

The Judgment of Paris grand opéra and Dom Sébastien

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What a shame the outreach articles in the Covent Garden programme book failed so signally to take note of the one really essential characteristic of Parisian *grand opéra*: that is, that it reflected the priorities of its perfectly idiosyncratic audience. Not just that a ballet had to be included somewhere or other to the order of a mythomaniac "Jockey Club", but that the entire score had to have its own special configuration [the buzzword: *infrastructure*]. The Académie Royale de Musique was a *French Temple of Art* not a tourist caravanserai. Composers had to know the rules – including how and when to conform if they hoped to survive.

To make a start: almost no one in the audience found it necessary to sit through five acts of music, *no one* spent so long in the theatre. The operatic connoisseur kept his hat on his head or in his hand; people kept coming and going throughout the performance. Of course the critics had to stay to the bitter end (at least at the première - they were paid to do so) together with the mother of the first violin (no doubt) but no one else did, only a handful of fans and fanatics stayed to the end. The gratin *never* took their seats before the beginning of Act II and *always* left before Act V. It was not chic to arrive with the *canaille* (pace M. Sarkozy) and the overdressed and bejeweled knew how long it took to retrieve their carriages in the foyer and would not put themselves in danger of rubbing shoulders with the importunate or worse on the pavement (the queue of waiting carriages stretched right down to the *Quai*). Supper awaited. The Opéra supplied huge reception rooms (far bigger than the Salle) for this élite so that they could socialize interminably and grace their boxes as and when they pleased.

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The form and content of *grand opéra* depended upon these engaging parameters. Those parts of the score that could expect to see the fashionable throng *en masse* would contain the most memorable music and/or spectacular settings. Donizetti's *Dom Sébastien roi de Portugal* (thanks to the canny M. Scribe) was fully compliant with the Judgment of Paris.

It was fundamental to *grand opéra* that each act should be completely *selfsufficient*; that is, that each act should have an emphatic beginning and end so that a fleeting client could be assured of hearing a carefully packaged fragment of the whole. Each disparate act enshrining one big aria by a great singer as its centrepiece, to be digested over supper. Composers had to be realistic over this, it was the rule: at least one memorable air in each act. Above all, apart from such quirks - the hardy maestro would know all too well that M. Pillet or whoever was in charge would *decompose* his opera as soon as the curtain fell, preferring to mount one or two isolated acts in a concerted "mixed-bag" rather than restaging the whole thing over and over again - battles - processions - boiling oil and so on - so expensively (hence, of course, Rossini's famous sarcasm on being told of the forthcoming appearance of Act III of his *Guillaume Tell* in such a "mixed-bag": "*What! all of it?*").

Thus *Dom Sébastien* has four solidly constructed acts – each complete in itself. Act V - given over to collecting shawls, fans, and saying goodbye to friends - is swift and relatively inconsequential.

Those things that have puzzled our critical friends about the successful revival of the opera so recently in London have come about as a result of the unawareness of these parameters: the "sombre colouring" of *Dom Sébastien* was far from "doom laden" when only a portion of the opera was tasted at any one time; the spectacular element was spread evenly over the whole score so that no one should leave the theatre feeling deprived whatever the duration/brevity of their visit; the novelty of the wonderful tenor aria which terminates Act II reflected Donizetti's desire to overwhelm his flighty patrons, in this one act he had supplied the gratin with two big airs, a ballet, a sensational scene-change and a duet *to-die-for* as well as some of the most extraordinary music they would ever hear on that stage in their lifetime.

Whereas it was usual for Italian Opera to build-up to one single important climax inevitably at or near the end, Parisian *grand-opéra* is a frieze with a series of musical peaks. This notwithstanding, *Dom Sébastien roi de Portugal* clings to Italian precedent to an astonishing degree, given the venue; it is clear that Act I is a standard Italian *Introduzione* - its two important arias: Camoens' 'Soldat, j'ai rêvé la victoire' and Zayda's 'Ô mon Dieu! sur la terre', both within the arc of the opening action as is usual in such a position in the score, and here blessed with the traditional enveloping chorus. Indeed the whole act is nothing but a rousing envoi - with a procession generously thrown-in - to send off the King on his fatal misadventure. It is a Prologue merely, whatever its substance and rataplan air, thus perfectly dispensable to the modish spectators not yet in their seats. Such an *Italianità* did not escape the Chauvin press of course - nor did the opera's blighted love-entanglement with an archi-familiar melodramatic dressing, *Dom Sébastien* and the Moorish princess in cahoots with the subplot of the wicked Dom Juan, it merely confirmed an indecent transit from the Théâtre-Italien and did not presage a long stay on the noble boards of the Académie Royale.

The real drama, everyone seated, indeed begins with Act II. The celebrated diva Rosine Stoltz in her most glittering dress surges to the footlights and sings her eagerly awaited *aria di sortita*, followed, in Paris, by a full scale ballet thus leaving nothing to chance. [In Vienna, some eighteen months later Donizetti added a cabaletta to this *sortita* - a species of vocal excess not to French taste but allowed under Imperial ægis to satisfy flexible ears] A catastrophic scene-change follows, with bloodstained military chaos, a ferocious Moorish army, violence, nobility, self-sacrifice and slaughter, transforming the stage from light to dark. No horror is omitted and the act is capped by the terminal *cri-de-coeur* of the tenor, alone on a moonlit stage, surrounded by corpses, the unrivalled Gilbert-Louis Duprez with his ecstatic romance 'Seule sur la terre', at once a bold peak, a blow to the pretensions of Mme Stoltz, and a pivotal bridge - unique in the opera of the day as well as quite the most persuasive encouragement - who can doubt it - for the gratin to stay in their seats for Act III.

Act III too has a calculatedly seductive structure. Its focus is the nostalgic cantabile aria by Camoens 'O Lisbonne', the solo spot of the suave Paul Barroilhet, spectacularly cushioned by the elaborately ironic and grandiose sight of the fugitive King of Portugal watching his own funeral – a sufficiently piquant spectacle targeting the ranks of jaded legitimists who formed the backbone of the great theatre. [The ROH programme details that the afflicted Marquise de la Marismas fainted with emotion at the sight, but it was simply because her husband - the ultra-rich financier who paid the bills at the Opéra and was Rossini's banker - had just been buried] The composer, however, had more compelling problems with this act, the watertight integrity he had planned was threatened by a skirmish with Scribe, an adagio in the *finale* was dropped to his chagrin thus curtailing the dramatic seal at the end. [But the deleted section was promptly put back in the Vienna version]

Act IV, in contrast, was thought to be too short by the Pillet/Scribe duo. In view of the utterly momentous Inquisition Scene that takes place in this act we can scarcely agree today, its truly hair-raising effect perhaps makes the greatest impact of the whole score. Here the vocal gravitas is enhanced by Dom Juan with his 'Ô voutes souterraines' sung by Nicolas-Prosper Levasseur with a secondary input from the 'Va perjurer, épouse impie' from the Abayaldos of Jean Massol within the skirts of a fabulous septet. This, a veritable *point de repère* of this important opera, gave the signal for departure to most of the audience.

Act V, as indicated above, is more summary. The primadonna has a recitative and cabaletta (the cantabile is missing perhaps for brevity), there is a duettino between the lovers, urgent and irresolute, a barcarole as a brief touch of local colour, and a scurrying *a cappella* trio (extracted from *Élisabeth*), then two shots and all is over.

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As a confection to the taste of one of the most special audiences on the whole of the continent of Europe the form and content of this ultimate opera by the Bergamasc composer, one he considered his greatest work, is embedded in a species of *crème brûlée*. A comestible hard on the surface, indulgent below. As with *grand opéra* in general, the composer and his critics burned their fingers in trying to dispense it satisfactorily to unheeding audiences almost to the end of the century.