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MUSIC REVIEW | 'LES HUGUENOTS'

## Rediscovering an Opera of Love and Slaughter

By [ANTHONY TOMMASINI](#)

ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, N.Y. — There have been many cases of historically momentous operas that claimed the public in their day, then fell into neglect. But the near disappearance of Giacomo Meyerbeer's French grand [opera](#) "Les Huguenots" is especially baffling.

For nearly 100 years after its astonishingly successful 1836 premiere in Paris, the opera was a mainstay of the repertory, especially in France. It was the first work in the history of the Paris Opera to reach the milestone of 1,000 performances.

"Les Huguenots" was last performed at the [Metropolitan Opera](#) in 1915, in an Italian translation with a cast that included [Enrico Caruso](#), Frieda Hempel and Emmy Destinn. It is amazing to read a review of that performance from The New York Sun in which the opera is referred to as "the familiar old work." What happened?

Once again the conductor [Leon Botstein](#), a champion of neglected works, has leapt into the breach, presenting a production of "Les Huguenots," which opened on Friday night in the SummerScape festival at [Bard College](#) here. (It is linked to the Bard Music Festival's Wagner and His World series, which will offer two weekends of concerts, lectures and panels this month.) For the second performance of this four-hour, five-act opera on Sunday afternoon, the Fisher Center for the Performing Arts was packed. Renaud Machart, the music critic of Le Monde, had come from Paris to see his first production of the work, an indication of how far the opera has fallen from view.

Though an astute musicologist and an influential college president, Mr. Botstein is often a technically dicey, variable conductor. But on this occasion the performance he drew from the [American Symphony Orchestra](#), an impressive and mostly young cast and an eager chorus, if not tidy and clear, had energy and style. Though the muddled production by Thaddeus Strassberger mixed starkly modern sets with period costumes to no particular effect, it too had gripping moments.

Meyerbeer, a German Jew who fell under the sway of the heroic Rossini operas during his early years, loved the artifice of theater, as Mr. Botstein explained in a preperformance talk. Though the story of "Les Huguenots" deals with brutal religious intolerance and fanaticism, the score presents an eclectic mix of styles and set pieces. There are dances, show-off arias galore and a string of stirring choruses. The opera has dignity, elegance and moments of wrenching drama. But the story is told with an "ironic detachment," Mr. Botstein said, that audiences today, more conditioned to Wagnerian total immersion, are impatient with.

“Les Huguenots” places a fictionalized love triangle against the backdrop of the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre of French Calvinist Protestants by the Roman Catholic forces of Charles IX and his indomitable mother, Catherine de’ Medici, in 1572 (an event depicted in the opera’s brutal final scene, staged here with gore and nudity). Of the seven major roles, the tenor lead, Raoul de Nangis, a young Protestant noble, drives the story and has the most demanding music.

In the first scene Raoul is invited by the Count de Nevers, a Catholic, to join a gathering at the count’s chateau. Queen Marguerite of Navarre has been trying to foster better understanding between Catholics and Protestants. To this end, she has decided to have Raoul marry Valentine, the lovely daughter of Count de Saint-Bris, a tenacious Catholic filled with enmity for the Huguenots. Valentine was engaged to Nevers.

The love triangle does become convoluted. But you can enjoy “Les Huguenots” without following the network of romantic intrigue too closely. There are stunning episodes, as in the concluding ensemble of Act II, when choruses of Catholics and Huguenots voice their hatreds in vehement music, performed with fearless intensity by the young choristers here. Yet this grand opera also has passages of subtle intimacy: a forlorn aria for Valentine, for example, accompanied during long stretches only by horn and clarinet.

The young singers here benefited from the lively acoustics of the 900-seat Sosnoff Theater. The tenor Michael Spyres, as Raoul, brought a sweet, fresh sound and affecting poignancy to his work, though he pushed his voice worrisomely at times. The soprano Alexandra Deshorties was a vocally incisive and dramatically vulnerable Valentine.

Queen Marguerite — a role sung by [Joan Sutherland](#) on a landmark 1969 recording, conducted by Richard Bonyngé — was sung here by Erin Morley, a coloratura soprano who combined earthy sound and agile technique in a formidable performance. The appealing baritone Andrew Schroeder was a sympathetic Nevers, and the bass Peter Volpe brought a robust voice and charismatic presence to Marcel, the count’s stalwart protector. The lively mezzo-soprano Marie Lenormand was impishly right as the page Urbain. The bass-baritone John Marcus Bindel had gravelly voiced authority as Saint-Bris.

For all the grace, craft and charm of the music, the opera can finally seem a little frivolous. After a while, as scene after scene, aria after chorus, unfolded, there was little sense that an inevitable dramatic-musical arc was holding the work together.

Still, this production was a chance to enter into the cultural mind-set of a rich era in opera history. The time may be right for a Met revival. Until then, Mr. Botstein once again deserves credit for an overdue rescue job.

*The final performances of “Les Huguenots” are on Wednesday afternoon and Friday evening in the Fisher Center for the Performing Arts at Bard College; (845) 758-7900, [fishercenter.bard.edu](http://fishercenter.bard.edu).*

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