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Frenzied Momentum in *Les Huguenots* and *Le Prophète*

One of the appealing yet elusive facets of Grand opéra aesthetics is the buildup of movement and momentum in the large-scale scenes characteristic of the genre. Giacomo Meyerbeer and Eugène Scribe were amongst the most imaginative creators of such movement, effectively absorbing and translating the acceleration of nineteenth-century Parisian life through their monumental music-drama projects. In this context, "dynamic" recitatives, which traditionally constitute the scaffolding of operatic kinesis, step unexpectedly into the limelight, providing a flexible means of conveying movement and accelerating dramatic time. Describing the adaptation of his Italian opera *Poliuto* as *Les Martyrs* for the French stage in 1839, Gaetano Donizetti coined some of the differences he perceived between his native Italian tradition and the influential Parisian style of the first half of the nineteenth century:

> "La musica, e la poesia teatrale francese hanno un *cachet* tutto proprio al quale ogni compositore deve uniformarsi; sia nei recitativi sia nei pezzi di canto; per esempio, bando ai crescendi etc. etc. bando alle solite cadenze *felicità, felicità, felicità*; poi in tra l'una e l'altra cabaletta avvi sempre una poesia che innalza l'azione senza la solita ripetizione de' versi di cui i nostri poeti fanno uso."[1]

A lack of repetitions and a tendency to "move the action forwards" are seen as the crucial traits which composers (including himself) "must" emulate in order to master the Grand opéra style. Indeed, even such critical voices as the Wagnerian theorist Hermann Hettner were forced to acknowledge, although grudgingly, that beyond what he calls the "unworthy operatic pomp" of Meyerbeer's works, his operas are among those that contain a truly dramatic essence and structure.[2] Notwithstanding the extravagant lyrical numbers and spectacular tableaux that are characteristic of Grand opéra in general, the taut dramatic progression of the Scribe-Meyerbeer collaborations constitute one of the most remarkable and avant-garde traits of these nineteenth-century masterworks.

In the following analyses, I refer to a method developed in my dissertation, whereby terms such as "montage", "timing", "pacing", "sequence", "cut" and "shot" are used in loose metaphorical analogy with the domain of film studies as an experimental tool to

1 "French music and poetry for the theatre have a *cachet* all their own, to which each composer must adapt. In the recitatives as well as in the sung pieces one must for example ban the crescendi, etc. etc. and ban the usual cadences *felicità, felicità, felicità*; and between one and the other cabaletta [verse] there is always poetry which moves the action forward, without the usual line repetitions of which our poets make use." Gaetano Donizetti: Letter to Giovanni Simone Mayr, 8 April 1839, in: Guido Zavadini: *Donizetti: vita, musiche, epistolario*, Bergamo 1948, pp. 494 f.

2 Hermann Hettner: *Das moderne Drama*, Braunschweig 1852, pp. 186 f.

achieve closer insight into time structures in opera.[3] I will consider some of the music-dramatic means of momentum which contribute to the dynamic progression of large-scale scenes in Meyerbeerian opera, and take a closer look at how Scribe and Meyerbeer construct and adapt operatic temporality to create breathless pacing in the culminating love scenes of *Les Huguenots* and *Le Prophète*.

"... le danger presse et *le temps vole*" Meyerbeer's own comments about making the fourth and fifth acts of *Les Huguenots* "very short" confirm the composer's desire for acceleration already at an early stage in the creative process.[4] The effect eventually achieved in performance and the impression this made on the contemporary opera public was famously parodied in Jules Verne's novella of 1874 *Une Fantaisie du docteur Ox*.[5] Indeed, Act IV of *Les Huguenots* presents a remarkably paced dramatic continuum for 1836: other than a few repetitions in the "Conjuration et Bénédiction des poignards" and some lyrically expanded moments of the "Grand duo" between Raoul and Valentine, Scribe's text is rarely duplicated or interrupted for any length of time. Rather the whole act is driven forwards to an unprecedented extent. An obvious case in point is the first scene of the act, which was massively cut and transformed throughout the composition process. With the removal of the originally foreseen solo Romance for Valentine, the scene bears the incongruous title "Entracte, récitatif et scène" – which might as well read *entracte, récitatif et récitatif* (!) since the terms "scène" and "récitatif" were synonymous at this time in terms of declamatory texture. Although cuts in opera (and particularly Meyerbeerian opera) were often motivated by the pragmatic necessity of reducing scenes to manageable proportions, in certain cases they also reflect aesthetic developments, especially when considered in relation to authorial statements and overall stylistic tendencies of the time.

Act IV of *Les Huguenots* opens with Valentine reflecting alone in her apartments on the pain of her forced marriage and separation from Raoul; when Raoul himself unexpectedly appears, an uneasy exchange ensues in which neither protagonist is able to

3 See Laura Moeckli: *Tracing Nineteenth-Century Recitative 1820–1860. Prosody – Composition – Dramaturgy – Performance*, PhD Diss., University of Bern, 2015. See also my article Narrative Pacing and Flashback in Meyerbeer's Recitatives, in: *Meyerbeer and Grand opéra from the July Monarchy to the Present*, ed. by Mark Everist, Turnhout 2016, pp. 333–357. For a generally critical view of analogies between opera and film see Delphine Vincent's contribution in this book pp. 119–131. I am thankful to Delphine for her suggestions concerning film terminology, in particular the importance of distinguishing between a preproduction "take" and a postproduction "shot".

4 "Les trois premiers actes ont été si longs qu'il faut tâcher de rendre bien court les deux derniers." Meyerbeer-Scribe concept notes, 1832, BNF shelfmark: ms n.a.f. 22502.

5 For a more detailed discussion of this parody see Anselm Gerhard's contribution in this volume pp. 147–155, as well as his reference study of Grand opéra: *Die Verstädterung der Oper. Paris und das Musiktheater des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Stuttgart 1992.

express what they really feel. The following table proposes a division of this 80-bar declamatory scene into 9 "shots" determined by music-dramatic criteria including variations in "Syllabic Density" (SD) – a figure obtained by dividing the number of syllables by the number of bars in each shot, providing a rough indication of syllable-concentration per segment:

Les Huguenots, Act IV, No. 22: Scène Valentine – Raoul[6]

Pacing Shots	Syllables / Bars	SD	Texture	Motifs
a) Ritournelle	0 / 17	0.0		repeated eighths + breathless accents
b) Valentine "Je suis seule …"	40 / 16	2.5	motivically punctuated recit.	snippets from the ritournelle
c) Valentine "Et vous que j'implorais …"	48 / 9	5.3	tremolo recit.	
d) Valentine "Juste ciel! est-ce lui? …"	24 / 4	6.0	tremolo recit.	
e) Raoul/Valentine "Oui, c'est moi! …"	53 / 10	5.3	punctuated recit.	
f) Valentine "Qu'entends-je! …	13 / 3	4.3	arioso/parlante "allegro moderato"	
g) Raoul (froidement) "Oui, je pouvais les rencontrer …"	32 / 5	6.4	punctuated recit.	
h) Valentine/ Raoul "Entendez vous ces pas? …"	18 / 9*[7]	2.0	parlante "allegro con spirito" 3/4	
i) Valentine "Mon père! mon époux! …"	18 / 4	4.5	punctuated recit.	

Despite the missing *Romance*, this opening scene manages to draw a rough sketch of the dramatic situation: with repeated staccato eighth notes, the ritornello introduces a mechanical movement like the incessant ticking of a clock, punctuated by breathless, dotted gestures. The expanded density (SD 2.5) of Valentine's opening monologue occurs

6 A "shot" in a film is defined as a single camera scene between two "cuts". In opera analysis a greater subjectivity is of course involved in defining such "cuts" and "shots" compared to the technically determined filmic terms. Despite the flexibility of metric performance in recitative, this SD-ratio provides a useful tool for identifying micro-variations in compositional pacing. Based on some preliminary analyses, the average SD-rates for simple recitative appear to lie somewhere between 3.0 and 5.0. By contrast, syllabic densities in nineteenth-century lyrical passages typically lie somewhere between 0.5 and 2.0, although these numbers do of course vary greatly from one passage to another.

7 This shot actually consists of 12 bars in 3/4 measure, but in order to maintain a proportional sense of temporal extension, the 36 notes are grouped into artificial 4/4 *units comparable to the rest of the section.

through the insertion of hectic motifs from the introduction, depicting her agitated state in a condensed form of declamatory introspection (example 1, page 138).

Her inner turmoil is further underlined by tremolo texture and chromatic modulations in shots (c) and (d). With Raoul's appearance however, the inexorable pace of high-density dialogue sets in (SD 4.3–6.4) until the sound of male footsteps on the stairs – expressed in surging mimetic figures in shot (h) – brings dramatic tension to a paroxysm as Valentine urges Raoul to hide. In the ensuing "Conjuration" scene, declamatory interjections, impetuous motifs, marching or ticking accompaniments, and harmonic surges continuously recall the relentless passing of time between the lyrically expanded moments of fanatic debate and sinister communion. In his analysis of the score after the Parisian première, Berlioz vividly evokes the "sublime horror" of this large-scale scene, describing its vocal texture accurately as "une de ces formes intermédiaires, familières à M. Meyerbeer, qui tiennent du récitatif autant que de l'air et ne sont cependant ni l'un ni l'autre."[8] Once the conspirators depart, Raoul re-emerges horrified from his hiding place; Valentine attempts to retain him and stall for time, giving rise to the work's culminating duet.

As Steven Huebner has pointed out, one innovative aspect of this central love duet lies in Meyerbeer's increased fusion of declamatory and lyrical textures within the traditional Italianate *solita forma* structure.[9] Already in the opening 40-bar *scena*, the texture constantly wavers between *parlante* dialogue and melodic arioso:

Les Huguenots, Act IV, No. 24: Scena Raoul – Valentine

Pacing Shots	Syllables / Bars	SD	Texture	Motifs
a) Valentine "Oh ciel! où courez vous? …"	12 / 9	1.3	punctuated parlante "allegro vivace"	staccato chromatic motifs
b) Raoul "Où je vais? …"	42 / 8	5.2	"presque parlé" "allegro maestoso"	beating 'pulse' + nervous upbeat
c) Valentine "Mais ces ennemis …"	18 / 4	4.5	arioso	
d) Valentine/Raoul "Voudriez-vous les immoler …"	28 / 5	5.6	dialog with repetitive figures	
e) Raoul/Valentine "Et voilà le Dieu …"	23 / 4	5.7	parlante "allegro maestoso"	beating 'pulse' + nervous upbeat

8 "[…] one of those intermediary forms, common to M. Meyerbeer, which owes as much to recitative as to aria, yet is neither one nor the other." Hector Berlioz: Les Huguenots, in: *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires*, 10 December 1836, pp. 1 f., here p. 1.

9 Steven Huebner: Italianate Duets in Meyerbeer's Grand Opéra, in: *Journal of Musicological Research* 8 (1989), pp. 203–258.

f)	Valentine "Ah! ne blasphémez pas! ..."	51 / 9	5.6	arioso / parlante	galloping acceleration
	Tempo d'attacco "*Le danger presse* ..."	80 / 32*	2.5	"allegro moderato" 2/4	

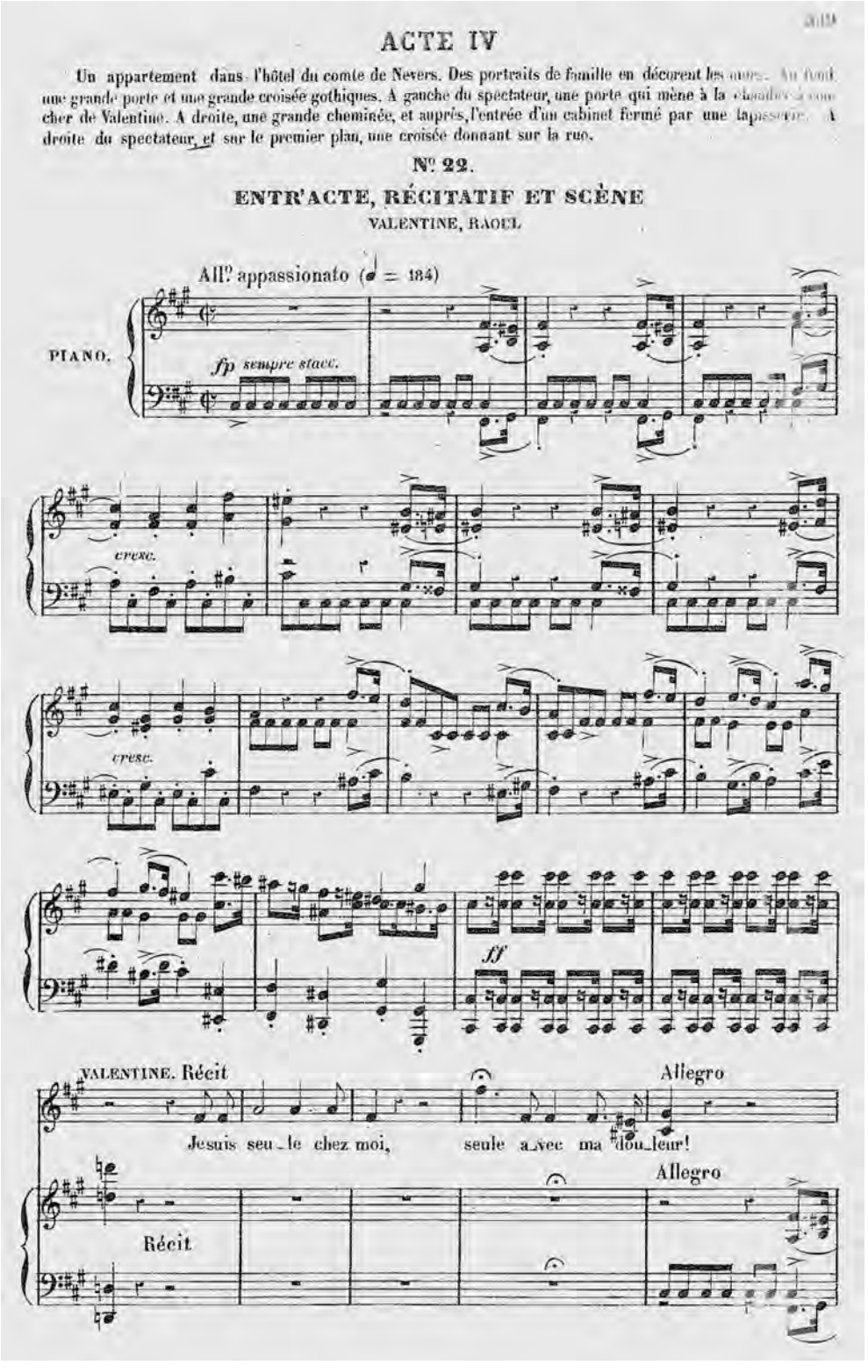
At several points in this *scena* one is tempted to think that the *tempo d'attacco* strophes are about to begin, but each time expectations are confounded by a return to monotone *parlante* or irregular declamation. Sustained mimetic accompaniments underline the mounting tension of each shot without interrupting the declamatory flow, up until the yearning ritornello in 2/4 which launches the real *tempo d'attacco*. Such confusion persists throughout the duet, with again not one, but several declamatory sequences interrupting the lyrical closure in the manner of a *tempo di mezzo*. Finally, the unusual declamatory ending of Act IV is also underlined by Berlioz:

> "[...] le duo finit à peu près en *récitatif*, par un solo, et sur la *note sensible*. Ce dénoûment [sic] musical, si contraire à nos habitudes, semble devoir manquer de la force et de la chaleur nécessaires à la conclusion d'un tel acte; et, tout au contraire, la dernière exclamation de Raoul: *Dieu, veillez sur ses jours, et moi je vais mourir*, est si déchirante, que l'effet de l'*ensemble mesuré* le plus vigoureux ne saurait lui être supérieur."[10]

Indeed, instead of the expected grand finale, the act closes with Valentine fading in and out of consciousness and Raoul's fragmented interjections petering into timeless suspension.

Even on a diegetic level, the unstoppable passage of time is an underlying theme of this duet: "le danger presse et *le temps vole*", "Oh mon Dieu! Voici *l'heure*", "C'est la mort! Voici *l'heure*", and finally the chiming of the hour and Raoul's exclamation "C'en est fait; *voici l'heure*!" that brings the breathless *cabaletta* to a close. Meyerbeer introduces a further explicit device for time structuring in this closing *scena*: the sound of a ringing bell. Initially bell tolls occur evenly on the first beat of each bar establishing a regular point of temporal reference; but then the tolls are accelerated to two per bar, suggesting a faster passage of time, until they finally cease altogether, only re-entering in extremis as Raoul rushes off to warn his fellow Huguenots of the impending massacre. Thus the relativity of time is conveyed and synthesized in the varied pacing of these bell-tolls; time is compressed and expanded according to the protagonists' impressions and sen-

10 "[...] the duet ends more or less in recitative, with a solo, and on the leading note. This musical ending, so contrary to our conventions, seems destined to lack the necessary force and warmth for the conclusion of such an Act; yet, quite to the contrary, Raoul's last exclamation: *Dieu, veillez sur ses jours, et moi je vais mourir*, is so heart-wrenching that the most vigorous measured ensemble could not be superior." Berlioz: Les Huguenots, p. 2.



Example 1 Giacomo Meyerbeer: *Les Huguenots*, vocal score, Brandus, Paris circa 1860, Act IV, Scene 22 (beginning)

sations, without however completely managing to evade the recurring sound of the bell which symbolizes the inexorable pressure of "flying time" in face of the impeding dilemma.

"Ah! ... Morte! ... Morte!" Meyerbeer and Scribe pursued their time condensation experiments in *Le Prophète* working towards effects of unprecedented momentum and brutality.[11] Following the immense success of *Les Huguenots* in the French capital and abroad, the Parisian public waited thirteen long years for the next collaborative chef-d'œuvre to appear on stage. Although first sketches for *Le Prophète* date back to 1835, and a plan for *Vasco de Gama* (*L'Africaine*) was also conceived by 1837, the penury of suitable French singers after the disappearance of the soprano Cornélie Falcon and the tenor Adolphe Nourrit initially postponed further progress.[12] Moreover, professional frictions between Meyerbeer, Scribe and opera director Léon Pillet, as well as political tensions leading to the collapse of the July Monarchy in 1848, made attempts at a new collaboration impossible. Only after Henry Duponchel and Nestor Roqueplan became directors of the Opéra in 1847 and the disruptions of the third revolutionary wave subsided, could *Le Prophète* finally be staged in Paris in 1849. With regard to frenzied momentum, the incongruous encounters between Jean de Leyde and his betrothed Berthe offer some of the most remarkable examples in the history of opera.

The first encounter of the lead couple occurs in the second act, after Jean dismisses the fanatical Anabaptists. He sighs in relief at their departure, regaining a sense of normality in the thought of his upcoming marriage. However, his reflexions are immediately interrupted by a mimetic gesture of threat, tension, and acceleration – the sound of galloping hooves:

(*Les trois anabaptistes sortent.*)
JEAN
Ils partent! ... grâce au ciel! leur funeste présence
M'empêchait d'être heureux!
Oui, demain quand j'y pense,

11 For more on temporal acceleration and "realism" in *Le Prophète* in general see Sieghart Döhring: Multimediale Tendenzen in der französischen Oper des 19. Jahrhunderts, in: *Report of the twelfth congress of the International Musicological Society Berkeley 1977*, ed. by Daniel Heartz and Bonnie Wade, Kassel/London/Basel 1981, pp. 497–500.

12 On the role of these singers in the development and production of Meyerbeer's operas see Laura Moeckli: "Nobles dans leurs attitudes, naturels dans leurs gestes". Singers as Actors on the Parisian Opera Stage, in: *Sänger als Schauspieler. Zur Opernpraxis des 19. Jahrhunderts in Text, Bild und Musik*, ed. by Anette Schaffer, Edith Keller, Laura Moeckli, Florian Reichert, and Stefan Saborowski, Schliengen 2014 (Musikforschung der Hochschule der Künste Bern, Bd. 5), pp. 11–40.

Demain mon mariage! … ô riant avenir!
Quel bruit … retentit à cette heure? N'entends-je pas …
Le galop des coursiers, les armes des soldats?
(*Berthe entre en courant, pâle, défaite. Elle se jette dans les bras de Jean.*)
JEAN
Ah! Berthe! ma bien aimée! et d'où vient cet effroi?
BERTHE, *hors d'haleine.*
Des fureurs … d'un tyran … sauve moi! …
Comment … fuir ses regards? Juste ciel!
JEAN, *lui montrant la cachette.*
Là! Là!
(*Jean sort pour voir si Oberthal est près de la chaumière.*)
BERTHE, *avec une expression douloureuse.*
Ah! d'effroi, je tremble encore!
Au trépas, viens m'arracher,
Dieu puissant, toi que j'implore!
À leurs yeux, viens me cacher.
(*Oberthal entre.*)[13]

The lovers thus meet in a state of utmost agitation. Berthe having fled her captors, arrives in dire need leaving Jean mere seconds to grasp the situation. All expectations are confounded in this reunion: instead of the gradual build-up to the obligatory love duet, any thought of lyric expansion is immediately dismissed by the rapid succession of events. Breathless and stunned, the protagonists resort to direct physical communication – more efficient than words – for conveying their desperate needs. Indeed, throughout the compositional process, the authors increasingly cut away the text in the successive libretto versions as their concept developed and matured.[14] Language is reduced to a minimum: the alexandrines of Jean's part are condensed so that they merge and flow easily into each other, changing rapidly from one thought to the next. Berthe's phrases are reduced to short irregular lines of nine- and seven-syllables which mimetically underline the protagonist's frantic gasps.

Moreover, the musical "montage" of this reunification scene further emphasizes the lovers' desperate situation and their necessity to act rapidly without taking time to express anything in words:

13 All the libretto extracts are based on the indispensable critical edition Eugène Scribe/Giacomo Meyerbeer: *Le Prophète. Livret – étude, sources, documents*, éd. by Fabien Guilloux, München 2007. In some cases, indentations have been placed differently to reflect the typology of French libretti in what I consider to be a clearer manner. For this passage see Version "musicale" Brandus-Troupenas, p. 131.

14 See the four successive libretto versions published in Scribe/Meyerbeer: *Le Prophète. Livret – étude, sources, documents*.

Le Prophète, Act II, No. 9: Reunion Jean – Berthe

Pacing Shots	Syllables / Bars	SD	Texture	Motifs
a) Jean alone "Ils partent! … grâce au ciel! …"	36 / 7	5.1	punctuated recit.	
b) Jean's apprehension "Quel bruit … retentit …"	24 / 6	4.0	sustained parlante	galloping march
c) Berthe's arrival "Ah! Berthe, ma bien-aimée!"	13 / 6	2.2	ritournell + punctuated recit.	
d) Berthe breathless "Des fureurs … d'un tyran …"	20 / 11	1.8	sustained parlante	chromatic surge
e) Berthe Arioso "Ah! d'effroi, je tremble …"	28 / 13	2.2	arioso	
f) Oberthal's arrival "Loin de ces rives …"	50 / 15	3.3	sustained parlante / arioso	galloping

The dominant vocal texture of the passage is fragmented *parlante*, punctuated or sustained by mimetic orchestral motifs. Starting at an average recitative syllabic density value of 5.1, the rates plummet in the following shots, not because time is in any way expanded, but rather because there is not enough time to say anything at all. Jean's apprehension builds up in the galloping progression, which at the same time evokes the sound of Oberthal's approaching convoy, while Berthe's distress translates musically into chromatic surges and breathless interrupted motifs, so that both the protagonists' reactions to this menacing situation are simultaneously conveyed. Amid this commotion there is only a single phrase which evokes joyous reunion: Jean's ecstatic sigh "Ah! Berthe, ma bien-aimée!" which, however, shifts immediately to rising alarm and anxious interrogation. Surely, this scene must be the least lyrical lovers' reunion in the history of nineteenth-century opera. First, Berthe's tender, almost Verdian, arioso fragment is completely lost on Jean, who is looking out to see the progress of Oberthal and his troupes. Then, Berthe is forced to remain largely hidden during the struggle for power between Jean, Fidès and Oberthal. Faced with the true dilemma of losing his betrothed or watching his mother die on the spot, Jean decides in a flash to pay the agonizing price and save his mother from execution. Thus in this whole palpitating scene there are only two points of direct verbal contact between the lovers: their initial furtive phrase of greeting, and their violent separation as Jean casts Berthe from him in despair "Ah! Va-t'en! Tu le vois, il le faut!"

Due once more in large part to the extensive transformations and cuts made over the thirteen years of the opera's gestation, the lovers only meet again in the final act. There appears to be no time for love in the would-be prophet's world. And once again, when it finally arrives, Jean and Berthe's reunion in Act V is rough, frenzied and largely restrained

within a taut declamatory pace. There are a few moments of temporal expansion in the culminating trio between Berthe, Jean, and his mother Fidès. The typically Meyerbeerian extended *solita forma* juxtaposes two contrasting lyrical parts: first the Allegretto pastorale "loin de la ville" and second the cabaletta Allegro "O spectre épouvantable". In between, a declamatory *tempo di mezzo* enables the transition from fragile hope to fatal despair. Berthe realizes that the prophet-impostor she had been seeking to destroy is in fact her former lover Jean whom she had thought dead. In a few instants, her aims and illusions collapse, everything losing its meaning in view of the irreconcilable double relation to this single person whom she has simultaneously loved and hated above all else. In some of the early sketches, Berthe's death scene is set in arioso texture, her suicide prepared by a series of gasping utterances:

BERTHE, d'une voix faible et languissante.
Déjà … mon œil … s'éteint … hélas! …
Mon sang … glacé … s'arrête!
Mon âme … à Dieu …
(*avec un douloureux effort*)
À s'envoler … est prête!
(à Fidès)
Que ton fils se repente, ma mère tant chérie,
(*d'une voix mourante*)
Pour que je puisse au moins le revoir dans les cieux!
Adieu!
(Elle meurt.)
FIDÈS, JEAN (avec désespoir)
Elle expire![15]

Several versions of this arioso exist, including one with a haunting saxophone solo accompaniment. But in the end Meyerbeer decided to push temporal condensation even further, cutting this already minimal form of operatic death entirely before the 1849 performance. A single recitative phrase is therefore all that remains of Berthe's farewell, followed by the equally minimal reactions of Fidès and Jean:

BERTHE
Je t'aimais, toi que je maudis,
Je t'aime encore peut-être … et m'en punis!
(*Elle se frappe d'un poignard et tombe dans les bras de Fidès.*)
FIDÈS, JEAN
Ah!
JEAN
Morte! … Morte! …

15 Scribe/Meyerbeer: *Le Prophète. Livret – étude, sources, documents*, see Version "originale", p. 273.

(faisant signe aux soldats d'emmener sa mère)
Veillez sur ma mère! Moi je reste en ces lieux
Pour punir les coupables!
(Les soldats entraînent Fidès.)
FIDÈS
Mon fils! … Mon fils!
(Silence pendant lequel Jean regarde si Fidès est assez éloignée.)
JEAN
Et maintenant, vous qui m'avez perdu,
Tous, vous serez punis![16]

In this massively shortened version of the text, almost nothing remains of Scribe's original libretto structure; the prosody, rhythms, and rhyme patterns are blurred by numerous cuts, and merge into prose-like fragments. The characters' expressions are condensed into minimal words, sounds and gestures, building a taut dramaturgical drive towards the ultimate tragedy of the finale. Berthe's two remaining lines succinctly convey the contrasting emotions of her inner conflict in the antithetic verb pairs "aimais/maudit" and "aime/punis". The phrase is artfully paced, with several comma pauses, an emphasis on the personal pronoun "toi", and a moment of poignant hesitation in the second line ("peut-être …") postponing, ever so slightly, the oblivion of suicide. In the confusion that follows, the reactions of Jean and Fidès are reduced to isolated exclamatory cries – "Ah! "Morte! … "/ "Mon fils!" – expressing their state of stunned shock and disbelief.

In terms of musical pacing, Meyerbeer expands the protagonists' minimal utterances with expressive motifs and long silences. Only when Jean turns away from the horror towards his new plan of action, does the syllabic density return to average declamatory values:

Le prophète, Act v, No. 28: Berthe – Jean – Fidès

Pacing Shots	Syllables / Bars	SD	Texture	Motifs
a) Berthe "Je t'aimais, …"	14 / 12	1.2	tremolo parlante	chrom. descent
b) Berthe's suicide "… et m'en punis!"	4 / 4.5	0.8	parlante	stabbing gestures
c) Jean and Fidès shock "Ah! morte …"	3 / 5.5	0.5	interjections	
d) Jean's reaction "Veillez sur ma mère! …"	17 / 4	4.3	punctuated recit.	
e) Fidès "Mon fils …"	2 / 5	0.4	arioso	syncopated strings

16 Scribe/Meyerbeer: Le Prophète. Livret – étude, sources, documents, see Version "musicale", pp. 271 f.

f)	Jean "Et maintenant …" *Ritournelle*	16 / 5	3.2	sustained recit.

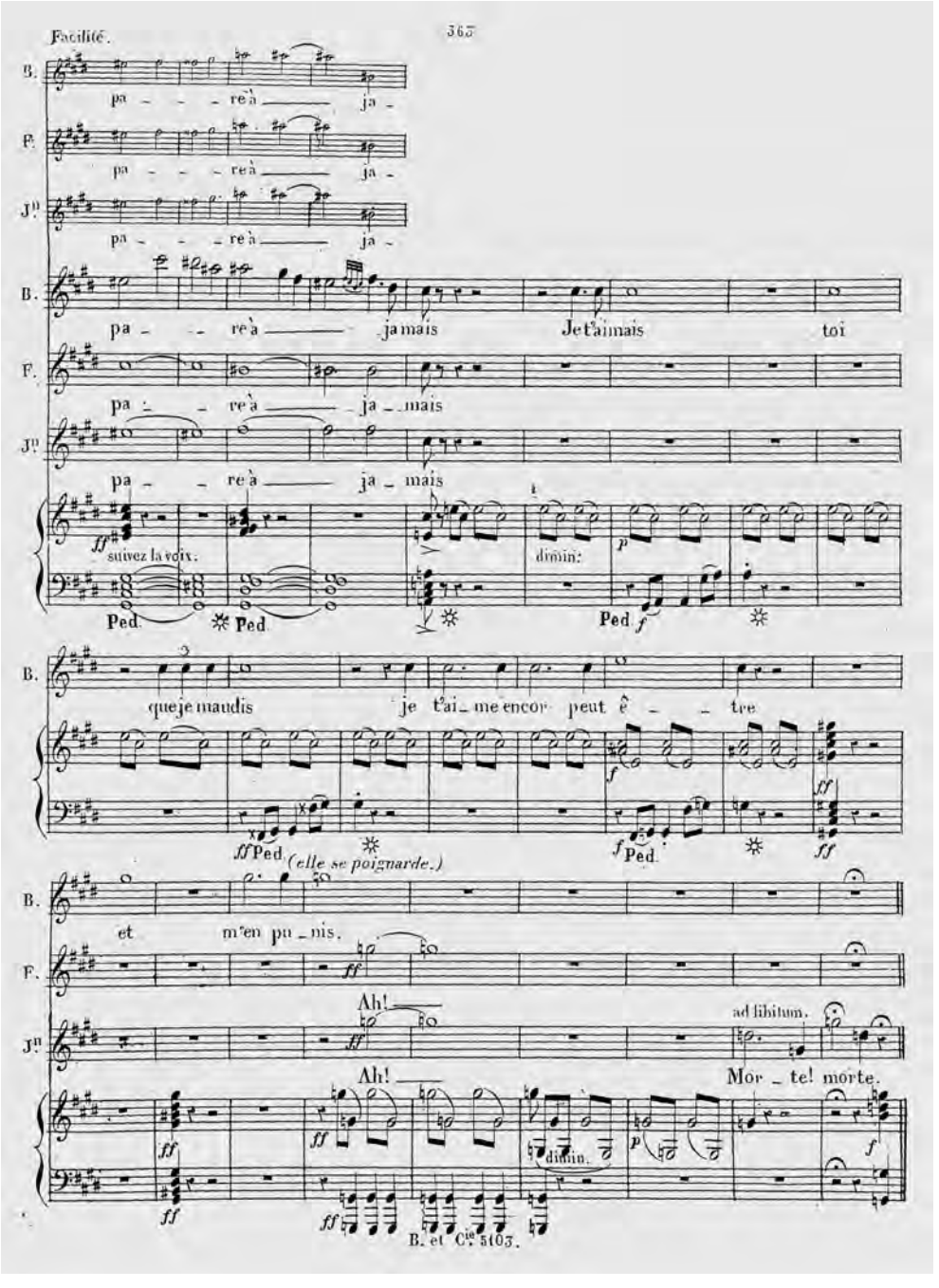
Berthe's despair translates as monotone scansion above a c♯ minor string tremolo, with occasional sustained notes that slightly expand the crucial rhetorical accents such as the accusatory pronoun "toi" and the suspensive conjunction "et". Her parting words are punctuated by kinetic motifs of the basses and trombones, descending in a chromatic lamento, before fading altogether as the final unaccompanied phrase is sung on a slowly dotted rhythm; the protagonist's fatal intent is thus unmistakably announced and underlined with explicit death topoi.[17] Berthe's suicidal stabbing gesture is also mimetically rendered in the brutal shift from G♯ to G♮, underlined by Jean and Fidès' fortissimo cry and a plummeting syllabic density (0.8–0.5) which marks a decisive dramaturgical break in the plot – a point of no return. This *parola scenica* does not however function as the usual "launching pad" for subsequent lyrical effusion.[18] There is merely time for Jean to helplessly state the obvious – "Morte! … Morte! …" – flailing around "ad libitum" on the dominant, and finding neither resolution nor solace in the diminished seventh chord that follows (example 2).

After the rush of the preceding minutes, Jean's shock turns to deliberation. In the livret de mise en scène established by Louis Palianti and supervised by Meyerbeer himself Jean's expressive pantomime is described in detail: "Tout à coup, frappé par une idée subite, il a l'air de reprendre son sang froid."[19] He orders the soldiers to bring his mother to safety and remains alone a few instants planning his revenge: First he places his crown back on his head; then he pronounces his ruthless sentence with restrained pacing, each syllable given considerable weight and space, the accusatory personal pronoun "vous" emphasized by repetition, and his bitter resolve strengthened by the forceful plosive alliteration "perdu"/"punis" in the concluding couplet. Instead of lyrical expansion, all emotionality is abruptly dismissed in a feigned return to calm. Only a shimmer of emotion remains in the major-sixth drop on the word "mè-re" with which he orders the soldiers to take his mother away. Fidès, however, is not fooled by her son's composure. Meyerbeer magnifies the mother's distress through surging repetition of her equally

17 See for example Frits Noske: The Musical Figure of Death, in: *The Signifier and the Signified. Studies in the Operas of Mozart and Verdi*, The Hague 1977.

18 See Anselm Gerhard: Zugespitzte Situationen. Gestische Verständlichkeit und "parola scenica" in der französischen und italienischen Oper nach 1820, in: *Sänger als Schauspieler*, p. 111–123.

19 "All at once, struck by a sudden idea, he seems to regain his composure." Meyerbeer: *Le Prophète*, livret de mise-en-scène by Palianti, Reprint in H. Robert Cohen: *The Original Staging Manuals for Twelve Parisian Operatic Premières*, Stuyvesant, NY, 1991, p. 176. For more on this exceptionally detailed staging manual see Arnold Jacobshagen's contribution in this book pp. 241–260.



Example 2 Giacomo Meyerbeer: *Le Prophète*, vocal score, Brandus, Paris 1849, Act V: Berthe's Suicide

absurd monosyllables – "Mon fils! mon fils! mon fils! mon fils!" – underscored by syncopated, undulating strings. The low syllabic density (0.4), due to her helpless, mechanical repetitions, conveys a fruitless struggle to find adequate words. Silence ensues, in the form of a prolonged double fermata, in which Jean watches his mother depart. Only after Fidès is dragged beyond hearing range, can Jean's withheld frustration explode. However this does not occur in words either; rather it is left to the orchestral ritornello which accompanies the final "changement à vue". With chromatic ascensions, emphatic arpeggios, fp accents of the winds, and syncopated circling figures Meyerbeer renders the violent agitation brewing beneath the protagonist's superficial semblance of control as he moves from the dark cellar vaults to the floodlit grand hall of the Münster palace for his final revenge in the cataclysmic "Bacchanale" of the ensuing finale.

Thus an essential aspect of Meyerbeerian climaxes lies in the condensation of overwhelming emotions into taut dramaturgical sequences propelled by the relentless pressure of time. Through their elaborate gestation work, cuts in the libretto and music, prosodic and compositional transformations and innovations, mimetic gestures and orchestral motifs, Scribe and Meyerbeer accelerate the pace of events towards the approach of each climatic peak – the impending massacre of the Huguenots, the arrival of Oberthal, or the treason at Münster – reducing moments of contemplation as disaster draws inexorably closer. In terms of operatic momentum, two strategies can be observed: either syllabic density increases proportionally in relation to the acceleration of time creating a faster flow of information and content; or else syllabic density drops unexpectedly as the pressure of time exceeds that of speech and words begin to fail. In these cases momentum transfers instead to the orchestra where the perception of temporal pressure and suspense occurs on a sensual-kinetic level through mimetic gestures, harmonic shifts and strategic silences. This reflects, on the one hand, the emerging perception of time as a linear rather than a cyclic phenomenon, a view which has been described as characteristic of modern perception and thought.[20] On the other hand, it suggests a feeling of powerlessness with regard to external events, a sense of being overrun by collective issues and movements regardless of personal plans or plights, an attitude which resonates deeply with the political and social turmoil of the times. Furthermore this acceleration of external affairs seems interconnected with the characters' psychological tendency to set aside, ignore, or repress emotions as quickly as possible in the face of dilemma, plunging into action rather than engaging with or reflecting in depth upon their situations.

20 See for example Karol Berger: *Bach's Cycle, Mozart's Arrow. An Essay on the Origins of Musical Modernity*, Berkeley 2007, and Robert Wendorff: *Zeit und Kultur, Geschichte des Zeitbewusstseins in Europa*, Wiesbaden 1980.

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Musikforschung der
Hochschule der Künste Bern

Herausgegeben von Martin Skamletz
und Thomas Gartmann

Band 9

Dieses Buch ist im März 2018 in erster Auflage in der Edition Argus in Schliengen/Markgräflerland erschienen. Gestaltet und gesetzt wurde es im Verlag aus der *Seria* und der *SeriaSans*, die von Martin Majoor im Jahre 2000 gezeichnet wurden. Gedruckt wurde es auf *Alster*, einem holzfreien, säurefreien, chlorfreien und alterungsbeständigen Werkdruckpapier der Firma Geese in Hamburg. Ebenfalls aus Hamburg, von Igepa, stammt das Vorsatzpapier *Caribic cherry*. *Rives Tradition*, ein Recyclingpapier mit leichter Filznarbung, das für den Bezug des Umschlags verwendet wurde, stellt die Papierfabrik Arjo Wiggins in Issy-les-Moulineaux bei Paris her. Das Kapitalband mit rot-schwarzer Raupe lieferte die Firma Dr. Günther Kast aus Sonthofen im Oberallgäu, die auf technische Gewebe und Spezialfasererzeugnisse spezialisiert ist. Gedruckt und gebunden wurde das Buch von der Firma Bookstation im bayerischen Anzing. Im Internet finden Sie Informationen über das gesamte Verlagsprogramm unter www.editionargus.de. Zum Forschungsschwerpunkt Interpretation der Hochschule der Künste Bern finden Sie Informationen unter www.hkb.bfh.ch/interpretation und www.hkb-interpretation.ch. Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über www.dnb.de abrufbar.
 ISBN 978-3-931264-89-5