

Chapter 17: Romantic Spectacles: From Virtuosos to Grand Opera: 1800–1850

I. Romantic spectacles

A. Introduction

1. Spectacle became an important means of drawing audiences to public concerts and operas.
2. French opera of the time became known as *grand opéra* because of its sensational musical and visual effects.
3. The size of audiences grew rapidly in the nineteenth century in response to new economic, demographic, and technological developments.

II. The devil's violinist: Niccolò Paganini

- A. Paganini was the first in a line of nineteenth-century virtuoso performers who toured European concert halls.
- B. His virtuoso playing set high standards, which were also demonstrated in his publications.
- C. While Schubert likened his playing to the song of an angel, most associated Paganini's talent with a deal with the devil.
 1. Legends grew around Paganini and sorcery.
- D. Paganini's performance in Paris in 1831 inspired Liszt to become the "Paganini of the Piano."
- E. Despite a short major performing career, Paganini's impact was formidable.
- F. The technical demands of Paganini's shorter works (particularly the caprices) caused them to be deemed "unplayable."
 1. Left-hand pizzicato, octaves, etc.

III. "The Paganini of the Piano": Franz Liszt

- A. Liszt was born in an area that mixed Hungarian and German culture.
 1. He spoke German but at times styled himself as an exotic Hungarian.
- B. As a boy, he studied piano with Czerny (Beethoven's pupil) and composition with Salieri.
 1. He was acknowledged as a prodigy by Czerny.
 2. He debuted in Paris in 1824 (he was born in 1811).
 3. He played typical concert fare, which were virtuoso variations on popular tunes.
- C. After hearing Paganini, Liszt revisited technique, including trills, octaves, tremolos, double notes, etc.—all inspired by the violinist's performance.
 1. He composed fantasy on Paganini's "Campanella."
 2. In the 1830s he published his Transcendental Etudes.
- D. At the same time he added the new elements to his technique, Liszt read voraciously. These readings influenced his thoughts on politics and culture and ultimately enabled a new self-perception of the role of the public artist.
- E. In 1848, Liszt settled in Weimar and focused on composition.
- F. In the 1860s he took minor orders in the Catholic Church.
- G. Liszt had several intimate relationships with women, including a countess and princess.
 1. Marie d'Agoult was the mother of Cosima, who eventually married Wagner.

2. These well-born and wealthy women were influential in his career.
- H. Liszt met important composers, including Beethoven and Debussy, and he promoted composers of different styles and nationalities.
- IV. Transforming music through arrangements
- A. Liszt arranged the music of many composers, and some of his transcriptions have lasted longer than the originals.
 - B. Some of his pieces are transcriptions in a narrow sense of the word; others are more recompositions of preexisting material.
 1. Arrangements were particularly popular in the nineteenth century, serving to disseminate music and facilitate domestic music making.
 2. His free-form fantasies on operas were the most popular, although he also reworked music by older composers.
 - a) Liszt's fantasy on themes from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* is exemplary of the way he could take someone else's music and put his own stamp on it—a musical commentary reflecting his own vision.
- V. The Lisztian concert
- A. Like Paganini, Liszt sought to combine his virtuoso concerts with a public persona that teased with hints at a dark side, flirtations, etc.
 1. It was called Lisztomania by the poet Heinrich Heine.
 2. The modern understanding of the word “recital” originates from his performances in London in 1840.
 - B. Liszt played with a physical presence that was captivating and heavy for the instruments of the period.
 1. He had several pianos onstage because he broke strings frequently.
 2. Critics reported an orchestral nature in his playing.
 - C. He toured throughout Europe, and the text highlights a performance at St. Petersburg.
 - D. Improvisation was typical on Liszt's concerts.
 1. Sometimes he went so far afield of the original that critics began to complain—which is a commentary on the idea of the “work.”
- VI. Spectacle on the stage: French grand opera
- A. Paris, the cultural capital of Europe, was the home of the largest theatrical spectacles.
 1. These large events reflected a French self-perception of being the largest and, therefore, most significant nation in Europe.
 2. Spectacular opera had existed in France since the time of Lully.
 - B. The operas associated with the librettist Eugène Scribe were among the most famous.
 1. He was musically sensitive.
 2. The composers who used his librettos included Halévy, Auber, Meyerbeer, Verdi, and Gounod.
 3. While he was not particularly inventive when it came to language and often used clichés, Scribe had a gift for drama.
 - C. The emphasis on spectacle in opera meant that all aspects of a production were expanded, often with innovations appropriate to each aspect.

1. These operas, with their increased use of chorus and more unified dramatic unfolding, eventually led in the late 1820s to a new and epoch-making kind of extravaganza called *grand opéra*.

D. *Grand opéra*

1. The new Paris opera house on the Rue Peletier had a seating capacity of nearly two thousand.
 - a) It was the first opera house to use gas lighting instead of candles, the first to use limelight, and the first to use electricity.
 - b) Its stage machinery was advanced, and emphasis on spectacle required innovative kinds of direction, mechanical stage craft, lighting, costumes, and scenery.

(1) The stage director became important to opera.

VII. Daniel-François-Esprit Auber's *La muette de Portici*

- A. Scribe expanded the libretto to what would become the standard five acts with fully accompanied recitative, ballet, and a story that was historical, heroic, and tragic.

1. The music proceeds for extended times without a break, which added to the suspense.
2. Two principal tenets of late-century opera reforms—the emphasis on closely aligning different media in a mutually reinforcing collaboration and the achievement of dramatic or musical continuity—were anticipated in an attempt to court public taste.

- B. *La muette de Portici* is noteworthy for its political association.

1. The Bourbon Restoration (1814–30) was the intended reason for the opening, and the opera was to try and sway public opinion away from revolution—since that is what happens to the revolution in the opera.

- C. Anthology 2-37 (*La muette de Portici*)

1. The power of music, in this case opera, to persuade public opinion in driving politics emerged in the nineteenth century.
2. *La muette de Portici* also had severe consequences for the governing parties in Belgium, which had been ruled by the Dutch since 1815.
3. The July Revolution inspired Belgians to seek independence, including a performance of the banned *La muette de Portici*.
 - a) Although heavily cut, the influential “Amour sacré de la patrie” was left in.
 - b) Already popular, upon hearing it in the opera, the audience rose and applauded with show-stopping fervor.
 - c) Riots resulted, to the extent that the Dutch forces withdrew and Prince Leopold Saxe-Coburg-Gotha became king.

VIII. Giacomo Meyerbeer

- A. After the overthrow of the aristocracy in France, a “Citizen King,” Louis Philippe, governed France.

1. He was to mediate power between different groups and represented conservative liberalism.
2. Religious and civil tolerance and political stability resulted.
3. There are comparable ties to “Americanism.”

4. The opera in Paris took on some of the characteristics we associate with early Hollywood: high-tech production values, special effects, overdone/overdecorated settings in somewhat fantastical historical interpretation, and reinforcement of middle-class values. Jewish talent rose to the fore, as seen in works by Meyerbeer.
- B. Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* became the standard by which other operas were judged.
1. Its theme is religious tolerance.
 2. Meyerbeer had studied in Italy and soon became Rossini's most serious competition.
 3. An earlier opera, *Robert le diable*, was similar in many respects to Weber's *Der Freischütz*, but is larger in scope and scale.
 4. The political morals in *Les Huguenots* are unambiguous.
 5. Meyerbeer's grand opera represented a different singing style, not bel canto.
 - a) Grand opera has fewer arias, but they do require vocal virtuosity.
 - b) Meyerbeer extends singing "from the chest" to the top of the range, what we think of today when we say "operatic singing."
 6. Meyerbeer's most famous ensemble piece, the "Blessing of the Swords," demonstrates the composer's impressive ability to maintain drama through music in an extended scene.
 - a) He relies on musical cues, such as the slow dotted rhythms of the French overture to signify the dignity of the blessing.
 - b) The use of the chorus highlights the drama.
 - c) The return of the tenor, in "aria time," heightens the tension by holding the audience in suspension throughout the singer's solo reflection.

IX. Meyerbeer's contested reputation

- A. Meyerbeer's operas received numerous performances in Paris, and their popularity spread over almost a dozen countries.
- B. Nonetheless, today his operas are performed only occasionally.
 1. Part of this is due to the sheer costs of putting on grand opera.
 2. Wagner's attacks on Meyerbeer (particularly Wagner's anti-Semitic writings) also lessened the latter's stature in the opera world.
 3. Cosmopolitanism contributed to the reception of grand opera in the Romantic period.
 4. Jews were increasingly seen as threatening to many Romantics.