numerous “divertissements” which lay outside the principal plot and thereby give them a wholly new meaning, thus settling the problem of unity of perspective’ (Gilles de Van). The plots hinging on human passions found in the socio-political issues at stake an epic dimension thanks to which collective history and individual destinies met. Hence, in its (admittedly rare) finest accomplishments, *grand opéra* succeeded in linking the central plot and the multiple subsidiary episodes intended to revive audience interest and provide the visual splendour demanded by the Opéra.

In this context, was *Olympie* – derived from a tragedy by Voltaire, written by librettists with a classical mentality and set to music by an Italian composer identified with imperial neo-classicism – capable of meeting the new aesthetic expectations aroused by recent trends in both literature (the historical novel) and the theatre (the melodrama)? In other words, was the choice of Voltairean tragedy judicious and musically and dramatically fruitful in 1819?



#### A VOLTAIREAN TRAGEDY UNDER THE RESTORATION

The *tragédie lyrique* was composed nearly sixty years after the birth of its literary model: the first performance of *Olympie*, Voltaire’s tragedy in five acts, took place at Ferney on 24 March 1762. According to its author, it was

written in six days for performance in Voltaire's private theatre, then in the theatre of the Elector Palatine in Schwetzingen on 30 September 1762. In Voltaire's dramatic output, *Olympie* comes after *Tancredè* (1760), which transported its spectators to eleventh-century Sicily. The new tragedy, centring on the fate of the family of Alexander the Great after that hero's death, returns to ancient subject matter. The work is situated after the dramatist's period of creative maturity, thirty years after *Zaïre* and twenty-one years after *Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet le Prophète*. It is also situated before the period of dazzling public recognition he enjoyed at the end of his career: *Olympie* was premiered at the Comédie-Française on 17 March 1764, fourteen years before the apotheosis of Voltaire on that same stage, when he was crowned with laurels after the first performance of his tragedy *Irène*. And it is one of the least performed works in Voltaire's output. In the preface to his edition of four plays by Voltaire, Jean Goldzink uses the statistics established by Jean-Pierre Perchellet in his thesis to show that the dramatic works of Voltaire most frequently staged at the Comédie-Française before 1814 all date from earlier than 1764: *Œdipe* (1718), *Méropé* (1743), *Zaïre* (1732), *Tancredè* (1760), *L'Orphelin de la Chine* (1755). *Olympie* was given there only sixteen times and dropped out of the repertory for good in 1787. A modest career that does not bear comparison with the 480 performances of *Zaïre* or the 384 of *Tancredè*, according to the records of the Comédie-Française for the period 1718-1966.

Why then did Spontini and his librettists, in the early Restoration period, pick a tragedy by Voltaire that was no longer in the repertory of the Comédie-Française? In those years of monarchical reconstruction and re-Christianisation of France, the reference to Voltaire may seem surprising at first glance. But according to Goldzink, his plays only began to lose their grip on the overall theatrical repertory in 1831, a process that suddenly accelerated after 1850. Under the Restoration, the ideological context in no way prevented the dramatic œuvre of Voltaire from reigning over the theatre. His works chalked up 314 performances between 1821 and 1830, as against 306 for Racine and 147 for Corneille. For example, in the theatrical season of 1820/21, the Comédie-Française performed *Alzire*,

*Adélaïde du Guesclin*, *Mérope*, *Cédipe*, *Sémiramis*, *Tancredi* and *Zaïre*. When the first version of Spontini's *Olimpie* had its Paris performances, in December 1819, the Comédie-Française put on *Mérope* and *Sémiramis*. When the new version of *Olimpie* was staged at the Opéra in 1826, the Comédie-Française gave *Cédipe* in March and *Mahomet* in April. Parisians could choose between Voltaire in the original version and in an operatic version. A final indication of this continued interest in Voltaire's plays is provided by the librettos printed in 1819 and 1826 and the full score published in 1826: all of them carry just beneath the title of *Olimpie* the words 'tragédie lyrique en trois acts imitée de Voltaire'. The source is not concealed, but on the contrary displayed on the printed title page of the work.

The reception of the opera in the press clearly shows that the name of Voltaire was an asset rather than a handicap for the new opera. The young Victor Hugo, then still a royalist, published a review of Spontini's *tragédie lyrique* in *Le Conservateur littéraire*. His reservations focused less on the Voltairean origins of the subject than on what he judged to be the essential weakness of the tragedy: the librettists 'have managed to produce an estimable opera from a rather poor tragedy by this great man, which is better than making an operatic rhapsody out of a tragic masterpiece'. In the young critic's view, the problem with *Olympie* was that it had come too late in Voltaire's career:

If the author of *Zaïre* had written *Olympie* in the maturity of his talent, at that time of life when the heart retains no more of youth than the memories that fecundate genius, the heat of his imagination would doubtless have triumphed over the coldness of the subject, and we would owe him one more masterpiece.

In similar fashion, the Ultras did not attack the choice of Voltaire but rather the fact that the librettists and composer had picked a tragedy generally thought to be weak. *Le Drapeau blanc* (24 December 1819) speaks of 'late fruit' that 'shows every sign of caducity':

Like those old men who never show their debility more clearly than when they want to *imitate youth*, Voltaire, then almost a septuagenarian, had the pretentious and ridiculous whim of attempting a tour de force.

The 'tour de force' consisted in writing his tragedy in six days – which the newspaper regarded as the only remarkable thing in the conception of this work; in the end it finds the verse of Dieulafoy and Brifaut superior to Voltaire. As to the critics who had remained faithful to the Empire, like Geoffroy, the drama critic of the *Journal des débats*, they criticised Voltaire's play for its religious grandiloquence and its tragic bleakness:

*Olympie* is a pious, ecclesiastical, even monastic work. The last act of *Olympie* is as sad as a Requiem Mass. Never was there a colder denouement, even though the stage is covered in flames.

Hence the reception of Spontini's opera was a battle fought on two fronts: the Ultras admired the religiosity of the work, while finding it lacked dramatic power and poetic eloquence; the liberals criticised both the *tragédie lyrique* and Voltaire's original for dressing up in ancient garb a characteristically Christian pomp that they incorrectly identified, in the context of the Restoration, with political propaganda.

Yet it was neither ideology nor religion that prompted the creators of the *tragédie lyrique* to draw on Voltaire's *Olympie*. Their choice is explained by the dramatic virtues and above all the reserves of grandiose spectacle offered by the Voltaire's tragedy, which was remarkable for its splendour in performance. To be sure, we are far from the bold dramatic strokes of *Sémiramis*, with its tombs and its wandering shades, but the mobilisation of every dramatic sign and every theatrical resource is genuine and enthralling. For example, we hear the temple trembling at the start of the recognition scene between Statira and Olympias (Act Two, Scene 3), when Cassander and Antigonus are about to violate this consecrated place. And we see the 'flaming pyre' with Statira's burning body,

on which Olympias throws herself (Act Five, Final Scene). Voltaire's correspondence shows a dramatist delighted with the tragic power of this set design:

Two scenery wagons [*fermes*] on which burning coals had been painted, and real flames, which darted through the holes cut out of the first wagon, pierced in several places. This first wagon opened to receive Olympias and closed again in the twinkling of an eye. All this artifice was so well contrived that pity and terror were at their height.

Finally, the actors' bodies were regularly called upon to accompany the eloquence of speech: the sections requiring them to mime movement (*pan-tomime*) are numerous but are always described by the alexandrine, since Voltaire, unlike, say, Diderot, refused to abolish words totally in favour of movements. Mime is still subjected to the order of logos. When Statira recognises her daughter, her body expresses her agitation and emotion under the gaze of Olympias, who describes Statira's movements in four lines of verse:

*Hélas! vous soupirez, vous pleurez, et mes larmes  
Se mêlent à vos pleurs, et j'y trouve des charmes. –  
Eh quoi! vous me serrez dans vos bras languissants!  
Vous faites pour parler des efforts impuissants!\**

Despite these dramatic effects, the play remains unified in its constant tone of tragic elevation. The overall unity is partly obtained by the exploitation of the theatrical space. Unity of place is respected, since all the action takes place in the temple of Ephesus. But this is broken down into several acting spaces by the device of opening and closing the gates of the

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\* Alas, you sigh, you weep, and my tears / Mingle with yours, and I am enraptured by them! / What now! You embrace me in your fainting arms! / You make vain efforts to speak!

temple. This simple and conventional procedure creates three settings – the square, the peristyle and the interior of the temple – while the movement of the gates gives the play its rhythm, punctuated by the alternation between open and closed spaces, between profane and sacred spaces. The play's theatricality and spectacle are provided by the religious ceremonies that accompany its unfolding: the entrance of the Hierophant, the procession of priests and priestesses, the nuptial ceremonies transformed into funeral ceremonies. Yet Voltaire never yields to gratuitous effect: he always integrates the spectacular elements and sensory signs (decors, sound effects, mime) into the tragic action and the subject. Thus he remains faithful to the concern manifested in his celebrated dissertation on tragedy in the preface to *Sémiramis*: the desire to make representation subject to the dramatic poet, to avoid dispersing the spectators' attention by showing off profusion and effects and, on the contrary, to favour their concentration. Similarly, in the numerous notes that accompany the text of *Olympie*, Voltaire justifies the place accorded to visual spectacle on the grounds of dramatic necessity:

It is not that there is no merit in showing priests and priestesses, an altar, torches, and all the ceremony of a marriage: that apparatus, on the contrary, would be but a miserable resource if it did not also excite great interest, if it did not form a situation, if it did not provoke astonishment and anger in Antigonus, if it were not linked with Cassander's schemes, if it did not serve to explain the true object of his expiations. It is all of that together which forms a situation. Any apparatus that yields no result is puerile. What difference do the set designs make to the merit of a poem? If success depended on what is striking to the eyes, one would only have to show moving images [*tableaux mouvants*]. The aspect that concerns the splendour of the spectacle is undoubtedly the least important; it must not be neglected, but one must not attach too great importance to it.

This unity and balance were endangered by operatic adaptation. In the passage from spoken tragedy to *tragédie lyrique*, particularly in the second

and third versions of Spontini's *Olimpie*, the opera tends to conserve only the outer form of the visual spectacle, to the detriment of the profound dramatic necessity to which Voltaire staked his claim. But since he adorned the French tragic stage with an unaccustomed splendour, hitherto reserved for opera, perhaps the latter art, in borrowing from Voltaire, was merely recovering its rightful property.



#### THE 1819 VERSION: RELATIVE FIDELITY TO VOLTAIRE

The monumentality of the tragedy, its sombre mood, its awe-inspiring subject and the solemnity of the spectacle all appealed to Spontini, who was so attached to it that he devoted four years to composing the opera and preparing it for performance. He was reunited here with the ancient religious rites already represented in *La Vestale*, the conflict between sacred and profane, the theme of the priestess – here Statira – torn from the protection of the temple and the gods, and caught up in the passions of the secular world. But Spontini also found a new opportunity to compose vast choral scenes and spectacular finales, as in *Fernand Cortez*. In fact, it is the first version of *Olympie* that is closest to the tragedy of Voltaire. The libretto by Brifaut and Dieulafoy preserves the essential elements of the plot and all seven characters of the tragedy. The librettists' concern to keep faith with or pay homage to Voltaire sometimes leads them to use alexandrines for the sung recitatives that are copied almost literally from the play: 'D'Alexandre au tombeau dévorant les conquêtes' becomes in the libretto 'D'Alexandre au tombeau dévorer l'héritage'. All the same, the tragedy is reduced from five acts to three, and one notes an amplification of the spectacular elements of Voltaire's *Olympie* that reaches the point of decorativism. The unity of place maintained by Voltaire through his skilful use of the temple gates is cast aside in favour of an inflation of the sets, though admittedly always in phase with the action and the subject. According to the stage directions of the libretto printed in 1819, each



of the opera's three acts opens on a new set, successively: the precincts of the temple of Diana at Ephesus, with a view on the triumphal arches and porticoes adorned with statues of the divinities, and, in the distance, the city on Mount Illissus; in Act Two, the sacred wood where the temple of Diana the Avenging Goddess is situated; in Act Three, the camp of Antigonus with part of a sacrificial temple, an Asiatic throne and a triumphal arch, while the backdrop shows Antigonus' fleet and all his troops. The opera remains loyal here to its 'kaleidoscopic' aesthetic, functioning as a 'théâtre des enchantements' in the words of Rameau's librettist Cahusac, a 'picture box' capable of continually surprising its spectators.

Following the same logic, the librettists and the composer reverse the balance obtained by Voltaire between intimate scenes, set in the peristyle in front of the closed gates, and ensemble scenes and ceremonies in the open temple. It is now the latter category that dominates and provides the highlights of the spectacle, chiefly at the beginnings and ends of the acts. So much may be seen at once from the Introduction and Chorus, with the people of Ephesus singing and dancing to celebrate the new-found peace between Antigonus and Cassander:

The prevailing movement in the instrumentation of this number represents the disorderly, joyful movement of the people as they run in all sides, singing and dancing.

Similarly, in Act One, the wedding procession provides the opportunity to compose a religious march (*Andante religioso*) with harp accompaniment and a gradation of volume from the *mezza voce* of the opening bars. The first act ends with a bacchanal, an allegorical ballet representing 'the various deputations from different nations singing and dancing', then a grandiose finale centring on Statira's denunciation of the 'criminal' Cassander and the interruption of the nuptial ceremonies. The concern for dramatic and musical unity, inherited from Gluck and remaining faithful to the Voltairean tragic model, may be observed in the stage direction reproduced in the score:

Extreme care should be taken for the entire duration of this finale that dance and singing always occupy the stage with movement [*pantomime*] dictated by the action.

At the beginning of Act Two, a prayer to Diana is interrupted by a thunderclap and flames emerging from beneath the statue of the goddess – a spectacular transposition of the moment when the temple trembles in Voltaire. The Finale of Act Two is founded on oppositions of choral masses, the priests and priestesses to one side, the warriors of Antigonus to the other. Finally, Act Three brings the riot of spectacle to its height, with the triumphal entrance of Antigonus mounted on an elephant, preceding the chariot of Statira and Olympias ‘drawn by peoples of all nations’. This triumph scene is a coronation: according to the stage direction in the printed wordbook, ‘all the religious ceremonies of the coronation of Statira are performed, and her brow is encircled with the crown of Alexander. These ceremonies are followed by a martial celebration and other similar divertissements’ (Act Three, Scene 1).

In parallel with this inflation of the spectacular elements held in reserve in the tragedy of Voltaire, one notes in the first version of *Olimpie* an attenuation of the most terrifying elements of the tragedy. In the end, spectacle is deployed to the detriment of the terror that Voltaire knew how to arouse. This change concerns more especially the character of Cassander. He is no longer the man who once stabbed Statira; on the contrary, he claims to have removed the dagger from her side and thereby saved her from death. His guilt is therefore diminished, which impoverishes his tragic character, attenuates his hubris and lowers him to the status of a conventional lover. At the end of the opera, Cassander does not commit suicide, and the three successive deaths contrived by Voltaire in a dreadful escalation are reduced to two. As in Voltaire, Statira’s suicide is concealed from sight: the Hierophant pulls a drape aside and reveals her body at the foot of the altar (Act Three, Scene 5). Olympias stabs herself on stage while the entire set ‘must appear to be ablaze’. Another change concerns the couple formed by Olympias and Statira, which undergoes



Portrait of Spontini as a young man.  
Geneva Conservatoire.

Portrait de Spontini jeune.  
Conservatoire de Genève.

a change of balance compared to the tragedy. In the opera, Olympias is above all the passionate lover in her scenes with Cassander, whereas Voltaire shows her torn asunder, excessively influenced by her mother. Love and its tender manifestations are injected into the opera in order to provide material for pathos-laden duets and trios. In his article in *Le Conservateur littéraire*, Victor Hugo was appreciative of these changes that Spontini's librettists had made to Voltaire's tragedy:

This man [Voltaire], who depicted love so well, did not realise that love must be the foundation of the whole interest of his play. Far from presenting us with a pathetic portrayal of the passion of Cassander and Olympias, he thought only of Statira fallen from her throne, and painted a philosophical picture of her. He placed great hearts on the stage, yet his acuity of judgment did not warn him that if such lofty sentiment rang true in Statira, it rang false in Olympias.

Hugo was therefore grateful to the librettists 'for having avoided, by portraying a passionate Olympias, the pitfall into which the most theatrical of our tragedians had stumbled'. In other words, Brifaut and Dieulafoy had corrected Voltaire to felicitous effect.

There is one last important, even essential change. In Voltaire, the atmosphere of terror remains intact when the curtain falls, with the frightened interrogation of Antigonus, the only survivor of the tragedy, who calls the whole of Creation into question:

*Dieux, dont le monde entier éprouve le courroux,  
Maîtres des vils humains, pourquoi les formiez-vous?  
Qu'avait fait Statira? qu'avait fait Olympie?  
À quoi réservez-vous ma déplorable vie?\**

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\* Ye gods, whose rage the whole world suffers, / Masters of base humans, why did you create them? / What had Statira done? What had Olympias done? / For what have you saved my piteous life?

With Brifaut, Dieulafoy and Spontini, the final catastrophe does indeed take place, but is immediately set at one remove by a spectacular apotheosis scene, described by the stage direction accompanying the death of Statira in the printed wordbook:

Here darker and denser clouds envelop the stage. Brighter shafts of lightning give it a tinge of blood; amid them, the colossal shade of Alexander, holding the poisoned goblet in his hand, moves crosswise across the stage as if on a fiery path.

After the death of Olympias, night falls on the scene, and we witness the aforementioned apotheosis:

Through these clouds, which grow constantly brighter, we see the shade of Statira rising up: when she has reached a certain height, a bright light reveals the temple of immortality in the distance. A radiant Alexander comes forward to Statira; their hands and their glances directed towards the earth seem to summon Olympias.

Finally, the shade of Olympias rejoins her parents and 'vanishes into the temple of memory', while an ethereal chorus sings:

*D'un devoir rigoureux, victimes généreuses,  
Montez aux plaines lumineuses;  
Venez briller sous des astres nouveaux.  
Venez au temple de mémoire  
Partager l'immortelle gloire  
Qui couronne les vrais héros.\**

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\* Generous victims of a cruel duty, / Mount to the luminous plains; / Come, shine beneath new stars. / Come to the temple of memory / To share in the immortal glory / Which crowns true heroes.

In the opera, then, immortality comes to reward the heroes whom Voltaire's tragedy sacrificed to their passions. The opera – premiered, need we recall, under the Restoration – gives the tragedy a metaphysical prolongation, where Voltaire left the spectator alone, faced with the sight of utter misery and an unanswered question.

Comparison between the *tragédie lyrique* and Voltaire's tragedy reveals the law of opera: the multiplication of effects freed from the tutelage of declamatory speech. From a musico-dramatic point of view, however, its most remarkable feature is the fluidity obtained by Spontini, giving the spectacle, despite its excrescences, a unity comparable to the unity Voltaire obtained by literary means. It is easy to detect two key devices in the score. On the one hand, the omnipresence of the chorus: it is above all in the importance given to massed voices that Spontini approaches the ancient model of tragedy. The chorus is less an actor in the drama than a commentator, with the task of amplifying emotion in order to arouse terror and pity. On the other hand, the art of recitative makes it possible seamlessly to connect the airs (often treated freely in *arioso* style), duets, trios and ensembles. The recitative turns into an air, itself supported by the interventions of the chorus, so that the whole flows without a break. Statira's big number in Scene 3 of the second act, which is really a double air, offers a good illustration of this. A recitative opens the section, following the different psychological states of the heroine ('très *agitato*', 'avec l'accent du désespoir', 'avec emportement').\* Then a vehement first air, *Allegro impetuoso*, allows the heroine to give vent to her anger: 'Implacables tyrans, ennemis de mon sang'. Exhausted by such passion, Statira collapses while the chorus and the Hierophant comment on the situation. After this she emerges from her prostration, falls to her knees and utters a prayer, the second air: 'Dieux, pardonnez à mes injustes plaintes'. Equal remarkable is the recognition duet for Statira and Olympias, an *Andante* enriched by vocal melismas, trills and appoggiaturas. And finally, the art of emotional gradation,

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\* Very *agitato*; in tones of despair; furiously.

founded on the rhythmic instability used to represent the affective situation of the heroine, recurs in Olympias' air accompanied by the priestesses in Act Three, Scene 2, 'Ô saintes lois de la nature'. Before such apt dramatic expression, one inevitably wonders if the rhythmic flexibility and variety of Voltaire's alexandrines did not sustain Spontini's musical inspiration.



#### THE 1826 VERSION:

#### THE BETRAYAL OF THE VOLTAIREAN MODEL

The original version of *Olimpie* possesses an undeniable tragic grandeur. Yet it was in the version revised by Hoffmann that the opera became known outside France, as was the case for one of its rare revivals in the twentieth century, at the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino of 1950 with Renata Tebaldi singing under the direction of Tullio Serafin. The printed libretto and score of the third version reveal the substantial changes it underwent, essentially in the last act and in the character of Antigonus. In a reversal of the tragedy of Voltaire, its darkness and its implacable tragic movement, the new version of *Olimpie* is based on a misunderstanding that it is easy to find artificial: all the characters, Statira first among them, think the unfortunate Cassander is guilty of the murder of Alexander. Now a new *coup de théâtre* occurs in Act Three, Scene 7: during the duel between the two rival kings, the thunder redoubles in violence, a sign of divine anger, and Antigonus enters, mortally wounded. He 'staggers towards the altar' of Diana, who has just directed the thunderclap against him and thus acted as *deus ex machina*. With his last breath, Antigonus confesses, in jerky recitative:

*D'Alexandre c'est moi qui tranchai le destin;*

*De Statira mon bras perça le sein.*

*Triomphez, triomphez! dans vos sanglants abîmes*

*Entrainez l'assassin!*

So Cassander is now seen to be innocent. The effect produced by this modification thought up by Hoffmann is twofold. First of all, it empties this character of all interest, destroying the tragic hero in him, while clothing Antigonus in the hackneyed garb of a tyrant of melodrama. Secondly, it results in a happy ending, totally alien to the spirit and letter of Voltairean tragedy. We no longer witness the apotheosis of the dead heroes, as in the first version, but the coronation of Statira. Alexander's widow reconquers and re-establishes the empire:

The scene changes to represent Cassander's camp on the banks of the Caystrus. [...] It has been prepared for the coronation of Statira. In the middle of the stage is a triumphal arch, beneath which the procession will defile. The backdrop represents Cassander's fleet and his troops, arrayed along the banks of the Cayster to take part in the ceremony.

Here is a formidable inversion of history and of the tragic representation of the period; and a formidable ideological transformation too. Now everything concludes with a 'triumphal march and general chorus', a military band on stage, a religious march 'to which the Hierophant, and the priests and priestesses bearing altars advance majestically in front of the triumphal chariot in which Statira and Olympias are seated'. There follow a Pas de Cinq, a Pas de Trois and finally a grandiose oath: 'Vive à jamais notre reine chérie'. A faithful servant of the European monarchies, French then Prussian, Spontini, the former supporter of Napoleon, transforms his work into a colossal apologia for the regime in power. After its passage by way of Berlin, the opera broke free once and for all of the tragic necessity to which Voltaire laid claim in his notes accompanying the text. In spite of its historical interest, this final version ought to make way, if a modern revival is attempted, for the first version of *Olimpie*, undoubtedly more 'Voltairean' and dramatically more powerful. Unfortunately, the score of the original third act is today nowhere to be found. At least it may be said of the final, 'German' version that it



shows off Spontini's supreme skill in handling massed sonorities, contrasts and colours.



#### TRAGÉDIE LYRIQUE OR GRAND OPÉRA?

As we come to end of this discussion, the opening question must be raised once more: does the French *Olimpie*, whether in the 1819 or the 1826 version, constitute an important stage in the birth of *grand opéra*? And could Voltaire, with his tragedy, have been the unwitting accomplice of this aesthetic transformation? Manuel Couvreur does not hesitate to perceive the seeds of Romantic drama in the neglected tragedy *Olympie*. Ronald S. Ridgway, for his part, sees in the conflicts between races, religions, customs and ideologies that are work in *Zaïre*, *L'Orphelin de la Chine*, *Les Scythes*, *Les Lois de Minos* and *Mahomet* an anticipation of *grand opéra*, which is founded, in *Les Huguenots*, *La Juive* and *Le Prophète*, on antagonisms between belief systems and religions.

An initial contribution to the debate is provided by Spontini himself, now embittered and spiteful, as he witnessed the triumph of Meyerbeerian *grand opéra* in Paris under the July Monarchy. In a letter to Victor Hugo dated 22 April 1839, he speaks of his unwavering attachment to the grandiose and faux-antique aesthetic of the *tragédie lyrique*; he loftily ignores the aesthetic evolution of both French Romantic drama and historical *grand opéra*, going so far as to commission from the author of *Hernani* a subject for a libretto that appears partly modelled on *Olimpie*:

I would also have a few ideas to submit to you to help you find a good subject for a passionate, voluptuous grand opera, with frequent ballets, religious ceremonies, warlike hymns, songs and ballads of the heroic, voluptuous or hunting variety. Finally, either Venus, or Diana, or Mars, or Bacchus, or even Pluto could do the honours, each in their turn.

Spontini's position is further clarified in the draft of a letter to Dorow written in Marienbad and dated 12 August 1836. The letter is conserved in the Bibliothèque-musée de l'Opéra de Paris and was published by Romain Feist. The composer, looking back with regret to the era of Lully, Gluck, Sacchini and Piccinni, gives his opinion on the current state of music. He fustigates the 'destructive and devastating scourge of political revolutions', which he deems responsible for the transformation of dramatic music:

Today this so-called dramatic music is (with a few rare exceptions) no more than the brute force of the din produced by countless brass and metallic instruments, a continual bizarre racket, wild, almost ferocious, without a shape, without a design or rules, without rhyme or reason.

He attacks 'texts with revolutionary, obscene and antireligious subjects, jumbled and incoherent assemblages of caricatural modulations and harmonies, of well-known melodies travestied and disguised'. And he cannot find words harsh enough to denounce the 'musical monstrosities' put on the stage 'in churches and Protestant temples' and 'in pagodas, mosques and synagogues'. This position has nothing original about it: Spontini was not the only one to mix traits of anti-Semitism into his condemnation of Meyerbeer and Halévy.

A decade before he wrote these bad-tempered words, *Olimpie* already appears, with the benefit of hindsight, out of phase with history: the choice of Voltaire and especially of a tragedy like *Olympie* was most assuredly conservative in 1819. With its roots in Greek Antiquity and its fidelity to the Winckelmannian ideal of Gluck, the work belongs to a neo-classicism of which Spontini was the leading representative during the Empire. In 1826, for the second French version, the subject might even appear anachronistic at a time when, with *Le Siège de Corinthe* echoing the Greek War of Independence, then *La Muette de Portici* depicting the Neapolitan popular revolt of 1647, the Opéra was about to portray historical conflicts whose topical resonance was increasingly powerful. So it was only indirectly that Spontini could have played a role in the evolution of the *tragédie*

*lyrique* towards *grand opéra*. Jean Mongrédien's nuanced judgment of the composer's contribution to the history of opera rings especially true:

It is very probable that, without Spontini, the French *grand opéra* of Rossini, Meyerbeer, Halévy and many others would not have been exactly what it was. The profound originality of this Italian master was not that he brought about a revolution – for there was never any clean break – but rather that, arriving in Paris in the early nineteenth century, he assimilated the French Gluckian tradition and subsequently redirected it towards a new path where his instinct perhaps gave him a presentiment of the masterpieces to come.

Aside from its subject derived from the ancient world, a number of key differences keep *Olimpie* on the side of the *tragédie lyrique*. First of all, in *grand opéra*, religion becomes not only an ingredient of the spectacle, nurtured as in Voltaire by the ceremonial and pomp of the rituals, but above all the very stuff of the drama. *Les Huguenots*, *La Juive* and *Le Prophète* are founded on the oppositions between religions and expose the ravages of fanaticism, whereas in Spontini religion remains a backcloth, adding its colour to the opera. Indeed, *Olimpie* has been criticised for the uniformity of its gloomy colouration. *Grand opéra*, on the contrary, faithfully mirroring the eclecticism of the bourgeois aesthetic, was to privilege variety and contrast of tones and forms, the latter sometimes derived from *opéra-comique*. Moreover, in both Voltaire's *Olympie* and Spontini's first operatic adaptation, the spectator is called upon to contemplate the ruins of an empire that has collapsed. Romantic *grand opéra* tended rather to depict the moment of historical fracture, to show the rifts at work: an anguished meditation on history through the metaphorical representation of the upheavals of the Revolution was to lie at the heart of the genre. In this sense, both the German version and the French version of 1826, in their readiness to cancel history the better to celebrate their faith in the providence of monarchs, seem still more anachronistic in the context of the Romantic revolution.

Finally, there is an essential respect in which the opera's meeting with Voltairean tragedy was a missed opportunity in both 1819 and 1826. If *grand opéra* was able to take Voltaire as a model in the way it incorporated spectacle into the necessity of the drama, it owes a debt above all to his philosophical orientation. The subject of *Les Huguenots*, *La Juive* and *Le Prophète*, all of them set to librettos by Eugène Scribe, is the denunciation of religious fanaticism, promoted by a liberal spirit keen to advocate tolerance. And a denunciation of the same sort already resounds in the *Olympie* of Voltaire. Its author appears fully conscious, in his correspondence, of the ambiguities of the tragedy and of the allusions to Christianity contained in its theatrical satire of a vindictive religion. In a humoristic vein, he wrote these words to the Comte d'Argental on 20 October 1761:

But, Madame d'Argental will say, it is a convent, it is a nun, it is a confession, it is a communion. Yes, Madame, and it is for that very reason that hearts will break. One must be able to imagine oneself in the tragedy in order to be moved. The widow of the master of the world with the Carmelites, reunited with her daughter who is to marry his murderer, all that is most august in ancient religion, all that is most imposing in the greatest names.

More clearly still, the accompanying notes to the tragedy comment on the role of the Hierophant in Act Three, Scene 3:

This example of a priest who withdraws within the bounds of his ministry of peace seemed to us to be of very great utility, and it is to be wished that priests should never be represented in any other way on a public stage, which ought to be a school of morals. It is true that a character who limits himself to praying Heaven and teaching virtue is not a very active one for the stage; but he must not be among the characters whose passions move the action of the play.

Voltaire's note continues with a list of all the 'perverse actions' to be found in the Old Testament: pursuing his combat against Infamy, he contrasts the fanaticism of Statira, who recognises only the *lex talionis*, the ancient law of 'an eye for an eye', with a religion of forgiveness and an edifying example of concord. This philosophical message was to be increasingly obscured by the three successive versions of Spontini's opera. By taking from the tragedy of Voltaire its pomp rather than its philosophy, the creators of the *tragédie lyrique* of *Olimpie* probably privileged the letter to the detriment of the spirit – a liberal and Voltairean spirit that was not to breathe upon *grand opéra* until after 1830.

[This text is an excerpt from an article by Olivier Bara published in *Voltaire à l'opéra*, ed. François Jacob (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2011), p.111-134.]



Cassiolette for burning incense.  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Cassiolette pour brûler l'encens.  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.