

No doubt *Lakmé* is the arch-(and arch is the word) encounter between East and West, one of those contrived lyrical affairs so typical of the later nineteenth century with its mixture of guilt and relish of the imperial prowess of the days before the flood. The St.Etienne programme gave any number of feeble sources for the somewhat faded plot, without making any mention at all of Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine* - still going the rounds in 1883 - which is its true begetter. The tragic heroine is a kind of Selika and like her, commits suicide at the end of the opera, after ensuring the safety of her lover, by wilfully sniffing a toxic soporific, in this case the exotic flower of the datura (quite a feat, as the flower is perfectly innocuous, it is the seeds of the datura which are poisonous!).

Horticultural niceties apart, the composer was not a normal habitué of the operatic stage but certainly did not lack the instrumental skills required, a shy person, he elected (it is not clear why) to write ballets and operettas instead of the momentous offerings which would have brought him enduring fame, being remembered above all for his *Coppélia* and *Silvia*. Perhaps his motive in writing *Lakmé* was money as well as art (it should be recalled that Rossini naughtily insisted that "*fric*" was the operative heart of *L'Africaine*) but his opera, though not a masterpiece and burdened by a plot which begins nonsensically and simply expires, contains some splendid music which has never been forgotten. And then, what there is in *Lakmé* is charm. Gérald, its jingoistic hero, repeats ad nauseam that it is charm, rather than her physical contours which enchants him, and he is right, in Lakmé's dated vocalises, oleograph gestures, in her wistfully asymmetric airs in minor keys (Delibes shows real ingenuity here) is all the nostalgia of a dusty salon of the second Republic, long closed but long remembered.

All this was very well understood at St.Etienne (Mise en scène: Gilbert Blin; Décors: Jean-Noël Lavesvre; Costumes: Yvonne Sassinot de Nesle), evocative settings, colours rosily glowing, colonially alien intruders in an eastern idyll and painfully unobservant of the never-never land of oriental scented-soap (beloved of composers as different as Félicien David and Camille Saint-Saëns). But, Oh dear, what a mess it made of Indian religions. No one ever saw a Brahmin elder so eager to consort with thugs, so surrounded by ladies with lamps and lights, so obsessed with ruins from other lands; no one ever saw a Hindu priestess wearing Pakistani dress and misguidedly expiring in the amputated hand of a gigantic Buddha. No wonder the British intruders were bewildered.

The opera was perhaps staged for Rockwell Blake as the impetuous Gérald, and wonderful he was indeed vocally but so stylised that he only just managed to avoid parody. Natalie Dessay was world-class and more as Lakmé, a stupendous performance whose two *pièces de résistance*, the famous flower duet (sung with a fine Christine Labadens), and the bell song, were not just faultless but breath-taking. Jean-Philippe Courtis as the Garibaldian Brahmin displayed a beautiful legato and sense of style. For a Donizettian, however, what proved fascinating in this very French score was the remnants of Italian routine. Forget Berlioz and Bizet (quoted in the programme), the first love duet between Gérald and Lakmé has parallel opening statements, a centre section (nearly) in thirds, and stretta of *unisono*, but the transcendental lyricism of its climax was truly worthy - to quote Rossini again- of "making the reputation of any composer"