

## Performances

Gaetano Donizetti *La Favorite* 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 persistently 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 let down 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,

