

A total work of art?

The visual element in *Robert le Diable*

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In our imagination, the total work of art is the invention of Wagner. Indeed, we frequently use the German term *Gesamtkunstwerk* when we talk about it. And it is quite true that the concept was first theorised in the German-speaking world. Yet, in Paris, too, it was discussed as early as the 1830s, and *Robert le Diable* might well be considered its first successful manifestation on the operatic stage. At any rate, that is how contemporaries of the work understood it, insisting in most unusual fashion on the visual dimension of the production, even in its most incidental aspects. Every element of the stagecraft – lighting, costumes and sets – was unanimously praised. It is customary, when a theatre does not skimp on expenditure, to praise the beauty of the staging. This usually comes at the end of a review of the premiere. The terms used are always the same and thus tend to become devalued. But this time the tone was different. The conventional superlatives gave way to a form of stunned amazement: ‘You have to see it to believe it. It is prodigious! It is prodigious!’ (*Le Constitutionnel*, 23 November 1831). So much so that some observers wondered whether the event did not reveal a new function of the operatic stage: to ‘make all the arts work together towards a single goal’ (*Le Figaro*, 23 November 1831). It would seem that for a few years, and especially following the premiere of *Robert le Diable*, contemporaries believed it was possible for the Opéra to achieve a synthesis of the arts that would break

down the traditional categories. The editorial board of the journal *L'Artiste* championed this idea, reviewing both the Salons de Peinture and the productions at the Opéra. The anonymous text quoted below comes from that periodical. The reader will find enumerated here several elements of Wagner's later discourse: the progress and union of the arts, the role of opera as a catalyst, the need to communicate with the people, and so forth (we have italicised the most telling passages).

It is in the very best interest of the fine arts for the Opéra to enjoy a flourishing existence, for it is in the opera house that they can be deployed on a large scale and combine in *a single magnificent work*. When the arts act in isolation, when poetry, music, painting, sculpture employ only their individual and highly specific strengths, their influence is limited and less potent. The aim of all the arts is to unite, to act in harmony, to assemble on the same stage, and there to concentrate all the magic of their varied resources in order to *sweep away and exalt the people*.

Only the Opéra is capable today of achieving this magnificent result, so important for the progress of art. The current administration of the Académie Royale de Musique has understood this very well; thus we observe that, in the staging of the fine works it has offered us for the past two years, it has endeavoured to call upon all the principal artists of Paris who had hitherto been averse to devoting their talents to theatrical sets and costumes.

Robert le Diable and *La Tentation* [an *opéra-ballet* premiered in 1832] have shown us the degree of perfection that dramatic art can attain through the happy association of the genius of music and the genius of painting and design; the richness and fidelity of the costumes, the beauty of the sets, which are no longer merely exercises in *trompe-l'oeil*, but admirable works of art.

(*L'Artiste*, 1833, vol. V)

Why did it fall to *Robert le Diable* to crystallise this ideal of the total work of art? For after all, recent though it may have been, the care lavished on

the visual aspect of the performance was no longer entirely new. A staging committee responsible for examining the technical and aesthetic aspects of set and costume designs had existed at the Opéra since 1827. For the first production of *La Muette de Portici* (1828), exceptional funds had already been allocated for the decors. The painter Cicéri (whom we will meet again with *Robert le Diable*) had even been specially sent to Italy to study the sets for Pacini's *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei* at La Scala. It is true that in the end, only three of the seven settings (known as *tableaux*) of *La Muette* were granted new decors. The others had to make do with recycled sets. The obligation to stage new works with new decors had not been included in the brief of the Opéra's administrator until 1831. There is therefore a difference in degree between the effort put into staging before and after that date. The critics were not exaggerating when they claimed that Eugène Véron, appointed director in March 1831, had 'surpassed in magnificence, in the expenses incurred by the staging of *Robert le Diable*, all that had been done by the governments which, for the last forty years, have administered the Opéra' (*Le National*, 23 November 1831). Yet this was perhaps not the most decisive factor. A study of the critical reception of *La Muette de Portici* suggests a clear disconnect between the high points of the score and those of the production. For example, the fifth act, which ends with the eruption of Vesuvius, was felt to be primarily aimed at achieving visual splendour ('Act Five offers only one musical scene, that of Masaniello's madness [...]; from that moment on the musician is no longer listened to, and another sense is captivated; it is the set designer who has seized it': *Le Moniteur universel*, 2 March 1828). *La Muette*, then, did not manage to intertwine the aural and the visual. The arts alternated rather than converged. By comparison, in *Robert le Diable*, the sections that the critics generally hailed as absolute masterpieces (Acts Three and Five) are those that solicit the eye as much as the ear. But it is worth pointing out that this polysensory character of the opera (some critics also mentioned the fragrance of incense in Act Five) was not initiated by Meyerbeer. It would even seem that he took it the wrong way: "All

this is very fine”, said the maestro [to Véron] almost angrily, “but you do not believe my music will succeed; you are looking to enjoy a success with the designs”” (Véron, *Mémoires d'un bourgeois de Paris*, vol. III, 1857). At the Paris Opéra, the total work of art was a collective adventure that the composer had to put up with; it was not determined by an omniscient creator like Wagner.



THE SUPERNATURAL AND MEDIEVALISM

If *Robert le Diable* was the occasion for a meeting of the aural and the visual, it was because each of the collaborators in the production knew how to exploit the potentialities of the libretto, in particular the supernatural dimension, which was relatively new on the stage of the Opéra (in Weber's *Euryanthe*, which had been premiered there in April 1831, the supernatural was still more a matter of what was said than what was seen). Fétis marvelled at the musical *trouvailles* to which this gave rise. 'It is in the third act', he reported, 'that M. Meyerbeer enters vigorously into the new style he has adopted, and it is there that he deserves praise above all' (François Fétis, *Le Temps*, 25 November 1831). The critic even declared that from the cloister scene onwards the effects of instrumentation 'defy analysis'. It was precisely for this tableau that Duponchel (then director of productions) encouraged the various artists and technicians whose work he coordinated (and especially the set designer Cicéri) to demonstrate their powers of invention. Véron relates that

the pantomime and dance scene in the third act, during which Robert goes to pluck the talismanic branch, initially represented nothing more than an old Olympus set from the Opéra's store, with quivers, arrows, gauze and cupids. M. Duponchel, whom I had given responsibility for overseeing the sets and costumes, flew into the most amusing rages against the decrepitude, the second-hand bric-a-brac of this classical Olympus; he

suggested the scene of the nuns emerging from their tombs in the midst of the cloister set that is now so familiar.

(Véron, *Mémoires d'un bourgeois de Paris*, vol. III, 1857)

That cloister [page 43] is still so familiar to us, even forming part of our visual culture, that it is hard to imagine that it was not the obvious choice. Although the action takes place in the Middle Ages, the initial plan for this supernatural episode was to use the traditional Greco-Roman decor. And, in fact, the stage directions for the previous tableau (the rocks of Saint Irene) do mention 'les ruines d'un temple antique' (literally, the ruins of an *ancient temple*). Two surviving sketches by Cicéri attest to the 'classical' style initially intended [pages 43 and 77]. Once Duponchel had given the lead, however, the set designer, costume designer and lighting technicians indulged in all sorts of experiments.

The first of these consisted in matching a genre (the supernatural play, 'le fantastique') with a precise historical point of reference (the Middle Ages) while avoiding the temptation of importing to the Opéra the formulas that had been tried and tested in secondary theatres for several decades. Systematic examination of the reviews of the premiere of *Robert le Diable* reveals the audience's surprise at the sight of a depiction of the supernatural that does not lapse into horror, a 'positive' supernatural, even though evil spirits are conjured up. Without really saying so explicitly, a number of critics commented on this characteristic: 'The fantastical element is deployed at length here: not that hideous evocation of the supernatural to which other productions attempt to accustom us by adding to the extreme ugliness of the characters of Teniers and Callot, but a supernatural full of grace and novelty' (*Le Figaro*, 23 November 1831); or '[the cloister scene] is of a realism at once horrifying and spellbinding. Never has a more novel and original effect been produced in any theatre' (*Journal des débats*, 23 November 1831). The cloister episode appealed to the audience because it managed to produce an effect of reality in its very unreality, thanks to its restraint: it was not 'theatrical' in the sense that the audience did not perceive any excess therein. For instance, the set design (to restrict

discussion to that element) does not play on the devices customary in the theatres of the Boulevard du Crime since the late eighteenth century. Cicéri does not seek to terrify the audience by emphasising the ruined aspect of the architecture, as had been recommended until then, notably by Pixérécourt for his melodramas: 'The setting is ghastly. Everything in the building is derelict; this aspect alone should arouse fear' (*Le Monastère abandonné ou La Malédiction paternelle*, 1816). On the contrary, Cicéri painted galleries that appear to have suffered very little damage, where only discreet vegetation suggests the passage of time. From this point of view, the set almost contradicts the libretto. The words Bertram sings ('Voici les débris du monastère antique') do not sit easily with what the spectators have in front of them: ruins that are barely ruined at all and, in any case, no *débris*.

By opting for a Romanesque architectural vocabulary (the cloister galleries are formed of semicircular arches rather than pointed ones), Cicéri persists in this choice of realism. First of all, he renews a stereotypical vision of the Middle Ages, which was then equated with Gothic. Secondly, he conforms to the geography of the libretto, since the action takes place in Sicily. This historical realism operates on several levels. In addition to the plausibility of its southern colouration (the Romanesque style), one may wonder whether it does not stem from the increased knowledge of medieval architecture made possible by the rise of lithography: this had led to multiple collections of 'picturesque views', including the famous *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l'ancienne France*, launched in 1820, which already numbered four volumes by 1831. The illustrated book certainly played a part in Cicéri's artistic decisions, but it was not the only factor. We should probably also consider a dialogue extended to other forms of what Théophile Gautier called 'spectacles oculaires', in particular the diorama. This term referred to large canvases painted on both sides which could be animated by varying the intensity of the lighting from the front or the back, for example by making the viewer move imperceptibly from a scene in daylight to the same thing seen at night. The process made it possible to 'bring to life' illusionistic tableaux

in which the audience was immersed. Diorama designers were constantly inventing new ways of absorbing the spectators into the scenes they viewed. A few days before the premiere of *Robert le Diable*, they unveiled their latest creation, a *Vue du Mont-Blanc*, the first scenes of which were not painted. As the press report printed below explains, they consisted of real objects:

The viewer is placed beneath a large barn, built according to the rules of Swiss architecture, in which a host of utensils and furniture brought from Chamonix itself have been assembled: hoods, baskets, sawn tree trunks, a machine for cutting hemp, and so on. To the right and left, two chalets have been built, based on meticulously accurate drawings. [...] All these constructions are real and material; one could positively walk through them and touch them. To add to the perfection of the imitation, a little stall contains a live goat, which can be seen eating and whose bleating can be heard at intervals. [...]

The combination of these two elements of illusion, relief and painting, produces a tableau that may best be compared to a theatre set: the only difference is that, in the diorama, the scene is illuminated by daylight, whereas in the theatre, it is illuminated by artificial lights.

(*Le National*, 21 November 1831)

If we have gone into such detail here about the diorama, it is because it illustrates another form of synthesis of the arts, surmounting the divide between the arts of time (the succession of signs in music or theatre) and the arts of space (the juxtaposition of signs in painting and sculpture), to take up the distinction theorised by Lessing in *Laokoön oder Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (Laocoon: an essay on the limits of painting and poetry, 1766). But there is more. For it so happens that the inventor of the diorama, the painter of this *Vue du Mont-Blanc* and of several ruined abbeys, Louis Daguerre, was in fact a former collaborator of Cicéri, with whom he had shared the position of chief set painter to the Opera between 1820 and 1822. Several contemporary reviewers pointed

out a probable competition between Cicéri and the diorama. One of them even made a slip of the pen, attributing the sets of *Robert le Diable* to Daguerre: 'Académie Royale de Musique. *Robert le Diable*, opera in five acts, words by MM. Scribe and Germain Delavigne, music by M. Meyer-Beer [sic], divertissements by M. Taglioni, sets by M. Daguerre' (*La Gazette de France*, 23 November 1831). Through Daguerre, his dioramas and his theatre of the same name, we now come to the issue of lighting, which merits further discussion.



LIGHTING: THE EXTINCTION OF FOOTLIGHTS AND CHANDELIER

It is difficult to get an idea of what the audience of 1831 saw, since we have visual documentation for only one of the seven tableaux in *Robert le Diable*: the cloister scene. Nothing survives, for example, of the concluding tableau in Palermo Cathedral, which also made the critics marvel. So what can we say about the work of the lighting designers? This time we have to make do with written sources. By comparing the stage directions in the libretto with the press reports, we already learn that the type of lighting varied constantly from one tableau to another, even aside from the alternation between outdoor settings (Act One, tableau 1; Act Three, tableau 3; Act Five, tableau 6) and indoor ones (Act Two, tableau 2; Act Three, tableau 4; Act Four, tableau 5; Act Five, tableau 7). The diurnal episodes of Acts One and Two are followed by the setting sun in the first tableau of Act Three (the rocks of Saint Irene) before the moonlight of the ensuing tableau (inside the abbey).

Imagine vast cloisters, one leading to another until they are lost in the darkness of the night. The shimmering, silvery light of the moon penetrates only through the opening of a courtyard that forms a cemetery, where it whitens the tombstones and the yew and cypress branches, and through

the intervals between the columns which support the nearest gallery and cast their shadow on the flagstones. It is there that the tombs are laid out.

(*Le Globe*, 3 December 1831)

Like many others, this account, valuable though it is, does not clearly convey the experience of the 1831 audience at this point in the opera: the sensation of suddenly finding oneself in complete darkness, whereas the chandelier normally remained lit throughout every performance. The footlights at the front of the stage had also been extinguished, leaving only one source of light: the gas lighting, used for the first time from the flies, which illuminated the stage according to the laws of nature, from above (we know all this thanks to the director of the Opéra himself, Véron, who relates it in his memoirs). This illusionistic moonlight diffused in the cloister garden left the adjoining galleries in semi-darkness, so that the spectators could sense rather than see clearly what they were looking at (some disgruntled patrons complained about this, but it was a remarkable way of keeping the audience members on the edge of their seats) [page 77]. In these conditions, the effect of reality discussed above was vastly increased. For a moment, the spectators were no longer in the Opéra as they knew it, an auditorium where scrutinising one's peers was as important as following the performance. Plunged into darkness, isolated from each other, they were projected into another universe that was at once fantastical and plausible. We now have a better insight into the stupefied reaction of contemporaries.

Pierre-Luc-Charles Cicéri (1782-1868).

Above: Preliminary sketch for the second tableau of Act Three.

Below: Second tableau of Act Three.

Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Pierre-Luc-Charles Cicéri (1782-1868).

En haut : Croquis préparatoire pour le décor du second tableau du troisième acte, 1831.

En bas : Second tableau du troisième acte, 1831.

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

