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Postlude

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Guillaume Tell created something of a furore in London in the summer of 2015. Claims were made – predictably enough – that Rossini would have been left spinning in his grave by Damiano Michieletto's new production for Covent Garden.[1] The *William Tell* comic book in which Michieletto had encountered the story as a boy, and which provided a framing device for the production, was an irritating irrelevance for some, and the Kalashnikov-toting soldiers a lazy updating. But it was the staging of the Act III ballet, in which the Austrian soldiers in Etienne de Jouy's libretto 'force the Swiss peasant women to dance', which became a lightning rod for the criticism.[2] The stylised rape of a peasant by a group of soldiers, accompanied by Rossini's jaunty march, was 'in blatant contradiction to the spirit of the music', complained Rupert Christiansen in *The Telegraph*, for whom 'the music for the ballet sequences' became 'the pretext for elaborate dumb shows', even if the smattering of boos had been replaced with loud cheering by the final night of the run.[3]

In fact, though, Michieletto's approach in many ways took us vividly back to the Paris Opéra in 1829: the use of pantomime in the ballet sequences; the contrast of music and dramatic situation in shocking juxtaposition, and the attempt to bring home to a modern audience the dark undercurrent running through the ballet sequence that would have been self-evident to Parisians who had experienced at first hand the brutality of war, political oppression and revolution – and for many of whom female dancers were regarded as little more than prostitutes.[4] Although today we are much less familiar with the aesthetic of *grand opéra* and its stories, Michieletto at least understood that in order for an opera to realise its emotional potential in the theatre, it must arrest our attention and move us in the here and now. For *grand opéra* the stakes are high: expanded orchestral forces, multiple choruses, a large ensemble of principals,

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1 The production premiered on 29 June 2015 at the Royal Opera House, conducted by Antonio Pappano with Gerald Finley in the title role, John Osborn as Arnold, Nicolas Courjal as Gesler and Malin Byström as Mathilde. A representative selection of responses can be read here: www.roh.org.uk/news/guillaume-tell-join-the-conversation. Although the response on social media and in the press was overwhelmingly negative, there were some more thoughtful pieces, including by Fiona Maddocks in *The Observer* (5 July 2015).

2 'Les soldats de Gessler contraignent des femmes suisses à danser avec eux, les habitants témoignent par leurs gestes de leur indignation', Act III, scene 2; Etienne de Jouy [et al.], *Guillaume Tell* [libretto] (Paris, 1829).

3 Rupert Christiansen, *The Telegraph* (30 June 2015).

4 Michieletto's improvisatory method with the singers, who experimented with gesture, movement and vocal expression as each scene was put together, also resulted in an interpretation that seemed very much rooted in theatrical practice of the period. In private conversation in June 2015, he did, however, claim that he responded directly to the text and music rather than attempting any archaeological approach to nineteenth-century practice.

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ambitious lighting and staging effects, and a historical–political theme that resonated with contemporary lived experience, combined to create an overwhelming spectacle that famously left nineteenth-century Parisians bedazzled, bewildered and crushed.

This potential was all too apparent to the opera's contemporary audience in the 1800s. Tell was forced to adopt disguises as he set off across Europe: in London (1830) he became Andreas Hofer, the 'Tell of the Tyrol', the rallying symbol against Napoleon's troops who was shot by firing squad in 1810; in Milan (1836), William Wallace (Guglielmo Vallace), who led the Scots against the English in medieval Stirling, and in St Petersburg (1838), Charles the Bold (Karl Smelïy), who fought in the Burgundian wars of the fifteenth century. Dangers of too-close identification with the Swiss hero and his cause were on the one hand anticipated – and often diverted into safer stories – by censors, but on the other hand the opera's adaptors recognised the continuing need to shock and thrill new audiences by presenting a passionate cause.

Seen from this perspective, Michieletto's (comparatively modest) reworking of *Tell* is part of a much bigger transnational history of operatic adaptation. For musicologists, however, *grand opéra* has been almost inseparable from its Parisian context since the publication, thirty years ago, of Jane Fulcher's *The Nation's Image: French Grand Opera as Politics*.[5] We continue to be captivated and entranced by the genre's complex political resonances in mid-nineteenth-century Paris. In contrast to emerging repertoires in neighbouring lands, *grand opéra* was after all funded by the generous subsidies of a highly centralised nation state, seeking to make a mark on the international stage. This collection of articles, however, demonstrates what is to be gained by releasing these works from the Paris Opéra, tracing the ways in which they have variously been transformed and inspired by, and have in turn shaped, host cultures in the mid-nineteenth century.

London was arguably the world's global capital in the first half of the nineteenth century, with a highly developed and varied theatrical culture, and we are reminded here what a successful export market it was for *grand opéra*. This was especially so after the opening of the Royal Italian Opera in 1847, when the genre became a tool for institutional one-upmanship and an alternative to Italian opera. But even in the 1830s, *grand opéra* contributed to the cross-Channel exchange of theatrical practice and scientific innovation. Staging technologies, directors, singers and other personnel (as well as the plays and operas themselves) moved back and forth between the two cities, enriching both economies. In this 'histoire croisée', *grands opéras* were not merely adapted ('mutilated' in the familiar telling of the story) to fit new local circumstances: they also contributed to the shaping of London's theatrical environment, and in so doing acquired new lives of their own.[6]

The role of lighting demonstrates this point particularly clearly. That Wagner's ideas for an opera on the story of the Flying Dutchman were gestating during his sea crossing from Dover to Boulogne is highly symbolic. As Gabriela Cruz argues, the innovatory phantasmagorical practices emanating from London, explored in relation

[5] Jane Fulcher, *French Grand Opera as Politics and Politicized Art* (Cambridge, 1987).
[6] Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, 'Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity', *History and Theory* 45 (2006), 30–50.

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to musical effects on the Parisian stage, provided the germ for the apparition of the phantom ship in *Der fliegende Holländer*. Moreover, for Tamsin Alexander, the distinctive London reception of Auber's *Gustave III* (as *Gustavus the Third*) highlighted the production's pioneering lighting effects and evoked a visual sublime that was distinct from the multi-sensory bedazzlement registered by Parisian critics. Indeed, London's pre-eminence in gas lighting, as Axel Körner tells us, prompted improvements at the Teatro Comunale in Bologna thirty years later for the Italian premiere of another *grand opéra*, *L'Africaine*. In other words, the nature of the London reception of *grand opéra* seems not only to have shaped its performances across time and place in quite specific ways, but also to have contributed to local theatrical, social and political economies at a more fundamental level.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is Meyerbeer who emerges as the central figure in these stories – the triumph of *Gustavus* notwithstanding. A composer with experience in German, Italian and French opera houses, he stands as a synecdoche for *grand opéra*'s defining eclecticism.[7] In Schumann's words, 'It is easy to trace in Meyerbeer Rossini, Mozart, Hérold, Weber, Bellini, even Spohr; in short, all there is of music.'[8] Of course, as Laura Protano-Biggs and Körner demonstrate, his cosmopolitanism has been more usually presented in negative terms: Schumann heard only 'vulgarity, distortion, unnaturalness, indecency and unmusicality' in *Les Huguenots*.[9] And once this view had been folded into Wagner's anti-Semitic dismissal of the whole genre as 'effects without causes', a sop for unthinking bourgeois audiences, his eclectic style became fatally tarred in the telling of operatic history. Yet when we step back from these attacks, we understand how Meyerbeer's eclecticism enabled his operas to promote alternative political agendas – in London, Bologna, New Orleans and beyond. The composer and the genre became aligned with a host of variously conservative and culturally progressive identities in Europe. In New Orleans, as Charlotte Bentley demonstrates, *Robert le diable* and *Les Huguenots* were harnessed by both francophone and anglophone publics to establish the roots of their emerging shared nation in relation to the competing cultural and political economies of Paris and London. In a further twist, Meyerbeer was not only seen by some as a successor to Rossini, but also eased the acceptance of Wagner in Italy; perceptions of his relationship with Verdi were similarly contradictory depending on the task at hand. Put slightly differently, Meyerbeer's cosmopolitanism can be understood in terms of mediating the acceptance of such 'national' composers as Wagner and Verdi, and rooting the traditions (and the terms of debate) of emerging nation states, at home and abroad.

The international perspectives presented in these articles encourage us to adopt a more open frame of reference when we experience *grand opérá* in the theatre today.

[7] Meyerbeer is a prominent figure in a colloquy convened by Dana Gooley 'Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Nationalism, 1848–1914', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66 (2013), 523–49; Gooley, 'Introduction', 523–29; and Ryan Minor, 'Beyond Heroism: Music, Ethics, and Everyday Cosmopolitanism', 529–34.

[8] Cited in Laura Protano-Biggs, 'An Earnest Meyerbeer: *Le Prophète* at London's Royal Italian Opera, 1849', 57.

[9] Cited in Protano-Biggs, 'An Earnest Meyerbeer', 57.

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Indeed, we might conclude that Michieletto's London production should be viewed less as a modern interpretation of *Tell*, standing in direct relation to its Parisian premiere and history, and more productively as part of the broader transnational process of grand-operatic performance that has unfolded across the last 200 years. One of the barriers to understanding *Tell* today is undoubtedly our assumption that we 'know' Rossinian opera: we hear this work of an Italian composer in France as a sort of flawed Italian opera, and fail to appreciate the less familiar qualities of *grand opéra*.[10] But what these articles emphasise is the benefit of occasionally letting *grand opérá* float free from its moorings in Paris. If we stop apologising for its larger-than-life ambitions and excavating its long-forgotten political messages, and instead just allow it to resonate with our own imaginations in the present, to overwhelm us with its powerful visceral effects, to engender horror and confusion as well as pleasure and recognition, it can speak powerfully to our own cultural and political aspirations.

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[10] As demonstrated by Christiansen's review, cited above. A similar misunderstanding has characterised reception of recent productions of Auber and Meyerbeer, heard as poor imitations of Rossini or half-hearted anticipations of Verdi or Wagner.

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