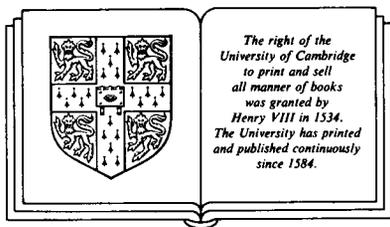


# The Nation's Image

## French Grand Opera as Politics and Politicized Art

JANE F. FULCHER



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## INTRODUCTION



**T**HE SUBJECT MATTER of this book is not narrowly an institution or the repertoire it produced: It is rather a set of interacting theatrical, political, and aesthetic phenomena. My study, then, is a cultural history and in a line of tradition that seeks the reasons for and consequences of such junctures or intersection of different sectors of culture.<sup>1</sup>

French grand opera, I maintain, is a genre that we must approach from this perspective if we are to grasp not only its historical significance but also its aesthetic force. For its nature as well as its meaning, or the signifying process of this body of works, was the product of a complex interchange between the artistic product and its institutional frame. The framework helped simultaneously to shape the character of the innovations possible as well as the audience's mode of construal and the character of the theatrical experience itself.

But in contending that the theater's function served on several levels to shape the genre (and thus denying the adequacy of a formalist approach) my argument is not entirely new. The established perspective is similarly one that insists on understanding social context and claims that the role that the theater played helped determine the experience and thus the utterance of this repertoire. For an utterance, to quote Bakhtin, derives from a common understanding of the situation and comprises "the simultaneity of what is actually said and what is assumed but not spoken." Here, however, the crucial point and the primary issue I wish to raise concerns "the larger body of discourse and social communication of which it was a part."<sup>2</sup> My study challenges existing interpretations of the kind of assumptions, understanding, and interaction that brought about both

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the works and their meaning, and so in two senses, their historical significance.

My consistent argument, which runs both implicitly and explicitly throughout this book, is that our crucial misconstrual of the institutional frame has obscured our understanding of the art. Grand opera was a different, a far more complex kind of theater—in its several senses—than we ordinarily suppose, and we can see this only if we recognize the complexity of its function. As my title indicates, I believe this function to be most fundamentally a political one and that the theater was politicized both in the tactics applied to its management and in the experience within it. Throughout the period of grand opera's rise, its dominance, and its final decline—from roughly 1830 to 1870—the theater was a subtly used tool of the state. Official intervention integrally affected the formation of the genre's artistic traits, the audience's construal of their significance, and concomitantly the gradual transformation they sustained in response. My argument here being so fundamentally iconoclastic in music history, it seems necessary by way of introduction to explain why I have challenged the existing view.

The clearest articulation of the now dominant interpretation of the genre appeared in 1948 in William Croston's *French Grand Opera: An Art and a Business*. Croston presents a sociological (and perhaps implicitly Marxist) explanation of both how the genre emerged as well as the nature of its specific values or traits. He begins, however, with the question of what occurred politically in 1830 in order to explain why the Opéra broke away from the tradition of state patronage in France.

Croston observes a decisive break with the past in 1831. The Opéra now becomes a business, catering to the newly ascendent bourgeois audience. Since a self-proclaimed "bourgeois king" had recently assumed the throne of France, cultural institutions now naturally turned to the needs and desires of this social class. And so it was as part of his program to buttress his new base of political support that Louis-Philippe encouraged the entry of bourgeois values into the Académie Royale de Musique.

Croston establishes this argument largely on the basis of the new director's contract or the "Cahier des charges" that designated him now a Directeur-Entrepreneur. Moreover, he cites

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those clauses in the document that defined “grand” opera’s attributes, for purposes of legal distinction between the theaters, as evidence of the common definition of its art. From here he links these traits, particularly the stress on size and lavish display, to the cultural character of the audience that the Opéra, in search of profit, now wished to attract.

Croston thus reaches a concomitant conclusion about the art that it produced: Calculated to titillate but not to threaten the beliefs of its audience, it was a compromise between tradition and innovation. More specifically, it was a popular romanticism, or one that superficially borrowed new techniques but balanced them with enough convention so as to remain acceptable to this social group. Grand opera, in sum, was an art “at once revolutionary and reassuring that extended one hand toward Romanticism and held fast to conventionality with the other.” For it was a genre that was “engineered by men who were able to judge . . . to what extent that movement was acceptable to the theater public.”<sup>3</sup>

From this point of view, the success of grand opera lay in its particular aptness for the audience it sought to address, an audience that responded more or less as its creators supposed. Their reaction to the works was passive: They derived a meaning that was not only unambiguous but rooted in their own values, which were simply reflected on the stage. Croston’s interpretation is thus one that prominently stresses what was absent, or the fact that these works did not challenge or engage the contemporary audience in any real depth. This too has carried the further implication that they were devoid of authentic artistic force and that their long-lived dominance on the stage resulted from a sociologically explicable aberration of taste.

Such an interpretation, together with the condemnation of Wagner and others who echoed him, has encouraged the tendency to derogate the genre. For when seen from this perspective it embodies those features we routinely condemn, particularly in genres as elite as opera—above all, meretricious, sensational display. Such an attitude, in addition, has influenced our treatment of the genre in operatic histories and classroom surveys, encouraging us to present it as fortunately only a transient stylistic link. To quote one recent source, “much of what was truly grand in it was absorbed by the stronger and more durable personalities of Wagner and Verdi.”<sup>4</sup> The “grandeur” intended here is most com-

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monly defined in terms like the following: "forceful staging, sharp contrasts, stirring choral scenes, virtuoso pieces, and a large orchestra, in at least three acts."<sup>5</sup>

Grand opera, I maintain, as theater, was far more than this in nineteenth-century France; what we now see is merely the shell of a once powerful and provocative theatrical form. My argument to establish the fact that we have misunderstood the theater and its theatrical dynamic is based on several key points of contention, which can be summarized as follows. First, the idea of a break between patronage and private enterprise is one that is based on questionable evidence and debatable historical interpretation. Refuting the claim of administrative rupture is a multitude of archival documents that testify to the state's continuing substantial financing and substantive political intervention.<sup>6</sup>

Here, however, we necessarily face both a semantic and conceptual issue: How can we define the nature of such an institution and perceptions of it during these years? If it was not really a private enterprise, then was it still state-patronized or "official" art? Or was there, and indeed is there still, a more elusive intermediate realm? In this case, to understand the historical past we might well turn to the present and to the issue of the relation of the national theaters to the state in France. Of particular relevance here is that a prominent minister of culture has characterized the national theaters as distinct in being "organismes publiques" as opposed to "organismes privés." As such, they are endowed with what he has termed a "personnalité morale"; they have a public resonance and are thus sustained by the state with which they are implicitly associated. It is not a question of overt political manipulation of the theater for propaganda but rather of "appropriation" of it for a more subtle political end.<sup>7</sup>

This intermediate realm is one, I propose, to which the Opéra belonged and in a particularly prominent way between 1830 and 1870. But to understand each government's goal in using opera in this manner we must look back to the French Revolution and its conception of legitimacy as expressed in art. It is here, I maintain, that we see the genesis of the Opéra's new role in political speech or the subtle new rhetoric that it was to communicate and to which Louis-Philippe returned. And here too we may observe the appearance of many of the phenomena that this book will trace, but particularly the emergence of the Opéra as a politically contestatory realm.

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To understand the function that the Opéra begins to serve in the French Revolution we must turn to recent historical insights concerning its conception of political legitimacy. This, of course, will be of essential importance in understanding its politics of culture as well as the way in which the arts began to participate in the political culture.

As François Furet has argued, with the French Revolution conceptions of power change; the locus of power is now the "people," and hence it resides in "public opinion."<sup>8</sup> To speak in the name of the people is thus to claim power in French society, for "the person who spoke successfully in the name of the nation was deemed to give voice to the general will."<sup>9</sup> But this immediately raised new questions concerning the exercise of power through culture, or the problem of political symbolism, of translating such claims into visual imagery or artistic discourse.

This is a problem to which a number of recent historians have devoted attention, and one that gave rise to another that has become the special province of historians of theater. It is they who have studied most extensively the issue of the gap that inevitably opened between such public revolutionary rhetoric in art and the actual political facts. For "public" culture, and the national theaters in particular, in order to remain true to such rhetoric had to represent public interests, embody public taste, and voice the common opinion. This became problematic as soon as the realities of power emerged, as they did very early in the French Revolution, immediately implicating the national stage. The state was forced here, for reasons of rhetoric, to try to respect an ideal of transparent public expression that clashed dramatically with the realities of the political world.

Historians of revolutionary theater have studied in depth the way in which the stage, as a result of this contradiction, now becomes a politically contestatory arena. As they have shown, despite its claim to be the voice of "opinion" this was not always the case, which compelled the audience to challenge it and at times to interact theatrically with the stage. Indeed, since the audience was now implicitly or theoretically "the Nation" or the political public, it could and often felt obliged to react to the message presented. And because of the theater's function such audience response was also a political act, similarly a statement of public opinion and consequently an act of political power. In effect, as a

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locus of affirmation or revocation of the right to speak for the nation, the theater of the French Revolution played a central political role.<sup>10</sup>

The Opéra, however, was to become a particularly problematic and contestatory realm, partly because of its firmly established role in political representation. The Académie Royale de Musique in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century had been the theater most closely associated with the personage and image of the king. His attendance at the Opéra was a political occasion to display himself to his subjects and to receive their homage both through prologues in the works and by the audience's applause.<sup>11</sup> But if the Opéra was used for a political message it is important to note that this message could change, and though the means were subtle it could still penetrate political awareness. Specifically, after the mid-eighteenth century the Opéra's repertoire turned away from "the legend of the Sun King" to "a new manner of operatic grandeur."<sup>12</sup> This shift in symbolic emphasis reflected a shift in political accent from a focus on the king himself to the abstract monarchical state. And such a transformation accordingly was accompanied by a change in administrative structure, from what has been termed traditional royal patronage to "an elaborate bureaucratic system." Further communicating the fact that the Opéra was no longer to be considered a court institution was that part of its administration was now entrusted to the city of Paris.<sup>13</sup>

But even if not uniform in nature, the Opéra's associations with monarchy still were strong, and so it is not surprising that the Opéra did not easily enter the Revolution's symbolic order. It waited until the Terror to follow the lead of the other national theaters there introducing a new repertoire with strong Republican connotations. On occasion it even belligerently offended Republican sensibilities, as in the case of Méhul's *Adrien*, which the Revolutionary leaders finally banned.<sup>14</sup>

All this made it particularly pressing to redefine the Opéra politically, to make it into an artistic forum for the expression of "*opinion publique*." The Opéra was gradually purged and made a prime Republican symbol as well as a stop to be included on major civic ceremonial routes. The Assemblée Nationale voted the theater an annual subsidy, but it continued to be closely observed by authorities for its political content.<sup>15</sup>

The Opéra's repertoire made political statements now on several

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levels, but the one of particular significance to us is the way it sought to embody public spirit and opinion. Like the other major theaters, it began frequently to use dramas of a popular nature, those that responded immediately to the events of the day and often seemed to confuse art with life. Like the boulevard theaters, in quest of greater *actualité*, or relating to current emotions and interests, it disregarded illogical stock settings and employed vividly realistic spectacle. Such “democratic” spectacle engaged the audience by blurring the boundaries between art and reality, often through powerful metaphors that carried explicit revolutionary connotations.<sup>16</sup> But beyond the language of spectacle, that of staging and décor played a similar role by often making explicit references to the political world beyond the stage. And sometimes the performers’ costumes also helped draw overt connections between those classical subjects still employed and their current political significance.<sup>17</sup>

Yet other symbolic changes associated the Opéra even more closely with the public realm, and its repertoire, implicitly, with *opinion publique*. The new Opéra, with conscious symbolism, used the décor from the theater at Versailles, although, significantly, now rearranging the spacial disposition of the hall. There were no longer forestage boxes, meaning no presence of the aristocracy on the stage, but rather a now clear demarcation between the actors and the audience that attended.<sup>18</sup>

One important consequence is that now the actors, distinctly separated from the audience, were provocatively presenting the latter with public opinion in the people’s name. This further encouraged the audience to accord its applause upon the basis of the political allusions it read, which sometimes created the problem for the authorities of controlling interpretation. And so the orchestra would here play a role, often instructed to reinforce the particular political allusions intended by playing specific political *chansons*. Indeed, one of the most violent episodes broke out toward the end of the Terror in reaction to the order that the orchestra play the Republican “Marseillaise” between acts. The royalists responded angrily by demanding the opposing “Reveil du Peuple,” which often led to violent rioting and even closing of the hall.<sup>19</sup> But politics and art continued to merge when audience members threw political pamphlets or *chansons* on the stage and demanded that the performer, the embodiment of public opinion, read them.<sup>20</sup>

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The Opéra was palpably a dangerous realm, one of contestation over the voice of the "people," and concomitantly officials saw it as potentially a realm of challenge to political authority. Not surprisingly they took special care to "control" the Opéra's public as part of an increased surveillance of the theaters and especially the national houses. This revolutionary experience implanted a nervous awareness of the Opéra's potential not only here but long after, including those regimes with which we are concerned. We can see such awareness manifest not only in Napoleon's stringent theatrical controls but, as is integral to my argument, in the Restoration's operatic policies as well.

The point of departure for my study is the Restoration for several reasons, but primarily because it is here that we see the return and transformation of revolutionary phenomena. For the Restoration ends by assigning the theater a political function or role that is not unlike what we have seen as characteristic of the French Revolution. Although no longer the vehicle of an explicit ideological propaganda, it serves once again as an image to associate the popular "spirit" with the regime. Through subtle controls, it continues to serve this "public" function throughout the next three regimes, and it is this, I shall argue, that is essential to our understanding of the development of the "grand" repertoire.

This quest for an "image" through the Opéra is one that affected the repertoire in several ways, shaping its definition, the audience's construal, and the way it was transformed in response. In every case, of course, these developments participate in each regime's political evolution, the tensions of which directly affect both theatrical utterance and operatic policies.

During this period the political public and thus the audience addressed perceptibly grows, and so we can trace an evolution of political concerns and theatrical tactics. The "image" and the repertoire is adapted as it addresses different groups who then apply different modes of construal and enter into operatic debates and controversies for their own specific political ends. What will interest me centrally, then, is how the image of the Opéra and the repertoire changed in a continuing process of subtle adaptation throughout these years; how this evolution relates to the changing political context; and how the works themselves reacted back on this context and helped to influence political perceptions. In all of these respects I shall emphasize the interplay of the phenomena

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around these works—the creative, the political, the theatrical—and how they interacted historically.

To do so and to retell the story of the rise and decline of the genre, my study focuses on several works that are from this perspective particularly illuminating. In each case they are operas already well studied from the standard point of view, but it is my aim to show different sides of them and different aspects of their genesis and histories. The particular events on which I shall focus are those that I believe help reveal larger structures or those causal forces that historically intersected to determine the genre's "fate." They are also events that help us to see the way in which this repertoire indeed "made sense," that explain its theatrical and musical conventions and how they once cohered or "spoke." Moreover, these works and events reveal the diversity of experience that the genre comprehended and testify that at specific moments in its history it was a powerful and evocative kind of theater in France.

My first chapter centers on the seminal opera, Auber's *La Muette de Portici*, and the reemergence and transformation of those phenomena I have seen in revolutionary opera. Chapter Two then traces the results of this development in the context of the succeeding regime, or what the monarchy of Louis-Philippe did or did not learn from the Restoration. Here, in order to follow the emergence of the repertoire's basic traits within the real mechanism and concerns of the institution, I shall focus on *Robert le Diable* and *Les Huguenots*. Both are works the response to which helped to determine subsequent policy and hence works to which we can see political tactics applied in several ways. Chapter Three traces the theatrical meaning and symbolism of grand opera through the period of the Second Republic and its effort to broaden access to it. Here I shall center on a work whose history is bound up with this policy and its subsequent abrupt reversal: Meyerbeer and Scribe's opera, *Le Prophète*. My concluding chapter follows the increasing loss of credibility of the genre in the period of the Second Empire as its symbolism, its image, and thus its nature change.

Although in all of the chapters I am concerned with the audience's construal of these works, my study is not narrowly a "reception history" but, once more, a cultural history. For what interests me is how grand opera was implicated in a social and

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cultural context—how it arose within these larger structures and in turn reacted back finally upon them. Grand opera in this sense is a challenge that forces us to see the cultural landscape anew, the way in which cultural functions and forms interacted in nineteenth-century France.