

Scribe and Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*: a world-minded Parisian opera.

Tommaso Sabbatini

We generally think of *L'Africaine* as the five-act opera that saw the stage in 1865, whose composer, Giacomo Meyerbeer, had died the previous year, whose librettist, Eugène Scribe, had been dead for four years, and whose very genre was in crisis – though I personally would not speak of death of *grand opéra*. The legacy of *L'Africaine* is so impressive that we cannot help seeing it against the later works that exploited the same themes: the romance between a Western man and a non-Western woman and the particular variety of love triangle in which an outcast woman sacrifices her happiness to a privileged rival. The Orientalist operas of the turn of the century, on the one hand, and on the other hand Ponchielli's *La Gioconda* (1876) and what the Italian literary scholar Luigi Baldacci dubbed the “host of surrendering masochists”¹ of decadent Italian opera can both be traced back to *L'Africaine*.

But *L'Africaine* is also an opera from the July monarchy, conceived in 1837 and completed in short score in 1843.² Especially now that Meyerbeer's autograph of this first version is available to scholars at Yale and online,³ one could argue, as I do, that *L'Africaine* is an ideal sequel to the same authors' *Les Huguenots* (1836); that it forms a loose Iberian trilogy with Donizetti's *Dom Sébastien* (1843) and Louis Clapisson's *Jeanne la Folle* (1848); or that it provides a tragic counterpart to Scribe and Clapisson's *opéra comique* *Le Code noir* (1842). This is to say that

This is a blueprint for a presentation I will give next month at the conference “Nineteenth-Century Grand Opera outside Paris,” hosted by the University of Copenhagen. I am drawing on the research I did for my “Genealogia di Sélika,” *La Fenice prima dell'opera*, year 2013–2014, no. 1 (November 2013): 27–44, accessible at <http://www.teatrolafenice.it/media/3uvbp1384931696.pdf>. Please do not circulate outside the workshop.

¹ “Schiera di masochiste rinunciatarie.” Luigi Baldacci, “Dopo Verdi,” in *La musica in italiano: Libretti d'opera dell'Ottocento* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1997), 120.

² See John Howell Roberts, “The Genesis of Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1977).

³ GEN MSS MUSIC MISC VOLUME 21, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Accessible at <http://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Record/3434401>.

L'Africaine can be read both in the context of the “end of grand opera,” as Gabriela Cruz has done so persuasively,⁴ and in that of its heyday, as I will try to do in this paper.

The late date of the *Africaine* we know, together with its traditional adoption of a historical background – the “discovery” of India by Vasco da Gama – makes it easy to underestimate how daring Scribe and Meyerbeer’s first idea for the opera was. A tragedy of cross-cultural incomprehension like *Les Huguenots*, it featured in the leading role an enslaved queen from the interior of West Africa, in love with, and briefly reciprocated by, a Spanish officer. Acts IV and V were set near the source of the Niger River. All of this at a time when, according to Léon-François Hoffmann’s groundbreaking monograph *Le nègre romantique*,⁵ blacks were associated, in the French imagination, with the West Indies rather than with Africa; when the typical black literary hero was a male; and when there were no fictional precedents for a white man falling for a black woman.

What Scribe and Meyerbeer were trying to do, in my opinion, was to project the subject matter and the politics of *Les Huguenots* on a world scale. As champions of a bourgeois liberal ideology, they were eager to show that they were ready for the new horizons opened up by the latest geographical explorations. Also, they wanted to voice their concern over the most pressing global issue of their time – namely, slavery, which was not abolished in the French Caribbean until 1848. *L'Africaine* is the work of two men who tried to transcend their own Europeanness, and treat the West and its Other with the same impartiality they had observed for Catholics and Protestants in their previous collaboration. A survey of the possible inspirations for the opera’s heroine, Sélika, and her kingdom, reveals how Scribe and Meyerbeer, guided by their cosmopolitan conscience, could turn their attention to Africa and the Caribbean, conceive a narrative of encounter, and forge a composite image of blackness, while safely at the center of European civilization.

* * *

⁴ Gabriela Cruz, “Giacomo Meyerbeer’s *L'Africaine* and the End of Grand Opera” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1999). Also her articles “Laughing at History: The Third Act of Meyerbeer’s *L'Africaine*,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 11, no. 1 (1999): 31–76, and “Meyerbeers’ Music of the Future,” *The Opera Quarterly* 25, no. 3-4 (2009): 169–202.

⁵ Léon-François Hoffmann, *Le Nègre romantique* (Paris: Payot, 1973).

Act III of *L'Africaine* famously depicts a shipwreck in proximity of a coast: the vessel crashes into a reef and its crew and passengers are captured by local warriors. If one keeps in mind that the original locale for this scene was Africa, it is easy to see where the authors took their cue from. Shipwrecks off the coast of West Africa, inevitably followed by the captivity of survivors on the mainland, made the news throughout the Restoration: the American brig *Commerce* (1815), the British brig *Surprise* (1815), the French frigate *Méduse* (1816), the French brig *Sophie* (1819), the French ship *Olympe* (1827). Accounts were published (and English-language ones translated into French) for each of these disasters. Also, 1816 saw the appearance of a captivity narrative by the American sailor Robert Adams – not necessarily genuine, but surely sensational. [Bibliography on slide.] It is well-known that the wreck of the *Méduse* was followed, in France, by a heated political controversy and by the momentous painting by Théodore Géricault, *Le radeau de la Méduse* (first exhibited in 1819). In the 1830s, books about famous shipwrecks continued to sell well,⁶ and the *Méduse* even reached the stage, as discussed, most recently, by Sarah Hibberd.⁷

After a hiatus imposed by the Napoleonic wars, the exploration of West Africa resumed with renewed vigor and attracted considerable attention in Britain and France. The city of Timbuktu and the Niger River, still the object of legends and speculations in 1815, had surrendered their mystery by 1830. At the moment of planning their opera, Scribe and Meyerbeer could read the accounts of no fewer than six expeditions: those of Gaspard-Théodore Mollien (1818), Alexander Gordon Laing (1822), Dixon Denham, Hugh Clapperton, and Walter Oudney (1822–1825), Hugh Clapperton and Richard Lander (1825–1827), René Caillié (1827–1828), and Richard and John Lander (1830). [Bibliography on slide.]

It is worth noting that Scribe placed Sélika's kingdom near the source of the Niger, which had been described by Gordon Laing. The halo of superstition that, according to the Scottish explorer, surrounds the source is not unlike the one surrounding the manchineel tree in the opera:

⁶ See Monique Brosse, "Littérature marginale: les histoires des naufrages," *Romantisme* 4 (1972): 112–20.

⁷ Sarah Hibberd, "Le Naufrage de la Méduse and Operatic Spectacle in 1830s Paris," *19th-Century Music* 36, no. 3 (2013): 248–63. See also Cruz, "L'Africaine and the End of Grand Opera," 268–70, and Mark Everist, "Donizetti and Wagner: *Opéra de genre* at the Théâtre de la Renaissance," in *Giacomo Meyerbeer and Music Drama in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 319–23.

[I]t is said, than although not more than half a yard in diameter at its source, if any one was to attempt to leap over it, he would fall into the spring, and be instantly swallowed up, but that a person may step over it quietly without apprehension of danger; also, that it is forbidden to take water from the spring, and that any one who attempts it will have the calabash wrested from his hand by an invisible power, and, perhaps, lose his arm[.]⁸

Moreover, two men of the theater such as Scribe and Meyerbeer could find in these travel relations prospective set designs [slide] complete with backdrops and architectural details [slide], prospective costume designs [slide] for priests, warriors, musicians, and female dancers, prospective prop designs [slide], and especially descriptions of elaborate ceremonies, an indispensable ingredient of a *grand opéra*.

Scribe and Meyerbeer's portrayal of sub-Saharan Africa in the first *Africaine* is, of course, inaccurate and biased. But we must give them credit for having recognized the civilization of West Africa, virtually unknown to Europeans until a few years earlier, as worth representing on the stage of the Opéra. True, it is depicted as a violent and superstitious civilization, but so is early modern Europe, against which it is measured. And its spokesperson, Sélika, gives a memorable moral lesson to the European hero.

* * *

It would be tedious to review everything Scribe and Meyerbeer could not or did not care to get right about Africa. More interesting is an error they made on purpose.

Acts IV and V of the opera revolve around the manchineel, a poisonous tree that allegedly grants a pleasurable death to those who sit in its shadow. As pointed out by John H. Roberts⁹ and discussed by Gabriela Cruz,¹⁰ the authors of *L'Africaine* were familiar with the manchineel tree from Charles Millevoye and Alexandre Dumas *père*. Surely they did not ignore that the manchineel (*Hippomane mancinella*) is native not to Africa, but to the Caribbean and tropical America.

⁸ Alexander Gordon Laing, *Travels in the Timanee, Kooranko, and Soolima Countries in Western Africa* (London: John Murray, 1825), 326–27.

⁹ Roberts, "Genesis," 92–93.

¹⁰ Cruz, "*L'Africaine* and the End of Grand Opera," 29–52; Cruz, "Meyerbeers' Music of the Future," 175–79.

Did Scribe and Meyerbeer fall victim to the automatic reflex that inevitably associated blacks with the West Indies? My guess is that, on the contrary, they used that automatic reflex to their advantage. Scribe knew perfectly where to find the manchineel: the tree plays a role in the backstory of the 1842 *opéra comique* *Le Code noir*, music by Clapisson, a pathetic comedy set in Martinique that took aim at slavery. So perhaps the presence of the manchineel in *L'Africaine*, among blacks who have never seen the Americas, but some of whom have experienced slavery, was meant precisely to draw the minds of listeners to the French Antilles, where blacks were still held in slavery. In the Act IV duo between Sélïka and the tenor (Fernand in the first version, Vasco in the reworking), she accuses him for his insensitivity and recalls the time when he has handed her over to his beloved Inès. In the 1843 autograph, though, she has more to say:

SÉLICA

Ne m'as-tu pas déjà vendue?

SÉLICA

Haven't you sold me already?

FERNAND

Ô ciel!

FERNAND

Heavens!

SÉLICA

Vendue à ma rivale,
si brillante et si bel[le] et moi je maudissais
et mes traits africains et ma couleur fatale
pour vous Chrétiens objets d'un dédain insultant[,]
car vous ne pensez pas qu'une esclave africaine
puisse souffrir, aimer et mourir de sa peine[.]

SÉLICA

You sold me to my rival,
so charming and beautiful! And I cursed
my African features and my fatal color
so offensively scorned by you Christians,
as you do not realize that an African slave
can suffer, love, and die of her affliction.

The message could not be clearer: the victims of oppressions at the hand of "Christians" are not just Africans, but people of African phenotype – in Africa as well in the Americas, in the past as well in the present, one can easily infer.

There was a drawback, however, to this strategy of conflating Africa and the Caribbean. The French intelligentsia of the July Monarchy was still shocked by the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804). To the embarrassment of French abolitionists, the black insurgents had committed gruesome atrocities and had found themselves fighting against revolutionary France, the country that had proclaimed the universal rights of man. If theatergoers had

identified Sélika's kingdom with Haiti – an infamous enemy to France – they would have failed to be impartial between Africans and Europeans, and they would have missed the point of the opera.

This might explain the change of locale in the later version of *L'Africaine*. To avoid any negative association, Sélika's kingdom was placed in India, whose culture was respected and admired through Europe. On the other hand, to dispel any thought of Western superiority, the picture of early modern Europe was made even darker – even at the expense of historical accuracy. In fact, the new *Africaine* has Vasco da Gama, prior to his first voyage (1497), jailed by a stubborn and merciless Inquisition. The Portuguese Inquisition was actually established almost forty years later, in 1536.

* * *

It seems evident by this point that there is an Atlantic dimension to *L'Africaine*. Scribe and Meyerbeer, though, could also find models for their Sélika closer to home.

Between 1823 and 1824 Madame de Duras, a liberal aristocrat and friend of Chateaubriand, scored a huge success with her novella *Ourika*. In 1824, three dramatic adaptations appeared almost simultaneously on the boulevard stage; according to Sylvie Chalaye,¹¹ Scribe wrote one as well, which was not accepted for performance. Based on a real figure, *Ourika* is the story of an African girl rescued from slavery and raised as a French aristocrat. Ourika – who was brought to France as a toddler and whose only identity is European – feels comfortable in her milieu until she falls in love with her white childhood friend Charles. Then, she realizes with horror that Charles, despite being a devoted friend, is completely blind to her feelings because of her color. Charles is affected by the same obtuseness that allows Fernand (or Vasco) to present Sélika as a gift to Inès: those well-meaning men are guilty not of cruelty, but of a catastrophic lack of empathy. Ourika can understand her white acquaintances, while they do not understand her: a similar imbalance is found, on a larger scale, in the opera, where the acculturated Sélika participates in two civilizations, but her own civilization is completely foreign to the European characters.

¹¹ Sylvie Chalaye, ed., *Les "Ourika" du boulevard* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003), xiv–xv.

Also immensely popular throughout Europe was the 1834 historical novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* by Edward Bulwer Lytton, set against the Mount Vesuvius eruption of 79 AD. Its protagonist, Glaucus, is as devoid of empathy as Charles and Fernand-Vasco: he does not realize that Nydia, a blind teenage slave from faraway Thessalia, is secretly but fiercely in love with him, and he inadvertently humiliates her by asking her to serve his fiancée Ione. Common between Nydia and Sélïka is also that their apparent disadvantages – being blind, being African (or Indian) – become assets at the moment of danger: Nydia, used to darkness, can escort Glaucus and Ione through the thick cloud of volcanic ash, Sélïka can use her authority as queen to spare the life of her beloved. If at first sight *The Last Days of Pompeii* might seem, as an archaeological fantasy, less political a book than *Ourika*, we must also keep in mind that Bulwer Lytton was a Member of Parliament and a staunch abolitionist, and that the act that ended slavery in most British colonies had just been passed in 1833.

There is a last, striking similarity between the deaths of Ourika, Nydia, and Sélïka. All three accept that their love will remain unrequited and give way to their rival. Ourika's death is a suicide barely disguised by a Christian veneer: she lets herself be consumed by suffering and dies in a convent. Nydia and Sélïka both commit suicide: Nydia by drowning, Sélïka by manchineel tree, both after having arranged for their loved one and his loved one to sail to safety. All three heroines seek in death the erotic fulfillment they were denied. Ourika retires to the convent to be free to constantly think of Charles. Nydia's jump into the sea sounds as sensuous as an embrace:

Slowly she crept along by the *fori*, or platforms, to the farther side of the vessel, and, pausing, bent low over the deep; the cool spray dashed upward on her feverish brow. "It is the kiss of death," she said – "it is welcome." The balmy air played through her waving tresses – she put them from her face, and raised those eyes – so tender, though so lightless – to the sky, whose soft face she had never seen!¹²

Sélïka sits under the manchineel knowing that she will see the man she loves during her agony, as per the magical properties of the plant, and her last words are "c'est le bonheur."

¹² [Edward Lytton Bulwer, later Edward Bulwer Lytton], *The Last Days of Pompeii* (London: Richard Bentley, 1834), 3:299–300 (bk. 5, ch. 10).

* * *

Here ends, after touching three continents, my short survey of the possible inspirations for the first *Africaine*. My hope is that a geography has emerged, and quite a different one from that of mature imperialism, which we usually evoke for Orientalist operas. Around 1840, the vast majority of Africa was unsettled by Europeans, slavery was still a thing in the Americas (while in 1865 it resisted only in Brazil), and colonization seemed to many a humane alternative to the slave trade – or, if you prefer, abolitionism was revealing its dark side, colonialism. Scribe and Meyerbeer lived in such a world when they first envisaged *L'Africaine*, and, animated by their artistic and political passion, they thought of themselves as citizens of that world.