

Scene IV: Classical Gas (1781-1814)

Mozart: *Idomeneo* (1781)

Mozart only wrote 18 operas in toto, not counting the one pastiche (*Der Stein der Weisen*); compare that with the thirty that Gluck wrote before *Orfeo*, and then take into consideration that, with his wacky and sometimes bawdy sense of humor, most of the surviving ones are comedies. Even two of the three great da Ponte operas are comedies, despite each of them having some astounding beautiful and serious music, and unlike Joseph Kerman, I consider *Die Zauberflöte* to be in the same vein, a fantastical sort of comedy but with a moral lesson (and two dreadfully dull arias for Sarastro). Had he not been working hard on completing *Zauberflöte* and had more time, it would have been interesting to see what he could have made out of *La Clemenza di Tito*, but as it stands it was a rush job, written in just 18 days and set to a convoluted, old-fashioned libretto by Metastasio. Small wonder that it is only intermittently brilliant. Most of it is Mozart's version of musical wallpaper, written to please the pompous stuffed shirts in the royalty without trying to be really dramatic.

But *Idomeneo*, taken on its own terms, is indeed a masterpiece, despite the fact that it, too, had a libretto drawn from Metastasio. The difference seems, to me, the fact that Mozart was younger and became really involved in drawing out the characters. Some of the music is purely decorative, but not nearly as much as in *Clemenza di Tito*, and the young Mozart (he was only 24 when he wrote it) poured his full imagination into its creation.

The story takes place in Crete shortly after the Trojan War. Wikipedia has the best synopsis:¹

Act I

Ilia, daughter of the defeated Trojan King Priam, has been taken to Crete after the war. She loves Prince Idamante, son of the Cretan King Idomeneo, but hesitates to acknowledge her love. Idamante frees the Trojan prisoners in a gesture of good will. He tells Ilia, who is rejecting his love, that it is not his fault that their fathers were enemies. Trojans and Cretans together welcome the return of peace, but Electra, daughter of the Greek King Agamemnon, is jealous of Ilia and does not approve of Idamante's clemency toward the enemy prisoners. Arbace, the king's confidant, brings news that Idomeneo has been lost at sea while returning to Crete from Troy. Electra, fearing that Ilia, a Trojan, will soon become Queen of Crete, feels the furies of the underworld rise up in her heart.

Idomeneo is saved by Neptune (god of the sea) and is washed up on a Cretan beach. There he recalls the vow he made to Neptune: to sacrifice, if he should arrive safely on land, the first living creature he should meet. Idamante approaches him, but because the two have not seen each other for a long time, recognition is difficult. When Idomeneo finally realizes the youth that he must sacrifice for the sake of his vow is his own child, he orders Idamante never to see him again. Grief-stricken by his father's rejection, Idamante runs off.

Act II

At the king's palace, Idomeneo seeks counsel from Arbace, who says another victim could be sacrificed if Idamante were sent into exile. Idomeneo orders his son to escort Electra to her home, Argos. Idomeneo's kind words to Ilia move her to declare that since she has lost everything, he will be her father and Crete her country. As she leaves, Idomeneo realizes that sending

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idomeneo>

Idamante into exile has cost Ilia her happiness as well as his own. Electra welcomes the idea of going to Argos with Idamante.

At the port of Sidon (a fictional city of Crete), Idomeneo bids his son farewell and urges him to learn the art of ruling while he is away. Before the ship can sail, however, a storm breaks out, and a sea serpent appears. Recognizing it as a messenger from Neptune, the king offers himself as atonement for having violated his vow to the god.

Act III

In the royal garden, Ilia asks the breezes to carry her love to Idamante, who appears, explaining that he must go to fight the serpent. When he says he would rather die than suffer the torments of his rejected love, Ilia confesses her love. They are surprised by Electra and Idomeneo. When Idamante asks his father why he sends him away, Idomeneo can only reply that the youth must leave. Ilia asks for consolation from Electra, who is preoccupied with revenge. Arbace comes with news that the people, led by the High Priest of Neptune, are clamoring for Idomeneo. The High Priest tells the king of the destruction caused by Neptune's monster, urging Idomeneo to reveal the name of the person whose sacrifice is demanded by the god. When the king confesses that his own son is the victim, the populace is horrified.

Outside the temple, the king and High Priest join Neptune's priests in prayer that the god may be appeased. Arbace brings news that Idamante has killed the monster. As Idomeneo fears new reprisals from Neptune, Idamante enters in sacrificial robes, saying he understands his father's torment and is ready to die. After an agonizing farewell, Idomeneo is about to sacrifice his son when Ilia intervenes, offering her own life instead. The Voice of Neptune is heard. Idomeneo must yield the throne to Ilia and Idamante. Everyone is relieved except Electra, who longs for her own death. Idomeneo presents Idamante and his bride as the new rulers. The people call upon the god of love and marriage to bless the royal pair and bring peace.²

I've included this synopsis in full, even for the sake of those who may be somewhat familiar with it, in part to illustrate the challenges that Mozart faced in organizing the plot into a workable drama, and then writing music to match the mood of each scene and character. Again, his final results were not perfect, but they were far better than adequate. Performed properly, which it seldom is, *Idomeneo* can be a shattering dramatic experience.

And, of course, the reason it is not always performed dramatically is that it's Mozart, and to most audiences Mozart means pretty arias with memorable tunes to please them. Interestingly, Germans and Austrians thought of *Idomeneo* as a dramatic masterpiece and tried to perform it as such, but primarily in the 20th century. The first really important revivals of the work, ironically, were re-writes by then-contemporary composers because such an "outdated" score would have "offended" their audiences. Thus Munich commissioned Italian composer Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari to revise it for that city, which he did, primarily in the orchestration and with slight abridgements to the score, but Vienna commissioned a new version the same year from Richard Strauss. Strauss not only revamped the orchestra, but replaced about a third of the opera with his own music. Why Munich and Vienna couldn't perform the same version by Wolf-Ferrari remains unclear, except for the fact that Strauss was an icon in the latter city who, in their view, could do no wrong. Ironically, the Strauss version is still occasionally performed (and recorded) today while the Wolf-Ferrari version has all but disappeared.

But there was one other revision made by Mozart himself in 1786. For a performance at the Palais Auersperg in Vienna, he rewrote the opera somewhat and also lowered its pitch. He

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idomeneo#Synopsis>

did this because the original Idamante was yet another castrato soprano, Vincenzo dal Prato, and he wanted to rewrite it for tenor. This made Idomeneo a baritone rather than a tenor and also lowered the roles of Ilia and Electra from the province of high-lying soubrette voices to richer, more lyric sopranos. This version is almost never performed today, but fortunately there is a live performance from 1955 which we will discuss in due time.

As I said earlier, conducted and sung properly, *Idomeneo* can be a powerful, sometimes even overwhelming experience, but one *must* conduct it with drive and vigor, as is most often done with Mozart's other dramatic masterpiece, *Don Giovanni*. By and large, we can thank conductor Fritz Busch for finally reviving the "real" *Idomeneo* in the 20th century, in his 1951 Glyndebourne production with tenor Richard Lewis in the title role and none other than dramatic soprano Birgit Nilsson as Electra. Despite some heavy cuts to the score, it sent a message out to the opera world that *Idomeneo* was back, and, despite Busch's early death later than year at age 61, the re-launch of *Idomeneo* was an important part of his legacy. Interestingly, the first thing you hear after the powerful overture is a recitative by Ilia set to orchestral accompaniment (which occasionally switches over to harpsichord and basso continuo accompaniment), but in the right hands (and voice) this can be projected with considerable passion. Towards the end of this, Mozart uses an interesting device, a rising and falling figure played by the lower strings in a minor key which is then imitated by the soprano just before it moves into her aria. This was the first of his "dramatic coloratura" arias in which he used decorations and trills to illustrate the high-strung state of mind of his character. But if you just sing it straight, without dramatic inflections as is often done, it makes far less of an impression. This is then followed by a long *secco recitativo* duet that, although it advances the plot, can drag for a bit, but Idamante's following aria, "Non ho colpa," is a very interesting piece with different sections in contrasting tempi—much like his later "Non so più, cosa son, cosa faccio" for Cherubino, except with alternating sections in major and minor.

This sort of musical roller-coaster ride continues throughout the first act and, indeed, throughout the opera. Once set on its musico-dramatic trajectory by a committed cast and conductor, *Idomeneo* propels itself with, at times, even greater and more consistent force than *Don Giovanni*, but in a different way. Idomeneo's arrival, washed up on the beach by the good graces of Neptune, is announced via a spirited chorus with a wind machine in the background to suggest the heave sea winds. Mozart also brings drama to the first meeting between father and son, where the former does not recognize the latter, by using musical pauses and hesitations in the dialogue between them, and then continuing this a bit into Idamante's minor-key aria (with occasional dips into the major). The only real flaw in the first act is the postponement of the finale with a four-minute march.

Act II opens with a harpsichord-accompanied recitative by Arbace and Idomeneo, followed by a brief recit by Ilia and Idomeneo, then Ilia's aria "Se il padre perdei," a reflective, lyric aria that is just a stand-there-and-sing piece, although a good soprano with dramatic instincts can inject some drama into it. Next up is one of the highlights of the opera, Idomeneo's recitative and coloratura aria, "Fuor del mar," another instance where Mozart wedded florid singing with drama. But by and large, the second act is the weakest of the three in terms of dramatic action; there are just too many arias and not enough forward movement of the plot. But hey, Mozart was only 24 years old, and he was still feeling his way in creating a complete opera. (After Electra's aria, there's a march that he later re-tooled for the end of Figaro's "Non più andrai.") Things do pick up, however, in the Idomeneo-Idamante recitative and ensuing trio with Electra chiming in, where the first-named finally recognizes the second as his son, and in the next scene Mozart whips up the orchestra for another storm-at-sea scene.

In Act III, we start with an orchestrally-accompanied recitative for Ilia that is almost like an arioso, leading directly into her lovely aria “Zeffiretti lusinghieri,” in which, oddly, I heard overtones of “Che faro senza Euridice.” The ensuing recitative between Idamante and Ilia is surprisingly dramatic, as is the duet that follows. Mozart then masterfully rushes into a fine recitative by Idomeneo, Ilia, Amante and Electra which is followed by an excellent quartet with a sort of slithering melodic line in the minor that, typically, morphs and changes as it goes along. (Mozart once said, in a letter, that he wrote his music to appeal to even unsophisticated listeners, but always included something in it to catch the ear of the sophisticated ones.) Arbace’s aria, “Sventurata Sidon!,” is often overlooked because it is not usually sung with dramatic feeling, but when it is, it’s a very effective piece, and the ensuing scene with the High Priest, Idomeneo and a chorus of the people is also very effective. But, of course, the highlight of this act is Electra’s mad scene, “D’Oreste, d’Aiace,” one of the finest arias Mozart ever wrote and still a show-stopper today. Interestingly, the ballet music at the end (sorry, but it was still the convention at the time) almost acts like an orchestral postlude to the opera. Although there are no voices in it, it bears a kinship to the finale of *Don Giovanni*.

We are fortunate to have two very good and one pretty good commercial recordings of the original version. The better of them is the one conducted by René Jacobs with tenor Richard Croft as Idomeneo, Bernarda Fink as Idamante, Sunhae Im as Ilia, Alexandrina Pendatchanska as Elettra and Kenneth Tarver as Arbace. A close runner-up is the John Eliot Gardiner recording with Anthony Rolfe-Johnson in the title role, Anne Sofie von Otter as Idamante, Sylvia McNair as Ilia and Hillevi Martinpelto as Elettra. James Levine’s recording features an all-star cast including Heidi Grant Murphy as Ilia, Cecilia Bartoli as Idamante, Carol Vaness as Elettra and Thomas Hampson as Arbace—fine singers all—but the recording is spoiled by Plácido Domingo’s harsh, guttural-sounding tenor (which can’t negotiate the runs in “Fuor del mar”) in the title role. But there is an even more exciting live performance available (at this writing) on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mncNpoblOg4>), also conducted by Jacobs, with Croft as Idomeneo but the exciting Sophie Karthäuser as Ilia, Gaëlle Arquez as Idamante, Marlis Petersen as Elettra and Julien Behr as Arbace. Its one weakness is that several of the recitatives are either abridged or omitted, but if one simply splices in the recits from Jacobs’ commercial recording you’ll have an *Idomeneo* for the ages. It’s that superior to all the others from a dramatic standpoint.

So much for the original version of the opera. Although Mozart’s revised version is, to my knowledge, never performed nowadays, there exists a live performance from 1955 with a baritone Idomeneo (Constantino Ego), a tenor Idamante (David Lloyd), a baritone Arbace (Kostas Paskalis), and two lyric sopranos for Ilia and Electra (Eleanor Steber and Maria Kerestetzi), conducted by the highly talented but ill-fated Jonel Perlea. It was given in Athens and is, of course, an abridged performance of the music (*Idomeneo* was always abridged in one form or the other during the 1950s and early ‘60s), and the sound is not optimal (being a mono radio broadcast), but except for those things plus the somewhat scrappy-sounding Greek orchestra of the 1950s, it’s a terrifically exciting performance. Perlea, now forgotten and vastly underrated, understands the musical style of this opera perfectly; his conducting, the somewhat larger orchestra aside, is eerily similar to that of Jacobs. With a slightly smaller orchestra and a harpsichord continuo instead of a piano (used not just due to current convention, but because a harpsichord simply could not carry in an open-air theater—it was given at the Odeon of Herodus Atticus in Athens), the performance would be fine. Like it or not, there is absolutely no question that having a tenor Idamante makes a *huge* difference in the dramatic projection of that role, particularly by using David Lloyd, who had an absolutely terrific voice (and was the first Welsh tenor to have a truly international career). The scenes between father and son are all the more dramatically believable

because, for once, Idamanta *sounds* like a man. Kerestetzi, a Greek soprano so obscure that you can't even track her name down on the Internet, is the fiery Elettra, and Ego, despite having some problems with the runs in "Fuor del mar," is a credible if not terribly subtle Idomeneo. Scene by scene, Perlea creates a cohesive musical and dramatic whole. Sound and performance limitations aside, this is not a recording to be missed.

***Salieri: Les Danaïdes* (1784)**

While reading Vol. 1 of David Cairns' great biography of Berlioz, I kept running across this opera, which so impressed the young composer-to-be that he went to see performances of it every chance he could and was deeply moved. This surprised me, as I had never heard any Salieri opera that I really found impressive in any way, particularly the serious works—until I learned, on Wikipedia, that Christoph Willibald von Gluck, one of Berlioz' musical gods, was partly responsible for the music.

The story goes like this. In 1779, Gluck's opera *Écho et Narcisse* bombed big in Paris, leaving the famous composer red-faced and ashamed, particularly after the success of his rival Niccolò Piccinni's opera *Iphégenie en Tauride*, a subject that Gluck himself had already done in 1781. Gluck fled back to Vienna, intending at first to retire from music altogether, but in 1783 was presented with a libretto for *Les Danaïdes*. The subject concerns two rival kings (and twin brothers) who each have 50 children—Ægyptus 50 sons and Danaus 50 daughters—and try to make peace by having these offspring wed to each other. Unfortunately, Danaus secretly orders his daughters to kill all the sons on their wedding night of whom only one, Hypermnestra, defies him. This plot immediately appealed to Gluck.

But this is where we get divergent stories about how the opera was handed over to Antonio Salieri to write. According to Benoit Dratwicki, writing the liner notes for the Bru Zane recording of this work,³ claims that

Gluck accepted the libretto translated by Du Roullet and Tschudi, but immediately entrusted the composition to his student (also living in Vienna), Antonio Salieri. No doubt aided by Gluck's advice on what did or did not appeal to French audiences, the latter completed the work quickly, but did not present it to the directors of the Académie Royale de Musique under his own name. Gluck was far too familiar with the music world in Paris and its factions, its pitfalls, to leave Salieri to face alone a public that was so hard to please. To facilitate the reception of *Les Danaïdes*, he declared that he himself was the principal author of the music, written with the collaboration of his student. That at least was how the opera was announced in the press prior to the première.

Only after the work's success had been confirmed did Gluck admit to the deception, and by then it was too late for the public to call into question Salieri's talent. Thus he became the new darling of Parisian opera circles and of the French court – having, of course, dedicated *Les Danaïdes* to Marie Antoinette. Only after the sixth performance was it announced (in the *Journal de Paris*) that Salieri was the sole author of the music. This play of disinformation enabled the work to make an immediate and permanent place for itself in the repertoire of the Académie Royale de Musique, where it was revived until 1828.

Now, this account seems pretty straightforward, but it is open to several questions. Other than promoting Salieri's career, why would Gluck allow his pupil to write the whole score when it was he himself who wanted to benefit from a "hit" opera to climax his return to Paris? And, considering how much of the score really does sound like Gluck, just how much did the older

³ Ediciones Singulaires, Palazzetto Bru Zane ES1019, © 2015

master really write? Dratwicki points to two other Gluck-like operas by Salieri, *Les Horaces* (*Oath of the Horatii*, 1786) and *Tarare* (1787), but I've heard the former (discussed below) and that music is not so much Gluck-like as much as it is prescient of such works as Cherubini's *Medea*. So either Gluck was lying when he said that Salieri wrote every note of *Danaïdes* or Salieri was simply able to channel his teacher much better in this work than in the other two.

Yet there is a very different account of what happened on the Wikipedia page devoted to this opera:

Calzabigi originally wrote the libretto of *Les Danaïdes* for Christoph Willibald Gluck, but the aged composer, who had just experienced a stroke, was unable to meet the Opéra's schedule and so asked Salieri to take it over.

Emperor Joseph II assured that Salieri wrote the music "almost under the dictée of Gluck," in a letter (dated 31 March 1783) to Count Mercy-Argenteau, the Austrian ambassador in Paris. Then Mercy told the directors of the Opéra that Gluck had composed the first two acts, and Salieri supplied the third act's music (Mercy did not realize the opera was in five acts). Even when the libretto was published, Gluck and Salieri shared billing as the composers.

Though flattered, Gluck was not foolish enough to risk too close an association with young Salieri's work and diplomatically informed the press: "The music of *Danaïdes* is completely by Salieri, my only part in it having been to make suggestions which he willingly accepted." Gluck, who had been devastated by the failure of his last Paris opera, *Écho et Narcisse*, was concerned that *Les Danaïdes* would suffer a similar fate. He wrote to Roulet the same day that the opera premiered, crediting Salieri with the entire work, and the press noted this confession.⁴

Note that the Emperor Joseph stated that Salieri wrote the music "ALMOST under the dictée of Gluck," indicating that it was known to him before the premiere that Salieri wrote a good amount of the score and not that Gluck wrote it all, as stated in the other account. Note also that this account states that Gluck informed the press that the music was not his not because he wanted to promote Salieri but because he didn't want to risk that close of an association with a young composer—also, that long after Gluck supposedly "spilled the beans," the libretto was published showing Salieri and Gluck as co-composers.

There are several places in *Les Danaïdes* where the music is clearly that of Salieri and only Salieri, particularly the several dance-like numbers (of which there are quite a few, which is probably what endeared the opera to the ballet-loving Parisians) which are obviously Italian in style and not German. In these pieces, Salieri's music resembles that of Spontini who also followed in the footsteps of Gluck. Yet several of the sung recitatives and ensembles, and particularly the arias, sound like nothing else Salieri ever wrote. They sound like Gluck and are most probably written by him, lack of hard evidence notwithstanding.

To a certain extent, Salieri's opera is not quite as Gluckian as that of Jean-François Le Sueur's *Paul et Virginie*—or, to be more specific, not as much like the late-period Gluck of *Armide* as Le Sueur, who was more harmonically daring. It is more like a hybrid between *Orfeo ed Euridice* and *Iphigénie en Tauride*, more melodic than the second but much more dramatic than the first. In some of the linking orchestral and choral passages, too, the music looks forward to Spontini...as I said, very Italian though still in the Gluckian style. The original published score said the opera was "par Salieri, élève de Gluck" (by Salieri, pupil of Gluck), but Gluck politely informed the press that "The music of *Danaïdes* is completely by Salieri, my only part in it hav-

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Les_Dana%C3%AFdes

ing been **to make suggestions which he willingly accepted** (bold print mine),” which tells me that he might even have written a few bars of certain scenes to start Salieri on the right track. Salieri himself, not wanting to ruffle his mentor’s feathers, put his own twist on this, saying that he was “led by [Gluck’s] wisdom and enlightened by his genius.”

Yet it is still a splendid work by any measure. Unlike many other Italian operas of this period, the music is continuous, it does not stop dead for an aria to make a cheap effect via high notes or coloratura runs, and for the most part the music fits the drama perfectly. I just wish that Salieri had cut two or three of his instrumental dances; they are the one thing that very occasionally bogs down the dramatic continuity, but as I said, this is what the Parisians loved. Gluck slowly but surely eliminated this kind of nonsense from his operas, and this is what put him out of favor in Paris. The good thing is that Salieri found a way to blend some of the dance music right into a following scene or aria in the same tempo and key, which helps with the musical if not with the dramatic continuity, and at least *his* dance music is not as cheap-sounding and “rat-a-tat-tat” as that of Rossini and Verdi. And Salieri also has specific moods for each act, i.e. the first, in which it seems as if joy and happiness are about to reign the music is happy and playful whereas, in the second when Danaus’ dark plot is revealed, the music is slower, softer and moodier.

If I were to make one criticism of the opera as a whole, it is that Salieri dragged out the plot over five acts lasting nearly two hours whereas Gluck would probably have written no more than three and reduced it to roughly 100 minutes. One may say, look at how Gluck elongated the discussion between Pylade and Oreste in *Iphigénie en Tauride*, but the music for these scenes is in a very dramatic and almost realistic melodic recitative, not an operatic duet in the strict sense of the term, and when it is seen on stage one is riveted by the conflicting emotions that both brothers have in trying to save one another. Salieri does achieve something of the sort in the dramatic duet between Hypermnestrea and Danaus in Act II...or, perhaps, this was one of several passages in the work by Gluck himself. It has his fingerprints on every note and phrase and sounds absolutely nothing like Salieri-cum-Gluck.

Listening to the opera, one hears many things that are Italianate, such as the overture and specifically the ballet numbers (far too many for my taste), but many vocal sections and even some of the orchestral music do sound like Gluck, particularly the Gluck of *Armide* and the French *Alceste*. Salieri cleverly builds up the drama in increments; only a few moments in the first act, which after all is mock-celebratory (the kids are getting married, remember?), reaches deep down emotionally, but this is deceiving. The soprano-tenor duet in Act I is quite lovely but *not* decorative, and the layout of the musical line—often pausing, and at the end, introducing a trumpet solo followed immediately by a chorus—is a typical Gluckian device. In the opening of Act II, there is an excellent orchestrally-accompanied recitative, with chorus, between Danaus and Hypermnestrea with choral interjections in the Greek manner—very much like Gluck—which then turns into a fast-paced, dramatic aria for the former with those “running” string figures at double-time behind him and, again, the chorus to interject, this time with tympani rumbling behind them. Later in the same act, Hypermnestrea’s great aria, “Par les larmes donc votre fille,” has a few lines of music in it that are prescient of the last scene in Berlioz’ *Les Troyens*.

In addition, the opera is really quite compact: despite being spread over five acts, a complete performance (*sans* intermissions) only runs about 110 minutes, less than two hours. This, too, was typical of Gluck at his most compact. Lyncée’s Act IV aria, which (again) runs into a duet, also has Gluck’s fingerprints all over it. In addition, this act quickly and surprisingly ends on a quiet note, the music hanging in mid-air. Hypermnestrea’s dramatic recitative-with-string-tremolos at the beginning of Act V is also strongly dramatic, leading into a furiously fast aria that seems to combine the best elements of “Divinites du Styx” and the coloratura aria from Act I of

Orphée. Indeed, this final act is clearly the finest and most consistently dramatic in the entire opera, moving from one sharply-defined and edgy moment to another in a continuous arc of sound. The later choruses resonate against the walls of the theater, as Spontini's in *La Vestale* would later do, and the edgy, compact yet rhythmically diverse orchestral writing is simply phenomenal. The latter half of this act, in fact, consists of fast-paced, dramatically-infused sung recitatives set against the febrile orchestra. I know many an opera buff who would complain that "as soon as the music gets going, it gets bogged down in recitative," but the Gluck-Salieri style of recitative is as exciting as any aria you think is so hot that I've ever heard in my life. The opera ends in a crescendo of orchestral and choral music that will simply take your breath away.

Despite some good earlier recordings of this opera, the one that tops them all is the one with Judith van Wanroij as Hypermnestra, Philippe Talbot as Lycée, Tassis Christoyannis as Danaus and Christophe Rousset conducting Les Talens Lyriques on the Bru Zane label.

***Salieri: Les Horaces* (1786)**

Following up on the Salieri-Gluck *Les Danaïdes*, I decided to take a listen to his next opera, *Les Horaces*, which flopped badly at the Paris Opéra. The reason usually given for its failure is the poor libretto, which caused people to laugh on opening night and afterwards. This may indeed be part of the reason, but I can tell you the real reason it failed. The music is too terse, too dramatic and completely lacking in the kind of qualities that pleased Parisian audiences back then.

As for the story, it comes from a 17th-century play by Pierre Corneille taken from Livy. The story is basically a true one although Corneille invented the character of Sabine. In it, the cities of Rome and Alba are at war, although they were united by ties of patriotism and blood, for Alba is the birthplace of the founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus. They decide to settle their dispute once and for all by each city sending three of its fiercest warriors to battle each other to the death. The catch is that Curiace, the leader of one side and Horace, head warrior of the other, are brothers-in-law, married to each others' sisters. The emotional upheavals caused by this conflict of patriotic honor and familial love are the crux of the opera.

Oddly, the one leading female character in the opera, Camilla, is neither of the warriors' wives, but the daughter of the King of Alba, "old Horatius," and is afraid that if Alba loses she won't be allowed to marry she lives, the Alban Curiatius. She calls upon an oracle to guide her; he tells her that the battle will be decided that very day, and that she will be "united forever" with Curiatius, who is one of the three warriors chosen to represent Alba in the battle. Forced to choose between engaging in battle or staying with Camilla, he decides to defend his country. During the battle of each trio against the other, soldiers from both sides intervene to prevent such abominable murder. The high priest calms both sides by telling them to go and consult their gods, who he thinks will stop the fight, but apparently the gods were getting a kick out of it because they tell them to go right on and kill each other. The word from the battlefield is that young Horatius turned tail and fled, but eventually we learn that he used that as a ruse to be able to kill the Curiatii one by one. Thus Rome is victorious. Camilla, angry at the celebrations that follow, curses both Rome and her brother and asks the gods to destroy them.

At the premiere performance, the audience actually laughing at this dramatic opera. Granted, it was probably the weak and ineffective libretto that convulsed them, not the music, which does have some surprisingly Gluck-like numbers in it, but apparently Gluck had no further interest in connecting himself with Salieri after the success of *Les Danaïdes*.

Salieri apparently admitted that the libretto was not all that he had wanted it to be, but he pushed forward and wrote what is, in the opinion of many, his finest and most forward-looking score. Breaking free from the grand style of his mentor, Gluck, he presents us here with a fast-

paced, almost breathless score that looks forward to the most advanced music of Cherubini or Spontini some 20 years in the future. There are no real arias here except Cuirace's "Victime de l'amour, victime de l'honneur" in Act II, and even duets are brief and focused on pushing the drama forward rather than stopping the moment and pleasing the ear with lovely melodies and high notes. But for Paris especially, the principal sin was that it had very little ballet music, in the *last* act instead of the *first*. Thus Salieri knowingly committed one artistic sin in the eyes of the Parisians and an incidental sin with no arias to hang on to or hum on their way out of the theatre (the booklet even acknowledges that the chief "flaw" in the libretto is that it had no monologues to be turned into arias). The tenor does have one high C to sing, in the Act II trio "Oui mes enfants partez sur l'heure," and it comes at the climax of the scene, but the soprano does not go up with him and the moment goes by fairly quickly. But DAMN is it exciting!

The overture is hard-driving and sounds like battle music, setting an excellent tone for what is to come. After Camilla's torment-filled lament, the pace of the opera picks up and enters an almost manic pace as number follows number, the music propelled as if by some demonic energy. Harmonically, it is not as complex as some of the music in *Les Danaïdes*, but it is even more tightly knit; after the opening scene, even the sung recitatives are set to driving, rhythmic music, propelled by feverish strings and brass and percussion interjections. The smell of battle is never very far from this score; even the few slower-paced moments only seem to act as temporary breathers between the hard-driving music. This is opera drama at its best; although some may argue that it is a little too much of a good thing, the almost continuous pace of the score involves the listener intently. Even the ballet music, when it finally appears in the last act, is fast-paced although rather banal, the only weak link in an otherwise strong dramatic chain.

There is only one recording of *Les Horaces*, but it is a good one. Conductor Christophe Rousset presides over a tight ship that brooks no lingering. This is mostly for the good, although a little relaxation or *rubato* here and there would have been welcome. The only negative aspect is his orchestra, Les Talens Lyriques, which takes the false gospel of Straight Tone to extremes. Fortunately, it only affects his phrasing negatively in the most tender *legato* passages, since straight tone strings sound their whiniest and least attractive in slow numbers.

Happily, most of the singing is of such a high quality that it carries the drama. You just have to pretend that the singers are accompanied by a sort of barrel organ and compensate for the lack of a real orchestral sound. Pride of place goes to soprano Judith van Wanroij for not only her lovely tone but also her sensitive and dramatic portrayal of Camille, and tenor Cyrille Dubois as Cuirace, although Julien Dran (young Horace) and Philippe-Nicolas Martin (Oracle/Arbain/Valère) are also very good. The only mediocre singer here is bass-baritone Andrew Foster-Williams as the High Priest; his tone lacks proper support and he has a wobble. This is a shame, as he was a pretty darn good William Tell in the audio recording and video of the opera made for Naxos about a decade ago, but that's how quickly voices deteriorate nowadays.

***Mozart: Don Giovanni* (1787)**

And here, at last, is THE major opera of the 18th century that everyone knows (and most people accept as Mozart's masterpiece). Considering how well it is known, going over the plot or the music in detail would be counter-productive, but a little historical perspective is in order. Unlike *Le nozze di Figaro* which preceded it or *Così fan Tutte* which followed it, the opera was not premiered in Vienna but in Prague, where the tenor singing Don Ottavio, Antonio Baglioni, insisted on a florid aria to show off his coloratura technique, which is why we got "Il mio tesoro." Considering how this aria stops the action at the very moment when things are moving dramatically, I'm not sure that Mozart was happy about it. When the opera was then finally given in Vienna seven months later (May 1788), the score underwent several revisions. The two most im-

portant and remembered was that “Il mio tesoro” was scrapped because the tenor in the Vienna premiere, Francesco Morella, couldn’t sing it, thus Mozart (probably with relief) tossed it out and instead wrote a slow, lyrical aria for Don Ottavio in Act I, “Dalla sua pace,” which although it also stops the action is more reflective of the character’s gentle, conciliatory nature. By contrast, however, Italian spitfire Caterina Cavalieri, the new Donna Elvira, who Mozart really admired for her histrionic abilities, insisted on an aria for herself in Act II, which is how we got “Mi tradi.” This also slows down the pace of the drama, but it comes earlier in the act than “Il mio tesoro” did.

But the other two score changes are less well known and scarcely ever performed. The first was a duet between Zerlina and Leporello, a nice piece but one which is almost never sung nowadays. The second involved cuts in the final scene of the drama where the statue of the Commendatore drags Giovanni down to hell. Mozart did this for two reasons. Firstly, he thought that the opera was long enough as it was and didn’t want his audience to start squirming (particularly after adding not one but two numbers to that act) and secondly, he felt that this final denouement should be as swift and quickly concluded as the opening scene in which the Don dispatches with the living Commendatore (whose name, by the way, is Don Pedro, which almost no one knows). Unfortunately, later audiences loved *both* of Ottavio’s arias so much that they insisted on both being included, they didn’t like the reconciliation duet, and they wanted the climactic scene of the opera in the original version simply because it was more music by Mozart. (Interestingly, in both cities the epilogue scene in which everyone except Don Giovanni comes out on stage and sings “The moral of this story is...” was only performed once, at the premiere performance in each city. After that, it was omitted and in fact was not reinstated until fairly well into the 20th century. One wonders if this was Mozart’s choice or that of the theater managers.)

Joseph Kerman had a lot of trouble accepting *Don Giovanni* as Mozart’s greatest opera. One of his arguments I kind of agree with, and that was the preponderance of stop-and-sing arias that did not advance the drama, although I accept “Dalla sua pace” and “Mi tradi” better than he did because they reflect these characters’ states of mind at those specific moments. I would also argue that Donna Anna’s “Non mi dir,” which was in the original Prague version, is probably the biggest momentum-killer in the entire opera. But his other argument I disagree with, and that was the inclusion of so much comedy in an otherwise pretty grim story. Mozart was a master of *chiaroscuro*, the play of light elements against dark ones; he had already proven this in *Entführung aus dem Serail* by the inclusion of the very serious arias “Ach, ich liebte” and especially “Martern aller arten,” and in *Le nozze di Figaro* by the Countess’ two arias, “Dove sono” and “Porgi amor,” not to mention the final scene where Count Almaviva kneels before his wife and begs forgiveness, but apparently the latter did not bother him quite so much as all the comedy (most of it coming from Leporello) in *Don Giovanni*, but I, and millions of others, understand that the opera was billed as a “drama giocosa,” and that is exactly what Mozart wrote. And clearly, for all its humor, Leporello’s aria “Madamina” has its ironic serious side to it: his master is an out-of-control libertine, and he has the evidence to back it up, thus Donna Elvira shouldn’t feel too bad about being merely one in a couple of thousand sexual conquests. Personally, I’m more troubled by the fact that Elvira is the only one of those conquests who seems poised on the brink of killing him for violating her, yet she never acts on it. At least Donna Anna is more straightforward: she is emotionally scarred and appalled by what he did to both her and her father, but she wants a man to do the killing. Unfortunately, her beau is Don Ottavio, the one milquetoast in the entire cast...and that, too, is a subtle and ironic bit of humor.

Otherwise, the layout and dramatic pacing of the opera is flawless. Even in the overture, Mozart clues you in on what you are about to hear, starting with extremely dramatic music but then morphing into a fairly jolly tune which he develops brilliantly. I’ve always found it interest-

ing to reflect that the jolly tune of the overture does not appear anywhere else in the opera, yet the dramatic opening *is* reprised in the scene where the Commendatore's statue confronts Giovanni and drags him to hell. This was a sheer stroke of genius. The jolly music of the overture slowly fades, giving way to the jolly opening of the opera sung by Leporello, but this quickly moves into the scene where the Don is dragging a rebellious Donna Anna out of her bedroom, the Commendatore intercedes, sword in hand, to defend her honor, and gets killed in a swift, almost brutal musical denouement. Leporello is a compromised character; he is apparently bound to help Giovanni by some contract or other, but although he clearly disapproves of his master's actions he himself does nothing to stop them—nor to walk away from his master. Indeed, there are so many little psychological subtexts to this work that it has kept analysts busy for more than 130 years. This is, by definition, great drama. As the great Canadian tenor Jon Vickers said, often, "Great art asks questions, but it does not provide answers."

Listening to *Don Giovanni* immediately after Salieri's two best operas reveals not necessarily the paucity of the latter's powers of invention but the superiority, in subtlety of construction, of Mozart's. There are so many little moments in this opera that make the listener pause and take notice of what is going on musically that it almost boggles the mind. No wonder Salieri was stunned when reading through Mozart's scores—the only factual moment presented in the play and movie, *Amadeus*. (Mozart and Salieri, rivals at first, actually reconciled and became friends. Salieri attended an early performance of *Die Zauberflöte* and applauded generously at the moments he particularly liked; and the two went out to dinner together fairly often.)

Also, in this opera (as even in several moments in the others), Mozart achieved the near-impossible: tuneful, melodic duets and scenes that somehow, miraculously, fit the words like a hand in a glove. If you listen to the opera with fresh ears, you'll be amazed at how well he did this. Only the over-exposure of this work has dulled its freshness. This is evident even in Act I, but even more so in Act II, and here, as in some of Gluck and Salieri, the switch back and forth between sung scenes and the *parlando* recitative isn't all that annoying, as it is to some extent in *Idomeneo*, because Mozart keeps them short and the words really are important to defining the action. The scene where the Don is dragged down to hell was one of the most astounding dramatic coups of its time, and done properly today it can still astonish.

The platinum standard for *Don Giovanni* recordings remains Colin Davis' stupendous 1972 recording—stupendous not just for its swift, taut conducting and good voices in every role, but for the fact that he drew genuinely dramatic singing out of sopranos Martina Arroyo (Donna Anna) and Kiri te Kanawa (Donna Elvira), two singers who were scarcely known for giving intense performances onstage. Among the 24-karat gold voices in this case are Stuart Burrows as Don Ottavio, Mirella Freni as Zerlina and Richard van Allen as Masetto. The only drawback is that the Don (Ingvar Wixell) and Leporello (Wladimiro Ganzarolli) sound very much alike, but this works to their advantage in the scene where Leporello disguises himself as the Don in order to pitch some woo. To this date, there has not been another complete recording of the full composite opera (including both of Don Ottavio's arias but not the Zerlina-Leporello duet) ever made.

Another outstanding performance, this one live from c. 1960, is the one with Mario Petri as the Don, Sesto Bruscantini as Leporello, Teresa Stich-Randall as Donna Anna, Leyla Gencer as Elvira and Graziella Sciutti as Zerlina, conducted by Francesco Molinari-Pradelli. There is a very fine recording of the Vienna version of the score by John Eliot Gardiner with Rod Gilfry as the Don, Luba Orgonasova as Anna and Ildebrando d'Arcangelo as Leporello, but it has two drawbacks. The first, which you can't do anything about, is that the microphone placement was too far from the singers, so that the recorded sound sometimes lacks presence and clarity. The other is that the Donna Elvira has a small, shrill, unsteady voice. This you CAN fix by splicing in

Joyce di Donato from the Yannick Nézet-Seguin recording in the important parts, but you have to lower the pitch a half-tone because Gardiner uses Vienna pitch whereas Nézet Seguin does not. I would also recommend, if you can find a copy, the DVD production by Herbert von Karajan from 1987 with Anna Tomowa-Sintow (Anna), Julia Varady (Elvira), Samuel Ramey (Don), Ferruccio Furlanetto (Leporello) and Gösta Winbergh (Ottavio) for its highly imaginative stagecraft without resorting to cheap, tawdry effects. This, and his 1980 video of *Falstaff*, may well be Karajan's finest achievements as a stage director.

***Cherubini: Lodoïska* (1791)**

In July 1791, two months before Mozart's last opera *La clemenza di Tito* premiered, the Théâtre Feydeau in Paris gave the first performance of Luigi Cherubini's *Lodoïska*. A fussy, perpetually annoyed man who would brook no contradictions of his own opinions on music—which Hector Berlioz learned to his dismay when he was a pupil of Cherubini's at the Paris Conservatoire—Cherubini, at that stage not yet 31 years old, scored one of his greatest successes, and he did so by abandoning the French *opéra serie* format in favor of a robust, energetic score that has been deemed the first Romantic opera.

Yes, there were compromises, the most important being that he was forced to use spoken rather than sung dialogue since the Théâtre Feydeau would only stage *opéra-comiques*. The second, of course, was that silly ballet music which was a requirement for all operas performed in France. Yet in one fell swoop, Cherubini outdid Mozart in presenting real blood-and-guts music to match the strong dramatic flavor of the libretto, and in doing so created the first “rescue” opera.

Again, as in the case of *Idomeneo*, the plot is extremely important to know in detail in order to appreciate the music, and even more so than Mozart's opera it is not well known, so once again I am leaning on Wikipedia to give you the basics of the drama.⁵

Act I

A group of Tartar warriors, led by Titzikan, are approaching the castle of a notorious baron named Dourlinsky. One of Titzikan's men reports that Dourlinsky leaves the castle frequently, and that while he's gone the castle could be taken easily. But Titzikan says that a sneak attack would be underhanded — he wants to defeat Dourlinsky in a fair contest. They then hear someone approaching, and hide in the woods to observe.

The Polish count Floreski appears with his faithful attendant Varbel. Their horses have been stolen by the Tartars, so they're trudging along on foot. Floreski is hunting for his girlfriend, Lodoïska. The two had planned to be married, but Lodoïska's father had a political disagreement with Floreski so he cancelled the wedding, denounced Floreski and hid Lodoïska in a secret location. Since then, her father has died and nobody knows exactly where she is.

Floreski and Varbel are confronted by Titzikan and one of his warriors. In a fight, the tartars are disarmed. Titzikan is impressed by Floreski's honorable way of battle, and the two men form an alliance. Titzikan says he and his forces are planning to attack Baron Dourlinski, whose forces have ravaged their land — and he says that Dourlinski lives in the nearby castle.

Floreski remembers that Dourlinski was a friend of Lodoïska's father. Can this be where she's been hidden? A stone then lands at his feet, with a note attached. It was thrown by Lodoïska herself. She's being held in the castle's prison tower. When Floreski approaches the tower, she sings to him, saying that at midnight, he should climb to the top of the tower and lower a note to her window.

⁵ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lodo%C3%AFska_\(Cherubini\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lodo%C3%AFska_(Cherubini))

But the skittish Varbel has another idea. Dourlinsky doesn't know that Lodoiska's father has died. Varbel says they should go to the castle, deliver the news, and say they've been sent by Lodoiska's mother to bring her home. Floreski agrees. They knock on the castle door and a wary servant ushers them inside.

Act II

Dourlinsky's henchman Altamoras has taken Lodoiska from the tower to a dark hall deep inside the castle, along with her nurse, Lysinka. Dourlinsky himself then enters and orders Lysinka out of the room. He wants to speak with Lodoiska privately. Dourlinsky has decided to marry Lodoiska but when she tells him he has no right to marry her, he replies that he has the rights of "a lover who has you in his power." She tells him he's a monster, not a lover, and that she loves Count Floreski.

There's a vehement confrontation where Dourlinsky orders his men to take her to the darkest, most secret part of the prison tower. He also vows to track down this Floreski, whoever he is, and get rid of him. With Lodoiska gone, Dourlinsky meets with Floreski and Varbel, not knowing who they are. When they tell him they've been sent to take Lodoiska back to her mother, Dourlinsky doesn't believe it. He tells them to report back that Lodoiska is no longer with him. Knowing Dourlinsky is lying, Floreski hesitates, not sure what to do next. To buy some time, he says that he and Varbel would like to stay the night, to rest up before their journey home. Dourlinsky agrees, but tells Altamoras to keep an eye on them.

Alone, Floreski is fuming, realizing that Dourlinsky intends to steal Lodoiska for himself. Varbel then joins him with disturbing news: He's overheard a couple of Dourlinsky's men, who are planning to offer them some refreshments — two glasses of poisoned wine. When the men appear, Floreski stalls for time — and Varbel switches the wine they've been offered for the glasses Dourlinsky's men have brought for themselves. They all drink up, and the would-be poisoners are soon out cold. But when Floreski and Varbel try to escape, Dourlinsky confronts them with a group of soldiers. Floreski defiantly reveals his identity, and he and Varbel are taken prisoner.

Dourlinsky goes to Lodoiska with an ultimatum: if she refuses to marry him, Floreski will be killed. Not knowing what's happened back at home, Lodoiska pleads a technicality: She can't be married unless her father is there to give her away. Dourlinsky curtly tells her that her father is dead, and Lodoiska passes out from shock.

Floreski is then dragged in, and as Lodoiska regains consciousness, she runs to him. Dourlinsky repeats his demand: either Lodoiska marries him or Floreski dies. Lodoiska tells Dourlinsky that she'd rather be stabbed through the heart than marry him. She and Floreski vow to die together rather than give in. Dourlinsky had been sure that he was about to get what he wanted, and wonders what to do next. But it's a moot point when cannon fire is heard. Titzikan, Floreski's Tartar ally, is attacking the castle with his army.

In a spectacular scene that helped to make the opera a hit in Paris, one of the castle walls is blown up, then crumbles to reveal the battlefield outside. In fierce fighting, the Tartars overcome Dourlinsky's forces. While that goes on, Dourlinsky hides Lodoiska in the tower, but Titzikan rescues her just as the tower collapses. The resourceful Tartar also manages to save Floreski by snatching a dagger from Dourlinsky's hands in the nick of time. With his castle in flames around him, Dourlinsky admits defeat while Floreski and Lodoiska celebrate their reunion.

Onto this meaty plot—for once, having nothing to do with Roman or Greek mythology, but based on a historical event and containing no roles for castrati—Cherubini lavished some of his best and most exciting music. The overture, which opens with the deceptive sound of gentle

cellos and basses with a few French horn notes tossed in for flavor, slowly but surely expands about a third of the way into it; soft tympani rolls support the faster string figures, which eventually include some breathtaking effects with the bows being zipped across the strings to indicate action, and the piece builds in an almost symphonic manner, similar to Mozart but in a different style. A bit later on, there are some pregnant pauses before the onrush of string figures continues. Although a bit lengthy, this overture clearly indicates that action, not philosophical musings, are about to occur.

Even so, Cherubini builds the tension by starting out in a medium-allegro tempo, yet Titzikan sings his opening solo to short, stabbing notes—no longer the formal style of Rameau, Gluck or even Salieri. Later in this scene, when the chorus appears, they too support Titzikan with short, stabbing notes, not the usual choral style. This could almost be a scene by Spontini or even early Bellini or Donizetti, except that it is better constructed and tied more closely to the text. Cherubini made the best he could out of the spoken dialogue by keeping it short and immediately moving more dramatic music after it was done. He also introduced abrupt key changes of a sort not unknown to Mozart but seldom used by him. This scene has the kind of “rising” vocal line, backed by stepwise rising harmonies, one heard in Pedrillo’s “Frisch zum Kampfe!” from *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, but in a much more dramatic style. Indeed, the almost consistently feverish orchestral figures are what made this opera so innovative. If one is considering opera as drama, the orchestra clearly plays a part as well as the singers.

In addition, Cherubini wrote the kind of long-lined melodies for his characters in front of this nervous-sounding orchestra that would later be fleshed out by other Italian composers in the 19th century—except that his melodies were not written to be pretty or entertaining, but dramatic. There are other allusions to some of Mozart’s music in this score, but never direct plagiarism. Here, Cherubini used them surprisingly frequently. At one point in the dramatic trio between Titzikan, Floreski and Varbel, which ends with a sword fight, Cherubini moved the harmony *down* chromatically instead of *up* as a way of heightening tension. These little touches are the very things that were frequently missing from the dramatic Italian (and French) operas of the bel canto and early “dramatic” period of the next century. And, whenever he could avoid using spoken dialogue, Cherubini created continuous scenes where one dared not applaud for fear of missing something interesting.

Lodoïska, for all its good things, was a prescient opera and a masterpiece in its own way but not perfect; some weaknesses that bog down the action includes Floreski’s Act I aria, “Perd ma belle,” but at the end of the first act there’s a pretty neat, fast-paced duet between Floreski and Varbel which then moves into a trio with Altamoras and the chorus, set to a march beat.

After some spoken dialogue, Act II opens with lyrical recitative and aria for Lodoïska that turns dramatic in its second half. Then some truly dramatic dialogue, followed by a fiery duet between Lodoïska and Dourlinski with running string figures played by the violas and cellos. After another very brief exchange of dialogue, an even faster-paced quartet in which Lysinska, Altamoras and the chorus join them. Cherubini was clearly inching towards the kind of writing we later heard from Giuseppe Verdi in *Ernani*, but tied more closely to the words. The way he heightened tension using minor keys and, better yet, rapidly rising chromatics, was something that the young Verdi did not use...not because it didn’t occur to him, but because complexities like these were out of fashion.

Sadly, the following section of dialogue, though dramatically necessary, slows down the action. As mentioned earlier, this wasn’t Cherubini’s choice, but sadly it robs the following slower-paced scene of its dramatic context by placing too many words in front of it. The rest of the opera moves at a similar pace, mostly fast and exciting, which drives the urgency home.

There's no question that the best performance of *Lodoïska* is the one conducted by Riccardo Muti, with Mariella Devia in her short prime in the title role, Bernard Lombardo as Floreski, Thomas Moser as Titzikan, Alessandro Corbelli as Varbel and William Shimell as Dourlinski.

***Méhul: Stratonice* (1792)**

If the operatic accomplishments of Gluck are often misunderstood or ignored, those of Étienne Nicolas Méhul (1763-1817) have been reduced to one aria, “Champs paternels” from his short opera *La légende de Joseph en Égypte*, which is actually more like a religious cantata. Yet in his heyday, which was the period immediately following Gluck's death to about 20 years later, he was considered to be, according to Wikipedia, “the most important opera composer in France during the Revolution,” a man who kept Gluck's flame alive, particularly in this opera from 1792. As his admirer Hector Berlioz wrote:

[Méhul] was fully convinced that in truly dramatic music, when the importance of the situation deserves the sacrifice, the composer should not hesitate as between a pretty musical effect that is foreign to the scenic or dramatic character, and a series of accents that are true but do not yield any surface pleasure. He was convinced that musical expressiveness is a lovely flower, delicate and rare, of exquisite fragrance, which does not bloom without culture, and which a breath can wither; that it does not dwell in melody alone, but that everything concurs either to create or destroy it – melody, harmony, modulation, rhythm, instrumentation, the choice of deep or high registers for the voices or instruments, a quick or slow tempo, and the several degrees of volume in the sound emitted.

Although technically an “opéra-comique” because it contained spoken dialogue, there is nothing comical or funny about *Stratonice*. On the contrary, it was not only influential but popular, racking up an astonishing 200 performances during Méhul's lifetime. The story concerns Antiochus, the son of King Seleucus, who is pining away but would rather die than tell his father what ails him. The doctor, Erasistratus, suspects love is behind Antiochus's suffering. He notices that the prince's pulse rate increases when he sees Stratonice, the young woman intended as his father's bride, and further tests confirm his diagnosis. The doctor subtly reveals the truth to the king, who is content to relinquish Stratonice to Antiochus to save his son's life and happiness.

Clearly, it's not much of a plot, but then again, Méhul kept the opera to a mere 65 minutes—a one-act opera in 14 scenes that could easily be paired with something else, probably a comedy to offset its seriousness, in order to fill an evening's entertainment. But the point is not how short it is but how *dramatic* it is, and even a cursory listen to this opera will convince you that Méhul was a man who knew what he was about.

Indeed, in this work he took the Gluck-Salieri model one step forward, even topping what Gluck did in the Italian *Alceste*. There is not an extraneous scene, phrase or note in this remarkable work; Antiochus' opening aria is both inherently dramatic and musically diverse, dividing his emotions, and thus the music, into fast and slow sections which alternate with each other. There are a few high notes, but no high Cs...the cult of the “belt-'em-out” tenors had not yet arrived. The words of this aria, in English, are as follows:

*My friends, hold your lamentations and tears;
Your commiseration aggravates my pain.
It is terrible for me to cause such consternation,
It is dreadful to see my own misfortunes fall upon you.*

*Take yourselves away from me! Allow me the consolation
Of having only myself as sole witness to my suffering.
It is in private that I pour out my tears,
In solitude and silence;
These are my dearest sources of consolation.*

In this manner, Méhul elevated what would be, in the hands of an inferior composer, a moment for pathos or bathos—just think of Mario Cavaradossi’s whiny, self-pitying “E lucevan le stelle” from *Tosca*—and makes of this situation something not only serious but noble. Antiochus suffers inside but will not wallow in self-pity; he would rather die than to make others pity him, or even know what it is that erodes his emotional and physical strength.

Of course, a subject such as this was undoubtedly inspired, at least in part, by Goethe’s story *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the difference being that Antiochus is no stalker. Not even Stratonice knows that it is she who is the cause of his suffering; in a spoken dialogue with her, he refuses to disclose the cause of his pain. Yes, this is all heavily tied in with the burgeoning Romantic movement, yet although Antiochus is a member of the nobility, in a way his audiences, even those who were ordinary working people, could identify with his suffering. His character was sympathetic. This was a new form of drama, a humanizing element that would slowly but surely grow in the century ahead, although not in the same manner as this.

Stratonice is a relatively quiet, intimate opera; not a single note of it storms the heavens. Its one weakness is that there is a LOT of dialogue and not as much music as one would like. This, however, was also a convention of the time, at least in France, but each and every musical number has a direct connection to the text being sung, and that is what impressed Berlioz. In the duet he sings with the doctor, “Parlez. Achevez de m’apprendre,” Méhul accompanies it very simply with little turns on the violins as the cellos and basses play a sort of moving “ground bass” underneath them—a very simple and elegant way to accompany the deceptively simple vocal lines. The trio of the three male characters subtly shifts tonality in addition to going back and forth between major and minor. A great many composers in the century to come could have learned a lot by listening to Méhul...but they didn’t. They were too obsessed in creating pop-along tunes that the people could hum, set to rhythms that excited the pulse, and in the bargain true musical drama was shoved to the side.

There is only one recording of *Stratonice*, but it’s a good one, featuring tenor Yann Beuron as Antiochus, Étienne Lescroart as his father, baritone Karl Daymond as the doctor and soprano Patricia Petibon as Stratonice, conducted by William Christie.

***Cherubini: Medée* (1797)**

We now reach the other late-18th century opera, other than *Don Giovanni*, that most opera listeners know, although many know it only in the abridged version, the libretto translated into Italian, made famous by Maria Callas in the 1950s and early ‘60s. Premiered at the Théâtre Feydeau, Paris in March 1797, it received a lukewarm reception and thus was not revived. It popped up again in Germany, its libretto translated into German, in 1800, 1802 and 1809 (the latter a shortened version), which shows that the Germans appreciated Cherubini’s masterpiece better than their French counterparts.

Of course, the weak reception of the opera in France may have been due to the ineffectiveness of the original cast. We have to understand that the kind of vocal acting we hear nowadays, even on some vintage recordings, is a product of the 20th century, a confluence of the “verismo” era, great actresses like Sarah Bernhardt whose influence reached the opera house, the German trend towards “realism” in operatic performance, and the very powerful, almost overwhelming

influence of Feodor Chaliapin, whose work seeped into the Italian, French and German countries, forever changing the way opera would be conceived onstage. This is yet another example of my earlier statement that our concept of drama has changed. Of course, there may have been a few 18th- and early 19th-century singers who acted on stage, at least with the voice, but we have no way of proving this, and most reviewers of the time spoke only of the singers' "pathetick accents" which they considered to be emotionally moving.

Since the plot is so well known, we won't cover it here, but of course we need to discuss the music and its general effect on the listener. Unfortunately, there is only one complete performance of the Cherubini original that was recorded, and that was the one given at Alice Tully Hall in Lincoln Center, New York in March 1997, a bicentennial production of Opera Quotannis with Phyllis Treigle in the title role, Carl Halvorson as Jason and Thais St. Julien as Dircé, conducted by Bart Folse, which was released on CD by Newport Classic and was once available for free streaming on YouTube. Yet although, at the time, music critic Peter G. Davis raved about the full original version in *New York* magazine, asserting that "Its weak sister, the doctored *Medea* we've been hearing all these years, should now be permanently set aside," posterity has not been kind to either the full version of the opera nor this specific recording.

Aside from the fact that those of us used to the powerful voices of Mirto Picchi and Jon Vickers as Jason must now deal with a *haute-contre*, which of course would be a condition in any somewhat authentic rendition of the score, the full *Medée*, though containing some marvelous dramatic music, simply goes on too long, and much of the music you've not heard before is of lesser quality. In addition, there is a LOT of spoken dialogue, much more than in most opéra-comiques of the period, and quite aside from the fact that non-French-speaking audiences would be bored by it, it's not always very dramatic. To put it quite honestly, the original, uncut *Medée* is not a great dramatic work while the abridged French and Italian versions are. (And only some opera buffs are aware that the version we are used to, which was performed by Callas, was partly the work of Leonard Bernstein, who conducted her in the first performances she did in 1953.)

Here, again, we come up against changing tastes and altered editions which have also changed over the decades. If you listen to the original uncut *Medée* referenced above, I seriously doubt that you'd consider it a great dramatic work, particularly since both the conducting and the singing are very much sub-par. I think this explains, in large part, why there have been no other recordings of this edition and no performances of it, and here it is *not* just a case where audiences are simply not used to it. Even if you mounted a production of the full, uncut *Medée* with some of the finest singing-actors in the world today—let us say, Lise Davidsen in the title role and Anthony Dean Griffey as Jason—and a conductor on a par with René Jacobs or John Eliot Gardiner, it would not make as good an impression as the abridged version. Eliminating the dead wood between the dramatic peaks urges the drama forward in a way that almost seems inexorable and inevitable. Leaving it in is like damping a fire with buckets of water between flare-ups. It just doesn't work, interesting though it may be.

Interestingly, Cherubini, like Beethoven after him, opens his opera with very pretty, light music, establishing a "normal" mood before the real drama begins. Also of interest, both composers make the bridge from pretty to dramatic music via a march, although Cherubini's is much longer and includes a chorus. But once we arrive at the dramatic music, even in the HIP performance with somewhat lighter voices and a lighter orchestra, Cherubini completely shifts gears, writing sharp, stabbing orchestral figures to punctuate the drama (not to mention darker orchestration and minor keys). In the Jason-Medea duet near the end of the first act, Cherubini pulls out all the stops to portray the conflicting emotions of these two characters, not just between themselves but within each of them, with constantly shifting tonality and a driving rhythm in the orchestra. This is the first instance of the title character really confronting the father of her children

and letting him know that she is very displeased by his upcoming marriage to Dircé (to put it mildly).

My choice for a French *Medée* is the recording on Nuovo Era with Jano Tamar, a far superior singer to Treigle, in the title role (in fact, Tamar is also an experienced Lady Macbeth), Luca Lombardo as Jason, Jean-Philippe Courtis as Creon and Patrizia Ciofi as Dircé, conducted by Patrick Fournillier. Both conductor and singers get into the drama of the piece much better than in the Folsie performance, and the shaping and pacing of the score are exemplary. In addition, this performance has only slight cuts, all for the better.

Of course, one must also hear at least one of the Maria Callas performances, though sung in Italian, in order to hear how she could “build” the character. The most intense performance is the one from Dallas in 1958 with Vickers as Jason, Elisabeth Carron and Teresa Berganza, but this has fairly poor sound. The one with the best balance of excellent sound and good, dramatic singing is the one from London in 1959, also with Vickers but with Joan Carlyle and Fiorenza Cossotto replacing Carron and Berganza. Both are conducted by Nicola Rescigno.

***Méhul: Uthal* (1806)**

Méhul’s *Uthal*, an opera based on the poems of Ossian, a legendary bard in Irish mythology, which were collected and published by James Macpherson. Macpherson claimed that they were copied word-of-mouth from “ancient sources,” but most scholars believe that he just made most of them up himself. Yet he was honored by being buried among the literary giants in Westminster Abbey since, as W.P. Ker asserts in the *Cambridge History of English Literature*, “all Macpherson’s craft as a philological impostor would have been nothing without his literary skill.”

In this opera, Larmor, the old chief of Dunthalmon, has taken refuge in the forest because his son-in-law Uthal decided he was no longer able to fight in battle but only to eat a lot and so usurped his authority. Larmor’s daughter Malvina went with him in the hopes of curbing some of the old man’s anger and trying to get him to reconcile a bit with Uthal, whose only vices are that he is violent and believes bad advisors. Eventually, Uthal is beaten in battle and sentenced to banishment, but when Malvina offers to follow him into exile, Uthal confesses that he has been wrong and he and Larmor are reconciled.

Thus, this is a fairly dark opera but, like all of Méhul’s other works in this field, it is quite short, a full performance running about an hour. One of the most interesting features of the score is that it dispenses with violins, instead scoring the string section for violas and cellos, which gives the music a continually somber sound. This was, however, not to the liking of several people, including composer André Ernest Grétry, who purportedly said, “I’d give a louis d’or for the sound of an E string!”

Yet despite the absence of violins, this score is tremendously exciting, using the old Gluckian model for the orchestral introduction of a soft opening followed by almost violent string action at a faster tempo. In the middle of it, a female voice is heard singing the syllable “Ah!”⁶ Being an opéra-comique, there is, of course, spoken dialogue, but in *Uthal* it is used much more sparingly than in *Stratonice*. Moreover, in this opera Méhul exploited the high ranges of his singers more, and Larmor’s opening aria has more of an “aria” sound about it, if you know what I mean, though it subtly shifts from B-flat major to B-flat minor and then cleverly morphs into sung recitative, then a duet (with cabaletta) between him and Malvina—to match the scoring, a mezzo-soprano and not a high soprano voice. The sound of cellos is prominent throughout.

⁶ Hugh Macdonald (ed, and translator) *Berlioz's Orchestration Treatise: a Translation and Commentary* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 40

One of the most striking things about *Uthal* is how completely unified the structure is: so tight, in fact, that it almost seems like a stage play even if you just listen to the recording of it. Scene follows upon scene with an unerring dramatic hand; it is almost like listening to a condensed version of a Gluck opera, and a very good Gluck opera at that. In those moments where Méhul accelerates the tempo, as in the chorus “O combine votre aspect,” it comes upon you suddenly rather than building up to it. After the reprise of the chorus, Uthal and Malvine are moved into this dramatic vortex. And yes, this tightness of structure even includes the spoken dialogue. Everything moves quickly, as if we were experiencing the drama in real time rather than in “operatic time,” where such a simple statement as “I love you” is drawn out over eight bars in a medium-slow tempo. With good singing actors in the cast, it is a surprisingly emotional, almost overwhelming listening experience. The Larmor-Uthal duet with chorus has an underlying march rhythm that cones and goes with impunity. This is not an opera that, like *Stratonice*, depends on somber reflections, no matter how beautifully written, for its effects, but an opera of action, and within this action Méhul created a fast-paced, intriguing feast for the ears. No “squirmer” this, except, of course, that he does not exploit and held high notes for the singers. In track 10, Méhul gives us an exquisite duet for the two Bards, to which he adds sung commentary by Malvina.

Indeed, there is so much of Malvina in this opera that I’m a bit surprised that he didn’t name it after her rather than Uthal. The latter, by the way, is a real tenor and not a *haute-contre*, another innovation, and although Méhul did not exploit the high range, he did end Uthal’s aria with a high C, sung in *voix mixte*. The ensuing Uthal-Malvina duet is appropriately breathless, covering, as it does, the characters’ conflicting emotions.

Happily, the lone recording of this opera, with Karine Deshayes as Malvina, Yann Beuron as Uthal and Jean-Sébastien Bou as Larmor, conducted by Christophe Rousset, is so good that you’ll probably not need another version for a long time. It gives full and proper representation of this remarkable score, and will convince you that *Uthal* is indeed a masterpiece.

***Spontini: La Vestale* (1807)**

Gaspare Luigi Pacifico Spontini (1774-1851), a composer of Italian comedies, moved to Paris in 1803. The following year, his 1799 comic opera *La Finta Filosofa* was given due in part to the recommendation of the Comte de Rémusat. Now hobnobbing with some well-connected members of the royalty, he was encouraged by the Empress Joséphine herself to try his hand at a serious work.

The result was *La Vestale*, built around the story of the Roman soldier Licinius’ girl friend, Julia, becoming a vestal virgin while he was away at battle. She tries to avoid him but is assigned the task of presenting him with a laurel wreath to honor his valor on the battlefield. Julia prays in the temple of Vesta to rid her of the temptation to reunite with Licinius, but he enters the temple and the flame of love is rekindled. And of course, wouldn’t you know it, the temple flame she was assigned to protect goes out. Interrogated by the High Priest, she refuses to say who she was with, but she is nonetheless sentenced to death for licentiousness. Licinius intercedes on her behalf, even admitting that it was he who entered the temple and tempted her, but to no avail; she is to be buried alive. Suddenly, a thunderstorm erupts, during which a bolt of lightning reignites the sacred flame. Seeing this as a message from the gods, the High Priest releases Julia who is then free to marry Licinius.

Yet despite Spontini’s connections in high places, the premiere of *Vestale* was postponed for two years. Though written in 1805, it did not premiere until 1807, and it was an instant success. Spontini had found a way of updating the Gluckian model even beyond what Méhul had done in *Uthal*, writing long melodic lines that were neatly interwoven into the fabric of the op-

era. This innovation was expanded upon by Vincenzo Bellini, who somehow got full credit for inventing that style out of thin air, but ‘tain’t so. Spontini beat him to it.

After an energetic but not blatantly pretty overture, we hear Licinia (Licinius), recently returned to Rome, learning from Cinna that his beloved, Julia, has become a vestal virgin. Spontini’s music here characteristically alternates between melodic lines and strophic ones, orchestral-ly-accompanied, but what impresses one is his musical variety. Cinna is alarmed by Licinius’ determination to kidnap her from this position. This is followed by the stately chorus of the Vestal Virgins, often taken at far too sluggish a pace. After a surprising key change into the minor, the Gran Vestale (mezzo) bursts forth with a highly dramatic outburst, followed by Licinius and Julia exchanging lines. This is the “stateliest” portion of the opera which, when conducted too slowly, can bore an audience to tears; when conducted at a decent pace (and using a light orchestra), it makes a good effect. The dramatic outbursts of the Gran Vestale are key to the success of this act; without a forceful and dramatic-sounding mezzo-soprano, the scene falls flat. Spontini then takes this conversation-like music and suddenly breaks out in a very Gluck-like aria for the Gran Vestale with a similar “stabbing” orchestra. Sung and conducted properly, this is one of the great moments in the opera.

Yet best of all is undoubtedly Julia’s long scene in Act II, beginning with the aria “Toi que j’implore avec effroi” (“Tu che invoco” in the Italian translation) which then builds up in a mighty *cabaletta* which Spontini orchestrated in such a way that, when played in a theater, literally resounded off the walls. (Hector Berlioz later recycled this idea in his *Requiem*.) This, in turn, morphs into the duet with Licinius; after the High Priest enters and discovers that Julia has inadvertently allowed the sacred flame to go out, it then morphs into her second most recognizable aria, better known by its Italian title, “O nume tutelar.” It is something that hadn’t been achieved by any opera composer since Mozart, the continuous operatic scene that keeps growing and gaining momentum as it went along, culminating in her exposure by the High Priest.

There are only three commercial recordings of the complete, or almost complete, opera in the original French, conducted by Gustav Kuhn, Riccardo Muti and Christophe Rousset. The first two feature sluggish conducting and the last two defective singing, but I’ve recently discovered a superb 2013 live performance on YouTube with Alexandra Deshorties as Julia, Yann Beuron as Licinia and Sylvie Brunet-Grupposo as the Gran Vestale, conducted by Alessandro de Marchi at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sv04zK5B3A8>. If you can put up with the defective sound, however, you should also hear Maria Callas’ abridged live 1954 *Vestale* with a young Franco Corelli as Licinius, conducted by Antonino Votto.

***Spontini: Fernand Cortez* (1809)**

Following the success of *La Vestale*, Spontini decided to set *Electra* as an opera, but in 1808 he received a “request” from Emperor Napoleon himself to write an opera based on the Spanish conqueror of the Aztecs, Hernán Cortez, to be symbolic of his own world-conquering plans. Unable to refuse, Spontini set to work. The libretto by Étienne de Jouy and Joseph-Alphonse Esménard thus had to sanitize Cortez’ story and turn him into some sort of good guy.

Considering all of this, it’s a miracle that the opera was even a good one, let alone a great one, but the music is in fact so good (the *frou-frou* overture aside) that it has become the only Spontini opera other than *La Vestale* to continue to be performed, albeit infrequently. Quite aside from its political connections, *Cortez* was a difficult opera both for the singers and the orchestra, both of whom constantly complained during rehearsals about the difficulty of their music.

Yet, in the end, it was surely worth it, because from start to finish *Fernand Cortez* presents a happy combination of drama and entertainment. Interestingly, the lead role was not written for a *haute-contre* but for a *taille*, yet another vocal range indigenous to the French, a sort of “bari-

tenor.” Thus it would have been perfect for such singers as Jacques Urlus, Lauritz Melchior, Ramón Vinay or Jon Vickers, none of whom ever sang it. Writing for such a voice, Spontini inadvertently created the Heroic Tenor as we now know it; in fact, in Act I there is a scene for Cortez, “Suivez-moi, Castellans,” the original version of the heroic tenor cabaletta formula, which Italian composers in particular fell in love with and exploited for the next seventy years.

Also, because this was more or less a “pageant opera,” Spontini purposely wrote music that was martial and thrilling which he interspersed with music meant to carry the drama. This makes *Fernand Cortez* about one-third showcase music to two-thirds truly dramatic music, but this formula, too, was taken to extremes by the Italian composers who followed him.

Yet the differences between Spontini, an admirer the Gluckian aesthetic, and Rossini, progenitor of bouncy Italian melodies, can be heard in Amazily’s first-act aria, “Hélas! Elle n’est plus!,” where the melodic line progresses almost like conversation, with constant changes in where the music is placed both melodically and rhythmically moment to moment. Rossini and Meyerbeer would have written a Lovely Tune with Climactic High Notes—undoubtedly pretty and attractive, but a far cry from the brilliant, original creation that Spontini gives us here. In other words, it may not be entertaining, but it is *dramatically apt*. The same is true of the ensuing Amazily-Cortez duet, “Quels sons nouveaux.” Here, Spontini maintains a steady 6/8 rhythm throughout, but in places the accents are more march-like than in others. And then note how the music progresses *without a break* into the ensuing chorus, which uses a variation on the tune of the duet. It was yet another way that Spontini used to bind his scenes and acts together. And that, dear readers, is why his music was superior to that of Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini and even Meyerbeer.

Note, too, how Spontini suddenly threw a key change in the middle of the Amazily-Telasco duet, “Dieu de Mexique, Dieu vengeur!” Nor is this the only number in which he indulged in surprising key changes; indeed, they abound in Act II. Many French critics of the day complained bitterly about this because it didn’t follow their “rules of harmony.” In Act II, we also get the very first “concerted number” in which three voices—Telasco and the two Spanish prisoners—sing an *a cappella* trio in which their voices intertwine.

The only complete commercial recording is the one issued by Dynamic in 2020 with tenor Dario Schmunck as Cortez, soprano Alexia Voulgandou as Amazily and baritone Luca Lombardo as Telasco, conducted by Jean-Luc Tingaud, but it is not only an excellent performance but also note-complete, even incorporating the music that Spontini took out of the score after the fall of Napoleon. At that time, Spontini took the first part of Act III and made it the core of Act I whereas the original first act became Act II with the second act becoming Act III. In addition, this performance also includes all passages from the manuscript that Spontini left out of the printed editions.

Beethoven: *Leonore* (1805-06)/*Fidelio* (1814)

Poor Beethoven! All he wanted to do, in 1805, was to write an opera with a plot he felt would be suitably dramatic and really grab an audience...which he did, but he wasn’t satisfied with it. Originally, in fact, he was commissioned to write an opera titled *Vestas Feuer* by Emanuel Schikenader, who had earlier commissioned Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*, but the libretto wasn’t to Beethoven’s liking. He fooled around with it for about a month, but abandoned it as soon as the *Leonore/Fidelio* libretto came to his attention. Some of the music was written for an earlier, never-completed opera. He revised it the following year, mostly by reducing the number of acts from three to two, but also by writing new music and dropping some of the old. Three different overtures were written for *Leonore*, all of which survive and all of which are concert-hall favorites, but in 1814 he finally settled on an entirely new overture and yet another rear-

rangement of scenes, mostly in the first act.

In the very fine recording of *Leonore* conducted by Herbert Blomstedt, we notice several differences from the finished *Fidelio*. First, there is spoken dialogue leading into the opening duet and a few different notes in the orchestral introduction to this duet. Rocco initiates a trio immediately after this duet that was dropped later on. This, too, was wise; the trio is superfluous. And, of course, a lot of the dialogue is different as well, even in scenes that were carried over to the revised opera. The trio “Gut, Söhnchen, gut” is considerably longer here—over seven minutes—with lots of extra music that, though well written, holds up the action.

The second act of *Leonore* opens with the March that introduces Don Pizarro. Again, Beethoven was wise to compress this into one longer act, even though the March is exactly the point at which the dramatic temperature changes, things become tense, and the music stops sounding like Italian opera. There’s also some extra music in the Pizarro-Rocco duet, but I didn’t mind this so much; in fact, I rather liked this version.

Yet Beethoven made another mistake: after the Pizarro-Rocco duet, we hear dialogue between Marzelline and Fidelio, then a six-minute duet in waltz tempo for both sopranos. Moreover, this duet harks back to the Italianate style of the first scene—there’s even an obbligato solo violin!—that is as out of place here as a high-born lady dancing the minuet during a military invasion. Finally, we reach Leonore’s big aria, but here it starts quite differently with music you’ve never heard before, set to the words “Ach, brich noch dicht” before moving into the more familiar “Komm, o komm” section. This intro works musically but not dramatically, as Beethoven later realized. There are also several bars of extra music, and semi-florid musical lines for the soprano, in this section, and when the *cabaletta* arrives it is entirely different and not nearly as effective—until the exposed horn call, at which point we hear the more familiar music, but not exactly. Some of *this* is different, too, and much more florid, later including a trill.

Then we reach the Act I finale, the Chorus of Prisoners, much of it the same and some not. After this, Beethoven inserted a Rocco-Leonore duet and a Rocco-Leonore-Marzelline-Pizarro quartet, later Pizarro with chorus, which extends the final scene to a whopping 18 minutes. And yet, that duet which turns into a trio and then a scene with chorus is VERY dramatic music, some of Beethoven’s best for that period in fact, and I wish he’d have carried most of this over as the finale to the later Act I. Abridge it, but don’t throw out the baby with the bath water.

“Gott! Welch dunkel Hier” starts out pretty much as we know it now except for several bars of different music prior to the tenor’s entrance, but the music the tenor sings to the familiar words is quite unfamiliar and lacks dramatic punch. Once we reach the more lyrical section of the aria, there is more unfamiliar music mixed with the familiar. It’s way too long (over 10 minutes) and dramatically weak in places. Much of the rest of the act is pretty much as you’ll recognize it, but there’s too much music in the Leonore-Florestan-Rocco trio (an extra minute, in fact) which bogs down the drama. But once again, there’s some really good extra music later on that *shouldn’t* have been cut because it’s dramatic and fills out the scenes better.

In yet another performance of *Leonore* conducted by Ryan Brown with opera Lafayette, the opening dialogue leads not into the familiar duet but into Marzelline’s aria, with a few altered notes, *then* Jacquino enters, speaks a few lines, and goes into the duet with Marzelline. Actually, I thought this worked better from a dramatic standpoint as it established Marzelline and her deep love for Fidelio before Jacquino tries unsuccessfully to woo her back.

As one can see, then, there were several gains in the transition from *Leonore* to *Fidelio*, but also a few losses. I think it’s only tradition plus respect for Beethoven’s changes that some of this better music from the earlier version is not performed in *Fidelio*, but for the most part the finished product clearly has some very dramatic music. Still, one could argue that the arias and even the extraordinarily beautiful quartet “O mir ist wunderbar”—Leonore’s and Florestan’s

arias excepted—hold up the action rather than move it forward, but anyone who has seen a performance of this work onstage knows that it works extremely well. I would thus say that *Fidelio* is a qualified masterpiece, having a few extraneous moments but generally very good. The more cheerful, “normal” atmosphere of the opening scene actually helps make the drama, when it erupts, all the more effective. Here, Beethoven borrowed some ideas from Mozart’s *chiaroscuro* effects in *Don Giovanni*.

But the one feature of *Fidelio* in which Beethoven was prescient of things to come was his use of high notes for the lead soprano and tenor. In both cases, he injected high notes for dramatic climaxes in their big arias, but he did not keep their voices up high. In technical terms, the *tesitura* or general range of the voice stayed in the mid-range with a few moments in which they went up in order to highlight certain words dramatically. Mozart did the same thing with “Or sai chi l’onore” in *Don Giovanni*, but to a much milder extent. Beethoven had learned, from writing the dramatic soprano aria “Ah, perfido!,” how to make this work to his and the singer’s advantage. In “Abscheulicher! Wo eilst du hin?,” the singer rises to an F and F-sharp early on in the aria, always to conclude a short phrase. In the slower “Komm’, hoffnung” section, she sings a high sustained B at full volume, but in the middle of this section, not at the end. Yet it is in the fast concluding section of the aria that he pulls the stops out. At the end of the very first phrase, she sings an A-flat, but then the voice stays generally down in range for the rest of the aria—until the end, when she sings up the scale to another *forte* high B just prior to the closing phrase. It’s all very effective, both musically and theatrically.

In Florestan’s aria “Gott! Welch dunkel hier,” conversely, the tenor *enters* on a *forte* high G—not a really “high” note as tenors go, but it is above the break in the voice and, since this is the tenor’s warm-up music (he sings nothing at all in the opera before he comes in on that high G) it is already a climactic moment. Yet Beethoven pulls back from this, creating an almost “conversational” aria until the change of tempo for the faster final section. And it is here where Florestan, seeing visions of his “angel Leonore,” keeps rising to high-lying phrases, including a climactic high B-flat. Unfortunately for the high-note lovers, the tenor does not hold and milk this note for very long, but it is there, and in fact he sings it again before concluding the aria.

This very intelligent pattern that Beethoven created, of keeping the singers in the middle of their vocal range for most of the time but occasionally venturing higher, had a profound effect on Richard Wagner who did the same thing. It was a German approach to trying to preserve the voice throughout a long performance without tiring it too much...but it was not a French or an Italian approach. Perhaps the most exciting moment in the entire opera is when, in the dungeon, Leonore pulls the pistol out from inside her jacket pocket, points it at Pizarro, and tells him that if he takes one more step towards Florestan she will kill him. At this point, the soprano lets out with a truly ringing, *forte* high B that has the effect of a sledgehammer within the otherwise gloomy music of the dungeon scene. It is perfect musically, vocally, *and* dramatically.

For some listeners, the festive ending with the chorus, Don Fernando and all the gang has always seemed a bit contrived. I admit that I’m not crazy about it, but considering where we were emotionally through most of the second act, it certainly works to relieve tension and bring the opera full circle.

Despite a weak-sounding Jacquino, the best commercial recording is Ferenc Fricsay’s from the late 1950s with Irmgard Seefried as Marzelline, Gottlob Frick as Rocco, Leonie Rysanek as Leonore/Fidelio and Ernst Häfliger as Florestan, but the most intense performance ever recorded is the live Metropolitan Opera broadcast of January 7, 1984 conducted by Klaus Tennstedt. The cast includes Roberta Peters as Marzelline, Paul Plishka as Rocco, Eva Marton as Leonore, Franz Mazura as Don Pizarro and John Cheek as Don Fernando. It can be streamed for free on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gY7qLG3r9xU&t=0s>.