

Meyerbeer's
L'Africaine

Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*:

History, Heroism and the
Mythological Hermeneutic

By

Robert Ignatius Letellier

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Frontispiece: Giacomo Meyerbeer, photo by Pierre Petit

“Greater love has no one than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends”.
(John 15:13)

Hero by hero, fame by fame inspir'd:
Without thine aid how soon the hero dies!
By thee upborne, his name ascends the skies...
By fame immortal, and by GAMA'S shade:
Him shall the song on ev'ry shore proclaim,
The first of heroes, first of naval fame.
(Camões, *The Lusiads*, Book 5)

C'était au sein des mers, sur ce lointain rivage
Où sous un ciel plus pur on voit les fleurs s'ouvrir,
Où le mancenillier étend son noir feuillage
Et son ombre qui fait mourir.
(Alexandre Dumas)

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INTRODUCTION

On 5 September 1991 the bicentenary of the birth of Giacomo Meyerbeer was celebrated. But this was not the only reason for festive remembrance in that year of anniversaries: on 25 December 1991 it was two hundred years since the birth of Augustin-Eugène Scribe, the famous librettist of Meyerbeer's operas, the author whose gripping stories delighted over a century of opera-goers, and proved the enduring inspiration of Meyerbeer, Auber and so many others, perhaps the most influential playwright in the history of opera.¹ It is peculiarly appropriate that Meyerbeer and Scribe should have been born within four months of each other: their joint achievements for the lyric stage changed the history of opera, and the extent of their achievement, hardly questioned in the 19th century, stands on the threshold of re-discovery and serious re-evaluation at the end of our own. Scribe died on 21 February 1861, a mere three years before the composer's death on 2 May 1864. This was before the completion of their last collaboration, *Vasco de Gama*, the opera which had intermittently preoccupied them both since 1838, an opera that had become legendary as *L'Africaine* years before its completion, the *Vecchia Africana* of the long years of Meyerbeer's anxious labours on this most troublesome of his operas. The enduring power of this legend dictated the posthumous, and perhaps inaccurate, choice of the famous title of this swansong of these two great creators of opera. It was sanctioned by Minna Meyerbeer in deference to the expectations of an adoring public who were to give Meyerbeer a tumultuous accolade on the première of *L'Africaine* a year after his death, 28 April 1865.² This opera which occupied Meyerbeer and Scribe's creative energies for so long includes in one last and splendid achievement many of the elements that had hitherto featured in varying degrees in all their other joint creations. Both composer and librettist were men of immense imagination and genius. Between them they created four works of great power and beauty that radically affected the history of opera, not in any violent or revolutionary sense, but by an evolutionary consolidation and highly original remoulding of all existing operatic resources. Operas like *Robert le Diable*, *Les Huguenots*, *Le Prophète* and *L'Africaine* could hardly have achieved their worldwide fame by negligible artistic means or shallow integrity: such renown is not won with shoddy goods, a fact admirably illustrated in the interplay of music and

drama in this final product of their artistic collaboration. The influence of Scribe and his liberal preoccupations (shared by the composer), is clearly in evidence in the finished work. The opera raises a series of interwoven issues that relate to race and religion, slavery and imperialism, that were actual and most topical to the spirit of contemporary France. It is easy to see in hindsight how this work was part of an Orientalising trend in the second half of the century, a cultural by-product of European colonial expansion.

Perhaps the first and most important observation is the need for scholarship in the study of the composer and his operas. The appearance of the English translation of an anthology of his letters selected by Prof. Heinz Becker from the definitive *Briefwechsel und Tagebücher* (eight volumes, published by De Gruyter in Berlin, 1960, 1970, 1975, 1985, 1998, 2002, 2006)³ has drawn attention to this monumental work and provided the scientific basis for any new biographical study. Similarly the re-publication of the full orchestral scores of his seven major operas by Garland Press of New York (1975), the re-appearance of the lost original manuscripts from their wartime hiding place, now housed in Cracow, and the work of scholars like Prof. Becker and Prof. Sieghard Döhring, mean that there can be no excuse for approaching the life and work of Meyerbeer without the same scientific scrupulousness and academic impartiality as is now taken for granted in the re-assessment of even less famous figures in the history of music.

There are now new biographies in German (Becker 1980,⁴ Wessling 1984,⁵ Zimmermann 1991,⁶ Henze-Döhring & Döhring,⁷ Kliche⁸) and in French (Segalini 1985,⁹ Anger 2017,¹⁰ Thiellay 2018¹¹). Added to the academic efforts of some American scholars (R. W. Gibson 1972,¹² T. L. Thomson 1976,¹³ J. H. Roberts 1977,¹⁴ A. Armstrong 1991,¹⁵ Cruz 1998¹⁶), there have now appeared in English both critical studies (Epstein 2010,¹⁷ Jackson 2011¹⁸) and biographies (Letellier 2018/2021,¹⁹ Faiman 2020,²⁰ Thornton 2021²¹).

Ronald Crichton's refreshing article "Sketches for a Portrait of Meyerbeer" (*Opera*, December 1990), written on the eve of the composer's bicentenary, provides several observations that serve as thought-provoking points of departure in any fresh assessment of the composer and his work.²² In reviewing the new Virgin video of *L'Africaine*, he saw the opera as making its way back into the repertoire, and potentially as the most popular of Meyerbeer's four *grands opéras*.

Indeed, *L'Africaine* has been revived more frequently than any of the composer's other works, and a survey of the more notable performances since the First World War leads one to ask whether this work has ever really disappeared from the repertory:

New York 1923	Munich 1978 (concert)
Berlin 1925	London 1978
New York 1929	London 1981
Verona 1932	Caracas 1981
New York 1933	San Francisco 1988
Vienna 1937	Bielefeld 1992
Rome 1937	Berlin Staatsoper 1991
Brussels 1938	Marseille 1992
Stockholm 1938	Strasbourg 2004
Berlin Städtische Oper 1951	Gelsenkirchen 2008
Frankfurt 1952 (concert)	New York 2008 (concert)
Ghent 1955	Würzburg 2011
Ghent 1958	Chemnitz 2013
Munich 1962	Venice 2013
Toulouse 1963	Berlin 2015
Naples 1963	Frankfurt 2015
Marseilles 1964	Halle 2018-19
BBC 1964 (radio)	Berlin 2019
Rouen 1965	Lübeck 2019
Florence 1971	Stata Zargora 2019
New York 1972 (concert)	Lübeck 2020
San Francisco 1972	Marseilles 2021
Barcelona 1977	

This list of performances hardly suggests a forgotten work. So many of the great singers of the 20th century have sung in this opera, while its special association with Gigli and Domingo, who have appreciated the lyrical beauty of Vasco de Gama's music, is particularly interesting.²³ The roll call of famous sopranos who have sung *Sélika* is equally impressive. Yet until 2013 there was no commercial recording of this famous opera available to the public, an inexplicable omission that is surely extra-musical, given the nobility and grandeur of this score? The complete version of the orchestral score as printed by Brandus in 1865 was at last performed by the Oper Chemnitz between 4-7 February 2013, and the whole opera produced for the first time as Meyerbeer left it prior to rehearsals and the editing of Joseph-François Fétis. The performances were recorded and presented in CD format by CPO in 2014, giving the

public the first-ever opportunity to hear the composer's dramatic conception as he left it, and without the disfiguring cuts that continue to afflict performances of Meyerbeer's works. This is a recording of immense historical significance, and vital for the proper rehabilitation and understanding of Meyerbeer's dramatic art

Notes

BT = *Briefwechsel und Tagebücher*

DGM = *The Diaries of Giacomo Meyerbeer*

LGM = *Giacomo Meyerbeer: The Complete Libretti in Five Volumes*.

Vasco da Gama is the name of the explorer; Vasco de Gama is the operatic character.

Camões is sometimes rendered in English as 'Camoens' or 'Camoëns'

L'AFRICAINNE / VASCO DE GAMA

THE AFRICAN WOMAN / VASCO DA GAMA

Opéra en Cinq Actes

Paroles de Augustin-Eugène Scribe (with revisions, additions and translations by Charlotte Birch-Pfeiffer, Heinrich Duesberg and Giacomo Meyerbeer)

Musique de Giacomo Meyerbeer

WORLD PREMIÈRE

28 April 1865

Paris, Académie Impériale de Musique (L'Opéra)

Sélika Marie Sass
Vasco de Gama..... Emilio Naudin
Nélusko..... Jean-Baptiste Faure
Inès Marie Battu
Don Pédro Jules-Bernard Belval
Don Diego..... Armand Castelmary
Don Alvar Victor-Alexandre Warot
Le Grand Prêtre de Brahma Louis Henri Obin
Le Grand Inquisiteur..... (Monsieur) David
Anna (Mlle) Levieilly

Georges Hainl (conductor)

The late works of great composers are always special or striking in some unusual way. Such works often represent a composer's last reflections on themes considered throughout his life, and can bring a new twist or development in the formal apprehension of his art.

Meyerbeer's late operas are typical in both these thematic and stylistic senses. As a composer born into an 18th-century heritage, he always worked with a strong sense of genre. As a Jewish German and lifelong wanderer for his art, the issues of identity, belonging, homeland, true values and freedom were always defining aspects of his world view—from his very first opera about the Biblical tale of Jephtha and the daughter who is nearly sacrificed to an intransigent religious principle. His famous 'Italian Journey' had confirmed him as a skilled and original practitioner of *bel canto melodramma*. His Italian operas, working with increasing boldness within the formal code established by Rossini, all depicted variations of wandering, exile, loss of identity and freedom, and the eventual euphoric advent of illumination, restitution and reintegration. When Meyerbeer moved to Paris he continued this pattern of working within recognized generic topoi, while re-shaping and re-casting their parameters all the time. The patterns of *grand opéra* established by Auber and Rossini found their most famous expression in *Robert le Diable* and *Les Huguenots*. And always, from his first youthful visit to Paris in 1814, he had cherished the ideal of writing in that quintessential French form—the *opéra-comique*.

Meyerbeer's swansong, *L'Africaine*, notoriously took twenty-five years and two versions to complete. The second version was actually written in a relatively short period in his very last years. Like the two late and slighter *comique* works, it is rich in its integrated symbolic fictional world. The opera helped to establish the vogue for Orientalism, which itself was a by-product of the resurgence of European colonialism during the mid-19th century. The story of Vasco da Gama's route to India around Africa (1498) is envisaged as grand historical opera in the tradition of Spontini's *Fernand Cortez* (1809), but it is much more. By deriving inspiration from the 16th-century Portuguese national epic, Luís Vaz de Camões's *Os Lusíadas* (1574), Scribe and Meyerbeer tuned into the world of mythological implication. The story of Vasco and his relationship with his Portuguese beloved Inès and the mysterious foreign queen Sélíka becomes a parabolic discourse between the old world of fixed medieval values and the new world of Renaissance exploration and discovery. The certainties of the first two acts in Lisbon cross the symbolic transitional divide during the ocean voyage of the third act, with its betrayal and tempest, reef and

shipwreck (embodied in the famous Adamastor Ballad). They enter into a wonderful but frightening world of novelty in the India of Acts 4 and 5. This new world is fragrant and exciting, but uncertain and potentially deadly in its many hidden dangers and poisons. Vasco is entranced but also mindful to make it his own in the spirit of swashbuckling colonial enterprise. He will be a victim of this dangerous engulfing new world unless he is saved from it. This happens through the self-sacrificing love of Sélïka who offers her life so that Vasco and Inès can escape back to their heroic old world certainties. Sélïka breathes in the fatal poisons of her own milieu (the venomous flowers of the Mancenillier Tree), losing herself, her self-identity, her life, in order to gain something altogether more exalted and transcendent in her final translation and transfiguration.

1. THE ORIGINS

The success of Meyerbeer's two *operas-comiques* (1854 and 1859) could have kept the composer working in this lighter vein: indeed in the last months of his life he was considering subjects for another libretto in the comic mode (see the Diary for January 1864). But his deteriorating health meant that he needed to return to his long-neglected "navigator project".

On 12 January 1801, an Italian opera *Vasco da Gama* by Friedrich Heinrich Himmel (with libretto by Antonio Filistri) was produced at the Court Opera in Berlin,²⁴ just nine months before the boy Jakob Meyer Beer made his public debut as a pianist. Knowing his lifelong preoccupation with the theatre it is almost certain that Meyerbeer at this early age of ten was already brought into contact with the historical figure of the famous Portuguese explorer. A seed was sown that would grow into an idea, an idea that was to haunt him all his life.²⁵

The text of *L'Africaine* is first mentioned on 16 September 1837, when Scribe delivered acts 1 to 3 of a new libretto to Meyerbeer. The attention of the collaborators was immediately taken up with the other projected text, *Le Prophète*, even though a contract was drawn up on 1 January 1838. The termination date was set for 24 August 1842.

The first involvement with this work was at the beginning of 1837, in that fruitful period when Meyerbeer, inspired by the success of *Les Huguenots* (1836), considered a whole series of new plans and even began working at them. Without doubt the project *Les Anabaptistes*, from which *Le Prophète* (1849) would grow, was in the foreground.

Dissatisfaction with the scenario, ready by the end of 1836, determined Meyerbeer to postpone this project in favour of another: an opera based on an exotic subject, with a leading female role for which he was considering Marie-Cornélie Falcon, the outstanding creator of Valentine in *Les Huguenots*. The contract conceded postponement because of the illness of Falcon who was now unable to essay the new role.

On 24 May 1837 Meyerbeer and Scribe signed a contract for the new grand opera *L'Africaine*; the libretto was to be delivered in three months, the score in three years. Whether or not Meyerbeer actually began the

composition at this time is not known, but in any case he turned away from the project in the summer of 1838, mainly because Falcon, afflicted with a vocal crisis, would not be available for the foreseeable future. However, her ailment was to see the end of her career, and in the light of developments at the Opéra in the 1840s, was a serious discouragement to Meyerbeer's creative interest in the project.

2. THE TEXT

The original scenario of 1837 had been drawn from an unidentified German tale and from a play by Antoine Lémierre (1723-1793) (*La Veuve de Malabar*, 1770) treating the love of a Hindu maiden for a Portuguese navigator, a theme already used by Spohr in *Jessonda* (1823).²⁶ In this earlier draft, the first two acts were set in 16th-century Seville; the third on a ship commanded by a Spanish naval officer (Salvator) modeled on the explorer Hernando (Ferdinand) da Soto; the fourth and fifth in central Africa. Despite his dissatisfaction, Meyerbeer sketched an entire draft for this version.²⁷

The story (extensive summaries of the action in Christhard Frese,²⁸ and the libretto itself in John Howell Roberts²⁹) was of the unhappy love of the African princess Gunima (in the scenario; in the libretto she is Sélica) for the Portuguese naval officer Fernand, whose affection she in return does not have, and eventually loses to his first love, the daughter of the governor Estrelle (the viceregent's daughter Inès). She consequently breathes in the poisonous fragrance of the manzanilla (or Mancenillier or Upas) tree. This story, after *Robert le Diable* and *Les Huguenots*, could have appeared only as a regression to conventions of the older operas. Meyerbeer's glosses and proposed changes in the scenario show that he acknowledged these weaknesses, and obviously tried to invest the subject with historical features (like the opposition between Christians and Moors in Act 1), but the fundamental structure of the individual action remained untouched.

Meyerbeer had further artistic reservations about the libretto, and turned back to *Le Prophète*. His doubts about *L'Africaine* can be derived from the libretto of 1837. Scribe and Germain Delavigne produced a four-act libretto in 1838 with a contraction of the first two acts, but neither this, nor a five-act version by Scribe alone in 1843, resulted in more than a half-hearted involvement in the project on Meyerbeer's part. On 10 December 1841 he noted that "I ... decided to begin preliminary work on ... *L'Africaine* in order to finish this provisionally, since I will soon have to deliver it to Scribe [on 31 December 1843]".³⁰

In various private utterances the composer made it clear that he held the text and the music of *L'Africaine* in lower regard than that of *Le Prophète*, and that after such a long period of silence, he could not contemplate returning to the Opéra with this work. So he set aside this provisionally completed version of the score (which he called the *Vecchia Africana*), especially as his new duties as *Generalmusikdirektor* to the King of Prussia made heavy demands of him.³¹ The official activities in Berlin, as well the composition of *Ein Feldlager in Schlesien*, *Struensee* and *Le Prophète*, meant that Meyerbeer did not even look to this project.

The project was, however, already becoming something of a legend, and even a talking-point among French ministers of state (“Thiers and Rémusat are extremely keen that I should produce either *Le Prophète* or *L'Africaine* at the Opéra,” 16 January 1846). On 26 April he also notes that “it is Scribe’s opinion that I should now go ahead with *L'Africaine*”, and on 23 January 1848 he attended a revue at the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin, *La Fin du monde*, which made fun of the composer’s unproduced works, including the long-awaited *Africaine*. However, Meyerbeer must have been working on the libretto, even though his diary makes no mention of this, because on 11 and 12 March he notes that he “read through the sketches of my *Africaine* carefully”. After the tumult of the *Prophète* première, with his thoughts turning to new projects, he reports on 5 June 1849 a conference with Édouard Monnais (1798-1868), a well-known music critic and royal *commissaire*, to whom he had given the libretto of *Africaine* for examination. The composer tersely notes: “He is not happy with it”.

Only after the completion of *Le Prophète* could the question of resuming the old project, on the basis of fundamental restructuring, be renewed. Certainly at the end of 1849 and beginning of 1850 the composer was reading Luis de Camões’s epic *Os Lusíadas* and contemporary travel literature on India (the copper engravings of the Indian journey made by Prince Soltikoff) probably with the idea of using the Portuguese naval hero and explorer Vasco da Gama as a new protagonist for his old opera. In autumn of 1850 Meyerbeer and Scribe resumed their discussion about the work.

While the composer was unable to give Nestor Roqueplan, the new director of the Opéra, any assurance of the new score for 1850, he did begin conferring with Scribe about a revision to the existing libretto (16 October 1850), and in this connection, also read Camões’s *Lusíads* in a French translation (21 October). On 27 October 1851, while traveling, in transit at Minden, he wrote to his famous collaborator:

It would be necessary for the clarity of the subject that the two lovers should meet in Act 1. You could provide a scene of recitative at the rise of the curtain where Ines, who knows from her father the makeup of the Council, and its malevolent disposition towards Vasco, advises her friend, begging him to be on his guard. In this scene you would be able to explain everything you need the public to know—I communicate these ideas to you, dear friend, as they pass through my mind. Do with them whatever you judge appropriate in your wisdom. But in any case I am counting on your kind promise to study and reconstruct the piece on an entirely new basis, on a foundation both *historical* and noble, with more interesting types of characters, more elevated than those of Fernand, Ines, Salvator in whom it has been impossible for me to take the slightest interest. More than anything, give Vasco a heroic and chivalrous character [*un héroïque & chevaleresque caractère*].³²

A new scenario was ready by 18 December 1851, but it was still unsatisfactory (“it does not please me very much”). A full scale revision was undertaken by Scribe during 1852 after further conferences during his visit to Meyerbeer in Berlin in May. On 14 June Meyerbeer wrote down his observation on the new plan, two days later “took out several books on India in order to research details for *Vasco*”, and on 27 June “fetched the copper engravings of the Indian journey made by Prince Soltikoff”.

In a letter of 27 October 1852 the composer reminded the librettist of his earlier promise “to place the work on new foundations with an historical and noble background”.³³ Scribe delivered various scenarios and libretto drafts which Meyerbeer annotated with his *remarques générales*. The extensive material allows a close look into the composer’s working practice, and shows yet again how much he initiated himself by way of scene and text. Partly descriptive, partly argumentatively, he proposed for the librettist the outline of the characters of Vasco, Sélika, and Yoriko (Nélusko), as well as general situations in the action (the Council Scene, the Adamastor Ballad). The new foundations were applied only in the first two acts of what now became known as *Vasco de Gama*; the dramaturgical structure of the other acts, on the other hand, stayed unaltered in their basic features. In Acts 1 and 2 the scene of the action shifted from Cadiz or Seville to Lisbon; Acts 4 and 5 from a place near the source of the Niger in Central Africa (as the libretto the *Vecchia Africana* has it) to India; the setting of Act 3, on a ship’s deck, was retained.

For a while the working contacts between Meyerbeer and Scribe were intensive, as with the meeting in Berlin early in 1852, but in 1853 the project was again delayed. In the following year the composer’s interest in

the matter would flicker for a while, usually in connection with plans for the casting of the principal characters. But apart from a brief period near the end of 1857, when he completed the duet for Vasco and Séliska in Act 2 and two of Nélusko's arias, other projects took precedence: *L'Étoile du Nord*, *Le Pardon de Ploërmel*, the incidental music for *La Jeunesse de Goethe*, some work on the three-act grand opera *Judith* (1854-1858, text by Scribe, and uncompleted) as well as many other small occasional pieces.

In the second draft of 1852, the title became *Vasco de Gama*, the time moved back a century, the first two acts relocated in Lisbon, the Spanish naval officer became the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama; the third act was still set on board ship, but now the fourth and new fifth acts were set in India. The character of the former African queen was adjusted to this new environment.

It is clear from the *Tagebücher* that Meyerbeer's own choice of title was *Vasco de Gama*.

From the time of the revision of the libretto in 1852 until the year of his death, he refers consistently to *Vasco*, but hardly ever to *Africaine*:

Den Plan von 'Vasco' durchlesen, um meine Bemerkungen darüber für Scribe niederzuschreiben... [Tgb. Mai 16, 1852.]

[read through the plan of 'Vasco' in order to write down my observations for Scribe.]

Meyerbeer's other researches for the revision reveal beyond all doubt the Indian emphasis of the work: the characters of Séliska and Nélusko, and the actual locale intended for Acts 4 and 5.

The confusion caused by the retention of the old title has notoriously been a source of adverse criticism against the dramatic logic and artistic integrity of both librettist and composer. The diaries confirm beyond all doubt the composer's intentions and thorough preparatory researches:

16 June 1852:

Auf der Bibliothek ... und ... einige Bücher über Indien mitnahm, um Recherchen über indische Details für 'Vasco' zu machen... Abends das grosse Kupferwerk 'L'Inde française' ganz durchgesehen.

[To the library where I took out several books on India in order to research Indian details for *Vasco*. In the evening looked through the big book of copper plates, *French India*.]

27 June 1852:

...Aus meiner Wohnung die Kupferstiche aus der indischen Reise von Fürsten Soltikoff geholt.

[Fetched from my apartment the copper plates from the Indian journey of Prince Soltikoff.]

His findings were carefully passed on to Scribe, as the entry for 30 June 1852 indicates:

Ich habe Scribe die Lithographien von dem Werke des Fürsten Soltikoff über Indien gegeben.

[I gave Scribe the lithographs from the work of Prince Soltikoff on India.]

Scribe now prepared the new words, and at a meeting in Paris on 16 January 1853 Meyerbeer noted: "Scribe read out three acts, and then gave them to me. They seem very lovely...." Acts 4 and 5 followed on 3 February. Preliminary composition began soon after, but momentum was not sustained because of the work on *L'Étoile du Nord* and then *Le Pardon de Ploërmel*.

Conferences with Scribe were resumed in September 1855, and on 10 October the whole matter received an unexpected development when the worm turned, and Scribe finally lost patience with the dilatory composer:

Conference with Scribe who has come out against the idea that I should produce an *opéra-comique* before completing either of the two *grand opéra* libretti I have from him: I pacified him, and he stopped protesting...³⁴

As soon as he had completed the composition of *Dinorah*, and before embarking on the demanding rehearsal period, Meyerbeer had another conference with Scribe on 7 September 1856, and thoroughly reacquainted himself with the libretto during November 1857. Composition began in earnest while at Nice (December 1857 - April 1858) with the great Council Scene in Act 1. Once the frenetic activity surrounding the production of *Dinorah* was completed in 1859, *L'Africaine* was to be the composer's constant companion until the very days before his death (March 1860 - April 1864).

The renewed work on *Vasco* in 1860 was soon interrupted by Scribe's death on 20 February 1861. This precipitated another crisis. Who would now help with the necessary revisions and alterations the composer always

required as any text was taking its final shape? Scribe was always involved in the rehearsals and dramaturgy of the final production. There was, further, the ownership of the libretto and the author's rights. The potential difficulties with Scribe's estate were resolved by new contracts drawn up with Mme. Scribe in 1862 and 1863. For textual changes Meyerbeer turned to the dramatist Charlotte Birch-Pfeiffer in March, April and May 1861; she was asked by Meyerbeer to provide alterations and extra verses at his direction; she undertook German revisions which were then translated into French at different times during 1862 and 1863 by the writer Joseph Duesberg (these were mainly in Acts 2 and 4). The alterations included new passages in the Sélïka's death scene written by the composer himself during November and December 1863.

In September 1863 Meyerbeer decided to go to Paris to begin his deliberations about the casting. The collaboration on the text continued until the preliminary completion of the score on 29 November 1863. Even at this stage important dramaturgical changes were made, like the elimination of the Slave Market Scene in Act 1, and as a consequence of that, the insertion of the entry of Sélïka and Nélusko into the Council Scene, as well as the new motivation for the love duet between Vasco and Sélïka in Act 4 by means of a love potion. When Meyerbeer died suddenly just before the rehearsals began in May 1864, the score was complete, apart from the ballet music. Since it was the composer's habit finally to establish the definitive shape of the work only during the rehearsal period as a result of insights gained from the process, this left open a number musical and dramaturgical problems.

Meyerbeer died on 2 May 1864, the day after the completion of the copying of the full score. The rehearsal period was always a time of radical revision and excision for the composer, and he left a verbal request that the work should not be produced if he were not alive to supervise it. Minna Meyerbeer and César-Victor Perrin, the director of the Opéra, however, entrusted the editing of a performing edition to the famous Belgian musicologist François-Joseph Fétis, while the libretto was revised by Mélesville.

After contractual clarification of complex questions of rights between the management of the Opéra and the widows of Meyerbeer and Scribe, Fétis (assisted in textual matters by Camille Du Locle, Delavigne, Mélesville, and Marie-Joseph-François Mahéroul) was commissioned by Minna Meyerbeer to prepare a performing edition from the voluminous material of the score. He completed this very responsible task with competence and

taste, and on the whole reached an acceptable compromise between the presumed artistic wishes of Meyerbeer and the practical necessities of performance (see the Preface to the vocal score). For the obligatory ballet Fétis arranged two of the excluded numbers: a variant of Sélîka's Lullaby (Act 2) and the sailors' *Ronde bachique* (Act 3). Perhaps his most daring contribution was simply to remove a duet movement for Sélîka and Nélusko from the extended Act-3 finale, and relocate it in Act 5 in order to give greater weight to Nélusko's presence at the end. He further implemented his proposal to change the title back to *L'Africaine*. Retaining the historical figure of Vasco as well as the Hindu religion depicted in Act 4, led to almost irreparable absurdity in the action because of the locations given for Acts 4 and 5 on the printed libretto in the vocal score (an island on the east coast of Africa) and in the full score (an island in the Indian archipelago). At this time the name of Yoricko was also altered to Nélusko, the name of the high priest of Brahma (Zanguebar) cut, and the definitive spelling of Sélîka fixed.

Because of the long public expectation, the original title was restored, and an attempt was made to reconcile this to the Hindu elements of the action by shifting the action to the island of Madagascar. Much of the music and action was suppressed, in spite of the damage this inflicted on the internal logic of the story. Nonetheless, the work was produced on 28 April 1865, a great posthumous tribute to its famous creators. While used to surprises of eye and ear in Meyerbeer's operas, the Ship Scene, the exotic Indian Act, and the Scene of the Manchineel Tree exerted much fascination on audiences, and elicited new praise. The work began a triumphal progress through the world, beginning with the big stages of London and Berlin.³⁵

The Plot

Lisbon, on board a ship, and in India, 1497-1498

Act 1. The Council Chamber of the king of Portugal in Lisbon; in the background and on the sides there are doors; to the right on a podium the chair of the president, with benches of the councillors on either side. Inès, the daughter of the admiral Don Diego, has been waiting with longing for two years for news of the expedition of Bartholomew Diaz to the Cape of Good Hope. Among his crew is the intrepid officer Vasco da Gama whom she loves. She recalls his song of farewell to the Tagus River. She is devastated to hear that it is the king's wish that she should marry Don Pédro, and her sorrow is compounded by the news that Diaz's expedition has been shipwrecked with all his crew. The King's Council gathers, led