

# VOX IMAGO

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GIOACHINO ROSSINI  
MOÏSE ET PHARAON

RICCARDO MUTI  
TEATRO ALLA SCALA



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## MOÏSE ET PHARAON

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### MOÏSE ET PHARAON: LISTENING GUIDE

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Until recently Rossini's four-act French opera, *Moïse et Pharaon*, which the composer presented to the Parisian public on 26 March 1827, was largely known in a poor Italian translation, entitled either *Mosè* or *Il nuovo Mosè*, to differentiate it from the related three-act Italian opera that Rossini had written a decade earlier for the Teatro San Carlo of Naples (*Mosè in Egitto*, 5 March 1818). That transformation from *Mosè* to *Moïse et Pharaon* offers a fascinating glimpse of the operatic world within which Rossini pursued his artistic goals.<sup>1</sup>

#### The Background: *Mosè in Egitto*

It was to the Théâtre Italien that Gioachino Rossini first turned his attention when he began his official activities in Paris in 1824, mounting productions of his major Italian works, some of which - such as *La donna del lago*, *Zelmira*, and *Semiramide* - were unknown in France. Few doubted, however, that among his goals was to compose operas in French for the primary theater of the capital, the Académie Royale de Musique, commonly known as the Opéra. He prepared his way carefully, becoming comfortable with the French language, courting government favor (his *Il viaggio a Reims* was written for the coronation of Charles X in 1825), and developing a new generation of French singers proficient with Italian vocal style. Rossini's earliest efforts at the Opéra reflect a deliberate plan. Instead of beginning immediately with a new opera in French, he adapted two of his finest Italian serious operas, works whose emphasis on theatrical spectacle made them particularly congenial to the traditions of French dramaturgy. Both operas, in fact, had been written for the Teatro San Carlo of Naples, where Rossini had functioned as music director between 1815 and 1822. For Naples he wrote his most original and historically most significant operas, works whose impact was fully felt by the next generation of Italian composers during the 1820s and 1830s, including Bellini and Donizetti, and persisted through the early years of Verdi during the 1840s. Of all Italian cities, Naples was the most influenced by French culture, a legacy of the reign of Murat during the Napoleonic era, and the operas of Gluck and Spontini were frequently seen there. It was natural, then, that Rossini should choose to revise two Neapolitan operas as his calling cards at the Opéra. *Le siège de Corinthe*, a French adaptation of *Maometto II* (Naples, Teatro San Carlo, 3 December 1820), had its premiere at the Opéra on 9 October 1826; *Moïse*, a French adaptation of *Mosè in Egitto*, followed on 26 March 1827. In each case the libretto was prepared jointly by an Italian poet, Luigi Balocchi, who worked closely with Rossini between 1825 and 1829,<sup>2</sup> and a French poet (Alexandre Soumet for *Le siège de Corinthe* and Étienne de Jouy for *Moïse*). Their job was to help Rossini transform works conceived for the Italian stage into French operas, translating into French those compositions that were to be reused in whole or in part, and preparing new text for the added sections and numbers.

That *Mosè in Egitto* was an opera particularly appropriate for a French public was recognized already by the young French composer Ferdinand Hérold. At the request of Giovan Battista Viotti, director of the Académie Royale de Musique and the Théâtre Italien of Paris, Hérold visited Italy in 1821 seeking to engage new singers and to investigate new repertory. After having seen *Mosè in Egitto* in Florence, Hérold traveled to Naples, where he and Rossini became good friends. In a letter of 13 April 1821 he reported to Viotti that from his point of view: "Rossini's oratorio *Mosè in Egitto* is one of his best works. Very little is needed to permit the music to have a powerful effect at the French Opéra". And Hérold continued: "Of all Rossini's serious operas, I believe that *Mosè* is the only one whose poem and musical genre might be appropriate to French opera, and I think it would be extremely effective. I discussed this idea with Rossini, who would be delighted and who would [be prepared to] make several changes".<sup>3</sup>

By the end of April Hérold was *en route* to Paris with a copy of the score and a letter from Rossini to Viotti, assuring the director of his willingness to assist in the translation of the opera into French. Furthermore, he added, "I will gladly cooperate in rendering this score the least imperfect possible, that is, I will compose new pieces of a more religious character than those presently in the opera". Without taking up Rossini's offer, Viotti had the opera translated into French by Castil-Blaze, who finished his work by early January 1822. To the King's representative for the theaters, Baron Papillon de Laferté, Castil-

Blaze wrote these flowery words: “It has grandiose and colossal forms, which suit our premiere lyric theater, the style is severe, but strong and passionate. Since the effects are mostly produced by the ensemble, it provides the opportunity to employ to our advantage the excellent chorus of the theater. Everywhere in this marvellous work there reigns a sense of novelty, a force of color, an originality in the cut and conduct of the pieces that would ensure its success, even had many brilliant trials [in other theatres] not already guaranteed it”.

But the time was not ripe. It was judged wiser to consign Rossini’s operas to the Théâtre-Italien and to leave the sacred Opéra unsullied by the upstart Italian. And so, Castil-Blaze’s translation was rejected by the jury of the Opéra, which judged it “defective in its conduct of the drama”. *Mosè in Egitto*, with some modifications (introduced probably by Hérold), was therefore first heard by the Parisian public at the Théâtre-Italien on 20 October 1822, where it was well received, but did not inspire enthusiasm.

The opera Hérold brought with him to Paris was not the opera Rossini had presented to the Neapolitans in 1818. From the first, *Mosè in Egitto* featured choruses and ensembles derived from *Exodus*: plagues of darkness (with which the opera opens) and fire (with which the first act concludes), the death of the first born of Egypt (with which the second act concludes), the crossing of the Red Sea (the third act). Following the traces of the tragedy by Francesco Ringhieri, *Osiride*, on which it is based, Rossini’s *Mosè in Egitto* balanced these Biblical scenes with a more personal, tragic love story between the son of Faraone (Osiride) and a Hebrew maiden (Elcia).<sup>4</sup> The choruses and ensembles, usually cited by Hérold and Castil-Blaze when they speak of music appropriate for France, received most of Rossini’s attention. Many remained unchanged when he revised the opera for a new series of performances at the Teatro San Carlo during the Lenten season of 1819. The third act, however, had not succeeded well in the original production, probably because of defects in the staging; Rossini rewrote most - if not all - of the act a year later, introducing the famous Preghiera, “Dal tuo stellato soglio”. Unfortunately, no musical source has yet been found for the 1818 Finale.

Despite the presence of some highly accomplished music (a Duetto for Elcia and Osiride in the first act, one for Osiride and Faraone in the second, and a Duetto for the would-be lovers that becomes a Quartetto near the end of the second act), many of the scenes that explore the individual fate of the principal characters are less fully realized. Indeed, in 1818 Rossini allowed a young composer, Michele Carafa, to prepare the angry Aria for Faraone in the first act, “A rispettarmi apprenda”, and perhaps much of the recitative of the second. To Faraone’s wife and Osiride’s mother, Amaltea, he assigned an Aria in the second act in which she sings to Mosè and Aronne of her unhappiness (“La pace mia smarrita”), but lifted it with only minimal change from a youthful ‘sacred’ opera, *Ciro in Babilonia* (1812). Yet another composer was allowed to prepare the Aria in which Mosè threatens Faraone in the second act, “Tu di ceppi m’aggravi la mano?”. The composer then derived the following chorus for the Egyptian nobles, “Se a mitigar tue cure”, from his 1817 opera *Adelaide di Borgogna*, although he wrote the entire piece out anew.

During subsequent years in Naples, Rossini made other changes to his original Italian score. Already in 1819 he omitted the Amaltea Aria, which sounds stylistically out of place in *Mosè in Egitto*. For performances in February and March 1820, as Bruno Cagli has demonstrated,<sup>5</sup> he replaced Carafa’s “A rispettarmi apprenda” for Faraone with a new Aria of his own composition, “Cade dal ciglio il velo”, the autograph of which is bound into Rossini’s autograph manuscript of the opera. The *Mosè in Egitto* that Hérold brought to Paris in 1821, in short, had been modified significantly since its 1818 premiere, but the changes were somewhat haphazard. It should come as no surprise, then, that already in April 1821 Rossini had offered to compose for the Opéra “new pieces of a more religious character than those presently in the opera”. Five and a half years later he would have the opportunity.

### Transforming an Opera: The Sources of *Moïse et Pharaon*

After the success of his French adaptation of *Maometto II* as *Le siège de Corinthe* in October 1826, Rossini decided to turn his attention to *Mosè in Egitto*. The administration of the theater wanted the work mounted no later than the Lenten period of 1827, an unusually short period of gestation for the Opéra. By early January 1827 Rossini was hard at work, as Étienne Pellot wrote to the singer Giuditta Pasta (at that point engaged in Naples) on 6 January 1827: “The Maestro and M.<sup>r</sup> de Jouy have laid out the action. The poem is entirely changed. There will be a great deal of pomp. Everything promises that this will be one of the most beautiful spectacles ever seen”. Ferdinando Paër, no friend of Rossini’s, reported to a friend on 17 January: “Il Rossini è tutto intento à impiastrare di nuovo parole francesi sopra il suo *Vecchio Moïse*. Ciò fa la delizia del suo Protettore il Viconte”. By 20 January Rossini was supposed to give the first act to the copyists and the second on 29 January, with the rest following soon after. He apparently lived up to his commitment, since rehearsals went smoothly.

He had much to accomplish. The three-act Italian opera was constructed as follows:<sup>6</sup>

*Mosè in Egitto*

Act I

- N. 1 Introduzione
- N. 2 Invocazione e Quintetto
- N. 3 Duetto Elcia e Osiride
- N. 4 Aria Faraone  
(Originally “A rispettarmi apprenda” by Michele Carafa;  
in 1820 replaced by Rossini with his newly composed “Cade dal ciglio il velo”)
- N. 5 Finale Primo

Act II

- N. 6 Duetto Osiride e Faraone
- N. 7 Aria Amaltea  
(Borrowed with small changes from *Ciro in Babilonia*; cut by Rossini already in 1819)
- N. 8 Scena e Quartetto
- N. 9 Aria Mosè  
(Not by Rossini)
- N. 10 Coro  
(Borrowed largely from *Adelaide di Borgogna*)
- N. 11 Aria Elcia

Act III

- (as revised in 1819)
- Marcia  
(Reprise of the Marcia from Finale Primo)
- N. 12 Preghiera e Finale

The revisions for Paris made by Rossini and his librettists sought to highlight and expand the spectacular elements of the Italian opera by further developing the role of the chorus and by adding dance movements absent in the original. At the same time they removed or revised the weaker elements of *Mosè in Egitto*, particularly the self-borrowings and the use of material written by other composers, imposing a stylistic unity that the original opera sometimes lacked. Finally, the recitative needed to be recast completely in French. All of the musical changes seem to have been done by Rossini himself: for the Paris Opéra nothing else would have been acceptable.

Rossini's four-act French opera was constructed as follows:<sup>7</sup>

*Moïse et Pharaon*

Act I

- N. 1 Introduction  
(Newly composed)
- N. 2 Chœur  
(Coro di Ninfe from *Armida*, Act III, «Qui tutto è calma», revised and reorchestrated)
- N. 3 Duo Anaï e Aménophis  
(*Mosè in Egitto* N. 3, Duetto Elcia e Osiride)
- N. 4 Marche et Chœur
- N. 5 Duo
- N. 6 Final  
(*Mosè in Egitto* N. 5, Finale Primo)

Act II

- N. 7 Introduction  
(*Mosè in Egitto* N. 1, Introduzione)
- N. 8 Invocation et Quintetto  
(*Mosè in Egitto* N. 2, Invocazione e Quintetto)
- N. 9 Duo Aménophis et Pharaon  
(*Mosè in Egitto* N. 6, Duetto Osiride e Faraone)
- N. 10 Air et Chœur Sinaïde

(Sinaïde is the new name for Amaltea)  
 (*Mosè in Egitto* N. 11, Aria Elcia, with some important cuts and revised cadences)

Act III

N. 11 Marche et Chœur

(*Bianca e Falliero*, Act I, “Viva Fallier”, revised, reorchestrated, and expanded)

Air de danse, N. 1

Air de danse, N. 2

Air de danse, N. 3

(Newly composed, although some melodies from N. 2 are taken from *Armida* and *Ermione*)

N. 12 Final

(Newly composed, except for the Andantino, «Je tremble et soupire», which is derived from the Andantino, “Mi manca la voce”, in *Mosè in Egitto* N. 8, Scena e Quartetto. Some musical ideas are also borrowed from *Ermione*)

Act IV

N. 13 Récitatif et Duo Anai et Aménophis

(*Mosè in Egitto*, the opening Scena e Duetto from N. 8, Scena e Quartetto, with newly composed recitatives)

N. 14 Air Anai

(Newly composed)

N. 15 Prière

N. 16 Final

(*Mosè in Egitto* N. 12, Preghiera e Finale, with significant modifications for the Final)

N. 17 Cantique

(Newly composed. This concluding chorus was omitted during rehearsals in Paris and does not figure in the La Scala performances)

Rossini did not create a completely new autograph manuscript of *Moïse*, nor did he cannibalize the autograph of the Italian *Mosè in Egitto*, which he left intact.<sup>8</sup> Instead, he prepared a large number of different kinds of autograph and partially autograph sources, some extensive, some fragmentary, which served Rossini’s publisher, Eugène Troupenas, as the material from which he could prepare the printed full score of the opera that he issued in 1827.

Poor Troupenas! his task must have been extremely difficult. It hardly comes as a surprise, then, that the full score he published in 1827, from which all later sources derive, is filled with errors and misinterpretations. When a critical edition of *Moïse* is finally prepared, it will be necessary to retrace Rossini’s steps, returning wherever possible to autograph sources, verifying every note against manuscript performance materials at the Opéra, which were certainly prepared independently from the Troupenas edition and which probably reflect changes introduced by Rossini during rehearsals. Until then, however, Troupenas’ edition remains the best starting point for performers, as long as they approach the printed score with a healthy scepticism.

### The Music of *Moïse e Pharaon*

Whether the interventions of Rossini and his librettists were all successful has been the source of considerable debate over the past thirty years. More than anything else, critics have lamented that the brilliant opening of *Mosè in Egitto*, with the curtain raised on the Egyptians thrown into darkness, is transported to the beginning of Act II for *Moïse*. Act I of the French opera, instead, opens on the Hebrews, lamenting their bondage and then, chided by Moïse, praying. Their prayers are answered by the appearance of a rainbow and the sound of “A mysterious voice”, which offers Moïse and his people the tablets of the law. It is an impressive scene, melodically varied, orchestrally rich, ranging from passages with full orchestral accompaniment (“Dieu puissant du joug de l’impie”) to those for voices alone (“Dieu de la paix, Dieu de la guerre”). Verdi would remember it when composing *Nabucco* fifteen years later.<sup>9</sup> However musically successful the new scene may be, however, the opening of *Moïse* lacks the dramatic urgency of the Italian original.

Another choice that weakens the impact of the opera is the revision of the Aria Elcia, which ends Act II in *Mosè in Egitto*. In this Aria, originally sung to Osiride by his beloved, Elcia, the Hebrew maiden tries to convince the prince to marry the Armenian princess chosen by his father as his future bride and to allow her and her people to leave Egypt. Infuriated, Faraone’s son threatens Mosè, at which point a thunder bolt strikes him dead, the Angel of Death passes over Egypt, and the distraught Elcia sings of her anguish as the

curtain falls. In *Moïse*, where the prince (now called Aménophis) is not killed, the Aria closes the second act as the Air et Chœur Sinaïde, sung by Aménophis' mother, rather than by his beloved. And at the end of the piece he seems to agree to the wedding, so that the act ends as if everything will be resolved. While the music of the cabaletta can stand with either text, there can be no question that it is more effective in its original form.

Yet, taking the opera as a whole, it is difficult not to see *Moïse* as a distinct improvement on *Mosè in Egitto*. All the weakest parts of the original work, especially the useless arias for Faraone (whether that of Carafa or Rossini's replacement), Amaltea (a self-borrowing), and Mosè (by a collaborator) are removed definitively. By assigning Elcia's original Aria to Sinaïde, Rossini provided himself the opportunity to write a new Aria for Anaï, whose beloved is alive to hear that she has decided to join her people. "Je l'aimais, je l'aimais", she sings: "Je fuis sa presence". It is one of Rossini's finest arias, incomparably more powerful than the pieces omitted.

While Act III, almost entirely new, features the *divertissement* so beloved of the French (both the introductory chorus and the dances are expertly crafted), it also has a powerful Finale, of which only the Andantino, "Je tremble et soupier", is derived from *Mosè in Egitto*. In it we hear of the plagues that are besetting Egypt and the decision of Pharaon to abandon the chained Hebrews in the desert, where he anticipates they will meet their death. The music is powerful, and the role of Moïse is noticeably expanded. Even the more conventional gestures take on an individual note (for example, the massive syncopated cadential figuration). Some of this is derived from what Rossini called his little *Guillaume Tell*, the Neapolitan *Ermione*, although it is completely transformed for the new context.

But we must not exaggerate the differences between the two scores: the numbers carried over from *Mosè in Egitto* into *Moïse* (Nn. 3-10, 12 in part, 13, 15, and 16 in part) are essentially unchanged orchestrally, and the new numbers in *Moïse* (Nn. 1-2, 11, most of 12, 14, part of 16, and 17) are scored for the same instruments as *Mosè in Egitto*, even if Rossini handles the orchestra with more assurance in 1827 than he did in 1818 and 1819. That Rossini supervised the revision of the vocal lines in the numbers carried over from *Mosè in Egitto* is apparent everywhere: words and music fit together beautifully, the changes are simple and always musical. Whether as prepared for Naples in 1818-1820 or as revised for Paris in 1827, Rossini's opera about Moses and the Exodus from Egypt remains one of the composer's finest achievements.

1. I am indebted to several recent treatments of this history, especially to PAOLO ISOTTA, *I diamanti della corona. Grammatica del Rossini napoletano*, part of his presentation of *Mosè in Egitto*, etc., in the collana, *Opera*, Serie Prima, vol. 4 (Torino, 1974). Among more recent studies, see BRUNO CAGLI, «Tra cielo e terra», and M. ELIZABETH C. BARTLET, «The Parisian Première of *Moïse* (26 March 1827) and Its Context», in the programma di sala for the performances at the Rossini Opera Festival (1997), as well as the essays by BRUNO CAGLI and SERGIO RAGNI in *Attorno a Moïse et Pharaon* (Pesaro, 1997).

2. Balocchi also wrote the libretto of *Il viaggio a Reims* in 1825 and, in 1829, prepared a singing translation in Italian of Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* (Paris, Académie Royale de Musique, 3 August 1829), the composer's first and only completely original opera in French and the last theatrical work to issue from his pen. Balocchi's translation was published by Artaria of Vienna in their printed edition of *Guillaume Tell*.

3. All letters are cited after *Gioachino Rossini: Lettere e documenti*, edited by Bruno Cagli and Sergio Ragni (Pesaro, 1992, 1996, 2000).

4. Franco Piperno has argued convincingly that these characteristics of Rossini's opera derive from a decades-long tradition in Naples of Lenten operas based on Old Testament stories. See his «Il *Mosè in Egitto* e la tradizione napoletana di opere bibliche», in *Gioachino Rossini 1792-1992: Il testo e la scena*, edited by Paolo Fabbri (Pesaro, 1994), 255-71.

5. See *Lettere e documenti*, I: 410.

6. The structure reflects Rossini's autograph manuscript. Recitative accompanied by the strings - not always by Rossini - separates the individual musical numbers and opens Act II. A critical edition of *Mosè in Egitto*, ed. by Charles Brauner, will be published in 2004 by the Fondazione Rossini of Pesaro.

7. The structure reflects the full score printed in Paris by Eugène Troupenas. Newly-composed recitative accompanied by the strings separates most individual musical numbers.

8. It is preserved today in the collection of the Conservatoire at the Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris, Département de la Musique, MSS 1326 and 1327. The manuscript, of course, is a composite of music composed in 1818, 1819, and 1820.
9. See PIERLUIGI PETROBELLI, «Dal *Mosè* di Rossini al *Nabucco* di Verdi», first published in 1966, but most easily accessible in his *La musica nel teatro: saggi su Verdi e altri compositori* (Torino, 1998), 7-33.