

Race and Identity

Appraisals in France of Meyerbeer on his 1891 Centenary

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Abstract

This article examines the ways in which critics and music historians in the Third Republic wrote about Meyerbeer's national and racial identity focusing particularly on the period around the time of the centenary of his birth, the period just before the explosion of the Dreyfus affair. The centenary of Meyerbeer's birth was celebrated in November 1891, by a performance to a packed audience at the Paris Opéra. Critics marked the centenary by writing substantial articles about Meyerbeer.

Although many of Meyerbeer's contemporary critics conferred honorary French citizenship on him, by 1891 a significant number saw him as lacking any national identity. This should be seen in the context of a period in which French composers were intensely debating the issue of their own national identity, and clearly since the Franco-Prussian war, they were no longer so complacent about welcoming a German as a Frenchman. Yet the perceptions of Meyerbeer's lack of national identity were also often motivated by negative associations of Meyerbeer as Jew.

Derogatory stereotypes of the Jewish composer are present in Meyerbeer criticism from the July Monarchy onwards, but in the early days of the Third Republic they change slightly in focus and also, as might be expected, become more overtly stated. This article presents a brief overview of this change in focus and concentrates on a number of discrete topics: eclecticism, nationhood, originality and artistic capitulation. The examination of this last topic leads to a short discussion of the impact of Wagner on the musical world at this time, and the effect that this had on Meyerbeer reception. The centenary celebrations occurred only two months after the success of *Lohengrin* at the Opéra (16 September 1891) and the proximity of the two events caused many critics to ponder whether the celebrations marked the end of Meyerbeer's reign at the Opéra and the beginning of the reign of Wagner. The centenary event forced critics to take a position on Meyerbeer's current standing in the operatic world.

In November 1891, to celebrate the centenary of the birth of Giacomo Meyerbeer, the most popular nineteenth-century composer of opera in France, a concert was held at the Paris Opéra to a packed audience that included the

'tout Paris' of opera premieres, the President of the Republic,¹ and members of Meyerbeer's family. Articles in the press² anticipating the event commented on the fairly arbitrary date set for the celebration, since Meyerbeer's actual birthday was in September.³ There was, however, some understanding why a September date was rejected, since no one 'who counted' would have been in town. Originally, the programme was to be the fourth acts of all of Meyerbeer's operas written for the Paris Opéra.⁴ However, because of understandable difficulties with scenery and costume changes, the consent of Meyerbeer's nephew was sought⁵ to modify the programme to the following items, the performance of which must nevertheless still have presented serious difficulties:

Programme: Le Centenaire de Meyerbeer 15 Novembre 1891⁶

Ouverture *Struensée*

1^{ère} acte *L'Africaine*

4^{ième} acte; 2^{ième} tableau *Le Prophète*

Prélude 5^{ième} acte *L'Africaine*: 'Meyerbeer' poésie de Jules Barbier dite par M. Mouney-Sully

3^{ième} acte, 2^{ième} tableau *Robert le Diable*

4^{ième} acte *Les Huguenots*.

The fourth act of *Les Huguenots* included a novelty, a few pages that had been censored by Thiers at the premiere and never performed in Paris; this was the appearance on stage of Catherine de Médicis during the massacre of the Huguenots. The evening finished at half-past twelve and was followed by a supper for the artists hosted by the opera administration.⁷

It is very difficult to get much of a sense of the quality of performance that night because hardly anyone reviewed it.⁸ Not, as one might think, because no

¹ According to Frimousse, 'La Soirée parisienne', *Le Gaulois*, 15 Nov. 1891, the President was there with all his family and 'on a beaucoup applaudi dans la loge présidentielle'.

² The following journals and newspapers have been used in this article; many others were also consulted but did not contain enough information to be used: *L'Art musical*, *L'Echo de Paris*, *L'Eclair*, *L'Événement*, *L'Estafette*, *Le Figaro*, *Le Gaulois*, *Gil Blas*, *L'Intransigeant*, *Le Jour*, *Le Journal des débats*, *La Liberté*, *Le Ménestrel*, *Le Moniteur universel*, *La Patrie*, *Le Petit Parisien*, *Le Petit Journal*, *Le Rappel*, *La Revue blanche*, *Revue des deux mondes*, *Revue de Paris*, *Le Temps*. Reviews contained in the Dossier d'artiste (Meyerbeer) at the Bibliothèque nationale (Opéra) were also used. My thanks to Clair Rowden for help in locating these reviews.

³ Many critics both before and after the event expressed surprise that 14 November rather than 21 November was chosen, as 21 November was the sixtieth anniversary of Meyerbeer's first Parisian success, *Robert le Diable*, that work being, as Charles Darcours (pseudonym for Charles Réty) claimed, the true birth of Meyerbeer in France, *Le Figaro*, 14 Nov. 1891.

⁴ Mentioned in *Le Ménestrel*, 1 Nov. 1891.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Programme given in many papers. This version is from *L'Événement*, 15 Nov. 1891.

⁷ Frimousse, *Le Gaulois*, 15 Nov. 1891.

⁸ There were some exceptions. The critic for *L'Eclair* (unsigned), for instance, makes a point of giving a brief account of the evening saying that despite being left standing at

reviewers were interested in attending, in fact many did attend, but because the Opéra directors, Ritt and Gailhard, neglected to send invitations to the press. As an outraged M. de Thémènes writes in *La Patrie*, 'the Parisian press learned with stupefaction that the Opéra was planning to celebrate Meyerbeer's centenary behind closed doors, that is to say, with the exclusion of the said Parisian press'.⁹ Members of the press retaliated by largely ignoring the event. While they refused to review the event, they nevertheless marked the centenary by writing substantial articles about Meyerbeer in which many took the opportunity to make swipes at the opera administration.

Why was the press not invited? Many put it down simply to a cost-saving exercise. By not giving out free tickets to the admittedly extremely numerous press, the Opéra could make a greater profit. Moreover since Ritt and Gailhard were coming to the end of their term of office they no longer needed to curry favour with the press. As the Meyerbeer centenary was a 'one-off' affair with a guaranteed audience, the administration was not reliant on critical approbation to attract audiences to a continuing season, and as the critic for *L'Eclair* put it, 'Meyerbeer no longer ha[d] any need for publicity'.¹⁰ This approach was a cynical one, to say the least.

The programme included a poem by the librettist Jules Barbier that was read on the evening by M. Mouney-Sully to a muted orchestral accompaniment from *L'Africaine*, and during which a bust of Meyerbeer by the sculptor Paul Fournier was crowned with a laurel wreath.¹¹ Also present during the ceremonial crowning were many of the singers who had created the principal roles in Meyerbeer's operas in the past, some in the costumes of their former roles, some in black and some in evening dress.¹²

Barbier's poem is laden with grand rhetorical gestures making extravagant claims for Meyerbeer's power. For instance he describes the 'Master's voice' as a voice which 'sings, hovers and rocks, like a call made from God to

the door without a ticket, he put his role as 'man of the world' (homme du monde), as specified by the code of 'civilized men', before that of journalist, and wrote a review, 16 Nov. 1891, 2.

⁹ 'La presse parisienne apprendra ... avec une certaine stupeur que l'Opéra compte célébrer le centenaire de Meyerbeer à huis-clos, c'est-à-dire avec exclusion de la susdite presse parisienne'. M. de Thémènes [Achille de Lauzières], *La Patrie*, 16 Nov. 1891, 2. Thémènes is actually quoting a note written by one of his colleagues. Most newspapers refer to the press not receiving an invitation.

¹⁰ 'Meyerbeer n'avait plus besoin de réclame', *L'Eclair*, 16 Nov. 1891, 2.

¹¹ Mentioned in *L'Echo de Paris*, 14 Nov. 1891. According to the review in *Le Gaulois*, 15 Nov. 1891, signed 'Frimousse' they did not have a new bust made but resurrected an old one that was found in the back rooms of the editor Maquet. I have not been able to find out what happened to the bust. It is similar to the one that adorns the Palais Garnier although with a slightly more severe expression. (See Fig. 1, from *Le Monde illustré*.) There appears to have been a number of photographic prints made of it, some of which are currently available for sale on the internet.

¹² See *L'Eclair*, 16 Nov. 1891, 2. The list of singers who were invited is given in *La Patrie*, 15 Nov. 1891: Mmes Viardot, Marie Sasse, Krauss, Carvalho, Dorus-Gras, Battu, Poinsot, Mauduit, Issac, Dufrane, Pleux; MM Duprez, Faure, Obin, Boudouresque, Villaret, Warot, Bosquin, Giraudet Caron. Faure was too sick to attend and no doubt others as well were not present. Unfortunately the press contains very little information about who was there on the evening because of their deliberate policy of not reviewing something to which they had not been invited.



M. Caron. M. Deschamps. M. Mounet-Sully. M. Duprez. M. Adry. M. Méhul. M. Renaud.

LE CENTENAIRE DE MEYERBEER A L'OPERA, LE 14 NOVEMBRE 1881. — M. MOUNET-SULLY LISANT

LES VERTS DE M. JULES BARBIER. — (D'après nature, par M. ZIEB.)

Fig. 1 An artist's impression of the event published in *Le Monde illustré*, Nov. 1881, 325

humanity'.¹³ There is even a brief and extremely forced topical reference to the Franco-Russian alliance where Meyerbeer's all-embracing art is seen also as extending a gold thread from Russia to France. The meaning of this allusion is not immediately obvious, but it is possibly a reference to the large number of Russians, either resident in Paris for long periods or passing through on springtime trips to the Côte d'Azur, who attended the Opéra during this period. According to André Spies they formed part of the conservative audience that ensured the continuation of Meyerbeer in the repertoire.¹⁴

The panegyrics are perhaps to be expected. Yet there is one particular verse in the poem that deserves closer investigation. It reads as follows:

Art has no country, it is true, but perhaps
 A country has its own inescapable art, o master!
 Ours, blooming with grace and clarity,
 Conquered your soul, and you, mastering that which had mastered you,
 Transformed it without taking its own life from it,
 Applying its force to the service of your own
 With your genius, you were able to ennoble the new art
 That transfused French blood into your body.
 France incubated your glory under its wing
 And returned the love with which you burned for her.

Thus, as a man with an honest heart you wished to repay
 in masterworks the price of your mother's milk.¹⁵

This verse raises the issue which is present in all French writings on Meyerbeer from the mid-1830s onwards, that of Meyerbeer's national identity. It is an issue that very often becomes enmeshed with perceptions of Meyerbeer as Jew.

During the first decade of the performance history of Meyerbeer's French operas, very few critics actually mention the fact that he is Jewish, though critics constantly claim that Meyerbeer's operas combined the national charac-

¹³ 'La voix du maître chante, et plane, et se balance, Comme un appel que Dieu fait à l'humanité!' Quoted in H. Moreno, 'Revue théâtrale', *Le Ménestrel*, 15 Nov. 1891, 363.

¹⁴ Spies claims that when the direct St Petersburg-Nice train line was put in just before the turn of the century there was a noticeable drop in audience attendance at the opera. André Spies, *Opera, State, and Society in the Third Republic, 1875-1914* (New York, 1998), 79.

¹⁵ 'L'art n'a pas de patrie, il est vrai; mais peut-être
 La patrie a son art inéluctable, ô maître!
 Le nôtre, éblouissant de grâce et de clarté,
 Conquit ton âme; et toi, domptant qui t'a dompté,
 Le transformant sans lui ravir sa propre vie,
 T'appuyant de sa force à la tienne asservie,
 Tu fis à ton génie agrandir l'art nouveau,
 Qui transfusait le sang français dans ton cerveau;
 Et la France a couvé ta gloire sous son aile
 Et t'a rendu l'amour dont tu brûlas pour elle.

Aussi, cœur d'honnête homme, as-tu voulu payer
 En chefs-d'œuvre le prix de son lait nourricier'.

Quoted in *Le Ménestrel*, 15 Nov. 1891, 362.

teristics of three countries, Germany, Italy and France.¹⁶ This thesis is elaborated in a number of ways.¹⁷ For some, Meyerbeer wrote German music in Germany, Italian music in Italy and then French music in France. However, for others, French music was seen positively as a fusion of the best characteristics of German and Italian music!

Many critics praise this eclectic merging of styles and regard it as having definite artistic value. On the other hand, others were less positive about Meyerbeer's eclecticism, claiming that Meyerbeer's mixing of various national styles demonstrated a lack of national roots. As Gustave Planche comments: '[Meyerbeer] decided to borrow elements of all dynasties from their coats of arms; his plan was realized ... But his coat of arms belongs to all races. He forcefully ennobled himself but he forgot only one thing, to give himself any ancestors.'¹⁸ Planche also parallels the lack of a musical 'home-base' and the lack of any original style, which resulted in Meyerbeer's need to borrow from others.¹⁹

It is also interesting in these reviews that while many talk of 'national styles' in Meyerbeer's music, his own national identity remains vague; he is said to be of German origin, but no longer really German. Many critics, however, came to regard him as a sort of 'honorary Frenchman'.²⁰ A common trope that emerges in critical writings from mid-century is the image of Meyerbeer arriving in France as an empty vessel, looking for direction. The French spirit, the French nation, gives him the direction his music requires, and at the same time he acquires a quasi-national identity. He repays this debt to the French with his four French masterworks.

To give an example of this attitude, Pierre Scudo, musing about Meyerbeer in 1850, comments that the best thing about the French spirit is its 'impartiality, this elevated eclecticism that accepts and appropriates all that is beautiful, without worrying too much about where it has come from. Isn't it in fact an honour for us that such men [as Meyerbeer] consent also to speak our language and that they aspire to receive from our taste and from our fairness the supreme sanction of their genius?'²¹ Charles-Ernest Beulé also provides very clear

¹⁶ See for instance D'Ortigue's review in *Revue de Paris*, 33 (1831), L. Desnoyers's review in *Le National*, 15 Mar. 1836, and Fétis's review in *Le Temps*, 5 Mar. 1836.

¹⁷ The following paragraphs are a summary of information presented in my article 'Berlioz, Judaism and French Music Criticism of the 1830s', in *Berlioz: Past, Present, Future*, ed. Peter Bloom (New York, 2003), 90–103.

¹⁸ '[Meyerbeer] s'est proposé d'emprunter à toutes les dynasties quelque trait de leurs armoiries; son dessein est réalisé, il a battu monnaie; mais son blason appartient à toutes les races. Il s'est anobli violemment et n'a oublié qu'une chose, de se donner des ancêtres'. Planche, *Chronique de Paris*, 28 Feb. 1836, 253.

¹⁹ See my article 'Berlioz, Judaism and French Music Criticism of the 1830s' for further discussion of this.

²⁰ This designation is not always clear-cut. Pougin, for instance, in his book *Meyerbeer* (Paris, 1864), although stating that Meyerbeer 'est maintenant Français, de par tous les chefs-d'œuvre qu'il nous a laissés' (p. 44), also in a brief appendix places Meyerbeer in 'la tradition de l'Allemagne musicale' (p. 45).

²¹ 'son impartialité, cet éclectisme élevé qui accepte et s'approprie tout ce qui est beau, sans s'inquiéter du lieu qui l'a produit. N'est-ce pas un assez grand honneur pour nous que de tels hommes consentent à parler notre langue et qu'ils aspirent à recevoir de notre goût et de notre équité la sanction suprême de leur génie'. Paul Scudo, *Critiques et littérature musicales* (Paris, 1850), 310.

instances of the way this argument presents itself, in these two examples of criticism, the first written after Meyerbeer's death in the 1860s and the second later in the early 1870s: 'One could say that France created his talent and revealed Meyerbeer to himself. ... [we are] justly proud of having conquered him.'²² And 'when [Meyerbeer] came to Paris, he saw the Opéra, he felt himself growing wings, he drew water from the sources of French genius ... he understood what force he was going to have at his disposal, and he let himself be taken by this force, even beyond himself ... After writing *Les Huguenots* and *Robert* he understood that "he was, despite himself, subject, vassal, tributary, something conquered, but calling himself a French genius!"'²³

Many critics express variations of this view. The tone of condescension is typically quite striking; it is as though Meyerbeer's success were created by a force outside himself and that he had no identity until he came to France. The poem by Barbier read at the centenary celebrations is obviously in the same vein, with its reference to French blood transfusions and mother's milk.

Of course, it should be acknowledged that France has a long tradition of adopting non-native composers as its own, starting with the Italian-born Lully. M. Beulé, in the *Eloge* quoted above, describes Paris as an eclectic city that welcomes all skilfully written music, citing in particular the works of Gluck, Piccini, Rossini and Weber.²⁴ The case of Meyerbeer seems to be different, however, because of the suggestion that the French actually *created* his genius.

During the early Third Republic the portrayal of Meyerbeer as 'honorary Frenchman' and writer of French music continues with some critics. For instance 'Ch. G.', writing in *L'Art musical*, in reference to Meyerbeer's fading glory, cautions colleagues not 'to burn down the paternal home just because its architecture is no longer in fashion'.²⁵ Albert Wolff writing for *Le Figaro* also states: 'One could thus say of Meyerbeer that France was his artistic homeland, that which gave him glory in exchange for his genius. Germany can be proud to have witnessed the birth of Meyerbeer but Paris has the right to show its pride at having produced him.'²⁶

Yet alongside this we also begin to find references to Meyerbeer as a musician 'with no precise nationality' and such statements as: 'If Weber is German, Rossini Italian, Auber French, it is impossible to say what Meyerbeer is.'²⁷ The important thing to note here is the claim that Meyerbeer's music now lacks nationality.

²² 'On peut dire que la France a créé ce talent, et qu'elle a révélé Meyerbeer à lui-même (p. 3) ... justement fiers de l'avoir conquis' (p. 25), *Eloge de Meyerbeer* (Paris, 1865).

²³ 'Mais quand il [Meyerbeer] est venu à Paris, il a vu l'Opéra, il s'est senti pousser les ailes, il s'est abreuvé aux sources du génie français ... il a compris de quelle force il allait disposer, et il s'est laissé emporter par cette force au-dessus de lui-même' ... 'il était, malgré lui, sujet, vassal, tributaire, chose conquise, mais s'appelait un génie français'. Charles-Ernest Beulé, *L'Opéra et le drame lyrique* (Paris, 1872), 12–13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁵ 'Faut-il brûler la paternelle maison parce que son architecture n'est plus de style?' Ch. G., 'Le Centenaire de Meyerbeer', *L'Art musical*, 22, 30 Nov. 1891, 170.

²⁶ 'On peut donc dire de Meyerbeer que la France fut sa patrie artistique, celle qui lui donna la gloire en échange de son génie; L'Allemagne peut être fière d'avoir vu naître Meyerbeer, mais Paris a le droit de se montrer orgueilleux de l'avoir produit', *Le Figaro*, 14 June 1891.

²⁷ 'sans nationalité précise'; 'Si Weber est Allemand, Rossini Italien, Auber Français, il est impossible de dire ce qu'est Meyerbeer'. André Corneau, *Le Jour*, 16 Nov. 1891, 2.

Allied to this, opinions on the value of eclecticism begin to change too. As already said, from the first days of his Paris operas, one occasionally finds negative references to Meyerbeer's eclecticism. But in the Third Republic they become common. In an article in the *Echo de Paris* of 1891, the critic asked a number of prominent composers about their opinion of Meyerbeer and his influence. He quotes Vincent d'Indy as saying: 'Eclecticism is condemnable and pernicious; Meyerbeer was a great eclectic.'²⁸ D'Indy, of course, would develop this claim at some length in his *Schola Cantorum* lectures in the late 1890s. Slightly later, in the early twentieth century, Paul Landormy begins his book *La Musique française* by discussing the bad days when 'French music was invaded by Italianism and eclecticism, by Rossini and Meyerbeer'.²⁹ The juxtaposition is telling, referring to Rossini's 'Italianism' and Meyerbeer's 'eclecticism', implying once again that Meyerbeer has no nationality – there is a link between the two.

One could argue that, whether consciously or not, these writers in their reference to lack of nationality are referring to the common perception in the nineteenth century of the Jewish race as being 'nation-less'. It can be linked to the image of the 'wandering Jew', *juif errant*, which was widely used as a symbol in French literature and art during the July Monarchy and Second Empire. This image was not always used negatively but often it 'embodied the threat that the Jew posed as rootless nomad [who] might overrun and plunder another's land'.³⁰ Of course, in the Third Republic, the *juif errant* was not just a literary image, but for many took on a concrete reality, as people experienced the exodus of Jews from Alsace-Lorraine in the 1870s and the influx of Eastern European Jews into Paris after the Russian pogroms of the 1880s.

So although many of Meyerbeer's contemporary critics conferred honorary French citizenship on him, by 1891, a significant number saw him as lacking any national identity.³¹ This should also be seen in the context of a period in which French composers were intensely debating the issue of their own national identity, promoting the composition and performance of native French music. And clearly since the Franco-Prussian war, the French were no longer so complacent about welcoming a German as a Frenchman.

In the article from the *Echo de Paris* quoted above, where the author carries out a series of interviews with composers, the composer Henri Quittard, when asked what he felt to be Meyerbeer's influence, states: 'Meyerbeer never had any influence or imitators ... One can only imitate something that exists. One can imitate, or even copy, Gluck, Wagner or Rossini ... because they have a unity, an expressive force that co-ordinates all the separate parts of their work ... Meyerbeer had no original ideas and never knew how to create his own

²⁸ 'L'éclecticism est, à mon sens, condamnable et pernicieux; Meyerbeer fut un grand éclectique'. J. D', *Echo de Paris*, 15 Nov. 1891.

²⁹ 'la musique de France était envahie par l'italianisme et par l'éclecticism, par Rossini et par Meyerbeer' (Paris, 1910), 1.

³⁰ Mentioned in Gale B. Murray, 'Toulouse Lautrec and French Anti-Semitism', *The Jew in the Text: Modernity and the Construction of Identity*, ed. and intro. Linda Nochlin and Tamar Garb (London, 1995), 72.

³¹ One can find various permutations of this, however. For instance the critic 'Jean sans terre' writing for *Le Petit Journal*, 17 Nov. 1891, in a review which contrasts Meyerbeer favourably with Wagner, concludes that in the final analysis their works belong to humanity, not to a nation: 'one doesn't ask a bird where he comes from, but what he can sing', 'Ne pas demander à l'oiseau d'où il vient mais ce qu'il chante'.

style.³² One of the other common racial stereotypes of the Jewish artist to be found all throughout Meyerbeer criticism is the perceived inability of Jews to be truly creative or inspired.³³ As is well known, this topic was developed by Wagner in his *Das Judentum in der Musik* (1868) and later reproduced approvingly by d'Indy in his *Cours de composition*: 'The Jew can only repeat and imitate, he can never create.'³⁴ In the criticism from the Third Republic, Meyerbeer's perceived lack of creativity becomes supplanted by, and at times also linked to, the argument that he had no artistic integrity and was interested only in money. Meyerbeer's wealth had always been the cause for comment although, earlier on, open references linking it to his Jewishness are not so common and where they occur often exonerate him from the perceived failings of his race. For instance, in 1858, E. de Mirecourt, while openly discussing Meyerbeer's Jewishness (and also revealing the same prejudices as the later critics), claimed that Meyerbeer rose above his racial origins: 'Meyerbeer is of Jewish origin. He has none of the numerous faults of his race ... his original instincts that he was born with draw him to money, to the accumulation of wealth: he tamed his instincts, he has set an example of disinterest.'³⁵ Some years later Charles-Ernest Beulé, in his *Eloge* of 1865, also describes Meyerbeer's attitude to monetary gain in these terms: 'wealth, which for others would have been a danger, was never even a temptation for him'. Beulé compares Meyerbeer to a Benedictine monk.³⁶

The issue of 'money' is raised in one way or another in nearly all articles concerning the centenary.³⁷ One influential article by Charles Darcours in *Le Figaro* provided some statistics on Meyerbeer performances that were widely quoted by other critics at the time. Darcours states that since the premiere of *Robert le Diable*, Meyerbeer's operas had averaged 42 performances a year, and more astonishingly brought sums averaging 29–30 million francs a year to the Opéra administration.³⁸ These figures obviously impressed. Most of the short

³² 'Meyerbeer n'a eu d'élèves ni d'imitateurs. ... On ne peut imiter que ce qui existe. On pourra imiter, copier même, Gluck, Wagner ou Rossini ... parce qu'il y a chez eux une unité, une force expressive qui coordonne toutes les parties de l'œuvre'. 'J. D', *Echo de Paris*, 15 Nov. 1891.

³³ This is also discussed in my article 'Berlioz, Judaism and French Music Criticism of the 1830s', 92–6.

³⁴ 'Le Juif ne peut que répéter et imiter, il ne peut pas créer', *Cours de composition musicale*, vol. 3, ed. Guy de Lioncourt (Paris, 1950), 105. This volume was published posthumously.

³⁵ 'Meyerbeer est d'origine Israélite. Il n'a aucun des nombreux défauts de sa race (p. 11) ... ses instincts d'origine et de naissance le portaient au lucre, à l'entassement des richesses: Il a dompté ses instincts, il a donné l'exemple du désintéressement (p. 30)'. Mirecourt, *Meyerbeer* (Paris, 1858).

³⁶ 'La richesse, qui pour d'autres, eût été un danger, n'a pas même eu pour lui des tentations'. Beulé, *Eloge*, 25.

³⁷ Not all references are negative. Once again Albert Wolff in *Le Figaro*, 14 Nov. 1891, is an exception, writing 'La richesse n'était pour lui [Meyerbeer] qu'un accident agréable dans la vie'.

³⁸ 14 Nov. 1891, *Robert le Diable*, 738; *Les Huguenots*, 876; *Le Prophète*, 468; *L'Africaine*, 449. Charles Darcours had for some time maintained a fascination with the sums of money that Meyerbeer gained. In an article in *Le Figaro*, 1 Mar. 1886, for instance he spends some time calculating how much money Meyerbeer would have been getting in royalties per year from his 'French' operas.

potted biographies provided by critics mention Meyerbeer's personal fortune.³⁹ Many of these biographies also mention that Meyerbeer's nephew M. Jules Beer gave the choirmaster three million francs to distribute to the choristers.⁴⁰ In a negative vein, many critics bring up the old chestnut that if tickets were not sold, Meyerbeer would pay to fill houses, an apparently apocryphal story for which there is no evidence. The claim that Meyerbeer relinquished artistic values and capitulated to money making is widespread and I shall quote just a small number of critics to show this:

*L'Echo de Paris*⁴¹

Meyerbeer was the son of a banker ... had in his soul the power of money. With such a well-replenished wallet, how could he not put it at the service of his ambition? He made the grave mistake, however, of thinking only of success, never thinking of an immortal work, but of a successful opera, and without having the excuse of needing to make a living.⁴²

*Gil Blas*⁴³

Success! This was the driving force and standard of his life. He sacrificed everything for success ... Long-term victories, and slow and laboriously worked-on triumphs didn't interest him in the slightest; he wanted prompt and overwhelming renown; because he had the soul of a banker he was in a hurry to get a discount.

*Le Jour*⁴⁴

[Meyerbeer] knew so well how to make an impression on the public, and had a particular ability to understand and hold on to the taste of the mob ... the businessman too often took over from the artist.⁴⁵

³⁹ See e.g. *La Patrie*, 15 Nov. 1891.

⁴⁰ e.g. *Le Temps*, 14 Sep. 1891; *Le Gaulois*, 16 Nov. 1891.

⁴¹ 'Meyerbeer était le fils un banquier ... eu dans l'âme la foi en la puissance de l'argent[.] L'escarcelle bien garnie, comment pouvait-il ne pas mettre ses ressources au service de son ambition? (p. 1) Il eût le tort si grave! de ne songer qu'au succès; jamais il ne se préoccupa de faire une œuvre immortelle, mais un opéra à succès, sans avoir l'excuse de la nécessité de vivre'. André Maurel, *L'Echo de Paris*, 8 Nov. 1891, 2.

⁴² See also J. Weber, *Le Temps*, 26 Nov. 1891, who states that Meyerbeer was an 'homme du monde' who most of all wanted success.

⁴³ 'Le SUCCES! Ce fut la norme et le mobile de sa vie. Il y sacrifia tout. ... Les victoires lointaines, les triomphes lentement et laborieusement préparés ne le tentaient guère; il voulait la renommée prompte et foudroyante. Comme il avait l'âme d'un banquier; il se hâta de l'escompter'. Victor Wilder, *Gil Blas*, 16 Nov. 1891.

⁴⁴ '[Meyerbeer] sut ... si vivement impressionner le public et fut d'une si particulière adresse à saisir et comprendre le goût des foules. ... L'homme d'affaires trop souvent l'emportait sur l'artiste'. André Courneau, *Le Jour*, 16 Nov. 1891.

⁴⁵ The article continues stressing how Meyerbeer was not one of those 'artistes sincères n'empruntant rien à personne, qui, sans se soucier des modes et des petites courantes et ambiantes, accomplissent leur œuvre les yeux fixés sur un idéal supérieur et ne consentiraient pas, même au prix des succès les plus exorbitants, à renier les éternels principes de l'art'.

*La Revue blanche*⁴⁶

his works are larded with deliberate banalities written to raise the applause of the mass public ... He affronts the artistic honesty of certain artists.

And one final quote from around the same time: 'Meyerbeer never followed an ideal or believed in any dogma, he was an Israelite by character 100 times more than one of religion, and in everything that he observed, in all that surrounded him, he saw only that which could be of use to him.' The author has footnoted the word Israelite saying, 'I am not using the word Israelite in an insulting sense ... but just in its popular understanding where it is used to refer to someone with a talent for making money.'⁴⁷

Slightly later, the issue of Meyerbeer's lack of artistic integrity became a major issue also with d'Indy who, as Steven Huebner states, 'erect[ed] the Jew as an almost metaphysical embodiment of aesthetic evils in binary opposition to true Art'.⁴⁸ In his *Cours de composition* d'Indy describes what he termed the 'Période Judaique (1825–1867)' and how during this period 'money became the ultimate aim of art' and how, 'in order to gain money, it was necessary to have immediate success which was obtainable only by playing to the taste of the greatest number. This was, of course, to neglect artistic duty. That is, instead of raising up your fellow men, to lower yourself freely to their level. When this pursuit of success ... brought in money, the Jew, who by his nature willingly looks for profitable deals, enters into art.'⁴⁹

⁴⁶ 'ses œuvres sont parsemées de banalités voulues, écrites pour enlever les applaudissements du gros public ... Il blesse la probité artistique de certains musiciens'. René Lenormand, *La Revue blanche*, 1 (Dec. 1891): 198. See also Victorin Joncières, *La Liberté*, 16 Nov. 1891, 'Le succès et non l'art lui-même, est le but qu'il poursuit, au prix des concessions les plus regrettables.' Clair Rowden has pointed out to me that the critics of Massenet's operas at the time also denigrated Massenet for sacrificing artistic ideals for success. It is revealing that Vincent d'Indy, who also states of Massenet that 'il chercha toujours à profiter des éléments de succès pour se les approprier', concludes 'il fut le vrai continuateur et l'aboutissement direct de l'école judaïque dont le but ne dépassait le succès, avec toutes ses conséquences pratiques', *Cours de composition musicale*, 3: 197.

⁴⁷ 'Meyerbeer ... fut jamais le disciple d'une idée ou le croyant d'un dogme, il fut Israélite de caractère cent fois plus que de religion* et ne vit dans tout ce qu'il observa, dans tout ce qui l'entourait, que l'avantage qu'il en pouvait tirer' '*L'auteur n'emploie nullement le mot Israélite dans le sens insultant, que lui donnent quelques évergumènes. Il n'est appliqué ici que comme qualificatif d'habileté commerciale, signification que lui donne le langage populaire.' Unsigned article, Dossier d'Artiste (Meyerbeer), 31 Bibliothèque nationale, Opéra library. See also Alfred Bruneau in a submission on French music at the International exhibition of 1900: 'Meyerbeer ... eut facilement soumis la foule à sa royauté légitime d'artiste convaincu. Il préféra se soumettre, lui, aux lois arbitraires du public versatile.' *La Musique française* (Paris, 1901), 72.

⁴⁸ Steven Huebner, *French Opera at the Fin de Siècle: Wagnerism, Nationalism, and Style* (Oxford, 1999), 306.

⁴⁹ 'l'argent devient le but final de l'art' and how 'pour gagner de l'argent, il faut du succès immédiat, et le succès ne s'obtient qu'en flattant le goût du plus grand nombre. C'est là, naturellement, manquer au devoir de l'artiste. C'est, au lieu d'élever ses semblables, s'abaisser soi-même volontairement au niveau du public ... Lorsque cette course au succès apporta l'argent, le Juif, qui par nature recherche volontiers les fructueuses opérations, s'introduisait dans l'art', *Cours de composition musicale*, 3: 104–5. Jane Fulcher has written interestingly on d'Indy's anti-Semitism in 'Vincent d'Indy's

Virtually all the reviews from the Third Republic, some directly, some indirectly, refer to the association of Jew with exploitative capitalist. In the minds of many at this time, Jews were seen as controlling the economic activity of the country and became the emblem of the 'grasping financier', a figure that featured prominently in Edouard Drumont's extremely popular *La France juive* of 1886.⁵⁰ This book spawned a large number of works of fiction such as Victor Joze's *Reine de joie* (1892), based on the figure of a morally corrupt banker Baron de Rozenfeld.⁵¹ The anti-Semitic platform espoused by the Boulangists in their fight against the government in the 1890s also drew on the belief that Jews controlled the finances of the country, an issue which also surfaced in the Panama scandal of 1892.

To what extent is the critics' image of the capitalist inseparable from the figure of the Jew?⁵² One could also ask to what extent were critics simply jealous of Meyerbeer's wealth?⁵³ It is quite likely that the critics who used and perhaps even exploited these negative stereotypes of Jews would have repudiated the accusation that they were anti-Semites. Victor Wilder, for instance, goes out of his way to point out that he, personally, 'had nothing against Jews'.⁵⁴ In his book on anti-Semitism in France during the Dreyfus affair Stephen Wilson discerns two different levels of anti-Semitism current at this time, one 'ideological, based on a structured and intellectualised system of ideas' and the other 'social and cultural, a pervasive dislike of Jews that found expression in a variety of forms and was broadly tolerated and accepted'.⁵⁵ The Meyerbeer criticism I have been discussing fits largely into the latter category. This is suggested by the definition of Israelite I quoted before, although in the context of what else the writer is saying about Meyerbeer's lack of artistic ideals, this definition is perhaps a little too disingenuous. These critics of 1891, however, were aware of the strongly anti-Semitic statements on Meyerbeer in the writings of Wagner, and at this point, a brief mention of Wagner must be made.

At the time of the Meyerbeer centenary celebrations members of the press all refer to Wagner. The celebrations occurred only two months after the success of *Lohengrin* at the Opéra (16 September 1891) and the proximity of the two events caused many critics to ponder whether the celebrations marked the end of Meyerbeer's reign at the Opéra and the beginning of the reign of Wagner. Some

drame anti-juif and its Meaning in Paris, 1920', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 2/3 (Nov. 1990): 295–319.

⁵⁰ Stephen A. Schuker, *The Jews in Modern France*, ed. Frances Malino and Bernard Wasserstein (Hanover, NH, 1985), 148. Drumont's *La France juive* (Paris, 1886) also refers to the inability of the Jews to be creative.

⁵¹ Mentioned in Murray, 'Toulouse Lautrec and French Anti-Semitism', 58.

⁵² Murray also discusses the leftist tradition of attacking the Jew not so much as a Jew but as a financier, 59.

⁵³ In his introduction to Meyerbeer's diaries, Robert Letellier remarks how Meyerbeer's 'wealth and success cloud perception of the man and his achievement'. He continues sardonically, 'It is interesting to speculate that if *Le Prophète* had been written at Theresienstadt by a struggling composer living in the shadow of death, the work would no doubt be honored now as entartete Musik, and the whole of his oeuvre long since committed to subsidized recording.' Robert Letellier, ed. and trans., *The Diaries of Giacomo Meyerbeer: 1791–1839*, vol. 1 (London, 1990), intro., 50.

⁵⁴ 'Je n'ai contre le peuple juif aucun préjugé personnel', *Gil Blas*, 16 Nov. 1891.

⁵⁵ *Ideology and Experience: Antisemitism in France at the Time of the Dreyfus Affair* (Rutherford [NJ] and London, 1982), 82.

also wondered whether Ritt and Gailhard deliberately downplayed the Meyerbeer celebration in order not to overshadow their achievement with the success of the *Lohengrin* production,⁵⁶ and if so, this might also have been behind their decision not to ask the press to celebrate the centenary celebrations.

When discussing Wagner, virtually all critics had his anti-Semitic comments on Meyerbeer fresh in their minds. This was because of a pamphlet published earlier in the year by Albert Soubies and Charles Malherbe.⁵⁷ The pamphlet reproduced letters from Wagner expressing gratitude to Meyerbeer and an unpublished article by Wagner (probably from 1842) in which he pays homage to Meyerbeer as a composer and extravagantly praises the fourth act of *Les Huguenots*. The pamphlet then discussed the way the composers drifted apart, recalling an anecdote in which Meyerbeer is said to have publicly denigrated Wagner, and concludes with an excerpt from Wagner's *Das Judentum in der Musik*. While the authors of the pamphlet maintain a studiously objective tone, they nevertheless present a picture which was sympathetic to Wagner. Although not precisely excusing the anti-Semitism of *Das Judentum in der Musik*, they downplayed its significance in concluding that 'time, in abating anger, makes particular incidents recede in importance'.⁵⁸ The reaction of the critics to this pamphlet is mixed. Some of them just spoke critically about Wagner's opportunistic behaviour, without however being sympathetic towards Meyerbeer.⁵⁹ Some passed over Wagner's offensive remarks and concentrated on what the pamphlet portrays as Meyerbeer's slighting behaviour towards Wagner.⁶⁰ Others, while not condoning Wagner's behaviour, see it as almost understandable, if not inevitable.⁶¹ Yet others, although Wagner supporters, were rather embarrassed by his behaviour and, pre-figuring aesthetic debates about Wagner's music today, tried to make a distinction between the man and his music.⁶² A few, for instance Emile Pessard in *L'Événement*, condemned Wagner's anti-Semitism out of hand.⁶³ Whatever the case, and regardless of

⁵⁶ See *L'Echo de Paris*, 16 Nov. 1891.

⁵⁷ This was reproduced the following year in a volume entitled *Mélanges sur Richard Wagner* (Paris, 1892), 144 pp. The original pamphlet was 15 pages long; called *Wagner et Meyerbeer, document inédits publiés à propos du Centenaire de Meyerbeer*, it was sold at the offices of the *Revue de l'art dramatique* (according to 'A. H.', 'Wagner et Meyerbeer', *L'Art musical*, 31 Dec. 1891, 189). I have not found a copy of it at the Bibliothèque nationale but there is a copy in the British Library.

⁵⁸ 'le temps, en apaisant les colères, diminue ... l'importance des faits particuliers', *Mélanges sur Richard Wagner* (Paris, 1892), 143. This could be seen as similar to the way that many Wagnerian composers and critics reacted to Wagner's farce on Paris under siege in 1870, *Eine Kapitulation* (French translation 1875); they just looked 'the other way'. See Huebner, *French Opera*, 13.

⁵⁹ 'A. H.', 'Wagner et Meyerbeer', 189, which states that Wagner was ready to praise Meyerbeer publicly until he felt he was strong enough to set out on his own, at which point he turned violently against him.

⁶⁰ *L'Echo de Paris*, 8 Nov. 1891.

⁶¹ Johannes Weber, *Le Temps*, 26 Nov. 1891, is understanding of Wagner's resentment of Meyerbeer and states that it was inevitable that two men who were so different in temperament would fall out one day.

⁶² *Le Rappel*, 16 Nov. 1891, acknowledges that Wagner's behaviour to Meyerbeer was appalling, but states: 'Décidément c'était un grand musicien, mais un vilain monsieur. Oublions ces vilénies. L'homme passe, l'œuvre reste.'

⁶³ 15 Nov. 1891.

their feelings for Wagner's music, all were aware that he was someone who had a blatantly anti-Semitic attitude towards Meyerbeer.

So where does this leave us? Can we say that the critics' perception of Meyerbeer as a grasping financier reflects the political stance of the papers? It seems a difficult view to support although this could be the case with *L'Echo de Paris*, which also published the quite strongly anti-Semitic writings of Willy. Yet Willy was also employed by *La Revue blanche*, which was owned by the Jewish Natanson brothers. The anti-Semitic paper *La Patrie* was mild in its criticism of Meyerbeer and merely portrayed him as an adventurer rather than an artist. Emile Pessard, who later became pro-Wagner and an anti-Dreyfusard, was the one critic strongly to criticize Wagner's anti-Semitism. Thus it is difficult to discern any trends. Most critics discuss Meyerbeer's illustrious reign at the Paris Opéra and marvel, in particular, at the amount of money he must have generated for the Opéra over the previous 60 years. Yet notwithstanding a few very positive articles on Meyerbeer's music,⁶⁴ those critics who did make some comment about the musical content of the actual celebration expressed weariness and boredom. It was perhaps also revealing that the conductor for the celebrations, Lamoureux, called in sick on the evening and was replaced by a Madier de Monjau. The critic for *L'Eclair* remarked sarcastically that 'M. Lamoureux is one of those rare conductors who can make himself sick when necessary',⁶⁵ implying that the evening was not important enough for the conductor to attend. It is also possible that Lamoureux's name was so closely associated with Wagner at this stage that he felt unable to celebrate the centenary of Meyerbeer.

The general feeling was that Meyerbeer's reign was over, as summed up in the first few lines of a poem in *Gil Blas*, 'Grand homme, joie de nos pères', published on the eve of the centenary celebrations.⁶⁶ Examined in the broader musical context the reign of grand opera was, of course, well and truly over. Since the humiliating defeat of France in 1871 French composers had been agitating for change; the country's music as well as its politics was seen as needing rehabilitation and revitalization. As Saint-Saëns wrote in 1872, there was a need to liberate music from where it remained 'imprisoned in [a] ... frivolous genre as in a gilded cage'.⁶⁷ For composers of the Third Republic the

⁶⁴ Ernest Reyer's article in the *Journal des débats*, 22 Nov. 1891, is one of the most positive and kindest reviews. Reyer speaks fondly of his friendship with Meyerbeer. Albert Wolff in *Le Figaro*, 16 Nov. 1891, complains that the centenary celebrations were too miserly and that instead of the boring formulaic 'laying wreath on bust-selections from operas procedure' there should have been an extravagant production of one of Meyerbeer's operas to which the 'tout Paris' of arts, sciences, letters and politics etc. were invited. This suggests that perhaps this audience was not present at the 14 November celebrations.

⁶⁵ 'M. Lamoureux est un des rares chefs d'orchestre qui sait être souffrant quand il le faut.' *L'Eclair*, 16 Nov. 1891, 2.

⁶⁶ *Gil Blas*, 14 Nov. 1891. It is revealing that the Meyerbeer centenary celebrations do not figure at all in the summary of the year's events for 1891 in *Les Annales du théâtre et de la musique 1875–1916* [1–41], 30 (available online at Gallica, Bibliothèque nationale, <http://gallica.bnf.fr/>).

⁶⁷ Quoted in Michael Strasser, 'The Société Nationale and its Adversaries: The Musical Politics of L'invasion germanique in the 1870s', *19th-Century Music*, 24/3 (Spring 2001), 232.

need for regeneration was based on a rejection of both the music and the political and social life of the previous generations.

The feeling that Meyerbeer's operas had had their day had indeed been around for a while. In *L'Art musical* of 1888 A. Landely discusses how members of the opera audience were bored with Meyerbeer and the generally 'stagnant repertoire' at the opera.⁶⁸ Things had not improved by 1890, as is clear from Camille Bellaigue's article, 'Un opéra idéal', for the *Revue des deux mondes* of 1890.⁶⁹ After imagining an ideal repertoire in which a whole array of operas from Gluck and Berlioz to Wagner were being performed, Bellaigue discussed the contemporary situation where 'instead of this what do we have? One week, *Les Huguenots*, *Faust*, *L'Africaine*; the next week, *L'Africaine*, *Les Huguenots* and *Faust*.'⁷⁰ And meanwhile, Bellaigue continued, *Les Troyens* was being performed in Germany and *Samson et Dalila* in Provence.⁷¹

However, as Bellaigue implied, Meyerbeer's operas were still not a spent force on the stage. When a fire at the Opéra in 1894 destroyed most of the scenery, and a decision had to be made which to remake, that for *Les Huguenots* and *Le Prophète* was included.⁷² The decision was vindicated when four years later *Le Prophète* was financially the most successful opera of the season. Nevertheless the number of performances of Wagner's operas were now slowly gaining on performances of Meyerbeer's operas. In the period 1891–99, for instance, there were 168 performances of *Lohengrin* as opposed to 78 of *Les Huguenots* at the Paris Opéra.⁷³

André Spies speculates that it might have been the continuing influence of the regular conservative subscribers that kept directors performing Meyerbeer, since inferior daily receipts indicated that his operas no longer appealed to casual patrons.⁷⁴ Nor, as I have shown, did they appeal to the majority of the press, who continued to dismiss Meyerbeer as a commercial manipulator of the Opéra with no artistic ideals, this being, for many, in contrast to the exceedingly high artistic ideals of Richard Wagner. Maybe, as Adolphe Jullien suggested in an article for *Le Moniteur universel*, the centenary celebrations were more like funerary celebrations for someone whose works had ceased to charm the majority.⁷⁵

The criticism of Meyerbeer during his centenary celebrations in 1891 is rife with highly derogatory stereotypes of the Jewish composer. As time passed the

⁶⁸ *L'Art musical*, 30 April 1888; out of 200 performances between April 1887 and April 1888 only 16 works were performed, which included all four of Meyerbeer's operas. My thanks to Steven Huebner for pointing out this review to me.

⁶⁹ *Revue des deux mondes*, 98 (1890): 460–66.

⁷⁰ 'au lieu de tout cela qu'avons-nous? Une semaine: *Les Huguenots*, *Faust*, *L'Africaine*; la semaine suivante, *L'Africaine*, *Les Huguenots* et *Faust*', 461.

⁷¹ Bellaigue then proceeded to demolish everything about the musical system in Paris, the waste of money spent on the Palais Garnier, the training at the Conservatoire, and the lethargy and ignorance of the public.

⁷² Mentioned in Frédérique Patureau, *Le Palais Garnier dans la société parisienne, 1875–1914* (Liège, 1991), 282. *La Juive* and *Robert* were dropped.

⁷³ See chart of performances at the Paris Opéra from 1890 to 1912 in Manuela Schwartz, *Wagner-Rezeption und französische Oper des Fin de siècle* (Sinzig, 1999), 310–11. See also a similar chart in Steven Huebner's article 'After 1850 at the Paris Opéra: Institution and Repertory', *The Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera*, ed. David Charlton (Cambridge, 2003), 301.

⁷⁴ Spies, *Opera, State, and Society*, 79.

⁷⁵ *Le Moniteur universel*, 23 Nov. 1891.

negative perceptions of Meyerbeer became even stronger and nastier. The language used was imbued with metaphorical references to his operas stifling, killing, poisoning operatic art in France, even carrying within them, as Etienne Destranges (1893) claimed, 'a virus which inevitably condemns them to death'.⁷⁶ This has obvious references to the stereotype of Jew as parasite, and reverberates with Drumont's description of the Jews in France as being responsible for the introduction of a foreign body into an organism which up to then had been in perfect health.⁷⁷ Vincent d'Indy apparently used to point out 'jokingly' that Meyerbeer's sensational successes always coincided with cholera epidemics.⁷⁸ In the early twentieth century, Pierre Lasserre, who in his book *L'Esprit de la musique française* called Meyerbeer a 'cosmopolitan manipulator ... far more than ... an artist of blood and race' who corrupted and 'debased operatic tradition',⁷⁹ concludes that the only French thing about the perception of Meyerbeer as French is the irony of it!⁸⁰

The 1891 centenary of Meyerbeer's birth forced critics to take a position on Meyerbeer's current standing in the operatic world. Given that Meyerbeer's day was considered basically over, perhaps the focus on his Jewishness was now simply seized upon as an appropriate way to justify making him less important in music history.⁸¹ However, it was also, I believe, something that had been more or less present in Meyerbeer criticism since the July Monarchy but had only now, in a context of anti-Semitism, emerged openly as a major issue.

⁷⁶ Etienne Destranges, *L'Œuvre théâtral de Meyerbeer* (Paris, 1893), 7, 'les opéras de ce compositeur portent en eux-mêmes un virus qui les voue fatalement à la mort'.

⁷⁷ Drumont, *La France juive*.

⁷⁸ Quoted in a footnote by Guy de Lioncourt in the third volume of d'Indy's *Cours*. 'Vincent d'Indy signalait plaisamment que les succès sensationnels de Meyerbeer ont toujours coïncidé avec des épidémies de choléra', 110.

⁷⁹ Pierre Lasserre, *L'Esprit de la musique française: De Rameau à l'invasion Wagnérienne* (Paris, 1917); *The Spirit of French Music*, trans. Denis Turner (London and New York, 1921), 146.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁸¹ Thanks to my anonymous reader for this suggestion.