

Opera Rara

*Rediscovering, restoring, recording and performing
the forgotten operatic heritage of the 19th century*

DONIZETTI LES MARTYRS

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Opposite: Gaetano Donizetti caricature (Opera Rara Archive)

ORC252

Gaetano Donizetti

LES MARTYRS

Opera in four acts

Libretto by Eugène Scribe

First performance: 10 April 1840, Paris Opéra

Pauline, *Félix's daughter*

Polyeucte

Sévère, *proconsul to the Emperor*

Félix, *governor of Armenia*

Callisthènes, *priest of Jupiter*

Néarque, *Christian friend of Polyeucte*

Un Chrétien

Une Femme

Joyce El-Khoury

Michael Spyres

David Kempster

Brindley Sherratt

Clive Bayley

Wynne Evans

Simon Preece

Rosalind Waters

Young girls, secretaries to Félix, people of Mélitène, Christians, priests of Jupiter, soldiers, gladiators – **Opera Rara Chorus**

Stephen Harris, *chorus master*

Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment

Matthew Truscott, *leader*

Sir Mark Elder, *conductor*

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Chorus manager
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Recorded at St Clement's Church
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Introductory essays
Flora Willson and Jonathan Keates

Synopsis*
Flora Willson

**The synopsis translated into French,
German and Italian can be found at
www.opera-rara.com/Les Martyrs*

Libretto translation*
Sue Rose

**A libretto translation is available, in
PDF format, at [www.opera-rara.com/Les
Martyrs](http://www.opera-rara.com/Les Martyrs)*

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Gaetano Donizetti, *Les Martyrs*,
Critical edition edited by Flora Willson,
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ACT I

	Duration
[1] Overture – Chorus Chœur	9'21
[2] 'Amis... silence...' – Chorus Duo et Récitatif – Néarque, Polyeucte	4'02
[3] 'Arrêtons-nous, Polyeucte'	5'05
[4] 'Que l'onde salutaire'	2'03
[5] 'Viens, suis-moi...'	0'17
[6] 'Que viens-tu nous apprendre ?' Air et Prière – Pauline, Chorus	1'49
[7] 'Eloignez de ces lieux'	3'52
[8] 'Jeune souveraine'	3'24
[9] 'Allez ! laissez-moi maintenant'	1'04
[10] 'Toi qui lis dans mon cœur, ô ma mère'	1'56
[11] 'Qu'ici ta main glacée'	2'57
[12] 'O Dieu tutélaire !' Final – Polyeucte, Pauline, Néarque, Chorus	2'14
[13] 'Pauline !...'	4'40
[14] 'Quel danger nous menace'	1'41
[15] 'Objet de ma constance'	3'17

ACT II

Récitatif, Air et Chœur, et Cavatine – Félix, Pauline, Chorus, Callisthènes	
[16] 'Achevez ! Pollion, – transcrivez ces édits'	1'36

	Duration
[17] 'Dieux des Romains, dieux de nos pères'	3'42
[18] 'Viens, ma fille ; je sais que ta pieuse haine'	2'26
[19] 'Mort à ces infâmes'	1'31
[20] 'Tout mon sang se glace'	2'08
[21] 'D'où te vient, mon enfant'	1'35
[22] 'Déjà l'on voit au loin'	1'41
[23] 'Sévère existe !... Un dieu sauveur'	3'10
Chœur du triomphone, Romance Sévère – Chorus, Sévère, Félix	
[24] 'Gloire à vous, Mars et Bellonne !'	5'26
[25] 'Valeureux habitants de l'antique Arménie'	1'30
[26] 'Amour de mon jeune âge'	2'44
[27] 'C'est son père'	0'27
[28] 'Les dieux ont conservé des jours si précieux !'	1'16

CD2 74'01

Danses

[1] 'Lutte des Gladiateurs'	3'37
[2] 'Pas de deux'	4'58
[3] 'Danse Militaire'	8'45
Final – Félix, Sévère, Pauline, Callisthènes, Polyeucte, Néarque	
[4] 'De Décius, notre souverain maître'	2'18
[5] 'Soutenez-moi ! Divinité suprême !'	1'54
[6] 'Voilà le proconsul'	1'15
[7] 'O blasphèmes nouveaux !'	1'24
[8] 'Dieu puissant qui vois mon zèle'	4'18

ACT III

Duo – Pauline et Sévère

[9]	‘Dieux immortels, témoins de mes justes alarmes’	4’36
[10]	‘En touchant à ce rivage’	5’22
[11]	‘Ne vois-tu pas, qu’hélas !’	3’59

Scène et Air – Pauline, Polyeucte, Félix

[12]	‘C’est Polyeucte !... mon époux’	2’11
[13]	‘Mon seul trésor, mon bien suprême’	4’18
[14]	‘O mon fils !...’	2’17
[15]	‘Oui, j’irai dans leurs temples !’	2’54

Chœur et Final – Callisthènes, Chorus, Néarque, Sévère, Pauline, Polyeucte, Félix

[16]	‘Dieu du tonnerre’	5’11
[17]	‘A tes pieds, proconsul’	1’37
[18]	‘Quoi ! des dieux la voix sainte’	2’08
[19]	‘Jusqu’au sein du sanctuaire’	4’34
[20]	‘Lui-même a voulu son supplice’	2’08
[21]	‘Je crois en Dieu’	3’40

CD3 36’50

ACT IV

Trio – Félix, Pauline, Sévère, Chorus

[1]	‘L’arrêt est prononcé’	2’05
[2]	‘Oui, par la foi jurée’	1’57
[3]	‘O dévouement sublime !’	2’18
[4]	‘Oui, venez arracher Polyeucte au trépas !’	1’28

	Duration
[5] 'Leur voix immortelle' Duo, Chœur et Final – Polyeucte, Pauline, Chorus, Callisthènes Sévere, Felix, Nearque, Un Chrétien	3'06
[6] 'Rêve délicieux dont mon âme est émue'	4'52
[7] 'Seigneur, de vos bontés il faut que je l'obtienne !'	1'23
[8] 'Pour toi, ma prière'	3'28
[9] 'Miracle soudain...'	2'48
[10] 'O sainte mélodie !'	2'33
[11] 'Il nous faut et des jeux et des fêtes'	1'12
[12] 'Au peuple impatient nous devons ce spectacle'	1'40
[13] 'Grands dieux !'	4'50
[14] 'Ah ! voici le signal du supplice !'	3'02

Sir Mark Elder
(conductor)



LES MARTYRS:

LOST AND FOUND IN TRANSLATION

PARIS, SPRING 1840. Ten years into Louis-Philippe's reign as the bourgeois-friendly 'King of the French', governments were still short-lived, often falling apart within months of their establishment. The country remained in the grip of an economic crisis, with periodic attempts at insurrection by groups of republicans or factory workers.

Small wonder, in these circumstances, that Napoleon Bonaparte's exiled nephew (France's future Emperor Napoleon III) saw his opportunity for a family comeback, landing at Boulogne in August in the hope of rallying troops and overthrowing the monarchy. His attempt failed almost immediately and resulted in a term of imprisonment; but it was an inauspicious start to Louis-Philippe's second decade in power, which would come to an abrupt end in the tumultuous events of 1848.

Amid such political instability, Paris's opera houses – above all, the Académie Royale de Musique, or Opéra, as it was usually known – continued to draw audiences and composers from all over

Europe. But while Paris's status as the continent's operatic headquarters might have offered the city a welcome source of continuity, its theatres were by no means safe havens from political matters: the operatic landscape was, after all, endlessly subject to the wranglings and extravagant gestures of local and international diplomacy.

Indeed, Hector Berlioz – certainly no peacekeeper, but one of the era's acutest musical witnesses – complained in February 1840 about a 'veritable invasion' under way on the city's operatic scene. The assailant was already well-known to many: 'M. Donizetti seems to treat us like a conquered country... One can no longer speak of the opera houses of Paris, but only of the opera houses of M. Donizetti.'

As a critic, Berlioz was averse neither to exaggeration nor unprovoked aggression; Donizetti, usually the mildest and most forgiving of men, would later refer to him as 'the bitter enemy of everyone other than Beethoven'. Yet Berlioz's account here has echoes of the Italian composer's own report of his Parisian activities in a letter to a friend in December 1839:

I am in rehearsal at the Grand Opera with *Les Martyrs* and at the Opéra-Comique with Marie [the opera that would become *La Fille du régiment*]. This latter will go on first, and the other will go on in mid-February. Then there's another work at the Renaissance... In the meantime, *Lucia* will be given at Havre, Nantes and Liège, and it goes very well.

This is impressive activity by any standards – and particularly for a composer who had only arrived in Paris little more than a year earlier, in late October 1838. As Donizetti predicted, *La Fille du régiment* was the first of his two named Parisian commissions to reach the stage, premiering in February 1840. Two months later, when *Les Martyrs* eventually had its first performance at the Opéra on 10 April, it was one of a trio of Donizetti operas onstage in the French capital that same evening: *La Fille* was still going strong at the Opéra-Comique, and a French translation of *Lucia di Lammermoor* was proving enormously popular at the Théâtre

de la Renaissance. What is more, the city's only major opera house not staging Donizetti that evening – the Théâtre-Italien – had already finished its season; but its production of *L'elisir d'amore* in January 1839 had been a frenzied success.

That Donizetti could dominate the stages of Europe's operatic capital in this way can remind us of two important things. First, that he was enormously prolific, able to produce new works at a rate unmatched by any other high-profile composer. Indeed, his fluency was so renowned that the satirical French paper *Le Charivari* published a caricature of him (as seen on the inside front cover of this booklet) in its 1840 'panthéon charivarique': the drawing shows Donizetti bent over his desk, yawning and with a candle burned low, brandishing a quill pen in each hand. With his right, he is writing a comic opera; with his left, a serious one: clearly a reference to his seemingly simultaneous production of *Les Martyrs* and *La Fille du régiment*. Underneath, the caption explains that 'soon Donizetti will have only one homeland; and that will be the entire universe'. The second point concerns the increasing geographical

reach of Italian opera as its repertoire became an exportable commodity – most prestigiously to Paris and London, but now further afield to urban centres in India, South America, Asia and beyond. The true operatic masterpiece was a work that could boast both staying power and, quite literally, global success.

Yet this operatic universe continued to operate, at least in Paris, on a strictly hierarchical basis. Notwithstanding Berlioz's fears about the French being 'conquered' by a Donizettian onslaught, Paris continued to boast the most widely respected, generously funded, socially powerful opera house in the world. To produce a new work for the Opéra was a unique marker of international success for a composer in the mid-19th century. It was, for example, in search of an Opéra commission that the young Richard Wagner came to Paris in 1839; his sojourn was famously frustrated and, in a peculiar crossing of paths, eventually saw him obliged for financial reasons to produce piano-vocal scores and other arrangements of Donizetti's operas for the Parisian publisher Schlesinger.

By contrast, when Donizetti arrived in

the city, he could already boast a contract with the Opéra, won largely on the basis of the positive reception of his Italian works at the Théâtre-Italien. Several milestones stand out: months after its Milanese premiere in 1830 had sealed Donizetti's reputation at home, *Anna Bolena* enjoyed its Paris debut and was well enough received to remain for many years in the theatre's repertoire. Admittedly, *Marin Faliero*, Donizetti's first new work written especially for Paris (it had been commissioned by Rossini, who had managed the Théâtre-Italien during the 1820s and remained heavily involved there) went down less well in 1835.

But the Paris premiere of *Lucia di Lammermoor* in December 1837 gave Donizetti a decisive breakthrough. Finally, the ecstatic reception of *L'elisir d'amore* ensured his status as the most popular composer of Italian operas and, with Rossini no longer active, as the tradition's most important living representative in the city.

Like Rossini before him, Donizetti was not content to remain solely on the roster of the Théâtre-Italien. The Opéra offered higher fees, better protection against piracy

Michael Spyres
(Polyeucte)



and, most important of all, incomparable prestige. Its particular brand of *grand opéra* was a genre on a vast scale, with unprecedentedly elaborate, state-sponsored spectacle served up alongside musical and dramatic innovation. With *Lucia's* Parisian triumph to his name, Donizetti's ambitions were suddenly more realistic.

He was still living in Naples with obligations to fulfil at the San Carlo opera house when, in May 1838, he signed a contract with Henri Duponchel, director of the Opéra. Emboldened by his recent Parisian triumph (not to mention his status back home), Donizetti insisted during negotiations that 'my debut in France must accord with what I have achieved up to the present in Italy'. The composer largely got his way, and Duponchel commissioned him to provide those two works for the Opéra, the first of which was to be delivered by 1 September 1839. The penalty for failing to meet the deadline would be an eye-watering 30,000 francs.

Even in these circumstances, Donizetti could not start work immediately on his Parisian commissions. He had several large commitments in Naples, where he had been

musical director of the royal theatres since 1829 and also, more recently, pro-director of the Naples Conservatory. When his beloved wife Virginia died in July 1837 (shortly after the death of a newborn son), he had attempted to resign his position at the theatre, but the authorities apparently ignored his request.

The situation at the Conservatory remained similarly unclear: a letter of resignation from Donizetti in June 1838 once again went unanswered, and it was only in June 1840 – by which time he was living in Paris – that the Neapolitan Saverio Mercadante was announced as the new director, preferred to the 'outsider' Donizetti. Yet most pressing when Donizetti signed his first contract with the Opéra was the fact that he was still committed to producing a new work for the San Carlo theatre – one whose fate would, as it turned out, be intimately tied to his first Parisian outing.

In early March 1838, after a trip to Venice to supervise the premiere of *Maria de Rudenz*, Donizetti returned to Naples to fulfil his contract with the San Carlo. While in Venice, he had met Adolphe Nourrit,

Paris's most recent star tenor, who had created major roles including Arnold in Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* (1829) and Raoul in Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* (1836). Nourrit had left Paris suddenly after the emergence there of a significant rival: the stentorian Gilbert Duprez, whose powerful, Italianate timbre reached places that Nourrit's famously gentle, lyrical delivery could not. Travelling to Italy in the hope of adjusting his technique to the new style, Nourrit ended up with Donizetti in Naples, receiving daily lessons in Italian vocal production.

Donizetti, meanwhile, was understandably keen to write for 'le grand Nourrit', and it was decided that his new opera for the San Carlo would provide the singer's Italian debut. The subject was to be *Polyeucte* (Italianised as *Poliuto*), Pierre Corneille's 1642 tragedy about Christian martyrdom. On 15 May Nourrit wrote to his wife, enthusing that 'our opera is going well' – note the joint ownership! – and that Donizetti had already written a prayer especially for him.

Nourrit had (he said) himself proposed the subject – an appropriately exalted

one for a celebrity French tenor – and drafted the scenario on which Salvatore Cammarano's libretto would be based. As work continued on the opera, Nourrit reported that Donizetti was particularly pleased with a theme new to Italy: 'He is becoming quite excited about the Christians, and is counting on the effect of the religious chants in the midst of dramatic situations.'

Yet the choice of a French tragedy may also have been pragmatic for a composer thinking ahead to his Parisian assignments, and possibly even considering his Naples commission as the basis for a grand operatic debut. Religious subjects were unusual in mid-century Italy, but they were a key feature of two of the most successful Parisian grand operas: Halévy's *La Juive* (1835) and *Les Huguenots* – the latter a work that would not receive its Italian premiere until 1841, and to which Donizetti was probably introduced by Nourrit.

Unfortunately, though, it was precisely this religious element that was to be the new work's downfall in Naples. Despite Cammarano's attempts to emphasise the libretto's 'moral purpose', insisting in a

preface that his introduction of the pagan priest Callistene served to highlight the ‘errors and impiety’ of that creed in contrast to ‘the most sublime Christian virtue’, the Neapolitan censor banned the new work on the eve of its scheduled premiere. Following a brief tussle that saw the submission and rejection in quick succession of both a superficially modified version of *Poliuto* and a sanitised version of *Lucrezia Borgia*, Donizetti gave up: he paid a penalty of 300 scudi to be released from his contract at the San Carlo, gained permission from the King to leave Naples and set sail for Paris.

Once in the French capital, Donizetti agreed with Duponchel that the first of his two operas would be a French adaptation of *Poliuto* – now retitled *Les Martyrs* and reconceived as a grand opera in four acts. Eugène Scribe, the undisputed éminence grise of Parisian librettists, was engaged to translate and make substantial additions to Cammarano’s text. Scribe’s principal innovation was to modify Corneille’s drama by importing elements of another, more recent monument of French literature: Chateaubriand’s prose epic *Les Martyrs* (1809), which had itself been heavily

influenced by Corneille’s play.

Ultimately, Scribe sought to shift the opera’s emphasis away from the smaller-scale Romantic drama of *Poliuto*, in which the hero’s jealousy functions as a major catalyst; his goal was, quite properly for the venue, theatre on a much grander scale, in which what Chateaubriand called his ‘tableau des deux religions’ would provide the central interest.

The opera’s new dramatic momentum was drawn from the tension between two opposing religious forces – tyrannical pagans on the one hand, persecuted Christians on the other – that could, as in Meyerbeer’s *Les Huguenots*, present a vast canvas against which personal drama might unfold.

For all the adjustments made to Cammarano’s libretto in order to transform Neapolitan *Poliuto* into Parisian *Les Martyrs*, there was still more to be done musically. Donizetti was aware of the scale of the endeavour, as a letter to his teacher Simon Mayr in April 1839 makes clear:

I have had to rewrite all the recitatives, make a new finale to



Joyce El-Khoury
(Pauline)

Act 1, add arias, trios, [and] dances related to the action, as is the custom here, all so that the public won't complain that the texture is Italian. French music and librettos have a cachet all of their own, to which every composer must conform, both in the recitatives and in the sung pieces.

As Donizetti realised, and as Parisian critics would still be pointing out when Verdi produced *Don Carlos* for the city in 1867, the distance between a French grand opera and an Italian *opera seria* was far greater than that separating the Opéra from the nearby Théâtre-Italien. To fit its new genre, *Les Martyrs* needed to be long (Donizetti seems to have hoped for five acts before eventually settling on a four-act structure); it needed to be scenically overwhelming, demonstrating the latest in Parisian staging techniques; it needed a full-length ballet *divertissement*; and it needed to show off the Opéra's celebrated orchestra in a score that could boast intricate uses of *couleur locale*, employment of the newest musical instruments and harmonic

combinations, and 'symphonic' bombast when nothing else would do.

That Donizetti managed in *Les Martyrs* to answer each of these demands – and in such a short period, with the 1 September 1839 deadline still in place and Scribe's revised libretto only gradually emerging – is impressive indeed. We can see in close-up his method of moving from *Poliuto* to his new French score in his autograph manuscript, which has three distinct layers, constructed in two different hands. The first layer is Donizetti himself, writing out in full the new French-language vocal lines of numbers adapted from *Poliuto*, as well as all the recitatives (necessarily written afresh) and the many entirely new numbers needed in *Les Martyrs*. The second layer appears in the hand of a copyist, who – to Donizetti's instructions – copied in the orchestral parts of material to be carried over from *Poliuto*. Then Donizetti once again took over, making many modifications to this orchestration, further adapting his old Italian score to new French fashions.

What is clear from all this is how thoroughly and painstakingly the composer managed to marry his 'native' operatic

idiom to that demanded by the conventions of the Opéra – all the while tailoring his score to a new set of vocal soloists.

Those soloists comprised some of the best singers then available in Paris: Julie Dorus-Gras, a soprano who had created major roles in grand operas by Meyerbeer, Halévy and Auber, was to sing Pauline; her father Félix would be performed by the great French bass Prosper Dérivis, another central figure in the Opéra's recent history and soon to be the creator of Zaccaria in Verdi's *Nabucco* (1842); Sévère was sung by baritone Jean-Etienne Massol, who would later take the title role in the first performance of *Nabucco* at the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels (1845). Finally, in one of the sad ironies of the genesis of *Les Martyrs*, the role of Polyeucte was taken by Gilbert Duprez – the very tenor whose presence in Paris had caused Adolphe Nourrit to leave in 1837.

While Donizetti and his prohibited score had found new potential in Paris, the end of Nourrit's Neapolitan adventure was purely tragic. He had been relying on *Poliuto* to relaunch his career; with that possibility foreclosed, he continued to pursue an

Italian debut via other roles, but with little success. Having heard that Donizetti was adapting *Poliuto* for the Opéra, he wrote to his brother-in-law in November 1838 to suggest that 'the composer would do well to wait for me'. In the following months, however, Nourrit's mental health deteriorated rapidly; on 8 March 1839, he leapt to his death from the balcony of his Naples hotel.

Nourrit's death was by no means the only ill-omen associated with *Les Martyrs*. Parisian newspapers scrambled to enumerate the various delays to its production – above all, the serial illnesses that seemed to afflict each of the principal singers. The daily newspaper *Le Siècle* recounted that 'Duprez has the flu, Mme. Dorus has neck pain, Dérivis is getting a wisdom tooth and Massol is suffering an attack of rheumatism.'

Donizetti was predictably frustrated as rehearsal after rehearsal was cancelled. He wrote to a friend on 7 April complaining that the dress rehearsal rescheduled for the previous day had been postponed for the fourth time, and that 'my nerves are suffering awfully. Oh, if you knew how

much one has to suffer to produce an opera here?' *Le Charivari* reported that a new phrase was circulating backstage at the Opéra: 'Nous sommes martyrisés.'

On 10 April 1840, months after the premiere had originally been planned and fully a year and a half after Donizetti's arrival in Paris, the Opéra's curtain finally rose on *Les Martyrs*. As was routine at that theatre, the new work was scrutinised by a phalanx of critics. Its reception was decidedly mixed. Most writers applauded the choice of subject, with some declaring themselves incredulous that the Neapolitan censor could have found anything to object to in the opera's themes. Many were impressed by the singers, even though traces of their various ailments persisted. Duprez and Dorus-Gras were, perhaps predictably, awarded the greatest accolades: some critics claimed that Duprez had surpassed all previous triumphs in his new role, while Dorus-Gras was praised for her dramatic characterisation as much as for her singing. The staging was almost universally fêted; indeed, *Les Martyrs* seems to have stood out from the mass of recent grand operatic offerings because of its

return to an ancient setting (rather than the Gothic milieu favoured by Meyerbeer and several others).

For better or worse, critics were struck by the opera's plethora of classical accoutrements: one complained about the unrealistic 'grande accumulation' of temples, palaces, statues and porticos. But many others praised its staging of an unfamiliar antiquity – that of Mélitène, in Armenia, under the Emperor Decius – rather than the classical Rome that was regularly called for in operas of a slightly older vintage.

The primary site of critical contention, though, was Donizetti's score. There were, perhaps inevitably in the circumstances, accusations that the Italian debutant had failed to take seriously the requirements of writing for the Opéra. Some critics evidently found it easy to detect the work's Italian roots – although it is difficult to say whether they objected more to a 'recycled' work or to one not sufficiently *francisé*. One critic admitted: 'We French are exceptionally difficult to please in our native operatic idiom, but are much less so with Italian operas ... audiences at the Opéra

remain frosty unless a composer has crammed enough material into his score for at least three Italian operas.'

It is hardly surprising, with such importance placed on novelty, that Donizetti's innovative re-use of the chorus 'O Dieu tutelaire' to provide Christian local colour throughout the opera was met with acid dismissal from Berlioz, who called *Les Martyrs* 'a Credo in four acts'. Not all critics agreed with him, however, and Donizetti's grandiose third act in particular won widespread approval. The *Revue et Gazette musicale* (arguably Paris's most prestigious music journal) insisted that the Act 3 finale would alone guarantee the work's success, while its competitor *France musicale* saw the entire opera as a sign of Donizettian compositional progress, reporting that, at the end of the third act, 'the opera house quaked under the enthusiasm of the audience'.

Nevertheless, few dared to predict the fate of *Les Martyrs* in the longer term. One crucial manifestation of the Opéra's stability at a time when France's political situation often seemed fragile was its cultivation of a repertoire of 'great works', whose revivals

would continue in a perpetual afterlife, promising immortality for opera and composer alike. In 1840 this repertoire included *Guillaume Tell*, *Les Huguenots* and *La Juive*; whether *Les Martyrs* might join their ranks remained to be seen. Yet the works against which *Les Martyrs* was most often judged were not grand operas, but Donizetti's own earlier Italian works – those which had already triumphed in the French capital, and which already belonged to a canon of modern Italian masterpieces, revivals of which would be a central pillar of operatic culture to the present day.

As it turned out, *Les Martyrs* was given a respectable (but only just so) 18 performances in 1840; and an 1843 revival lasted only two nights before disappearing from the Opéra's roster, never to return. Donizetti's first grand opera did not by any measure gain admission to the genre's pantheon. What is thus ironic is that when the premiere of *Poliuto* was finally given at the San Carlo in 1848, months after its composer's death, it marked the beginning of an altogether more successful career: the opera would remain in the repertoire of Italian opera houses throughout the

David Kempster
(Sévère)



19th century. *Les Martyrs*, meanwhile, was given its own new lease of life in an Italian translation – as *I martiri* – which was produced to considerable acclaim in London, among other cities, in 1852, before also disappearing gradually from view.

One conclusion is clear: that *Les Martyrs* is unequivocally a product of its time and place. It bears the fruits of its Italian beginnings, while also belonging fully to its eventual Parisian home. The score is, in short, fascinating documentation of a composer at home not only in two countries, but also in multiple genres produced within a single city. And just as *Les Martyrs* was criticised after its premiere for its supposedly unholy mixture of French and Italian approaches to operatic construction, we might now, in a different context – one free from the institutional strictures that characterised Parisian operatic culture in 1840 – celebrate its marriage of those styles. It was, after all, in just such internationalisation that the future of opera as a whole would lie: in Verdi's own cross-pollination of national traits in *La forza del destino* and *Aida*; in the lasting influence of those miserable Parisian

experiences on Wagner; and, looking even further ahead, in the self-consciously 'international' works of Puccini or Richard Strauss.

In this sense, listening to *Les Martyrs* with 21st century ears, we might best hear it not so much as a record of an operatic world long-gone, but as a work that can gesture unexpectedly towards an operatic future that is now our own.

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Gilbert Duprez, the first
Polyeucte.

Opposite: Julie Dorus-Gras,
the first Pauline



DONIZETTI IN PARIS

EARLY IN 1834, on the eve of the Florentine premiere of *Rosmonda d'Inghilterra*, Gaetano Donizetti received an offer he could not refuse. It came in the form of a flattering letter from Gioachino Rossini, inviting him to write an opera for the Théâtre-Italien in Paris. 'You will achieve a swift and brilliant success here,' declared Rossini, pointing out that the city's other lyric theatres currently lacked decent composers. 'With such skill and facility as yours, I do not doubt that you will score a notable triumph. You could hardly find a better opportunity for developing your admirable talent.' As a further incentive, Rossini listed the theatre's leading singers, an unparalleled galaxy of bel canto stars, led by the prima donna Giulia Grisi, alongside the tenor Rubini, the dramatic baritone Tamburini and the versatile bass Luigi Lablache.

During the first half of the 19th century, a Paris premiere represented every self-respecting opera composer's major ambition. From 'Parigi', the Italian name for the French capital, derived the adjective

parigibile, meaning 'adaptable for a Parisian audience' and Donizetti himself had nursed such an aspiration from an early stage in his career. By 1833, following the success of *Parisina*, he complained to his publisher Giovanni Ricordi that 'it has not eased my path to Paris with the impresarios. They say "We have Rossini, so why do we need operas by anyone else?", as if that colossus would be jealous of mere insects.'

Now that very same colossus was tempting Donizetti in terms which placed him well above the insect class. He accepted at once, and by the autumn of 1834 his new opera *Marin Faliero* was ready, its libretto mingling Byron's sombre Venetian tragedy with a more recent drama by Casimir Delavigne, the whole work created, in the composer's words, '*con grandissima simpatia*.' Arriving in Paris early in the new year, he revised the score under Rossini's guidance but the work, premiered at the Italien immediately after Vincenzo Bellini's hugely admired *I Puritani di Scozia*, only achieved what Italians call a 'discreet success' in comparison. If this initial Parisian encounter was not quite the instant conquest originally promised by Rossini's

letter, it made Donizetti eager to try again. Thus began a ten-year relationship with Paris, its theatres and its cultural life, which was to prove simultaneously one of the most stimulating yet most frustrating of Donizetti's artistic career.

While rehearsing *Marin Faliero* at the Théâtre-Italien, he paid a visit to its larger French-language counterpart around the corner in Rue Le Peletier. The Académie Royale de Musique, known as the Opéra, had opened its doors in 1821. Though externally the building was a vulgar mishmash of Gothic and classical elements, further muddled by touches of pantomime Orientalism, the interior represented a magnificent assertion of the Opéra's claim to be the ultimate temple of lyric theatre. The impression of grandeur and immensity offered by the Corinthian-columned auditorium was intended not merely to see off the competition from other Parisian theatres but to proclaim France's cultural supremacy to the rest of the world.

The audience was not necessarily as grand as the setting provided for it. Four years before Donizetti's arrival in Paris a revolution had replaced France's ultra-

conservative King Charles X with his more liberally inclined cousin Louis-Philippe d'Orleans, nicknamed 'the Citizen King'. A new age of commercial prosperity began for the French. '*Enrichissez-vous!*' ('Get rich!'), the new monarch encouraged his subjects – and the Opéra, if it was to survive, needed to cater for the tastes of an increasingly affluent bourgeoisie. The theatre's manager, Emile Veron, sprang from just such a background, as a businessman who made his fortune from marketing a so-called 'pectoral paste', the 19th-century equivalent of Vicks VapoRub.

Since the Opéra was an officially subsidised institution, Veron worked under the supervision of a government committee which took its work with due seriousness. The various spectacles on offer were scrutinised for any hints of political sedition, offences against public decency or criticism of the Catholic church. This created a more complex and insidious kind of censorship than the downright obstructiveness which Donizetti and his various Italian librettists were accustomed to facing in the opera houses of Milan, Venice or Rome. The Parisian reviewing

committee, as he would soon discover, oversaw his initial contract, the plot and language of the dramatic text, the rehearsals in their different phases and the impact of a finished opera on its first-night audience.

Image was of vital significance in sustaining the theatre as a centre of excellence which should mirror the Orleanist regime's aspirations by catering for a much more diverse, socially fragmented audience than those which had patronised lyric drama under Napoleon and the restored Bourbon monarchy. During the 1830s France, very belatedly in comparison with other European cultures, began embracing Romanticism, with its emphasis on the supremacy of feeling, the evocative power of landscape and wild nature, a love of exotic locations and ethnicities and a nostalgia for the past, more especially the Middle Ages.

This was a world already familiar to Donizetti's Italian audiences in such operas as *Pia de'Tolomei*, *Gemma di Vergy* and *Parisina*, but its presence on the Parisian stage demanded a far higher standard of historical authenticity than anything offered by La Scala or La Fenice. At the Opéra

a conscious effort was made to establish correct period detail in the design of sets and costumes. A glance at the various stage pictures for *Les Martyrs* shows just how important a feature of the whole visual illusion such attempted accuracy had become. The temples and tombs of Roman Armenia in 200 AD have been painstakingly recreated from available antiquarian evidence by the theatre's chief set designer Pierre-Luc-Charles Cicéri and his team of scene-painters. As one of them put it, 'The audience, now more numerous, is made up of all social classes and their knowledge of archaeology is more exact. Local colour has become a necessity.'

The epic quality of Opéra staging enhanced these exalted production values. On such a deep stage it was possible to deploy a huge number of performers, more at any single moment than in other Parisian theatres. In major ensembles such as the act finales of *Les Martyrs*, a miniature army of soloists, chorus and supers executed carefully drilled manoeuvres according to meticulous instructions from the handbook specially prepared for each opera and later printed for use in other theatres. This air

Soloists, Opera Rara Chorus and the
Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment recording
at St Clement's Church London



of limitless immensity created by the great gaslit stage was essential to a successful show, regardless of possible shortcomings in the score or the libretto. Out of the paradox that 'prodigality is the better economy' the phenomenon known as grand opera was born.

Donizetti's earliest direct encounter with the genre was a performance of Fromental Halévy's much-admired *La Juive*, premiered in 1835. The music itself made much less impression on the composer than the staging, which left him understandably wide-eyed. 'The illusion is taken to the ultimate degree. You would swear that everything was real. Real silver, almost real cardinals, real weapons and armour, the false ones copied from the genuine article and costing 1,500 francs each. There is just too much reality, making the last scene [in which the heroine is flung into a cauldron of boiling oil] too horrible and yet more horrible by virtue of such illusion. A lot of nonsense leads up to this episode but all so rich and magnificent that you turn a blind eye to such things.'

The ambiguity of Donizetti's reaction is worth noting. It was his first experience of

operatic Paris at its most flamboyant. The city he later called 'this siren' was drawing him closer to her, even while he seems to have apprehended something of the inherent dangers in the full-on sophistication of grand opera as a theatrical experience.

Despite the modified rapture with which the Théâtre-Italien audience greeted *Marin Faliero*, Donizetti's established reputation in Italy made his work an ultimate object of desire among French *mélomanes*. His success was clinched when in December 1835 the gifted vocal actress Fanny Tacchinardi Persiani, for whom he had recently composed *Lucia di Lammermoor* in Naples, repeated her triumph before a Parisian audience. 'No performances in Paris have ever been as brilliant,' declared an enthusiastic letter to the composer from the French traveller and aesthete Astolphe de Custine. 'The admirable colouring of that music has been felt from the first moment by the dull, cold Parisian public. You have electrified the dead: it is a miracle.'

By now the question was not whether Donizetti would return to Paris but how soon. Naples, his home for almost a decade,

had failed to honour him as he deserved. The management and resources of its San Carlo theatre could hardly match those of the Opéra or the Italién. He had been spurned, meanwhile, as candidate for the directorship of the city's San Pietro a Majella music conservatoire and, apart from *Lucia* and *Roberto Devereux*, few of his mature stage works had found favour with Neapolitan audiences. Government censorship hardly made matters easier by prohibiting *Lucrezia Borgia* and *Rosmonda d'Inghilterra* and notoriously wrecking the prospects for *Maria Stuarda*'s premiere.

Matters came to a head with the prohibition, owing to its Christian theme, of *Poliuto*, adapted from Pierre Corneille's sacred tragedy *Polyeucte* by Salvatore Cammarano, librettist of *Lucia di Lammermoor*. At the Paris Opéra, however, they took a more enlightened view of such matters. When Donizetti received its director's commission for two new operas, one of his conditions for accepting was a libretto from the pen of Eugène Scribe. This most industrious of theatre poets, in the course of a long career, supplied texts for everyone from Rossini, Cherubini and

Auber to Meyerbeer, Verdi and Gounod. If Scribe was less of a literary artist than a skilled technician, his dramatic style was skilfully tailored to the demands of both the Opéra's audience and, more significantly, those of the theatre management committee. The latter were often disposed to overlook the fact that his chosen subject matter involved such potentially subversive themes as revolution, political assassination and anti-clericalism.

Returning to France in the autumn of 1838, Donizetti confronted the reality of Astolphe de Custine's claim that his music had 'electrified the dead'. Where Parisians were concerned, he was now, it seemed, lord of all he surveyed in the international operatic world. Having overseen productions of *Roberto Devereux* and *L'elisir d'amore* at the Théâtre-Italien, he started work on *Les Martyrs*, Scribe's four-act version of *Polyeucte/Poliuto*. When rehearsals for the latter were delayed, he accepted a further commission, this time from the Opéra-Comique for *La Fille du régiment*. In the meantime he had begun composing the second grand opera required by his original contract with Duponchel,

Le Duc d'Albe, to a Scribe text based on rebellion against an oppressive government in 16th century Flanders.

As if such demands were not exhausting enough, another opera company, the Théâtre de la Renaissance, having courted him with a request for a French-language version of *Lucia*, offered two further commissions, a reworking of his 1832 opera *Il furioso all'isola di San Domingo* and a new libretto, *L'Ange de Nisida*, a work which, in its grand-opera incarnation, eventually became *La Favorite*. This was enough to infuriate Hector Berlioz, whose journalistic pen used every available means to cut Donizetti down to size, including unjustified accusations of plagiarism in the score of *La Fille du régiment* and the somewhat tortuous argument that by writing for the Opéra-Comique the composer was undermining the gravitas embodied by his commission from the Opéra for *Les Martyrs*.

Berlioz might have felt happier with the Donizetti craze gripping the boulevards had he known how frustrated and fundamentally unsatisfied the Italian composer himself was by the particular

nature of his triumph over the French. Among relatively few major weaknesses in Donizetti's character was a continuing tendency to want to please too many people too much of the time. His willingness to engage Parisian audiences was never quite reciprocated with the kind of warmth he felt it merited. Yet though he seems always to have believed that Paris was merely one among several important staging posts in the rootless existence forced on him by the tragic deaths of his wife and children in 1837, it was the place to which he kept returning. The specific demands of French musical theatre – grand opera had always, for instance, to include an extensive ballet episode – undoubtedly irked him. So also did Eugène Scribe's tendency to keep on tweaking the libretto during rehearsals and the management's generally high-handed attitude towards the composer as a mere cog in the Opéra's massive theatrical machine. Yet it was Paris which gave Donizetti the freedom to embark on a new kind of operatic venture, whose imagination, resourcefulness and originality are displayed so abundantly for us in the score of *Les Martyrs*.

The siren's embrace, however, did not come without its tragic aftermath. Paris would witness not only the composer's most spectacular artistic triumphs but also the fatal onset of his final illness. In its own ghastly fashion this was a martyrdom which gave the title of his first essay in grand opera a sinister personal resonance.

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Final scene from *Les Martyrs*,
Act IV, Scene VI.
(Opera Rara Archive)



The Story

Act 1

The action takes place in Mélitène, capital of Armenia, under Roman rule during the third century. Persecuted Christians have gathered in the catacombs; among them are Polyeucte, a new convert about to be baptised, and his friend Néarque. As the Christians withdraw to perform their religious rites, Néarque holds Polyeucte back to ask whether he is truly dedicated to the faith. He is, after all, son-in-law of the tyrannical governor Félix, notoriously intolerant of Christianity, and husband of Pauline, who remains a pagan and knows nothing of his conversion. Polyeucte reassures Néarque that ‘God alone will rule my heart’ and looks forward to the day when Pauline will share his new beliefs. Before they can rejoin the Christians, news arrives that Roman troops are nearby. Polyeucte muses that his baptism may yet prove to be a martyrdom, but is determined to proceed.

Young Roman girls and slaves appear, bearing accoutrements for a pagan ritual and followed by soldiers. Pauline is in their

midst; she dismisses the military escort before paying her respects at the tomb of her mother with a display of sacred offerings. Left alone, Pauline reveals her most intimate thoughts: she is torn between marriage to Polyeucte, chosen for her by her father, and continuing love for Sévère, a courageous Roman general who is believed dead in battle. She overhears the chanting of the Christians nearby as, unbeknown to her, Polyeucte is being baptised. She is about to flee when Christians appear, followed by Polyeucte himself. He is furious that she has stumbled upon them; she is appalled as he defends the Christians. Pauline’s threat to denounce them to her father precipitates Polyeucte’s confession that he is now one of their number. As the Christians pray that Pauline, too, might convert and she hopes that her husband might yet be saved, the act ends with news that a further menace to the Christians – a pitiless proconsul – has just arrived in Mélitène.

Act 2

Scene 1

From his study, Félix orders his secretaries to transcribe edicts sentencing Christians

to death; his own allegiance to the Roman gods is firm. When Pauline enters, Félix announces that he is issuing a new edict. Pauline, trembling, reads it aloud: all those who have administered or received the rite of baptism will be condemned. As Félix and his staff celebrate the edict's publication, Pauline privately expresses her anguish. Her father notices her sorrow and asks whether it is caused by unhappiness in love. Pauline replies that she had indeed been happy with Sévère, but that after his presumed death she had accepted the husband chosen for her; she insists that she loves her husband. Their conversation is interrupted by the sound of military music outside; the high priest Callisthènes appears, accompanied by priests, magistrates and citizens, announcing the arrival of the proconsul favoured by the Emperor ever since his narrow escape from death on the battlefield. The revelation that this proconsul is none other than Sévère shocks Félix and Pauline alike; the latter struggles to hide her joy before rushing off.

Scene 2

A vast crowd has gathered in the square to

watch the proconsul's arrival. Sévère makes a spectacular entrance in a procession led by Roman legions and standard bearers, surrounded by dancing girls and followed by slaves, pipers and gladiators. He vows to protect the people from the Christian scourge and looks forward to seeing his beloved again. Sévère is treated to a gladiatorial display, followed by Greek and Roman dances. Sévère reveals that the Emperor has offered Armenia as the dowry for whomever he chooses as his wife – and that his heart is set on Pauline. His beloved now appears, but accompanied by Polyeucte, who is announced as her husband. Distraught and angry, Sévère reflects on his lost love. The scene is brought to a climax by the entrance of Callisthènes, who announces that a further baptism has just taken place; the curtain falls as Polyeucte is urged by Pauline to remain silent while the followers of the opposing faiths call on the assistance of divine powers.

Act 3

Scene 1

Pauline, alone in her bedroom, prays for

assistance. Sévère enters unannounced. In the ensuing duet Pauline implores Sévère to allow her to forget their shared past and leave forever. Lamenting his position, Sévère eventually bids her farewell – leaving just before Polyeucte enters with the news that a great sacrifice is being prepared in honour of Sévère. Pauline asks Polyeucte to accompany her to the ceremony; he refuses, but insists that his love for her is equal only to that he has for his new God. Seeing his wife's distress, he exclaims that although he can face death, he cannot bear her tears. Félix appears: as Néarque has refused to name his new Christian convert, he will be an additional sacrifice at the temple. Polyeucte now insists that he will attend the ceremony after all and, following Pauline's and Félix's departure, vows to share his friend's fate.

Scene 2

Callisthènes and the priests leave the temple with braziers, sacred vases and idols, which they place on its steps; priests and citizens sing a hymn to Jupiter, before Félix, Sévère and Pauline enter for the sacrifice. Néarque is led in and denounced

as a Christian before being interrogated again about his new convert; Pauline quakes with terror. Since Néarque refuses to cooperate, Callisthènes proposes to execute him. Just in time, Polyeucte appears and, to the shock of all present, reveals himself to be the mystery neophyte. The scene ends with reactions to this revelation: Félix and Callisthènes are furious, Pauline is desperate; Polyeucte offers renewed affirmations of his faith. Pauline's appeals to her gods are condemned as futile by her husband; Félix insists that Polyeucte must recognise those gods if he is to be spared. He refuses, adamant that dying a Christian will be his moment of glory.

Act 4

Scene 1

Félix is in his private rooms with Pauline, who tries to reason with him: Polyeucte may be a Christian, but he has become a member of their family. The governor refuses to yield: the Emperor himself has condemned Polyeucte and Sévère will carry out his command. Sévère enters, reporting that the people are demanding Polyeucte's death; he is appalled to see Pauline, who

continues initially to appeal to her father. When Félix refuses, Pauline turns to Sévère, begging him, as one who loves her, to help save her husband. Sévère eventually succumbs, agreeing to risk the wrath of the people and the Emperor. Félix remains implacable but repeats that he is willing to pardon the new convert if he rejects his new faith. Still hopeful, Pauline goes to find her husband.

Scene 2

In a vault where the condemned await execution, Polyeucte dreams of being united with Pauline in heaven; he implores God to reach out to her. Pauline appears, vowing to save Polyeucte's life; he insists that he wants to save her soul. Their positions seem irreconcilable until Polyeucte invokes divine intervention. To the sounds of celestial harmony, Pauline sees the light, professing herself seized with Christian zeal, and, to Polyeucte's joy, declares that she wants to share his fate. As celestial harmony is heard once more, guards appear and attempt unsuccessfully to separate the couple; they exit arm in arm to greet their deaths.

Scene 3

A vast amphitheatre teems with spectators awaiting the execution of the Christians. Félix, his bodyguards, Sévère, Callisthènes and the priests enter. Callisthènes urges immediate action; Félix confides to Sévère that Pauline has not yet returned, but cedes to Callisthènes' impatience, ordering that the Christians be fed to the lions. To Félix's and Sévère's horror, Pauline accompanies Polyeucte into the arena, insisting that she will die both as a dutiful wife and as a Christian. Sévère begs her to consider her father; the couple respond that they will be united in heaven. Néarque and other Christians are brought in. In a final confrontation, the priests vow death to the impious, while Pauline, Polyeucte, Néarque and the other martyrs affirm their readiness to die. Sévère tries to save Pauline, but is held back by guards; as the lions are released from their enclosures, Félix falls faint. The Christians drop to their knees and Pauline throws herself into her husband's arms; Polyeucte alone remains standing. The curtain falls as the lions make their approach.

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