

MEYERBEER'S REPUTATION, both as a man and musician has suffered badly in the last 100 years. His present reputation stands at about the same level today as Donizetti's did in the 1950's.

Meyerbeer, like Donizetti, was a key-figure in the development of nineteenth century opera. His influence was even wider than Donizetti's, in that he had access, in both Berlin and Paris, to many of the leading musicians of the day. He frequently met Berlioz, Chopin, Liszt for example, and attended concerts and salons where their music was performed. Yet his achievements have been set at nought, and faults both in his character and in his music have been exaggerated.

THE MAN Meyerbeer is difficult to gauge as a man. A Jew of the Prussian reformed 'Enlightenment', he did not capitulate, as the Mendelssohns and Heine did, to Christianity. He was a man of painstaking politeness, and despite his finickiness over details, when composing and conducting, seems to have gained respect from those who played for him. He had many acquaintances in the social circles of both Paris and Berlin, befriending such figures as Wagner, Cèsar Franck, Mikhail Glinka, Jenny Lind, as well as poets like Heinrich Heine. He was devoted to his family, and seems to have been happily married, despite the fact that two children died in infancy.

He did not have a prickly, but essentially lovable character like Verdi nor was he a social charmer like Donizetti, nor a source of scandal like Liszt and Wagner. The sarcastic anecdotes and abuse heaped on him by Wagner and Heine are not borne out by contemporary sources. Indeed French sources, like Berlioz have to be read in the context of the age.

HIS MUSIC In some ways, his was of working was the reverse of Donizetti's. Donizetti essentially had a craftsman's approach. His work always seems to be most original, when the dramatic situation, in which there is an accumulation of emotional stress on key characters, stimulates him to produce new, but spontaneous solutions to problems, while remaining within set formulas. In his best work, these solutions occur frequently enough to carry the whole work on to a tragic climax. The whole effect is often better than the parts, for instance, in *Gemma di Vergy*, the build-up proceeds unevenly, until the splendidly climatic final scene is reached.

On the other hand, Meyerbeer used to spend many years carefully planning his more extensive works, often tinkering with the structure, adding scenes for musical, rather than dramatic effect. For instance, Berthe's whole role in *Le Prophete* has little purpose

other than to act as *love-interest* and vocal foil to Fides, the great mezzo-soprano role. Unlike Donizetti, whose vocal ornamentation was to become more and more opposite to the dramatic situation, Meyerbeer could make the decoration in his female voice arias too instrumental, and so make them sound very contrived. Catherine, in the mad scene in *L'Etoile du Nord* outdoes Donizetti's Lucia (the likely model) by having three flutes to go mad to, while her coloratura seems merely rhetorical, rather than properly expressive. The net result of his meticulous attention to detail can be a distortion of a scene, an act, or even the whole work, *Dinorah* and *Le Prophete* being good examples of this, thus the whole can as a consequence, come to seem less than their parts. Thus *Les Huguenots* emerges as the most homogeneous of his later operas, in this respect.

Although he added to his wealth as a result of successful presentations of his music, he was concerned to be thought of as a serious artist. He was always at considerable pains to ensure that the music he wrote, or conducted, was performed to the greatest possible technical standards. He followed Spontini's lead in Berlin and Paris, and improved the quality of orchestral playing, especially in the operahouse, by careful rehearsal. He developed the range of the orchestral palette by introducing into his latest scores new instruments, and recent technical developments of older ones. The resultant increase in the sonority of the orchestra made for the emergence of new types of voice, (especially the tenor). Singers, thus, began to need to have more power, rather than the brilliance and flexibility of previous times. In general, he sought to make vocal lines more allied to the text, especially if the scene was relevant to the overall dramatic situation, (his touch was less sure in solo scenes, as indicated above). He also widened the scope of the chorus with Scribe's help, so that it became more than a mere accompaniment to solo, or for filling a gap in the action, but a dramatic force in its own right, especially when divided into several sections, singing sometimes in unison blocks, or '*a capella*' and sometimes in harmony, sometimes in counterpoint, whatever the dramatic situation warranted. In this way, he prepared the way for the developments of Wagner, Verdi, Gounod, Massenet and Bizet.

In the last analysis, familiarity with his life reveals something of the man, and if his music is listened to with an open mind, his achievements can be put into their proper context. Like Donizetti, he rewards the careful, unprejudiced listener.

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