

## CAUSES AND EFFECTS

A word in explanation of the title of this piece: I was seated for the *Margherita d'Anjou* to the extreme right of the front section of the stalls. This placed me at a considerable distance from the tenor (Bruce Ford) and the soprano (Annick Massis) and in close proximity to the double basses, the percussion and the lower frequency brass. Most of the melody instruments and the chorus reached me only through a curtain of sounds that would normally have been relegated to the status of background accompaniment. Wagner famously dismissed the music of the far more successful (in his day) Meyerbeer as 'effects without causes'. For me in the Royal Festival Hall on November 2nd the causes of the prodigious maestro's effects were all too obvious from its proximity.

From my disadvantageous eyrie it was difficult to judge the performance on its merits. In a score with quite a lot of variety but few of the extravagances of Meyerbeer's Paris operas it seemed to me that the orchestral lack of unanimity of ensemble was a trifle excessive (although I could not tell how many of them were within sight of David Parry's baton). On the other hand the demands on the singers (particularly the tenor and the soprano) and the fact that a hard week had been spent recording the full opera (the recitatives were omitted in the concert) gave some licence to the restraint with which the more extreme singing passages were attacked. Only Fabio Previtalli as the chameleon-like doctor (or were his attempts at interchangeability of coat more likely to earn him the title of turn-coat?) could consistently cut through the instrumental noise to my side-lined ear.

But it was the fascination of the opera itself that had so nearly filled the Royal Festival Hall with the operatic cognoscenti of London (and a few more far-flung places). Was this just sub-Rossini or a trial run for *Les Huguenots*? Well, it was actually neither but also both. Sure, there were plenty of Rossini-like features, but the cut of the melodies and some of the po-faced comic effects in the music could never have come from the Pesarian charmer. Act 1 had some clear omens of Grand Opera to come. The musical montages had more of the fresco-like Tableau about them than the cavatina-cabaletta combination so beloved of Italian composers. And those bass lines that accumulated in front of me like a string of pile-drivers held more than a trace of Meyerbeer's Germanic roots and his training under the Abbé Vogler.

Act 2 brought more familiar fare with major solos for some of the principals-but where, oh where did that trio for the basses (three of the four lower male voices) come from? For the duration of that piece we left 1820 La Scala far behind and might have been on an ice-covered Belgian lake watching the risible goings on in the dark or Les Patineurs in the background as in Act 3 of *Le Prophète* some 29 years later.

All in all an enjoyable excursion into the unfamiliar world of Meyerbeer's apprenticeship in Italy, and a frustratingly early taster for Opera Rara's full recording due to be released in September 2003.

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