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Processions in French Grand Opéra

I would like to begin by quoting one Robert Walsh, a reporter for the *American Quarterly Review*, who wrote the following words from Paris in 1837, after attending several performances at the Paris Opéra:

> "On Monday the procession of the opera appeared in La Juive; it there assumed two distinct characters – the triumphal parade of the emperor and his knights, and the mournful *cortége* [sic] which conducts the Juive to execution. On Wednesday the procession of the opera appeared first in *Nathalie*, a Swiss *ballet-pantomime*, wherein Mademoiselle Taglioni plays and dances divinely; it suddenly threw off its gay manners and peaceful costume, and appeared in the third act of William Tell; and, strange transformation! the evening's performance winds up with the masquerade of Gustave [in which the "motley army marches in graceful measure to the majestic *Polonaise*"]. [Now] It is Friday night – the Huguenots are played at the opera, and we have already seen the part which the procession plays in this wonderful drama. One would think that the procession of the opera had here had enough of such horrors – but no! it is again Monday night, we are at the fourth act of La Esmeralda – […] see! the procession of the opera again appears on the scene."[1]

Robert Walsh's striking descriptions confirmed a suspicion I had come to hold over the years as I sifted through scores, librettos, and staging manuals of operas and ballets created at the Paris Opéra: that the procession constituted an important and frequently seen element of staging and drama there. Such processions were numerous (see table 1); they included various types, including marches to the scaffold, wedding processions, military marches, triumphal processions.

In some cases, the processors took a turn around the stage, allowing everyone the chance to behold them. In others, they came onstage in a line formation but then took their places without taking a tour. Some processions had their own diegetic music; others didn't. And if the music had a text, it was sometimes non-diegetic, as for instance, the text intoned by the monks who process in the opening scene of *La Favorite*. They are not singing liturgical music in Latin as one may expect of monks, but this text:

Pieux monastère!	Dans cette chapelle
De ton sanctuaire	Guidé par ton zèle,
Que notre prière	Pèlerin fidèle,
Monte vers les cieux!	Viens offrir tes vœux.[2]

1 Robert Walsh: Art. VIII. [The Grand Opera of Paris.] La Esmeralda, opera en quatre actes, musique de Mademoiselle Louise Bertin, paroles de M. Victor Hugo: représenté pour la première fois sur le Théatre de L'Académie Royale de Musique. Le 14 Novembre, 1836, in: *The American Quarterly Review* 21 (1837), No. 41, pp. 160–186, here pp. 184–185.

2 Alphonse Royer/Gustave Vaëz: *La Favorite*, Act I, Scene 1, Paris 1841, p. 1.

When ballet-pantomimes and operas from the age of French Grand opéra are produced on stage today, processions are often left out. And even if the *music* is retained, the original procession tends to be replaced with some other action. In scholarship, too, the processions created for the ballets and operas of this period tend to receive little attention; no study has yet been dedicated to them.[3]

Why are processions so often overlooked? In the case of scholarship, it is perhaps because they have fallen between the disciplinary cracks. They were not danced, and therefore have not come to the attention of dance historians. Nor, apparently, have their music or words attracted the interest of music or literary scholars. Another reason for their neglect is surely that the procession has lost much of its power in real life; its presence in the streets and the countryside of July Monarchy France was far more typical in those days than it is today. (Indeed, I would argue that the frequent appearance of processions at the Opéra was simply a matter of bringing to the stage a feature of life that audiences were accustomed to.) Since it is out of sight, it is out of mind.

What sorts of processions might one see in July Monarchy France? Some were humble, like the wedding and funeral processions of everyday people. Some were luxurious and massive in scale, their sheer size – like the regular paradings of the National Guard in the 1830s and the state funeral of Napoleon in 1840 – suggesting that the biggest processions at the Opéra, deploying great numbers of actors and extras, were likely seen by audiences there as obviously miniaturized stand-ins for real-life processions that could easily number in the thousands, or even tens of thousands. Some were festive; some were satirical, like the paradings of the Boeuf gras on Mardi gras. Some were controversial, and attended by detractors and likely to erupt in violence.

Thus did the Opéra's audiences of this era dwell in a setting that offered opportunities aplenty for appreciating a procession's inherent theatricality and reading its symbols.

Now I turn to the question: what did these processions on the stage of the Opéra accomplish dramatically? (For certainly the artists who created operas and ballets did not just insert processions into the action for the sake of empty display, as has been inferred by the latter-day detractors of "spectacle" in Grand opéra.) First, it must be noted that walking in a procession, like singing or playing "stage music", is usually a diegetic event – a kinetic one – and as such its ways of being dramatically useful might best be examined by using the template set forth some twenty-five years ago by Luca Zoppelli in his im-

3 Mark Everist points out that "[i]n general, cortèges have received little attention in modern scholarship." Cf. idem: Grand Opéra – Petit Opéra. Parisian Opera and Ballet from the Restoration to the Second Empire, in: 19th-Century Music 33, No. 3 (Spring 2010), pp. 195–231, here p. 200, footnote 22.

portant study.[4] He noted some dramatic functions served by stage music; I am contending that these functions are also served by processions. Let us consider three such functions.

Local color This function can define a situation or help create an ambience; for instance, the *marche champêtre* of village notables in Act I, Scene 15 of *Nathalie*, 1832; the procession of monks in Act I, Scene 1 of *La Favorite*.

Local color of a generalized nature could also be readily supplied by processions, like that of the company of *grenadiers espagnols* filing across the back of the stage in Act II, Scene 5 of *L'Orgie* (set in a picturesque village near the Guadalquivir) and the cortège of the Emperor in *La Chatte métamorphosée en femme* (set in China). But in some cases a procession could show quite specifically where a scene was set: Köln, for instance, in *Le Lac des fées*, which depicts that city's traditional procession of the Magi. Another particularly localizing procession is the ecclesiastical cortège in *La Juive*, meant to evoke the city of Constance at the time of the Council.

The emblem A second category, the emblem, says Zopelli, is to some extent a variation on the "local color" function, but one that can "represent dramatic values, symbols of a group or even of an ideology or an existential situation."[5] Processions of monks like those in *La Favorite*, or nuns as in *Robert le diable*, served obviously to represent Catholic piety, whether ironically or not. And nothing says "ideology" like the Cross-carrying crusaders in *Jérusalem* or the Muslims carrying a Koran on a bejeweled cushion in *La Révolute au sérail*.

Focalization A third potent effect, focalization, is accomplished when a character responds in an obvious way to a procession. As Zopelli says, stage music (otherwise known as diegetic music) can re-direct the audience's point of view by wrenching audience members "from their position as outside observers and [inducing] them to see with the eyes of the character, to identify with his or her reactions. There occurs, in short, a shift of narrative voice, the assumption of a new, individual point of view."[6]

4 Luca Zoppelli: "Stage Music" in Early Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera, trans. Arthur Groos and Roger Parker, in: *Cambridge Opera Journal* 2 (1990), No. 1, pp. 29–39. Zoppelli attributes the basis of his theoretical framework and terminology to the first part of Cesare Segre: *Avviamento all'analisi del testo letterario*, Turin 1985. See also Luca Zoppelli: *L'opera come racconto. Modi narrativi nel teatro musicale dell'Ottocento*, Venice 1994.

5 Zoppelli: Stage music, p. 31.

6 Ibid., p. 33.

Certainly this is true in two of the Opéra's processions, perhaps the best known today: Eléazar's contemptuous response to the ecclesiastical cortège in *La Juive* shifts the focus to him and helps the audience to see it through his eyes; likewise the horror of Fidès upon watching the coronation march in *Le Prophète*, during which she realizes that the Anabaptist messiah, whom she detests for his violence, is actually her own son.

In both of these cases, the audience is permitted (in Zoppelli's words) again "to identify with a character, [and] completely assume his or her state of mind. [...] the resulting tension is all the greater since the audience has shared the terror [or emotion] step by step."[7]

Now, in addition to these three above-mentioned purposes, how else can a procession serve the ballet or opera in which it is found?

Framing A procession could frame an important event by arriving before an event happens, and then departing when it is over. This sets the event off nicely both visually (as the processors stand by picturesquely while the event takes place) and temporally, making for a miniature narrative with a beginning, middle and end. This was a tool often used toward the beginning of an opera, to help set up the action with a striking scene framed by a procession. A case in point is in Act I, Scene 3 of *La Muette de Portici*, wherein Fenella conveys her distress to Elvire in a scene framed by the arrival of Elvire with her cortège at the beginning of the scene and their departure at the end.

Continuity between scenes A procession could also push the action forward from one scene to the next by having onstage characters hear the procession's approach and express excitement or fear about its imminent arrival. For instance, at the end of Scene 4 of Act I in *Giselle*, in which Berthe has expressed fears for her daughter's health, the village girls hear hunting horns in the distance and run animatedly toward stage left, hoping to catch a glimpse of the hunting party, which is soon to appear. This approach lowers the risk of losing the audience's attention at the end of one scene, and at the same time eliminates the need for the new scene to build up energy from scratch.

Expansion of the imagined space A procession that generates sound offstage effectively expands the performing space and, moreover, provides a specific image of what is happening in that offstage space. In Act I, scene 6 from *Le Dieu et la bayadère*, a small terror-inducing group of guardsmen arrives on stage, their herald sounds a trumpet, and the head guard unrolls his parchment and reads the official announcement: the grand vizir is looking for a stranger in the city, who will be executed upon being found. Mean-

7 Ibid., pp. 34 f.

while, the stranger, who is on stage at the time, expresses his fear in an aside to the audience. Soon thereafter, the slaves sing of their terror, and the procession marches off the stage. Now (to quote the libretto), "one can hear in the distance the first motif [again], announcing that the same proclamation is being made in another place".[8] So the audience can readily visualize this procession offstage in the expanded space provided by offstage music.

Finally, let us turn to an example of a procession from a Meyerbeer opera – not a particularly famous nor spectacular procession, but one that can show us how Scribe and Meyerbeer could make a procession work dramatically, using it to full advantage. It is Act II, scene 6 of *Robert le diable*, in which Princess Isabelle arrives at a tournament in a procession and then departs in a procession.[9] Here, we find two more purposes served well by the appearance of the procession.

Demonstration of the character's state and circumstance There are at least sixty-six characters in this procession, counting the princess herself (see table 2).[10] She is preceded by men at arms, pages, and so forth, and followed by her five ladies. The entrance procession is allotted about four minutes of music (at the least), a B♭ 6/8 Allegretto, "Accourez au devant d'elle". The procession is attractive to watch in itself; it also serves the purpose of visually demonstrating Isabelle's high station and her dependence on her father, who leads her by the hand.

Provision of an ironically happy backdrop The prevailing happy mood (imparted by the festive nature of the procession and the festive song) is of course in conflict with Isabelle's true feelings, which are thereby emphasized through irony as she is forced by custom to partake in the ritual of the procession and the watching of the tournament. Indeed, she has just secretly pledged her love to Robert and believes that a showdown between him and his rival is imminent – a showdown on which the course of her life depends.

After her processional entrance, Isabelle watches a danced entertainment (along with the others who had processed in, and twenty-five spectators). The entertainment is intended as a pleasant event but one that for Isabelle is suspenseful, because it is merely a postponement of the decisive confrontation between her true love and his rival. Then, when the dancing is finished, things go from bad to worse for Isabelle: the Prince of Grenada invites her to give him his arms, a ceremony she does not care to partake in. Yet she is compelled by her father to consent, and because Robert has still not arrived she

8 Eugène Scribe: *Le Dieu et la bayadère*, Paris 1830, p. 16.

9 Eugène Scribe/Germain de Lavigne: *Robert le diable*, Paris 1831.

10 Ibid.

feels she has no choice. Soon thereafter comes the departure procession – as the Prince of Grenada's followers express their enthusiasm for the combat soon to follow, Isabelle laments Robert's absence in a coloratura aside before she joins the procession and leaves.

Because this procession is a two-part framing device in which both arrival and departure are shown, normally one would expect some important event to take place in the middle; some dramatically kinetic event that would push the plot forward. Indeed, the event expected here, quite specifically, is Robert's arrival and his anticipated face-off with his rival. Instead, the audience sees the ballet divertissement performed for the occasion, but then, along with Isabelle, experiences the thwarting of expectation and the *non*-event of Robert's non-arrival. So at the end of the scene (and the act), neither Isabelle nor the audience has gotten what they expected. The procession has framed an anti-climax, imparting to the audience the same sense of emptiness and non-fulfillment that Isabelle herself feels.

Though a producer or scholar of *Robert* today may consider Isabelle's procession superfluous to the action, I hope, in this paper, to have offered sufficient evidence to support my claim that the procession is well worthy of our attention as a dramatic device deployed skillfully in ballets and operas at the Paris Opéra in the age of Meyerbeer. My list of eight dramatic purposes the procession could serve is not an exhaustive one by any means, but is meant to give some more specific ideas of how dramatically useful processions could be, and thus to explain their pervasive presence.

Table 1 Some processions at the Opéra, circa 1830s–1840s

Wedding processions
1828 *La Muette de Portici* (opera)
1831 *L'Orgie* (ballet)
1832 *La Sylphide* (ballet)
1836 *Les Huguenots* (procession of young Catholic women) (opera)
1838 *Guido et Ginevra* (opera)
1840 *Le Diable amoureux* (ballet)
1841 *La Reine de Chypre* (opera)
1842 *La Jolie fille de Gand* (ballet)
1848 *Griseldis* (ballet)

Arrival and/or departure of VIP and his/her group
1831 *Robert le diable* (opera)
1840 *La Favorite* (opera)

Civic processions
1828 *La Muette de Portici* (opera)
1842 *La Jolie fille de Gand* (ballet)

Cortège of the grand vizir
1830 *Le Dieu et la bayadère* (opera-ballet)

Marche champêtre
1832 *Nathalie* (ballet)

Polonaise – entrance of ball-goers
1833 *Gustave III* (opera)

Nuns' or monks' processions
1831 *Robert le diable* (opera)
1840 *La Favorite* (opera)

Hunting processions
1829 *Guillaume Tell* (opera)
1832 *La Tentation* (opera-ballet)
1841 *Giselle* (ballet)
1841 *Le Freyschutz* (opera)

Council of Constance procession
1835 *La Juive* (opera)

Imperial procession
1837 *La Chatte métamorphosée en femme* (ballet)

Military processions
1832 *La Tentation* (opera-ballet)
1834 *La Tempête* (ballet)
1835 *L'Orgie* (ballet)
1839 *La Tarentule* (children imitate soldiers) (ballet)

Funeral processions
1839 *La Tarentule* (ballet)
1834 *Don Giovanni* (Don Juan) (this scene takes place in Hell) (opera)
1843 *Dom Sébastien*[11] (opera)

Coronation march
1849 *Le Prophète* (opera)

Marches to the scaffold
1835 *La Juive* (opera)
1836 *La Esmeralda* (opera)
1847 *Jérusalem* (opera)

March of the three kings
1839 *Le Lac des fées* (opera)

Triumphal procession
1840 *Les Martyrs* (opera)
1846 *Le Roi David* (opera)

Procession of crusaders
1847 *Jérusalem* (opera)

March of the jardinières
1848 *Griseldis* (ballet)

Table 2 *Robert le diable*, Act II, Scene 6 procession (entrance, characters)

les hommes d'armes
les pages (28)
les écuyers *portant des bannières*
les seigneurs (16)
les chevaliers de la princesse (15)
la princesse et son père *lui donnant la main* (2)
ses dames (5)
(total of at least 66)

Robert le diable, Act II, scene 6 procession (departure, characters)

Tout le cortège, à la fin de l'acte, défile, en ordre, par le fond du palais.

Position
10 Les hommes d'armes
20 Les écuyers portant les bannières
30 Les dames d'honneur

11 The funeral procession was replaced by a coronation scene when *Dom Sébastien* was revived in Paris in 1849. See Mary Ann Smart: Mourning the Duc d'Orléans. Donizetti's *Dom Sébastien* and the Political Meanings of Opera, in: *Reading Critics Reading*, ed. by Roger Parker and Mary Ann Smart, Oxford 2001, pp. 188–214.

40 Les seigneurs chevaliers
50 La princesse, son père
60 La suite, les pages
70 Le peuple et les hommes d'armes ferment la marche
(at least 91 and as many as 101)

[note that the spectators to the ballet file offstage with the princess and her party, thus augmenting the size of the procession]

From manuscript "Quelques Indications / sur / La Mise en Scène / De / Robert-le-Diable", reproduced in: Robert H. Cohen: *The Original Staging Manuals for Twelve Parisian Operatic Premières. Douze livrets de mise en scène lyrique datant des créations Parisiennes*, New York 1991, pp. 183–210, here p. 192–194; and livret published by Bezou, 1831.

Inhalt

MEYERBEER IM KONTEXT

INTERVIEW

Bild und Bewegung im Musiktheater

Interdisziplinäre Studien im Umfeld der Grand opéra

Image and Movement in Music Theatre

Interdisciplinary Studies around Grand Opéra •

Herausgegeben von Roman Brotbeck, Laura Moeckli, Anette Schaffer und Stephanie Schroedter unter redaktioneller Mitarbeit von Daniel Allenbach

Musikforschung der
Hochschule der Künste Bern

Herausgegeben von Martin Skamletz
und Thomas Gartmann

Band 9

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