



Opera in London during the Nineteenth-Century No.6

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Polyeucte/Poliuto/Martyrs

The celebrated French ténor Adolphe Nourrit was to make his Italian début at the S. Carlo in Naples. In April 1838 he wrote to a friend "*I am making my début in an opera by Donizetti, written especially for me on a subject which I chose myself. It is Corneille's Polyeucte*". The opera was in rehearsal when word came that it had been prohibited. And the reason? The King of Naples (Ferdinando II) felt that Christian martyrs were too sacred to be represented on stage as public entertainment. Two months later Donizetti left taking his *Poliuto* with him. In Paris he split the first act into two, re-arranged the music and inserted a ballet of 30 minutes duration. Reborn as *Les Martyrs* this 4 Act *grand opéra* opened in Paris on 10 April 1840.

I martiri

In its resurrected Gallic guise the former *Poliuto* was first promised in the prospectus of 1851 for Covent Garden. It never materialised.; no explanation was ever given but it is interesting to note that at the same time as this projected season, the St. James Theatre was starring the great French tragédienne Rachel in a season of French plays to great acclaim. One of them was *Polyeucte* in which she appeared as Pauline.

The following year of 1852 the opera was again advertised, and this time in a new Italian translation by Manfred Maggioni as *I martiri*. The cast included Enrico Tamburlik as Poliutus, Madame Dejean Julienne as Paulina and Giorgio Ronconi as Severo. The first night was to be on Saturday 17 April but due to the indisposition of Tamburlik it was postponed and *La sonnambula* given instead. It is interesting to see what the management did: those already in their seats could stay and see Bellini's opera and have a free ticket for a later performance of the Donizetti opera: those *outside* the theatre could have their money back or accept a voucher for a future performance or pay to see *Sonnambula*. The following Tuesday, the 20 April saw the first night of *I martiri* with Her Majesty Queen Victoria, Prince Albert and Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg heading an audience of the nobility and High Society of the time. There were mixed reviews but on the whole it was considered a success. Of the three principal singers Madame Julienne (making her London début) found favour straight away. It was felt that she was nervous in her first act aria "*but a few bars sufficed to show the audience that an artist of great skill and power stood before them*". Another voice added that she had "*given a most able performance from first to last, her histrionic efforts being remarkable for intelligence and power*".

One critic spoke of Giorgio Ronconi's "*fine taste and artistic judgement in the insignificant part of Severo*". He "*lit the auditorium with the melodious gem of the opera 'Amor de miei prim anni' and as ever gave a truthful and well-studied portrayal*". But it was Enrico Tamburlik who drew the greatest acclaim from both critics and audience. All the reviews spoke of "*this great singer, who, with every new part, rises higher in the*

estimation of the public, was in glorious voice and completely electrified the audience". The aria in the third act where Poliutus resolves to overthrow the idols in the temple took the house by storm. This had to be encored and at the end he took the C sharp in alt with thrilling effect. The sextet and finale to that act excited the enthusiasm of the house to the highest pitch and the curtain fell to a storm of cheers. As one critic put it - "*In point of conception and execution, this finale may take its place with the finest displays given in the Royal Italian Opera*".

The production as a whole was thought to be more than satisfactory. The architectural scenery was "*of the best*"; the costumes splendid; and the procession in the firum [see print] was a "*gorgeous display for which the theatre is rightly celebrated*". The ballet also had a good press despite large cuts. However, the spectacular *final ultimo* did *not* meet with approval. It was not effective even to the point of being laughable and could have endangered the whole success of the evening. One critic observed "*the wild beasts which are to devour the martyrs were hardly impressive due to the awkward effigies of the lions and tigers from the property department*".

Donizetti's score had schizophrenic reviews, ranging from "*dull, heavy and spiritless*" to "*one of his most powerful compositions*". One critic felt that the "*great defect in the music was that he had not grappled with, and embodied, the antagonistic passions of the Christians and the Romans*". yet another thought "*In the matter of high notes straining the voices, Donizetti has almost put Mayerbeer, Halévy and Verdi in the shade*". Others detected similarities to *La Favorite* and *Lucia*. [While preparing this article I listened to both *Les Martyrs* and *Poliuto* and heard Verdi's *Aida* of yet thirty years in the future]. One review proposed that "*I martiri, with all its defects and merits (which are tolerably well balanced) is likely to remain one of the stock operas of the theatre*". Alas this was not to be the case..

In May and June just five performances of acts three and four were heard as appendices to complete performances of *Lucia* and *Lucrezia Borgia*. A single performance of act four was heard in July. The last complete performance was given on 22 June. The Morning Chronicle reported the demise of *I martiri* with the following cabaletta: "*The state of the house did not justify this experiment. Apart from two or three isolated points and to the excellence of the artists generally will this opera owe any favour it may obtain. The most elaborate score is pale, colourless and monotonous, a recocking of all those musical phrases and melodic snatches which have become almost the stock property of the Italian Opera. This has proved to be an expensive failure*". *I martiri* has not been heard in London since.

The première of *Les Martyrs* in London took place momentarily in 1975 (see Newsletter 100 pp16-17)

A TRAGIC ENDING AND A NEW START

Adolphe Nourrit, ill and plagued by self-doubt, threw himself from a fourth floor window seven months after the aborted opera he and Donizetti had conceived together; *Poliuto*, in its turn, saw a momentous Neapolitan resurrection, after the death of the composer, on 30 November 1848.