

Meyerbeer's Les Huguenots

FIRST, SECOND, AND THIRD ACTS (PART II)

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The success of this admirable work grows with every performance. Every day new beauties appear that had hitherto passed unnoticed. Already it is clear that the opposition, which was willing to grant marked superiority only to the last two acts, has begun to acknowledge the eminent merit of the first three; and full justice is now being rendered to both the overall score and the details.

We are going to attempt an analysis of *Les Huguenots* that, if less than discerning, will at least be done in good faith and good conscience.

The introduction is composed largely of the Lutheran chorale presented in every which way and orchestrated in the most varied manner. The orchestra does a marvelous imitation of an organ. One of the composer's most successful devices for such imitation involves combining the flutes and clarinets with an English horn in the midrange of the harmony; this instrument's somewhat nasal sound gives the little grouping the sound of reed stops, which the timbre of the oboe would be too high-pitched to render well. Despite the beautiful coloring and interesting workmanship of this introduction, we still regret that M. Meyerbeer wrote no overture.

The chorus "À table, amis, à table" is full of verve and gusto,¹ and the voices are arranged in such a way as to be heard throughout, despite the full orchestra's relentless rhythmic beat. The episodic melody in the middle ("de la Touraine, versez les vins") is captivatingly fresh and shows great rhythmic originality. The whole charm of the phrase stems from its ending, accented on the unstressed beat of the measure. Place the melodic cadence on the stressed beat of the following measure, as an Italian would unfailingly have done, and you would have a regular rhythm and a perfect platitude.

1. "To the table, friends, to the table!"

The accompaniment to Raoul's recitative is strikingly expressive, including, as it does, the cheerful cries and offensive annoyances of the students circling around his beautiful sweetheart. The romance that follows is perhaps more notable for its accompaniment than for the air itself. The viola d'amore is a marvel,² and delaying the entry of the orchestra until the words "ô reine des amours" is a felicitous idea.³

I will point out here, apropos of Nevers's exclamation "Amis, buvons à nos maîtresses,"⁴ a habit of M. Meyerbeer's that makes no little contribution to enlivening the recitative: at the earliest opportunity, he starts threading the dialogue with brief measured phrases, sometimes even with melodies so striking in their brevity that we are almost sorry they are never developed into true themes. By such means the dryness of musical declamation is avoided, and the listener can move from one piece to another without experiencing even an instant of fatigue or boredom.

In the stanzas of "À bas les couvents maudits,"⁵ one aspect of the soldier Marcel's character, the Puritan side, is depicted with a masterly hand. Everything in the piece is strange: rhythm, melody, and orchestration. The melody is placed between the two extreme timbres of the orchestra, double bass and piccolo; to this are added a few *pianissimo* strikes of the bass drum and cymbals. A strident trumpet fanfare in the major mode further underscores the somber fanaticism of the following phrase, which is murmured *a mezza voce* in the minor. In the recitatives, the composer has succeeded equally well in characterizing Marcel, reducing the accompaniment to simple cello chords as in early operas; this type of harmony, beyond its evocative old-fashioned quality, is in itself perfectly in keeping with the nature of the character in question.

The chorus "L'aventure est singulière" strikes me as very far in every respect from the piece I have just cited.⁶ The rhythm and the harmony are less distinguished; it is clear that M. Meyerbeer considered it a mere accessory of no interest, although it does recur twice in the course of the first act. The entrance of the page Urbain, "Une dame noble et sage,"⁷ is on the contrary an exquisite melody, which Mlle. Flécheux's voice renders beautifully.

2. In his *Treatise on Orchestration* Berlioz includes an entry on the viola d'amore in which he gives as example this piece by Meyerbeer and mentions Urhan as the instrument's only current performer. Berlioz would like to see it preserved and fostered at the Conservatoire, which in fact "conserves very badly."

3. "O queen of loves."

4. "Friends, let us drink to our sweethearts!"

5. "Down with accursed convents!"

6. "The event is strange"

7. "A noble, wise lady."

The second act has been judged very harshly—wrongly so, in my opinion. Its interest is not nearly as great as that of the rest of the work, but is that the fault of the composer? And could he have created anything other than graceful cantilenas, run-embellished cavatinas, and calm, sweet choruses on verses that speak only of “smiling gardens, bubbling fountains, melodious sounds, loving waters, folly, coquetry, love refrains echoed all around”?⁸ I don't believe so; indeed, it took a truly superior man to manage as well as he has done. The chorus of bathers, among others, is delightfully carefree and perfectly right for the situation. The finale, highly dramatic and full of gripping orchestral effects, would make a name for any other composer, but for M. Meyerbeer it seems to me insufficiently original in both conception and form. But wait, the next act is going to bring us ample compensation.

Here the composer has implemented a project that at first seems sure to produce a chaotic mass of sound with no real musical interest. It is easy to imagine just a painfully worked-out combination intended more for the eyes than for the ears, like those vaunted school compositions called double fugues on a chorale, which would put the devil himself to flight if he were ever foolish enough to expose himself to such music. Far from it: the truth is very different. After a Huguenot soldiers' chorus of an entirely new type, admirable in its lively gaiety, comes a simple and pious hymn to the Virgin; then comes another chorus on some subject or other. (There are so many things in this scene that it leaves me rather dizzy; no surprise, then, if, after several attentive hearings, I still hesitate on this point.) These choruses are all markedly different from one another; once they have been heard separately, there follow a few bars of recitative, and then they are all combined, each remaining distinct in the ensemble and in no way obscuring the harmony. The result of their unexpected assemblage is the most magnificent musical amalgam. It is a really curious experience for artists and a beautiful one for all. Nothing of the sort had ever been attempted on the operatic stage; the three orchestras in the ball scene of *Don Giovanni* don't come anywhere close. And that is not all. This act, which in the early days there was talk of sacrificing to the two final acts, also includes a superb septet for four tenors and three basses, as well as all the detailed preparations for the fighting—measured recitatives, some in dialogue, some as asides, some with no accompaniment, others with two or

8. “Riants jardins, vertes fontaines, sons mélodieux, flots amoureux, folie, coquetterie, refrains d'amour que répètent les échos d'alentour.” Berlioz is exercising the subterfuge of blaming the librettist for the inadequacies of the musician. In his review of *William Tell*, we saw that Berlioz considers it the composer's responsibility, in fact, to shape his libretto or have it altered to suit his musical purposes.

three instruments—and then with the entire orchestra. There the composer's dramatic sense and musical genius appear once more in all their brilliance. After the vocal work deployed in these various scenes, it seems impossible that he could draw from the voices anything new and different. Not so! His resources are not exhausted, as proven in the quarreling of the two groups of women. There, out of the clash of certain dissonances hurled against a background of brusquely accented syllables, there spring forth effects for which I can suggest absolutely no comparison. It is all immensely interesting and an immense pleasure to hear.

In a following article we shall see with what marvels the indefatigable composer of *Les Huguenots* has filled the rest of his opera and how he expresses the passions of individuals now that we have heard the language of the crowd.⁹

H. Berlioz

9. *Berlioz on Music*, #36.