

Gioacchino Rossini *Guillaume Tell* Opéra en quatre actes de Étienne de Jouy et Hippolyte Bis, Palafestival, Pesaro 22 august 1995

The Pesaro Festival *Guillaume Tell* was my first in the theatre thanks to the criminal inefficiency of Covent Garden some years ago in not providing covers for the main singers, and if it should be my last I shall be glad of the visual images it left in my mind. Pier Luigi Pizzi's set consisted of, round the edges of the vast sports hall stage, mountain sides, winter trees and defiles, and throughout the opera the chorus marched, fled, clambered across this terrain. In the foreground simple changes suggested individual locales, and the characters wore clothes of simple greys, browns and creams, all in a timeless, rough-peasant style that convinced and satisfied. The unfortunate exception was Mathilde, who was got up in fur-tipped coat, fur hat and voluminous skirts, suggesting nothing so much as the Empress Elisabeth decked out for a wicked tryst with cousin Ludwig of Bavaria.

The dramatic side, under Pizzi's direction, was almost equally successful, with the vast chorus cleverly massed and differentiated and tactfully moved around. Even Gesler's black leather thugs were convincingly and vigorously nasty, while the final tableau, with the peasants beautifully lit in the surrounding hillsides while Tell and his associates thanked God for deliverance and freedom was magical. Corny? Maybe - but powerfully, justifiably so. The themes and aspirations of the opera have not dated, even if some of the ideals are being perverted across the border in former Yugoslavia.

The main singers were not quite on this level, but how could they be, with the talent pool available today? Michele Pertusi's Tell began as the concerned bourgeois and grew convincingly into the inspired and decisive leader of the last two acts. In assessing Gregory Kunde's Arnold one must emphasise first his musicianly phrasing, his excellent French and feel for a phrase, his dignity in action and in anguish. The first section of 'Asile héréditaire' was a high-point, but Act II suffered from his inability to fill his lovely phrases with the full tone required. One hopes he refuses offers to sing the part again for the next decade or so.

Daniela Dessi as Mathilde just sang. 'Sombre forêt' sounded nice enough, some clumsinesses apart, but where was the sense of the wonder and mystery of nature at dusk? She was a late replacement, so it is perhaps mean to complain that this was not much more than a walk-through. Jemmy was brightly sung and characterised by Elisabeth Norberg-Schültz, and among the smaller roles Paul Austin Kelly and Ildebrando D'Arcangelo impressed both by their voices and their acting.

And the edition? Well, here was the new, full performing edition, virtually every note of it, in excellent (well, mostly) French. And the audience left the stadium at approaching midnight, after six hours in the theatre (three intervals, one of 50 minutes) with no sign of being jaded or sated. Nevertheless, an uncut *Tell* is a festival affair, or a gramophone one. Where is the conductor or administrator who will provide a *Tell* of moderate length for a middle-sized theatre? Even middlingly-well sung as these performances proved, it is a life-enhancing experience.

Robert Barnard

