

Giacomo Meyerbeer



# Giacomo Meyerbeer:

## *A Critical Life and Iconography*

By

Robert Ignatius Letellier

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BT = *Giacomo Meyerbeer: Briefwechsel und Tagebücher*. Berlin: De Gruyter: vols. 1 (1960) & 2 (1970) ed. by Heinz Becker; vols. 3 (1975) & 4 (1985) ed. by Heinz and Gudrun Becker; vol. 5 (1998) ed. Sabine Henze-Döhring, with Hans Moeller; vol. 6 (2002) & vol. 7 (2004) ed. Sabine Henze-Döhring with Panja Mücke; vol. 8 (2006) ed. Sabine Henze-Döhring.

Clément & Larousse = Clément, Félix & Larousse, Pierre. *Dictionnaire des Opéras (Dictionnaire Lyrique): contenant l'analyse et la nomenclature de tous les opéras, opéras-comiques, opérettes et drames lyriques représentés en France et à l'étranger depuis l'origine de ces genres d'ouvrages jusqu'à nos jours. Revu et mis à jour par Arthur Pougin* (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1905), 2 vols. Reprinted New York: Da Capo Press, 1969. All translations are by R. I. Letellier.

DGM = *The Diaries of Giacomo Meyerbeer*. Translated, edited and annotated by Robert Ignatius Letellier. Madison and Teaneck, NJ: Associated University Presses. vol. 1: *1791-1839 – The Early Years, Italy and the Parisian Triumphs* (1999); vol. 2: *1840-1849 – The Prussian Years and 'Le Prophète'* (2000); vol. 3 *1850-1856 – The Years of Celebrity* (2002); vol. 4 *1857-1864 – The Last Years* (2004).

LGM = *Giacomo Meyerbeer: The Complete Libretti in Five Volumes. In The Original and English Translation by Richard Arseny with an Introduction by Robert Letellier*. London: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2004.

Loewenberg = Loewenberg, Alfred. *Annals of Opera, 1597-1940. Compiled from Original Sources by Alfred Loewenberg. With an Introduction by Edward J. Dent*. Second edition, revised and corrected. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1970.

# INTRODUCTION

This work takes a fresh look at the reputation, career and work of Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791-1864) by considering the composer in terms of the primary sources of his life (diaries and letters). These are now available for forming a more complete and detailed biography unclouded by prejudicial or uninformed opinions. This book is no substitute for engaging with the original papers themselves—whether in the now completed *Briefwechsel und Tagebücher* (1960-2006, 8 vols) or *The Diaries of Giacomo Meyerbeer* (1999-2004, 4 vols). Both these resources are daunting prospects, however, requiring knowledge of German, French and Italian in the first instance, and time, dedication and expense in both cases. This volume provides a manageable account of the composer's story, using a comprehensive selection from his diaries and letters that establishes the chronology of his life year by year, and also provides opportunity for some critical perspectives on his major works. These perspectives in turn are selected from the studies *The Operas of Giacomo Meyerbeer* (2006) and *An Introduction to the Dramatic Works of Giacomo Meyerbeer* (2008), both of which look at the composer's achievement in more systematic depth.

## The Reputation

Few composers have elicited such strong feelings as Meyerbeer does. Just to mention his name is to court immediate controversy, often with astonishing outbursts and a manifestations of scorn and contempt that border on hatred. The reasons for this remain unclear still. No other composer is treated with a type of moral opprobrium, both in relation to his work (often dismissed even by those who do not know it) and his person (where the ancient issue of anti-Semitism is still rife). The Berlin Philharmonic, for example, refused to play even a piece by Meyerbeer at the time of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death in 2014. Why? A conductor of renown put the phone down when asked his opinion about Meyerbeer. And in this writer's experience, a reviewer on Amazon.com even went so far as to wish a retrospective early death upon Meyerbeer in place of Bellini's premature demise! Wherein lies the power of this prejudice? It



has something to do with vestigial racial prejudice, combined as this often is with an idolatry of Wagner who did so much to discredit Meyerbeer. Mendelssohn, who was also attacked by Wagner, has curiously remained untouched. One may in fact love Wagner's music without espousing his *Weltanschauung*, and, amazing as it might seem, love both his and Meyerbeer's music—as those great composers and magnanimous men Franz Liszt and Camille Saint-Saëns were able to do. Knowledge of Meyerbeer's operas, and the immensely serious, challenging, and even contentious ideas they in fact explore, can be a transforming experience, a secret of the operatic repertoire that might surprise many present-day opera lovers if they can try to listen without preconceptions.

## **The Biographical Sources**

The first part of the book looks at these matters—at the historical legacy of controversy and disapprobation, examining the nature of the prejudice, and assessing how the availability of Meyerbeer's private papers, completely edited only very recently, makes all the difference in the historical process. This now constitutes a necessary precondition to any serious study of the man, and must question the formation of preconceived opinions about him that dominated musical history unchallenged for over a century. This introduction is essentially an updated version of the preliminaries written for the first volume of the English edition of Meyerbeer's diaries. The range of considerations is very complex and needs to be opened to wider readership in addition to dedicated musicologists.

## **The Jewish, Prussian and Family Background**

The extraordinary nature of Meyerbeer's Jewish background, and the role of his dynamic family in Jewish emancipation, are also considered. The role of the Prussian State was of crucial importance in the unfolding of Meyerbeer's life, in shaping aspects of his self-identity, and, because of his return to Berlin in mid-life, and his close association with the Royal family especially the later stages of his extraordinary career. The person of his mother Amalia Beer was of enduring importance for the composer both as man and artist, as were to lesser extent the lives and support he received from his gifted brothers Wilhelm and Michael Beer.

At this point particular and grateful thanks are accorded Elaine Thornton for her specialist research into the Jewish population of old Berlin, and into the fascinating and influential Berlin salons of the

Romantic period and the wonderful women who hosted them. She has also looked closely into the family of Giacomo Meyerbeer, and has made her research available to this study: her work shapes the form and content of this chapter, and is her own very special contribution.

## **The Life Unfolded**

The third section of the book is devoted, most importantly, to Meyerbeer's life and works. These are presented in a critical chronology that is fundamentally based on his own private papers, with testimony (both positive and negative) from many contemporary sources. Meyerbeer's diary was begun only in 1812, but was maintained in some form or another for the rest of his life. Where his activity precluded writing up this concise but cogent daily record, then his pocket books provide many vital and fascinating details about those whom he met and the nature of his work. Meyerbeer's inveterate and lifelong travels all over central and western Europe, and his often picturesque observation of the details of his journeys, provide a remarkably consistent record of the life and times of a famous man and his world. The realms of opera, production, singers, theatres, contemporary composers, musicians, authors, directors and rulers, are vividly conjured up. His observations of events also help to readjust received positions, or speculative commentary on his artistic role and his personal character. Unsubstantiated assertions about the composer can now be compared to the sober record of his remarkably restrained and mortified daily life. Due attention is also paid to his famous working partner, the librettist Eugène Scribe, whose experience of the dramatic and lyric stage was unparalleled. His wonderful stories reveal the breadth of his knowledge and reading, his acute awareness of national heritage, social trends and historical movements, his perception of the *Zeitgeist*, and his very deep compassion. The triumph of Meyerbeer's operas was also that of this inspirational dramatist.

## **The Iconography**

A detailed iconography is integral to this process, and helps to bring alive Meyerbeer's story and music more immediately. This fourth aspect of the book presents the portraiture of the composer across his life (drawings, engravings, lithographs, prints, paintings, sculpture, caricatures); images of his family; those who played an important role in his life; those who influenced his career or the politics of the times he lived in; some of the places and events of central importance to his story. Added to this is a

chronological selection of imagery from his operas. These were among the most widely known and performed works of the nineteenth century, and the most significant pictorialism arising from their production enriches this record of a life lived for music by one of the great innovators of operatic history.

## The Critical Edition and New Interest

The second decade of this century saw the appearance of the critical edition of Meyerbeer's scores, with most of the German, Italian and French operas published by Ricordi—in so far as this was possible with the loss of many Meyerbeer manuscripts during the Second World War. The emergence of these scholarly editions has been accompanied by a resurgence of interest on the operas themselves.

In 2011 *Les Huguenots* was presented in March in Madrid, and in a major production in June in Brussels. Other productions followed in June 2014 in Nuremberg, and in November 2017 in Budapest. The years 2012-13 were incredible for *Robert le Diable*, with productions in Erfurt, Monte Carlo, Sofia, Salerno, London and Geneva. In February 2013 the complete original version of Meyerbeer's last opera *Vasco de Gama* was presented to the world in Chemnitz, for the first time. This was followed in November 2013 by a spectacular production of *L'Africaine* at La Fenice in Venice. The years 2015-17 saw revivals of *Le Prophète* in Karlsruhe, Essen, Toulouse and Berlin. The Deutsche Oper in Berlin launched a Meyerbeer cycle in 2014 with *Dinorah*, followed by *L'Africaine* in 2015, *Les Huguenots* in 2016, and *Le Prophète* in 2017. *L'Étoile du Nord* was revived in Kokkola, Finland (July & November 2017) and *Margherita d'Anjou* featured in the 43<sup>rd</sup> Festival of the Valle d'Itria at Martina Franca (July-August 2017).

This book provides an opportunity for a fresh look at Meyerbeer's life and work.

Robert Letellier  
Cambridge  
15 January 2018



## CHAPTER ONE

# GIACOMO MEYERBEER—THE SOURCES: A LIFE REVEALED IN HIS PRIVATE PAPERS

The most frequently performed of all composers in Covent Garden and at the Paris Opéra during the nineteenth century was neither Mozart nor Verdi but Giacomo Meyerbeer.<sup>1</sup> His operas dominated the international repertoire with a popularity that seemed unassailable.<sup>2</sup> Yet now he has all but passed out of popular consciousness. His operas until more recently have only been rarely performed, and the general public are not even properly able to hear his music, once so beloved.<sup>3</sup> The average music-lover comes across his name only in reading about Richard Wagner, and the role he played in Wagner's path to glory.<sup>4</sup> The intellectual and popular perception of Meyerbeer is something of an historical phenomenon, a sociological as much as a musicological matter, an example of the perplexing power of prejudice.<sup>5</sup> And yet the former ubiquity and longevity of his art suggests an intrinsic worth far beyond his historical significance as precursor of the sublime achievements of Wagner and Verdi. But the materials for a proper reappraisal of both the man and his music, let alone

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<sup>1</sup> See Harold Rosenthal, *Two Centuries of Opera at Covent Garden* (London: Putman, 1958) and Stéphanie Wolff, *L'Opéra au Palais Garnier, 1875-1962* (Paris: Entr'acte, 1962) for the seasonal statistics.

<sup>2</sup> Meyerbeer's operas were an almost annual feature of the repertoires of Covent Garden, the Metropolitan and La Scala from 1870—1910.

<sup>3</sup> By 1999, for example, there were no commercial recordings of either *Robert le Diable* or *L'Africaine*, two of the most famous operas ever written—and this in a situation where the catalogues now boast extensive exploration of the most obscure composers. Imperfect live recordings appeared only recently: *Robert le Diable* (2001, 2013) and *Vasco de Gama* (2014).

<sup>4</sup> The cue has been taken from Hugo Riemann's famous dictum: "History will point to Meyerbeer as one of the most important steps to Wagner's art" (*Musik-Lexikon* [1882]; reprint Berlin: M. Hesse, 1929).

<sup>5</sup> Franz Werner Halft is right in describing most popular and critical responses to Meyerbeer as "eine Anhäufung von Vorurteilungen" [a heap of prejudices] (*Fono Forum* [1975]:1109).

any curiosity about him, or a sense of justice about his treatment, are singularly lacking, most especially in the English-speaking world.

This extraordinary situation *is* nonetheless bound up with Wagner. His following has come close to resembling a religious cult, and his words have often had the effect of scriptural utterances on the Wagnerians of this world—be they musicians, critics or ordinary music lovers.<sup>6</sup> Wagner's repudiation of Meyerbeer has had the effect of a ban, and like so many of his ideas, they have exerted a pernicious effect far beyond their innate worth. It

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<sup>6</sup> Even during his life Wagner was referred to as “der Messias von Bayreuth” (Theodor Goering, 1881). George Bernard Shaw's *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1899) is a famous attempt at analyzing the emotional and the intellectual intensity of Wagnerolatry. Shaw's discussion amounts to a demolition of Meyerbeer's aesthetic integrity: “A race of literary and theatrical musicians appeared; and Meyerbeer, the first of them, made an extraordinary impression. The frankly delirious description of his *Robert the Devil* in Balzac's short story entitled *Gambara*, and Goethe's astonishingly mistaken notion that he could have composed music for *Faust*, show how completely the enchantments of the new dramatic music upset the judgment of artists of eminent discernment. Meyerbeer was, people said (old gentlemen still say so in Paris), the successor of Beethoven: he was, if a less perfect musician than Mozart, a profounder genius. Above all, he was original and daring. Wagner himself raved about the duet in the fourth act of *Les Huguenots* as wildly as anyone. “Yet all this effect of originality and profundity was produced by a quite limited talent for turning striking phrases, exploiting certain curious and rather catching rhythms and modulations, and devising suggestive or eccentric instrumentation. On its decorative side, it was the same phenomenon in music as the Baroque school in architecture: an energetic struggle to enliven organic decay by mechanical oddities and novelties. Meyerbeer was no symphonist. He could not apply the thematic system to his striking phrases, and so had to cobble them into metric patterns in the old style; and as he was no ‘absolute musician’ either, he hardly got his metric patterns beyond mere quadrille tunes, which were either wholly undistinguished, or else made remarkable by certain brusqueries which, in the true rococo manner, owed their singularity to their senselessness. He could produce neither a thorough music drama nor a charming opera. But with all this, and worse, Meyerbeer had some genuine dramatic energy, and even passion; and sometimes rose to the occasion in a manner which, whilst the imagination of his contemporaries remained on fire with the novelties of dramatic music, led them to overrate him with an extravagance which provoked Wagner to conduct a long critical campaign against his leadership. Thirty years ago this campaign was mentally ascribed to the professional jealousy of a disappointed rival. Nowadays young people cannot understand how anyone could ever have taken Meyerbeer's influence seriously. Those who remember how his reputation stood half a century ago, and who realize what a nothoroughfare the path he opened proved to be, even to himself, know how inevitable and how impersonal Wagner's attack was.” The rest of the article praises Wagner as “the literary musician par excellence”.