

HAMLET

Music by Ambroise Thomas

Libretto by Jules Barbier & Michel Carré, after Shakespeare

First Performance: Opéra, Paris, March 9, 1868

Act I. At the festivities marking the crowning of Queen Gertrude, who has married her late husband's brother Claudius, her son Hamlet enters, brooding and bitter. Nevertheless he assures Ophelia, daughter of Polonius, of his love. Her brother Laertes announces his departure on a mission for the king. Hamlet sullenly refuses to join the celebrants at the ball.

Horatio and Marcellus, watching at the ramparts, tell Hamlet they have seen the ghost of his father. The ghost reveals his murder by Claudius and urges his son to revenge.

Act II. Hamlet ignores Ophelia, who asks permission of Gertrude to leave the court. The king is convinced Hamlet is mad. Hamlet announces that he has arranged a play. Alone with the players, he instructs them in their roles, then leads them in a Bacchic drinking song. The play mimes Hamlet's father's death, and the king's reaction confirms Hamlet's suspicions; he accuses his stepfather, but the court ignores him, believing him insane. Hamlet ponders his future in an abridged version of the famous soliloquy.

Act III. Suspecting Polonius of complicity, he vents his anger on Ophelia, also on the Queen, who is spared by the apparition of the ghost, who chides Hamlet for his laxity.

Act IV. Ophelia, distraught, wanders among the guests at a fete champetre on the shores of a lake and, left alone, enters the water.

Act V. Hamlet muses near a grave; his questions to the philosophical gravediggers are interrupted by Laertes, who engages Hamlet in a duel. A funeral cortege enters; Hamlet realizes Ophelia is dead. He kills the King, then stabs himself. (This is the "Covent Garden" ending, written for the London premiere in 1869. The original elevated Hamlet to the throne.)