Gaetano Donizetti *La Favorit*e opéra en quatre actes et cinq tableaux, livret de Eugène Scribe, Orchestre des Concerts Colonne, cond. Arturo Tamayo, Opéra de Vichy, 3 August 1991

It was once a favorite, as this revival in the magnificent, tawny, and truth to tell, somewhat kitsch fin-de-siècle opera house at Vichy sets out to prove. But it should be said immediately that grand-opéra seldom thrives nowadays, not one of them seems to survive in our impatient world, Meyerbeer simply hugs the edges of the repertoire, Verdi's hybrid offerings fail to get much more than casting difficulties and carping, beautiful operas like La Juive and La Muette de Portici (pace Ravenna) fall on persistantly deaf ears. As for Guillaume Tell, I suspect that managements would dearly like to prune it as radically as in Rossini's own day, if only they dared to stand-up to CD collectors who love every note.

I suppose La Favorite has had generous treatment by this reckoning, thanks to Italian loyalists, but only in a travesty translation and with a grotesquely changed plot. Unlike the resplendent Dom Sébastien, roi de Portugal and the heartbreaking Duca d'Alba, it is alive and comparatively kicking. Too long and too gloomy? The dearth of francophone artists to interpret it? I don't believe these are valid reasons to avoid revival in an authentic edition. The real issue has never been the length of the work, nor the unfashionably prurient plot, modern audiences could take these in their stride, it simply hinges on a modern revival of a major work written for specific singers and for a specific theatre as well as for the cloistered bourgeoisie of Louis-Philippe. For them, Scribe and Donizetti created a dark drama of sex, sin and an odour of sanctity. The composer, challenged mightily by Paris and its minions, conjured-up a score of continuous variety and considerable daring, orchestrated with real flair. Indeed, so brilliantly that the score lives in its own right and independent of any action on the stage. Thus, Donizetti triumphed here at Vichy and will go on triumphing, as long as the music is played as he wrote it. This is a real plus for the composer.

Vichy assembled a notable team of advocates for this La Favorite. The singers not quite as francophone as perhaps one would wish, but passim imaginative, involved and urgent of delivery: Katherine Ciesinski put everything she had into her Léonor, which was very considerable (too much so at the start, her voice spreading too much, but looking very beautiful as the role demands); Justin Lavender sang with style and elegance, but one was conscious that there is no-one nowadays to take on these Duprez war-horses, his Fernand lacked the intrinsic force that is required; Marcel Vanaud as Alphonse brought the house to life, not just on account of his ringing delivery but because he was at last an authentic francophone artist, replete with admirable phrasing; Jeffrey Wells was a "supérieur" Balthazar. The Choeurs de l'Opéra-Comique were a joy, the orchestra sumptuously effective under Arturo Tamayo. All the famous plums were pulled out effectively: "Pour tant amour" and "O mon Fernand" created the necessary furore. Really, the score is quite admirable, not dated at all, wonderfully consistent in its vivid flexibility, eschewing formula everywhere, only letadown in my opinion by the disconcerting reminiscence of Maria Stuarda that infuses banality into the finale secondo.

The crux of this particular production, however, was the mise en scène of San Bartolomé, aided and abetted by Patrick Teroitin whose costumes were anything but banal. Pierre-Jean de San Bartolomé is a distinguished and passionate advocate of this repertoire, a rejuvenator of genuine flair, anxious to illuminate every bar with kaleidoscopic fantasy, his La Favorite was teeming with incident, brilliantly coloured, open, the stage thronging. It proposed a constantly diverting stage picture and the audience responded with enthusiasm. But there were gains and losses in all this vivacity, sex was almost squeezed-out, sin raised no hackles,

and the odour of sanctity made a reluctant appearance in Act IV only. Here Ciesinski and Lavender were at their most convincing, she managed to evoke Rosine Stolz (an almost impossible feat), and Lavender admirably skirted the absurdity of Fernand's improbable recantation of his monkly vows (an almost equally impossible feat) with some dignity. It has to be said that Scribe's over-ripe plot works best when the principals are left to do their business on stage alone, this tonsured drama is perfectly acceptable without extraneous distraction in the front back and sides.

San Bartolomé did well by the score, bringing to light an inedito duo in Act II that added some necessary motivation to the text; that he reduced the ballet to two of its sections (and these were not danced as the Académie Royale de Musique would have wished) was a sad loss, but even greater a loss was in the characteristic pulse of Donizetti's composing, this constantly diverting stage picture lost out on irony and romance, Fernand's fatal infatuation for the King's mistress became two-dimensional, like the lavish, eye-catching, but liquorice allsorts costumes. In the final analysis I found much to enjoy in this provocative setting. It postulated an urgent refurbishing of nineteenth century grand opéra which demands respect. A rare concept - one to be honoured, if not (quite) loved.

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