

NOURRIT

LES MARTYRS REVIVED

by John Allitt

The recent revival in London of Donizetti's Les martyrs contradicted general opinion which for years considered the opera to be an inferior version of Poliuto. Though Les martyrs contains music from the earlier opera on the same subject, both operas stand in their own right as different works. It should be remembered that Donizetti did not envisage Poliuto, banned by the Neapolitan censorship as having much chance of being performed. Poliuto (composed in 1838 but not performed until ten years later) may be understood as the culmination of the style we now associate with Donizetti's Neapolitan years, whereas Les martyrs (1840) looks forward to changes in the composer's style brought about by new demands and pressures caused by the Parisian operatic stage.

In my book on Donizetti, written long before hearing Les martyrs, I maintained that it was wrong to perform Poliuto with odd extracts from Les martyrs as was once the fashion - Les martyrs takes its stand in the realm of French grand opera. Donizetti reorchestrated many of the extracts he used from the earlier opera, modifying the vocal line for the new French text and according to the precepts of Parisian operatic taste. The music which he composed for the additional scenes in Scribe's libretto reveals a new Donizetti conscious of various European masters, for example, Spontini, Cherubini, Beethoven and Weber. The music is also fundamental for any assessment of Verdi.

Les martyrs poses problems for a modern audience. It is a long work and requires the inclusion of the ballet without which Act 2 becomes irrelevant. Furthermore, a ballet was an integral part of 'grand opera'. The opera also requires to be sung in the original French, otherwise many of the work's subtleties are lost. I martiri was a dubious edition, satisfying no one.

The French tenor Adolphe Nourrit inspired Poliuto from the pens of Donizetti and Cammarano. On 29th April 1838 he wrote in a letter, '... I am making my debut in an opera by Donizetti, especially written for me and the subject of which I chose myself. Its the

one I dreamt of on leaving France, it is Corneille's Polyeucte in which I have found some fine musical situations, and you know how much I believe in the sentiments which I shall have to express in the martyr's role... The subject pleased Donizetti even more, since its subject is entirely new to Italy and because it gives him a chance to do something different from what he has done up to now. The Christians have gone to his head, and he is counting on the effect of religious chants in the midst of dramatic situations full of tragedy. We have not kept to the rather too noble drama of Corneille before the triumph of the religious sentiment. We have allowed human passion to develop and thus the sacrifice is all the finer. The poet (Cammarano) working for Donizetti, has also adopted this plot confidently and is already working on the plan which I wrote for him myself in Italian'.

The story of St. Polyeuctus as remoulded by singer, librettist and composer offered Donizetti two essential qualities to inspire his particular genius: religious truth (literal or allegorized as in L'elisir d'amore) and the bringing into play of archetypal passions. Such precepts he had learnt from his teacher, Mayr, and who in his study of the history of the oratorio had judged Les martyrs to be closer to that form than pure opera. All of which helps to indicate the seriousness with which Donizetti approached the subject, it also helps us to know how we should approach the work if we are going to appreciate its particular merits.

Eugene Scribe rewrote Cammarano's libretto in order to bring it closer to Corneille's play. The open display of emotions found in Poliuto had to be more concealed for French taste and emphasis was given to the classical concept of 'duty' besides the role of the passions. Callistène, the high priest became a minor role whilst Félix, Pauline's father, became a major bass part. New scenes were added to the story in order to lengthen it out to four full acts. Scribe visualized his stage setting as an accurate archeological representation reflecting the neo-classical world so dear to gallic taste, a strange contrast to Donizetti's romantic theme of ideal love. Gautier's review of the opera considers at length the architectonic magnificence of the original stage sets. The economy and spiritual insights of Cammarano's

libretto are lost for a totally new form which caused Donizetti to completely re-think his approach to the work.

Donizetti's correspondence reflect his interest in his task. A letter to Mayr (Zavadini 319) contains the following interesting reference : 'I am going to give at the French Grand Opéra my Poliuto which was forbidden at Naples since it was considered to be of a too sacred nature. It is now lengthened into four acts instead of the original three. It is also translated and tailored by Scribe for the French stage. So I have had to re-write once more all the recitatives, compose a new finale for the first act, add arias, trios and the appropriate dances as is the custom here. All this is so that the texture may not be considered by the public as being too Italian. They are not wrong in this matter. French music and theatrical poetry have a cachet all of their own to which every composer must conform, whether it be in the recitatives or in the sung pieces. For example, a ban on crescendos, etc. etc. forbidden are the usual cadenzas - what joy! joy! joy! Then between one cabaletta and another they always have some lines to heighten the action without the usual repetition of verses as is the custom with our poets. Poliuto is now transformed into Les martyrs - and it will be given within the year.....

'Perhaps you say where do I find the time? I find it and I also go for a walk at midday because walking makes me work all the harder. I love art and I love it passionately'.

These were the unhappy years after his wife's death. The letters occasionally reveal the composer's profound sadness and loneliness. He confesses that he is famous, sought after, in constant company, but that in reality he is unknown and alone. On the 15th May 1839 he wrote to Mayr: 'I am grey and tired of working .... the world believes me to be what I am not, but I do not care for the world ... Oh dear Master, I would have given the theatrical world a bitter adieu before now. I say bitter even if I am now rich, but I will say it from the heart in order to be free many souffrances'. (Zavadini 320).

There can be little doubt that Donizetti projected his love for his beloved Virginia into the relationship between Poliuto and Paolina. Their theme is his. The

letters show that he yearned to die in order to be reunited with her. His melancholy is found in the sentiments of his heros :

Unis sur la terre
Unis dans les cieux!

These were also years of bitter criticism. The composer's amour propre was undoubtedly hurt. On 7th April 1840 he wrote to his friend Persico 'Now just you imagine for a moment how I am. I suffer horribly from nerves. If you only knew what one suffers to stage an opera here. You have not the least idea. It is enough to tell you that they have annoyed Rossini- enough said! The intrigues, the enemies, journalism, the directors - auff! But with God I will come through it all. I will write to you in a few days and let you know the outcome. In fact, I will already predict it to you: Act 1 - quite good; Act 2 - cold; Act 3 - very good; Act 4 - it will bear up. If you could see all the changes, abridgements and lengthenings! I am still working on it this morning'. (Zavadini 334)

Donizetti was accurate in the judgement of his opera. It has been shown that Les martyrs was more of a success than generally accepted. However, Schumann dismissed Donizetti as a composer of music fit for marionettes, and Berlioz poured out venom in the press. He dismissed Les martyrs as 'a creed in four acts', referring to certain words in Act 3. Unwittingly, he was not far from the truth, for the opera contains many thoughts and concepts dear to Donizetti.

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The revival of Les martyrs was due to one of the Society's most active members, Leslie Head. He not only undertook to conduct the performance but was essential in helping to prepare the music for performance. We had already worked together on Mayr's L'amor coniugale and La passione. After the effort required for restoring these two beautiful works to life, we erroneously thought that Les martyrs would be an easy task since we knew that printed performing material dating from Donizetti's own times was still available. How wrong we were, because as we

gathered the material together we soon realized that the piano-vocal score, the orchestral parts and the full-orchestral score all printed by Schonenberger in the 1840's did not correspond with one another. Furthermore, the orchestral material was full of mistakes and omissions. For example, 23 bars of music could be suddenly missing for the first violins! What those early performances must have sounded like, goodness knows! Judging from the various marks made by performers of the period, when things went wrong, that particular section of the orchestra simply stopped playing until it could pick up its place a few bars later. From an orchestral point of view the performances must have been unbelievably bad and these shortcomings may explain why Les martyrs eventually disappeared from the stage! The parts caused us many heart aches and hours of work.

However, the question why we had three different versions of the opera was still unanswered. The answer lay in Donizetti's correspondence. The first clue is a letter to Tommaso Persico (Zavadini 326) in which Donizetti informs us that the piano-vocal score was printed before the first performance. More than once he complains of the opera's length. Other letters (Zavadini 333 and 334) indicate that changes were taking place, for example the repeat of the 'Choeur du triomphe' at the end of Act 2 which appeared in the orchestral parts but was not printed in the piano vocal-score. Other letters speak of how sickness was interfering with rehearsals and the need to make cuts in order to make the work theatrically more viable. The parts therefore must substantially correspond to Donizetti's re-think of his opera, especially once it left for the provinces. We have already noted that he judges Act 2 as 'cold'. In the vocal-score it is long and made up of pieces from Poliuto with new sections of recitatives in order to create a dramatic situation to justify the ballet. Donizetti did add a rather beautiful emsemble built around Polyeucte's words, 'Dieu puissant qui vois mon zele', but this was cut in the parts in order to bring Sévère's cabaletta 'Je te perds, toi que j'adore' to a hasty conclusion. We concluded that Donizetti did this to shorten an Act with which he was not satisfied. The prunings cut down a score of nearly four hours of music to just

over three hours! Il buono consiste nel far poco e non nel cantarmolto e seccare. (Words written in 1832 by Donizetti to Jacopo Ferretti).

The problem of the full-orchestral score being different again still remained unsolved. We eventually decided that it was a French score of the edition of the opera which became known as I martiri a version performed after the composer's death. We corrected it so that it corresponded to the orchestral parts.

Professor Barblan in an article on Maria di Rohan has wisely remarked on the folly of trying to establish 'complete' editions of Donizetti's operas since they so often developed and changed from performance to performance. Bearing this thought in mind we made four minor adjustments during the rehearsals. First of all, due to Donizetti's interest in the dramatic effect of religious chants as testified by Nourrit's letter, we restored the first verse of the chorus 'O Dieu tutelaire' in Act 1 and kept it unaccompanied. This is both musically and dramatically justified. We did not perform the ballet sequence known as the 'lutte des gladiateurs' because of the time factor. The trio in Act 4 scene 1 was sung unaccompanied as it was originally intended to be by the composer. The orchestration which was added later was there merely to help keep the singers in tune. Finally, because of French literary considerations we restored the twelve bars which make up Polyeucte's prayer in Act 4 scene 2. ('La priere de Polyeucte' is a highlight in Corneille's play). Donizetti referred to Les martyrs as O cosa eterna! The various cuts were logical and to have restored Les martyrs to the version as represented in the piano-vocal score would have been a futile exercise.

I trust we have followed the composer's will in our edition. It is clear that Mayr taught his pupil that a work of art should never be considered 'finished', for 'to finish' may be considered as an act of arrogance and of pride; like the Persian carpet maker who consciously weaves 'mistakes' into his carpet as an act of humility before the act of creation, so the true composer should be detached enough from his opera to watch it grow from performance to performance. Donizetti's operas in the past have often been lamentably cut and sung in appalling editions, they have however

spoken to each generation and its needs. This alone testifies to his genius.

Perhaps it is time to dispel the myths which have been created around Donizetti and his art. The more one is prepared to study, the greater the rewards. Donizetti reveals himself as a composer of great subtlety and of fine artistic sensibility. He is not a 'simple' composer, rather, his music requires time, utter sincerity and innocence of approach. The music is the expression of transparent integrity. It flows from a unity which is not at first apparent, but which once discovered places Donizetti amongst the most sensitive of souls.

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Les martyrs.....The story.

The action takes place at Melitene, capital of Armenia.

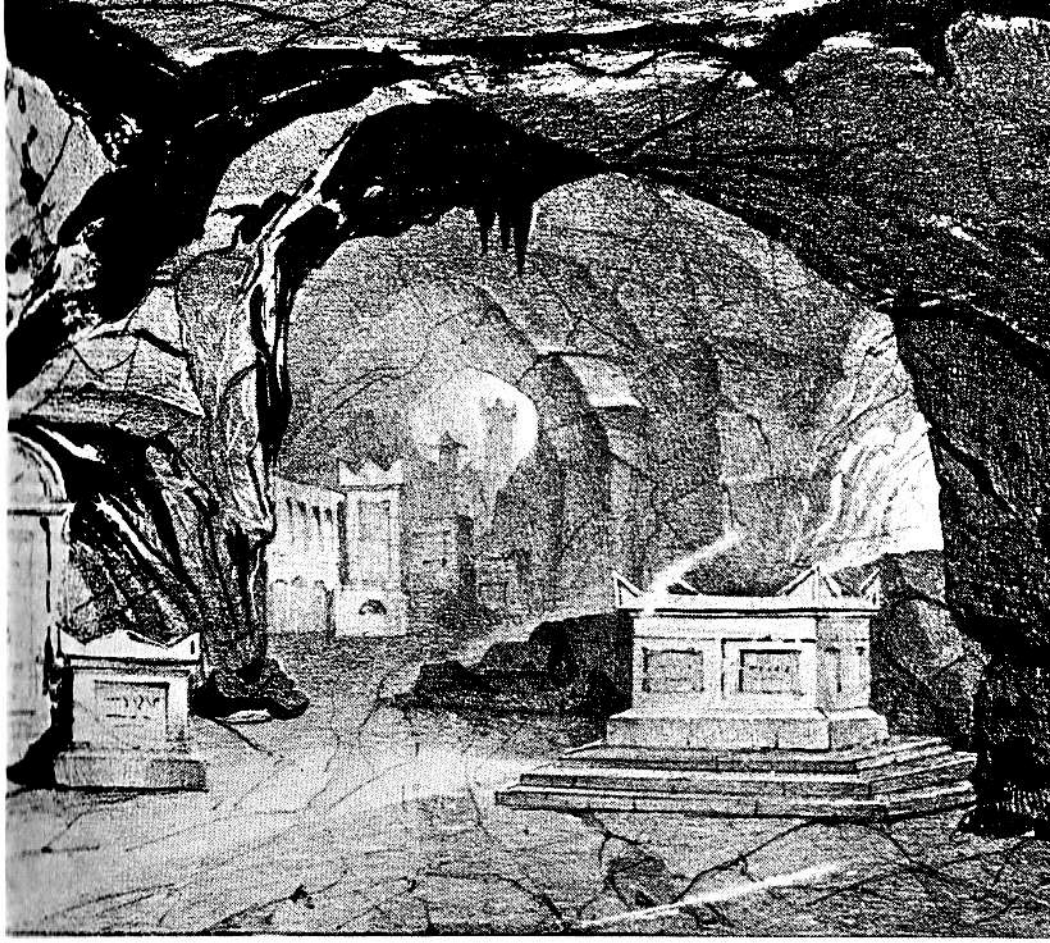
Act 1

The scene represents the entrance to the catacombs used by Christians for their worship and meetings. Nearby are Roman tombs. It is night and the Christians are gathering for their rites. Chorus:'O voûte obscure, ô voûte immense'. Néarque draws Polyeucte aside and asks whether true faith and courage have taken root in his heart. Polyeucte affirms it to be so, for he has seen the power of prayer through the recovery of his wife, Pauline, from an illness. He yearns to be baptised,'Que l'onde salutaire'. A believer informs them that they have been followed by a group of soldiers. The Christians quickly descend to the catacombs. A group of young girls enter among which is Pauline. They place offerings on the nearby tombs and sing a hymn to Persephone, 'Jeune souveraine, O puissants reine'. To the surprise of all, Pauline asks to be left alone. She then prays before her mother's tomb. Her mother, when alive, had given her blessing to Pauline's love for Sévère. Her lover was one day reported missing in battle and so her father gave her in marriage to Polyeucte. She now has to live with a man she does not fully love even though she admires the nobility of his character, 'Qu'ici ta main glacée'. Pauline is suddenly surprised by the sound of singing

coming from the catacombs, 'O Dieu tutélaire'. The Christians return. Polyeucte recognizes Pauline and reproaches her for following him. She in turn reproaches him for embracing the Christian faith.All gather around her and pray for her conversion. Pauline is resolved to denounce the Christians to her father, Félix, the governor. Polyeucte would then be forced to recognize the foolishness of his ways. A watchman announces that a new pro-consul with a reputation for his severity is being sent to the city. The act ends with Polyeucte praying for Pauline's conversion, 'Objet de ma constance'.

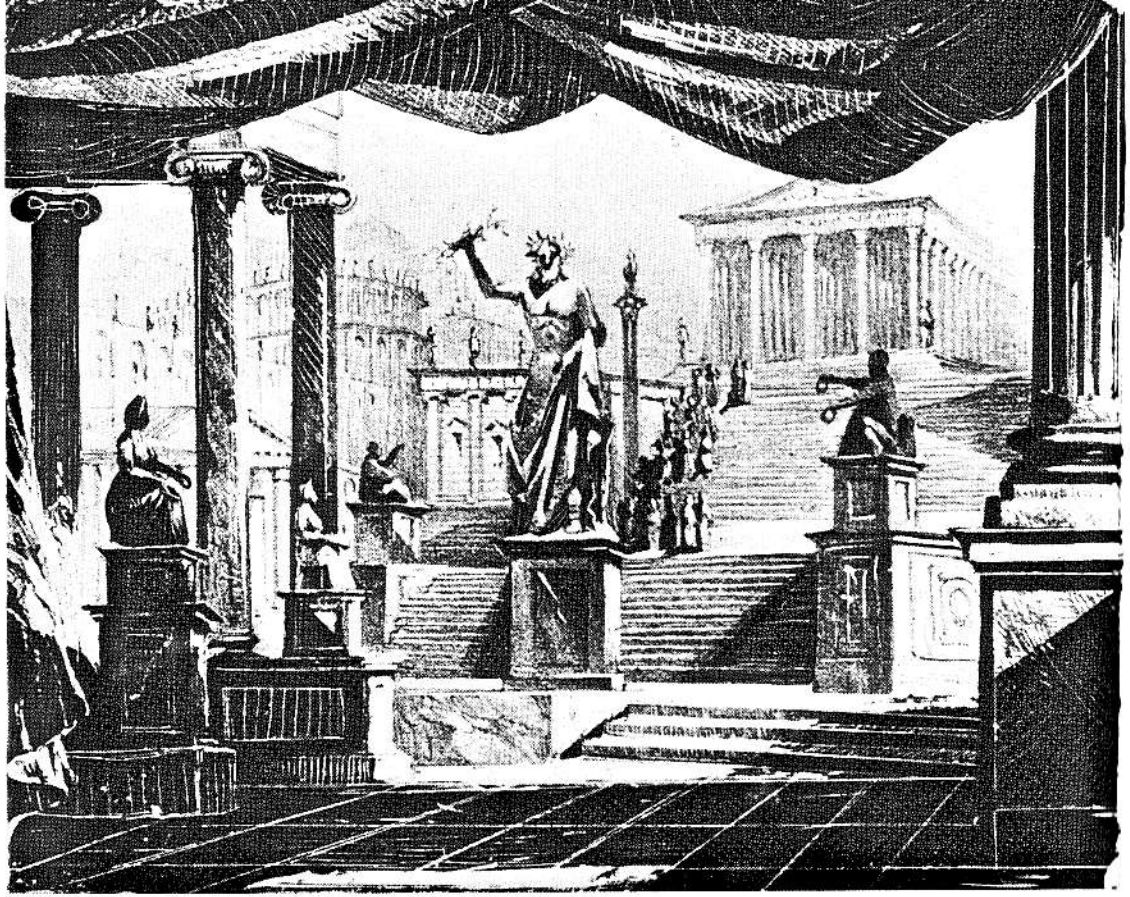
Act II Scene I. Offices of State.
Félix asks a secretary to transcribe various edicts regarding the persecution of Christians. He sings his aria, 'Dieux des Romains, Dieux tutélaires'. His pious sentiments are interrupted by the entrance of Pauline with various members of the household. She is given the edict to read and Félix continues his aria, saying that he wishes to see Christianity persecuted, 'Mort à ces infâmes'. All agree with the sentiments expressed, whilst in an aside Pauline fears for her husband's life.
When left alone Pauline confesses to her father that she still loves Sévère. Callysthènes, the high priest, enters with an official entourage and announces that Sévère, once believed lost in battle, is now returning in glory as the new proconsul. Pauline is confused between the affections of her heart and her sense of duty towards her husband. The scene concludes with her famous cavatina, 'Sévère exist! un Dieu sauveur'.

Act II Scene II. The central square at Melitene.
The crowds have gathered to greet their new proconsul. The chorus sings a triumphant hymn to the gods of war. Sévère greets the citizens and sings in an aside his aria, 'Amour de mon jeune age'. He expresses his emotion at the thought of meeting Pauline. Félix gives orders for the Greek dances to begin. These reach a general climax with the crowning of Sévère. When the ballet is over Sévère notices Pauline with Polyeucte. He realizes that he has lost his beloved to another and sings a passionate aside, 'Je te perds, toi que j'adore'. The act is brought to a conclusion with a repetition of the triumphal march.



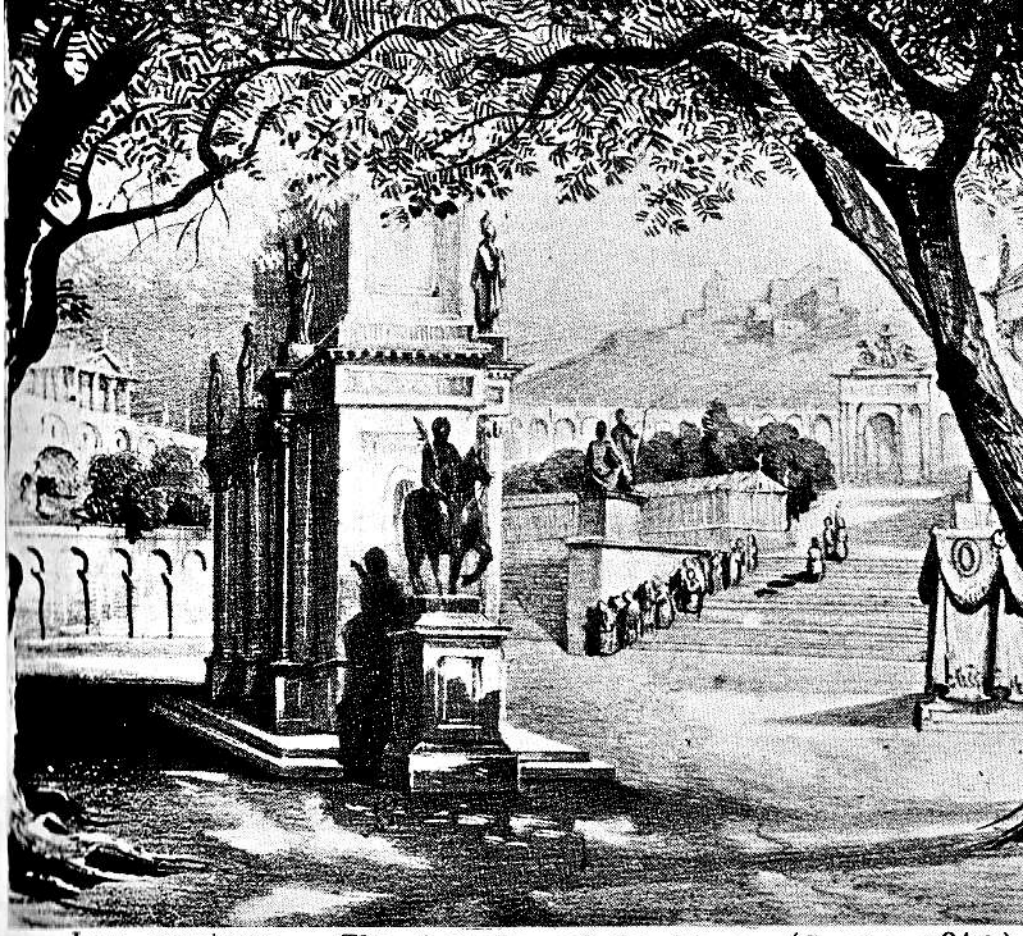
Les martyrs - The entrance to the catacombs. (Paris 18

Act III Scene I. Pauline's bedroom.
She is praying to the gods to take from her heart all the sweet memories of her first love. Sévère enters. He refuses to believe that Pauline loves Polyeucte and maintains that only his supposed death could have made her forget her original promises of love. The meeting develops into the duet, 'En touchant à ce rivage. Pauline pleads with Sévère to leave the room, but a chance remark reveals her emotional state. Sévère seizes on the situation and pleads, 'Do you not see that your rigour tears and bruises my heart?' Pauline insists that he respects her sense of duty towards her husband. Sévère leaves and Polyeucte enters. He is talking to himself. Pauline asks him what is wrong. The sacrificial rites being prepared in the temple in honour of a ruthless new proconsul outrage him. He has decided to refuse to offer sacrifices to false gods.



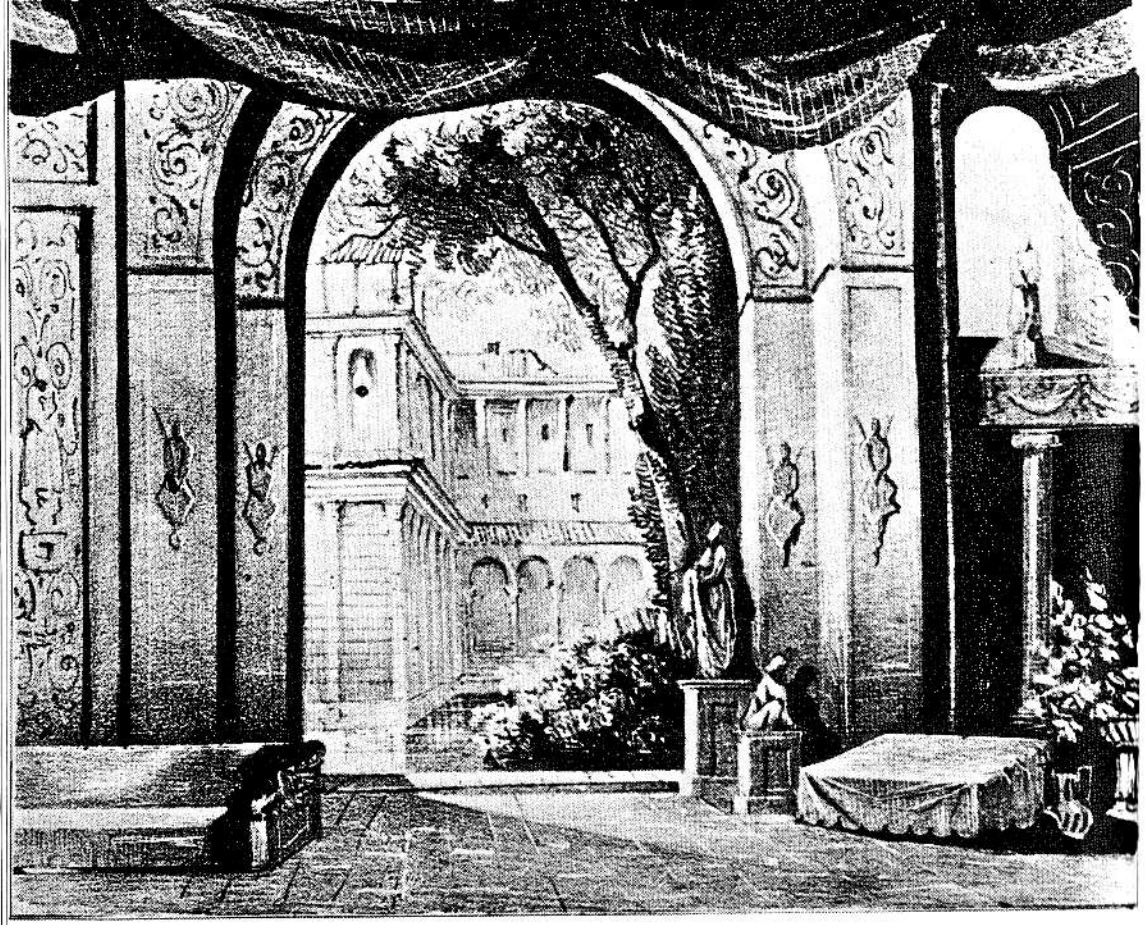
Les martyrs - The central square at Melitene. (Paris 1840

Pauline pleads with her husband to be sensible for the sake of their love. Polyeucte answers with his romanza, 'Mon seul tēsor, mon bien suprème'. He tells Pauline that his love for her corresponds to his love for God, 'Tu m'est plus chère que moi-même'. True love is true sacrifice. Félix interrupts with the news that Néarque has been arrested for being a Christian. He has confessed to having baptized a convert, but refuses to reveal the neophyte's name. As Polyeucte moves forward to give himself up, Pauline throws herself in his way, asking whether mercy exists for the mentally deranged. Félix warns them to keep away from the temple because Néarque will there be forced to tell the disciple's name. Polyeucte is resolved to go in order to be with his friend. Pauline attempts to stop him. The scene concludes with Polyeucte's grand air, 'Oui, j'irai dans leur temples'.



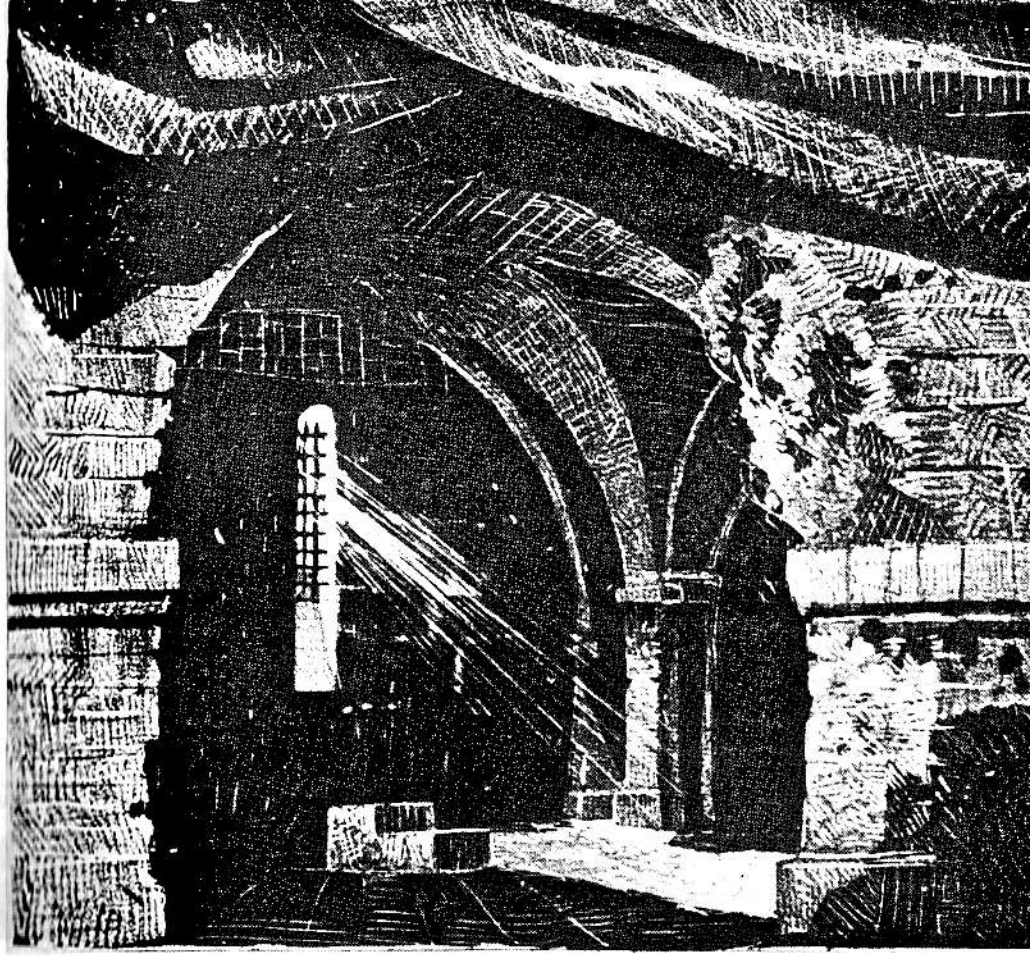
Les martyrs - The temple of Jupiter. (Paris 1840)

Act IV Scene I. A room in the Governor's house. Félix confirms to Pauline that the Christians will soon be sought out and persecuted in earnest. She begs him to save Polyeucte since as governor he has the necessary powers. Sévère enters at this point and encourages Félix to take a firm stand in the condemnation of the Christians. A trio develops in which Pauline pleads with Sévère to save her husband's life. She relizes that to a jealous rival her demands are well-nigh impossible, however, such a decision could be realized as a glorious act of virtue. Sévère finally agrees to help Polyeucte. Pauline praises the nobility of his heart, whilst Félix remarks that whosoever defends the victim approves of his error. Félix refuses to save Polyeucte and signs the edict sanctioning a general persecution. The scene concludes with the trio of voices expressing their various sentiments, whilst off-stage voices indicate that the harassment of the Christians has begun.



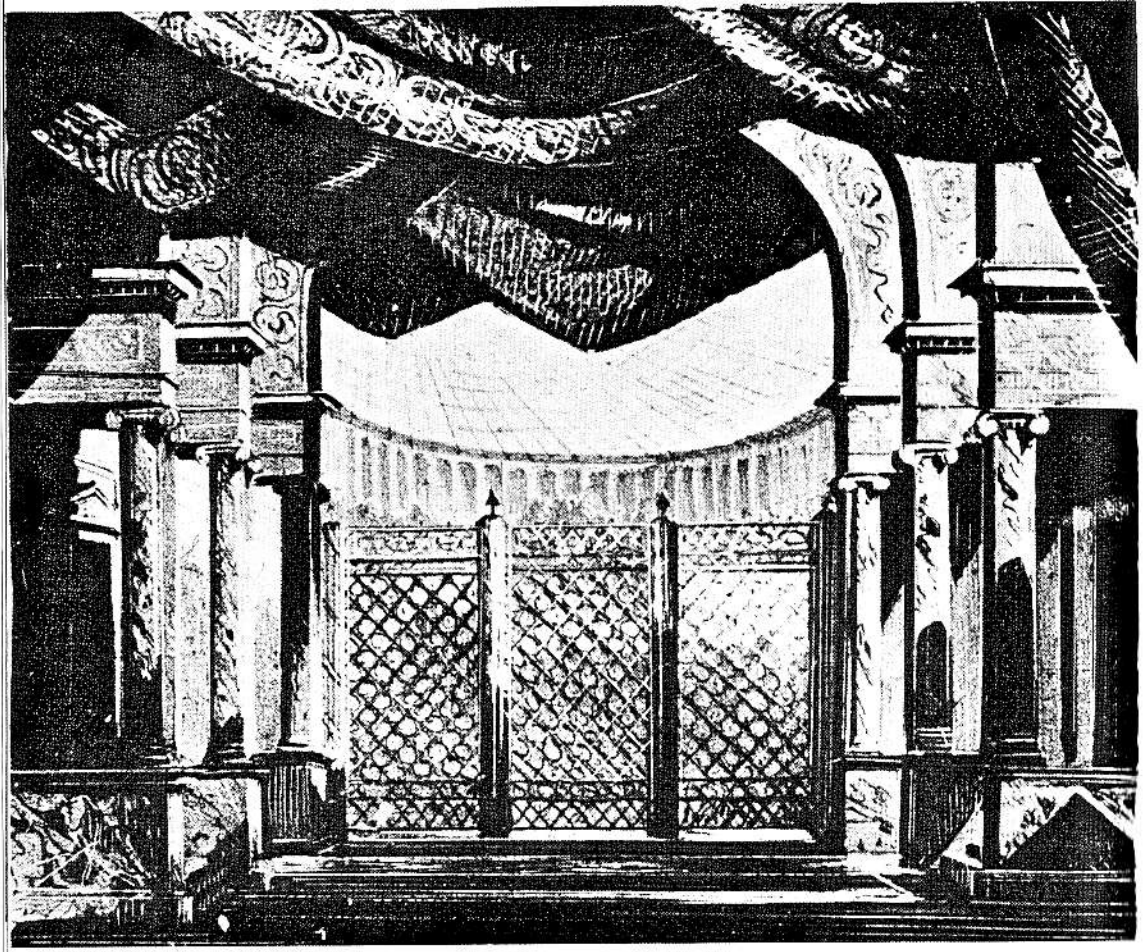
Les martyrs - Pauline's bedroom. (Paris 1840)

Act III Scene II. At the Temple of Jupiter.
The famous temple scene begins with a hymn to Jupiter, 'Dieu du tonnerre'. Meanwhile the priests and their assistants commence the sacrificial ceremony. When interrogated Néarque refuses to reveal his friend's name. Polyeucte moves forward and declares to the amazement of all that it is he whom they seek. The action moves into a most beautiful sextet, 'Feu divin! Sainte lumière', and the final stretta. Pauline pleads for her husbands life, much to Polyeucte's disgust. He pushes her to one side and joins Néarque beside the sacrificial altar. He throws down all the sacred vessels, kicking them aside. In religious fervour and ecstasy he breaks spontaneously into a creed, 'Je crois en Dieu' to the God of the living and not of vain idols. Amid general chaos the two Christians are led away to the prisons.



Les martyrs - The prison. (Paris 1840)

Act IV Scene II. The Prison.
Polyeucte is asleep and on waking tells of his dream in which Pauline is beheld as his heavenly intercessor. He falls to his knees in adoration, for he realizes that this was no dream,but a vision. Pauline enters and attempts to save Polyeucte from martyrdom. He is not interested in his own life, his only prayer is for her conversion to the God of Love. At first it is her husband's zeal which catches Pauline's attention, then gradually the power of the Spirit enlighten's her soul. Husband and wife discover a union deeper than any physical bond. They sing in ecstasy the famous duet, 'O sainte mélodie! Concerts harmonieux'.



Les martyrs - The Amphitheatre. (Paris 1840)

Act IV Scene III. The Amphitheatre.
The prisoners await their ordeal. There are rows of spectators demanding blood, whilst behind iron gates lions are to be seen awaiting their release, 'Il nous faut des jeux et des fêtes à là mort'. Callysthènes, Sévère and Félix take up their places of honour. Polyeucte and Pauline, dressed in white robes, are led into the arena. Félix and Sévère are horrified. In a concerted finale, they express their horror, and the lovers sing of their new-found love. Their fellow Christians who gather around them kneel down and praise God, and the crowds demand death. The iron gates are thrown back and the lions approach their victims.



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