Meyerbeer and *Robert le Diable*

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Writing to Meyerbeer in the famous Eleventh Letter of her *Lettres d'un voyageur* (September 1836), the French novelist George Sand marvelled at the composer's dramatic ability to capture in his operas the symbolic essence of the spirit of religion – in both its Catholic and Protestant forms.

> Though you are a musician, you are more a poet than any of us! In what secret recess of your soul, in what hidden treasury of your mind did you find those clear, pure features [of Marcel in *Les Huguenots*], simple as antiquity, true as history, lucid as conscience, strong as faith? It was not long ago that [in *Robert le Diable*] you were on your knees in the sensuous darkness of Saint Mark's, constructing your Sicilian cathedral on a still vaster scale, smothering yourself in Catholic incense at that dark hour when tapers are lit, making the gold and marble sparkle until you were overcome and bowed down by the tender and terrible ecstasies of that holy place. How then was it, when you entered the church of Luther, that you were able to evoke that austere poetry, revive its heroic dead?
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> (George Sand, *Lettres d'un Voyageur*, Paris : Bonnaire, 1837, tr. Sacha Rabinovitch and Patricia Thomson, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987, p.279)

These poetic insights lead one most pertinently into Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* – regarded (with Auber's *La Muette de Portici*, 1828 and Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*, 1829) as the definitive statement in the nineteenth-century development of French *grand-opéra* from the traditions of the *tragédie*

lyrique of Lully, Rameau, Gluck and Spontini. The libretto was written by Eugène Scribe and Germain Delavigne, derived from the medieval legend of 'Robert the Devil'. The opera was first produced on 21 November 1831 at the Paris Opéra, and was the work that brought Meyerbeer international fame. Although this work has particularly reflected the varying fortunes of its composer, it remains a legend in the history of opera. The fascinating story, with a surprisingly complex imagery and symbolism touching on the deepest intuitions of human experience and development (much akin to the nature and effect of fairytales), exercises an archetypal unconscious appeal. The musical language, richly melodic and theatrically powerful, looks back to Rossini and the traditions of the *bel canto* heritage, and yet forges a new formal pliancy and dramatic urgency. Its effect on the history of opera was very substantial, and still needs to be fully gauged.

Meyerbeer was born in Berlin on 5 September 1791. He always regarded himself as a Prussian subject, and remained loyal to the Hohenzollern family all his life. Meyerbeer grew up in an exciting period of revolutionary upheaval, with the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars shaping the landscape of the modern world. All the countries of Europe were forced to rise to the new challenges, not least Prussia. Having gained a solid German technique in Berlin, by his nineteenth year Meyerbeer was accepted as a pupil of the famous organist, composer and pedagogue Abbé Vogler in Darmstadt. From this teacher Meyerbeer learned more about harmony, dramatic characterisation and the malleability and extended palette of the orchestra. After a sojourn in Vienna, and trips to Paris and London, in 1816 he repaired to Italy, where for eight years he immersed himself in the vibrant lyrical traditions and the compositional method that Rossini was decisively codifying. The six works Meyerbeer wrote between 1817 and 1824 mark a period of growth, as he reflected on the traditions he was now exposed to: each of the operas marks a further stage in a process

of assimilation and development. His handling of the voice would be profoundly and decisively affected by the school of *bel canto*. In his last operas for Italy, especially *Margherita d'Anjou* (Milan, 1820) and *Il crociato in Egitto* (Venice, 1824), glowing melody and powerful choruses impart colour and impact to rich descriptive harmony, with a flexible use of forms, both old and new. Meyerbeer was now known internationally as a successful composer. The years 1825-26 were decisive for him: they saw the death of his father Jacob Herz Beer, his marriage to Minna Mosson and his arrival in Paris, the city of his artistic destiny.

His Italian success had brought Meyerbeer considerable fame, but for years he wrote nothing new for the theatre. In a letter to the famous bass Nicolas-Prosper Levasseur written on 5 July 1823 he had already indicated the limitations of his Italian experience, and revealed the direction of his artistic thinking.

> I can assure you that it would be even more glorious to have the honour of writing for the French Opéra than for all the Italian stages. (I have indeed given my works in all the major Italian houses.) Where else, therefore, but in Paris can the vast resources be found which the French offer to an artist who wants to write truly dramatic music? Here, there is a lack of good libretti: the public enjoys only one kind of music. In Paris, there are excellent libretti, and I know your unbiased public welcomes all types of music, if allied to genius.
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> (Giacomo Meyerbeer, *Briefwechsel und Tagebücher*, ed. Heinz Becker, vol. 1, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1960, p.509)

It is as though Meyerbeer was acknowledging the end of an era in his creative life. His trip to Paris for the production of *Il crociato* was undoubtedly the most significant move of his artistic career. The composer now prepared to meet the challenges of the French stage. He was aware that he was not yet ready to create something new in the highly wrought French manner, and buried himself in the study of French civilisation, its history, literature, graphic arts and theatre. Meyerbeer's exhaustive explor-

ation of the *théâtre lyrique* made him an authority on the repertoire of the Opéra, while his researches into the spoken theatre were to bring him into contact with the principal collaborator of his life, the dramatist Eugène Scribe (1791-1861). Using French bourgeois life for his principal theme, and with a staff of co-workers, Scribe produced a long series of plays, vibrant with actuality. His work as a librettist also showed him as instinctively understanding of the needs of the stage, and the psychology of his composers and audiences, as he distilled the very aspirations of the age. Meyerbeer, with innate and astute perception of the times, responded to contemporary political, religious, social and aesthetic issues. All the themes he would explore, with the help of Scribe, were topical at the time of his arrival in Paris in 1826 and through the 1830s, when the scenarios of all his major works were written or conceived. Many of these ideas would be explored cyclically in Meyerbeer's French works, which in fact can be seen as progressive stages in an unfolding operatic discourse of ideas about mankind and society, caught up in the processes of history.

The topicality of these issues was brought to the fore by the political scene in France during the Restoration. The ultra-royalist reign of Charles X marked a desire to recreate the Ancien Régime. His reactionary rule ended when his attempt at a coup d'état provoked revolution in Paris in July 1830. This period was thus initiated by a popular uprising, and stimulated enduringly pertinent questioning about the rights of the ordinary man to make political choices for himself, and espouse the path of liberty. Was it desirable to bring back the old ways and restore the *pax catholica* of the Middle Ages? Was the alternative only the darkness and chaos of rebellion, a return to the Wars of Religion? The social choices for the young and vulnerable were centrifugal, with harsh reality constantly qualifying the ideals of true liberty. These issues were perfectly reflected in the character of Robert le Diable: the age responded intuitively to his sense of helplessness, and saw itself reflected in the parable of the opera. This was something discerned by both Balzac and Heine.

Meyerbeer established an immediate artistic affinity with Scribe. They decided to work together on a three-act work. Scribe proposed an

old French subject, based on the medieval French legends of Robert le Diable, or Robert the Magnificent, father of William the Conqueror – an idea that enthused the composer. The tale was attached to Robert, sixth Duke of Normandy, about whom many legends gathered on account of his violence and cruelty. The basis of the drama was a French thirteenth-century romance about a childless woman who obtains a son by praying to the Devil; the son is strong and wicked, and lives a lawless life, but finally repents of his misdeeds and is reconciled to the Church.

The work was originally planned as a three-act *opéra-comique*, but Meyerbeer persuaded Scribe to turn it into a five-act *grand-opéra* and recast it as an intensely Romantic drama for production at the Opéra. This entailed some rewriting of the storyline, reducing the essentially comic role of Raimbaut (who vanishes after Act Three in the final version). Meyerbeer signed a contract with the Opéra on 1 December 1829. Inspired by the quality of the material in its reorganised form, he immediately began composing, and made rapid progress. The early composition was associated with the political unrest of the time, culminating in the July Revolution, and the change of scene at the Académie Royale de Musique where the dynamic Louis Véron (1798-1867) was to begin his memorable tenure as director with the sensational premiere of Meyerbeer's opera, and initiate and oversee for a few years one of the most extraordinary efflorescences in the history of opera – beginning with *Robert* (1831) and Auber's *Gustave III* (1833), and culminating in Halévy's *La Juive* (1835) and Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* (1836).

For this production Véron contracted the elite of the French theatre to his house. For the *chef du service de la scène* there was Edmond Duponchel (1795-1868), who shared the stage management with Scribe the librettist and Adolphe Nourrit (1802-39), the tenor who would create the title role. The set designer was to be Pierre-Luc-Charles Cicéri (1782-1868), the choreographer Filippo Taglioni (1777-1871), the conductor François-Antoine Habeneck (1781-1849). Added to this was a first-class ensemble of singers and dancers, and what was at the time the best opera orchestra in the world.

The dramatic music, harmony and orchestration of *Robert*, its melodramatic plot, and its overwhelming stage effects (especially the famous Ballet of the Nuns in Act Three) made it an overnight sensation at the premiere on 21 November 1831, and instantly confirmed Meyerbeer as the leading opera composer of his age. Meyerbeer seemed to fuse German counterpoint, Italian melody, the pomp of Spontini and unprecedented orchestral riches in a unique and overwhelming artistic blend. Frédéric Chopin, who was in the audience, was led to observe: 'If ever magnificence was seen in the theatre, I doubt that it reached the level of splendour shown in *Robert*. [...] It is a masterpiece of the new school. [...] Meyerbeer has made himself immortal' (letter to Titus Woyciechowski, Paris, 12 December 1831). It became one of the most popular and ubiquitous operas of the century. The fame of the opera in its day made it a social phenomenon. For Heine, Meyerbeer epitomised his era. Balzac would depict Meyerbeer as the ideal composer in his novel *Gambara*; for George Sand and Alexander Dumas *fils* he was the supreme lyric dramatist in history; the philosopher Herbert Spencer ranked him as the greatest opera composer of the century.

What were the ingredients of this success? First, there is the nature of the libretto created by Scribe from the medieval French legend of Robert le Diable, deriving from stories surrounding the father of William the Conqueror. The long-sterile mother of Robert the Magnificent agreed to dedicate her unborn son to the Devil. The story of the adventures and development of the young hero and his various trials and tribulations taps into the well-springs of folktale, a national heritage, and beyond that into those mythic elements we now call the collective unconscious. This was reinforced by Scribe's adaptation of other more recent historical trends, the Romantic concern with the past and especially the Middle Ages, a new fascination with the origins of the modern nations. Then there was the emergence of that strand of Dark Romanticism we now call the Gothic,

especially the Gothic Novel which had flourished in English literature from the 1790s to the 1820s, and produced hugely influential works like the romances of Mrs Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis, the novels of Charles Robert Maturin and Mary Shelley. The movement was hugely popular in Germany and slightly later became a potent force in French literature too, in translation and through original works in French. These works used an historical framework, but were really concerned with the experiences of the mind and imagination, with exploring dream, fantasies and the forbidden and perplexing aspects of human behaviour we now associate with our deeper or repressed psyches and unconscious. Then there was the literary work of Sir Walter Scott, a literary phenomenon, whose poems and novels were translated into every European language and became a vast cultural influence. Scribe used his works both overtly in adaptation (like the archetypal French *opéra-comique* of the second school, *La Dame blanche*, 1825) and also more subtly in his adaptation of Sir Walter's extraordinary heroes, the apparently vacillating and impressionable young men struggling with changing historical and social factors, pulled in opposite directions, between the allure of the glamorous but dangerous past and the more prosaic but sensible demands of the present age and the new challenges. This type became known as 'the Waverley Hero'.

The scenario of *Robert le Diable* thus functioned on many levels, eliciting all kinds of memories of other sources and literatures, appealing to myth, legend and history, and also to personal and contemporary social concerns. On one level it is the history of a soul, a search for salvation; it unfolds a spiritual drama about sin and salvation, about the search to overcome the disruption and imperfection of the unredeemed self in a saving act of reconciliation and integration; the theological dimension is very powerful. On another level, it is about the achievement of the balanced self, the growth of the personality dealing with the issues of heredity and the demands of life lived in the present. On yet another, it is about making social and political choices between opposing and in some ways equally alluring social options, concerning political affiliation, the pursuit of corporeal pleasure, financial acquisitiveness and sexual licence, or the pur-

suit of higher ideals and more altruistic callings. The mix is a potent one, and the levels of appeal, both conscious and intuited, are very powerful.

The scenario itself was constructed on the most intriguing and integrated of dramatic lines, shaped by the hero's confrontation with his demon father Bertram on the one hand and his angelic mother's representative Alice on the other. In Act One the three characters are placed in a loose association; in Act Three they met briefly in the famous unaccompanied trio, together but detached; in Act Five they are fixed in a dramatic and decisive confrontation that will decide the hero's fate and, in the process, create the most powerful and memorable music in the opera – overwhelming in its melodic and dramatic force. The intervening acts show Robert in relation to the romantic heroine, the Princess Isabelle, his muse, his ideal, the image of perfect womanhood. In Act Two they interact formally in the rituals of courtly love; in Act Four they are forced to confront each other in a drama of light and darkness: will the chivalric code prevail, or will Robert tear it asunder in abduction and rape? Isabelle is able to appeal to his nobler self, and in her plea for grace shows herself to have a profound understanding of the traditional Catholic doctrine of salvation. The closing moments of the opera show the couple at last united after their trials, and about to enter a sacramental union in Palermo Cathedral.

The powerful appeal of mythic elements lies in the psychic residue of numberless experiences of the same kind. In *Robert le Diable* this focuses on the dominant and overarching parental images, and the pull between the paternal and the maternal instincts in life. The hero in fact lives through the Jungian process of maturation, from adolescence to full maturity. This entails the triple process of the individual in encountering and eventually overcoming the great challenges of life. Firstly, the *Shadow*, the dark alter ego of the hero. Here it is Bertram in his initial role of tempter and magician and (in Act Two) the Prince of Granada. Secondly, there is the *Anima*, the negative destructive elements of femininity in the male psyche (revealed in Act Three in the spirits of the dead nuns). These are vanquished when Robert breaks the magic branch in Act Four, so ending the spell of black magic. But thirdly, there is still the *Wise Old Man*, Bertram

in his final role as the father figure revealed in Act Five, and in his struggle with Alice for Robert's 'soul'. Robert is 'saved by the bell' of midnight, when the Old Man is defeated by an 'act of grace' at the key moment of transformation at the transition between night and day.

But it was the music that made the greatest and most enduring impact. What sort of music did the composer devise for the multifarious implications of this fascinating story? First of all, it is beautiful. It is full of engaging and haunting melodies that enjoyed immediate popularity and established themselves almost as folk tunes, like Raimbaut's ballad of Robert the Devil in Act One, and Alice's ballad of the hermit's prophecy, coupled as it is with a maiden's prayer to the Virgin Mary at the centre of Act Three. The last-named also became a kind of contemporary folk tune. The music of the Gambling Scene at the end of Act One, too, turned into one of the defining tunes of the age: 'L'or est une chimère'. The famous solos for the bass, Bertram's *Valse infernale* and Evocation in Act Three, both associated with his demonic power, became hugely popular: the former established itself as a king of the dark Romantic genre piece; the latter, with its apocalyptic trombones and wonderful fanfares, its mellifluous but anguished lyricism, is still a famous recital piece for basses.

The composer showed great skill in combining the old and the new in a most beguiling manner. The spirit of the Italian school is very potently present, forming as it did a crucial part of Meyerbeer's musical education and self-expression. The scene for Isabelle at the beginning of Act Two is the traditional nexus of recitative, slow aria, choral *tempo di mezzo* and fast cabaletta. The andante is redolent of Rossini, but the cabaletta with its bolero rhythm is suffused with dreamy languor intensified by the subtle Sicilian character of the melodic conception (Meyerbeer had collected Sicilian folk tunes in the early months of his Italian years; some of these also feature in the gentle and pastel Ballet of the Tournament in Act Two). Isabelle's great scene in Act Four is another matter. Her plead-

ing Cavatina ('Robert, toi que j'aime'), with its affecting cor anglais and harp accompaniment, became one of the most widely known arias of the age, and, in terms of melodic appeal and formal structure, a touchstone that would influence the general shape and style of the operatic scena for soprano (particularly evident in Verdi, as in the music for Violetta in *La traviata*, Acts One and Two).

Another way in which the music looks forward is the radical development of the extended scenic sequence. The whole of Act One is spun between two choral blocks – the opening Drinking Chorus and the concluding Gambling Scene. While these may contain traditional set pieces (like Raimbaut's Ballad), the musical medium is fluid and unbroken, even if it uses an underlying structural pattern, like the rondo in the finale. The most famous of these scenic frescos is the Ballet of the Nuns in Act Three. The whole scene, from the *Valse infernale* and Bertram's Evocation, through the rising of the nuns from their graves with its flickering will-o'-the-wisps, their orgiastic Bacchanal in the moonlight, the entry of Robert, the sequence of seductive dances, to the final chorus of demons who reclaim the nuns for the underworld, moves almost seamlessly from one event to the next. Unresolved cadences provide the necessary structural-tonal transitions, as well as certain dramatic and grotesque orchestral motifs, which unify the dances and increase the internal logic of the drama. The image of the spirits rising from their graves and dancing in the moonlight became an icon of the age, and the very origin of the *ballet blanc*. It epitomises the Romantic ideal of *Nacht und Träume*, and it must suggest an unearthly beauty while at the same time conveying the nightmare of the dark origins and almost mechanical nature of these satanic automata, the immediate ancestors of the Wilis in *Giselle*, of the enchanted Swans in *Swan Lake*, and of the spirits of the dead dancers in *La Bayadère*.

What made the first opera of his new regime so striking was the care Véron lavished on the whole enterprise. *Robert le Diable* in fact represents the

perfect fulfilment of a Romantic ideal – that of the *Gesamtkunstwerk,* a fully integrated work of art that utilises all the branches of the plastic and performing arts in achieving a complete and effective dramatic presentation. The librettists Scribe and Germain Delavigne, with Meyerbeer's new and in many respects revolutionary music, had been cooperating even to the last minute, to achieve a fluent and effective dramatic medium of situation, words and music. Some of the most celebrated pieces in the opera were conceived at a late stage, most famously the final form of the Ballet of the Nuns in close cooperation with the choreographer Filippo Taglioni; so too Isabelle's Cavatina, which had been composed only a few weeks before the premiere for the soprano Laure Cinti-Damoreau, to the simplest words. The singers were among the greatest talents available at the time – apart from the great dramatic coloratura soprano Cinti there was the more lyrical Julie Dorus-Gras as Alice, the formidable bass Levasseur and, most famous of all, the tenor Nourrit, whose musicality and dramatic instinct made him one of the foremost singers of the age and a legend of operatic history. He created the leading roles in Auber's *La Muette de Portici*, Arnold in *Guillaume Tell*, Gustave III, and then Eléazar in *La Juive* and Raoul in *Les Huguenots*, two of the most difficult and prestigious parts ever written for the tenor voice. The chorus and orchestra, under the direction of Habeneck, were well able to meet the composer's imaginative demands.

The set designer Cicéri had travelled widely in France and Italy, and his detailed sketches inspired a new and exciting type of historical theatrical scenery that revolutionised the art of stage design. His ideas for the Cloister Scene in the opera became another icon of the age. Duponchel commissioned costume designs from the artist François-Gabriel Lépaulle. These were of the highest standard, and the richness of the conceptions and materials used created an enduringly vivid impression of sumptuousness and colour. The prominence given to the chorus and the ballet was of further crucial importance to the score and the whole concept. The role of the ballet in Acts Two and Three was integral to French opera from the very first days of the *opéras-ballets* of Lully and Rameau. The

venerable convention was faithfully maintained, but in the Ballet of the Nuns assumed a whole new dimension of importance. Here the dance was no longer a divertissement (as in Act Two, sustaining the *couleur locale* and proving distraction), but was crucial to the drama, inseparable from the action, and of enduring importance for the whole history of ballet. So, on several levels the opera established its own unique importance, and in its singular realisation of these Romantic ideals, can well claim the title of the *premier opéra romantique*.

The vast interest in the opera generated a lithographic industry. Several of its scenes became famous in iconographical depiction. The Cicéri-Duponchel Cloister Scene remains the most celebrated, but then so was the depiction of the *prima ballerina assoluta* of the Romantic period, Marie Taglioni, as the ghostly Abbess with her hapless victim, the illustrious Nourrit as the wretched Robert. The scene would be immortalised by the two versions of it painted forty years later by Edgar Degas. Central to the meaning of the opera, and perhaps the most widespread of the images, was the *Scène de la Croix* from Act Three, Scene 2, where Alice is depicted holding onto the base of a huge ruined cross, having just discerned the demonic nature of the dark Bertram and heard his threat of death. The scene was particularly associated with the soprano Jenny Lind and her famous impersonation of Alice in the 1847 performance of the work at Her Majesty's Theatre in London. The image became inseparable from the public persona of this singer, and was depicted as a figurine in Staffordshire chinaware, going through many different models and variations over some decades. The Trio in Act Five became a *locus classicus* in the dramaturgy of grand opera; it was painted twice by the artist Lépaulle, and provides a vivid sense of the fabulous historically and symbolically informed costumes he designed.

The opera, based on a legend, seemed to generate its own legends from the very beginning. Even in its compositional stage rumours began circulating, creating a mystique around the work. Stories sprang up about the creation of the opera: its transformation from an *opéra-comique* into a *grand-opéra*, its composition in the secrecy of Meyerbeer's favoured hotel

in the rue de Richelieu, the final stages written during the Revolution and in the umbrageous seclusion of Spa, the late genesis of the ballet and Isabelle's Cavatina. Other stories surrounded its preparation: a singer (i.e. Levasseur) frightening the wits out of a concierge by calling on Meyerbeer in a remote Parisian apartment for 'devilish' clandestine rehearsals; talk of the extravagant costs, the sums spent on the *mise en scène*, Véron's fundamental lack of faith in the work. There were tales of the premiere: the *trois chutes* (three mishaps) during the first performance – the great cross almost toppling onto the praying Dorus-Gras, part of the scenery nearly dropping on Taglioni as she lay on her tomb, Levasseur precipitating himself prematurely though a trapdoor into Hell in the final trio. Then there was the popular and intellectual furore following the first night. All these formed the stuff of operatic legend.

Robert le Diable became one of the greatest successes in the history of opera. The statistics of its most significant performances are still astonishing. Meyerbeer provided a list of the cities where *Robert le Diable* was produced in the first two years of its history (published in the *Revue musicale,* 1834): there were thirty-nine cities in France, twenty-three in the German-speaking lands and seven in other countries – a total of sixty-nine different theatres. It was performed 754 times at the Paris Opéra until 28 August 1893 (there were performances every year apart from 1869, 1875 and 1880) and revived there in 1985. It was performed 260 times in Berlin (until 1906) and revived there in 2000, 241 times in Hamburg (until 1917), 111 times in Vienna (until 1921), eighty-three times in Milan (until 1886), fifty-seven times in Parma (until 1882) and fifty-four times in London (until 1890). It was given throughout the world on every continent, from Barcelona to Odessa, Constantinople, Oran, Cape Town, Calcutta, Mauritius, Batavia, Melbourne, Valparaiso, Buenos Aires to Mexico City. The huge success of the opera was reflected in more than 160 transcriptions, arrangements, paraphrases and fantasias for orchestra, military band, dance band, piano

and other solo instruments written between 1832 and 1880 by, among others, Adam, Chopin, Cramer, Czerny, Diabelli, Fumagalli, Herz, Kalkbrenner, Liszt, Litolff, Musard, Offenbach, Pixis, Prudent, Raff, Strauss (*Vater*), Strauss (*Sohn*), and Thalberg. Scribe and Meyerbeer produced a work which affected the very nature of opera and influenced even those contemporaries who became the composer's musical adversaries.

So much of Meyerbeer's work as a dramatic artist would be focused on the theme of faith and what this means in terms of the great choices in life. In fact, his entire oeuvre was imprinted with this concern – from his first opera, *Jephtas Gelübde* (1812), to his last, the posthumous *L'Africaine* (1865). His most famous French operas in fact themselves constitute a tetralogy, in which the issues of faith, history, society and personal choice interact with the demands of intransigent religion. In *Robert le Diable* this is conceived of as the unified faith of the Middle Ages, and despite all doubts, the issues are resolved in positive statements of sacramental faith. These concerns were understood by some of the composer's contemporaries. The famous author and critic Théophile Gautier had no doubt about the true preoccupations of Meyerbeer's operas, and provided a serious critical response to them. He wrote a penetrating analysis of *Le Prophète,* placing it in an intellectual relation to Meyerbeer's other major works.

> These three operas [*Robert le Diable, Les Huguenots,* and *Le Prophète*] compose an immense symbolic trilogy, filled with profound and mysterious meanings; the three principal phases of the human soul are found represented there: faith, examination and illumination. Faith corresponds to the past, examination to the present, illumination to the future. In order to be made visible, each one of these ideas has taken its necessary form: *Robert le Diable* the fairytale; *Les Huguenots* the chronicle; *Le Prophète* the satire.
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> (Gautier, *Histoire de l'art dramatique en France depuis vingt-cinq* ans, Paris, 1858-1859, vol. 6, p.82).

These concerns were born of Meyerbeer's life and background, of his consistent awareness of the relentless nature of anti-Semitism (from which he suffered throughout his career) and the fragility of all social commitments. The Wagnerian animus epitomised in *Das Judentum in der Musik* is still maleficently active, while Nazi opprobrium destroyed the idealism of Prussia and damaged Meyerbeer's standing in Germany. The great irony of Meyerbeer's life is that his work, often dismissed as meretricious and bombastic, is in fact a profound reflection on some of the most serious of life's concerns, and a powerful assertion of the freedom of the human spirit, the supreme defining nature of love. Even his second, apparently slight *opéra-comique*, *Le Pardon de Ploërmel* – a work of exquisite craftsmanship and intimate loveliness – is a parable of redemption. In the end it is the beauty of Meyerbeer's musical inspiration and his simple but searing humanity that endure: people are more important than ideas.

Scene from *Robert le Diable* (Act Three, Scene 2).
Palazzetto Bru Zane Collection.

Scène de *Robert le Diable* (acte III, scène 2).
Collection Palazzetto Bru Zane.

Nicolas-Prosper Levasseur as Bertram by Jean-Pierre Dantan.
Musée Carnavalet, Paris.

Nicolas-Prosper Levasseur en Bertram par Jean-Pierre Dantan.
Musée Carnavalet, Paris.