



The Perils of the Progress of Time

I set off for Wexford this year out of a sense of duty and with my heart heavy with nostalgia for the soon-to-be-lost little Georgian theatre that will be unrecognisable after its redevelopment starting next year. I need not have bothered taking the extra emotional baggage. Two nights negotiating the crowded front-of-house and then sitting behind not-very-large gentlemen reminded me graphically of the impossibility of preserving both Festival and theatre in their present form. Along with the other frustrated patrons, ingress and egress was achieved without actually coming to blows, and after manoeuvring I managed to see the stage with reasonable continuity. Some lingering regrets about the loss of the intimate character of the Wexford Festival remain, but I have no doubts that change is essential.

Turning to this year's productions, matters are not so clear-cut. The introduction of David Agler as Artistic Director, replacing the departing Luigi Ferrari, has been muted by the sad death of the Chief Executive, the unique Jerome Hynes. How typical this year's productions are of the new man and his future direction we will have to wait and see. At this stage all I can tell you is that musical standards seem to have high priority and that the ideas of the creative production teams will get unquestioning support rather than critical challenge. Directorial excesses, long the bane of opera in certain countries, seem to have invaded this heretofore haven of restraint. A 'Director's Note' was issued for the second evening.

Both of the productions I saw (*Maria di Rohan* and *Pénélope*) presented the audience before the 'curtain-up' with strong stage pictures; for *Maria* a draped gauze curtain with a projected black and white female head, whilst at the side lurked a sepia-coloured photograph of an older woman, in front of which the soprano laid flowers during the overture. For *Pénélope* a lounge wall bearing a Magritte-like mural of a Mediterranean coastline that had leaked across furnishings such as an over-size standard lamp. The problem in both cases proved to be the way both directorial 'concepts' developed. Rather than explore the scope of the visual puns, new ideas were piled on top. In the final act of *Maria di Rohan* the rapid dramatic action took place under a peeling coat-of-arms (Chevreuse) from the centre of which a hidden passage improbably opened. For *Pénélope* a tilted bed-sit room became home to the suddenly aged Ulysses and Penelope as the dramatic coup de grâce. Neither bore much resemblance to the operas as written. Both 'concepts' proved at best distracting; at worst confusing to me and to others I consulted. The influence of *Maria's* mother over that plot lies in having caused the original problematic (secret) marriage and is less than central to the events of the opera itself. She would certainly not have been photographed. [She died when the real Marie de Rohan was one year old! Ed.]

While the productions were annoying there was real pleasure in the music. Eglise Gutiérrez was strongly cast as Maria and gave a ringing performance of the music accompanied by much wringing of hands. Of the men only Chevreuse (James Westman) brought his character into a kind of life. He spent much of his time after his emergence from below-stage prison dressed like a half-unwrapped Frankenstein monster. His expression when his arm emerged from its sling seemed to ask, 'Is this broken or bionic?' But his voice showed no such breaks. Weak stage direction and some wooden acting hampered the other male parts. It was only afterwards when the RTE broadcast of the next performance allowed me (courtesy of Sky channel 915 in the UK) to listen again in the comfort of my own home, that I could relish the musical pleasures fully.

Without a comedy to leaven this year's Festival it could have been a leaden affair, so the first night audiences were desperate to find something to chuckle about. Sadly the opportunities came from the occasional oddities in the productions rather than the (rare) attempts at persiflage. Donizetti's *Maria di Rohan* should have provided no such laughs either deliberate or otherwise, but from about half way through Act 2 the suppressed guffaws became audible. Nothing in the musical performance encouraged this mirth: Signor. Polastri, who took over as conductor from Antonino Fogliani late in the day, kept tight control dealing with the excursions of some singers (beyond the limits of rubato) with regal restraint.

The plot of *Maria de Rohan* or *Chevreuse's Revenge* (from a play by Lockroy and Badon: *A Duel* at the time of Richelieu) progresses so speedily that essential bits of information are easily missed. The men (Chevreuse, Maria's secret husband, Chalais, her equally secret lover, and Armando di Gondì her loud-mouth suitor) must be clearly differentiated from the outset. Maria's motivation must not be personal if her behaviour in front of so many men who expect a unique relationship with her is not to degenerate into farce. Some things came over well. Richelieu's fall from power was well done through the ripping down of his portrait, but the corollary when his power became re-established never appeared. Chevreuse's release from gaol as a bloodied wretch (more as a result of Richelieu's demise than from Maria's insincere machinations) was unnecessarily melodramatic, and drove subsequent events further so. The significance of the challenge by Chalais to a duel with Gondì (after tactless remarks questioning Maria's morals) never really registered with the audience: the illegality of duelling under Richelieu's law made even less impact.

The letter that will later expose lover and beloved gets written by Chalais at the outset of Act 2 and despatched on its wayward way. Only then is Maria's true allegiance supposed to emerge when she appears and swears affection only for Chalais now he is due to fight the duel. It is from this point that the ticking clock must rack up the tension as lack of time determines that events happen in a tragically wrong order. But this feeling of accelerating doom eluded both director and conductor. In an

anonymous apartment (meant to be that of Chalais) the focus was more on the laughable incarceration of Maria in a wardrobe (almost the sole piece of furniture) whilst husband and lover discuss the duel.

Finally in Act 3 Chevreuse returns from fighting the duel on behalf of Chalais who failed to appear in time. Richelieu is tightening his noose round the duellers as the letter is delivered and read, not by Maria but by her husband. Chevreuse's revenge on Chalais is pursued down the hidden passage. Only Chevreuse reappears.

Up to this point the plot has been conventionally melodramatic, which might explain the director's lack of attention to clear characterisation and building tension. Certainly up to this point Maria has looked like a case of Princess Diana-like mental instability that seems only skin deep. But this opera bursts its conventional banks with the closing cabaletta. It is not easy to find the text, and without some new commercial agreement this year's Wexford performance may sadly not make it onto CD. Here is the text:

Onta eterna? Io non t'amai!
 Io ti resi un omicida.
 Per me infamia e morte avrai,
 E fu pura la mia fé.
 Cielo! or usa del tuo dritto,
 Questa vittima ti sfida.
 Se obbedirti fu delitto,
 È il tuo fulmine mercè.

[Eternal shame? I never loved you!
 I call you a murderer.
 For me there will be infamy and death,
 As a result of my faith.
 Heaven! now be my judge,
 This victim remained true.
 If obeying you was a crime,
 Then your anger is a blessing.]
 (Trans AW)

It turns the conventional operatic woman-victim into something heroic with a tinge of proto-feminism. This cabaletta was cut from the Vienna prima during the preparations: Wexford delivered it forcefully but firmly in the bel canto tradition, and it brought the opening night audience out of their jocular dissociation from the drama, and in some cases out of their seats as well.

The following night Fauré's *Pénélope* was marred by the director's insistence on an additional storyline on top of the usual 'the warrior returns to his faithful wife'. This super-plot ran something like 'the love that does not age well'. As an adjunct to Fauré's dreamy music drama it was distracting and led the promising opening image of a serene eternal Mediterranean portrayed on the walls of Penelope's palace into the cul de sac of the inset modern bed sit. Nothing could be further from Fauré's consoling closing music and nothing in the music's performance could rescue the masked dancers (one heavily pregnant) from looking faintly ludicrous.

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