

Tibor Tallián

The Prophet in the Province

The première of Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète* in the Hungarian National Theatre on June 12th 1850 was an event of unprecedented importance in the short history of professional opera in the Hungarian language. In my paper I am going to demonstrate the role of the orchestra in the success of this work. I shall combine this with the presentation of other outstanding aspects of the performance so that we shall be able to fairly judge the orchestra's contribution to the success.

At first we should take a look at the political or historical aspect. Some of the Hungarian contemporaries felt that *Le Prophète* is the paradigm of history brought on the operatic stage. In the first paragraph of a feuilleton that was published a day after the première, the writer duly referred to the extraordinary political circumstances of the period when *Le Prophète* was composed, calling 1849 a year "where the political blood contest has uprooted the harmony of art, and where the overwhelming severity of life has shackled the flying thought"¹. In Hungary this reference to the revolutionary events of 1848/49 recalled the war of independence against Austria, which ended only a year before the première of *Le Prophète*. The country was still living through the worst period of terror under Julius Jakob von Haynau, the hyena of Brescia. The newspaper "Magyar Hírlap" ["Hungarian Journal"] being the official Gazette of the Austrian government in Hungary, clearly did not show any sympathy towards the revolutionary past. One wonders what effect the political negativism of *Le Prophète* had on the feelings of the public.

As a matter of fact we cannot presume that during the incredible first run of 27 performances of *Le Prophète* in five months the nationally minded were in the majority in the audiences crowding the theatre. At that time the population of Buda and Pest was still in great part German. They surely were present at the Hungarian National Theatre. Since 1847, when the German Civic Theatre burned down, the Hungarian National Theatre was the only permanent theatre in the city.

¹ Magyar Hírlap, 19. Juni 1850.

Standing without a rival in the field of opera, the National Theatre could stage the first production of *Le Prophète* in the Hungarian states. Earlier all of Meyerbeer's operas had been first performed at the German Civic Theatre including *Emma di Resburgo* in 1821 and *I crociati* in 1828. From 1834 on *Robert le diable* enjoyed a lasting success on the German stage, and *The Huguenots* did remarkably well from 1839 on, even though they were presented not in the original version but in the arrangement by Georg Ott as *Die Ghibellinen in Pisa*. In the Hungarian theatre, only *Robert le diable* had been premièred in 1843. It apparently met with a considerable success in the first season, but then disappeared for ten years. It was tentatively reintroduced in 1853, but scored real succes only after 1857. *The Huguenots* were premièred in 1852, two years after *Le Prophète*. With 124 performances until 1884, its popularity almost equalled that of *Le Prophète* with 138 performances.

In March 1848 pro-revolutionary and anti-Hapsburg sentiments had seized even the German-speaking citizens, but this may not have been constant during the one and a half year long war of independence. As for the Hungarians, one might perhaps cautiously surmise that the disillusioned treatment of a revolution and especially of a revolutionary hero like Jean in *Le Prophète* may have met with some understanding even with independent- if not revolutionary-minded parts of the audience. Some may even have been reminded by the coronation scene of a crucial political event of the previous year: On April 14th 1849 the Hungarian National Assembly gathered in the Great Church in Debrecen, the centre of Hungarian protestantism, to proclaim the dethronement of the House of Austria, to declare Hungary's independence, and to elect Lajos Kossuth, the silver-tongued prophet of the movement for independence, Governor of the country. Not a few of his compatriots reprimanded him after the war for having gone to extremes in the quest for independence.

So much for politics; they only played a secondary role in the enormous impact of *Le Prophète*. As elsewhere, the audiences and reviewers believed that historical motives might be important in this magnum opus, but while it is a parable, it is not primarily about history and politics. Scribe and Meyerbeer did not go as far as Wagner who, as we know, consciously gave up history to seek the eternal

human drama in myth. But they did go pretty far, and as a result *Le Prophète* is as near to a mystery play or a "rappresentazione sacra" as it was possible in the era of individualism in which it was created. Sieghart Döhring speaks about the end of the opera as a "Weltgericht"²; I would almost go so far as to name it an apocalypse.

The critics of the Hungarian newspapers were keenly aware of the intentionally sacred character of Meyerbeer's new opera. The expectations before the first night breathed the atmosphere of a real "advent". I quote from a review published on June 15th 1850 in "Magyar Hírlap": "The first performance of *Le Prophète* on our national stage has moved the whole city. The theatre was filled over capacity several hours before the beginning of the performance. It began at 6 o'clock, and as after a short prelude the curtain rose, the longing soul could enjoy the grandiose masterpiece that is like the rising sun: it irradiates more and more warmth on its way up on the sky". When the writer comes to speak about the music, he again returns to the celestial metaphor: "It happened rightly that we brought up the simile of the sun before: the work can be compared to a sun that warms us without us being able to look into it. The music does not ingratiate itself into our hearing, it rather works against our pleasure. This music is characterized by a religious fanaticism, a darkly burning image which appears all over as its fundamental note." The argumentation of the writer leads directly to the observation of the sacred character of Meyerbeer's concept. He identifies two factors in the work which ensure its mythical stature. Meyerbeer "has chosen for the arena of his activity an epic foundation, upon which he erected a construction of religious music. The fundamental tone of the work suggests as its most appropriate characterization that it is a magnificent dramatic oratorio." An oratorio for the 19th century musical mind was an universal genre, or rather a genre about universality. One has the impression that the analyst would call *Le Prophète* a "Gesamtkunstwerk", if only he were aware of the Wagnerian concept. I

² Sieghart Döhring, Artikel "Le Prophète", in: Pipers Enzyklopädie des Musiktheaters, hrsg. v. Carl Dahlhaus und dem Forschungsinstitut für Musiktheater der Universität Bayreuth unter Leitung von Sieghart Döhring, Bd. 4, München 1991, S. 143-152.

quote again from the first review to show how strongly the new unity that Meyerbeer achieved through lavish use of various elements of drama, music, and decoration was felt. From the point of view of this particular critic, Meyerbeer did this not for the sake of external effects, but for the expression of a central message. "Highest dramatic life is united in this work with greatest music, and to make the richness truly Salomonian, elements of sculpture, painting, ornamental art, mechanics, and optics were added. But this radiant surface is not an aristocratic plating which serves to hide the lack of spiritual content - under the sumptuous clothing we discern the noblest soul which conquers and moves us."

Universality and unity is underlined also in regard to the music: "Melodiousness is not an outstanding element in the opera of Meyerbeer, it rather stands in the shadow of the dramatic life of the music. The melodies of the single numbers are directed by the general character of his composition, and not the other way around. His music will directly seize the springs of the soul. His musical talent enters the greatest cathedral of God, nature itself, to listen to the magnificent hymn of the Aeolian harp, and it is the shattering tone of nature that he orchestrates in his music." A music that is universal also in another, more human and technical aspect: Following the example of Rossini, Meyerbeer had changed his earlier Italian style, and created his now outstanding musical style out of the amalgamation of Italian, French, and German style. The result is a "new operatic eclecticism."

By using the term "eclecticism" the author intended to evoke a broad vision of the work rather than a pejorative comment. We do not want to pretend that the eclecticism of the Meyerbeerian theatre elicited nothing but enthusiastic reactions in the Hungarian musical press. One author eulogized the same characteristics that were commented on ironically by another. For neither the first, nor the last time the most substantial analyse charged *Le Prophète* and its composer with superficiality. We shall now quote from a review which especially stresses Meyerbeer's orchestration. "For all the beauties of the music, one has to admit, that the most outstanding quality of *Le Prophète* lies in its orchestration which is handled with extreme care and ingenuity. It deploys gigantic forces, and for its execution gigantic strength is needed. Thus, the effects produced by the opera are

at most places due to the masses of sound. As for the essence of music, dynamic is an outward factor, exactly like the splendour of the decoration is artistically only an external effect of the stage performance. However, the reality of the opera consists mostly of these external effects, and it is Meyerbeer himself who points out that he counts on the external effect more than on anything else, and that he creates such effects as the rise of the sun, the skating, the dances, the pageants, the coronation festival, and the collapse of the palace at the end as essential components of his opera. We do not mention all this as a sign of disapproval. In using the external effect to such an extreme degree, he only responded to the requirements of the era. At the same time he arrived in such matters at a point which he cannot exceed without making his work a ridiculous caricature of itself"³.

Both feuilletonists perceived the same qualities in *Le Prophète*, but then, as it often happens, they appreciated them antithetically. For the one, the lavish means of staging and music serve as expression of inner powers, for the other, they only serve to make a strong impression. We could say: For both of them the style of Meyerbeer has the quality of sensation, but with a different meaning.

"Sensation", a derivative from the latin verb "sentire", primarily expresses the result of physical perception. Sensations in the primary sense - as understood in English, French and Italian - are imprints of reality in the human senses. By extension the term "sensation" denotes in its second meaning an outward phenomenon that has a strong effect on the senses and thus creates a sensation in them. For the second meaning, I would prefer to pronounce the noun in the German way - "Sensation"; in the colloquial German - and Hungarian for that matter - the word does not at all have the first meaning of "feeling".

What characterizes a typical "Sensation"? I believe, the adjective "obligat" which one reviewer uses to characterize all the theatrical wonders in *Le Prophète*, hits the nail on the head. "Sensationen" are miracles which are no miracles [Sensationen sind Wunder, die keine sind]: They are manufactured cleverly with much routine to elicit

³ Pesti Napló, 17. Juni 1850.

amazement that does not survive longer than the arrival of the next programmed "Sensation".

There can be no doubt about it: Scribe and Meyerbeer used extreme artistic means to excite strong sensations in their audiences. Some contemporaries felt that this craving for sensation brought the musical style and the dramatic structure to the verge of "Sensation".

Instrumentation clearly belonged to the primary sensations of *Le Prophète* in both meanings of the word. Appropriately, Meyerbeer's orchestration received in the feuilletons more attention than his vocal writing, and it was obviously considered a strikingly impressive and most valuable component of his musical style. "In no other work has Meyerbeer's prowess of orchestration and instrumentation yet appeared as magnificent as in *Le Prophète*". The feuilletonists enumerated one by one Meyerbeer's ideas in the use of instruments, and commented on their expressive or representative qualities. The descriptions are short but concrete in detail. They are almost like descriptions of abstract pieces of instrumentation studied in the score or what would be worse, copied from a printed guide to *Le Prophète* published in some unknown source of information. Special attention was paid to the intervention of the band of the k.u.k. Fifth Artillery Regiment on the stage. This, at least for sceptics, belonged more to the "Sensationen", to the external effects of *Le Prophète*, as if stage music only belonged to the spectacular and not to the acoustical features of the production. "New stage decors which have never been seen before, the multitude of stage personnel, which densely fills the stage, the wonderful dance of the skaters, the strong melodies, the cooperation of the theatre orchestra with the military band, the rising of the sun, the collapse of the city and thus the unfortunate end of the whole theatre personnel - all these are circumstances among which one watches more than one aesthetically enjoys."

The high opinion of the critics about the sensational importance of the orchestra as a component of the music contrasts strikingly with the scarce and stereotyped information they give about the achievement of the orchestra as a musical body. In practice, singing and acting still appeared as the main artistic activities in the performance of opera. External circumstances make this contradiction understandable. Since I am supposed to speak about the part of the orchestra in

the story of *Le Prophète's* advent to the province, I shall only briefly mention the single most important protagonist of the whole action, whose presence and collaboration was the real sensation of the production. The guardian angel of the whole enterprise was Anne de La Grange, the French-German singer who created the part of Fidés. She arrived to Pest from Vienna about May 27, and begun rehearsing on the 29th. With her superior knowledge of the exigencies of the whole work, she did not refrain from - as one newspaper review put it - "calling the attention of the personnel to the proper way of performing during rehearsals as well as in personal communications"⁴. It should not come as a surprise, that about 80 % of the coverage of the première and of later performances went to the description and laudation of the accomplishment of the primadonna. Other singers received much lesser attention. Afterwards followed usually the description of the sensations on stage. The chorus and orchestra, together with the conductor, had to be content with one of those famous last sentences of the reviews. I will now quote the longest critical remark on the accomplishment of the ripienists on the stage and in the pit: "The chorus sang excellently. And as for the music (that is: the orchestra), under the direction of Erkel it works so correctly, as if a single soul would direct the effects of all the instruments"⁵. Other critics reviewed the orchestral performances in similarly generic terms: "The chorus, as well as the orchestra, behaved most splendidly. Conductor Erkel deserves from the public more than a grateful acknowledgement"⁶. Or: "among the participants who received curtain calls were Mr Fáncsi, the stage director, and Ferenc Erkel, the brave conductor of our theatre, whose excellent direction added quite a lot to the happy outcome of the evening"⁷.

None of the remarks analyzed the playing of the orchestra in aesthetic terms as a process of musical performance and dramatic "Gestaltung" comparable to the activities of the singers. But at least they readily acknowledged the craftsmanship and the artistic con-

⁴ Hölgyfutár, 13. Juni 1850.

⁵ Ibid., 17. Juni 1850.

⁶ Pesti Napló, 15. Juni 1850.

⁷ Ibid., 17. Juni 1850.

sciousness, that the body of musicians showed. To be sure, craftsmanship and engagement were something that the musicians had to offer in a measure that was unheard of in the small "opera factory" in Budapest. In this respect, the simple fact of the production of *Le Prophète* had all the marks of a "Sensation". It was obvious from the beginning that the regular performance of this "wonder of theatre" overtaxed the forces of the provincial theatre that the Hungarian National Theatre was. The première was made possible through exhausting preparations. More than one player considered the long period of rehearsals extraordinary enough to note dates and hours of every single rehearsal in his instrumental part. Thus, we know that it was on April 23rd that Ferenc Erkel and his musicians begun working on Meyerbeer's score. Erkel first held five Korrekturproben with the orchestra alone, followed by 30 rehearsals, presumably together with the singers and the choir. The preparation ended with the Dress rehearsal on June 10th which lasted over 5 hours.

The records of the violoncello player inform us precisely about the sequence in which the numbers of the opera were taken up. Quite a few numbers do not appear in the listing. The question remains open, whether this means that they were cut and for this reason not rehearsed, or that they were rehearsed only later, when Erkel begun going through whole acts at one session. The sessions were held in the morning hours, and they lasted between one and three hours.

A tantalizing question arises at the comparison of the score with the actual number of musicians who in 1850 were under contract with the National Theatre: how did an orchestra of about 40 musicians come to grips with Meyerbeer's exigencies of massed sound? In any case, at the time of the première the Budapest orchestra already had all the necessary instruments at disposal. In addition to the standard orchestra of the 1840s - one pair of each woodwind instrument, two trumpets, four horns, three trombones - a bombardon player was engaged in 1847. But there were only two bassoons and two trumpets instead of four of each called for by the score. A harpist had been imported from Vienna in 1848. Of course there was no possibility of using four harps as Meyerbeer wished. Moreover, certain doubts arise as to the availability of this instrument at every performance. Attached to the viola and violoncello parts one finds so called

"Harfeneinlagen" for nos. 8 and 19, which can only mean that sometimes the string instruments had to double for the harp if the orchestra lacked it.

Alas, the harp was not the only instrument, which regularly failed to play its important symbolic role in the mystical sound vision of *Le Prophète*. From time to time, other instrumental colors were also missing from the palette of the orchestra. For some of these cases the printed score suggests alternative solutions. Meyerbeer allows that the organ may be substituted by a Harmonium or the "Harmonie"⁸ in the orchestra. Sometimes the Budapest company had to turn to this solution, as we learn from the notes of the players. The part of the flute is especially informative in this respect. The first flutist was an important personality, not only as a leading member of the orchestra. The career of Franz Doppler was a typically Austro-Hungarian one: Born in Lemberg, he had settled in Pest in the early 1830s to play the flute first in the German theatre, from 1841 on in the Hungarian theatre. He also composed three operas, out of which at least one, *Ilka*, became a standard piece in the local repertory. After Erkel's *Hunyadi*, Doppler's *Ilka* was also honored by de La Grange who learnt its title role and sang it a few times in the National Theatre. In 1858 Franz Doppler and his brother Karl, who was the second conductor behind Erkel, moved to Vienna where Franz pursued his career as an instrumentalist, and also acted as an agent of the Hungarian National Theatre in Budapest.

Doppler recorded all the vicissitudes which a grand opera like *Le Prophète* had to meet in a small opera like the Pest National Theatre in the 1850s. The inadequacy of the means of performance did not cut the run of *Le Prophète* for about another forty years after Doppler had left Budapest. That the sensation it caused at the beginning soon begun to wane, may perhaps not entirely be ascribed to the basic nature of sensations - that they simply do not last. It may have also been ascribed to the dulling off of the musical and theatrical sensations, which in turn were due to the inadequate performances.

⁸ Usual German name for the "Bläserkapelle" or "Bläserensemble".

Let me present at the end a few of the remarks Franz Doppler (and sometimes his substitute) wrote into the flute part of *Le Prophète* during the years he played it in the National Theatre:

- 22 Februar 1851 im Abonement ohne 2te Clarinett
- 7 Juni 1851 im Abonement sehr voll. Franz Doppler auf Urlaub in Wien. Fisharmonica statt Orgel!!!!!!!!!!
- 9 August im Abonement - Harmonie im Orchester statt Orgel
- 8 Oktober Dirigent Carl Doppler. Erkel krank Sehr volles Haus
- 14 Oktober Dirigent Carl Doppler Erkel krank.
- 21 Dezember Fr. Doppler 1ter Oboist / Carl Doppler 1 Flötist et Organist.
- 15 März 1855 Ohne Banda
- 18 May 1855 Ohne Oboe und ohne Bertha.
- 14 Juni ohne Oboe. 2ter Fagott ist zu tief
- 14 Juli Proch im 2ten Stock in der Loge sieht ein Orchester ohne Oboe Imo ohne 2ten Fagott.
- 10 Dezember 1855. Erkel als Organist
- 18 September 1856 Erkel bekommt einen Sohn. Herr Windl Abwesend, ohne 2te Flöte
- 31 Oktober 1857 Ohne 2ten Fagott. Stoll bewährt sich als tüchtiger Solobläser. Schlittschuhlauf wird ausgezischt
- 11 Februar 1858 schlecht besucht statt Kunok. NB vielleicht zum letzten mal in Pest Doppler.