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Divine transport at the Paris Opéra: From La Création du monde to Adam and Abel

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[Apologies: this is very much work in progress, with some large gaps in terms of argument and analysis, some underdeveloped sections, and some very lengthy footnotes (which can mostly be ignored). Please: not for circulation beyond the participants of the conference!]

Music had been implicated in the domain of the sublime through its alignment with the pathetic since at least the seventeenth century, but during the mid-eighteenth century the musical register of ‘strong feeling’ became focused on terror and astonishment.¹ The pivot from terror to relief epitomised the sublime feeling experienced by the listener. Inheriting the Longinian view that the sublime is our access to the divine, Handel was widely understood as activating this effect in his listeners: elevation, transport, astonishment. In 1790s Paris, an alternative model of the musical sublime emerged, rooted in revolutionary rather than divine transport, but similarly offering spectators access to a transcendent experience, and intimations of a higher realm: Luigi Cherubini’s cataclysmic tableaux of destruction at the Théâtre Feydeau generated a musical energy that, experienced in partnership with spectacular staging and memories of powerful lived experiences, overwhelmed the listener.² Their musical effects were adumbrated by Johann Georg Sulzer and Christian Friedrich Michaelis in theorisations of the musical sublime in 1801–5, written in response to German orchestral repertory of the late eighteenth century (notably the symphonies of Mozart and Haydn). The musical sublime could be created either through uniformity (by repetition or static harmony, for example) or through diversity (using unexpected modulations, competing voices and dynamic contrasts) – in both cases creating a structure that could not be readily grasped by the listener, and was experienced as transcendent.³

Thus, different models of the sublime rooted in choral, theatrical and symphonic music, with distinct divine and human references, were in play at the turn of the eighteenth century in different national contexts. When Haydn’s widely acknowledged ‘sublime oeuvre’ Die Schöpfung was performed (in French translation) at the Paris Opéra on 24 December 1800, less than a year after its premiere in Vienna, its reception betrayed the clash of these different national traditions. Although the work was widely admired (and the orchestra famously erupted in spontaneous enthusiasm at the final rehearsal), many audience members found it boring and in need of staged action. Within the decade a number of works based on biblical stories, culminating with two tragédies lyriques – Jean-François Le Sueur’s La mort d’Adam et son apothéose (1809) and Rodolphe Kreutzer’s La mort d’Abel (1810) –

² In the operas Lodoiska (1791) [burning castle], Elisa (1794) [avalanche] and Médée (1797) [burning palace]. For more on this idea in relation to Lodoiska (1791), see Sarah Hibberd, ‘Cherubini and the Revolutionary Sublime’, Cambridge Opera Journal, 24/3 (2012), 293–318.
³ This is a very simplified summary of how the musical sublime was understood in music theory c. 1800, and is discussed at greater length in James Webster, ‘The Creation, Haydn’s Late Vocal Music, and the Musical Sublime’, in Haydn and his World, ed. Elaine Sisman (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 57–102, 61–2.
had been received as sequels (and correctives) to La Création and its access to a higher realm.

This paper outlines the journey from La Création to Adam and Abel and examines the nature of the ‘transport’ supposedly experienced by Parisian audiences in their climactic scenes, understood in the light of earlier musical expressions of the sublime. I – like contemporary critics – ask what constituted a transcendent experience in the theatre at this time. I identify associations made between aesthetic and political aims, sacred and secular subject matter, and visual and aural effects. Ultimately, I argue that Adam and Abel offer insights into the development of sublime experience in Parisian theatre, from Cherubini’s revolutionary tableaux at the Feydeau to the apocalyptic denouements of grand operas of the July Monarchy. Indeed, they shed new light on the sublime’s diversification as an aesthetic category and experience during the Empire.

‘Sublime ouvrage’

As is well known, Haydn’s oratorio Die Schöpfung (1798), to a libretto by Gottfried van Swieten, depicts and celebrates the creation of the world, as described in the first part of the book of Genesis and the book of Psalms (Old Testament), and in John Milton’s Paradise Lost (1667). Structured in three parts, it is scored for soprano, tenor and bass soloists, chorus and orchestra. In parts I and II (the first six days), the soloists represent the archangels Raphael (bass), Uriel (tenor) and Gabriel (soprano), who narrate and comment; in part 3 (the day of rest, and the first morning on earth viewed through human eyes), the bass and soprano become the characters Adam and Eve. Haydn was apparently inspired to write the piece following visits to England during the 1790s, when he heard Handel’s oratorios performed by large forces. Die Schöpfung was first heard publicly in Vienna in 1799 and was published with a bilingual text in German and English in 1800.

With its opening representation of chaos and subsequent depiction of the creation of light, Haydn’s oratorio has been understood as a prime site of the musical sublime.4 The words ‘And there was light’ had been the touchstone of the sublime since antiquity, and as Elaine Sisman has explained, Haydn created the effect of transport and awe with the brief shock of brilliant light after obscurity.5 The sudden pizzicato chord in bar 25 invites us to hear the divine spark, which floods the created world with light. It has been understood as offering a perceptible and memorable experience of the unfathomable and unthinkable in a manner


5 Sisman, ‘The Voice of God in Haydn’s Creation’. Handel took up the repeated notes and ascending 4th from Handel’s celebrated setting of ‘let there be light’ in Samson but omitted the lugubrious setting and many repetitions of ‘and light was all over’. [Raphael’s recitative, the first after the chaos, contains only biblical text (‘In the beginning...’); the chorus enters and the spirit of god moves on the face of the waters, simultaneously with the sung text, in a series of vibrating Eb major chords (bb. 17–19). The hushed and awed ‘spectators’ at the creation make the narration mysterious and distant, until the sudden pizzicato chord (b. 25) which serves as a signal.]
analogous to Kant’s newly formulated category of the dynamic sublime. The choruses, too, were unanimously hailed as sublime: they elevated the listener in a manner that channelled Handel’s choral grandeur – notably at the end of part I (‘Die Himmel erzählen’/ ‘The heavens are telling’). Received by its first audiences in Vienna rapturously – a masterpiece, a work of genius – Die Schöpfung was soon performed across Europe and received in similarly adulatory terms.

In Paris, however, its premiere as La Création du monde at the Opéra on Christmas Eve 1800 in a French adaptation commissioned from Daniel Steibelt was somewhat overshadowed by a political event. While the performance was underway, Napoleon escaped an assassination attempt a few streets away. The bomb that struck his carriage was heard by the audience, and many had apparently assumed he was dead by the time he made his late entrance – with a studied air of calm defiance. This distraction was reported in press coverage that betrayed a particular mix of respect for Haydn’s international reputation, boredom with this overlong concert, and an interest in merging reality with fiction and interpreting the biblical story politically. These characteristics of the Parisian reception form the backbone of my argument.

When he programmed La Création, Jacques de Devismes, the director of the Paris Opéra, was seeking to revitalize the institution. He re-established the variety and quality that had characterised the Concert Spirituel before its suspension at the beginning of the revolution, and hoped to restore the Opéra’s pre-eminence by blending the traditional with the new and contributing to the integration of sacred and secular ingredients that characterised Napoleon’s political vision. Moreover, in a letter to the Courrier des spectacles, Devismes drew parallels between this sonic ‘monument’, which the Opéra had erected to the glory of Haydn, and the Apollo Belvedere that had just arrived at the Louvre (purloined from the Vatican), which was widely seen as epitomising the ideals of aesthetic perfection; another

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6 See, for example, James Webster, ‘The Sublime and the Pastoral in The Creation and The Seasons’, 155.
7 Translated and adapted text by Alexandre Ségur. Steibelt was known in Paris for his opera Roméo et Juliette for the Théâtre Feydeau (1793, but still in the repertory – and Ségur wrote the libretto), and for his performances as a virtuoso pianist. This background surfaced in some of the reviews and the nature of the criticism of La Création, as described below.
9 ‘On exécutait l’introduction, et 20 bars ou à-peu-près, venaient d’être marquées lorsque le bruit lointain de l’explosion se fit entendre sans qu’on sût encore à quoi devoir l’attribuer. Un moment après l’arrivée du premier consul, le bruit du danger épouvantable auquel il venait d’échapper en se rendant à l’opéra, circulait de bouche en bouche.’ Gazette nationale (26 Dec 1800) [official newspaper].
10 A mix of sacred choral works and virtuosic pieces, performed during religious holidays when other spectacles were closed. Devismes had previously been director at the Opéra in the late 1770s, and demonstrated his reforming spirit even then, controversially blending new and old.
11 Napoleon sought an accommodation with the Pope following a decade of dechristianisation and suffused the national agenda with religious symbolism.
12 ‘C’est un monument que le Théâtre des arts élève à la gloire d’Haydn... le rang que tient l’Apollon du Belvédère parmi les plus beaux modèles de sculpture.’ Courrier des spectacles (27 frimaire an IX/ 18 Dec 1800). The Apollo Belvedere had just appeared at the Louvre from 18 brumaire an IX (9 Nov 1800). See Noiray, ‘Die Schöpfung à Paris en 1800’, 145.
commentator joined these two artworks with Napoleon’s passage of the Alps (14 May 1800) as ‘memorable events’ that exemplified the spirit of the fin-de-siècle. Together, these three events seemed to capture a moment of ‘collective exaltation’, melding artistic, political and religious optimism for the future.\footnote{This is Michel Noiray’s term, ibid. ‘[T]rois faits à jamais mémorables auront illustré la fin du dix-huitième siècle: le passage des Alpes, l’inauguration de l’Apollon du Belvédère, et l’oratorio la Création du monde, ainsi que son exécution sur le Théâtre de la république et des arts.’ Courrier des spectacles, 5 nivôse an IX (26 Dec 1800). The Alpine victory was captured in a painting by Jacques-Louis David the following year.}

No recent musical event at the Opéra had been preceded by such publicity: it was presented as an affair of state, with international significance. ‘L’exécution de ce sublime Oratorio est un triomphe aussi glorieux pour la France, que pour la patrie de cet artiste immortel’, trumpeted the Journal des débats.\footnote{See, for example, Courrier des spectacles (1 Jan 1801), letter from J.B.C. Grainville.} And there were rumours that Haydn himself was en route to Paris, to hear his oratorio performed at the Opéra by Europe’s finest orchestra.\footnote{Though Noiray has demonstrated that Steibelt’s score was in fact remarkably similar; the principal difference was that the chorus at the end of part II (‘Vollendet ist das grosse Werk’/ ‘Fulfilled at the last great work’/ ‘Le grand oeuvre est consommé’) was reprised at the end of part III, replacing ‘Sing the Lord’; Die Schöpfung à Paris en 1800’.
} However, despite the enormous budget for the event, the starry cast and the vast forces (an orchestra of 170 and chorus of 80 drawn from the city’s various musical institutions), the performance fell rather flat. Everyone seemed to agree on the work’s significance, but the actual experience at the Opéra was less convincing. One strand of critique complained that Steibelt’s arrangement was a ‘mutilation’ of the German original, and for journalists this became a key reason why it did not affect the audience in the profound way they had expected from its reputation.\footnote{Notably the chorus at the end of part II, which also replaced the final chorus of part III in Steibelt’s arrangement (‘Vollendet ist das grosse Werk’/ ‘Fulfilled at the last great work’; rendered in French as ‘Le grand ouvrage est consommé’).} Another strand focused on the poor quality of the performance, which seemed to result from the inexperience of the Opéra orchestra playing symphonic music, and from singers who were either used to concert performance and seemed overawed by the operatic setting (notably Mme Barbier-Walbonne – Gabriel, Eve) or added inappropriate ornamentation to their numbers, as if they were performing Italian opera (Garat, Uriel). Others – channelling the complaints of German and English critics – simply disliked Haydn’s imitative writing and the demands made on them as listeners, ‘l’imagination presque fatiguée d’en avoir été frappée sans relâche’.

The word ‘sublime’ was used frequently in the press, but rarely did it signify audience transport and elevation. Rather, it seemed to replicate (automatically, unthinkingly?) wider European descriptions of Haydn’s oratorio as a work of genius and gesture to its religious subject matter. Thus, for example, Devismes believed the quality of the performance of ‘ce sublime ouvrage’ revealed Haydn’s divine inspiration; some pointed to ‘Le sublime chœur des anges’ (‘Prenons la lyre’): ‘C’est l’accent de l’enthousiasme, c’est le sentiment auguste de la contemplation’.\footnote{Gazette nationale (26 Dec 1800).} Although the moments critic most admired were often the same choruses and passages of orchestral writing that Viennese critics had associated with sublime awe, they praised the music in abstract terms rather than its transcendent effect on the listener.\footnote{Courrier des spectacles (26 Dec 1800), Courrier des spectacles (27 frimaire an IX / 18 Dec 1800); (5 nivôse an IX / 26 Dec 1800).}
By far the most common and consistent complaints concerned genre, which helps us draw together the particular musico-theatrical context for the performance and the rather muted reception. As a number of critics pointed out, Parisians had limited experience of oratorios or symphonic music: ‘Les français ne sont accoutumés qu’à la musique théâtrale et dramatique; le genre épique et descriptif ne leur est pas familier’. The most common responses to La Création betray this experience: it was too long (three hours), monotonous, with no action (just narrative, contemplation, celebration). It was boring. In contrast, there was an eruption of parodies at other theatres in the days and weeks that followed, which drew large and enthusiastic audiences. As Michel Noiray has observed, these seem to have swamped the second performance of Haydn’s work on 2 January – and signalled Parisian interest in the oratorio’s theatrical potential in prophetic ways.

This tension between objective admiration and subjective boredom was complicated by sardonic political commentary that reflected on the nation’s recent emergence into the light from (revolutionary) chaos and (following the assassination attempt) the danger of slipping backwards: ‘Malheureux! nous courrions au théâtre à la Création du monde, et la France allaît être replongée dans le chaos!’ The following allusion made in the parodie at the Opéra Comique was apparently seized ‘with the greatest enthusiasm’. Arlequin declares:

C’est un sujet de circonstance
Il est tout-à-fait à propos
Que la Création commence
Lorsque nous sortons du Chaos.

In short, the Opéra gained cultural and political capital by performing the most talked-about work by the most famous composer in Europe – conquering German music (along with ancient Greek sculpture and the Alpine passage to Italy) and thereby symbolising the nation’s glorious future. But in the opera house the audience struggled to be ‘transported’, in spite of the potential to combine elevating aesthetic and political experiences in a powerfully

ouvrage est consommé’). Nevertheless, it seems the orchestral musicians were transported. Reports described how, at the final rehearsal, the orchestra ‘Cédant à un mouvement d’enthousiasme, s’est levé tout entier en laissant échapper un cri unanime d’admiration’. Gazette nationale (26 Dec 1800). Or more specifically: ‘Les musiciens, pénétrés des beautés inouïs de ce chef-d’œuvre, ne purent retenir leur enthousiasme; les applaudissements patent tout d’un trait, les chapeaux sont levés et agités en l’air, l’archet frappe à coups répétés sur le coin de l’instrument, et au milieu de ce ravissement, tous les artistes votent d’un commun accord…’. Courrier des spectacles (3 nivôse an IX / 24 Dec 1800).

20 Journal des débats (1 Jan 1801), review of the folie-vaudeville at the OC. Though for more on Parisian concert life at this time, see, for example, Alexandre Dratwicki, ‘La Réception des symphonies de Haydn à Paris. De nouvelles perspectives de recherche’, Annales historiques de la Révolution française, 340 (2005), 83–104.

21 [Sample quotes]

22 There were five between 29 December and 11 January: La Recréation du monde at the Vaudeville; Les Suites de la Création, ou le Fruit défendu and Le Jugement dernier, ou Haydn vengé at the Troubadours; Le Petit oratorio, ou une création pour rire at the Cité-Varietés; and Le Premier homme du monde, ou la Création du sommeil at the Opéra-Comique. The latter signalled the almost instinctive politicisation of theatre pieces in Paris: it referenced Napoleon (premier consul) and the new era he claimed to have inaugurated in the wake of the revolution.


24 Journal des débats (1 Jan 1801), review of Le Premier homme du monde at the OC. ‘Cette allusion a été saisie avec le plus vif enthousiasme’.
transcendent moment. The contrast with the reported effects of Cherubini’s spectacular musico-visual tableaux during the 1790s is striking, and I shall trace the coming together of these distinctive experiences of the sublime in the next section.

Theatrical response

It is the theatrical rather than press response to La Création that gives us the clearest insight into how Parisian audiences accessed transcendent experiences during the first decade of the nineteenth century. A series of oratorios and operas on biblical subjects, staged at the Opéra between 1803 and 1810, expanded the emotional range of the biblical narrative and realised its sublime potential for Parisian audiences. Their stories were drawn from the Old Testament and filtered through adaptations by German and English authors in sentimentalised and human interpretations.25 Haydn remained an important reference point for exploring the expanded emotional range of the stories. His music was recalled in two pastiche oratorios ‘mises en action’: Saul (1803) and La prise de Jéricho (1805), both arranged by Friedrich Kalkbrenner;26 and imitated and transformed in two tragedies lyriques: Le Sueur’s La mort d’Adam et son apothéose (1809) and Kreutzer’s La mort d’Abel (1810).27 I suggest we can trace a path from part III of La Création to these later operas, which appear as sequels to the story, and realisations of its potential as topical human drama.28

Two types of scene emerge in the reception of these four works as foci for sublime experience, in juxtapositions of heaven and hell. The first scene-type is the elevation of the hero to divine status in scenes of apotheosis.29 Annelies Andries has recently argued

25 They fit into the broader interest in sentimentalist biblical literature, exemplified by Chateaubriand’s Génie du christianisme (1802), which, Andries argues, encouraged artists to take up works inspired by their own Christian experiences. Le Sueur explained in 1801 that it was precisely the human-centric sentimental quality of Klopstock’s play that appealed to him: he conceived of the opera as a historical rather than mythical work. Annelies Andries, ‘Modernising Spectacle: The Opéra in Napoleon’s Paris (1799–1815)’, PhD thesis, Yale University, 2018. In chapter 4, ‘Redemptive Spectacle: The Apotheosis of a Nation in Adam and Abel’ Andries discusses the conception and reception of the two operas – including the lengthy dispute about ownership of the subject matter and the tableau of apotheosis – and Le Sueur’s Lettre en réponse à Guillard (1801) in which he explains how his new opera could reinvigorate French operatic tradition.

26 Kalkbrenner was joined by Ludwig Wenzel Lachnith in his arrangement of Saul. These were received as sort-of staged concerts spirituels: one critic explains the history of the Concert Spirituel, which filled a gap in the suspension of spectacles during the three weeks of Easter, a tradition that was inherited, though other spectacles continued. Saul was viewed as an Italian oratorio: a sort of pasticcio. Journal des débats (8 April 1803). The story of Saul’s life is told in the Book of Samuel, the Battle of Jericho features in the Book of Joshua – both in the OT, and both from Deuteronomist history.

27 The stories of Adam and Abel feature in the first half (primeval history) of the Book of Genesis in the OT. Méhul’s biblical opera Joseph for the Feydeau in 1807 enjoyed considerable popularity (drawn from the second half of Genesis, the patriarchal history).

28 Although these works have been understood as part of the French fascination for Egypt (and the Middle East in general) following Napoleon’s 1798 campaign, the biblical subject matter points to the nation’s profound need for spiritual nourishment following the dechristianisation process of the revolutionary decade. Building on the Enlightenment criticism of religious institutions, the revolutionaries diminished the power of the Catholic Church, removing the wealth and power of the clergy and abolishing religious holidays. However, in 1794 Robespierre established a new Cult of the Supreme Being, which sought to fill the (dangerous) gap left by the Church with a state-controlled spiritual movement that was still heavily reliant on the structures of the church. Napoleon’s rapprochement was in accord with this shift back towards religion.

29 The climactic scenes in which Adam and Abel ascend into heaven, for example, offered a potent message at a time when Napoleon was fashioning images of himself as a Messiah, fusing state and religion. Andries makes
compellingly that these tableaux ‘merveilleux’ represent early examples of the nineteenth-century use of religious rhetoric and symbolism in the service of narratives about national redemption, and these scenes offered potent images for Napoleon’s self-fashioning as the Messiah.  

The second scene-type is the destruction of life in scenes of horror. These seemed to echo Cherubini’s cataclysmic tableaux of the revolutionary decade, alluded to above. In this way, then, two traditions of sublime experience were rooted in political actuality and expressed through audio-visual spectacle that transported the spectator forward into a distant realm.

Heaven
James Webster has theorised a musical category of the sublime consisting of climax (built from preparation), apotheosis and denouement. The apotheosis is a thunderbolt – an astonishing moment that comes at the culmination of a difficult passage, and both releases the tension of the build-up and projects a new and unexpected light upon the build-up. This double temporal effect produces the effect of incommensurability required for the dynamic sublime. The best-known example in Die Schöpfung comes at the end of ‘Die Himmel erzählen’ (‘The heavens are telling’/ ‘Des astres nous montrent la gloire’): the basses rise repeatedly to a B flat in successive waves. Initially they resolve, and but then they are held under a chromatic alteration before rising with the ‘unfathomable’ harmonies above and breaking through onto a super-tonic D minor triad. This sudden clarity sets up the final drive to cadence.

Saul recounts the final days of the king of Israel and Judah, and David’s succession. It concludes with the chorus heard at the ends of parts II and III of La Création: ‘Le grand oeuvre est consommé’ (‘Vollendet ist das grosse Werk’/ ‘Fulfilled at the last great work’), accompanying the celebrations as David ascends to the throne. Webster identifies this chorus as a classic example of a ‘sublime climax’, with its multiple forms of intensification (including pedals, harmonies, high-points (g^{2}–ab^{2}, brass dissonances) – and the longest and grandest chorus in Des Schöpfung [more here?]}. Although it is not an apotheosis as such, its quasi-divine elevation points forward to the spectacular concluding scene of Le Sueur’s La mort d’Adam.

As Andries has demonstrated, in 1807 the Opéra finally committed itself to performing La mort d’Adam (which had been conceived in the mid 1790s). Le Sueur and his librettist this argument in her dissertation chapter. I have made a similar argument in the context of Spontini’s Fernand Cortez (1810) and the Peninsular War. See “L’épique en action:” Fernand Cortez and the Aesthetic of Spectacle (delivered as a paper at the RMA conference, London, 2016; Tosc@Bern.2017; chapter in my monograph, French Opera and the Revolutionary Sublime (in preparation)).

30 In 1801, Napoleon had signed the Concordat with Pope Pius VII, his coronation ceremony in 1804 drew on Catholic imagery and symbol, and in 1806 the festival of St Napoleon (a newly resuscitated roman martyr) had been established, with an imperial catechism linking God with Napoleon. 1806 establishment of the festival of St Napoleon (a newly resuscitated roman martyr). 15 August marked Napoleon’s birthday and the Assumption, and was declared a national holiday; an imperial catechism was introduced to link God with Napoleon – and consolidate his authority (it features such lines as: ‘we owe to Napoleon I … love, respect, obedience, fidelity, military service, and the taxes levied for the preservation and defense of the empire and his throne’). Cf J.H. Robinson, Readings in European History, Vol. II, New York: Ginn and Company, 1906, pp. 509-510

31 Cf Webster, ‘The Creation’, 82–8:
Nicholas-François Guillard decided to expand the final chorus into an apotheosis – taking their scenic inspiration from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Satan and his demons battle Abel and the celestial spirits for Adam’s soul, which is finally welcomed into heaven with the promise that god will be clement rather than vengeful towards the human race. As Andries has discovered, the scene lasted about 40 minutes, and featured 134 singers and dancers dressed as angels and demons, with pyrotechnic effects (lightning, flaming torches and the pit of hell; heaven was an aerial palace with complex lighting effects that took up the entire depth of the stage). At the conclusion, Adam was raised into heaven on a cloud, in a pose recalling Christ’s assumption, with head and arms directed to heaven.

The music uses the expected celestial tropes, which contrast with the dark, dissonant (masculine) timbres of hell that precede them. Trumpet fanfares (strengthened by woodwind and percussion) announce the transformation: a unison chorus of offstage heavenly voices banish the demons, and a gentle, melodic, high tessitura passage, with harp-like figurations, effects the ascension. The chorus of celestial spirits sings:

Fils du ciel, reprenons nos cantiques de joie,
Chantons le Dieu de l’univers !
Son tonnerre a grondé sur le front des pervers,
L’enfer a ressaisi sa proie.

(la toile baisse.)

[MORE: this para will be developed with detailed reference to the score, and comparison points with Haydn/Creation]

The work was received in the press as a staged oratorio rather than an opera. Some remained unmoved, accusing Le Sueur ‘d’avoir monté sa lyre sur un ton trop élevé’ for the regular opera attender: ‘Nous nous plaignons … que souvent la musique de *la Mort d’Adam* soit vague, indéterminée, sévère sans s’emparer de l’imagination, et triste sans émouvoir les âmes.’ However, a number of critics reported that although the music itself was ‘monotonous’, inevitably so given the old church style required for the subject, the addition of visual spectacle drew in all the senses and made it accessible to everyone, not just to learned musicians:

[T]ous se réunissent pour admirer l’apothéose d’Adam, le spectacle le plus délicieux et le plus enchanteur qui jamais ait embelli notre scène lyrique…. L’Opéra est fait pour les sens : le machiniste, le décorateur, le musicien, contribuent à l’enchantement beaucoup plus que le poète, qui ne parle qu’à l’esprit.

Indeed, for ‘B.’ writing in the *Journal de l’empire*, although audiences had forgotten what the sublime sounded like, this blend of oratorio and opera seemed to have made the sublime accessible to all, as a multisensory experience:

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32 Andries, chapter 4. Seven costume sketches: http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84543815
33 Score at Ox and CUL.
34 ‘C’est donc comme un oratorio qu’il faut regarder Adam’. *Journal de l’Empire* (23 March 1809).
35 *Gazette nationale* (1 April 1809).
36 *Journal de l’Empire* (23 March 1809).
Depuis longtemps, nos âmes, endurcies et desséchées par l’habitude des bagatelles lyriques et théâtrales, semblent avoir perdu le sentiment et le goût sublime. Le magnifique oratorio de Haydn, exécuté à l’Opéra il y a environ dix ans, produisit plus d’étonnement que de plaisir. On ne peut supporter aujourd’hui le Stabat de Pergolèse. Les grands morceaux, dans les arts, fatiguent notre intelligence, et accablent notre frivolité. … [S]i la sublime de sa musique [de La mort d’Adam] n’était pas à la portée de tous les auditeurs, la miraculeuse apothéose suffirait pour électrifier la multitude : elle est à la portée de tous les spectateurs. Il faut de l’âme pour sentir les grandes beautés d’une composition musicale ; il ne faut que des yeux pour apprécier cette merveilleuse optique.

Les malveillants diront : ce genre est monotone et ennuyeux. Oui, le sublime est monotone et ennuyeux pour ceux qui ne trouvent d’amusement et de variété que dans des sons mous et effémérisés, dans les colifichets d’une mélodie vague et sans expression, dans les prestiges d’une voix légère et brillante. M. Lesueur a peut-être fait trop d’honneur à ses auditeurs, quand il a jugé capable de s’élever jusqu’à la hauteur de la musique sacrée, des hommes et des femmes noircis dans les salons et dans les concerts, de roulades, de traits, de passages, de modulations voluptueuses, d’ariettes de bravoure, et de toute la thauamaturgie du gosier. Mais le beau est toujours beau. … M. Lesueur n’a point dû, pour plaire à des gens blasés énerver sa lyre, et rebaisser par des agréments mesquins, le grand pathétique de son sujet ; il n’a point dû faire de la Mort d’Adam un joli opéra, mais une œuvre sublime.

[MORE: this quotation needs unpacking properly: tension between elite and popular listeners in experiencing the sublime; transported vs. electrified; eye vs. ear]

**Hell**

The impact of the apotheoses in Saul and Adam as sublime experiences derived in part from striking contrast with the preceding scenes. The reception of the oratorio La prise de Jérico and Kreutzer’s opera La mort d’Abel points to a delight in these horrifying scenes and their significance as potential sites of sublime experience in their own right.

The cataclysmic conclusion to Jérico seems to have been its highlight: archangels with flaming swords descended on the city and set it alight, causing earthquakes to collapse its walls while they rescued the Jewish prisoners in Baal’s temple. It was accompanied by music from Haydn’s first oratorio, Die sieben letzen Worte unseres Erlösers am Kreuze (1786). The concluding 90-second ‘Terremoto’ (presto e con tutto la forza) depicts an earthquake triggered by Christ’s death: a building, unstoppable stream of loud chords (highlighted with trumpets and timpani), offbeat accents, swirling scalar figures and tremolos, culminate in a thrilling fortississimo. It has the effect of Webster’s thunderbolt, both releasing pent-up tension and casting a retrospective new and unexpected light upon it. Critics complained that the overwhelming visual spectacle did not leave enough space for the music in this scene, and it is true that the brevity of the Haydn movement probably did not allow audiences to take in and fully absorb the unfolding horror of the spectacle. The work survived only for a handful of performances, but nevertheless points forward to the ways in which horror was to become a crucial component of the ‘sublime’ experience of Abel.

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37 The orchestral language has much in common with the much longer symphonie guerrière in Cherubini’s Lodoiska (1791), which I have argued elsewhere is an example of the ‘revolutionary sublime’ sound palette.
Kreutzer’s opera concludes with Abel’s ascension into heaven, accompanied by a chorus of angels. Critics compared this ‘pittoresque’ scene unfavourably with Adam’s apotheosis in Le Sueur’s opera and reserved their praise for the scene of Abel’s fratricide, which proved to be the opera’s principal site of sublime experience.\(^{38}\)

One critic noted how the opera’s creators had returned to an earlier approach to the story of Adam and Eve by focusing on its diabolical aspect:

La conspiration du Diable contre le genre humain, la désobéissance du premier homme et la condamnation de toute sa race, ont pu fournir au sombre et farouche Milton quelques sublime tableaux dans le style du Jugement dernier, de Michel-Ange ; mais les successeurs de Quinault doivent nous présenter des idées moins noires: ce n’est même ni à ses diables, ni à son enfer que Milton doit sa gloire; c’est au Paradis terrestre.\(^{39}\)

In Act 2, Cain is in the abyss with the rebel angels who forge the mace with which he will murder his brother. Kreutzer creates a music that is appropriately ‘sauvage, barbare, effrayante’; but critics complained that ‘on ne peut supporter long-temps sans fatigue une musique de la même couleur, sut-tout quand cette couleur n’a rien en soi d’agréable: la monotonie même du sublime est pénible’.\(^{40}\) It was in Act 3 that the opera really came alive, with the confrontation between the two brothers:

\[
\text{CAIN, d’une voix concentrée.} \\
\text{Quelle horreur me saisit. Je frémis... je m’égare...} \\
\text{Abel ! un grand malheur aujourd’hui se prépare.} \\
\text{Dans mon cœur irrité d’affreux pressentiments...} \\
\text{Un avenir funeste... Ah! fuis, il en est temps.} \\
\text{Cache-toi, cache-toi; c’est l’enfer qui m’anime...}
\]

Despite Abel’s entreaties, Cain finally announces that it is the devil he obeys, and murders his brother:

\[
\text{(L’éclair brille, le tonnerre gronde.)} \\
\text{CAIN.} \\
\text{Eh quoi ! toujours le ciel pour Abel se déclare !} \\
\text{Eh bien ! injuste Dieu, puisqu’Abel t’est si cher,} \\
\text{Tiens, qu’il reçoive aussi ce présent de l’enfer.} \\
\text{(Il le frappe.)} \\
\text{(Le finale commence au coup de massue.)}
\]

Frozen in an attitude of shock and horror, Cain listens to an (unseen) underground chorus of devils celebrating their victory:

\(^{38}\) Andries documents the rivalrous claims between the authors of the two operas over whose idea the apotheosis was in the first place; a legal dispute over claims of plagiarism was reported in the press over a period of months.

\(^{39}\) Journal de l’Empire (26 March 1810).

\(^{40}\) Journal de l’Empire (26 March 1810).
A number of critics homed in on the singer Etienne Lainez’s talents in this scene as Cain: his ability not only to feel the heightened emotions of his character, but to communicate them to the audience, who in turn shuddered and felt those same emotions, sharing in the full horrifying experience. Here, the locus of the sublime is understood as lying in the singer’s expressive acting, which transports the audience:

Une des plus belles scènes de l’ouvrage, sous le double rapport du dialogue et de la musique, c’est l’entretiens qui précède le meurtre d’Abel : il fait frémir ; et c’est toujours un plaisir, même à l’Opéra. C’est là que Lainez a produit un effet extraordinaire ; c’est là qu’il fait admirer sa terrible énergie, et qu’on a reconnu le grand acteur. Il a peint le trouble, le remords, le désespoir de Cain, le bouleversement de son âme qui tout à la fois médite et rejette le crime, qui tremble de ses propres fureurs, qui désire et qui craint sa vengeance : il a porté jusqu’au sublime l’expression de ces mouvements divers ; et j’ai cru voir Talma dans un de ces moments d’affreuse vérité, où ce grand tragédien épouvante les spectateurs, et fait passer dans leur âme les violents transports dont il est lui-même agité. La pantomime et les accents pathétiques de Lainez contribueront beaucoup au succès de l’opéra : l’acteur entre en partage de gloire avec le compositeur ; l’un et l’autre doivent s’embrasser.41

Le monologue de Cain : Qu’ai-je vu ? quelle horreur, &c., est d’un grand effet. On ne peut s’empêcher de frémir lorsqu’on voit ce malheureux poussé au crime par une force irrésistible, ramasser la fatale massue en s’écriant d’une voix terrible : Ah ! saisissons ce présent de l’enfer. Il y a dans la musique de cette scène, des effets dignes du génie de Gluck, & ce génie paraît aussi avoir inspiré Lainez, car il ajoute encore à la force tragique de la situation, par une brûlante énergie.42

[MORE: unpacking of these quotes required]

[MORE: discussion of the musical effects required, including picking up the reference to Gluck (and Orphée)]

The critical language is reminiscent of that used to describe the ‘sublime’ acting powers of Julie-Angélique Scio in the role of Médée in Cherubini’s opera at the Feydeau in 1797. Like Lainez, as she tells Jason she has murdered their children in vengeance for his betrayal, Scio seems to sublimate the horror of the situation, discharged in extravagant scenic, orchestral and vocal effects, and stimulate a reciprocal emotion in the audience – who are encouraged

41 Journal de l’Empire (26 March 1810).
42 Journal de Paris (24 March 1810).
to share her trauma. Abel thus seems to gesture back to the cathartic effect of such operas created during the aftermath of the Terror more than a decade earlier, as well as embrace more current fears in the collective consciousness [MORE: this idea needs expansion; alternative (diabolical) viewpoint to Andries’s focus on Napoleon as Messiah].

These four works staged at the Opéra between 1803 and 1810, inspired in part by the 1800 performance of La Création, offer two potential routes to an experience of the sublime, that audiences seem to have accessed: divine elevation to a higher abstract plane (via the familiar musical tropes of celestial harmony, communicated by choruses, orchestra and scenic display on a grand scale); and the channelling of violent onstage emotions rooted in real-world experiences (via communicative acting (especially in recitative) and spectacular orchestral and scenic effects on a grand scale). The distinction between objective admiration and subjective boredom that was observed in the reception of La Création is broken down in multi-sensory tableaux that depended on the combined effect of music and staging to overwhelm the audience – and the added enhancement of political topicality and personal investment in the drama.

The literary scholar Cian Duffy has observed that eighteenth-century encounters with the sublime have tended to be read as essentially free from cultural and political bias, as the disinterested transcendence of empirical phenomena. Rather, they have been viewed as precursors to the transcendentalist paradigm of the sublime set out by Kant. Duffy contends that this critical-theoretical bias came to be adopted by many subsequent histories. For musicologists, the hold of Kant can also be traced to Michaelis’s articles (1801, 1805), which have been accepted as ‘defining’ the traits of the musical sublime, and even written into our understanding of the period with James Webster’s coinage of ‘the age of the Kantian musical sublime’. The reception of La Création and its spin-off works should encourage us, however, to widen the optic through which we view sublime transport, to include transnational contexts, multisensory experiences and political agendas.

43 I argue that Scio’s performance provided a form of catharsis for the unresolved trauma of the Terror and its aftermath, allowing the audience to experience Medea’s sublimation of her fury as sublimation of their own unresolved emotions: ‘Medea’s Vengeance’, in *Sonorous Sublimes: Music in European Culture, 1680–1880*, ed. Sarah Hibberd and Miranda Stanyon (in preparation).
