

... in Inghilterra

Gioacchino Rossini *Le Siège de Corinthe* Tragédie Lyrique en trois actes
d'Alexandre Soumet et Luigi Balocchi: Geoffrey Shovelton (*Cléomène*),
Justin Lavender(*Néoclès*), Lawrence Richard(*Hiéros*), Eileen Hulse(*Pamira*),
Neil Howlett(*Mahomet*), Jeremy White(*Omar*), Louise Crane(*Ismène*), Geof-
frey Shovelton(*Adraste*). Chelsea Opera Group, Orchestra and Chorus, cond:
Howard Williams

15 March 1992 Queen Elizabeth Hall, London

In the relatively limited space of the Queen Elizabeth Hall, the opera came over as a splendid din. According to the programme notes, the same reaction was recorded in 1826, Berlioz and his cronies complained of its "noisiness", they were right, but it was not the "*Beaucoup de bruit pour rien*" which is the correct Shakespearian dismissal of all their works, it was the noise of a giant striding over his pigmy critics.

The eminently capable Chelsea Opera Group prepared a scrupulous edition of this sadly neglected score. Why, for Heaven's sake, is it not always given in the original form? The Troupenas score was used here, if it was Donizetti who masterminded the familiar *Assedio di Corinto* mezzo transposition, shame on him and all *convenienze teatrali*. How sharp and detailed it sounds in French, how pointed is the declamation, how effectively heroic are the two tenors lambasting the baritone enemy,

the treble clef readily sustaining an exalted pitch of fervour which is transposed only at the opera's peril. In *Le Siège de Corinthe*, Rossini's transformation of *Maometto II* is complete, that is, the French version is a completely new opera. It is of no importance that some of the melodies and a little of the orchestration remains untouched, the music is used to different ends. The characters too are different, even if poor Pamira still finds herself torn between two men, her particular problem is no longer the heart of the score. Here the programme notes were too enthusiastic: "there is a new psychological depth in the characterisation which was lacking in the previous opera"; as a matter of fact Anna Erizzo and Maometto are both subtler and more sympathetic in the Italian version as behoves audiences with an insistence on every nuance of emotion, the French opera is far more tight-lipped, Néoclès and Cléomène are *Tragédie Lyrique* stereotypes - their virtues are real but very familiar in the operas of Gluck, Piccini, Sacchini etc., and as for Pamira, her pivotal role has gone and she is a stoic heroine only, her poignant *envoi* is truncated and the opera ends - not with a human tragedy - but with an orchestral flare-up (whose impetus, to be sure, comes from the great interest Rossini evinced in reading the score of Pacini's *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei* of one year before).

The orchestration of this French sport is far more *évoluée*, but again, not always to the disadvantage of the earlier score, I missed the seductive "chinoiserie" of the jingling strains introducing the Turkish leader in *Maometto II*, strains which are more heavily and anonymously scored in the French version. And, for that matter, I missed Maometto's 'Duce di tanti eroi' which is much more compulsive than the blander, mellifluous 'Chef d'un peuple indomptable' whose mouthful somehow defeats any "Gloire"; syllabic pointing, so vital to *cabalette*, is seldom possible in French. (Certain of the Donizettian contingent missed the bare-feet which were such a prominent feature at Pesaro!).

But caveats of this kind fall before the magisterial vitality of *Le Siège de Corinthe*, Rossini had put himself to master French operatic *moeurs* with elegant diction, poised, incisive and balanced declamation, orchestral integrity and an integral ballet with utterly startling confidence. True the result is a bit *rétro*, a bit stiff for 1826 with Meyerbeer on his heels, but the forceful drama which results achieves a compelling political force that is outstanding, especially when Rossini had never been known to pin his heart on his sleeve. The cast at this concert performance sang in perfectly acceptable French, even in exposed declamatory passages: Geoffrey Shovelton's Cléomène was idiomatic and well-projected; Lawrence Richard was an attractive Hiéros, a musical even black-humorous interpretation with good bass notes; Wilcen Hulse as Pamira sang her vaulting music precisely and stylishly in well-schooled accents, but her voice would have been more suitable as the *comtesse Adèle* elsewhere; Louise Crane and Jeremy White sang forcefully. It was Justin Lavender, however, who quite rightly earned a hero's welcome this evening with exactly the right timbre and placing for his strenuous Néoclès, his gleaming 'Grand Dieu! faut-il qu'un peuple' cut like a sword through the staggering series of vocal hazards Rossini wrote for Adolphe Nourrit, an immaculate head voice and squeaky-clean articulation supplied an authentic glimpse of Rossini in 1826. Howard Williams presided over this testing compilation of Italian *ostinati* and French classical discipline with flair and perfect integrity; the "orchestra (almost entirely) and chorus (wholly) amateur", so the programme said, would have put any number of professionals to shame. This was a really excellent evening.

Alexander Weatherson

 Maestro Alberto Zedda was named *direttore artistico* at La Scala at the end of March 1992, renouncing the same role at the Carlo Felice of Genoa. This will mean yet another traumatic reshuffle of unknown outcome.