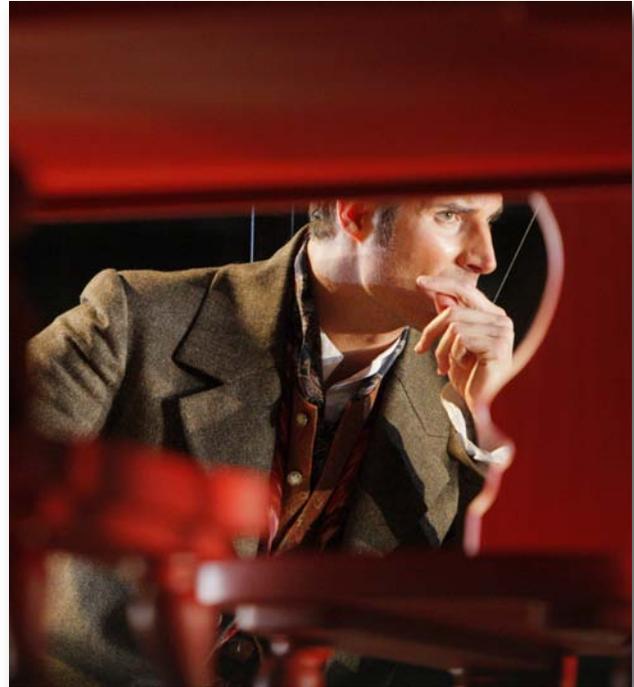


b Metz, August 5, 1811; *d* Paris, February 12, 1896

Nearly forgotten today, Ambroise Thomas was a central figure in the mid- to late-19th-century Parisian operatic scene. Born to a musical family, Thomas entered the Paris Conservatoire in 1828, studying piano and composition. Winning the Prix de Rome four years later, he triumphed upon his return to Paris at the Opéra-Comique with the one-act *La double échelle*, which achieved 247 performances.

Several less-successful opéra-comiques followed, as well as a few shorter works for the Opéra until 1849, when the composer unveiled *Le caïd*, an Orientalist opera with a Rossinian flare. It was a genuine hit, generating over 400 performances. *Le songe d'une nuit d'été* (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*; 1850) was also popular, although it had nothing to do with Shakespeare's play. *Raymond, ou Le secret de la reine* (1851) was based the French legend of The Man in the Iron Mask, recently made topical by the serialized three-part novel *Le Vicomte de Bragelonne ou Dix ans plus tard* by Alexandre Dumas père.



Other operas from this period include *La cour de Célémène* (1855; after Molière's *Le Misanthrope*), *Psyché* (1857), *Le carnaval de Venise* (1857) and *Le roman d'Elvire* (1860).

Thomas would find one of his greatest triumphs on the heels of his contemporary, Charles Gounod. Intrigued by the popularity of the younger composer's *Faust* (1859), he turned to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* and produced *Mignon* (1866). In spite of a change to the original tragic ending in order to satisfy the bourgeois audience of the Opéra-Comique, *Mignon* became a staple of the theater, achieving some 1,200 performances by the end of the century. As a result, he was soon afforded a prestigious premiere at the Opéra, an arguably loose adaptation of the Bard's classic drama *Hamlet*. His final work, *Françoise de Rimini* (1882), based on a canto from Dante's *Inferno*, was also performed at Paris' theater of first rank.

Thomas married later in life and had no children. In 1848, he served in the French National Guard during the February Revolution that deposed King Louis-Philippe, and later, fought in the Franco-Prussian War. In 1851, Thomas was granted a seat in the Académie des Beaux Arts and began to teach composition at the Conservatoire thereafter. He eventually assumed directorship of the institution upon the death of Daniel-François-Esprit Auber in 1871. It was here that the professor/composer held court, greatly influencing and assisting the next generation, (which included Jules Massenet) until his death in 1896. Two years earlier, he had been awarded the Grand Croix de Légion d'honneur to mark his life achievements, the first composer to receive such a tribute. Today, Thomas is vaguely remembered for only two works, yet he was an astute and flexible composer whose remarkable legacy remains incontrovertible.