

Gaetano Donizetti *Les Martyrs* opéra en quatre actes (livret de Scribe), Opéra de Nancy, Sunday 25 February 1996

It is no good repeating, yet again, that *Les Martyrs* is not at all the same opera as *Poliuto*. Though French critics (viz *Le Monde* of 28 February) can only hear its Italian roots, the rest of us are able to recognise that, like every other great artist, Donizetti could use the same pigments, the same forms, and much the same imagery, and paint a different picture. *Les Martyrs* has a changed colouring and enhanced chiaroscuro, an altered perspective, and is, of course, as a four-act score, on a far bigger canvas. More than this, its theme is exalted to the proportions of a Paris which invests in *grandeur*. Whatever Ferdinando II believed and was prepared to defend as the perquisite of the church in Naples, and not the stage, *Poliuto* is a clash of factions not unlike the *Pia* he had so recently been setting, *Les Martyrs* really is a credo, with moments of ecstatic writing that elevates the whole to a status of a grand altarpiece, with gesturing Saints and abashed heathens, the light of God descending. In fact both an appropriate and inappropriate offering to the capital of Louis-Philippe and its *Grand Boutique*.

This Nancy edition of *Les Martyrs* – in its original French it goes without saying – was a responsible agglomeration of the original material. As the lucid programme notes made clear, its revival was not without problems. A vocal score published before the première (and thus lacking those touches added at the last moment); a conductor's score at cross-purposes with the parts; and no continuing performance traditions in French, did not help at all. Basically the music played on this occasion was that of the conductor's score, plausibly construed as being the most valid account of the music actually played at the Académie Royale de Musique on 10 April 1840; all the wayward material was stabilised on this basis, as many cuts as possible were re-opened (but the ballet was missing alas) and most of the expansive articulation of the score was given its first twentieth-century airing. (The notes included an amusing polemic on the grave issue of the choral intrusion into the *Overture*, no doubt a serious issue, but failing to recognise that the *Overture* to *Les Martyrs* was originally written in 1837 for the Malibran memorial cantata and was nothing more-or-less than a portrait of that divinely dotty diva!)

Contrary factors were really two in number. The immaculate and brilliant Opéra de Nancy, a jewel of the Place Stanislas, was too constricted, too glittering, and too cold for a *ténébreuse affaire* of this musical complexion (no ballet could ever have cavorted on its stage without falling into the pit); and the utterly insensitive "setting" by Pier-Luigi Pizzi, who would have made a tasty offering to the lions at the end (if there *had been* any lions). Whereas Donizetti's response to Paris was a soavely pictorial one – *grand-opéra* in a nutshell – Pizzi's was that of an clumsy Lego, all dingy staircases and wobbling vases on plinths. Perhaps it wouldn't have mattered much, audiences have learned to close their eyes, but most of it was wilfully at cross-purposes with the music. One painful example will have to do, the tenor's prison scene obliged him to crouch in front of the fire curtain through the central door of which Pauline was admitted by a soldier. Ill-lit, they sang their dawning martyrdom with no attention either from above or below, bad, bleak and banal. At the end of their duet and in the wake of a paradissically-sung 'O sainte mélodie' ('Il suon dell'arpe angeliche') the door re-opened to allow Pauline to depart – and Polyeucte went with her! (maybe Pizzi fancied a *finale-nuovo*?).

Nor did the costumes help very much, though inoffensive they conspicuously failed to identify the beleaguered Christians, this would not have mattered either, except that in the final scene the pagan coro was shamelessly singing the Christian's prayer – as though audiences would not notice! It has to be said at once that this successful staging of *Les Martyrs* was sustained by a Holy Trinity consisting of Alessandra Ruffini, Giuliano Carella, and Gaetano Donizetti, everyone and everything else played only a subsidiary part. But it was indeed successful, the audience poured out from the beautiful theatre at the finish in exactly the elevated mood the composer planned. As Pauline, Alessandra Ruffini, exquisite, shaded, hefted her tremendous role with the most poignant vocalism I have heard for a long time, every gesture, every phrase was full of the pathos and resolution this heroine must sustain to the end; as Polyeucte the Mexican tenor Octavio Arevalo lacked both conviction and the warmth required, but little by little won over a recalcitrant diction to achieve a very creditable apotheosis in the final act (he also, unlike Duprez, looked the part!); Evgenij Demerdjiev made an impressive Sévère, his imposing physique even surviving the cut-price Triumph to which he was subjected in this idiotic production. when he was wheeled about precariously on a plinth before an exultant crowd of no less than seven people, his imposing voice not yet quite smooth enough nor desperate enough for this role, but there are many excellent interpretations waiting for such a voice; in the enhanced role of Félix, Nicolas Cavallier displayed an immense bass, fit to fill the Verona Arena, and very nicely coloured, his fine Act II aria magnificently projected. All this talent was held by the baton of a

superb Giuliano Carella whose springing, impulsive orchestra caught Donizetti's score on the wing.

And what a surprising score it is. Unlike *Polliuto*, on a trajectory as different as chalk from cheese from Verdi both in terms of continuity and histrionic substance, *Les Martyrs* may factually have a score which derives some eighty per cent of its music from the earlier opera but takes more than a hour longer to perform in its entirety. Not just longer and with some new airs but more fluid, some blunting of Italian contrasts in texture, more densely orchestrated, above all with a pulse that is cumulative and elegiac, rather than imposing and impressive. It was in its sustaining pedal that Carella showed himself to be splendidly adept, for the first time I heard Pauline's awakening to Christianity in its blazing revelation, in a perfectly judged tempo with its repeated descending six-note figure unfolding in rapturous mystery so very unlike the empty bravura of every one of her predecessors I have heard in this role; as for 'O sainte mélodie' for once it absolutely transcended every hint of an eagerly waiting *Armée du Salut*.

This *Les Martyrs* is to be repeated at Reggio Emilia I hear. If it is to be with this cast and conductor, it is to be hoped that someone will record it, for heaven's sake...

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