

LOUISE-ANGELIQUE BERTIN

Dilettante or Icon?

by Douglas M. Bennett,

(Please note that the pagination is not exactly similar to that in Newsletter 85)

What is drawing me to travel to the high Franche-Comte in February? Those that know me will expect to hear of at least a rare stage outing by Gerard Depardieu, or an encounter with Carole Bouquet. They'd be wrong! If you opted for an almost forgotten amateur female composer and her French Grand Opera, barely heard of since its unsuccessful run at the Paris Opéra in 1836, you'd be on the mark.

But, what are we to make of a woman composer from the early 19th Century, whose well-connected journalistic pedigree gained her access to musical opportunities that others couldn't get, and who, by the age of 31 had had 5 operas staged; yet after that age (she reached the age of 72) published only one set of piano pieces? Is she a valid feminist Icon or just a child of her time (grasping artistic glory by whatever means in the midst of the roller coaster ride of France, and particularly Paris, in a series of experiments with democracy and autocracy in almost equal doses that sowed the seeds of modern media-led government)?

Even allowing for some alleged early efforts at painting and her later two volumes of poetry, the label 'renaissance woman' would seem an exaggeration without substantial further evidence. It would be easy to be dismissive, but Berlioz was impressed by (but mildly critical of) her music, and he usually resisted bending his knee even under financial pressure (he was resident critic on Bertin père's *Journal des Débats*). He commented on extreme irregularity of phrasing and heavy orchestration, both characteristics with which he was prepared to flirt in his own music. A modern audience with more jaded ears and none of the political baggage of 1836 should find nothing to offend.

To judge for oneself as a listener is not easy (it took some effort for me to hear the one work of Louise Bertin that has made it to the record catalogue; a Lullaby, recorded in 1956 by Suzanne Danco). What I found was the most substantial contribution—poem and music—to an album assembled by Rossini for a private purpose (a gift to a Mlle Louise Carlier in March 1835 aimed, probably, to curry favour with her impresario father). The music itself is in an effective contrasting ABA form with the irregular phrase lengths observed by Berlioz. What is more surprising is the awkward word-setting that inhibits textual meaning—not an endearing quality in an opera composer unless the music amply transcends the words. On this limited evidence the term 'dilettante' would seem to adequately cover her music leaving only her operatic achievements to stand further examination. And that brings us neatly to *La Esmeralda*, her last opera, the failure of which put her off public exposure of her talent for the rest of her life.

Because *La Esmeralda* was Victor Hugo's only operatic collaboration it gets referred to (usually, as in Anselm Gerhard's book *The Urbanisation of Opera* without any direct musical references or quotations). In 2002 Besançon, Hugo's birthplace, is incorporating a rare outing for at least part of the music of *La Esmeralda* in their celebrations of the 200th anniversary of his birth. That the failure of the opera (Marie Falcon was forced to retreat from the stage during the 6th performance) was the result of a conspiracy of the claque probably aimed at Mlle Bertin's father rather than at the opera itself raises the faint hope that an undiscovered masterpiece lurks here.

(Page 17 was taken up with a full page version of the drawing that appears on page 18)

The format of the Besançon performance sounds promising. It is to be a staging of an imaginary recital of excerpts supposedly as performed in a château in the Bertins' home town of les Roches in 1835 to an audience including Rossini, Liszt (who made the piano reduction published in 1838) and, of course, Berlioz. Why not Donizetti, one might ask?—and the answer is that in 1835 he was more of an outsider than Bellini, who as an Italian was not in this very French get-together. The focus on the salon context rather than on the music (or dramatic staging) should pinpoint the historical importance of the work without risking the whole revival on the work's more doubtful dramatic and musical credentials.

I shall end on a dottily romantic note, thus risking my credibility in our image obsessed age. There is only one surviving picture of Mlle Bertin, an engraving by M Delvaux based on a lost portrait drawing by Ingres. The lost drawing was always in the ownership of the subject lady herself, so its disappearance must be considered 'suspicious'. The engraved image (reproduced on postage stamp scale in the New Grove Dictionary of Women Composers) is an unflattering thing to say the least. It would be fair to assume that the Ingres portrait would have been more skillfully accurate and more subtle in its technique (but perhaps still insufficiently flattering!)



To get me in the right mood for my coming visit to Besançon I need a more romantic image of the lady in question, and for lack of any other source I have to rely on my own efforts, which I offer to you, dear reader, as a final part of this 'taster' for the coming fascinating event.

Not quite Mlle Bouquet, but a fascinatingly enigmatic smile that may reveal its secret on 19th February in Besançon.

I shall report my reaction to you in due course (see Newsletter 86).

(Please note that in 2008, the Orchestre National de Montpellier Languedoc-Roussillon under Lawrence Foster recorded the opera on Accord CD 4802341.)