

PRESS RELEASE



**PALAZZETTO  
BRU ZANE**  
CENTRE  
DE MUSIQUE  
ROMANTIQUE  
FRANÇAISE

*The Palazzetto Bru Zane presents*

# LES ABENCÉRAGES

## LUIGI CHERUBINI



*Co-production* Palazzetto Bru Zane / Orfeo Music Foundation / Haydneum / MÜPA

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# LES ABENCÉRAGES

WEDNESDAY 9 MARCH  
7.30 P.M.

MÜPA, BUDAPEST  
(HUNGARY)

## CAST

### **Luigi Cherubini, *Les Abencérages***

Opera in three acts by Luigi Cherubini  
on a libretto by Étienne de Jouy,  
premiered on 6 April 1813  
at the Académie impériale de musique (Paris).

#### **ORFEO ORCHESTRA**

#### **PURCELL CHOIR**

**György Vashegyi**, direction

Noraïme, **Anaïs Constans** (soprano)  
Almanzor, **Edgaras Montvidas** (tenor)  
Le Vizir, **Thomas Dolié** (baritone)  
Gonzalve, **Artavazd Sargsyan** (tenor)  
Kaled, **Philippe-Nicolas Martin** (baritone)  
Alamir, **Tomislav Lavoie** (bass)  
Abderam, **Douglas Williams** (bass-baritone)  
Octair / Le Héraut d'armes, **Lóránt Najbauer**  
(baritone)  
Egilone, **Adriána Kalafszky** (soprano)



Concert performance

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Recording for the 'French Opera' series of the Bru Zane label

# A FEW WORDS ABOUT THE OPERA

Opera in three acts by Luigi Cherubini on a libretto by Étienne de Jouy, premiered on 6 April 1813 at the Académie impériale de musique (Paris) (salle Montansier). *Les Abencérages* marks the composer's return to opera after ten years of silence. Cherubini joined forces with the librettist Étienne de Jouy, who was inspired by Jean-Pierre Claris de Florian's novel *Gonzalve de Cordoue*. The marriage of Almansor and Noraïme, both from the Abencérages tribe, is threatened by the enemy Zégris tribe, whose chief is also in love with Noraïme. The Zégris imagine a stratagem to have Almansor deposed. Unjustly accused, he is restored to his honour thanks to the intervention of Gonzalve de Cordoue (Gonzalvo de Córdoba). The work enjoyed a certain success (nearly twenty performances – after a brilliant premiere conducted by Louis Luc Loiseau de Persuis, at which the imperial couple appeared), but sank into oblivion after the fall of the Empire. Nevertheless, *Les Abencérages* is a jewel of French romantic grand opéra, as it was then emerging with the works of Catel, Le Sueur and Spontini. In many ways, the opera prefigures some of the genre's greatest works: by the importance of development in the part-writing (perhaps under the influence of the recent discovery of Beethoven's symphonies in Paris); by the search for timbres for dramaturgical ends, contrasting the orchestra's woodwinds or brass fanfares with the lyricism of the solo instruments; by the very intricate link between the love story and the great historical narrative (Jouy anchors French *grand opéra* in a constant reference to history); finally, by the importance of the chorus, whose role, although less decorative, is given a more dramatic function.



# FAR FROM PARIS

This Budapest production fits in the history of *Les Abencérages*' dissemination, which, since the last performance at the Académie Royale de Musique (31 March 1816), has taken place outside France. During Cherubini's lifetime, the work was revived in Berlin, where Gaspare Spontini proposed a revised version, performed from March 1828. Then it was not until more than a century later that a new revival was offered, in May 1956, at Florence's Teatro Comunale. In September 1986, in the *Bulletin des amis de Luigi Cherubini en France*, the musicologist Jean Mongrédien was already wondering: "Is it not astonishing that, even today, one can set out to discover a *grand opéra* in three acts by Cherubini that is virtually unknown?" He ended his text with a prediction that, thirty-six years later, has finally come true: "I would be very surprised indeed if our era, so taken with passionate operatic rediscoveries, did not, in the near future, give Cherubini's *Abencérages* the attention it obviously deserves."



Portrait of Cherubini, published in Félix Clément's  
*Les Musiciens célèbres du XVIe siècle à nos jours*.  
© Palazzetto Bru Zane / fonds Leduc

# WHO WERE THE ABENCERRAGES?

By presenting the Abencerrages and the Zegrís as two rival Muslim tribes in the fifteenth-century emirate of Granada, the librettist Étienne de Jouy somewhat distorted historical reality. While the Zegrís were never a real entity, the Abencerrages were rather an influential political faction. The Banu al-Sarraj (literally the “saddler’s sons” in Arabic) played an essentially military role in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The prestige they derived from this protective role allowed them to interfere in the internal politics of the Emirate in the fifteenth century. They thus appeared as the protagonists of several coups between the succession of Yusuf II (1417) and the Christian conquest of Granada (1492).



# A POLITICAL MESSAGE?

The location of the plot in Spain did not help the reception of *Les Abencérages*. Launched in 1808, Napoleon's campaign in the Iberian Peninsula got bogged down in 1809, and a country whose conquest was far from assured could not be celebrated on the operatic stage. In December 1812, the censor even asked the librettist to revise certain passages and replace the "Spanish warriors" with "Christian knights". Joseph Bonaparte's abandonment of Madrid and the rout of the battle of Vitoria on 21 June 1813 explain why the work gradually fell out of the Opéra's repertoire.

The underlying political propaganda must rather be related to the meaning of the libretto. It contrasts treachery within the Emirate (the perfidy of the Zegrís' leader) with the help that the opposing camp can provide (the standard brought back by Gonzalve of Cordoba). It also emphasizes the irrationality of local laws (a death sentence for a lost standard). This account reinforces the vision that the Emperor wished to give of his military conquests, presented as liberating campaigns that allowed the conquered peoples to escape arbitrariness and follow the path of enlightenment and reason traced by the Revolution.



Portrait of Napoléon, anonymous.  
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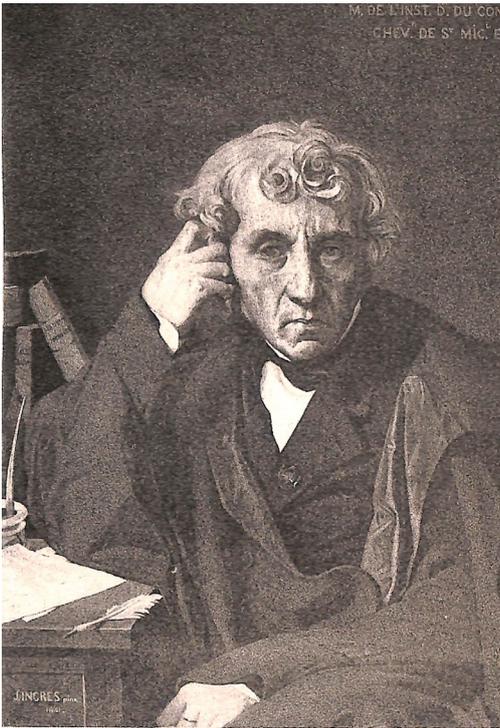
# NORAÏME AND CAROLINE BRANCHU : A MISSED OPPORTUNITY

One of the reasons for the lukewarm reception of *Les Abencérages* was the illness of the singer for whom the role of Noraïme was written at the time of its premiere. Caroline Branchu (1780–1850) was then at the height of her fame. The premiere of *La Vestale* (1807) had propelled her to the forefront of the stage, and the retirement of Madame Maillard made her the leading female singer at the Opéra. However, the day after *Les Abencérages*' premiere, the *Gazette de France* wrote: "We must place in the front rank Madame Branchu, who, penetrated by the beauties of her role and burning with the desire to contribute to the success of the work, made supernatural efforts to tame the suffering she was experiencing. No sooner had she left the stage than a serious illness set in." (16 April 1813.)



Portrait of Caroline Branchu by Louis-Léopold Boilly (1810).  
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# LUIGI CHERUBINI (1760-1842)



Luigi Cherubini (Palazzetto Bru Zane, Fonds Leduc)

Although born in Florence, Cherubini remains a prominent figure of the French school in the first half of the 19th century. His reputation as a composer suffered due to the enemies he made as director of the Paris Conservatoire (1822-1842). The unmistakable fact remains, however, that he was an influential composer, penning over thirty operas, as well as a great deal of chamber music and many religious and symphonic works. The son of a theatre musician who taught him counterpoint, he made his debut fairly quickly in Florence, then in London and Turin. In 1785, in Paris, he was introduced to Marie-Antoinette through the violinist Viotti and became a member of the Société Olympique, a concert society similar to a Freemasons' lodge, frequented by the French aristocracy. Despite this, his first composition for the Académie Royale de Musique, *Démophon* (1788), was not an out-an-out success. In 1789, he became co-director of the Théâtre de Monsieur, the future Théâtre Feydeau. It was there that he staged first performances of his main masterpieces: *Lodoïska* (1791), *Élisa* (1794), *Médée* (1797), *L'Hôtellerie portugaise* (1797) and *Les Deux Journées* (1800). Although his opéra-ballet *Anacréon ou L'Amour fugitif* (1803) shows a complete mastery of his art at the dawn of the First French Empire, Cherubini nevertheless found himself kept away from Parisian stages due to his counter-revolutionary reputation and his difficult relationship with Napoléon. In fact, his institutional career only really took off under the Restoration, in particular with his appointment to the post of superintendent at the Chapelle Royale (1814) and his election to the Institut de France (1815).

## More information on Bru Zane Mediabase

Digital data on the  
nineteenth-century French repertory

[BRUZANEMEDIABASE.COM](http://BRUZANEMEDIABASE.COM)

# LE PALAZZETTO BRU ZANE

## CENTRE DE MUSIQUE ROMANTIQUE FRANÇAISE

The vocation of the Palazzetto Bru Zane – Centre de musique romantique française is the rediscovery and international promotion of the French musical heritage of the period 1780-1920. Its interests range from chamber music to the orchestral, sacred and operatic repertoires, not forgetting the lighter genres characteristic of the 'esprit français' (chanson, opéra-comique, operetta). The Centre was inaugurated in 2009 and has its headquarters in a Venetian palazzo dating from 1695 specially restored for this purpose. It is an emanation of the Fondation Bru.

The Palazzetto Bru Zane conceives programmes focusing on the French Romantic repertory which it then entrusts to Bru Zane France. It undertakes many complementary activities in fulfilment of its mission:

- The **conception of concerts and staged performances** presented in touring productions or within the framework of its own festivals.
- The production and release on the Bru Zane label of **recordings** that perpetuate the artistic achievement of the projects undertaken, both on individual CD projects and in its series of book + CD sets, 'Prix de Rome', 'Opéra français' and 'Portraits'.
- The coordination of **research projects**.
- The **cataloguing and digitisation of documentary collections** and public or private archives relating to its chosen repertory, including those of the Villa Medici, the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris and the Cité de la Musique in Paris.
- The organisation of **conferences** in collaboration with different partners.
- The publication of **scores**.
- A series of **books** in collaboration with Actes Sud.
- The uploading of digital resources via the database **bruzanemediabase.com**.
- A digital platform, **Bru Zane Replay**, uploading filmed stagings and concerts produced or supported by the Palazzetto Bru Zane ([bru-zane.com/replay](http://bru-zane.com/replay)).
- A web radio, **Bru Zane Classical Radio**, streaming twenty-four hours a day.
- **Training sessions**.
- Outreach activities aimed at **young audiences** through the Romantici in erba programme..

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