

A walk round the bars and foyers of the Opéra Royal de Wallonie, Liège, looking at the posters of recent productions, reveals how well-served there are lovers of rarely performed operas of the first half of the nineteenth century, particularly French operas. Their latest offering was Meyerbeer's *grand opéra*, *Les Huguenots*. Rather than a detailed review of the performance, what follows is a personal assessment of the work itself and some thoughts about its staging that suggest priorities for productions of operas of this period.

In brief, the performance was vocally competent rather than outstanding, certainly not a "nuit des sept étoiles". The women lacked brilliance and the men refinement and precision. Annick Massis (Marguerite) sounded cautious, though she dropped every note of her fearsome coloratura neatly into place, for which perhaps I should be more grateful. Barbara Ducret (Valentine) and Gilles Ragon (Raoul) were both unhappy on high – the passage in her duet with Marcel with the sustained top C was omitted as was his high Db in the love duet cadenza – but reasonably effective elsewhere. The others lacked elegance in anything florid but were otherwise competent or better – Marie-Belle Sandis (Urbain) was fun and Philippe Rouillon (Saint-Bris) was menacing. Orchestrally the performance went well after the first few minutes and Jacques Lacombe's conducting was very fine, exciting and lyrical as needed.

Where the performance scored was in its direction and dramatic focus. Settings were suggested rather than portrayed with realistic scenery. Costumes were sumptuous, reds for the Catholics, blacks for the Huguenots, and convincingly (for me, I'm not an expert) 1572. This may have been a budgetary decision, but I think it was the correct one artistically. Realistic painted flats might not seem effective these days, especially in a medium sized house (though it would be interesting to see, once at least, this French *grand opéra* performed as it was in 1836), and solid sets would take too long to change, so the use of curtains, backdrops, some furniture and the occasional suggestive prop was perfectly adequate. Attention was thereby thrown onto the principals who responded keenly to Robert Fortune's direction with convincing and detailed acting. For example, Didier Henry (Nevers) achieved a moment of real nobility in his refusal to join the massacre plot. I was pleased that the opera wasn't updated, though I certainly don't want to suggest a matter of principle. The Covent Garden production of 1990 was updated to the then present and set in Northern Ireland and ranks high on many people's list of all-time horrors, though others rate it favourably. I too disliked it but fifteen years later I am more amenable to non-traditional productions and maybe I would now respond differently to it?

The production generally avoided gimmicks. A picture of a naked Christ figure in a Deposition or Pietà pose on the wall in Nevers' chateau in Act 1 seemed out of place at first. But when the curtain was raised on the carnage at the start of Act V (its first scene was omitted) to reveal a dead, half-naked youth in the same pose, it made sense, and movingly so. The bared bosoms of the serving women in Act 1, and the see-through-when-wet costumes of the bathers in Act 2, (a swimming pool with real water, plenty of bubble bath) may not have been true to either 1572 or 1836, but Meyerbeer's Act 2 bathing scene was surely intended to titillate his audience (the straight male part anyway) and they chimed with the modern acting style adopted. The central scene of Act 4 is the 'Conjuration et Bénédiction des poignards'. This is a

very famous passage, admired even by those who generally despise this work and its composer. Here it was excitingly produced, the stage filled by the end, and a real sense of menace and fanaticism generated. It is immeasurably helped of course in that its big tune is a really good one, broad and memorable, one that gains in power as the scene progresses, being given first to Saint Bris, then to Saint Bris and Nevers and finally to the whole company. I was conscious of staging and music working together.

Act 5 also worked very well as theatre; the horror of the final murders was convincingly realised. When Andrew Porter reviewed the Decca recording (*The Gramophone*, October 1970) he wrote, "Without the theatre to seduce one, the poverty of Meyerbeer's music is all too clearly apparent. Above all, Act 1 and Act 5 are wretched things." Well, I was seduced by the theatricality of this Act 5; in fact I didn't notice the music at all. But "wretched" seems a fair description of much of Act 3 too. Neither the Rataplan nor the Ave Maria has much virtue except that they can be combined contrapuntally. One notices the effect, but only as an effect.

There are famous solos for Raoul and Marcel in Act 1, yet both are unsatisfactory. Raoul's "Plus blanche che la blanche hermine" is typical of much of Meyerbeer's melodic writing, short-breathed, frequently threatening to expand into expressive lyricism yet somehow not doing so by falling in on itself. Perhaps Adolphe Nourrit, the first Raoul, or Mario or Jean de Reske later in the century, lavished so much vocal art on it that its deficiencies weren't noticed. Both this aria and Marcel's "Piff paff" contain examples of Meyerbeer's famous instrumental effects. But the obbligato for solo viola in the former and the "grotesque accompaniment that highlights piccolo, bassoon, cymbal and drums" (Grove) in the latter sound contrived. "Piff paff" sounds like a game of tin soldiers not a real conflict, and grotesque is a good description of that viola solo. Schumann's criticism of it, "he gives us whole arias with the accompaniment of a single instrument, as if he meant to say 'Behold what I can do with but small means! Look, Germans, look.'", though surely malicious, does point to real weakness in this case.

I noticed omissions of second verses and repeated sections and suspect there were other cuts I didn't spot. But whereas I always regret the omission of cabaletta repeats in Donizetti, I don't think it was the cuts that left me underwhelmed musically. For me *Les Huguenots* is *grand opéra*, not great opera, even if the suspicion remains that judgment should be reserved until I have heard a performance that combines Liège's fine theatrical qualities with a really complete text, stunningly sung.

Comparisons with Donizetti's *Pia de' Tolomei* seen recently in Venice at La Fenice are instructive. This was none too interestingly produced, its scenic ideas a distraction rather than illuminating and no substitute for the detailed direction of this *Les Huguenots*. Vocally both were competent rather than outstanding. But *Pia* has a spontaneity and sincerity that I find lacking in *Les Huguenots*, which is carefully, too carefully, calculated – a comparison that generalises to both composers' mature *œuvres*. *Les Huguenots* sounds busier and denser, more effect filled, and maybe that is why it had such a high reputation for much of the nineteenth century. I found I believed in *Pia*'s characters much more easily than those of *Les Huguenots*. Nonetheless, I am grateful that I had the opportunity to see it, and if Liège announces *Le prophète* I will be on the Eurostar booking line like a shot.