

Fromental Halévy and His Operas, 1842-1862

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By

Robert Ignatius Letellier
and Nicholas Lester Fuller

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19. CHARLES VI

Opéra in 5 acts. Libretto: Germain Delavigne (1790-1868) and Jean-François Casimir Delavigne (1793-1843). First performed: Paris, Théâtre de l'Opéra (Salle Le Peletier), 15 March 1843. Second version: Salle Le Peletier, 4 October 1847.

Performance details: Ballet in Act 2.¹

Characters

CHARLES VI (<i>baritone</i>)	Paul Barroilhet
LE DAUPHIN (<i>tenor</i>)	Gilbert Duprez
LE DUC DE BEDFORD (<i>tenor</i>)	Jean-Baptiste-Bazille Canaple
RAYMOND (<i>bass</i>)	Nicolas-Prosper Levasseur
L'HOMME DE LA FORÊT (<i>tenor</i>)	Auguste Massol
TANGUY DUCHATEL (<i>bass</i>)	Ferdinand Prévôt
SAINTRAILLES (<i>tenor</i>)	St. Denis
DUNOIS (<i>baritone</i>)	Octave
LAHIRE (<i>baritone</i>)	Martin
A Soldier (<i>tenor</i>)	Placide Poultier
LIONEL, English officer (<i>tenor</i>)	Raguenot
ISABELLE DE BAVIÈRE (<i>soprano</i>)	Julie Dorus-Gras
ODETTE, Raymond's daughter (<i>mezzo</i>)	Rosine Stoltz

Plot

Charles VI is the French response to Shakespeare's *Henry V*: a magnificent historical chronicle full of patriotic speeches and mediaeval knights. Through it stalks the tragic figure of a mad, abandoned king; his wicked queen who disinherits her own son; and a simple maiden who, like Joan of Arc, appears at France's hour of need.

In and near Paris, 1422, during the Hundred Years' War

The opera takes place in the aftermath of the French defeat at Agincourt in 1415. France is in peril: the King has lost his wits, his son is an outcast,

and the oppressed people suffer, while Isabelle de la Bavière and her lover the Duke of Bedford hunt and dance. But the opera's most famous number is adamant: "Guerre aux tyrans! Jamais en France l'anglais ne régnera".

Act 1: Room in the farmhouse of the old soldier Raymond. During the long conflict with England, France has fallen into an almost hopeless position. Paris has been besieged, and the kindly but mentally unwell King Charles VI is under the influence of his unscrupulous wife Isabelle, who, enthralled by the Duke of Bedford, represents the interests of the English. The French are threatened with danger from every side. Only the fugitive Dauphin, their son, with the help of knights loyal to him and carried by the sympathy of the people, is organizing the national resistance.

The Dauphin seeks out Odette, the daughter of the patriot Raymond. He once courted her incognito, and she has been chosen by Isabelle to be the companion of the King. (The historical Odette de Champdivers was the king's mistress.) The Queen hopes to use the young woman as a spy. Odette will miss her friends, particularly a young squire named Charles, who swore eternal love and gave her a necklace with the fleur-de-lis. The Queen spots the necklace, and realises that 'Charles' is the Dauphin. She warns Odette that her lover is a traitor. Charles reveals that he is indeed the prince; he tells Odette of a prophecy that a woman will raise the Oriflamme (the King of France's battle standard), and he will conquer.

The Dauphin asks Odette to arrange a meeting between him and his father. Odette, who responds to the Dauphin's love, denies her personal feelings so as to serve only her people. As horns call announce the arrival of the English, the Dauphin flees. Bedford and his followers burst in, but are deceived by Odette and take the wrong direction in their pursuit.

Act 2: Salon in the Hôtel Saint-Pol, the royal residence. A court festivity is taking place; much of the act is *divertissement*: a villanelle by Alain Chartier, on which Isabelle sings brilliant variations as a bravura aria; and mediaeval dances (the pavanne, the mascarade, and the bourrée). Isabelle and the Duke of Bedford have drawn up a document (the Treaty of Troyes) that will disinherit the Dauphin and leave the Queen in control; they only need the King's signature on their act, and France will be hers.

When the guests move into the banqueting-hall, the benighted King enters. He is a tragic figure: he walks slowly; his hair and clothes are in disarray. He is so abjectly treated that they have forgotten to feed him; Charles cannot remember who he is, but speaks of the king as though he were

already dead and buried. He will not answer Odette's efforts to comfort him; the dead do not speak. Now comes one of the finest scenes in the opera: the Duo des Cartes. (Playing cards were introduced to France to amuse Charles VI during his illness.) To rouse the monarch from his lethargy, Odette challenges him to a game of Bataille. Through the cards, the king relieves Agincourt—this time as victor. In the meantime, Odette has made all the necessary arrangements for a meeting between the King and the Dauphin. Isabelle and Bedford return to the salon and deceive the King into signing the act of abdication, as well as disinheriting his own son, and adopting the infant Lancaster (the future Henry VI) as rightful heir. Unaware of what proclamations he is endorsing, the King signs a document that immediately seals peace between France and England.

Act 3, scene 1: A tent in front of Raymond's house. The Dauphin and his entourage drink to a happier future for France. Odette leads the King here. Charles, swayed by Isabelle, has believed his son is poisoning him. After a long conversation with his son, the King slowly emerges from his mental darkness, and eventually recognizes his son. When he learns that he has inadvertently set his enemy on the path to coronation, he immediately restores his son's rights to him in order to prevent the coup d'état. At a signal from Odette (a *chanson*), the Dauphin will come by night, rescue his father, and bring him to Dunois (the Bastard of Orléans).

Act 3, scene 2: Street in front of the Hôtel Saint-Pol. The planned coronation of Lancaster ends with sudden éclat: instead of publicly endorsing him as successor, the King denies him the crown. The people are delighted to see their king act so decisively, and attack the English, but are driven back with fists and halberd blows. While Isabelle, Bedford and the English demand submission from the vanquished, the King, Odette, and their followers swear vengeance on the oppressors.

Act 4: The King's bedchamber. A heavenly voice has told Odette she will save France, but die forgotten. In front of Isabelle and Bedford, the King tears up the decrees he signed, and curses the pair as traitors. Nonetheless, to realize their aims, Isabelle decides to use psychological intimidation. She arranges a horror pantomime of apparently ghostly apparitions. Through a panel appear dreadful spectres: the ferocious man of the Forest of Mans, Louis d'Orleans, Jean-sans-peur, and Clisson, who raise the visors of their helmets to show the hollow sockets and hideous grins of skulls; they are followed by Death himself, carrying his scythe. They announce that the King will die at the hands of his own son. Agitated to distraction, the King betrays the agreed sign (the *chanson*) that will

show the Dauphin the way into the palace and put his enemies into his hands. Isabelle sings the *chanson* (instead of Odette); the Dauphin is captured by his opponents; and the furious King demands his son's death.

Act 5, scene 1: Dunois's camp on the banks of the Seine, night, with a fire for illumination. The Dauphin's followers wait for the sign to revolt, when Raymond and Odette enter and tell them of his arrest. Charles has fallen into madness, and the Dauphin is a prisoner of the English, awaiting execution. On the morrow the King will publicly abdicate in the Church of Saint-Denis, and concede the Oriflamme and the throne to Bedford. In great urgency, Odette devises a plan for his rescue. The conspirators should hide in the crypts of Saint-Denis, where Raymond is the warden, and at the ceremony the next day liberate the King and the Dauphin.

Act 5, scene 2: The Church of Saint-Denis, burial place of the French kings, with trophies and banners on the columns; in the centre, a raised portico with stairs, at the base of which on both sides are doors leading to the crypts. Charles VI denounces his son as a traitor, and demands he surrender the royal diadem. The Dauphin refuses to give up his rights freely, and the King is about to pass the Oriflamme to Bedford. At this moment, the conspirators burst from their concealment and force the English to flee. Odette herself hands the Oriflamme to the Dauphin. The King, as he dies, confirms his son as heir and predicts French victory. (The Dauphin will reign as Charles-le-Victorieux.) The crowd hail him with rejoicing.

Origins

Charles VI was first performed a year to the day after the death of Cherubini, Halévy's mentor. He lost a master, a father, and a friend, his brother Léon wrote.

I still see him bending under the weight of those three sorrows, holding one of the corners of the pall with Auber, on the way from the Faubourg Poissonnière to Saint-Roch.

Large tears flowed from his eyes, and at each roll of the funeral drums, at each note of the instruments playing the sublime *Requiem* that accompanied the remains of the great artist, he staggered as if struck in the heart.

Our works always bear the imprint of our feelings at the time when we create them; they are like the echo and the reflection of that mysterious and slow task, a work, too, which each of us accomplishes: our lives.

The most beautiful pages of *Charles VI* are the sufferings of a wounded soul; and the composer's thought seems veiled with that mourning crepe which enveloped fourteenth-century France, which he depicted so movingly.²

The literary brothers Delavigne derived their libretto from contemporary literature exploring the reign of the tragic King Charles VI: N. Lemercier's 5-act tragedy *La Démence de Charles VI* (1826); H. de la Ville de Mirmont, *Charles VI* (1826); and E.-L. Lamothe-Langon, *Isabelle de Bavière* (1829).³

The work was first scheduled to appear in December 1842, two years after the premiere of Donizetti's *La Favorite*. Casimir and Germain Delavigne initially wished the two popular tenors Duprez and Mario to sing the roles of Charles and the Dauphin; when Mario left Paris, the baritone Paul Barroilhet was given the part of the king, and Duprez that of the Dauphin—too minor a role for the great tenor, many felt. The work was delayed until January 1843, which brought back the depression Halévy suffered when composing *La Juive*.

Halévy's work did not progress quickly, Monnais recalled;⁴ he put it to one side, then picked it up again only to abandon it once more. "He was undergoing one of those nervous crises where the imagination is sicker than the body, and it must be admitted that the libretto was not one to dispel his dark moods. The remote times in which he necessarily lived surrounded him with an atmosphere laden with blood and tears."

Halévy served as director of music to the Duke of Orléans; the crown prince was surprised to hear the composer was working on such a story.⁵ A mad king was a sorry subject, he told Halévy. The musician agreed, but replied that the Dauphin was there to console France. The king himself, Louis-Philippe, shared his son's repugnance; at a feast given at the Tuileries, he declared he could not understand such a choice—and glared at Auber, who had been invited. The composer of *La Muette de Portici* was generous enough to take the blame.

Grim memories were attached to the opera, Monnais recalled. The Duke of Orléans died from injuries following a carriage accident in July 1842, while Halévy was composing the opera.

Suddenly, in the present day, one of those terrible events occurred which changed the fate of dynasties and nations: the Duke of Orléans perished in a few minutes, and the whole of France felt that royalty had trembled on its base!

I will never forget the effect that this sudden and unforeseen catastrophe had on Halévy; instead of destroying him, it restored his energy. “What can we count on here below, after such an event? The only good and certain thing is work. Well, I’ll get back to it; now I will finish my opera.” He kept his promise to his friends, as well as to himself, and he tried to regain, as much as his strength allowed, the four or five months he had lost.

Charles VI, a great and severe work, had this in common with Méhul’s *Joseph*: that love, the essential element in theatrical success, especially in Paris, was absent, and that the provinces were more sympathetic than the capital. As I urged Halévy not to deal with such subjects anymore, he replied: “If I had refused this one, I would not have composed the card duet.” And he could list several more tremendous or graceful pieces, like the appearance of the ghosts and the man of the forest of Le Mans, which contrast so strongly with the villanelles and sweet songs with which the score is strewn.⁶

One of the librettists, Casimir Delavigne, died shortly after the first performance of the opera. Monnais remembers seeing him at the meeting of the theatre commission where the poem was first read.

It was dark and cold; the ailing poet, silent, wrapped in his cloak, stood near the fireplace, in a corner of the vast hall. His brother Germain read the first act, and when he had finished, Casimir, suddenly emerging from the shadows, took the manuscript from his hands, saying: “Give it to me, my friend; it’s tiring you.” Obviously, this was only a pretext, and Casimir wanted to read, with his poet’s voice, the dramatic scenes of the second act: the entry of the king, his plaintive dreams, his warlike awakening in the card duet with Odette. The poet then seemed to wake up like the king; his dull gaze cleared, and his voice, although weakened, for a moment rediscovered the expression that coloured the words and gave them warmth and life. But this effort exhausted him; he fell back in his chair, and handed the manuscript back to his brother, who finished reading the last three acts.⁷

Commentary

Charles VI (1368-1422), king of France (1380-1422), was the son of Charles V. During his troubled reign, civil war between the Burgundians and the Armagnacs was almost continuous. France was invaded by Henry V of England and heavily defeated at Agincourt in 1415. Charles was forced by the Treaty of Troyes (1420) to recognize the English king as his successor.

The unusual libretto exploits an action of political intrigue without combining it with private conflict. The love relationship between Odette and the Dauphin and the relationship between Isabelle and Bedford are used only insofar as needed for the comprehension and viability of the plot. In the same way, *histoire* is not a categorical element of the dramaturgy, but the mere medium of a romantically transfigured vision of Medieval France. This tinges the essential character of international *grand opéra* with an unmistakable national colouring. Much of the text in fact gives the opera an almost nationalist-propagandist purpose, like the *Chant national* in Act 1 with its refrain (“Guerre aux tyrants! Jamais en France, jamais l’anglais ne règnera”) which recurs in Act 3 and is taken up in the finale.⁸ This tendency is even more apparent in the closing tableau, where the depiction of the coronation church of Saint-Denis conjured up a place of cultic significance in French history with an almost archival realism.

The Music

Halévy’s score only partially follows this patriotic line. Its strongest effect is realized in scenes centred around the ailing monarch in Acts 2 and 4, where the composer is revealed as a master of differentiated musical characterization.

The overture begins with a series of dark ruminations, reflecting the catastrophe of the Hundred Years War ravaging France. This is interspersed by a series of very high and full treble chords that introduce an almost mystical dimension, perhaps reflecting on the high calling of France and those sent to save it. The following theme touches a melancholic and pathetic note, and conjures up the personality of the stricken and mentally afflicted monarch, the innocent one, like the Lamb of God, who carries the suffering of the kingdom. (The theme is from his A-flat romance in Act 1, “C’est grand pitié”, which becomes a theme recurring in the Act 3 trio of reconciliation with the Dauphin and in the Ghost Scene in Act 4.) The *allegro* main section presents the famous refrain “Guerre aux tyrans”, the rallying cry to the French to resist all tyranny and occupation. It occurs in various guises, and at the recapitulation launches into the triumphant coda. The theme itself starts off very confidently, but seems to miss reaching a positive climax, and remains curiously restrained, unresolved, unfulfilled, even slightly melancholic.

The King’s entrance recitative is full of affective and telling contrasts: the distant chorus of courtly revellers breaks into his melancholy romance; the dramatically pointed Card Duet with Odette apprehends the several layers

of reality in a detailed counterpoint of mimic gesture; the ballad whereby Odette sings her ‘vieil enfant’ to sleep casts a beguilingly magical mood. All these help to sustain a psychological study realized with highly nuanced musical expressiveness. The feigned haunting by the apparitions in Act 4, presented as an actual vision of horror to subjugate the mentally deluded Charles, is in terms of theatrical effectivity obligated to the *pages sataniques* of Meyerbeer’s *Robert le Diable* (1831), but in compositional detail already looks forward to the Tsar’s mad scene in Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov* (1874).

Less successfully realized are the poster-like crowd scenes. The only effectively differentiated Tableau is directly modelled on the example of Meyerbeer. The *Chant national* in Act 1 unfolds in the context of a scene with solo-chorus-couplet leading into ensemble-double chorus. A confrontation of the French and English opponents builds up increasing tension, but the imminent clash is deflected by the sudden arrival of a hunting party. This is a dramaturgical replica of the scene in Act 3 of *Les Huguenots* (1836) where the looming violence between Catholics and Protestants on the Pré-aux-clerics is diffused by the bustling entry of a group of gypsies.

The subject lent itself to the favourite processional topoi of grand opera. The entry of the English leaders on horseback into old Paris illumined by an autumn sunshine is depicted, but all is thrown into chaos when the King unexpectedly rejects Lancaster. Such public and confrontational scenes gave the composer opportunity to project national songs—like the key refrain “Guerre aux tyrans” and the patriotic anthem “À toi, France chérie” which are integral to the great final tableau in St Denis.⁹

Many commentators thought that *Charles VI* would assume its place as a French national opera. The fact that this never happened indicates simultaneously both the strength and weakness of the score: a subtle distinction of musical language eschews popular directness, but at the same time falters for want of involving dramatic striking power.

In Act 1, the young Odette, daughter of Raymond, a veteran of Agincourt, leaves her hearth to be with her king, as both his goddaughter and a type of guardian angel in the midst of his attacks of madness. Clément admired the chorus of farewell sung by the young girl’s companions; it was fresh, simple, and charming. Even better was the first appearance of the famous Chant National, which soon became a popular song of revolt. Raymond,

surrounded by peasants, evokes bellicose memories, stirring up hatred for the foreign invader, and singing the following strophe with the Dauphin:

Raymond:

*La France a l'horreur du servage,
Et, si grand que soit le danger,
Plus grand encore est son courage,
Quand il faut chasser l'étranger.
Vienne le jour de délivrance,
Des cœurs—ce vieux cri sortira:
Guerre aux tyrans! Jamais en France,
Jamais l'Anglais ne régnera.*

Le Dauphin:

*Réveille-toi, France, opprimée,
On te crut morte, et tu dormais ;
Un jour voit mourir une armée,
Mais un peuple ne meurt jamais.
Pousse le cri de délivrance,
Et la victoire y répondra:
Guerre aux tyrans—Jamais en France,
Jamais l'Anglais ne régnera.¹⁰*

For Clément, the music and the poetry of these strophes sufficed to unite the names of Casimir Delavigne and Fromental Halévy in common admiration. The Dauphin, disguised as a cavalry rider, takes part in this of deliverance interrupted by the arrival of the English soldiers, Bedford and Queen Isabelle. The Queen's interview with Odette is distinguished by the lovely, high-minded, opening phrase "Respect à ce roi qui succombe". The Dauphin, who has been guided by his frivolous infatuation with Odette, does not hesitate to inform her of the special mission she is to fulfil for his father. It leads to the passage:

*En respect mon amour se change:
Reste pure, Odette, et soi l'ange
De tes rois et de ton pays!
Pour eux, c'est en toi que j'espère
L'ange qui va sauver le père
Sera respecté par le fils.*

The role was only a minor part for the star tenor Duprez; he disliked it, but Clément thought he sang it with much charm, and left good memories, especially in the duet "Gentille Odette, eh quoi? Ton cœur palpite!"

Act 2 depicts the celebration given by Isabelle of Bavaria for the Duke of Bedford in the Hôtel Saint-Pol. Mme Dorus-Gras was applauded in this scene. It is followed by the so-called *Folie*, which Clément considered perhaps the most remarkable pages Halévy ever wrote. The recitatives, the *cantabile* “C’est grand’ pitié que ce roi, que leur père” has the imprint of bewilderment, and each phrase develops this character.¹¹ When the composer thought and felt like the poet, the dramatic outcome was perfect.

Odette seeks to distract Charles VI. Clément noted the distinguished structure of the couplets “Ah! Qu’un ciel sans nuage” and the grand Card Game by which the young girl tries to awaken warlike passions in the King’s heart, but all in vain.¹²

The most original music comes in the relationship between the King and Odette: in his pathetic plea for peace and rest for his troubled mind, and in her childlike lullabies for the ailing monarch. The most extraordinary piece in the opera is the Card Duet for them both. It captures the central theme of the pathetic monarch in his illness, his helplessness, his child-like devotion to the astute and devoted Odette. The game of cards becomes a correlative of the troubled times, of the war with England resurgent because of the King’s incapacity, and of the Battle of Agincourt (1415), which saw the costly defeat of France. Odette seeks to distract and comfort the King, and tries to soothe his tortured memory by having him re-live the battle in the game (conjured up with fanfares and drum rolls): this time he is the victor. The pitting of wits becomes a vector of some sort of assuagement of the painful reality. Like the great Gambling Scene in *Robert le Diable*, the structural principle is the rondo, reflecting the changing moments and moods of the protagonists. The piece also provides another of Halévy’s carefully crafted *ritornelli*, setting the tone in tonality (C minor, both sombre and heroic) and the deeply serious and potentially tragic implications of this game. The febrile excitement reflects the delusional nature of the exercise. In the game the poor King wins the battle he lost in fact. Act 3 is largely filled with the march and procession leading to the coronation of the English child. Gauthier considered the procession magnificent: “an unimaginable luxury of helmets, breastplates, steel and gold armour, horses, banners, gears, that only the Opéra can offer with such brilliance and accuracy. We even see cannons of the time, made up of iron bars connected by circles, with their solid wheels and their circumvented carriages”.

Raymond’s aria “Fête maudite” is accentuated and energetic, Clément thought.

Act 4 begins with Odette's magnificent prayer "Sous leur sceptre de fer ils ont tous comprimé".

After burning the peace treaty, the exhausted king stretches himself out on a bed and sings the touching phrase:

*Avec la douce chansonnette
Qu'il aime tant,
Berce, berce, gentille Odette,
Ton vieil enfant.*¹³

Then immediately follows the admirable ballad sung by Rosine Stoltz, "Chaque soir, Jeanne sur la plage". Clément thought the oboe accompaniment produced a striking effect. *Le Ménestrel* considered this one of the most poetic, most tender pieces in the work.

When *Charles VI* was performed in Italy in 1876, Filippo Filippi (*La Perseveranza*) thought the fourth act rivalled those of Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète*, Donizetti's *La Favorite*, and Verdi's *Don Carlos*; Act 1 of *Lohengrin*, Act 2 of *Fidelio*, and Act 3 of *La Vestale*—in short, with all the most colossal pages of the greatest masters. The ghost scene, Filippi enthused, was absolutely new, especially in its use of the orchestra; the fantastic and the supernatural are marvellously expressed. After this tableau, worthy of Salvator Rosa, comes the grand finale. The drama is at its apogee, passions are unleashed in a concert of voices, in which science and inspiration, harmony and melody, line and colour, idealism and intensity of sound merge into a prodigious ensemble. And while the actors sing, in the auditorium the public does not move, holds its breath, and, on the last chord, applaud wildly.

Act 5 has two scenes.

The first contains the couplets "À minuit, le seigneur de Nivelles", which Clément thought produced considerable effect. The opera ends with a reprise of the patriotic chorus. Casimir Delavigne, however, did not finish the libretto simply with the return of the patriotic refrain. According to Clément, the final verses of his poem were not set, because of the length of the performance, and the natural distaste of the French public for the new and unusual. This genre of prophetic *prosopopoeia* would be used in the finale of Berlioz's *Les Troyens* (1863) with Dido's self-immolation.

Charles:
*Sacrilèges,
N'insultez pas aux divins privilèges*

*De ces murs par vous profanés,
 Voyez se soulever les pierres sépulcrales,
 D'où sortent ces morts couronnés!
 Tout ce peuple d'ombres royales,
 Qui par ma voix vous parle en m'entourant
 Vient de votre avenir dérouler les annales
 Aux derniers regards d'un mourant.*

Le Chœur:
*Quel jour pur l'environne
 De son éclat sacré,
 Et quel espoir rayonne
 Sur son front inspiré.*

Poultier was applauded in the lovely couplets for the sentry in Act 5:

*À minuit
 Le seigneur de Nivelles
 Me mit en sentinelle,
 Et s'en alla sans bruit
 Souper avec la belle
 Qui m'attendait chez elle,
 À minuit
 Si ta belle
 Est sans foi, Sentinelle
 Garde à toi!*

Reception

The cast was of star quality: Rosine Stoltz (Odette), Julie-Dorus-Gras (Isabelle), Gilbert Duprez (Dauphin), Paul Barroilhet (Charles VI), Nicolas-Prosper Lavasseur (Raymond). According to Clément, Barroilhet showed himself to be as much an intelligent actor as gifted singer in the difficult role of Charles VI. Rosine Stoltz, as gracious as energetic, created the role of Odette with a talent that would be difficult to equal. Gilbert Duprez resigned himself to a role that was too young and overshadowed by the two others. Mme Dorus, Lavasseur and Canaple interpreted the roles of the Queen, Raymond and the Duke of Bedford.

The cast, supported by a splendid staging, secured for the opera considerable success. The diorama effects of the closing scene inside Saint-Denis were overpowering: *L'Indépendant* called it the most magnificent diorama ever seen at the theatre,¹⁴ while the illusion of the church interior, according to Théophile Gautier, was so convincing that one could also smell the incense.