

Elisabeth Rogeboz-Malfroy *Ambroise Thomas* Editions Cêtre, Besançon 328pp 200F

Around the middle third of the nineteenth century (roughly from 1830 to 1865), French opera was dominated by a non-Frenchman, the great Meyerbeer. But two or three Frenchmen were not too far behind him: Auber, Halévy, and, to a lesser extent, Adolphe Adam. Hector Berlioz, now so greatly revered, was a relatively minor figure at the time, who managed to keep himself busy by writing frequently negative reviews of operas by the more successful composers. Ambroise Thomas (1811-1896) entered this crowded field in the 1830's and composed several opéras comique towards the end of the decade. Finally, in 1849, he enjoyed his first major success, another opéra comique: *Le Caïd*, and did even better with his next work: *Le Songe d'une nuit d'été* (1850). This was followed by several lean years, until, in the 1860's, he again enjoyed a double triumph: first with *Mignon* (1866) and then with *Hamlet* (1868). His later years were somewhat less productive, although *Françoise de Rimini* (1882) should be mentioned.

Posterity was never kind to Ambroise Thomas, perhaps because – unlike Berlioz – his operas never appealed to the more intellectual tastes which became prevalent in the twentieth century. He was forgotten and neglected while Berlioz gained in respect, and for more-or-less the same reasons as Meyerbeer, Auber, Halévy and Adam, dropped out of the repertory. There has been a small resurgence of interest in Thomas's works, with a number of revivals of *Hamlet*, and even one of *Le Songe d'une nuit d'été*. Let us hope that the latter will soon appear on CD, as has been rumoured.

While these revivals may play a big role in a hoped-for recovery for Thomas, the book by Rogeboz-Malfroy may play an even bigger role, if it gets the publicity and distribution it deserves. I would regard it as a model for the way books on unfamiliar composers should be done. It is essentially in two parts; part 1 dealing with the man, and part 2 dealing with his works.

As can be expected, the first part is above all a biography of this very important figure, who, among other honours, was president of the Paris Conservatoire, in which position he succeeded Auber.

The second part consists of four chapters: the first discusses the bulk of the operas, omitting *Mignon* and *Hamlet*. These are discussed in much greater detail in the next two chapters – while the last is a more general analysis of the composer, his century, and his role in the evolution of French opera.

The treatment of each opera is close to ideal, but not absolutely perfect. If I have reservations about some points, they should be seen as minor quibbles, rather than as significant complaints.

Using *Le Caïd* as an example she gives a brief description, followed by the place, date and cast of the première. Missing are first names of the singers (possibly not always available and generally never published in the libretti). Still, they should have been included wherever possible, as should the registers of the singers. Then, we are provided with details on premières outside Paris, and outside the French-speaking world. Where appropriate, twentieth century revivals are included – most of these undoubtedly obtained from Loewenberg, but some may have come from other sources which are not listed in the bibliography. This is then followed by the plot, a list of the musical numbers, and a brief, but most useful, analysis.

In the case of the two major successes (*Mignon/Hamlet*), the musical analysis is carried out in much greater depth.

I consider this an essential book for anyone who is interested in neglected nineteenth century composers and forgotten nineteenth century operas.

