

OLIMPIE did not get off to a good start at its premiere in 1819, as Gasparo Spontini, a favourite of Empress Josephine, was no longer in favour as a composer with the Bourbon court. 10 years earlier, he seemed to be the musical epitome of the aspirations of the Emperor and the Empire with his grand operas, *La Vestale* 1807 and *Fernand Cortez* (1809).

By 1820 Spontini had moved on to Berlin, where *Olimpie* was brought out again for Frederick William III's court at the Hofoper. The libretto had been translated into German by E.T.A. Hoffman (of 'Tales' fame). The original final tragic suicide of the mother Statira, wife of Alexander the Great, and their daughter, *Olimpie* transmuted into a finale of rejoicing over the union of Cassander, King of Macedonia and *Olimpie*, once the machinations of Antigonus King of Syria are discovered.

As with *Fernando Cortez* and many other *historical* operas, historical fact and operatic plot and characterisation part company. Records of Olympia (*Olimpia*) are not really existant, but Alexander's mother bore the name, Olympus. *Olimpie* operatic mother, Statira (properly Barsine-Statira) did exist, and did marry Alexander, but did not produce any known off-spring to him. Antigonis and Cassander in reality were the opposite to the way they are portrayed in the opera. Antigonus did lay claim to part of the Empire at Alexander's death, while Cassander was much more of a devious murderer.

As befits a quasi-heroic theme. the structure of the opera is large and spacious. The many marches, provided by on-stage and off-stage bands create a feeling of aural depth. Choruses are of contrasting character likewise, being religious, martial, rejoicing, in awe etc.

as appropriate. The choral models provided by Gluck are used widely and the ensemble numbers, the trios, quartets etc. are also Gluckian. The gentler arias show that Spontini had hearkened to the 'airs' of Grétry as well as his Italian antecedents like Cimarosa and Mayr. The orchestra is handled with resource and skill, reflecting the contemporary sonority of Méhul skilfully combined with a telling integration of motifs derived from Cherubini's French operas. Yet in the overture, it is the music of the next generation that is so strongly foreshadowed.

The use of re-iterated triplets in it, is a typical Berlioz mannerism. Berlioz was very impressed by Spontini and much of the ceremonial side of Berlioz's music owes not a little to the earlier maestro. The monumental feel leads one, via the spaces Meyerbeer creates in *Les Huguenots* and *Le Prophète* to the Wagner of *Rienzi*, although neither Spontini nor Meyerbeer are never as coarsely noisy as Wagner is in *Rienzi*. Altogether then, this is a work of more than historical interest within distinct merits of its own.

The score used for the performance was prepared by RAIS Berlin in conjunction with WDR radio and Orfeo Records*. It is based on the Berlin revision with its happy ending, and suffers from many small cuts in the vocal line of repeats during the set arias, duets and the like, plus the excision of much of the ballet-music. All of this tends to distort the structure of a purposefully constructed whole.

The orchestra and chorus perform well for their conductor. The French sung by the chorus is reasonable clear. This leads to the poorest part of the whole presentation, namely the generally unidiomatic way the principals handled the French text, and more importantly, the French vocal style. The best stylist was George Fortune as Hiérophantes, the High Priest. Vocally, he sang with clear tone, even if he had difficulty with the more closed French vowels.

He would have been better than Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau as Antigonus, whose tone was clouded and often unfocused. What a pity to hear a great artist singing like this! His French was well articulated, but his barking tone pulled the line around. Franco Tagliavini also sounded elderly and strained under pressure, but in the less taxing, more lyrical passages sang quite sweetly and certainly managed his French vowels rather better than many other Italian tenors. Stefania Toczyska as Statira sang quite well, but her voice is not a very rich mezzo, her tone

