

AN ECHT MARTYRS (with the audience suffering too)

Gaetano Donizetti *Les Martyrs* opéra en quatre actes (livret by Scribe after Cammarano), Teatro Municipale Valli, Reggio Emilia 11/12 March 1997

What is to be expected of this opera? A vision? Courage? Human frailty on the most imposing scale imaginable? An opera impossibly attempting to bridge the cultural divide between Italian suavity and French gesture? An epic, indigestible melding of *tableaux vivants* and wide ranging vocalism? All this was present in the splendid staging at Reggio Emilia. Those who remember the edition of Nancy (see Newsletter 68) will have found themselves listening to a score considerably enhanced, with a more expansive production, a newly rehearsed setting, a *grand-opéra* this time replete with ballet (of sorts) above all with an integrity that compelled attention from the *ouverture* (wonderfully played) to the ecstatic final exit of the principals for their appointment with the lions.

The critical response to all this theatrical and thematic heroism was mixed. In general there were slightly miffed reviews, as if Donizetti had wilfully turned his back on the Italianate virtues of *Poliuto* and simply stretched his his music to the size of the Opéra in Paris. Of course there is some justification in this, but it should not be imagined that - just because there has continued to be a thinly-spaced series of revivals of *Poliuto* in Italy between - say - the Donizettian nadir of the later nineteenth century and the fascist apogee in the 40's of this century, capped by that *dea ex-macchina* which was Maria Callas - the composer had not the right to uprate his own score to a different dimension. A more dispassionate view might be that the Bergamasc had evolved, the stage was evolving, and plots had no longer quite the same priorities. Frankly, a schism began to be apparent which coincided with the arrival of Verdi; though this latter could be saying "less words" and driving the Italian melodramma to ever more concentrated forms, Scribe and his uprated version of the *tragedie-lyrique* could be insisting upon "more words", more prolix forms, and ever more thematic digressions. It is no surprise that Verdi always expressed enthusiasm for *Poliuto*, *Les Martyrs* was a visiting card placed on the salver of an alien Syren.

And then the attention span of French audiences was shorter than almost anywhere else, *fashionable* people arrived in their boxes only at the start of act II, and left in the penultimate act (it was not done to depart with the hoi polloi); as a result, neither the beginning of a *grand-opéra*, nor its end, could have the same impact as in Italy - instead of a cumulative climax there was a frieze of chunks of drama, each one quasi self-sufficient and with a suitable emotive aria or ensemble embedded within. No one found it necessary to sit though a *whole performance* (one's supper should not be allowed to suffer - the early Christians could do their ultimate suffering all on their own and before a half-empty house). The familiar insistence that it was the members of the Jockey Club who demanded a ballet in their favoured act misses the point, opera in France was a *divertissement*, its most characteristic manifestation being the *opéra-comique* with vocal periods widely separated by spoken dialogue.

Donizetti, like Rossini before him, accepted this challenge. The dramatic focus is now the centre of the score, but whereas Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* is his unanswerable operatic credo, Donizetti reinvents himself continuously with in pious plot, reaching out for an omnibus romantic panorama, taking French foibles in his stride, with a more intense colouring, a faster pace, more forceful ensembles, a greater orchestral depth and a vocalism at the service of the whole, not at as end in itself,

This last, of course, was the rub at Reggio Emilia. Ah!...that *singing* (THAT SINGER!). Cannot one make out a case for authenticity? Since 1830 or so the belcantist vogue had been on the wane in France, in the same way that Rossinian virtuosity had become *vieux jeu* (at the Opéra it was viewed as a kind of betrayal) patriotic voices were now pressing for a species of vocalism that represented *French* rather than Italian strengths. This meant a plethora of acid sopranos, beefy tenors, and light baritones, above all it meant voices in an exaggeratedly diverse dynamic range in, perhaps, deliberate contrast with the harmonious accents of the Théâtre-Italien - an increasingly unfashionable bastion of taste. Vocal homogeneity was not a factor of French *grand-opéra*. This

Opposite: Roberto Servile as Sévère (Courtesy Teatro Municipale Valli di Reggio)

mood of independence coloured both casting and composition, it can be no surprise that Duprez and his tearing *Do di petto* (even if not quite the novelty it has been claimed) found a natural home at the Salle Le Peletier where it infuriated Rossini and burst out of all bel canto bounds; the Opéra also frowned-on the vocal felicities of the travesty mezzo, applauded white voices with an altitudinous tessitura, and had a *faible* for an occasional cavernous basso profondo - greatly widening the vocal gamut descriptively if not necessarily qualitatively. In making his *rifacimento* of *Poliuto* for the Opéra Donizetti was extremely sensitive to all this, as too was Reggio Emilia in casting Alessandra Ruffini as Pauline, a lyric soprano as was Julie Dorus-Gras; in fact her crystalline voice has real quality, and though it sounded more rounded in the same role at Nancy (where the theatre was smaller) the slight edge it gained in the larger house added to its intensity and her delivery and quite excellent acting had also notably evolved. The tenor of Miguel Olano attracted much attention (!!), and criticism - if not outrage, but he too had something of a claim to authenticity, if only in respect of abandonment of bel canto tenets. Very loud, singing in an unrelenting forte, he looked-like and sounded-like a credible Polyeucte, an unendearing figure, boneheaded, driven by goodness-knows what vision, confronting a simmering audience who had become the serried ranks of Romans in the circus. Donizetti would not have been pleased by his cavalier treatment of his music, but he might have found some respect for the dramatic impact. Of course it was not really appropriate, but it was compelling theatre and the listeners paid attention to every note (they had no choice). I personally was fascinated, there was an antidote to much all-purpose anodyne vocalism in this performance and clearly he had gained control in the period after the shocked impact of the *prima*. And then this loud voice dominated the many huge ensembles (as it should). Altogether a memorable, even a committed, rendering (for once the correct word). Maybe, had he gone on singing the role for a month, he would have won over his antagonists. Or maybe not.

Sévère is quite the most difficult role in all Donizetti's canon. A hero, but humane; a conqueror with a tender heart; willing - even at the expense of his duty - to save Pauline's dispensable husband from a humiliating death out of his love for her he is obliged to encompass all these contradictions in music still retaining much of the character of the earlier, more one-dimensional, Severo of *Poliuto*. Even Roberto Servile with his beautiful voice, the very personification of the hero, found it a puzzle to equate the music with the words supplied by Scribe in 1840. The fact is, Donizetti did not completely assimilate this role - the most important one in the opera - and baritones have to make a choice which Sévère is best suited to them. Here we heard a Sévère who was the embodiment of valor, imposing his will on everyone except himself and finding the anguish to point almost all the challenges. A memorable performance for all the very best reasons. Umberto Chiummo's Félix fully represented the admirable vocal gifts of this artist, only lacking the testing subterranean notes asked of this French opera, and the odious Callisthène of Enzo Capuano made a good case for the overthrowing of the pagan world. The staging, revamped by Pier Luigi Pizzi himself, succeeded in reducing the earlier Nancy setting to a sketch of his intentions and he handled the coro with a rare mastery, the *insieme* varied, with sensitive sculptural grouping, he shaped each successive challenge with care (the *a cappella* trio was quite beautifully conceived). The main problem was the *French* - a cast without any native linguists is facing a tremendous hurdle - those parts of the ensembles which needed a congruity of French vowel sound to underpin the music (Donizetti himself was a good French linguist) simply fell apart. Ruffini constantly sang "*Che*" instead of "*Que*", and Olano insisted upon "*Amore*" in among a variety of choices. A man in the train on the following day said he had difficulty in following the plot of this opera "*as he did not understand English!*" Ho capito.

No carping can possibly offset the tenuous impact, however, of this *Martyrs*, the first time I have heard a French *grand-opéra* in all its magnificence, tremendous, overwhelming in its incomparable orchestration, surging forward under the gifted baton of Daniele Callegari. It will be recorded, and I suspect that its vocal qualities (or inequalities) - quite surprisingly - will be found to have made a vivid case for this wonderful score, as never before, and for a long time in the future.

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