

# Wagner's Unfinished French Revolution Operas: Männerlist größer als Frauenlist oder: Die glückliche Bärenfamilie, and Die hohe Braut oder Bianca und Giuseppe

Text: Peter Bassett

When Wagner was twenty-five and in his first year of marriage to Minna, he occupied himself with two works linked to the aftermath of the French Revolution: Männerlist größer als Frauenlist oder: *Die glückliche Bärenfamilie* (Men's cunning greater than women's cunning, or The happy family of bears) and *Die hohe Braut oder Bianca und Giuseppe* (The noble bride, or Bianca and Giuseppe).

The French Revolutionary Wars and their Napoleonic aftermath were still fresh in European minds in the 1830s. After 1789 many aristocratic French émigrés had taken refuge in German cities such as Coblenz in the Rhineland, where the Archbishop-Elector was the uncle of Louis XVI. These émigrés (who included the French king's brothers the Comte d'Artois and the Comte de Provence and his cousin the Prince de Condé) incited armed conflict in an effort to restore the old regime. Pillnitz Castle on the Elbe, well known to Wagner, witnessed key events in this process. The ill-considered initiatives of the émigrés prompted general mobilization by the revolutionary government, hastened the execution of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette and, ultimately, prepared the way for Napoleon Bonaparte. No wonder Wagner felt inclined to poke fun at them. Nevertheless, he had been horrified by the cruelty and excesses of the Revolution when he read about them as a seventeen year-old: 'I recall being truly appalled by the heroes of the French Revolution...; without knowledge of the prior history of France my human sympathies alone were outraged by the atrocities of the revolutionaries, and I was dominated by these purely human sentiments for so long that even in later years it cost me a real struggle to give due weight to the true political significance of those acts of violence.'

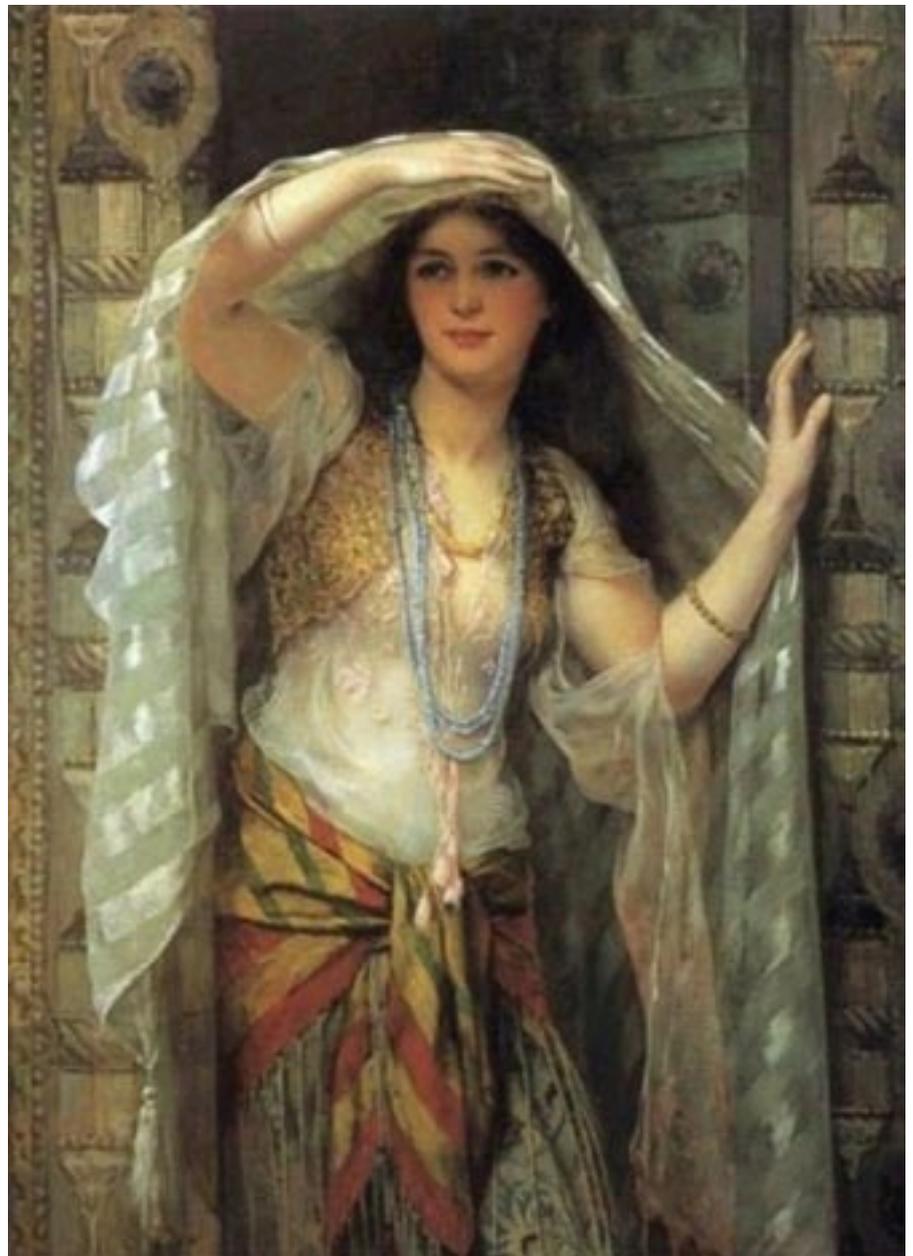
In *Die glückliche Bärenfamilie* Wagner's targets are the Baron von Abendthau ('Evening Dew') whom he describes in *Mein Leben* as a 'snobbish old man', and his friends 'the élite of the aristocratic French émigrés during the revolutionary period'. The two principal female characters have revolutionary names and each, in her own way, undermines the Baron's pride in his 'enormously old lineage' (enorm altes Geschlecht). The Baron's ugly daughter is Aurora ('the Dawn': always a threat to the evening dew). Dawn or sunrise was a widely used image during the French Revolution and other revolutions too. Her beguiling cousin is Leontine ('Lion-like'). A lion was a revolutionary symbol of power. In Wagner's prose draft, the French-named Leontine is indeed described as a French-

woman, which suggests that the whole family is at least partly French.

Wagner worked on *Die glückliche Bärenfamilie* in 1837 at Königsberg and in 1838 at Riga where he had been appointed music director. The music for three numbers was sketched in Riga before the project was abandoned. He found that the style of the music was beginning to remind him of Auber's or Adam's and so he lost interest in it. Others have suggested that the style was influenced more by Rossini. *Die glückliche Bärenfamilie* was the composer's only attempt

at a 'number' opera with spoken dialogue, in the manner of the French opéra comique and German Spieloper – the comic opera form derived from Singspiel. Today we would say 'operetta'.

The plot was based on *Women's Wiles*, one of the Tales from a *Thousand and one Nights*. The original oriental tale begins on the one hundred and ninety-sixth night of Scheherazade's resourceful attempts to keep her head, and may be summarized as follows. In the city of Baghdad, a young girl passed by a shop owned by a handsome young man



A Woman of Baghdad by William Clarke Wontner. (The clever young woman from Baghdad in the original tale used by Wagner. She became French in Wagner's version.)



*Le Petit Coblentz* by Jean-Baptiste Isabey. (This shows the French emigres in Coblentz.)

called Alá al-din, and noticed a sign above the door that read: 'There is no cunning other than men's, for it is greater than women's'. The girl resolved to outwit the young man and prove him wrong so, on the following day she made herself as attractive as possible and went to the shop on the pretext of buying something. There she began to expose parts of her beautiful body, and asked if it was fair that she should be slandered as being ugly and misshapen. The young man wondered what he had done to deserve such a display of captivating beauty, and began to improvise poetry praising her loveliness. The girl said she had been badly treated by her father, who had described her as ugly and no better than a slave girl, and had refused to allow her to be married. The young man asked who her father was, and was told that he was the Chief Judge of the highest court in Baghdad.

After the girl left the shop, the young man went to see the Chief Judge and asked for the hand of his daughter in marriage. The judge replied that his daughter was not worthy of such a fine young merchant, but the suitor, taken aback, insisted that he wished to marry her. A marriage contract was concluded and a dowry given. That night the bride was taken in procession to her husband, but when he lifted her veil he discovered underneath a face so repulsive that he decided to annul the marriage then and there. But this wasn't possible and he realized he had been tricked. On the following morning the young man rose and went about his business with a heavy heart. His friends all greeted him with mocking congratulations on his marriage. After they had left him, the first girl returned, even more attractively attired than before.

When he asked her why she was tormenting him in this way she replied that she had

been provoked by the sign over the door, and then she instructed one of his servants to have a new sign prepared reading: 'There is no cunning other than women's, for it is a mighty cunning and overcomes the falsehoods of men'. The sign was duly made and set over the door. Then she told the young man to go to the public square where he would find mountebanks, ape-dancers, bear-leaders, drummers and pipers, and invite them to come to him the next day while he was drinking coffee with his father-in-law the Chief Judge. This motley band should offer congratulations, she said, and express the hope that he wouldn't abandon them, since they were so proud of him. If the judge asked what this meant, the young man should reply that his father had been an ape-dancer but the family had come into good fortune and so now he was in business. The judge would express horror at the thought that his daughter, whose lineage could be traced back to the prophet, had married the leader of a tribe of mountebanks. Then the girl advised the young man to say that he wouldn't forsake his wife even if he were offered the kingship of the world, after which, eventually, he should allow himself 'reluctantly' to be persuaded to speak the words of divorce.

The young man did as he was advised and, to make a long story short, his father-in-law was duly outraged and the young man duly divorced. He then married the beautiful girl who had outwitted him.

So, what did Wagner do with this old tale from *The Thousand and one Nights*? Firstly, he moved the setting from Baghdad to an unidentified 'large German town'. The shop became specifically a jeweller's establishment and the young man was given the name of Julius Wander. In Wagner's version, the veiled young woman became Leontine

and the equivalent of the Chief Judge of Baghdad is Baron von Abendthau, a veritable Pooh-Bah of family conceit, who is in despair of ever marrying off his ugly daughter Aurora to anyone of comparable social rank. But Julius persuades the Baron that he is suitably well-born (though in fact he is not) and obtains consent for the marriage (he thinks, to Leontine) which takes place soon afterwards. During the ceremony, Julius discovers he has been landed with the hideous Aurora, and then Leontine appears from amongst the guests to mock the hapless groom. Aurora is revealed as Leontine's cousin. Julius is in despair.

Wagner described what happens next in the following terms:

'The beautiful lady now returns to the despairing bridegroom to exult in his misery and promises to help him out of the terrible marriage if he will remove the motto from his signboard. At this point I departed from the original, and continued as follows: the furious jeweller is on the point of tearing down the offending sign when a curious apparition leads him to pause in the act. A trainer of bears appears in the street, making his clumsy beast dance, in whom he at once recognizes his own father [called Gregor] from whom he has been parted by the curious vicissitudes of fate. He suppresses any sign of emotion, for in a flash a scheme occurs to him by which he can utilise this discovery to free himself from the hated marriage with the daughter of the snobbish old man. He engages the bear-tamer to come that evening to the garden where the ceremonies of betrothal will be celebrated before a select group of guests. To his young lady adversary, however, he announces his intention to let the sign hang over his shop for a while longer, for he hopes that the motto can still be substantiated.

After the marriage contract, containing a lot of fictional titles he has awarded himself, has been read to the assembled company, composed, as I conceived it, of the elite of the aristocratic French émigrés during the revolutionary period, the bear-tamer's whistle is suddenly heard and in he comes, together with his dancing beast. Angered by this tasteless spectacle, the astonished company becomes actually indignant when the groom, now giving vent freely to his emotion, falls into the arms of the bear-tamer and loudly proclaims him as his long-lost father. The consternation of the company becomes even greater, however, when the bear itself embraces the man they supposed to be of aristocratic pedigree; for the bear is really his brother [called Richard] who, upon the death of the



Fighting in a French town during the Revolutionary Wars.

actual bear used in the act, has enabled the poverty-stricken pair to continue to earn a living in the only way they know how by donning the skin of the deceased. The sudden discovery of his lowly origins dissolves the marriage at once.'

Leontine falls into Julius' arms, salutes his cunning and suggests that the inscription over the shop be left just as it is. She is, one might say, even more cunning than her eastern counterpart because she lets Julius think he has won their little game of wits, as any astute Victorian wife would.

It seems likely that some of the names are autobiographical: Julius Wander for instance, is presumably the composer's elder brother Julius Wagner, who trained as a goldsmith and had recently returned from 'wandering' in France. Richard, who inhabits the bear-skin, is undoubtedly the composer himself. This precariously employed theatre director in his early twenties, pursued by creditors and always on the hop, probably took ironic pleasure in comparing himself with a dancing bear! The bear would return in act one of Siegfried. How that idea must have amused Wagner!

But is Gregor a coded reference to **Ludwig Geyer**, the composer's step-father (and perhaps, as **Nietzsche** mischievously suggested, biological father)? Some commentators consider that Wagner was hinting at doubts about his paternity, but this seems unlikely. Not only is there scant reason to doubt that Richard's father was **Friedrich Wagner** as asserted in *Mein Leben*, but also Ludwig Geyer had died when Richard was only eight. **Karl Geyer**, Ludwig's brother, on the other hand was a goldsmith with whom both Richard and **Julius Wagner** had lived in Eisleben and from whom Julius had learnt his craft. If (and this is by no means certain) 'Gregor' is code for 'Geyer' the particular Geyer in question must surely be Karl, not Ludwig.

*Die hohe Braut*, based on a novel of the same name by **Heinrich König**, was planned between 1836 and 1842 as a grand opera in five acts; a history subject modelled unashamedly on French grand opera in which, typically, romantic passions are played out against a background of historical troubles. Wagner sent his prose scenario twice to Eugène **Scribe**, librettist to **Meyerbeer** in Paris, in the misguided hope that it would be shaped into a libretto for which he, the young and unknown Richard Wagner, would be asked to write the music. In this way, he

hoped, he would get his foot in the Paris door. He even translated the text into French to improve its chances, but to no avail. Undaunted, he tried the same tactic with a French prose draft of *Der fliegende Holländer*, again without success. In the end, Wagner himself wrote the *Hohe Braut* libretto, which he offered to at least two other composers before a Bohemian friend **Jan Kittl** agreed to set it to music under a new title: *Bianca und Giuseppe, oder Die Franzosen vor Nizza* (Bianca and Giuseppe, or the French at the gates of Nice). So there is no Wagnerian music at all for this opera by Wagner the librettist, but there is Czech music for it, and this made it one of the most successful Czech operas before Smetana's. Its premiere was in 1848. A modern recording is available of a performance at the National Theatre Prague in 2003 conducted by **Jan Chaloupecký**.

Wagner records in *Mein Leben* that, after the first performances of *Die hohe Braut*, a Czech critic advised him that his true calling was as a librettist, and that he was wasting his time in attempting also to compose. The novelty of Wagner the composer writing his own texts is often remarked upon but, more correctly, we should speak of Wagner the dramatist who felt compelled to write his own music. Significantly, all his advances in composition, which had a profound influence on western music, grew out of this dramatic need. He completed both text and music for thirteen operatic works, but there were another fifteen dramas for which he produced prose sketches, scenarios or librettos, and of these, four were offered to other composers.

*Die hohe Braut* is set in and around Nice in 1793, when French revolutionary armies captured the city from the Italian house of Savoy. Anticipating *Tannhäuser*, there is a scene for a chorus of pilgrims bearing the body of Brigitta who had ended her life after being persecuted for falling in love with the commoner Sormano. Kittl, with one eye on the censor, diluted much of the revolutionary content including a quotation of *La Marseillaise*. Wagner was upset by the changed ending, and asked for his name to be removed. It must have been increasingly clear to him that he needed to take control of both text and music, but his even greater need at the time was to establish a foothold in Paris, centre of the operatic firmament, and this made him compromise yet again, with *Holländer*. Little wonder that, disillusioned at last, he felt he had compromised his art while trying, unsuccessfully, to win the support of the men who ran the Paris Opéra and the Académie Royale de Musique. The strength of his reaction when it came, directed at the French musical establishment in general and Meyerbeer and his associates in particular was, in large measure self reproach and over-correction. In 1861 when he staged *Tannhäuser* in Paris, there was not a shadow of compromise. The ructions were spectacular but Wagner left with his head held high. It was a great lesson in self-reliance.