Notes on *Le Prophète*

No composer has suffered more cruelly from the vicissitudes of musical taste than Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791-1864). Acclaimed in his lifetime as the peer of Beethoven and Michelangelo and deeply admired by Berlioz, Verdi, and other eminent contemporaries, he fell victim in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to a violent reaction that led to the virtual banishment of his operas from the international repertory by 1940. Only recently has it become possible to view him dispassionately and to recognize in him an artist who, though undoubtably flawed, remains immensely interesting and vital.

Born in Berlin of a prominent Jewish family, his original name was Jakob Liebmann Meyer Beer. After several youthful attempts at German opera, he made his way in 1816 to Italy where he composed a string of successful *opere serie* in the manner of Rossini. But it was only with his first work for the Paris Opera, *Robert le Diable* (1831), that he found his true metier. In *Robert* and its successors *Les Huguenots* (1836), *Le Prophete* (1849), and *L'Africaine* (1865), he produced the classical examples of a type of spectacular and grandiose French opera, combining sumptuous and intricate staging, virtuoso singing, and elaborate choral and ensemble writing within a massive five-act framework, that left its mark on such diverse masterpieces as *Les Troyens, Aida,* and *Boris Godunov*. Musically his mature style is a blend of French, German, and Italian elements, held together by the force of his somewhat idiosyncratic personality.

The writing of *Le Prophete* extended over a period of no less than thirteen years. Meyerbeer first considered tackling the subject immediately after the premiere of *Les Huguenots* in 1836, then decided to begin *L'Africaine* instead, then finally returned to it in 1838 when he succumbed to doubts about the latter work. His score was completed in 1841, but a series of disputes over casting with the Opera director Leon Fillet long prevented its performance. Initially Meyerbeer insisted upon having for the role of Fides the brilliant young Pauline Viardot, while Pillet pressed the claims of the company's eccentric prima donna, Rosine Stoltz, who happened to be his mistress; then when Meyerbeer capitulated and accepted Stoltz, difficulties arose over the role of Jean—the great tenor Duprez, for whom the part had been conceived, having gone into precipitous decline. Not until the joint departure of Pillet and Stoltz in 1847 was the way opened for the production of *Le Prophete,* and even so the composer was obliged to settle for his third choice for Jean, the Opera-Comique singer Gustave Roger. (He had wanted Fraschini or Mario.) In 1848 Meyerbeer undertook a thorough revision of the opera, composing among other things the well-known Coronation March. Many additional changes followed during rehearsals, including the suppression of a scene in Act II, reflecting the polygamous practices of the Munster Anabaptists, in which ten queens are selected for the King-Prophet, and the elimination of an arioso for the dying Berthe accompanied by the recently invented saxophone.

Le Prophete received a dazzling premiere at the Opera on April 16, 1849. In addition to Viardot and Roger, both of whom drew the highest praise, the cast included

Jeanne Castellan as Berthe and Nicholas Levasseur (then aged fifty-eight) as Zacharie. The magnificent stage production contained two sensational novelties: an electric sun at the end of Act I, marking the advent of electricity at the Opera, and the use of roller skates to simulate ice skating in the winter scene. An immediate and overwhelming success, *Le Prophete* reached its hundredth performance at the Opera by July 14, 1851, and rapidly conquered the operatic capitals of the world. New York first heard it at Niblo's Garden in 1853, and between 1884 and 1928 it achieved some fifty-six renditions at the Metropolitan, with such luminaries as Jean de Reszke, Caruso, and Martinelli as Jean, and Brema, Schumann-Heink, and Matzenauer as Fides. Notable modern revivals took place at Zurich in 1960 and Berlin in 1966.

The libretto of *Le Prophete,* like those of all Meyerbeer's *grands operas,* was written by the ubiquitous Eugene Scribe, who also furnished Verdi with *Les Vepres Siciliennes* and, indirectly, with *Un Ballo in Maschera.* In the course of composition Meyerbeer demanded many alterations and at one point engaged the poet Emile Deschamps to carry out extensive revisions behind Scribe's back. The story is based, in the loosest sense of the term, on one of the most colorful.episodes in Reformation history, the career of John of Leyden (Jan Bockelson) and the communistic and theocratic state in Munster over which he briefly but ostentatiously presided in 1534-35. According to Scribe's friend Ernest Legouve, he conceived the central confrontation between Jean and his mother while contemplating a picture of the marriage at Cana, where Jesus rebuffed Mary with the words "Woman, what have I to do with you?"

In the prophet's fiercely devoted mother Fides, Meyerbeer created a highly original figure that obviously influenced Verdi's Azucena. Her eloquently expressive arioso "Ah! mon fils" ranks among his most celebrated pieces. Hardly less impressive are her desolate begging song "Donnez, donnez" and the passage in the second act finale where she invokes the malediction of heaven on the tyrant, unaware that he is her own son. The character of Jean remains confused in the libretto, hampering the composer's efforts at characterization; but his music consistently shows Meyerbeer at his most inspired.

Perhaps the most memorable personages in the opera are the villainous trio of Anabaptists: Jonas, Mathisen, and Zacharie. Meyerbeer had a peculiar genius for depicting evil, and from their first entrance we feel the chill of their malevolent nature. At the same time there is a touch of grizzly humor about them, which is heightened by their tendency to speak as a unit. Some of the finest pages in the score belong to the prominent chorus. One especially notes the scene of the mutinous rabble in Act I, Scene 3, and the opening tableau of Act II, in which the burgers alternately hail their new ruler and grumble over his oppression.

Despite his German heritage Meyerbeer was essentially a melodist rather than a weaver of symphonic textures. His is not the long-breathed lyricism of a Bellini but a more concentrated and popular idiom, which at its best, as in Jean's triumphal air "Roi du Ciel," can sweep us away with its exhilarating directness. He also excels in the deployment of vast orchestral forces, constantly shifting and intermingling his colors, often with telling dramatic effect. Although by no means approaching a Wagnerian

motivic system, he does employ a number of recurring themes. Thus, for example, Jean's account of his dream in Act I, Scene 2, musically foreshadows his subsequent coronation, and the Anabaptists' stark hymn "Ad nos, ad salutarem undam" (an invention of Meyerbeer's) serves as a sort of motto for the work as a whole. A curious feature of the score is its frequent echoes of the style of Handel, particularly in the music of the Anabaptist party. We know in fact that Meyerbeer studied the oratorios Joshua and Alexander's feast while composing the distinctly Handelian "Roi du Ciel." His intention was apparently to invest the drama with a special historical atmosphere, in pursuit of the favorite Romantic ideal of local color.

The climax of Le Prophete is unquestionably the coronation scene in Act II, the progenitor of many similar spectacles, including that in Bon's. Not only does it offer a splendid ceremonial display with the familiar March, the Anabaptists' archaic prayer, and the majestic processional chorus, but it culminates in one of Meyerbeer's most extraordinary dramatic conceptions. Jean, having been recognized by Fides, thereby compromising his claims of divine origin, announces that he will perform a miracle and cure her alleged insanity. Fixing her with his eyes, he bids his followers draw their swords and strike him down if she persists in her assertions. She proves her love by declaring she has lied: she has no son. A melting cello melody movingly symbolizes their unspoken understanding. At moments like this one realizes that as a master of theatrical effect Meyerbeer has never been surpassed. —]ohn Roberts