SYNOPSIS

Act 1

Outside Count Oberthal's castle near Dordrecht. Following a brief instrumental prelude, the scene is prepared by a pastoral chorus with such conventional rustic topoi as open fifths in the low strings and an imitation of shepherds' pipes, as well as a more unusual orchestral effect of small sheep bells rendered by triangle, piccolo, and pizzicato strings. Berthe meets her prospective mother-in-law, Fidès, and explains that she must obtain authorization from Count Oberthal to marry her son Jean. Three Anabaptists enter, intoning Latin words in unison to a dark accompaniment of bassoons and horns. The architecture of the subsequent number mirrors the spread of discontent among the peasants: an exposition of social evils by each of the three Anabaptists is punctuated by statements of "Ad nos ad salutarem"; individual peasants begin to show interest, the tempo increases, and a long dominant preparation gives way to a unison choral rendition of "Ad nos"; and the number closes with an even more rousing march chorus as the peasants arm themselves with pitchforks and axes and assume ranks. This brings the feudal lord Count Oberthal out of his castle. He does not establish a strong musical presence as he dismisses the seditious activities of the Anabaptists in nondescript recitative; from the musical point of view, the stage instructions for peasants to cower before him are scarcely credible. Berthe asks Oberthal for permission to marry Jean in a strophic *romance*, "Un jour dans les flots de la Meuse," in which Fidès echoes the end of Berthe's phrases and the two combine in the refrain. Oberthal refuses and orders his soldiers to seize Berthe and Fidès and disperse the peasants; "Ad nos" is heard in the distance as the two women are led away.

Act 2 *The interior of Jean's inn at Leyden.* A rustic waltz chorus is the musical backdrop for Jean's expressions of longing for Berthe, and for the discovery by the three Anabaptists that Jean bears a striking resemblance to an altar painting of King David in Münster. When alone with the Anabaptists, Jean reveals a recent dream: to music that will be heard in the coronation scene in act 4, he tells of being heralded as the Messiah and then dragged to hell by Satan. In a strophic pastorale, "Pour Berthe moi je soupire," he sings of his love for Berthe; between the stanzas, the Anabaptists, who see Jean as politically useful, try to enlist him by suggesting softly, with staccato singing, that, just as in his dream, he is destined to rule. These words do not strike a responsive chord, but, just then, Berthe rushes in, begging Jean to hide her. Oberthal follows and threatens to execute Fidès if Berthe is not given up; disgusted, Jean throws her into the hands of the soldiers and Fidès is freed. In a tender number with reduced scoring featuring muted cellos, Fidès blesses Jean. The Anabaptists reappear, and, this time, Jean—eager to wreak revenge upon Oberthal—places his faith in them. He is told, however, that in order to assume leadership of their forces, he must leave his homeland and mother forever. Recalling Fidès's arioso, Jean balks at first but cannot resist the call of the Anabaptists after a twofold rendition of a martial ensemble promising the end of feudal tyranny.

Act 3, Scene 1

The camp of the Anabaptists in the Westphalian forest. While sounds of battle are heard in the distance and aristocratic prisoners are led in, the Anabaptist forces express their fanaticism with repeated snap rhythms on strong beats and a unison passage in which they voice their hatred. In

strophic couplets of swaggering bravado, Zacharie revels in the apparent might of the Anabaptist forces (“Aussi nombreux que les étoiles”). Men and women bearing provisions approach the

camp: a sforzando followed by a rapid diminuendo on a sustained chord in each bar suggests the motion of skating. The soldiers enjoy a moment of repose.

Act 3, Scene 2

Inside Zacharie’s tent. Mathisen agrees with Zacharie that Münster must be taken soon and leaves to rouse the soldiers. Oberthal has stumbled into the Anabaptist camp and is brought before Jonas and Zacharie, who do not recognize him in the dark. Seeing a chance to enter Münster, Oberthal declares that he will join the Anabaptist cause. In a trio with ensemble refrains, he swears, tongue in cheek, that he would gladly hang assorted aristocrats at the first opportunity; in a lilting 6/8 passage with interspersed tra-la-las, Jonas casually tells him that Oberthal père has been executed. When Jonas lights a lamp, the real identity of the guest is discovered and the final refrain follows

with grim ironic effect: whereas the first two refrains were those of a drinking song, the third retains the same music—but Jonas and Zacharie sing about Oberthal’s impending execution and Oberthal expresses unbridled hatred of the Anabaptists. Just as Oberthal is about to be led off, Jean appears, in deep reflection about the Anabaptists as well as the intertwined fates of the two women in his life: the orchestra sounds the music of his earlier pastorale about Berthe as he actually sings of his mother. Oberthal informs him that Berthe has been seen alive in Münster. Jean immediately orders that he be spared, and an attack on the city mounted. Mathisen runs in with the news that there is

a revolt among Anabaptist soldiers.

Act 3, Scene 3

The Anabaptist camp. A chorus of rebellious soldiers is the first section of a multisectional finale; a long dominant preparation in C major veers suddenly to B major to underscore a fortissimo “mort à l’imposteur.” In a remarkable passage of declamation following the chorus, Jean forces his disenchanted troops to kneel. A prayer led by the prophet forms the slow section of the number. Following a transition in which, to the accompaniment of harps, Jean tells of a celestial vision, a “Hymne triomphal” functions as the strette. This culminates in a scenic coup before the curtain: the sun rising as the troops prepare for battle.

Act 4, Scene 1

A public square in Münster. The city has been taken and a chorus of inhabitants alternates complaints (in piano) about the oppressive rule of the Anabaptists with forte affirmations of

loyalty to the prophet as his patrols pass by. Fidès appears, begging for alms (“Donnez pour une pauvre âme”). The number is strophic, but, in the second strophe, Giacomo Meyerbeer brings

in the voice part on an E-flat, taking the music to G minor after the prevailing E tonic, thereby intensifying Fidès’s expression of distress. Berthe appears and recognizes Fidès. In the agitated first section of a duet, she tells of her futile search for Jean and then, to a broadening of the tempo, exudes joy that she is in Fidès’s arms. Fidès has been tricked by the Anabaptists into believing that Jean is dead; following a static ensemble in which both commiserate in extensive parallel singing, Fidès attributes Jean’s demise to the work of the prophet. In the cabalette of the duet, Berthe vows that she will kill the odious tyrant, while Fidès assumes a more passive position in prayer.

Act 4, Scene 2The cathedral at Münster. A large crowd has gathered to witness the coronation of Jean the prophet as a new emperor. To a grand processional march, featuring a family of saxhorns and a trumpet melody (foreshadowing that in act 2 of Verdi’s Aida), the electors enter with various imperial accoutrements, followed by Jean himself. The entire populace kneels in prayer. Fidès appears, and, in a fine passage marked avec exaltation in which the voice sweeps rapidly between extremes of tessitura, she vows to strike the prophet. A chorus of children hails Jean as the prophet-king, and, with halting pianissimo declamation, Jean concludes that he must be the son of God. His personal reverie and the entire public ceremony are abruptly cut off by Fidès’s exclamation of “Mon fils!” in recognition of her own son, the coup de théâtre that spawns the slow section of this finale. Jean refuses to admit that he knows the woman. In response to a faction that questions his legitimacy, Jean forces Fidès, by means of a ruse, to repudiate her relationship to him: when he offers to give up his life on the spot if her claim can be substantiated, maternal instinct leads Fidès to declare that he is not her son after all.

Act 5, Scene 1
A vaulted cellar beneath the Münster palace. In a brief exchange, Jonas, Mathisen, and Zacharie agree that, to ensure their own safety, they will deliver the prophet to the imperial armies advancing on the city. Fidès is led in as a prisoner. In the slow section of a grand air (“O toi qui m’abandonnes”), she pardons her son; learning that he intends to appear, she expresses hope that he will see reason, the music of her cabalette returning to the heroic sweep of the music marked avec exaltation in the coronation scene. Fidès assumes the dominant position dramatically, as well as in sheer quantity of music, in the subsequent duet. First, she unleashes her anger in a driving allegro replete with dotted rhythms. She orders Jean to give up power and assures him that, if he does this, celestial pardon will be his. Jean’s direct acknowledgment of Fidès as his mother ignites the final cabalette. Berthe happens upon the two and explains that she intends to set fire to the palace in order to destroy the prophet. She is overjoyed to see Jean alive and, in music that recalls the pastoral vein and tonality of the act 2 waltz, the three sing of the joy of a humble existence. When an officer enters and addresses Jean as the prophet, Berthe is horrified; following an alla breve strette capped by a torrent of coloratura, she stabs herself. Jean resolves to seek revenge on the Anabaptists and the advancing forces of order.

Act 5, Scene 2
A large hall in the palace. Those assembled celebrate the glory of the prophet in song and dance. Jean tells two officers to allow the enemy to enter and warns them that he has ignited the saltpeter in the cellar. Assuming a convivial air, he launches a strophic drinking song; the second

of the palace collapsestrophe is interrupted by the entry of the three Anabaptists, Oberthal, and imperial troops. As Fidès joins her son in the final strophe of the song, an explosion is heard, and the walls of the