

## A devil of a hit

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The Palazzetto Bru Zane's series of CD-books has already made several incursions into the French repertory of *grand-opéra*, viewed in a broad perspective. We have endeavoured to illustrate the 'post-*Guillaume Tell*' formula of the 1830s (with Halévy's *La Reine de Chypre*), the proponents of a more Italianate style inspired by Verdi (with Félicien David's *Herculanum*) and the final moments of the genre – around the time when Debussy wrote that the *Henry VIII* of Saint-Saëns marked the final milestone among these grandiose theatrical constructions – with Gounod's *Le Tribut de Zamora* and Massenet's *Le Mage*. In addition to the Palais Garnier, other Paris opera houses also tried their hand at this type of ambitious spectacle, putting on such lavish productions as Gounod's *Cinq-Mars* and Joncières's *Dimitri* at the Théâtre-Lyrique, Godard's *Dante* and Lalo and Coquard's *La Jacquerie* at the Opéra-Comique. We wanted our collection to document all of this, but until very recently we had always steered around a step that we knew was essential: to present, in addition, some of the key landmarks of the genre.

We finally took that step when Marc Minkowski suggested we should record Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* (1831) with the orchestral and choral forces of the Opéra de Bordeaux in September 2021. Our agreement was all the more readily obtained because the cast of singers represented a well-nigh ideal troupe: while building on the solid professionalism and proven talent of each of its members, it also allowed some of the artists

to reveal for the first time the full amplitude of their resources. This was especially true of the young soprano Amina Edris, who was assigned the perilous task of singing Alice. Her magisterial debut in the role at once made it clear she should be offered other parts of the same type.

The choice of *Robert le Diable* is by no means inconsequential in the context of Meyerbeer's catalogue. It inaugurated his great series of operas in French and shines in the firmament of the emblematic works of the *grand-opéra* genre, alongside Auber's *La Muette de Portici* (1828), Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* (1829) and Halévy's *La Juive* (1835). The work was performed more than 750 times at the Paris Opéra alone before the First World War, proof positive that it encapsulated the taste of an entire era and was the model adulated (or sometimes endured in spite of themselves) by at least two generations of composers, among them Gounod, Thomas, Saint-Saëns and Massenet.

To tackle such a well-known work poses the recurrent problem – specific to opera – of cuts and versions. Although *Robert le Diable* did not undergo any complex revisions, performing traditions and successive editions have altered certain passages, sometimes significantly. Fortunately, in 1998 Ricordi published a critical edition by Peter Kaiser and Wolfgang Kühnhold. This has served as the basis for the present production, even if we too have had to omit some passages. To those who spare no effort to denounce all such cuts and believe them to be the result of mere whim, we would point out the practical and musical reasons that have always led to these inevitable amendments: the limited rehearsal time available for concert versions; the duration of live performances (when they overrun the allotted time, they generate additional costs and try the patience of the audience, which melts away during the intervals or simply does not come at all); the need to minimise fatigue on the part of the soloists; and – in the case of the ballet music, imposed on rather than desired by many composers – the distinctly variable quality of certain 'Pas ajoutés pour Mlle X' or 'Variations pour M.Y'. Rather than leave the dilettante to search indignantly for the cuts we have made, we have preferred to indicate them with complete openness in the libretto provided.

This new volume will undoubtedly be followed by other recordings of famous works: one can dream of an idiomatic version of Cherubini's *Médée*, of Spontini's *Fernand Cortez* on period instruments, of Halévy's *La Juive* in exemplary French or of a complete recording of the Paris *Don Carlos*... But one thing is sure: rarities will continue to feature regularly in our series, which celebrates its tenth anniversary in 2022.



A performance of *Robert le Diable* at the Opéra (Act Three).  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Une représentation de *Robert le Diable* à l'Opéra (acte III).  
Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.



Laure Cinti-Damoreau as Isabelle (costume design).  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Laure Cinti-Damoreau en Isabelle (maquette de costume).  
Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.