

Performances

Guillaume Tell opéra en quatre actes, musique de Gioacchino Rossini
Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London 16 July 1990

What a curious masterpiece this is! First of all, it is *not* the "Birth of Romantic Grand-Opéra" as some cuckoos repeat endlessly, 'except in terms of length and scenic marvels, the opening scenes are neo-classical *tableaux vivants* of Spontinian frigidity and facture with yards of recitative strung-out upon staccato chords. It is true that later sections invoke *arie* which are romantically coloured, and the score becomes fluent and vivid, but currants do not make a cake. Nor do they indicate any thoroughgoing romantic conviction on the part of the great composer: if you are seeking *grand-opéra* in the process of gestation, listen to *La Muette de Portici* (as Rossini himself did). Nonetheless *Guillaume Tell* is a masterpiece full of irresistible music, as witness the encounter of Mathilde and Arnold in the *sombre forêt* which was "composed by God" according to Donizetti (some say according to Bellini), but if this was the case God was being fully attentive to the best kind of Italian dramatic pacing and on his best form melodically, later he was not quite so compelling. It is frankly a choral opera, whatever its vocal hurdles, its strengths are the *concertati*, the sublime final *coro* could well have been written by God, or possibly by Beethoven on a good day.

This particular evening was the second on which Chris Merritt sang, illness (an inflamed vocal chord) having taken its toll of the two intervening ones. He was slow to warm up, I suspect that it is more difficult to make the transition from Italian to French delivery than he would admit; finding the right *timbre* and phrasing is far from easy in my view, though Mr Merritt himself discounts it. I consider he has real potential in French music, once a certain ease asserted itself he sang with the sweet seductiveness we cherish from the *Donna del lago* of years ago. His trial-by-fire, 'Asile héréditaire', soared into unforced splendour, raising the temperature to boiling point in an already sweltering house. Lella Cuberli was stylistically perfect if a trifle underpowered. The Royal Opera House was full of music lovers for a change, unlike the opening night (rumour has it that the boeing was a put up job?). The staging

was pleasing, though naturally it failed to please the critics. Underpinning the whole, Michel Plasson's conducting was a thing of great elegance - no one should attempt this opera without his ingrained Gallic finesse. It was his delicious baton which - like Perrault's magic wand - turned the Royal Opera House band from swinish pinchbeck to Rossinian gold.

Alexander Weatherson

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