

DUPREZ

Paris, Sunday 12th April, 1840

LA FRANCE MUSICALE

ROYAL ACADEMY OF MUSIC

LES MARTYRS

Opera in 4 acts, words translated by Scribe, music by Donizetti; dances arranged by Corali

Nourrit is the person who has written the scenario of this work; and Nourrit is the one who had the idea of putting on the operatic stage this fine character, Polyeucte, who is one of the greatest creations of Corneille. This great artist, [Nourrit] who had brought with him from the land of Italy a feeling for religion which ought to flourish beneath France's clear skies, believed that, today, when everything is affected by scepticism and when men would like to pray yet all the while look for enjoyment, a religious story of so elevated a nature as is, above all, that of Polyeucte, would compel the attention of the indifferent crowd. Nourrit was a sincere artist who believed in all he did, but he deceived himself over the substance that could be extracted from this play. It would require an even greater imagination, a vaster genius than that of Nourrit to adapt for musical setting this sublime poetry of Corneille.

Donizetti had a very difficult task to fulfil, and great courage was necessary to dare to undertake it. He has not recoiled before the difficulty and more than once, in the course of composition, he has found music worthy of the poet who has inspired him.

A word, then, about the opera.

Scribe advises in all humility that he has only realised the libretto imagined by Nourrit; this modesty pays tribute to the talent and memory of an artist whom all France mourns. We would thank Scribe for it wholeheartedly if he had deigned to name just once his posthumous collaborator either on the frontispiece of the libretto or on the detailed information which precedes it.

It is useless to delay over the analysis of Polyeucte; everyone knows Corneille's tragedy; Nourrit has made a few changes, albeit essential changes for the composer. All that Corneille presents in reported form has been

changed into action in accordance with the demands of the operatic stage. The result of these changes has been a more spacious treatment of the exposition of the story and a series of dramatic situations which has put into the poem more variety and interest. Thus Polyeucte's baptism in the catacombs, the triumphal entry of Sévère, Polyeucte overturning of the idols while proclaiming Christianity in the midst of a pagan sacrifice, and finally the Christians led to martyrdom in the amphitheatre - all this is placed before the eyes of the spectator. There are still a few other happy changes. In the first act Pauline's arrival in the catacombs, where the tombs of great Armenian families lie and where Pauline comes to conduct expiatory ceremonies at the sepulchre of her mother, whilst in the distance Christians devote themselves to the ritual of their cult, is a very fine idea, for right from the start it puts one in the picture and by comparison introduces the principal element of the drama - the battle between two religions. The meeting which follows, between Polyeucte and Pauline, is also very dramatic, although a little baldly introduced. It is, moreover, ingenious to have Pauline converted to Christianity in the prison and by Polyeucte himself, after she had come to plead with him to renounce the new religion. It seems that this once Scribe has taken a little more seriously than usual our language and the rules of our poetry. His phraseology and versification are almost classical; he has religiously kept a few of Corneille's lines, the placing of these lines is masterly; they give colour and power to the duet. Finally the verses are very apt for musical setting.

The musician has approached with great boldness this colossal composition. We cannot make a detailed analysis of the pieces today; both time and space are lacking; the importance of this new composition, moreover, demands a well-considered examination and more than one hearing.

Right from the overture one can sense that we are going to be present at a heart-rending and terrible drama. It begins with a section for 4 bassoons in E major and this serves as introduction to the allegro, noteworthy above all for a motive which is cleverly developed. This motive is like a chain which binds together the whole overture; often it is hidden under

instrumental figuration, one believes that it has disappeared, but it suddenly returns winding its way a thousand times through the score. Towards the end a chorus is heard off stage; it is the chant of the Christians who are already praying in the catacombs. This simple, meditative prayer has a touching devotion and makes a startling effect by the new manner in which it is introduced.

Donizetti has sought in this work to fuse together melody and harmony, those two elements which up to now two schools - Italian and German - have ruled separately. This attempt already shows progress and one ought to give credit to Donizetti. We find a trace of this attempt in the first act finale and in those of the third and fourth acts. The impression produced by the finale of the third act has been overpowering; we have never heard anything more captivating. The first chorus of pagan priests, which comes back time and again, each time orchestrated differently and which then interlocks with the other parts, makes an immense effect; the auditorium has, for a moment, been shaken by the enthusiasm of the public. This finale alone is a work of inspiration which places Donizetti amongst the foremost masters.

All the other pieces, more or less new, have always one great merit, that of being cleverly handled, such pieces as Mme. Dorus' cavatina; the duet for Massol and Mme. Dorus in the third act; the trio for Massol, Dérivis and Mme. Dorus and above all the grand air for Duprez and the duet for Duprez and Mme. Dorus in the fourth act, have been listened to with deep concentration and have been vigourously applauded.

There is evidently progress in Donizetti's orchestration. This time he has shaken off the restraining features of the purely Italian school and, if one can reproach him at all, it is for having adopted forms which are severely classical for a subject which was itself already too severe. It is, however, necessary to praise the remarkable skill with which he makes the artists shine as well as the unity of thought, form and style which is the mark of this large and scholarly score; one feels in more than one place the hand of the master; and despite certain unfavourable prejudices which beforehand hovered other this performance, one

felt oneself carried away more than once and success has not been in doubt for a moment.

We know already that the new Donizetti work will arouse many jealouses and that he will not lack critics of extreme hostility. Here is in the arts, as in politics, a sort of chauvinism which tends to stifle all that which is not completely French; art has no country, or rather it belongs to all countries, and, if there is something which ought to flatter our national pride, it is to see the most intelligent of the élite of all countries come to seek in our land appreciation of their talent or of their genius. Donizetti has just written a fine musical work for our Opéra; we will not exaggerate its merit, but neither will we deprecate it for either emotional or doctrinaire reasons.

The performance has in general been remarkable. Duprez has well interpreted the character of Polyeucte who is profundly religious and dedicated. He has sung all the time with taste, suavity and vigour; above all he has phrased the recitative with purity and telling accentuation. Mme. Dorus-Gras, in the role of Pauline, has been classicially severe and impassioned; she has known how to restrain the brilliance of her singing so as to remain within dramatic truth. The creation of this role will only add to the reputation that acclaim and numerous successes have already won for her. Messol has sung expressively and with feeling: the timbre of his voice lends itself to every nuance and each day one senses more and more the meaning one may gain from it. One must acknowledge Dérivis and Serda for their willing support. As for Wartel, he has acquitted himself well in the role of Néarque, and he has even sung with taste. The chorus has sometimes failed in attack, but it is probable that the ensemble will be quite satisfactory by the next performance.

The orchestral playing has been irreproachable throughout; the work, however, presents difficulties, not of execution, but of ensemble, that any other less skilful orchestra would not have overcome with the same ease.

As for the production, it is a long time since the Opéra staged a work so richly. The scenery for the third act, which represents Sévère's triumphal arch, the magnificence of the staging of the pagan ceremony

in the fourth act, and finally the truly perfect and truly elegant costumes, all this gives to Les martyrs an irrestible attraction. The dances are fairly original; in the second act the dance executed by Mlle. Louise Fitzjames and Mme. Dupont was well liked. Mlle. Fitzjames danced with much grace and elegance; as for Mme Dupont, her solo is certainly old fashioned, too old fashioned for us today, but not old enough to recreate the period to which she would transport us.

ESCUDIER.

P.S. Throughout the whole performance certain boxes on the right of the performers did not cease from making hostile demonstrations, which at the very least were in the worst of taste. Is it that these Messieurs, as Scribe calls them in the preface to Les martyrs, have brought the privilege of hissing works of which everyone else approves, just as claqueurs applaud works of which nobody else approves? This savage hostility will not prevent the success of Donizetti's opera.

(Léon Escudier, music journalist, was born at Castelnaudary, 17.9.1816, and died in Paris, 22.6.1881. With his brother, Marie, he founded in 1838 the periodical 'La France Musicale', which continued until 1870).

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Les martyrs - The cast of the first performance.

Pauline.....Julie Dorus-Gras.....(1805 - 1896)
Polyeucte....Gilbert Duprez.....(1806 - 1896)
Sévère.....Eugène Etienne August Massol.(1802 - 1887)
Félix.....Prosper Dérivis.....(1808 - 1880)
Néarche.....Pierre Francois Wartel.....(1806 - 1882)
Callisthènes.Jacques Emile Serda.....(1804 - 1863)

Costume de HAVRE, rôle de VERDUC.
Opéra Bal.
Académie Royale de Musique.
Chez Bauderon, Martinet, Editeur, rue du Coq N°18 à Paris.

Costume de Mlle DORUS-GRAS, rôle de PAULINE
Opéra Bal.
Académie Royale de Musique.
Chez Bauderon, Martinet, Editeur, rue du Coq N°18 à Paris.

François Wartel
Richault

WARTEL