

## AUGUSTE AND HIS CLAUQUE

By W. LORAN CROSTEN

THE IMPOSING creation known as "grand opera", which ruled the French musical stage and served as a focal point in the social life of Paris during the 1830's, is a complex structure reflecting some of the aspirations and much of the compromise of its day. It is a product of that uneasy period in French history which saw the elevation of the bourgeoisie to a commanding position in society at the same time as it brought the victory of Romanticism in art under the fiery leadership of Victor Hugo. Grand opera modeled itself upon both developments. In many ways it is truly "romantic", and deserves particular recognition as a notable effort to achieve that ideal fusion of the arts dreamed of by many Romanticists. But grand opera is more than a union of arts. It is also a marriage between business and art, and as such it is an outstanding illustration of bourgeois commercial expansion during the early years in the reign of Louis-Philippe (1830-1848).

"Sometime ago," says a character in Eugène Scribe's play *Le Mariage d'Argent* (1827), "the fine arts revolted and decided no longer to allow themselves to die of hunger."<sup>1</sup> Despite this sensible resolution, some artists no doubt still were being underfed; but it is evident that those associated with the Opéra after 1831 were among the ones least likely to suffer from malnutrition. Their lot was more secure because grand opera became the greatest public success in the history of the French lyric stage.

Much of the credit for the triumph must be given, of course, to the creative artists responsible for this style of opera: to Giacomo Meyerbeer the composer, to Eugène Scribe the librettist, and to Duponchel and Ciceri the *metteurs en scène*. Yet it is no reflection on them to say that their work might very possibly have received less acclaim were it not for the labors of

<sup>1</sup> Eugène Scribe, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Paris, 1899, I, 306 f.

the Opéra's publicity department, centering in the program of the *claque*.

In the Paris of 1830 the *claque* was as formidable as the Opéra was brilliant. It was the spark that ignited the vast charge of public approval that greeted the Meyerbeerian grand opera. More than that, the action of the *claque* was itself like a bit of grand opera—played off stage, but guided by the same principles of effect as the spectacle on the other side of the footlights.

If, like modern advertising, it was the butt of occasional jibes, the *claque* was nevertheless recognized as an absolute business necessity by all theatrical producers in Paris. In particular, it enjoyed the esteem and the continuous patronage of Dr. Louis Véron, director of the Académie Royale de Musique, i.e. the Opéra, from March 2, 1831, until August 15, 1835. He considered it unthinkable to present a work without first making the necessary arrangements for stimulating applause. Such preliminary dispositions were as much a part of the production scheme as anything that took place on the stage, and they received just as careful thought.

Véron himself ordinarily reviewed everything that went into the preparation of a work, down to the last detail. But in all matters relating to the *claque* he relied completely upon the judgment of its leader, Auguste Levasseur. The latter, whose fame in the theater was so great that he became known simply as "Auguste", gave counsel to Véron and was the intimate of most of the important singers, dancers, and composers of the time. "He lived—indeed, he could only live at the Opéra. . . . Large, robust, a veritable Hercules in size, and gifted with an extraordinary pair of hands, he was created and put into the world to be a *claqueur*."<sup>2</sup> Lest this seem to be a minor distinction, it should be mentioned that his income from that profession is estimated by his contemporaries at between twenty and thirty thousand francs a year, a figure that compares favorably with that paid the leading artists of the company.

The sum included fees from a great many sources. A *début*,

<sup>2</sup> Charles de Boigne, *Petits Mémoires de l'Opéra*, Paris, 1857, p. 86.

for instance, was usually the occasion for a contract between the artist's family or patron and Auguste, in which the charge was governed by the pretensions of the *débutant*. The première of an opera also yielded rich tributes to Auguste from the artists appearing in the new work, and the authors themselves frequently "deposited offerings on this altar to glory".<sup>3</sup> In addition, a regular impost of tickets was levied on the administration of the Opéra.

Some of Auguste's payment was in cash and some in tickets. The authors and artists contributed in both ways, while the administration paid only in tickets. Mlle. Lise Noblet, the famous dancer who created the role of Fenella in Auber's opera, *La Muette de Portici* (1828), is said to have given him something like fifty francs a performance over a period of fifteen years.<sup>4</sup> Other artists may not have paid so much, but nearly all had contracts with him, and according to Charles de Boigne, habitué and chronicler of the Opéra, all handed over to him their *billets de service* (two to six tickets per performance given to each artist).<sup>5</sup> The director, on his part, gave Auguste at least one hundred parterre tickets for a première, forty to fifty if a work previously given still required assistance, and only ten to twenty when the piece in question already had a sure audience. The lion's share of the booty was kept by Auguste; the rest he doled out to his subordinates. The tickets were then either sold or given away, the recipient in either case being obligated to join the claque and applaud at command.

The plotting of those commands was like an exercise in military strategy. Theater-goers today are probably familiar with the practice known as "papering the house" employed by many artists in the concert field, but in this country there is nothing comparable to the carefully worked out system for stimulating applause that is associated with the name of Auguste. Applause to some may be only a spontaneous demonstration of approval; or in the tradition of the American concert hall, it may be

<sup>3</sup> Louis Véron, *Mémoires d'un Bourgeois de Paris*, 1856-57, III, 325.

<sup>4</sup> De Boigne, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

merely a stereotyped social gesture which is part of an uncritical attitude towards art. To Auguste, however, it was a phenomenon subject to almost scientific control—the result of a nice calculation and distribution of effective causes in the form of persons engaged to respond appropriately at a given signal. Naturally, the amount of stimulation to be applied depended on the event and the extent of the reward.

Since his services were in constant demand, Auguste spent all of his time at the Opéra. During the day he perfected the arrangements with his assistants, consulted with the management, spoke with the artists—most of whom favored him with particular deference—and at night he took his customary post in the parterre. The sum of his formal knowledge concerning the arts was probably quite small. He was neither a lettered man nor a musician, yet he does not seem to have been a total stranger to either literature or music. Frequent attendance at the theater had developed a flair for opera which allowed him to make quite accurate guesses about the effectiveness and the possible reception of new pieces. He knew his public and he put this knowledge at the disposal of his employers. There is every reason to believe that they valued his assistance.

The initial presentation of a new work was of course the occasion when Auguste's help assumed the greatest importance. In order to formulate an intelligent plan of action he would make a careful study of the book, the music, and the *mise en scène*, and would attend rehearsals constantly. Numerous campaigns had made him an able tactician, but he always prepared long in advance, never leaving anything to chance. Finally, on the eve of the first performance, he would have a long conference with the director in the latter's office. At that time, Véron says, "We would pass in review the whole work, from the first scene to the last. I never imposed my opinions, I listened to his. He estimated, he judged everything—dance and song—according to his personal impressions."<sup>6</sup> Auguste then would trace out the program he had mapped for the gradation

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<sup>6</sup> Véron, III, 237.

of the applause, and if Véron was satisfied the preparations were considered complete.

On the day of the performance, Auguste, like a wise general, made sure that his army entered the field before the public did, since he "wanted complete freedom to put into execution his strategic plans, to dispose his advance guard, to assure the position of his reserves, and to defend the flanks and the rear of his army by hardened troops".<sup>7</sup> The public thus found itself honey-combed and surrounded by groups of claqueurs, and over all reigned Auguste, dressed for the event in conspicuous clothes of colors chosen to attract the eyes of everyone. There is no point in overestimating the intelligence of the claque as a whole, but it is clear that the duties of its leader required something more of him than a large pair of hands.

Today it might be difficult to find many apologists for the claque. In Auguste's time, however, it was not only accepted openly in all Parisian theaters, but by some people its role was even considered worthy of respect.

Théophile Gautier (1811-1872), one of the 19th century's most acute critics, upholds the claqueur as a man who

renders as much service to the public as to the administration. If he has sometimes protected mediocrity, he has often sustained a new, adventurous work, swayed a hesitant public, and silenced envy. Moreover, in delaying the failure of pieces that have necessitated much expense, he has prevented the ruin of a vast enterprise and the despair of a hundred families. He enlivens performances that without him would be dull and cold; he is the lash of the whip that makes the actor rebound and precipitates him towards success; he gives heart to the young, trembling débutant. . . . In short, the claqueur represents the thoughtfulness of the director for the public that one supposes to be too genteel and well-gloved to applaud by itself.<sup>8</sup>

In the opinion of Véron, too, the mission of his paid applauders was varied and decidedly beneficent. They were "to come to the succor of the weaker and to defend them against the stronger; to give an example of politeness and good conduct, and to stop by all means the unjust coalitions against the artists

<sup>7</sup> Véron, III, 236.

<sup>8</sup> Théophile Gautier, *Histoire de l'Art Dramatique en France*, Paris, 1858, I, 192 f.

on the stage or against the works presented".<sup>9</sup> The claque thus was to be both a model of decorum and an institutional watchdog.

Véron's statement is enlightening provided we discount on his part any philanthropic zeal or intention. He used the claque because he thought it profitable. He undoubtedly wanted his audiences to be well-mannered, but not merely for their own good. His interest in the public's deportment was motivated by a realization that cabals in the theater can very easily wreck even the best-laid plans of a director. Theatrical feuds and public disturbances over the relative merits of artists or compositions perhaps indicate a lively concern with art, but they are not always an aid to the box office. Véron, whose object, as he says, was to make the Opéra the Versailles of the bourgeoisie,<sup>10</sup> saw clearly that to do this he could not afford the dubious luxury of allowing his theater to become a battleground. For that reason, full use was made of the claque and every precaution was taken to reduce to a minimum the hazard of a militantly divided audience.

To the makers of grand opera the public was a prospective friend and customer to be flattered and wooed rather than warred upon; while to the Romanticists of the drama it was an enemy to be shelled, then taken by storm. Read, for instance, Gautier's account of the opening night of Hugo's *Hernani* (February 25, 1830). The services of the professional claque were obstinately refused by Hugo on the ground that the members were Classicists at heart with a taste for writers like Casimir Delavigne (1793-1843) and Scribe. And in their place, small squads of disciples were posted in the theater, each man carrying as a pass a square of red paper with the word "Hierro" inscribed upon it. Concerning the rest of the house, Gautier says that one needed only to cast a glance at the public to see that this was no ordinary performance; that two systems, two parties, two armies, two civilizations, were facing each other

<sup>9</sup> Véron, III, 240.

<sup>10</sup> Véron, III, 104.

filled with mutual hatred of the intense literary kind, ready to come to blows and longing for a fight.<sup>11</sup>

Open hostilities of that kind were welcomed by the young warriors of Romanticism, but were not at all to the taste of the director of the Opéra. In Véron's theater whatever smacked of partisan bitterness was shunned like the plague. It was not only pleasanter but much better business to run a middle-of-the-road course designed to please as many and offend as few people as possible. He himself sedulously avoided expressing publicly such opinions as might reflect on any composer, and to the best of his ability he attempted to keep the opera house free of acrimonious debate. Hence he felt it eminently desirable to ease the way of his productions by dealing bountifully with the claque. Acting on the ancient principle that nothing succeeds like success, Véron went to great lengths to surround his administration with an air of affluence and invincibility. In his four and a half years at the Académie Royale de Musique he brought out only two operas that deserved to be called "triumphs": Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* in 1831 and Halévy's *La Juive* in 1835. Yet everything was treated as a victory, and the leading celebrant was Auguste.

Only twice between 1672 and 1835 was a director of the Opéra fortunate and clever enough to gain the unconditional ratification of his program by the public, and only twice did he complete his term of office with a profit. Lully accomplished the feat at the beginning of that 160-year period and Véron duplicated it at the end. Lully, of course, was prompted by a desire to further his own career in composition as well as to make money. Véron was simply a business man with no artistic pretensions or aspirations. He founded the *Revue de Paris* in 1829 because the moment seemed to him propitious for making a profit out of literature,<sup>12</sup> and he later turned to the theater because "the project of rendering the Opéra at once brilliant and popular appeared to me to have a fine chance of success after

<sup>11</sup> Théophile Gautier, *Histoire de Romantisme*, Paris, 1895, p. 113.

<sup>12</sup> Véron, III, 43.

the Revolution of July".<sup>13</sup> There is no reason to doubt de Boigne, who knew him and his achievements well, when he says that the dominating feeling in Véron's life was the love of money.<sup>14</sup>

As director of the Académie at the time when the bourgeois government of Louis-Philippe had just decided to make the manager of that institution financially responsible for any losses incurred, Véron made it his primary object to transform the Académie into a sound business concern. That meant operating the theater in the same manner as any other commercial establishment. He had a commodity for sale and he needed to use every means at his disposal to secure its acceptance by the public. He fêted the journalists; he cultivated the rich bourgeoisie who from 1831 "took up their residence at the Opéra";<sup>15</sup> he opened the backstage of the theater to its devotees; and for the crowning effort in the program to insure a proper reception for his offerings he turned to the *claque*.

Judging from all the energy devoted to its conquest, one might think the opera public was a veritable redoubt of antagonism. Auguste, however, could hardly have asked for a more numerous audience or for one more susceptible to his ministrations. Those who attended opera performances in 1831 were, as usual, mostly people from the upper classes of society; but with the rise of the bourgeois class to high places in government and business under the July monarchy, the opera audiences took on a less aristocratic hue than previously. Since the nobility had transferred its affections to the Théâtre-Italien, the bourgeois element easily predominated at the Académie. Its members understood Véron and he, being of the same class and with much the same kind of taste, knew how to please them. One may judge the extent of their satisfaction by the following passage which appeared in *La Revue des Deux Mondes*: "In Paris one's mind is on either politics or the opera . . . the Assembly echoes with threats and complaints; a thousand sinister prophecies disturb the air: all that is fine for the day. Night comes

<sup>13</sup> Véron, III, 105.

<sup>14</sup> De Boigne, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Véron, V, 320.

and one thinks no more of such things. Behold! the crowd rushes to the Opéra.”<sup>16</sup>

The opera public's size, however, was not matched by its sophistication. Operatic esthetics were of as little concern to it as to Véron himself. Brought up on vaudeville, melodrama, and the elaborate spectacles that had been popular on the boulevards since early in the century, this audience “was not interested in art for art's sake. It wanted to be distracted, to be made to forget budgets and bankruptcies. In short, it wanted to be amused; and was ready with its praise and its money for whoever could satisfy that desire.”<sup>17</sup> It was, on the whole, an audience whose acquaintance with the arts was neither long nor profound. Its favorite playwright was Eugène Scribe, the inexhaustible portrayer of bourgeois manners in the 19th century. Théodore de Banville observes that its taste in poetry ran to the sentimental romance, while in the graphic arts the colored lithograph was preferred. In opera, likewise, it showed small interest in the classic French traditions with their insistence upon finely molded musical declamation, and almost as little respect for the great 18th-century Italian style. Mozart was quite generally admired by French Romantic authors, but was largely ignored by the public. When his works were performed they obtained only the innocuous *succès d'estime*. Even Rossini, the last of the classic Italian line, who in the late 1820's appeared as the “uncontested master of the lyric stages,”<sup>18</sup> found himself superseded at the Opéra by the new bourgeois god: Meyerbeer.

There were critics, like Castil-Blaze, the busy champion and arranger of Mozart, Weber, and Rossini, who castigated their contemporaries for being able to judge music only “by the décors, the costumes, the richly ornamented quadrupeds, the velvet, and the satin, . . . and all the luxury of the *mise en scène*.”<sup>19</sup> In Véron's theater, however, the luxury trade was

<sup>16</sup> *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, 1831, IV, 113.

<sup>17</sup> *La Revue de Paris*, June 1831, p. 251.

<sup>18</sup> Albert Soubies, *Le Théâtre-Italien de 1808-1913*, Paris, 1913, p. 18.

<sup>19</sup> Castil-Blaze (François H. Joseph Blaze), *Les Théâtres-lyriques de Paris*, Paris, 1855, II, 227.

sought and catered to, for, in the opinion of the director, he would have failed in his mission had he not presented spectacles worthy of this vast house “which employed an orchestra of more than eighty musicians, a chorus of nearly eighty members—male and female—, eighty supernumeraries without counting the children, and a crew of sixty machinists to handle the scenery”.<sup>20</sup>

The fact that the audiences were so untutored in matters of art undoubtedly made them more amenable to the organized persuasion of Auguste. One should not assume, however, that his presence alone was always enough to guarantee the full success of a work. Even he, with all his minions, could not save Cherubini’s *Ali-Baba* in 1833, any more than he was able to make Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* a popular favorite in 1834. Public taste for the romantic, pseudo-historical operas in the Meyerbeer-Scribe idiom was far too strong at the moment to be sidetracked by any other style, however eminent. Auguste, though, could and did render complete failure less likely or at least less noticeable. By escorting each production with his band of hired applauders he lent a measure of security to the performers, and if necessary, cushioned the effect of any public apathy or disapproval of them or of the work itself.

The system observed in the use of the claque is a perfect reflection of the completely professional and utilitarian attitude that governed the creation and production of Parisian grand opera. This or that was done for only one reason: to increase the drawing power of the piece at hand. High artistic ideals were by no means abandoned, but no time was lost quibbling over the faint line that often separates the legitimate from the meretricious effect. The same careful balancing of means and intentions that Auguste and Véron depended upon in regard to the disposition of claqueurs may be observed everywhere in the productions. The claque was no more guilty of indiscriminate noise-making than Scribe was of heedlessly piling scene upon scene or than Meyerbeer was of tossing his musical re-

<sup>20</sup> Véron, III, 181 f.

sources about at random. Their actions, just as those of Auguste, were based upon a clear, practical knowledge of theatrical effect coupled with an understanding of current public taste and a willingness to accede to its demands.

The total result is a professionalism whose outlines become even more distinct if grand opera is compared for a moment with the Romantic drama of Victor Hugo. The poet's works were reinforced by principles formulated in the *cénacle*, reared in an atmosphere of youthful radicalism, and expounded in numerous prefaces. Grand opera, on the other hand, had little or no expressed theory. It had its origin, so to speak, in the marketplace, under the influence of no single code of esthetics but alive to any ideas that had strength to gain currency in the world at large. Lacking the support of a literary or musical coterie, this opera was as sensitive to public opinion and almost as dependent upon popular support as any melodrama of the boulevard.

From the beginning, therefore, the claque had an integral part in Véron's campaign to cement the position of the Opéra as a commercial asset both to himself and to the government. And as a part of the enterprise, the value of Auguste's contribution may be fairly measured by the success of the whole.

That, we know, was sensational. Awakening out of a twenty-year period of doldrums extending from the date of Spontini's *La Vestale* (1807) to the presentation of Rossini's *Le Siège de Corinthe* in 1826, the Opéra once again asserted itself as the official seat of French musical life. Paris, which gave only meager support to lieder, chamber music, or the symphony, lavished its patronage on the lyric stage. There, states Joseph d'Ortigue, "were concentrated all the interests of art".<sup>21</sup> In any case, we find there the commercial center of music—not just for Paris, but for Europe.

As the Opéra regained its reputation it extended naturally the geographical range of its influence. Musicians of talent from all over the Continent turned more and more to Paris for recog-

<sup>21</sup> Joseph d'Ortigue, *Le Balcon de l'Opéra*, Paris, 1833, p. 164.

dition and fortune and less to Vienna or Dresden or Milan. Thanks to the happy collaboration of Scribe and Meyerbeer, who furnished the definitive example of the grand opera style with *Robert le Diable*, and to Véron's unusual ability as a business executive and promoter, Paris found itself in the early 1830's well on the way towards becoming the acknowledged world-capital of opera—a place whose favor was later sought even by Wagner.

Judged by business standards, which are the only ones Véron professed to follow, his tactics, including his consistent and generous use of the claque, were amply justified by their reward at the box office. He amassed a small fortune, his associates also reaped a harvest, and the government gained reflected glory from the immense prestige of the Opéra. No one person in that organization is entirely responsible for its success, although much credit must go, of course, to the director himself. Working on the highest level of policy, he was the guiding spirit of the enterprise and in many ways is a key figure in the whole picture of bourgeois grand opera. Nevertheless, his own fortune was dependent ultimately upon the effective work done by the lower echelons, in which is included the claque. The latter, under the seasoned leadership of Auguste, not only became, as it were, a trademark of the Opéra—an accepted accompaniment to each performance—, but it earned very early a place as one of the producer's most valued aids. In Auguste one sees a picturesque figure whose name was a byword in French theatrical circles and whose trade in claqueurs is a vivid demonstration of the practical, utilitarian spirit, the professional manner, and the shrewd estimate of effect that characterize French grand opera and made it the most brilliant spectacle of its time.