

# Giacomo **MEYERBEER**

**Overtures and Entr'actes from the French Operas**

**Robert le Diable • L'Etoile du Nord • Les Huguenots**

**L'Africaine • Dinorah • Le Prophète**

**New Zealand Symphony Orchestra • Darrell Ang**



## Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791-1864)

### Overtures and Entr'actes from the French Operas

Giacomo Meyerbeer, of a wealthy and cultured Berlin Jewish family, having studied in Germany and Italy, became one of the most significant opera composers of all time. His fame rests principally on his four grand operas, *Robert le Diable* (1831), *Les Huguenots* (1836), *Le Prophète* (1849) and *L'Africaine* (1865), written for the Paris Opéra. These works were spectacularly successful, enormously influential and still popular into the 1930s. After the indisputable success of *Robert le Diable*, *Les Huguenots* became one of the most performed operas of all. This triumph was consolidated by the success of the dark and tragic *Le Prophète* and the lyrically resplendent *L'Africaine*, as well as the verve and charm of the smaller, rainbow-coloured *L'Étoile du Nord* (1854) and *Dinorah* (1859) which Meyerbeer wrote for the Opéra Comique later in his career, so fulfilling a lifelong aspiration.

*Robert le Diable* (1831) was the first of Meyerbeer's *grands opéras* written for Paris. Based on a Medieval legend, the story depicts the struggle for the soul of the feckless Duke of Normandy, caught between his heavenly mentor Alice and the demonic tempter Bertram, his father. The overture is cold, remote, sinister (even deathly), and is dominated by Bertram's Act 3 evocation of the spirits of the dead nuns (with its Doomsday trombones) which is subjected to a variety of minor key variations, like a tangled web of delusion. At the centre is the string motif from the beginning of Act 5, representing the frightened soul hoping for salvation. The two themes enter a brief struggle that seems to be won by the powers of darkness, as Bertram's theme is announced with all the power of the orchestra.

*L'Étoile du Nord* (1854), Meyerbeer's first *opéra comique*, is derived from stories about Tsar Peter the Great, showing his life as a disguised shipwright, his defeat of the Streltsy rebellion, and his choice of the Livonian peasant girl Catherine as empress. The story reflects a mixture of political-historical realism, the power and earthly success of the young Peter, and a romantic desire for pastoral peace, with a search for providential

destiny. The opening of the overture presents the military prowess of the Tsar's reign, emphatic and relentless, as depicted in the almost obsessional upward runs in the orchestra. These seem to generate a kinetic energy that impels the military theme forward, disturbing in relentless iteration. This military theme is contrasted twice, first by the elegant dance-like gypsy music (representing the alien, unorthodox and exotic world of romance), and secondly by the central serene and mystical *Theme of the Star*, depicting the young heroine Catherine's sense of manifest destiny (representing the spiritual world of her dead mother and the pastoral heritage she embodies, the theme of her Prayer in Act 1, and the motif of Providence). This beautiful long-lined melody with its shimmering double harp arpeggios and mellifluous legato melody, is the very antithesis of the military music. This obsessively reasserts itself, the upward runs again relentless, like a steamroller, but this time as part of Catherine's personal triumph. The final peroration is from the finale of the opera, the music of her coronation as bride and empress of Russia, with all the celebration and expansive quality of an imperial anthem.

*Les Huguenots* (1836), the most famous and successful of Meyerbeer's operas, set during the Wars of Religion and depicting the Massacre of St Bartholomew's Day (1572), shows the power of compassion and love between Catholic Valentine and Protestant Raoul rising above partisan hatred. The overture is both stately and controlled, presenting as it does a portrait of the Huguenot protagonists and their religious idealism. The opening is rich and sonorous, with woodwind and brass suggesting the sound of an organ in a church, playing Luther's famous chorale *Ein' feste Burg*, the Leitmotif of the Protestant cause. This is followed by delicate string writing, associated in the opera with the young hero Raoul and his pure aspirations (the *viola d'amore* is used in his Act 1 Romance). Luther's melody is now unfolded in a series of brief variants for woodwind and horns, all very gentle, remote, dreamy, almost muffled, like a fleeting

vision of loveliness. This gives way to growing agitation, as the inevitability of conflict breaks up the mood, and the theme is transformed in rhythm and instrumentation into a brassy call to arms, defiant and strong (from the Act 5 trio of martyrdom), representing the courage and suffering of the religious cause.

The *Orgie* in Act 1 is an orchestral arrangement of the splendid and hectic celebration of life in the drinking-song of the hedonistic Catholic noblemen in the opening scene. The propulsive movement, the catchy melodies, the rich harmonies, changing rhythms and glittering orchestration capture an effusive spirit of pleasure and joy in living.

The *Entr'acte* to Act 2 suggests the garden of Queen Marguerite de Valois at the Château de Chenonceaux. The rising cellos and answering woodwind figures create a sound-world of peace and innocence, eventually focusing on the solo flute, the symbol of this pastoral idyll. This little piece reflects the beauty of the gardens, and thematically represents the Queen's desire and plans for peace in the Wars of Religion.

The *Entr'acte* to Act 5 of *Les Huguenots* presents music that is fraught and agitated, with reiterated bass figures forming an *ostinato* of unease. The minor-keyed melody is suave but anguished, picking up the *stretta* of the love duet that ended Act 4. Raoul tears himself away from safety and the love of Valentine to warn his friends of the Massacre of St Bartholomew's Day. The signal for this terrible act of betrayal is the chiming church bells which play throughout, adding to the sense of menace and encroaching doom. It leads into ballet music for the glittering and splendid ball at the Hôtel de Nèfle where the wedding of Henri of Navarre and Marguerite de Valois is supposed to seal a treaty of peace between the warring factions. But the sinister tolling bells interrupt the grandiose processional sweep of the polonaise, and the succeeding galop, with its obsessive descending bass line. All is strangely frenetic, as though the music were trying to drown out the realities of the horror taking place outside. Eventually the relentless bells overwhelm all festive melody and rhythm.

*L'Africaine* (1865), Meyerbeer's swansong, depicting

the voyage of the explorer Vasco da Gama around Africa to India (1498), describes his relationship torn between his noble Portuguese love Inès and the self-sacrificing Indian queen Sélika. The overture is a poem of farewell, the whole piece infused with a tender melancholy and deep yearning. It begins with the lonely, remote theme of the *Ballad of the Tagus* sung by Inès. This is a song of parting, and the recurring motif of the score. The beautiful minor-key woodwind interchanges grow in emotional intensity until they are broken up by strong almost disconcerting chords that open the way for a slow and deeply-felt theme, weighed down by sorrow, emphasized by the low scoring, especially for the bass clarinet. This theme from the Act 2 finale is Inès's personal farewell to Vasco. To set him free from prison, she has agreed to marry his rival Don Pedro, and thinks she will never see Vasco again. The melody passes through a beautiful *ostinato* horn figure to flower in a rapturous line of soaring lyricism, with prominent harp accompaniment. The whole piece is a brief recital of sadness, a wistful valediction that trails away into nothing.

The *Entr'acte* to Act 2 of *L'Africaine* leads to a scene set in the prison of the Inquisition, where Vasco and his exotic Eastern slaves have been incarcerated. The hushed prelude is a gentle barcarolle dominated by an undulating bass-line and serene solo horn, depicting Vasco's dream of seafaring and discovery of new worlds in the Orient.

The *Entr'acte* to Act 3 is an extended prelude to the central action of the opera, set on board ship in the Indian Ocean. It begins with a wistful reminiscence of the *Ballad of the Tagus* (the theme of Portuguese heroism), on the cor anglais and clarinets, initiating a gentle but restless *ostinato* that plays throughout the piece, and captures a sense of the great calm waters of the ocean. Two oboes begin an extended melody in thirds high above, an emotional recital full of yearning. This serene reflection presents a tone painting of the Portuguese caravels ploughing through the nocturnal seascape in their search for glory far from home.

The *Entr'acte* to Act 5, in which Inès and Vasco,

shipwrecked on the far exotic shore of Sélîka's Indian homeland, eventually find each other again, in its agitated mood and broken motifs, captures dark and knotted emotions before giving way to the lonely emptiness of Inès's abandonment in this magical but alien paradise.

The final scene of *L'Africaine*, the *Grand scène du mancenillier*, is introduced by a unison prelude. Sélîka, knowing that Vasco loves Inès and will never return her devotion, decides to set him free, and to allow the Portuguese to return to their homeland on the only vessel surviving their shipwreck. She sorrowfully resolves to offer her own life under the poisonous blossomed boughs of the legendary Manchineel or Upas Tree. Her self-immolation is ushered in by a melancholic instrumental recital for the strings, the clarinets and the bassoons. It is a simple unison passage, but in its brief 25 bars captures both a spatial sense of the great expanse of sea and sky and an emotional world of loss. The theme of farewell is brought to its conclusion in this *Liebestod* (love-death) overlooking the vast empty ocean.

*Dinorah, ou Le Pardon de Ploërmel* (1859), Meyerbeer's second *opéra comique*, a pastoral tale set in Brittany, is a parable of loss and recovery, depicting a demented goatherd, the search for a cursed treasure, and the heroine's healing and marriage on the feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The *Overture* is an extended tone poem in the manner of Franz Liszt, and constitutes a musical prologue to the action of the opera. The delicate tracery of the strings that opens the piece represents the fey nature of the heroine Dinorah who, thinking herself abandoned on her wedding day, has lost her hold on reality and wanders around the Breton countryside with her goat (a symbol of domestic husbandry, but also associated with demonic forces). Dinorah's theme is extended into the delicate springing motif of the goat, with its tinkling bell that can be heard across the meadows. The opening movements develop this pastoral heritage, the reality of village life in the droning bagpipes (*cornemuses*) and giddy waltz-like dance movements of the peasants merry-making. Dinorah's joy in love is next represented, and this is extended into the religious dimensions of the rural community. Her wedding day, under the patronage

of Our Lady of Ploërmel, is depicted. The harmonium from the village church is heard, and then the central theme of the hymn requesting the protection of the Blessed Virgin. The wedding procession of Dinorah and Hoël now begins, moving from the church to the shrine of Our Lady (*Marcia religiosa*), but wind and clouds begin to rise, growing in strength, progressively drowning out the hymn as the storm increases in intensity and eventually breaks in sustained fury. The procession has been dispersed, and Dinorah's home ruined, her sense of abandonment complete. This is the situation at the beginning of the opera, but the overture now moves from depiction of the past to that of the future, to the end of the opera when order, health and society are restored. From the shambles of the storm the *Hymn to Our Lady of Ploërmel* begins slowly to emerge. It increases in confidence and force until it is boldly announced like a statement of faith. The themes of the hymn and the procession are taken up into this profession of thanksgiving, with the harps and woodwind in beautiful, lyrical, almost mystical interplay. Confidence and joy fuse in a rapturous climax of paradise regained.

The *Entr'acte* to Act 2 of *Dinorah* looks beyond the dramatic action that will unfold in the Haunted Valley to an assurance of providential restoration. The gentle rustling arpeggios and the serene melody develop a sense of peaceful expectation, underpinned by rich contracting triadic harmonies that infuse a sense of well-being. This is emphasized by the contrasting middle sections where the dotted skipping waltz motifs suggest celebration – the wholeness of the comedic experience that is realised in marriage and the dance. A rustic idyll is presented.

The *Entr'acte* to Act 3 is a brief introduction to the last reflective act of the opera that depicts the ebullient and dynamic side of rustic life – the mystique of hunting and the pastoral ideal, captured in the sonorous richness of five horns and the rushing excitement of the strings in the *stretta* that brings the piece to an exuberant conclusion.

*Le Prophète* (1849), another disturbing tale of the Reformation recounting the millennial kingdom founded by the Anabaptists in Westphalia (1534), famously develops the relationship between the charismatic innkeeper John of Leyden who becomes the prophet-

king, and his loving mother Fidès. This piece is a dark chronicle, a violent depiction of the troubled times of the story, the doomed Anabaptist uprising and theocracy established in the city of Münster. This is encapsulated in the heavy descending opening theme that is the shaping motif of the overture. It plunges into a passage that conveys the brutality and violence of the age. As it quiets the timpani begin the dramatic music that opens Act 3 of the opera, and shows the military camp of the Anabaptists as they besiege Münster prior to its capture. Their resort to violence as the means to social and religious change is expressed in the theme of the Anabaptist *Call to Arms*, with its strutting dotted rhythms and descending bass line, first heard in Act 1, when the preachers inflame the discontent of the people, and encourage them to revolt against their feudal overlords. The mood becomes detached and remote as we hear the theme of John of Leyden's prayer and triumphal hymn *Roi du ciel* as he leads the Anabaptists to victory. This success results in his coronation as King of the New Zion, and this brief moment of glory is reflected in the fleeting reference on the trumpets to the theme of the famous *Coronation March*. But such vainglory is swept away as the brutal opening theme, the *Anabaptist Camp* and the *Call to Arms* are now subject to a series of thematic transformations, before a recapitulation of torrential force

that gradually dies down to complete silence, marked by drum beats, interspersed by hushed passages. The strings emerge in downward figures, remote and almost mystical, like snow falling in the Westphalian forest, flecked with scattered fragments of the dominant motifs, perhaps suggesting the futility of the hero's idealism and this violent endeavour. These are harshly swept aside as, heralded by the timpani, the *Anabaptist Camp* and *Call to Arms* grow ever stronger, and carry all before them in a surge of violence. History and politics are fatally tainted by the human quest for power.

The famous *Coronation March* marks the highpoint of the Anabaptist movement and its social-religious quest. They seem to have achieved their dream of establishing a New Jerusalem on earth. It is also the personal triumph of the young hero John of Leyden who has genuine religious ideals and also a bitter sense of the need to right social injustice. The opening theme is magisterial, full of dignity and beauty, as the long procession enters the Cathedral of Münster (the Lamberti Kirche). The trios provide wistful reflection on these brief moments of an ideal apparently achieved. Eventually fanfares announce the arrival of the new Prophet-King himself, who enters to the splendid and emotionally exhilarating peroration of glory.

Robert Ignatius Letellier

## New Zealand Symphony Orchestra



The New Zealand Symphony Orchestra is the country's national full size, full-time professional orchestra and one of the world's oldest national symphony orchestras, in existence since 1946. The orchestra is continually on the road, touring as many as a hundred symphonic concerts as well as dozens of dedicated concerts for children and small communities each year. In 2010, the NZSO completed the most prestigious and successful international tour in their history, appearing at the Kultur- und Kongresszentrum Luzern, the Victoria Hall, Geneva, the Shanghai World Expo and the Musikverein, Vienna. Earlier tours have featured concerts at the BBC Proms, the Snape Maltings in England and the Aichi World Expo in Japan. Led by Music Director Pietari Inkinen, the NZSO has won consistent praise in the press for its performances, both in concerts and on recordings. The NZSO has an extensive catalogue of recordings, mostly on the Naxos label. More than one million of these CDs have been sold internationally in the past decade. [www.nzso.co.nz](http://www.nzso.co.nz)

## Darrell Ang



Darrell Ang's triumph at the 50th Besançon International Young Conductor's Competition, where he took all three top awards – Grand Prize, Audience Prize and Orchestra Prize – launched his international career, leading to the music directorship of the Orchestre Symphonique de Bretagne and numerous guest conducting engagements with the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Orchestre National de Lyon, Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg, Orchestra Sinfonica di Milano 'Giuseppe Verdi', St Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra, Konzerthaus Orchestra Berlin, Vienna Chamber Orchestra, Copenhagen Philharmonic Orchestra, RTVE Symphony Orchestra, Madrid, and the Hong Kong Philharmonic, among others. Three years later Darrell Ang was selected to join the prestigious International Conductors' Academy of the Allianz Cultural Foundation and invited to take on residencies with the London Philharmonic Orchestra and the Philharmonia Orchestra. In his native Singapore he became the youngest Associate Conductor of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and served as the Music Director of the Singapore National Youth Orchestra. Darrell Ang's uncommon gift was discovered at the age of four when he began to play the violin and piano. His training as a conductor was in St Petersburg, followed by study at Yale.

Giacomo Meyerbeer's eminence as an operatic composer was such that the works he wrote for the Paris Opéra between 1831 and 1865 – *Robert le Diable*, *Les Huguenots*, *L'Africaine* and *Le Prophète* – were among the most spectacular and popular, well into the twentieth century. These overtures and orchestral pieces illustrate the power of Meyerbeer's writing, his sense of drama, his orchestral colouring, and his melodic beauty. *L'Etoile du Nord* and *Dinorah*, written for the Opéra Comique, are lighter in tone, but notable for their programmatic inventiveness.

Giacomo  
**MEYERBEER**  
(1791-1864)

**Overtures and Entr'actes from the French Operas**

<b>1</b>	<b>Robert le Diable (1831) – Overture</b>	<b>3:24</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>L'Étoile du Nord (1854) – Overture</b>	<b>9:08</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Les Huguenots (1836) – Overture</b>	<b>4:48</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Les Huguenots – Orgie (Drinking Song, Act 1)</b>	<b>3:36</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Les Huguenots – Entr'acte to Act 2 (Flute solo: Bridget Douglas)</b>	<b>2:32</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Les Huguenots – Entr'acte to Act 5</b>	<b>0:39</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Les Huguenots – Ballet (Act 5)</b>	<b>2:02</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>L'Africaine (1865) – Overture</b>	<b>4:33</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>L'Africaine – Entr'acte to Act 2</b>	<b>1:33</b>
<b>10</b>	<b>L'Africaine – Entr'acte to Act 3</b>	<b>3:44</b>
<b>11</b>	<b>L'Africaine – Entr'acte to Act 5</b>	<b>1:24</b>
<b>12</b>	<b>L'Africaine – Grand scène du mancenillier (Act 5)</b>	<b>1:41</b>
<b>13</b>	<b>Dinorah [Le Pardon de Ploërmel] (1859) – Overture</b>	<b>13:16</b>
<b>14</b>	<b>Dinorah – Entr'acte to Act 2</b>	<b>2:55</b>
<b>15</b>	<b>Dinorah – Entr'acte to Act 3</b>	<b>1:45</b>
<b>16</b>	<b>Le Prophète (1849) – Overture</b>	<b>11:06</b>
<b>17</b>	<b>Le Prophète – Coronation March (Act 4)</b>	<b>3:17</b>

**New Zealand Symphony Orchestra • Darrell Ang**

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(Photo postcard, coloured, c. 1900) (akg-images)