

Sarah Hibberd

“Stranded in the Present”.

Temporal Expression in *Robert le diable*

In the trio towards the end of the final act of Giacomo Meyerbeer’s *Robert le diable*, we find our hero paralyzed by indecision: whether to follow his new-found, charismatic father Bertram to the underworld, or to listen to his half-sister Alice (and heed his mother’s warning from beyond the grave) and embrace this world and the future. As the stage tableau makes clear (see Figure 1 on page 158), and as the musical tropes confirm, it is cast as a choice between heaven and hell, good and evil. However, the arresting sound of two *trompettes à clefs* (keyed bugles) from below the prompter’s box, representing the voice of Robert’s mother, inject a powerful sense of nostalgia into the scene with their raw sound, which I take as an invitation to examine the relationship between past and future that this opera articulates, and that was so pertinent to opera audiences in 1831.

The historian Peter Fritzsche has argued that the reconfiguration of time in the aftermath of the 1789 revolution conspired to create strangers out of French émigrés, stranding them in new historical circumstances.¹ The seemingly relentless iteration of the new, and the deep rupture in remembered experience, meant that the past no longer served as a faithful guide to the future. Bewilderment, disorientation and paralysis were commonly reported, as familiar moorings were destroyed, and past and present floated free from one another. The Restoration when it finally arrived in 1814/15 remained fragile: the revolution lingered in the memory as an unsettling presence, evidence of the unpredictability of events. The July Revolution in 1830 amplified this sense of precariousness.

François-René de Chateaubriand spent nine years in exile in England. Returning home in 1801, he was unable to make peace with the succession of new regimes, and like many émigrés continued to feel profoundly out of place throughout his life. Yet, in his *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*, written over the course of forty years, he finds solace in remnants

1 Peter Fritzsche: *Stranded in the Present. Modern Time and the Melancholy of History*, Cambridge, MA, 2004. When the Bourbons were restored to the French throne, émigrés returned in large numbers and had considerable power in the legislature. Charles x insisted on being crowned at Reims (1825), with the elaborate ritual of the Ancien Regime, and this was taken as symbolic of his intention to revive the whole of the pre-revolutionary order. The Chamber voted into law a compensation to be paid from the treasury, the ‘*milliard des émigrés*’ (though following the July Revolution, this was not paid out). David Thomson: *Europe Since Napoleon*, London 1957, pp. 106 f.

of the past.² Although unable to fully remember and comprehend past events, he nevertheless constructs his life from its ruins. In the graveyard invoked in the title of his memoir, echoes of distant lives appear as ghostly presences, prompting feelings of loss that for Fritzsche evoke the “melancholy of nostalgia”, the shared experience of the age.³ A similar sensibility has been identified in the Walter Scott-inspired opéras comiques and other theatrical adaptations of the 1820s.⁴ The plot of François-Adrien Boieldieu’s popular *La Dame blanche* (1825), for example, concerns the return of an eighteenth-century Scottish émigré to reclaim his family’s castle and estate – facilitated by the protecting spirit of the title (in reality an orphan raised by the family). The poignant ballad that recurs through the opera (“D’ici voyez ce beau domaine”) evokes a ghost from the past looking after those in the present, and its effect derives as much from what has been irretrievably lost (the émigré’s parents have died in exile) as from hope.

For Chateaubriand, the 1830 revolution intensified the need to construct a future from the ghosts of the past:

“Le cercle de mes jours, qui se ferme, me ramène au point du départ. [...] J’appellerai beaucoup de songes à mon secours, pour me défendre contre cette horde de vérités qui s’engendrent dans les vieux jours, comme des dragons se cachent dans des ruines. Il ne tiendra qu’à moi de renouer les deux bouts de mon existence, de confondre des époques éloignées, de mêler des illusions d’âges divers, puisque le prince que je rencontrais exilé en sortant de mes foyers paternels, je le rencontre banni en me rendant à ma dernière demeure.”⁵

In this essay, taking my cue from Chateaubriand and from Fritzsche’s compelling encapsulation of the émigré experience, I focus on the way in which *Robert le diable* – conceived in 1827 as an opéra comique, but finally realized on a grander scale at the Opéra (Académie royale de musique) in November 1831 – captures the sensibility of the age. It dramatizes

- 2 Forty-two volumes written between 1809 and 1841. He began writing it under the title *Mémoires de ma vie*, but in 1830 decided to change its scope, revising the text and coming up with the new title. It was published posthumously after appearing en feuilleton in *La Presse*: François-René de Chateaubriand: *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*, 12 volumes, Paris 1849/50.
- 3 Fritzsche: *Stranded in the Present*, p. 57.
- 4 See, for example, Olivier Barra: *Le Théâtre de l’Opéra-Comique sous la Restauration*, Hildesheim 2001. The libretto for *La Dame blanche* was crafted by Eugène Scribe from a number of Walter Scott novels, including *Guy Mannering*, *The Monastery*, and *The Abbot*. One can assume the appeal of pre-revolutionary history at all of the royal theatres, including the Opéra itself (which each had a significant émigré audience).
- 5 “The circle of my days, which closes, takes me back to my point of departure. [...] I will summon many dreams to my aid, to defend myself against this horde of truths, generated in the old days like dragons hidden among the ruins. It remains for me only to reconnect the two ends of my existence, to bring together distant epochs, to mingle the illusions of different times, since the exiled prince I met, on leaving my paternal hearth, I encounter now banished as I travel to my last home.” Chateaubriand: *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*, Vol. 10, Paris 1850, p. 4 f. Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.



FIGURE 1 *Robert le diable*, Act V, Scene 3: Bertram (Nicolas-Prospér Levasseur), Robert (Adolphe Nourrit), Alice (Cornélie Falcon) trio, François-Gabriel Lépaulle, circa 1835 (BNF)

on the one hand the irretrievability of the past, but on the other hand it demonstrates the past's insistent, continuing presence, and the possibility of building a future from its ruins.⁶

Ghosts from the Ruins In the first decades of the nineteenth century, fragmentary traces of the past were no longer being understood simply as evidence of the frailty of human society, as inert signs of death and decay, but rather as evidence of an array of past lives, speaking to diverse experiences in the present. Indeed, the ruin became a key element of

6 The premiere took place on 21 November 1831, and the principal roles were taken by Adolphe Nourrit (Robert), Nicolas-Prospér Levasseur (Bertram), Julie Dorus-Gras (Alice). The conductor was François-Antoine Habeneck, the scene painter Pierre-Luc-Charles Cicéri, and the *chef au service de la scène*, who worked on the staging with Nourrit, Scribe, and Meyerbeer, and was responsible for the technology (including lighting) was Charles-Édmond Duponchel. For details of the creation of the opera and an overview of its reception, see the commentary in the preface to the critical edition: Giacomo Meyerbeer: *Robert le diable*, opéra en cinq actes, paroles d'Eugène Scribe et Germain Delavigne, ed. by Wolfgang Kühnhold and Peter Kaiser, Vol. 1: Acte I–II, Munich 2010, pp. XXI–XXVI.

the post-revolutionary recognition of the unsettled nature of the past – and communication with it.⁷ This historical rather than purely aesthetic fascination acquired a political, national dimension. During the 1820s, Charles Nodier, Baron Isidore Taylor, and Alphonse de Cailleux had embarked on an ambitious venture to publish large picture albums of the historical regions of France – the Languedoc, Picardie, Dauphine, Normandie. Rather than presenting a linear history of France, these volumes of *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l'ancienne France* offered a tentative biography of the nation pieced together over 50 years from a variety of images: architectural details, snapshots of landscapes, ruined edifices.⁸ They were testament to imprecisely defined conflicts and lives, and frequently incorporated figures. The ruin can therefore be understood during this period, as Fritzsche explains, as an object of reanimation, studied for its evocative potential to suggest counter lives.⁹ Abandoned castles and convents, for example, were remnants of political and religious confrontations, and had the power to inspire and to frighten, to communicate a variety of experiences. In other words, ruins could forge connections with other lives, offer guidance in the present, and invite an imaginative response from the observer – a response realized in art, literature, and theatre of the period, as well as in written histories.

Although the medieval legend of the Norman knight Robert the Devil has been adapted and transposed to Sicily by librettists Eugène Scribe and Germain Delavigne, the visual language of the *Voyages pittoresques* is clearly echoed by scene painter Pierre-Luc-Charles Cicéri and stage director Charles-Édmond Duponchel. In Act III, Alice clings to a cross, having just heard Bertram converse with his fellow demons in an underground cavern:

“Le théâtre représente les rochers de Sainte-Irène, paysage sombre et montagneux. Sur le devant, à droite, les ruines d'un temple antique, et des caveaux dont on voit l'entrée; de l'autre côté, une croix en bois.”¹⁰

As she waits in this desolate locale for her fiancé Raimbaut, Alice prays to Saint Irène, and remembers the voice of a hermit who predicted as she left her native Normandy that she would one day find a faithful lover. Her voice alternates with those of the under-

7 See Nina Dubin: *Futures and Ruins. Eighteenth-Century Paris and the Art of Hubert Robert*, Los Angeles 2010.

8 *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l'ancienne France*, ed. by Charles Nodier, Isidore Taylor, and Alphonse de Cailleux, 24 volumes, Paris 1820–1878.

9 Fritzsche: *Stranded in the Present*, pp. 125 f.

10 “The stage represents the rocks of Sainte-Irène, a dark and mountainous region. At the front, to the right, the ruins of an ancient temple, and some vaults, whose entrance is visible; to the other side, a wooden cross.” Eugène Scribe/Germain Delavigne: *Robert le diable, opéra en cinq actes* [libretto], Paris 1831, p. 23.

ground demons calling to Robert (through loud-hailers). When she peers into the vault, she faints and collapses against the cross (see Figure 2).¹¹

A volume of the *Voyages pittoresques* dedicated to *Ancienne Normandie* (1820) includes pictures of the ruined Chateau de Robert le diable and the nearby *souterrains*, which might have influenced Cicéri – who also contributed to the volumes.¹² However, one Abbé Audierne claimed in the 1840s that Cicéri had modelled his designs for the opera on the ruins at Brantôme in Dordogne:

“[Cicéri] trouvait à Brantôme tout ce qu’il avait à peindre: les rochers de sainte Irène, un temple en ruines, des caveaux, de longues galeries, un cloître, des tombeaux et, précisément, à gauche du cloître, une porte conduisant dans l’intérieur du temple.”¹³

Additionally, Cicéri may have been inspired by the wooden crosses that were being planted across France by missionaries in the 1820s, in unofficial ceremonies for the executed Louis XVI that evoked the revolutionary period, redefining notions of the sacred.¹⁴ As historian Sheryl Kroen tells us, crosses bearing a likeness of Christ were carried through the streets, and tens of thousands of people were led in mass confessions and singing of canticles; the crosses stood as symbolic channels of communication with their forebears and with fellow citizens. Whatever Cicéri’s inspirations for the scene, the whole seems designed – visually and aurally – to channel communication through time and space, in a landscape that evoked historical France as much as a fictional Sicily and the supernatural.

It was not only the subject matter of the volumes of the *Voyages pittoresques* that was suggestive. With the new technique of lithography, just beginning to flourish in France, the detail achieved in more traditional architectural engravings was supplanted by broader, softer strokes and subtle effects of light, which leant a certain spontaneity and

- 11 Ibid., Act III, Scene 3, pp. 27f. This is *morceau 11* in the critical edition of the score. The ruin, cross, and river in a distant landscape are evident in two pictures from around the time of the premiere: *Scène de la croix*: anonymous, copper engraving from *L’Artiste* (Paris, 1831); *Scène de la croix*: with orchestra pit and side boxes, lithograph by J. Rigo after a drawing by Déveria from *Album de l’Opéra*, Paris [n. d.]; both reproduced in Robert Ignatius Letellier: *Meyerbeer’s Robert le Diable. The Premier Opéra Romantique*, Cambridge 2012, p. 158.
- 12 *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l’ancienne France. Ancienne Normandie, Vol. 1*, Paris 1820, pp. 31–37; the five images include a sketch and a lithograph of the underground caves “*souterrains*”, and of a heavily overgrown castle ruin on a hilltop.
- 13 “[Cicéri] found in Brantôme everything he had to paint: the rocks of Sainte Irène, a ruined temple, vaults, long galleries, a cloister, tombs, and precisely, to the left of this cloister, a door leading into the interior of the temple.” François-Georges Audierne: *Notice historique sur l’abbaye de Brantôme, son église et son antique clocher*, Périgueux 1842, pp. 50 f.
- 14 Sheryl Kroen: *Politics and Theater. The Crisis of Legitimacy in Restoration France, 1815–1830*, Berkeley, CA, 2000, pp. 106f.



FIGURE 2 Act III, Scene 4, Alice and Bertram (anonymous), from *Album de l'Opéra 11: principales scènes et décorations les plus remarquables des meilleures ouvrages représentés sur la scène de l'Académie Royale de Musique*, Jules Challamel, n. d., (BNF)

atmosphere to the scenes depicted.¹⁵ One of the contributors to the volumes was Louis Daguerre, whose interest in luminous, illusory effects came to life in his dioramas of the 1820s and 30s, where (typically) ruined landscapes were peopled with shadowy figures who seemed to move through careful manipulation of light across carefully painted canvases. The quality of the painting and the sensitizing of the eye to the darkness of the auditorium enhanced the illusion. Spectators frequently reported how they felt themselves spirited to another time and place: “[P]ersons who have seen this chapel [...] on viewing the Diorama might think themselves transported by some magic spell to the scene itself – so perfect is the illusion [...]”¹⁶

¹⁵ See Stephen Bann: *The Clothing of Clío. A Study of the Representation of History in Nineteenth-Century Britain and France*, Cambridge 1984, pp. 60 f.

¹⁶ [Anon.] Roslyn Chapel, in: *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction*, Vol. 7, No. 185 (4 March 1826), pp. 129–132, here p. 132; see also Helmut and Alison Gernsheim: *L. J. M. Daguerre. The History of the Diorama and the Daguerreotype*, London 1968, p. 25.

A similar illusory effect was created in the staging of *Robert le diable* (Daguerre was involved in this too), and in Meyerbeer's orchestration. During the infamous ballet in the final scene of Act III, the hero is sent by Bertram to the moonlit cloister of Saint Rosalie to be seduced by nuns newly risen from their tombs into plucking the sacred branch that will win back his lover, Isabelle. Again, the ruins of an old abbey bear a close resemblance to the sorts of images found in the *Voyages pittoresques*.¹⁷ And the moonlight created by Daguerre's new gas-lighting techniques recalled not only the atmospheric lithographs, but also the diorama, in which the play of light across a ruined landscape encouraged the viewer to imagine the painted figures as ghosts.¹⁸

But it is the orchestra that definitively opens up the channel between past and present in such scenes. When Bertram summons the nuns in Act III, his voice seems to penetrate the cold earth and stone in a descending arpeggio, with the accompanying visceral, raw power of trombones and ophicleides. The ophicleide had been invented only in 1817 (as a bass version of the keyed bugle – a keyed serpent), and had been heard the previous year in Paris, supplying the archaic *Dies Irae* motif in the final movement of Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*. Here the instrument again seems poised between ancient and modern worlds. The stage directions tell us that in response to Bertram's summons, "les figures de pierre [des nonnes], se soulevant avec effort, se dressent et glissent sur la terre. [...] La pierre s'est amollie pour leur livrer passage; [...] toutes les apparences de la vie leur sont rendues."¹⁹ Berlioz describes this aural excavation:

"Les cors, les trompettes à pistons, trombones, ophicleïde, timbales et tamtam, gémissent seuls quelques accords sincoppés pianissimo, précédés sur le temps fort de deux coups pizzicato des violoncelles et contre-basses. Puis après chacune de ses horribles strophes, deux bassons seuls viennent glousser un rythme plus animé, qui fait déjà pressentir le mouvement des danses, auxquelles les Nonnes à demi ressuscitées vont bientôt se livrer [...]"²⁰

- 17 Notwithstanding the views of Abbé Audierne, for Marie-Antoinette Allévy the model for the cloister scene is the ruins of the sixteenth-century Montfort-l'Amaury cloister (Seine et Oise), *La Mise en scène en France*, Paris 1938, p. 104. Catherine Join-Diéterle suggests that the set borrows from several different sources: *Robert le diable. Le Premier opéra romantique*, in: *Romantisme* 28/29 (1980), pp. 147–166. Saint Rosalia is also the patron saint of Palermo. But whatever the model(s) the style and the effect on the viewer are very similar to those of the *Voyages pittoresques* lithographs.
- 18 Act III, Scene 7, Scribe/Delavigne: *Robert le diable*, pp. 35–37. This is *morceau 15* in the critical edition of the score. For more on Daguerre's innovations with gas-lighting for this scene, and on the staging more generally, see Rebecca S. Willberg: *The mise-en-scène at the Paris Opéra-Salle Le Peletier (1821–1873) and the Staging of the First French grand opéra – Meyerbeer's Robert le Diable*, PhD, Brigham Young University 1990, esp. pp. 307–328.
- 19 "Then the stone figures [of the nuns], rising with difficulty, stand and glide along the ground. [...] The stone softens to allow them through; [...] they are given every appearance of life." Scribe/Delavigne: *Robert le diable*, p. 36.
- 20 "The horns, piston trumpets, trombones, ophicleide, timpani, and tam-tam alone groan some synco-

The veiled sounds of brass and lower strings offer an aural counterpart to the deep shadows in the moonlit cloister that hosts the dead, and the low woodwind suggest the ghostly stirrings of life. The modern technology of the ophicleide is harnessed to suggest something primeval and otherworldly. But what of the voices of such shadowy figures of the past, briefly risen from the dead? It is in the final act that they ultimately erupt out of this evocative landscape, to guide Robert into the future.

Voices from the Past Robert has finally decided to sign Bertram's pact (which will take him to the underworld) when he hears a chorus of monks and accompanying church organ from inside the cathedral: "Ils frappaient mon oreille aux jours de mon enfance, / Lorsque pour moi, le soir, ma mère priait Dieu."²¹ We already know that Robert is susceptible to ghosts of the past – the fact that the sacred branch was at the tomb of Saint Rosalie (his mother's name) seemed to weaken his resistance to the newly risen nuns in Act III – and here his mind is transported back to his childhood. But when, in a desperate last attempt to persuade Robert to join him, Bertram shockingly reveals that he is his father and pours out his heart to him in an aria, our hero is wrenched back to the present and thrown again into indecision.²²

This is the moment when his half-sister Alice appears, launching the trio in which Robert must choose between the love of his father and his mother – the forces of hell and heaven. Bertram and Alice each plead with Robert, but when Bertram presents the pact one last time for him to sign, Alice produces their mother's will. A languid seven-bar melody played by a pair of *trompettes à clefs* is supported, *pianissimo*, by three horns, two trombones, an ophicleide and timpani: Robert's mother seems to speak directly from beyond the grave (the same shadowy sound-world evoked in the ballet) (see Example 1). Although ostensibly in D major, the theme has a melancholy flavour, deriving from a fleeting A# in the melody in bar 2 (and ambiguous harmonic support) and an effortful

pated *pianissimo* chords, preceded by two strong *pizzicato* strokes for the cellos and basses. Then, after each of its horrible strophes, two bassoons alone squawk a more animated rhythm, which already announces the movement of the dances, to which the nuns, half resuscitated, will deliver themselves [...]." Hector Berlioz: *De l'instrumentation de Robert-le-diable*, in: *Gazette musicale de Paris*, Vol. 2, No. 28 (12 July 1835), pp. 229–232, here p. 231 f.

- 21 "The sounds recall my childhood / when my mother prayed for me in the evenings." Scribe/Delavigne: *Robert le diable*, p. 46.
- 22 An entry in Meyerbeer's diary suggests that originally, Bertram reveals who he is to Robert in Act II, but only weeks before the premiere that early reveal was removed, to make the trio more effective. The *Diaries of Giacomo Meyerbeer*, Vol. I: 1791–1839, trans., ed., annotated by Robert Ignatius Letellier, Madison 1999, 12 November 1831, p. 420.

Andante cantabile

pp

ROBERT (*d'une voix tremblante, lisant le testament*)

dim. *p* *cresc.* *pp*

O mon fils, ma tendresse as - si - du - e

(*en soupirant*)

veil-le sur toi du haut des cieux du haut des cieux!

dim. *pp* *cresc.*

EXAMPLE 1 Act V, Scene 2

rising arpeggio (in thirds) in bar 7.²³ B minor has been associated with Bertram – most obviously in his evocation of the nuns and his communion with the underground demons in Act III – and here it is just under the surface, perhaps referencing his distant union with Robert's mother, or signalling his attempt to silence her voice now. When the eighth bar of the phrase transforms into the first bar of its repeat (and a dominant seventh chord in B minor resolves onto the submediant in D major) the insistent intrusion of the past into the present is suggested, and Robert begins to read (on a monotone) his mother's letter: "Mon fils, ma tendresse assidue / veille sur toi du haut des cieux."²⁴ Castil-Blaze was particularly taken with the effect: "elles [deux trompettes à clés] chantent avec douceur en s'unissant aux voix, dialoguant avec les violoncelles

- 23 We find a reference in Meyerbeer's diaries to a similar effect heard in Labarre's *Les deux familles*, which included a romance sung by Ponchard, with "striking instrumentation, even very simple in the first half. Horns and bassoons hold the harmony, the timpani marking the rhythm of the larghetto with crotchet beats, and nothing else." *The Diaries of Giacomo Meyerbeer*, 31 January 1831, p. 405.
- 24 "My son, my attentive love watches over you from the heavens." Scribe/Delavigne: *Robert le diable*, p. 51.

tandis que les contrebasses par un effet de pizzicato et les timbales voilées marquent le rythme.”²⁵

As Robert continues, the *trompettes* and the theme fall away: “Fuis les conseils audacieux / Du séducteur qui m’a perdue.”²⁶ Robert drops the letter, and viola tremolos signal Bertram’s nervous response to this hesitation. Alice picks up the letter and rereads the first line; the returning melody is doubled this time by flute, clarinet, and cello. The *trompettes* return only when Bertram takes up the melody, and speaks to Robert from his heart, adapting the words of his mother: “Mon fils! mon fils! jette sur moi la vue, / vois mes tourmens, entends mes vœux”,²⁷ moving away from his infernal B minor to A major. The *trompettes* and the melody fall away for the last time, and a beautiful, fragile stasis is established: it seems impossible to disentangle this distant voice from those of the present, as they pass the words and the appropriated melody between them. But this precarious concord is interrupted when Robert bursts through the texture, pleading insistently “prenez pitié de moi” (take pity on me). The viola tremolos that had suggested Bertram’s torments now represent those of Robert. Finally, the three of them come together in unison to sing the melody (though each offering very different thoughts), accompanied, fortissimo, by the full orchestra. But time has run out: midnight strikes, and Bertram is swiftly swallowed up into the underworld. Robert has held on long enough to escape the same fate and collapses at Alice’s feet. A series of harp arpeggios gently bring us back into the present. We emerge a bit dazed, as if from another world, and see the future at last: the curtain concealing the interior of the cathedral is removed to reveal a chorus celebrating Robert’s salvation and marriage to Isabelle. Joseph D’Ortigue wrote about the drama contained in the trio at some length:

“Cette triple angoisse, ce combat du ciel et de l’enfer sur la terre, ces anxiétés, ces craintes, ce désespoir, ce triomphe, tout cela vit, tout cela parle. Écoutez les sourdes tenues des cors, les sons caverneux de la trompette à clef qui accompagnent les accens entrecoupés que la lecture du testament de sa mère arrache à Robert; remarquez cette gradation d’expression harmonique à mesure que les sollicitations d’Alice et de Bertram deviennent plus pressantes, l’irrésolution de Robert plus grande, et vous oublierez alors que vous êtes dans une salle de spectacle, que vous entendez de la musique, qu’il y a un homme de génie nommé Meyerbeer; vous vous croirez transporté sur la limite de cette vie et de l’éternité, ayant devant vous le ciel et l’enfer, et votre cœur, luttant entre la terreur et l’espérance, s’endormira dans ce rêve poétique jusqu’à ce que des battemens de mains, la clameur de toute la salle et un rideau qui s’abaisse, fassent tomber tout à coup votre illusion.”²⁸

25 “[The two keyed bugles] sing sweetly, joining with the voices, in dialogue with the cellos, while the pizzicato double basses and veiled timpani mark the rhythm.” X.X.X. [Castil Blaze]: *Robert-le-Diable*. 4^e et 5^e actes (Cinquième article), in: *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires*, 14 February 1832, pp. 1–2, here p. 2.

26 “Flee the bold advice of the seducer who ruined me.” Scribe/Delavigne: *Robert le diable*, p. 51.

27 “My son, my son, look at me, see my torment, hear my wish”. Ibid.

For D'Ortigue and other critics, the light and shadow in the orchestra – harmonic and instrumental – seems to have had a similar effect to Daguerre's diorama lighting techniques, drawing the audience into the illusion, transporting them to “the limit of life and eternity”.

The irretrievability of the past on the one hand, yet the power of fleeting memories to help us forge a future on the other, are key to Robert's salvation – and to the “melancholy of nostalgia” that the scene conveyed. Central to this effect was the sound of the trompettes. They stand for his mother's protection, but also fleetingly for that of his father: at once familiar and alien – a sound associated historically with ritual, with passing messages to the spirit world, with driving out demons; here however, the effect results from modern technology. We learn from Meyerbeer's diaries that earlier in the year he had been struck by the use of a (valve) trumpet melody in an opéra comique by Adolphe Adam; but his creation offers something more arresting.²⁹

Like the ophicleide, the *trompette à clefs* was a new instrument at the time; indeed, just a month before the first performance it was far from certain that anyone would be available to play it. In the event, the Gambati brothers Alessandro and Antonio – engaged at the King's Theatre in London – came to Paris for the premiere.³⁰ A reviewer in London in 1826 gives a flavour of the unusual sound of the instrument, even in the hands of such excellent performers as the Gambatis:

“Their execution is wonderful; but their instruments being furnished with keys, enable them to increase facility by means that take very much from the astonishment which they create at first hearing. Their tone is rough and raw in comparison with Harper's.”³¹

- 28 “This triple pain, this battle between heaven and hell on earth, these anxieties, these fears, this desperation, this triumph, all of this lives, all of this speaks. Listen to the muted notes of the horns, the hollow notes of the *trompettes à clefs* which accompany the interspersed tones of the reading of his mother's will snatched from Robert; notice this gradation of harmonic expression as the solicitations of Alice and Bertram become more pressing, the irresolution of Robert greater, and you will forget that you are in a theatre, that you listen to music, that there is a genius named Meyerbeer; you will believe yourself transported to the limit of life and eternity, having before you heaven and hell, and your heart, struggling between terror and hope, will fall asleep in this poetic dream until the applause, the clamour of the house and the lowering of the curtain, will make you fall suddenly from your illusion.” Joseph D'Ortigue: Giacomo Meyerbeer, in: *Revue de Paris*, Vol. 33 [4 December 1831], pp. 14–27, here pp. 26 f.
- 29 The one-act *Joséphine, ou Le Retour de Wagram*, See *The Diaries of Giacomo Meyerbeer*, 2 January 1831, pp. 392 f.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 24 October 1831, p. 419. In addition, during the weeks that followed, there were continuing alterations being made to the viola part in the trio (7, 8, 10 November 1831, p. 420), and to whether the double basses and timpani should play without the cellos (10, 12, 15 November 1831, pp. 420 f.).
- 31 [Anon.]: Sketch of the State of Music in London, August, 1826, in: *Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review*, Vol. 8, No. 30, pp. 131–184, here p. 134.

It seems the rather uneven timbre of the keyed bugle (as opposed to the more homogeneous tone of the natural trumpet) drew attention to itself.³² This unusual, surprising quality of tone appears to have been key to the effectiveness of how the *trompettes* erupt – out of time, out of the narrative – arresting our attention, inciting curiosity with their almost mystical power, and at the same time conjuring us into the narrative.



For art historian Stephen Bann, the success of certain history paintings of the 1820s derived from introducing a “technical surprise” that draws attention to itself, but which is also allowed to echo and reverberate within a recognizably historical setting. His example is the series of paintings on historical subjects by the English artist Richard Bonnington: his works are based on careful research into portraiture of the period, but they rely on the fresh and vivid effect of water-colour, more usually associated with landscape painting at this time. Its effect – its technical surprise – derives from a novelty and immediacy of impact that is (secondarily) historically authentic.³³

A similar juxtaposition seems to be at work in the use of the *trompettes* in the trio: at once familiar and alien, archaic yet modern, they draw attention to themselves yet make sense in the flow of the drama. The disembodied nature of the sound – coming not from the orchestra, but from beneath the prompter’s box – may have added to its destabilising effect. Acousmatic listening has often been deployed to promote auditory access to essence, truth, profundity, ineffability or interiority, and the lack of an obvious source may here have encouraged such imaginative supplementation.³⁴ This self-consciousness of sound also resonates with Carolyn Abbate’s notion of “unsung voices”: morally distancing acts of narration that draw attention to themselves by means of bizarre or disruptive effects that separate them from their immediate musical milieu, and suggest voices from elsewhere.³⁵ Indeed, the unease felt with the return of something strangely

³² The English were particularly resistant to keyed brass, as argued by James Arthur Brownlow who discusses the first appearance of the keyed bugle in a London theatre, where it was played alongside a natural trumpet in Henry Bishop’s *The Miller and his Men* at Covent Garden in 1813. James Arthur Brownlow: *The Last Trumpet. A History of the English Slide Trumpet*, Stuyvesant, NY, 1996, pp. 100–102. C. Eugène Roy published his *Méthode de trompette sans clefs et avec clefs* in Paris in 1824, which has been reissued in a modern facsimile edition by Adrian Von Steiger, Vuarmarens 2009. See also *Romantic Brass. Ein Blick zurück ins 19. Jahrhundert. Symposium 1*, ed. by Claudio Bacciagaluppi and Martin Skamletz, Schliengen 2015 (*Musikforschung der Hochschule der Künste Bern*, Vol. 4). I am grateful to Martin Skamletz for providing me with copies of these works.

³³ Bann: *The Clothing of Clio*, pp. 58–60.

³⁴ See Brian Kane: *Sound Unseen. Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice*, Oxford 2014, pp. 8 f.

³⁵ Carolyn Abbate: *Unsung Voices. Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century*, Princeton, NJ, 1991, p. 29.

familiar – the voice of Robert’s mother – and its almost primal associations, brings to mind the uncanny aesthetic of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s short stories, which were beginning to be explored by French authors.³⁶

We hear the nostalgic quality of the *trompette* melody at the beginning of the trio as the melancholy of loss because Robert cannot go back to his remembered childhood. But nor can he forget the past: like Chateaubriand, he finds solace in remembering. Indeed this attachment proves to be his salvation – although he does not actively make a decision, his refusal to let go of the past, his need to remember his childhood, to hear the sound of his mother’s voice speaking to him from beyond the grave, stops him from rejecting it.

Robert has tended to be viewed by scholars as a frustratingly passive non-hero, saved only by time running out, but for the émigré, nostalgia becomes an active force for change. By holding onto the past, Robert creates his own future, constructs his own subject-hood. In this way, the arresting *trompettes à clefs* might encourage us to think more deeply about the ways in which Meyerbeer’s historical sensibility can be felt in his music, and about the variety of ways in which he moved his audiences both emotionally and through time and space. We, like Robert, listen, rapt, to his mother speaking to us from beyond the grave, an effect that in 1831 was likely to be felt even more intensely by an audience clinging to the debris of the past, in order to imagine a future.

36 Scullion and Treby have identified a fascination with acoustics in late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century Europe as an important influence on E. T. A. Hoffmann’s uncanny female voices as agents of change; Val Scullion/Mario Treby: *The Female Musical Uncanny in the Fiction of E. T. A. Hoffmann*, in: *Women and Gothic*, ed. by Maria Purves, Cambridge 2014, pp. 173–188. For Théophile Gautier, a sense of the uncanny was more often triggered by visual rather than aural tricks in his short stories of the 1830s and 40s.

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