

Discovering Luigi Cherubini's *Les Abencérages*

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Is it not astounding that, even today, one can set out to discover a large-scale Cherubini opera in three acts that is virtually unknown? Yet such is the case with *Les Abencérages ou L'Étendard de Grenade*, which was staged at the Académie Impériale de Musique in 1813 and has never been performed in France since 1816. As a rule, the very name 'Abencérages' stirs only vague memories in people's minds: in particular, recollections of a short story by Chateaubriand, entitled *Les Aventures du dernier Abencerage* (but does anyone still read it today?) in which the famous Romantic related the adventures of the last scion of the brilliant Arab tribe which, until the fifteenth-century reconquest by Ferdinand and Isabella, gave Granada its splendour. Biographers and authors of encyclopaedia articles have little to say of Cherubini's opera, and with good reason: the researcher's astonishment is at its height when he discovers that it has never been published in France, either in full or in vocal score. In order to get to know *Les Abencérages* today, one must therefore go to the Paris Opéra library to consult the (non-autograph) manuscript full score that was used for the 1813 performances. It is the only one we currently have in France.

It is not my intention, in the limited space of these few pages, to present a detailed study of the work. Let me simply ask a few rather general questions about it and offer my entirely provisional reflections following

a rapid examination, which might perhaps serve as a starting point for subsequent, more scholarly work.

First of all, how can we explain Cherubini's return to the Opéra in 1813 after a ten-year absence? Is the semi-disgrace in which he spent the imperial years sufficient to explain the relative silence of a composer whom the critics of the time presented, not without equivocation, as the 'foremost' or 'most learned' composer in Europe? It is well known that after the successes he achieved at the Théâtre Feydeau in Paris in the last years of the eighteenth century, the rhythm of Cherubini's operatic output slowed considerably: he had made his debut there in 1788 with *Démophon*, and in 1803 he gave *Anacréon ou L'Amour fugitif*, followed, in 1804, by a *ballet-pantomime*, *Achille à Scyros*. Then came the years of semi-retirement, interrupted, it is true, by his residence in Vienna and the premiere of *Faniska* there in 1806. After the relative failure of *Les Abencérages* in 1813, he wrote no more operas for twenty years, returning to the theatre only to present, in 1833, his swan song, the marvellous *Ali-Baba*, another work waiting for researchers and musicians to rescue it from a totally unjustified oblivion. Long though it was – for it spanned nearly thirty-five years – Cherubini's operatic career was, as the reader will have gathered, somewhat chaotic.

It was Étienne de Jouy, a well-known playwright and librettist of the time – he had just made a name for himself by collaborating with Spontini on *La Vestale* (1807) and *Fernand Cortez* (1809) – who provided Cherubini with the libretto for *Les Abencérages*. The Archives Nationales hold correspondence relating to the collaboration between the two men. The author had read his work to the jury of the Opéra on 21 May 1810, and had it accepted unanimously. The libretto was then submitted twice to the police censorship commission (December 1811 and October 1812). The copies submitted to the censor are still extant. In these early versions of the drama, there are some notable textual variants compared to the final version, but the general drive of the action remains, on the whole, the same. It is worth pointing out, however, that among the corrections requested by the imperial censors was the deletion of the word *espagnol*

throughout. At that time, thoughts of the Peninsular War and the violent political incidents caused by the performances of *Fernand Cortez* at the Opéra were still fresh in everyone's mind.

Cherubini, for his part, had completed his score in April 1812. The preparatory work for the production was carried out in the course of the same year, and the cast was decided in December: for the principal roles, the soprano Caroline Branchu, the tenor Adolphe Nourrit and the bass Dérivis. At that time, a new opera by Cherubini was awaited with interest and curiosity. Were those expectations fulfilled? It is difficult to answer this question. As was almost always the case in those days, the press was in the hands of mediocre men of letters, who knew little or nothing about music. Their comments are therefore essentially concerned with the libretto; as regards the score, they are too often satisfied with banalities and imprecise general remarks. From these apparently colourless and insipid articles, however, a few significant clichés emerge in highly symptomatic fashion, probably reflecting what was being said in Parisian society at the time.

On the evening of the premiere, the (unexpected?) arrival of Napoleon and Marie-Louise at the end of the first act (a week later, on 15 April to be exact, the Emperor was to leave Saint-Cloud for the German campaign) disturbed the audience. The music, in this case, took a back seat. The following performances were heard 'more calmly and with less distraction than the first one inevitably was' (*Gazette de France*, 16 April 1813).

Opinions of the libretto diverged at first. Some writers found it mediocre, if not odious, while others praised it highly. The *Journal de l'Empire* (13 April) perfidiously reminded its readers that, since *La Vestale*, 'M. de Jouy has failed in all his operatic ventures'. The *Journal de Paris* (15 April) observed: 'All over Paris, there are loud complaints about the foolishness and ineptitude of the subject of this opera.' On the other hand, I note the following judgment in the *Mercure de France* (10 April):

In my opinion, the best libretto is one which, while offering first of all the merit of a well-conceived structure and appealing scenes, still gives the

composer, the choreographer and the designer the means to deploy the full richness of their art. With this principle in mind, I am not afraid to say that *Les Abencérages* is one of the finest lyric dramas.

The critic of the *Gazette de France* (9 April) also came to the conclusion that the libretto 'functioned' perfectly: '*Les Abencérages* offers the most felicitous combination of dramatic situations and brilliant or graceful tableaux [...]. The style is always elegant and lyrical.'



WHAT ARE WE TO MAKE OF THESE JUDGMENTS TODAY?

The modern reader, unfamiliar with the history of the disputes between the various Arab tribes in fifteenth-century Granada, is at first confused when he or she looks at this libretto. The traditional pair of lovers (the soprano and the tenor) belong to the tribe of the Abencerrages. Their love is threatened by the opposing tribe of the Zegrí, whose chief is also in love with the heroine. The Zegrí set a trap for the tenor: unjustly suspected of cowardice, he is saved by the generosity of his enemy, the Spanish general Gonzalo of Córdoba, who comes to restore his honour. The opera will therefore have the *lieto fine* that was still more or less the norm at that time.

What seems to me particularly remarkable throughout this libretto is the constant reference to history: the action takes place 'in Granada, in the Alhambra (the palace of the Moorish kings), towards the middle of the fifteenth century, during the reign of Muley-Hassem [*sic*]'. The hero Almanzor, the chief of the Zegrí tribe and Gonzalo of Córdoba are historical figures. Étienne de Jouy expressly stated that he intended to evoke a specific epoch of Muslim civilisation in Spain. Hence, with *Les Abencérages*, the librettist continued in the same direction as his *Fernand Cortez* (1809): it was he who, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, was to give French *grand-opéra* a decisive impetus by systematically

orienting it towards historical events (he was also to write the libretto for Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* in 1829).

To be sure, De Jouy can be criticised for the lack of interest that the rivalries between the Moorish tribes of Granada arouse in us today. Chateaubriand, taking up the theme at the same time, had the inspired idea of depicting the conflict of cultures in his novella: the last Abencerrage and the Spanish Christian noblewoman renounce the passionate love that seemed destined to unite them for ever. There is nothing of this in the opera, since the general, Almanzor, and the princess Noraïme are both Abencerrages. It cannot be denied that the dramatic situations are conventional, stereotyped. However, once we accept that there is a certain exaggeration of dramatic effects and a perhaps excessive schematisation of sentiments – which the opera's detractors found intolerable – the libretto of *Les Abencérages* is no worse than many nineteenth-century libretti, and I am thinking here of another and much more famous 'historical' opera, Verdi's *Les Vêpres siciliennes*.



THE SCORE

As I have already pointed out, contemporary critics had little to say about music and almost always in very vague terms. However, one word is constantly repeated from one review to another about Cherubini's contribution: it is said to be 'learned' (*savant*). This apparently laudatory term is in fact a disguised criticism. Since the discovery of Mozart's vocal music by the French at the beginning of the nineteenth century and the ever-growing success of *opera buffa*, which familiarised Parisians with the art of bel canto and Italian *vocalità*, it had been a commonplace in criticism to oppose *le chantant* (melodious vocal writing) to *le savant*. *Opera buffa* and, at a push, certain light *ariettes* in *opéra-comique* fell into the category of *le chantant*, while French opera was in the category of *le savant*. Cherubini, Le Sueur and, to a lesser extent, Méhul were classified as *savant*

composers. Needless to say, the word *savant* in this sense has nothing to do with what is traditionally called the *style savant* (the 'learned' [viz. contrapuntal] style) in music. Those who used it did so as a way of stating more or less openly that they did not like music in which they did not find the airy grace of a memorable, easily hummable melody. To make amends for what was perceived as a deficiency, commentators imputed qualities of a strictly technical nature to such music, without taking much of a risk: they thought they had paid their dues to it by feigning the indifferent respect owed to anything that smacks of 'the schoolroom'.

To illustrate this attitude towards Cherubini's music, I will first quote an extract from the review in the *Journal de Paris* (15 April):

M. Cherubini, excessively faithful to his teacher [Sarti], seems, like him, to have yielded to the seductions of difficulty and of a school too easily excited by clever effects. His setting of *Les Abencérages* is full of good sense, studiousness and rectitude, but it lacks élan and vigour; the coldness of calculation, the lengthiness of reflection are constantly perceptible; each number can be compared to a beautiful academy; this body, so exactly rendered and so well drawn, is usually devoid of the grace of the forms and of the soul that is supposed to confer movement upon it.

This is certainly an astonishing judgment in the First Empire period, when the vogue for a neo-classical style strongly marked by academicism invaded the fine arts: the primacy of drawing over colour, of the straight line over the arabesque, of the order and balance of the parts over the passionate expression and impetuous élan of the whole. It is true that the music of *Les Abencérages* can hardly be described as graceful, but there is an abyss dividing that absence of grace from academic coldness. Its interest lies precisely in the power of its dramatic effects and in the plentitude of the inner tension that constantly underpins it.

Today, the musicologist who looks a little more closely at the score finds it impossible to understand the reproach of coldness, of chilly academicism that was levelled at it. On the contrary, he or she would be

tempted to see in the work one of the first gems of French Romantic *grand-opéra* which was then emerging with the more or less successful essays of Le Sueur, Spontini and Catel.

What strikes one first on reading this music is the exceptional dimensions of its conception: whether it be the airs, the recitatives, the choruses (most especially) or the orchestral sections, everything is extensively developed. From the very beginning of the Overture, one has the feeling of something novel in the treatment of the orchestra, which suddenly acquires a hitherto unknown power: the influence of Beethoven's symphonies? It is true that, in 1807, certain passages of the Overture to *La Vestale* already possessed this Beethovenian character. Cherubini paid considerable attention to the question of timbre: he gave prominence to the woodwind instruments, setting up sparkling contrasts between their solos and the thundering tutti of the full orchestra (with trumpets and drums). Throughout the work, fanfares alternate with much more lyrical episodes, whether passionate or serene. This double tendency is perfectly exemplified by the Overture, which fundamentally sets two themes against each other: one a heroic Largo with the trumpets on a D major arpeggio, the other a widely modulating Allegro spiritoso in which the strings play a passionate and feverishly chromatic motif. Its Overture alone encapsulates the two essential themes of this opera: war and love.

The use of choral forces in this score also seems to me of outstanding interest: often written in five real parts, occasionally in six (three female and three male voices), the choruses take a prominent place throughout the work from a dramatic point of view. They are no longer merely a decorative element: they intervene in the action and, in strictly musical terms, this participation in the drama is on several occasions reflected in the texture by the use of double chorus. Hence, in Act One Scene 6, the Abencerrages and the Zegrí sing a three-part chorus, while the Spaniards and the troubadours perform a four-part ensemble. In addition to this double chorus, all the soloists intervene at the end of the act. I do not know of any other example in French opera from this period of

such large-scale and extensively developed polyphony: a scene like this already suggests, at least in its structure, some of the great ensembles of Romantic opera.

By contrast, the two protagonists are assigned the most lyrical numbers in the score. Let us examine, for instance, the air sung by Noraïme at the beginning of Act Three, 'Épaissis tes ombres funèbres, nuit favorable', which seems to me in many respects to herald a 'new era'. The heroine is alone in the moonlight in the gardens of the Alhambra: believing her lover banished from Granada for ever, she comes to pray at her mother's tomb and sings an invocation to the night. It would not be difficult to show that this number already contains all the elements of the Romantic meditation. I would also point out that it is the first depiction in French music of the Andalusian night and its perfumes.

Cherubini chooses here the key of E flat major, so characteristic of the nocturne; long sustained notes in the orchestra, from which the violins have been excluded, while the viola desks are divided and the cello lines are written, at one point, in three real parts. The absence of violins, a device already used by Méhul in *Uthal*, his opera after Ossian, confers a sombre character on the scene, reinforced by the use of four horns whose slow arpeggios dialogue with the heroine's voice, like mysterious calls coming from the depths of the night. I find it incredible that this melancholic air is not in the repertory of today's international stars, who could easily use it to show their paces. It seems evident that certain numbers of French opera were already eminently Romantic, even in the Imperial era: here, all the heady fragrances of the Spanish night are present, floating around the solo voice which expresses the despair of unhappy love in its long-held notes. Yet I would like to quote the comments that this outstanding number elicited in the *Journal de Paris* dated 15 April 1813, a few days after the premiere:

Third act. Another air for Noraïme, very learned and very correct, but the ice of conformity has merely bound vague sounds together: the soulfulness of Madame Branchu and the talent of Madame Himm [the singer

who succeeded the ailing Madame Branchu in the role] will have great difficulty in bringing this piece to life.

Here one is frankly puzzled: how is it possible to evoke 'the ice of conformity' [*la glace de la sagesse*] when speaking of such restrained ardour, a sensuality so discreet and so novel on the French operatic scene? For us, today, this music is not at all *savant*; it is, simply, inspired. This is perhaps one of the keys that will allow us, one day, to analyse more accurately the underlying reasons for the incompatibility of an artist such as Cherubini with his era: the press of the French establishment was doubtless not ready to understand and acknowledge that this art could convey the profound, intimate song of a despairing soul with such simplicity of means, so manifest a lack of grandiloquence.

Les Abencérages was given fourteen times in 1813. A new version was presented the following year, with some cuts. This new two-act version appeared at the end of July 1814 and disappeared from the Opéra's repertory in March 1816 after just seven scattered performances. The work has never been staged again in France since then, and its score sank into total oblivion. There was, however, an attempt to revive *Les Abencérages* abroad on the part of another Italian composer, Gaspare Spontini. During his years in Germany as Kapellmeister to the King of Prussia, he asked his colleague Cherubini to entrust him with his manuscript in order to arrange a production of the opera in Berlin:

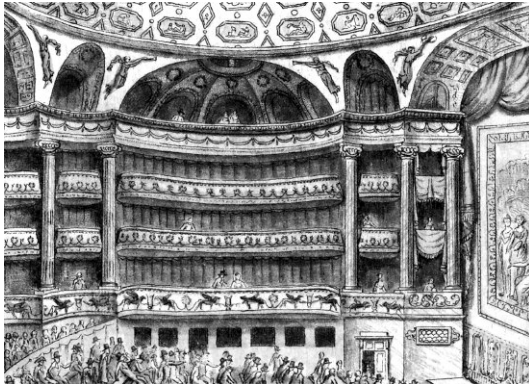
M. Cherubini, with the good nature and modesty that distinguish true merit, authorised M. Spontini to make such changes and modifications as he might deem appropriate. Taking advantage of this permission with all possible discretion, M. Spontini, during the course of the rehearsals, cut out a few recitatives and tightened up a few ensembles in the belief that the work would benefit from these slight changes, and all true connoisseurs applauded his judgment.

(*Revue musicale*, vol. IV, 1828, pp.46-47)

This 'new' version began its run on 11 March 1828. In the twentieth century, *Les Abencérages* had the honour of a fleeting resurrection at the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino (Teatro Comunale, Florence, 9 May 1956).

One would have to be deaf to listen to *Les Abencérages* today and not recognise that with this score, an important page in the history of French opera has been turned: the late eighteenth century, which saw the splendid masterpieces of Gluck and Sacchini, is well and truly over, and one has the impression of seeing the dawn of a new era. There are surely other contemporary scores worth rediscovering too. Nevertheless, a serious study of the origins of historical *grand-opéra* in France at the start of the Romantic period will no longer be able to ignore *Les Abencérages*, whose posthumous history is doubtless not finished once and for all, as had been thought until now.

I would indeed be surprised if our era, so fond of impassioned operatic revivals, did not, in the near future, award Cherubini's *Les Abencérages* the destiny it so clearly deserves.



'Views of Paris': Théâtre de l'Opéra.
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