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Che sara, sara: The "Star" of Which Dreams Are Made,
Meyerbeer's L'etoile du nord

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Che sarà, sarà: The “Star” of Which Dreams Are Made, Meyerbeer’s *L’étoile du nord*

R O B E R T I G N A T I U S L E T E L L I E R

*Catherine, chacun a son étoile:
La tienne brille au Nord,
Au dessus de toutes les autres,
Et te réserve de bizarres destinées.*

THE moment Meyerbeer had brought *Le prophète* to its triumphal premiere, on 16 April 1849, he was, as usual, immediately involved in plans for a new opera. His diary entry for Tuesday, 5 June 1849, records a “conference with Scribe about *L’Impératrice* [the new title of *Ein Feldlager in Schlesien*].”¹ Even during business surrounding the London production of *Le prophète*, the new project was at the back of his mind. On 16 July he records that “Scribe read me act 3 of the new opera.”

After Meyerbeer had left the demanding world of Paris to resume his indefatigable travels once more, the new project began to engross his attention entirely. While heading for Cologne on 1 August, he reveals that he had already “composed the first chorus of the new opera, which I am now going to call *La cantinière*.” On 2 August he was familiarizing himself with act 2, and on 3 August, the eve of his arrival in Berlin, with act 3. The work was then set aside until later in the month, when he again turned his attention to it during the coach journey to Salzburg from Linz. He felt inspired to make a striking piece of characterization that would be of importance for the new opera: “In the coach I again read through act 1 of *La cantinière*: it suddenly occurred to me that I should depict the anger in Peter’s character, which so often recurs, by an orchestral figure, or a vocal phrase, which would always be repeated when he becomes enraged.” On 17 August, en route to one of his regular water cures, this time in Wildbad Gastein, he began composing Danilowitz’s act 1 cavatina, continuing the composition the next day “in my head.” The piece was then put

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on hold for the four weeks' duration of the cure, but once again the process of journeying set his creative impulses into motion. On 14 September he records completing the diverse sections of the introduction while revealing an important point about his compositional technique: "Today I composed a great deal in the morning, namely the toast ('Buvons amis, à la Finlande'), the ensemble ('La guerre, la guerre'), and the conclusion to the introduction ('C'est la cloche du chantier'). Whether all this will please me when I play it to myself on the piano, however, remains to be seen."

The new opera was thus well begun: its slow but steady composition would continue over the period of the next three years, with the act 3 finale completed on 27 April 1852. The title would again be changed, to *La vivandière* (20 November 1849) and ultimately (on 5 October 1850) to *L'étoile du nord*.²

Why Meyerbeer felt the compulsion to write an opéra comique is never disclosed in his own writings. From his young days he had been an avid student of all operatic forms, and in Vienna in March 1813 he wrote at length about his reaction to Boieldieu's *Jean de Paris*, revealing his keen knowledge of the genre.³ His Italian semiseria opera *Margherita d'Anjou* contains many *demi-caractère* elements, while *Robert le diable* was originally conceived, and partially written for, the Opéra-Comique.⁴ In spite of his decisive, indeed trend-setting, success at the Académie Royale de Musique, Meyerbeer never ceased attending the smaller house and showing the keenest interest in all its productions.⁵

But it was the royal commission to write a German festival opera in the Singspiel tradition, *Ein Feldlager in Schlesien*, for the opening of the newly rebuilt Royal Opera House in Berlin, that presented Meyerbeer with an ideal opportunity and challenge to confront and master the "lighter" form.⁶

Although the commission was a uniquely "national" undertaking, the composer nonetheless felt that only the master storyteller and librettist Eugène Scribe could produce a libretto of sufficient dramatic interest to satisfy his stringent demands; he secretly commissioned Scribe to adapt one of his ballet scenarios, while entrusting the German versification to the Berlin poet and critic Ludwig Rellstab.⁷ However, it is clear that the intention of developing the work along French lines, with a view to an international audience, was there from the outset. Meyerbeer always felt that the specifically Prussian appeal of *Feldlager*'s plot, with its self-conscious adulation of the Prussian folk hero King Frederick the Great, and its almost mystical glorification of the House of Hohenzollern, would never be appreciated outside Prussia, let alone beyond the borders of Germany.⁸ In spite of its successful 1847 Viennese adaptation at the Theater an der Wien as *Vielka*, in which the overtly Prussian nationalism was toned down, the work remained obdurately bound to the Royal Opera in Berlin, a fact both acknowledged and sustained by Meyerbeer's refusal to let the score be published.⁹

The opéra comique plan was pushed into the background while the grand project of *Le prophète* finally moved forward, following the departure of Léon Pillet from the directorship of the Opéra in July 1847. Yet even at the height of

the hectic rehearsals for that huge venture, Meyerbeer was conferring with Scribe about the reworking of *Feldlager*.

The Reworking: The Rescue Theme

For the new opera, Scribe radically transformed the old scenario. *Feldlager* utilizes the rescue motif as its central organizing principle. In act 1 Saldorff, Vielka, and Conrad are able to save the king from capture; in act 2 Saldorff galvanizes the local Prussian regiments to free the king from his enemies; and in act 3 Conrad, Vielka, and Theresa successfully plead for Leopold's pardon and all the rescuers are duly rewarded, with Vielka in turn prophesying a glorious future for the king's house and his realm.

In *L'étoile du nord* the leitmotif of rescue again furnishes the central thematic strand of the plot. In act 1 Catherine saves her brother George's marriage plans with Prascovia, first by pleading with his future father-in-law and then by secretly taking his place in the conscription to the tsar's army.¹⁰ In the meantime she saves the tsar, who is working in disguise as a shipwright, from depression and futility by firing his sense of ambition and glory. Her primary act of deliverance is to rescue the village community from Cossack depredation by masquerading as a gypsy, filling the wild troops with superstitious dread and compounding it by telling their fortunes. In act 2 Catherine indirectly saves the tsar by shaking him out of his drunken stupor, just in time for him to react to a conspiracy by disloyal troops. In act 3 it is the turn of the assembled characters to rescue Catherine. George, Prascovia, the tsar, and the whole Karelian community help to free her from the darkness and confusion of her madness by a communal act of psychotherapy. The restoration of her sanity and the bestowal of the crown provide a fitting reward for her acts of sympathy, bravery, intuition, and resourcefulness.

The Deep Structure: Isolation, Integration

The rescue theme is underpinned by a deep structure of individual isolation moving in and out of communal integration. The village life, celebrated in the opening scene with rest, refreshment, patriotism, and prayer, opposes the threat of division when Danilowitz proposes Russian sympathies. But this communal unity is menaced by the Cossack raid, and only Catherine's actions, on both a public and a personal level, restore peace and end individual loneliness, enabling the integration of the village community in the wedding celebrations. It is Catherine who must assume the lonely, and potentially tragic, state of individual isolation by going alone to the army in her brother's place.

In act 2 the dance and regimental songs present an image of common purpose and loyalty, as life in the Russian camp is celebrated in traditional folk and

military terms. But this is a camp, a place of incipient violence and tumult.¹¹ Images of integration are immediately contrasted with negative notions of common intent, first in the conspiracy and then in the dubious merrymaking of the drinking episode, with disruptive potential for the greater community. Both situations present a type of limited unity as well as a counter-image, a destruction of true integration: the conspirators, in banding together, aim to destroy the great common bond of patriotism and loyalty to the crown; Peter's revels with Danilowitz and the nautch girls amount to a false conviviality, a debauchery of alcohol and sensuality, going against the spirit of his leadership and in direct contrast to the authentic village wedding celebrations. Here the ruler loses self-control — both as a monarch responsible for his realm and troops, and as a man committed to an absent beloved — and becomes entrapped in his own isolated world of selfishness and drunken folly.

This situation is underpinned by the irony of Catherine's witnessing the whole scene. The "absent" beloved is really present, although hidden and disguised; her arrest and death sentence precipitate the breakdown of the series of ploys that have concealed reality, both literally and metaphysically. Catherine's crying out for Peter while being dragged away shocks the tsar to his senses, begins to awaken his true self, and enables him to cope with the drama and the threat of conspiracy, also potentially tragic for him. The monarch's Prayer and Oath are steps in a process of reintegration, cumulatively augmented by the arrival of the loyal regiments, until genuine military order, loyalty, and resolve are achieved in the famous quadruple chorus and the final triumphant unison of the Tsar's March.

Although the tsar has more or less integrated himself back into his public role, Peter the individual remains alone, lost in remorse and retrospection. The soliloquy at the beginning of act 3 shows him completely isolated within himself, contemplating his loneliness in terms of the lost happiness of innocent childhood and ennobling love.¹² This isolation is emphasized by the wry commentary of the comic trio that follows: here the pull between his personal isolation and public integration is set in ironic perspective, since he is requested, as commander-in-chief, to reward a loyal soldier for services rendered to the crown. What gradually emerges in the course of the request, however, is that the genuine service was nothing less than the arrest and shooting of the apparent conspirator, Catherine in disguise. The tsar's personal wretchedness is thus compounded, although a ray of hope comes in Gritzenko's admitting that his prisoner escaped. Hope is incidentally sustained by the arrival of George and Prascovia with the other villagers from Karelia, who have come at the tsar's behest to recreate an image of his lost idyll. Danilowitz brings news of Catherine's reappearance but has to reveal that her traumatic experience and sense of betrayal have left her demented. Hence the scene is set for the final struggle between isolation and integration.

Catherine's mad scene is a process of readjustment and clarification whereby, through a series of dramatically recreated reminiscences, she travels back in time.

Each reminiscence becomes more and more personal, until the lost intimacy and joy of love realized finally cap the procedure and help to restore her consciousness hold on life.¹³ The pattern is modeled on the last scene of W. Friedrich's libretto for Flotow's *Martha* (1847), where the angry and disillusioned Lyonel is able to confront his true feelings of love for Lady Harriet by suddenly finding himself in the re-created context of the Richmond Fair, where he first met and fell in love with her when she was disguised as the simple maid, Martha.¹⁴ Catherine's is a battle between haziness and clarity, memory and reality, mental isolation and full psycho-social integration, as "a strange mixture of a thousand confused things, shining, coming back, then escaping and vanishing into the shades" are slowly but inexorably focused on, fixed, and made real. Rejection, loss, and trauma are transformed into assimilation, recovery, and healing. One by one the familiar faces present themselves: the village workmen, Danilowitz, the local pastry vendor, the young girls, the wedding musicians and guests, the bride and groom (the latter her brother, playing the flute with her beloved, Peter). Catherine is caught up in an emotional crisis based on the loss of her past idyll and all the labors of love: "Is this the shadow, the true shadow, the wandering spirits of those I loved?" The combination of all the people, the music, the circumstances and memories they evoke, catalyzes the dream, the paradise lost, and transforms it into a new reality: "Heavenly pleasure, o happy dream! This tune so sweet, so dear to my heart intoxicates me and brings the scent of flowers to my senses! Spring's heavenly melody enchants my heart." The awakening is the recovery of a rational perception of life, bolstered by the active presence of those recalled by reminiscence and magnified by a new transforming reality, which is the idyll found, or paradise regained. The situation is exactly analogous to Amina's sleepwalking and awakening in Bellini's *La sonnambula* (1831). Abandoned and betrayed, the disturbed girl is lost in her distraught reveries, observed by the whole village community; they and her confused lover now find her innocence vindicated. Her waking is an entry into a situation of love and bliss unexpectedly attained.¹⁵

The act of integration is not only communal festivity, the social fulfillment of marriage, but also coronation, in fact a double crowning, so that the fulfillment of love, patriotism, and destiny are all pulled together in the symbolism of the final mime. Catherine is garbed in the symbols of royalty as consort to the accompaniment of her mother's prophecy here, and in the final chorus of general acclamation that loudly concludes the opera, just as it had softly launched the overture.

Central Imagery: The Star of the North

The dominant image and theme of the Star of the North is fulfilled: the notion of prophecy and high calling; the loving, protecting spirit of Catherine's dead mother; the dynamism of Catherine's intrepid character based on generous sym-

Example 1. Theme of the Star.

cantabile con molto portamento

pathy, love, and personal resolve; and the realization of her fortune in royal matrimony and imperial coronation. In this way the “star” of her mother’s prediction and the symbol of her destiny become the star of state, the great northern power of Russia, in an astral configuration of multifaceted and pointed significance.

Interestingly, the famous theme of the Star was originally used as the high point of Vielka’s prophecy at the culmination of *Feldlager*, where it is sustained gloriously in its one apotheotic appearance (ex. 1). In the later adaptation it is a recurring leitmotif, with a central place in the overture, and the principal theme running through the opera: as resonance of the dead mother and her prophecy, as medium of prayer (and hence a link with the spiritual world of higher, guiding power), as theme capturing lost love and innocence in act 2 when Catherine is pulled away from the drunken Peter, and finally as prophecy fulfilled in the closing moments of the opera.

Peter’s Anger: Two Themes at Play

The theme of the Star is thus related to a register of pastoral values (mother, home, childhood, village, love, providence, destiny) and is indirectly contrasted with the other recurring theme, the motif of Peter’s anger (ex. 2), which, conversely, represents the world of harsh reality (human character, passion, violence, instability, chance, the awkward facts of life, psychological determinism), with all elements related to the darker aspects of the story (politics, history, and personality).

Example 2. Motif of Peter's anger.

Même mouvement

P. [Mor]- bleu! mor - bleu! je ne con - nais per -

son - ne lors - que mon sang bouil - lon - ne bouil - lon - ne, bouil - [lonne]

f *p* *crescendo.* *crescendo.* *più cresc.*

The two themes in fact symbolize the central polarity that basically structures the plot and generates the pertinent imagery. The theme of the Star stands for the pastoral side of the story—the world of comedy and romance, with emphasis on village life and countryside, peopled by ordinary little folk realized in stock types such as laborers, town musicians, wedding guests, village maidens, and bumbling old men. The motif of Peter's anger captures something of the dark elements in the story and, in its destructive potential, even hints at tragedy. It is also a means of very personal characterization, an attempt at investing the tsar's character with its own vigor and energy.

The darker aspect of life is distilled in the register of military images, which dominate the other side of the symbolic landscape of the opera. Peter is the bridge between these two worlds: he loves them both. On the one hand, he treasures his life as disguised shipwright, friend of carpenters, and lover of his fellow laborer's sister. But he is also tsar and a leader of nations with onerous political responsibilities, symbolized by his role as commander-in-chief and by the challenge of the military conspiracy.

Part of the dramatic interest of the story is Peter's need to reconcile these two aspects of himself. He is imperious and angry as laborer, and irresponsible and unpredictable as leader—in fact, an isolated personality who is brought into

greater integration of personality by Catherine. She, in her village-girl persona, inspires him to his higher calling; in her soldier disguise, she awakens him to greater responsibility as tsar. Finally, as demented victim, she invests him with greater humanity and compassion.

Romance and Comedy

The theme of the *Star* also involves elements of romance, in the technical sense of the word. Romance, depicting heroic legend in illustration of a moral, usually involves the suspense of circumstances normally attendant on human action (often through magic).¹⁶ Romance, rooted in a pastoral heredity, perceives a power or force surging through the universe, influencing and even guiding the lives of human beings. If this is not magic, or religious predestination, it can be seen as fortuna, or destiny. Catherine's dead mother's omnipresence, and the recollection and fulfillment of her prediction, rehearsed in Catherine's own assumption of the prophetic role in dealing with the Cossacks, embody this strong undercurrent of romance. So does the "fairy tale" ending to the opera.

But pastoral and comedy are much more central to the story. The insistence on happiness and the focus on simple but enduring values are laid out in act 1 in the little Karelian village where Catherine and Peter fall in love, helping to bring the love of George and Prascovia to its married fulfillment. This remains a vital image, and it is only by and through its re-creation at the end of the opera that true reconciliation and happiness can be achieved.

The pastoral experience centers on a celebration of love and song in a sunlit countryside, in the manner of Theocritus. And it is music, loving kindness, and the conjuring up of the lost Arcadia that restore Catherine to sanity.

The pastoral elements are integral to the underlying mode of comedy, the life blood of the action. Reference has already been made to the satirical and farcical aspects, but the radical origins of comedy in fertility rituals insist on a celebration of life, joy, communal integrity, and social harmony. The awkwardness of social and political necessity, of psychological individuality, leads to disruption and challenge, even to destruction of the pastoral legacy. Peter's rage, the marauding Cossacks, and the inescapable intrusion of the state via military conscription and soldiery assert these divisive forces in act 1. The whole camp scene, with its tumult, confusion, conspiracy, and strife, where values of love, loyalty, and stability are overturned, represents the darker elements, pregnant with potential tragedy. Here drama, distilled in the military metaphor, becomes a miniature reflection of the great issues explored in grand opéra.

Loss of identity and loss of peace, and possibly even of life, become the decisive moments of change for both Catherine and Peter. Only recovery of the pastoral inheritance will bring healing and restoration, and regain the lost idyll, albeit in terms of an altered, exalted imagery.

The Pastoral Ideal and the Threat to It

The pastoral theme had been investigated in Meyerbeer's grands opéras to some extent already. In *Robert le diable* it is highly developed, and the ideal achieved in the rapturous, "sacramental" conclusion. In *Les Huguenots* it is glimpsed in the court of Marguerite de Valois, where the beauty and tranquility of Chenonceaux reflect the desire to attain and secure peace before these ideals are lost in the brutal passage of history. In *Le prophète* the ideal, be it personal, family, communal, or ideological, is decisively lost to the intransigent forces of religion, politics, and hatred. So this theme is in the line of Scribe and Meyerbeer's recurring preoccupations, to the point where it becomes central in *L'étoile du nord*.

Similarly the military images, with violence and disruption, are also present in *Les Huguenots* (in the warring Catholic and Protestant factions) and in *Le prophète* (where the Anabaptist camp in act 3 is structurally analogous to act 2 of *L'étoile du nord*, both symbolically and semiotically).

The mixture of pastoral and military is one of the fundamental conventions of opéra comique, in large measure because of Scribe's own contribution to the history of the genre, particularly, and to the development of the libretto, generally.¹⁷ He gave it prototypical expression in the book for Auber's *Le philtre* (1831), where the heroine's world of rustic delight is intruded upon by the swaggering soldier Joli-Coeur, who threatens her true happiness and induces, at various levels of meaning, her real love, the peasant lad, to enlist. Scribe used the same thematic nexus as effectively a few years later in the hugely popular *Le chalet*, written for Adam (1835). Both operas passed into even wider international currency because of Donizetti's adaptations of them, as *L'elisir d'amore* (1832) and *Betty* (1836) respectively.

Opéra Comique Conventions

L'étoile du nord indeed exhibits so many essentials from the world of opéra comique that the coincidence could hardly be accidental. It is as if, in writing for Paris's second house, the authors were determined to subsume the traditions of the genre embodied there into a single work, and therein make some kind of comment on them, or give them their own special stamp. The nature and number of the topoi seem almost deliberate, and their occurrence was hardly unnoticed, since the situation was satirized at the time by the *Journal pour Rire*.¹⁸ Moreover, with Meyerbeer's fastidious concern over his texts, this is what he must have wanted.

The military opera. This work, in many ways, and certainly chronologically, lies at the heart of the military opéra comique, expanded from earlier works of Scribe for Auber (like *Fra Diavolo* [1830]), exemplified perfectly in Saint-Georges and Bayard's *La fille du régiment* (1840) for Donizetti, later satirized in operetta by Meilhac and Halévy for Offenbach in *La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein* (1867).

Sentimental addenda came in Duru and Chivot's *La fille du tambour-major* (1879) for Offenbach and *La mascotte* (1880) for Audran.

The martial music of act 2 of *L'étoile du nord* was lifted directly from *Feldlager*. In spite of Meyerbeer's personal disassociation from the Prussian military spirit, there was no doubt a powerful urge, an irrepressible instinct for military ceremonial in his makeup that reached far back into his childhood experiences of growing up in the heart of the Prussian kingdom. His structured approach to life and composition, and his preoccupation with fervent tempi and penchant for dotted rhythms, are all examples of the insidious compulsion — as, indeed, are all his orchestral works, which were, in any case, commanded for various Prussian royal occasions.¹⁹

The military spirit was in Meyerbeer's blood, but the call of the gentle pastoral was an antidote and an equally enduring drive: intensive treatment would come in his second opéra comique, *Le pardon de Ploërmel*, the creation and production of which were as much a priority for him as *L'étoile du nord* had been after *Le prophète*. This was in spite of the uncompleted *Judith* and *L'Africaine*, and the fury of Scribe that he should turn to other librettists (Barbier and Carré) while the works he had written for Meyerbeer were set aside.²⁰ The composer was, in his usual single-mindedness, prepared to place even his relationship with Scribe in jeopardy in order to fulfill his impulse toward the pastoral.²¹

Other conventions. There are other motifs and scene types familiar from the opéra comique, most of them of Scribe's devising: the wedding scene from *Le maçon* (1825), the heroine awakened from a dream in *La somnambule* (1827), the song remembered from past times that brings the present into new meaning, as in *La dame blanche* (1825). Other situations are from Italian Romantic opera: the mad scene, made so famous in *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835), and the conspiracy scene from Meyerbeer's own *Il crociato in Egitto* (later so illustriously developed in *Les Huguenots*). The challenge was for the creators, and the composer especially, to make something unique of this collection of types so recognizable to the public and so familiar from the repertoire of the Salle Favart and Théâtre-Italien. The thematic disposition of these conventions, scenes, and plot patterns in a new dynamic was surely achieved in the close, textured poetic and musical language both librettist and composer were able to produce in this late work.

Comedy

Perhaps the most striking feature about *L'étoile du nord*, in the context of Meyerbeer's oeuvre, is its basically comic modality. If *Margherita d'Anjou*, *Robert le diable*, and *Le prophète* all contain comic elements in the plot and music (this dimension in the latter work being particularly black), *L'étoile* marked the first time the composer tackled comic themes so directly. Contrary to Wilfred Mellers's assertion that Meyerbeer had no sense of humor,²² this opera, in spite

of its semiseria nature and glimpse into tragedy, is steeped in a very delicate and charming sense of fun and joy.

Musical characterization. Meyerbeer's appropriation of the mantle of comedy obviously finds expression in his treatment of musical convention, just as he and Scribe had approached and transformed some of the conventions of comic plot. This is abundantly clear from the handling of characterization, and the character of Danilowitz is exactly apposite here.

In the hands of a good singing actor, who can bring out the humor latent in this part, Danilowitz becomes the chief comic element throughout the story.²³ His opening vending couplets have all the airy patter of the buffo genre. And it is interesting that Meyerbeer's own additions to this part (the act 1 polonaise and the act 3 arioso, expressly written for Joseph Tichatschek)²⁴ flesh out Danilowitz's comic character most convincingly. The pompous, and at the same time whinging, humor of the polonaise and the sentimental charm of the arioso capture the changing moods of the essentially good-humored scenario. And certainly the dramatic success of the tent scene's boozy jocularity depends, to a large extent, on the vital participation of a sharp and witty Danilowitz. The act 3 trio, perhaps the single most extended and funny piece of the whole opera, is pure comedy of manners, misunderstanding, and ironic commentary: the somewhat dull but intransigent soldier, the exasperated and tetchy tsar — with the witty, resourceful, and somewhat detached Danilowitz mediating between the two — provide a sustained, various, and arresting situation of humor, reflected in the changing moods, rhythms, and harmonies of the music.

Perhaps nothing captures Meyerbeer's response to the comic challenge more exquisitely than the heroine's entrance aria. Catherine's couplets (really a trio, with Peter and George commenting) present the musical language of the smaller genre, the lighter style, perfectly. The music is deft and fleet, requiring rapid singing and playing, with constant changes of rhythm and tempo. The mercurial opening triplets capture Catherine's bright and brisk personality, as well as the quick-wittedness and humor of the story she tells — of going to plead her brother's case with his fiancée's father. Her assumption of the different parts of the conversation she reports give wonderful opportunities for humor in the comic impersonation of the grumpy old man, with her blithe, rapid upward runs and crisp, fluent coloratura establishing her masterful control of the situation and revealing her generous and resourceful character (ex. 3). The unison comments of Peter and George add to the rhythmic and harmonic grace of the piece and buoy up Catherine's quicksilver vocal line. The whole effect is one of brilliance and rapidity, intensified by the patter accelerandi for all three, Catherine's fioritura and short glittering cadenza, and the vivacious orchestral ritornello rounding off the piece with great élan. The characterization of Catherine is successfully presented in the lively and light language of the opéra comique, which Meyerbeer confects with the hand of a seasoned master.

Formal innovation. It is the mutually modifying interplay of form and characterization that presents some of the most startlingly original aspects of this

Example 3. Catherine's entrance couplets, act 1.

tempo 1 (avec sa voix naturelle, s'adressant à Georges.)

C. *doux.*
[servi-] teur! Par - lez! par - lez! Ne suis-je pas un bon am-bas-sa -

leggiero **tempo 1** *cresc.*


C. *cresc.* *dimin.*
deur? Mais la [paix]

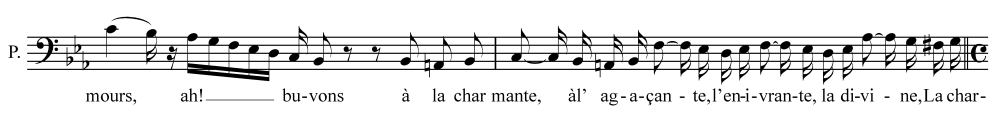
Georges
Le meil-leur am-bas - sa-deur!


Peter
Oui tues sur-mon hon-neur Le meil-leur am-bas - sa-deur!

musically inventive score. The tent scene is a case in point, where a shabby drinking binge leads to the physical and moral collapse of the tsar, who loses his identity and also comes close to losing his love and his power. The bibulous trio, the musical medium of these shenanigans, begins like any jolly drinking song, with a deft and elegant little ritornello that returns, rondo-like, at various points. But as Peter and Danilowitz's cavortings become more sozzled and Catherine watches appalled, the formal structure of the music breaks down; Peter's lines become longer and almost inchoate ravings (ex. 4), interrupting the fleet and formal structure of the music, which loses its tonal center and finishes almost desolately in a cabaletta movement more expressive of Catherine's distress than of a brilliant and formal conclusion to a show-stopping trio. Even her coloratura and cadenza share in this rather bleak and fraught unraveling of the comfortable exposition and expectations of form (ex. 5). This is by no means your typical operatic drinking song, but a transformation of

Example 4. The inebriated Peter's cadenza in the drinking trio, act 2.

P. 
mours, à Ca - the - ri - ne, à Ca - the - ri (très doux) ne, à mes a -

P. 
mours, ah! bu-vons à la char mante, à l' ag - a - çan - te, l'en-i-vran-te, la di-vi - ne, La char-

P. 
man-te, l'ag-a-çan-te, l'en-i-vran-te, la di-vi-ne Cath-e - ri - [ne]

Example 5. Cabaletta from the drinking trio, act 2.

C. 
[maî] - tres - se que son i - vres

D. 
mes sens ver - se, ver - se dans mes sens le bon-heur,

P. 
[mé] - moire ou-blie à tout ja - mais les tour - ments, ver-se ver - se dans mes sens le bon-heur,

C. 
se! du - re tou-jours!

D. 
ver - se! ah! viens!

P. 
ver - se! ah! viens!

convention, with disturbing formal modifications dictated by the exigencies of characterization.

The same applies to the licentious encounter with the camp followers, where the dicing and sexual passes become a quintet in which the underlying strain and artificiality of the situation are apparent (the tsar and his crony disposing

Example 6. Stretta from the act 2 quintet.

C. ma fu - reur, dans

N. oui, mon hon - neur,

E. oui, mon hon - neur,

themselves to enjoy the professional attentions of the two prostitutes, while the true love looks on helplessly). The music reflects the strain with a harmonic and rhythmic freneticism and exaggeration that almost distort the ensemble work and vocal lines, pushing the music to the edge of discordancy (ex. 6). This wrenching of formal contours is almost a mannerist response to the situation and characterization of the scene.²⁵

Another instance of startling innovation in the adaptation and transformation of convention can be seen in the treatment of the second soprano, Prascovia. In act 1 she appears initially as a stock type, a frightened yet coquettish soubrette, as she rushes in alarmed by the news that the Cossacks are coming. Her almost formalized fear leads into a broad and comforting quartet, the quintessence of *gemütlichkeit*, as she finds solace and reassurance in the heart of her family and friends. Later, in the duet with Catherine, her weeping motif reappears, this time subjected to comic scrutiny by Catherine, who turns the ritualized weeping into laughter; thus, by her dynamic assumption of control, Catherine changes grief and anxiety into joyful anticipation, with the weeping refrain becoming a cheery little *Ländler* in which the friendship of the two women is celebrated with all the melodic grace, rhythmic spring, and charming coloratura of the *opéra comique*. It is a piece of truly comic spirit (ex. 7). Prascovia's solo in the act 1 finale is already calmer and more purposeful, with a touching melodic melancholy that invests this bridal song with an element of gentle reflection.

The deepening of Prascovia's characterization continues in act 3 when she sings of the journey with George from Finland; the tenderness of the music is most affecting and picks up the marriage theme from act 1. The music is a comment on the disrupted romance between Catherine and Peter, and when Gritzenko has George arrested as a deserter, the counterpointing of the principal themes in the opera becomes a burlesque. The ensuing duet for Prascovia and George is an astonishingly imaginative handling of form (ex. 8). The whole piece is a mercurial rhythmic patter — an exercise in syllabic declamation, eerily

Example 7. Duet for Catherine and Prascovia, act 1.

Allegretto molto moderato

P. *dieu!*

p *cresc.* *p*

Prascovia. *(doux)*
Quin - ze grands jours, — à la bonne heu-re,

Catherine. *(doux)* *cresc.*
Quin - ze grands jours, — à la bonne heu - re, Quin-ze grands jours, à la bonne [heure]

gva *p*

Example 8. Duet for Prascovia and George, act 3.

leggiero e scherzando

P. *p* Il faut, sans bruit, il faut, sans bruit, fuir dans la nuit, il [faut]

G. *p* Il faut, sans bruit, il faut, sans bruit, fuir dans la nuit,

leggiero. *p*

prescient in its anticipation of more modern developments.²⁶ The stock lover-types of comic opera have something new to say in their situation of ironic reversal, which counterpoints and parodies the main plot. The strangely mod-

ern idiom of their commiseration is worlds away from buffo sentimentality, and it injects a stimulating tinge of irony into the comic scenario. The acerbity of the form and the sound prepare the way for the meditative transition to Catherine's great mad scene, with its sumptuous but more straightforward sound-world and extended structure. This underpins, but progressively diffuses, the semitragic situation and unfolds the kindly, sentimental, and intensely Romantic conclusion to Meyerbeer's first essay in opéra comique.

In all, *L'étoile du nord* is a densely wrought work, profuse in invention, of complex thematic and musical textures. Verve and fluency almost belie the hand of an old master who, in realizing a lifelong aspiration, provided new perspectives on a cherished and established genre. Its refined, almost precious, musical medium, flecked through with irony, is in fact subtle, if not challenging: it is a work that does not affect an obviously popolaresco appeal. After 406 performances in Paris until 1887, it disappeared from the repertoire of the Opéra-Comique. The late twentieth century saw revivals only in 1975 (at the Camden Festival) and 1996 (at the Wexford Festival). But with a new sense of rediscovery of the forgotten riches of the nineteenth-century repertoire, perhaps the time has come for its light to shine once again in the operatic firmament.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are from my new English version of Meyerbeer's diaries, appearing in four volumes from the Associated University Presses of Cranbury, N.J. (1999–).

2. For an account of the stages in the creation of the libretto, see Heinz and Gudrun Becker, "Giacomo Meyerbeers Opéra Comique *L'Etoile du Nord*: Anmerkungen zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Librettos," in *Festschrift Hubert Unverricht zum 65. Geburtstag* (Tutzing: Schneider, 1992), pp. 17–31. For a detailed account of the genesis of the libretto and composition, see Sabine Henze-Döhring, "L'Etoile du nord from Draft to Print," paper presented at the Tenth International Conference in Nineteenth-Century Music, University of Southampton, 16–19 July 1998. The process is investigated by reference to the composer's letters, observations to Scribe, diaries, and pocket calendars.

3. Meyerbeer's earliest and most extensive observations on opéra comique are recorded in the diary for 1813 (kept in the library of the Paris Opéra) separately from the rest of his *Tagebücher* and edited by Heinz Becker in

Festschrift für Rudolf Elvers (Tutzing: Schneider, 1984), pp. 29–47. The review of *Jean de Paris* is in the 2 April 1813 entry, pp. 45–46.

4. The best introduction to *Margherita d'Anjou* is by Philip Gossett, in his introduction to *Giacomo Meyerbeer: Excerpts from the Early Italian Operas (1817–1822)* (New York: Garland, 1991), pp. vii–ix, vol. 23 in the series *Italian Opera 1810–1840*. The history and analysis of *Robert le diable* in its preexistent opéra comique mode has been researched by Mark Everist in "The Name of the Rose: Meyerbeer's *Opéra Comique*, *Robert le Diable*," *Revue de Musicologie*, vol. 80, no. 2 (1994), pp. 211–50.

5. In 1831 alone, there are extensive records of Meyerbeer's visits to the Salle Favart, his reactions to Hérold's composition of *Zampa*, and his continuing desire to create an opéra comique of his own. His negotiations with Scribe for the libretto of *Le portefaix* and his early composition of substantial sections of that text are noted in his diary.

6. The Royal Opera House in Berlin was destroyed in a huge fire the night of 18–19 August 1843. Meyerbeer was asked by King

Friedrich Wilhelm IV to write a new work for the opening of the new building.

7. The brief, almost cryptic entries in Meyerbeer's *Taschenkalender* for October 1843 give the outlines of his clandestine negotiations with Scribe (see 28 October). Scribe had already come up with a scenario by 2 November. The need for strict secrecy with regard to the French librettist's authorship was emphasized: "Redern [intendant of the Berlin royal theaters] must know nothing about Scribe" (13 November). The secret contract with Scribe was signed on 25 December 1843. The most comprehensive account of the creation of *Feldlager* is by Heinz Becker in "Es ist ein ernstes Lebensgeschäft für mich": Zur Genese von Meyerbeers Preussenoper *Ein Feldlager in Schlesien*," in *Traditionen—Neuensätze: Für Anna Amalie Abert (1906–1996)*, ed. Klaus Hortschansky (Tutzing: Schneider, 1997), pp. 41–63.

8. In the opera, Vielka's prophecy of the future greatness of the House of Hohenzollern, later amplified into a series of *Traumbilder* (or tableaux vivants) depicting the glory of the dynasty, is characterized by a quasi-religious mystery and fervor that are also discernible in other propaganda employed by the former royal and imperial house, i.e., as in the sequence of mosaics in the Gedenkhalle of the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtnis Kirche in Berlin. Here the members of the dynasty are lined up in adoration of the Lamb of God, not only as worshipers but also as recipients of a divine commission to preserve and safeguard the faith. Kaiser Wilhelm II's interest in Jerusalem, his visit there, and the building of the Lutheran Church of the Holy Redeemer next to the Holy Sepulchre and of the Augusta Hospital on the Mount of Olives are other manifestations of this sense of a mystical calling and destiny evinced in the dynasty's perception of itself.

9. *Feldlager* was performed sixty-five times in Berlin until 1894; it was revived there in concert in 1984. As for the score, only a selection of three piano potpourris was published in Paris and London. A critical edition is planned as part of Ricordi's *Meyerbeer Werkausgabe*.

10. The story of a woman masquerading as a military man was not as unusual as one may think: *The Life and Adventures of Mrs. Christian Davies* (1739) was a popular account of just such a situation. The lady in question, popularly known as Mother Ross, served in disguise as a soldier and became a legend through this fictionalized biography. See also *The Female Soldier, or The Surprising Life and Adventures of Hannah Snell* (1750). Dianna Dugaw, in her introduction to the Augustan Reprint Society edition (n.d.), remarks on "the surprising . . . frequency of eighteenth-century female soldiers and sailors . . . not only in fiction but in history as well." It is interesting to note that the real Catherine, who became the mistress of Peter in 1708, was married by the tsar in 1712 following her distinguished conduct while on campaign with her husband during the wars against Sweden.

11. The model here, as in *Le prophète* and the camp scenes of Verdi's *La forza del destino*, was the vivid and disturbing picture of military life depicted by Schiller in his prologue to the Wallenstein trilogy, *Wallensteins Lager*.

12. The situation is analogous to that of act 3 of Lortzing's *Zar und Zimmermann*, where the tsar wistfully reflects on his lost youth and innocence ("Sonst spielt' ich mit Zepter, mit Krone, und Stern").

13. The topic of madness or mental delusion, treated extensively by Meyerbeer in *L'étoile du nord* and *Le pardon de Ploërmel*, should be considered in the context of the operatic tradition extending back to Handel's *Orlando* (1733), but particularly as developed in the serious operas of the early ottocento. See Mary Ann Smart, "Representations of Madness in Early Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1990) and the same author's "The Silencing of Lucia," *Cambridge Opera Journal*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1992), pp. 119–41. Meyerbeer's handling of the convention was original: "Perhaps the greatest reason for separating both *Le Pardon de Ploërmel* and *L'Etoile du Nord* from earlier, and better known, traditions is the almost complete absence of musical tropes associated with Italianate mad scenes" (Mark Everist, "'Der Lieblingswunsch meines Lebens': Contexts and

Continuity in Meyerbeer's *Opéras Comiques*," paper delivered at the Tenth International Conference on Nineteenth-Century Music, University of Bristol, 16–19 July 1998, p. 23). Halévy (in *Charles VI*, 1843) and Thomas (in *Hamlet*, 1868) also added French perspectives to this tradition.

14. Once again the operatic adaptation of an existent ballet scenario secured the worldwide fame of the story line. Much of Flotow's inspiration for *Martha* derived from his contribution to the ballet *Lady Henriette, ou La servante de Greenwich* (1844), which he had written in Paris with Bürgmüller and Deldevez to a scenario by Vernoy de Saint-Georges, with choreography by Joseph Mazilier. In the ballet Lyonell recovers his sanity through the same plot device. The work had a moderate success of thirty-nine performances.

15. While the fame of *La sonnambula* is inevitably associated with Bellini, it should be recalled that Romani's libretto is an adaptation of Scribe's 1827 ballet scenario *La sonnambule*, set to music by Hérold. This was one of the most important of the pre-Romantic ballets; by 1859 it had been performed in Paris 120 times. The dramatic theme of Amina/Thérèse awakening to happiness was thus particularly Scribe's own, although it was of course an adaptation of a larger plot motif that can be called "resolution through re- or pre-enactment."

16. See the definition provided in Margaret Drabble's *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 841–42.

17. "Scribe's contributions to the libretto, both in terms of the works themselves and in terms of his approach to the writing of them, are some of the most far-reaching in operatic history" (Patrick J. Smith, *The Tenth Muse: A Historical Study of the Opera Libretto* [London: Victor Gollancz, 1971], p. 210).

Smith's Chapter 14, "The French *Grand Opéra*," gives a useful critical survey of Scribe's achievement.

18. Cited by Harold C. Schonberg, *The Lives of the Great Composers* (1980; London: Abacus, 1991), pp. 204–5.

19. Five of Meyerbeer's seven published orchestral works were composed for events in the life of the royal family: the four *Fackeltänze* were written for weddings of royal princesses and the *Krönungsmarsch* for the 1861 coronation of King Wilhelm I in Königsberg.

20. The books for *Judith* and particularly *L'Africaine* were shelved while Meyerbeer gave himself over to the irresistible compulsion to compose *Dinorah*.

21. See the definition in Drabble, *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, p. 743.

22. See *Romanticism and the 20th Century* in the series *Man and His Music* (1957).

23. Aled Hall's assumption of this role in the 1996 Wexford Festival revival is a case in point: the tenor's insightful understanding of the comedy inherent to the character was a special feature of this production.

24. Meyerbeer completed these numbers in December 1854 for the great Bohemian tenor's assumption of this smaller part in the 1855 Dresden premiere of *Nordstern*.

25. See Sieghart Döhring, "Les oeuvres tardives de Meyerbeer," *Schweizerische Musikzeitung*, vol. 115, no. 2 (1975), pp. 57–65. See especially a discussion of the quartet with the vivandières, p. 62, "a learnedly artificial, almost abstract number, and at the same time extremely realistic with its daringly direct tone-painting in strings of rolled consonants (on rrr!). The simultaneous utilization of such extremes is eminently mannerist: the ancient theoreticians used to call such cases 'discordia concors'" [trans. Ed.].

26. The sound world reminds one of aspects of Ravel's *L'enfant et les sortilèges*.