

MASSOL

Paris, Sunday 12th April 1840

REVUE ET GAZETTE MUSICALE DE PARIS

ROYAL ACADEMY OF MUSIC[1]

LES MARTYRS

Opera in 4 acts

Music by Donizetti; translation by Scribe; dances arranged by Corali

(First performance)

Scribe's libretti, especially those he has written for the Opéra, are and will be incontestably the crowning achievements of his literary and dramatic career. Political, religious and historical scenes spaciously conceived in a firm and true style; scene changes of an extreme richness, characters drawn in bold and telling strokes, interesting and musical situations, such are the elements of which the majority of his operas are composed. In his opéras comique he seems preoccupied in manipulating the comedy, in putting the right spirit into the piece, as if he were thinking of a farce; then he writes with a sharp wit, he is mannered and often guilty of misrepresentation; but these qualities do not prevent him from succeeding in this theatre [the Opéra - Comique] where the habitués love the misrepresentations and mannerisms. But La Muette,[2] Robert Le Diable,[3] Gustave,[4] Les Huguenots,[5] La Juive,[6] independent of the music, are works which have more value and dramatic importance than the comedies of the same author. One feels in the libretto of Les Martyrs, which is only an adapted work, Scribe's professionalism and sense of stage. The work has succeeded, not because of the beauties of Corneille, which Scribe has kept such as the fine and dignified line : 'Let him die' : 'Où le conduisez - vous? A la mort. - A la gloire! ' which, in any case, one does not even hear, smothered as it is by the musical tumult, but by means of the episodes which are not in the great poet's work such as the refusal to bring incense to false gods and the overturning of idols, an eminently dramatic situation borrowed from Les Martyrs of Chateaubriand.

We will certainly not analyse the new composition which is based on Corneille's vivid and dramatic work,

and which has made poor Adolphe Nourrit a martyr too.[7] The composer of the music ought to have modified much of his work in order to present it at the exacting level required by the French stage, and he does not deserve being treated as lightly as either he himself approaches the task of composition or as the partisans of German music exclusively would wish to treat him. The journalist, before all else, ought to declare himself for eclecticism, which is the only thing the sound and sensible critic can do. That is not an easy decision to take, it is true, in regard to music. Usually one becomes passionately fond of this art as an ignorant dilitante, who is the worst of all enthusiasts, who assesses a new score by generalized descriptions of the music - light, easily composed, graceful, above all vivacious, - for we have a high regard for vivacious music in France. We have, moreover the new school of thought which wishes that every composer should become Germanic, that he should try out vague, new harmonies and distorted rhythms, features, on the whole, misunderstood by the common people. Donizetti has not put himself firmly in any one of these categories; he has acted like all great composers who have come to write for us, he has sought to satisfy the demands of the French stage without abandoning completely, as Rossini did in William Tell, the quick rhythm, which perhaps comes him all too easily, of Italian-type melodies.

The overture to Les Martyrs recalls in its form and its allegro section, that of La Vestale.[8] It is, however, cut across in the middle in a new and original manner by a distant and mysterious chorus of Christians who are meeting in the catacombs. This chorus, performed on stage before the curtain is raised, makes a fine effect, and interrupts, in an interesting way, the agitato introduction in E minor, which sets the scene well for the story of persecution which is to follow.

The introductory chorus :

O voûte obscure, ô voûte immense,
Où régne la paix des tombeaux,
Que rien ne trouble ton silence,
Que rien n' éveille nos bourreaux!

is in fine style; it well expresses the gravity and religious feeling of the story; it is a fine Christian evening hymn. The voices blend well, the metre of it

is straightforward but rhythmical; this piece does indeed make the audience ready - one cannot see how better - for the mysterious and sombre drama which is prepared, above all, by the following words :

'Marchons sans crainte
Dans cette enceinte
Pieuse et sainte
Où Dieu condiut nos pas!
Dans le mystère
Et la prière
Attendons, frère,
Un glorieux trépas!'

The clarinet solo, announcing the young Roman girls and Pauline coming to visit the tomb of her mother, is melancholy and touching; it has been very well placed. The young girls' hymn to the goddess of the underworld: Jeune souveraine, etc., fails perhaps to some extent to convey the feeling for classical antiquity that Gluck has so well given to the companions of the priestess, Iphigenia[9] and he [Donizetti] does not give sufficient expression to the feeling of respect mingled with fear by which these young girls ought to be motivated while making their vows and offering their homage to the powerful queen whose ebony sceptre rules the underworld.

The finale of the first act includes a fine duet between Pauline and Polyeucte and the latter spins out a delightful vocal line on the following words which he addresses to Pauline whom he wishes to make a Christian:

'Objet de ma constance,
Amour de ton époux,
Que Dieu, dans sa clémence,
T'appelle parmi nous'.

The second act opens with a fine bass aria sung by the governor Félix:

Dieux des Romains, dieux tutélaires,
Je servirai votre courroux, etc.

We would advise Dérivis, playing the dramatic role of the governor of Armenia, to show a little more feeling, and consequently more passion in this piece; he lets his voice roll out too spaciously and thus makes it sound as if he is dragging. For the rest he knows

how to give this character, who is difficult to play convincingly, the appearance of an ancient statue. The stretta of this aria; Mort aux infâmes, etc., makes a great effect, and is well matched by the trumpet fanfare announcing to the people the edict of persecution against the Christians which the governor has just signed.

The procession of the proconsul Sévère, in Armenia, sent from the emperor, Decius, is magnificent; it recalls, to those whom have seen it the pomp of The Triumph of Trajan[10] and the dazzling procession in La Juive. The triumphal arch and all the scenery, although overall a little too bright and consequently rather crude, makes an excellent effect. Massol, although announced as having rheumatism in his left arm, rides in his chariot like a man used to triumphs. He has sung his cavatina, Amour de mon jeune âge, etc., very well. This act, brilliant because of its pomp, makes no great musical impression; it is the third act which contains all the best music, just as it confirms the success of the work. It is the third act, and it alone, which is a fine and great work. In it the composer shows himself dramatic, emotional and powerful. The act opens with a fine duet for Sévère and Pauline. The latter sings a charming and melodious phrase to the words: Souvenir cruel et tendre, etc., and when Sévère says to Pauline: Quoi! te quitter encore! Tu le dois! Je ne peux, the composer has accompanied this dialogue with most interesting orchestral effects. Further, at Pauline's succeeding words :

Ne vois-tu pas que hélas! mon coeur
Céde et succombe à la douleur! etc.,

the horn blends with the voice in a delightful way; then comes a very attractive aria sung by Duprez: Mon seul trésor, mon bien suprême. The strongly rhythmic cabaletta of this aria; J'irai ! ..... will have the same success as Suivez-moi ! in William Tell.

At this point the scene changes and shows us a fine setting representing the temple of Jupiter, The hymn to this deity, as sung by the priests and people is of the finest quality. The brass instruments strive for prominence with the low unison voices of the chorus; the women's voices intervene against a charming decorative passage for the first violins: this is real

theatrical music, broadly conceived and composed with inspiration. The composer does not linger at so fine a moment. After the interrogation to which the priests and Sévère subject Néarque in order to discover his accomplice - this is a compact and very dramatic dialogue - there develops a spacious and powerful sextet, which one cannot imagine better written for either the voices or the situation; then a climactic event - the overturning of the statues, idols and sacred tripods; and at last the affirmation of belief in Christianity is made in the midst of all this confusion in an immense unison, almost giving rise, in our age of indifference, to religious emotion for all the believers except for those who worship the golden calf and for those who are too proud. This finale is very fine and alone will make the work a success. The fourth and last act is necessarily less dramatic; but it still includes some fine and brilliant musical numbers, such as Polyeucte's dream and the succeeding duet with Pauline. The last part of this duet, O sainte mélodie, will seem direct in manner, brilliant to some but commonplace to others. Altogether the third act of Les Martyrs is, without doubt, the best that Donizetti has written for the theatre. The interpreters have acted and sung well. Duprez has played Polyeucte as a fanatical Christian, as devoted to his wife as to his religion, and he has thus made him very true to life, which is more interesting than making him a man motivated only by religion, one who can only be admired. Madame Dorus-Gras has been what she always is, a conscientious actress and singer, as distinguished for her dramatic performance as for the purity of her vocalisation. We have forgotten to mention a very pretty polonaise, perhaps a little too close to the Italian style, that she sings in the second act when she learns that Sévère still lives, and for which she was rightly applauded. The work, we repeat, has been as well played as sung, and its success has not been in doubt for a single moment. The modesty and good taste of Scribe, who has abstained from proclaiming himself as Corneille's collaborator has been noticed.

Henri Blanchard

(Henri-Louis Blanchard, born Boardeaux 7.2.1778.and died Paris 18.12.1858. Studied the violin).

NOTES

1. Académie Royale de Musique is the official name of the Théâtre de L'Opéra, Paris.
2. La muette de Portici, opera in 5 acts by Auber; text by Scribe and Delavigne, Paris 1828.
3. Robert le diable, opera in 5 acts by Meyerbeer; text by Scribe, Paris 1831.
4. Gustave 111 or Le bal masque, opera by Auber: text by Scribe, Paris 1833.
5. Les Huguenots, opera in 5 acts by Meyerbeer; text by Scribe and Deschamps, Paris 1836.
6. La Juive, opera in 5 acts by Halevy; text by Scribe, Paris 1835.
7. Adolphe Nourrit was leading tenor at the Paris Opéra from 1821 - 1837 when Duprez was engaged. Nourrit then left for Italy where he had considerable success and where he helped Cammarano Christianise the text of Corneille's play Polyeucte, which became the libretto for Donizetti's Poliuto. He was to have sung the title role but the censor would not pass the opera for production. Nourrit suffered increasingly from melancholia and committed suicide in 1839.
8. La Vestale, opera in 3 acts by Spontini; text by Jouy, Paris 1807.
   The overture to Les martyrs also recalls the orchestral introduction to Rossini's Ermione, (San Carlo, Naples, 27th March 1819), which includes a stage chorus (before the curtain is raised). It is interesting to note that in its original form, as Poliuto, the Donizetti work was also written for the San Carlo and that both operas are based on French plays, Donizetti's on Polyeucte by Corneille and Rossini's on Andromaque by Racine.
9. Iphigénie en Aulide, opera in 3 acts by Gluck, Paris 1774, and Iphigénie en Tauride, opera in 4 acts by Gluck, Paris 1779. The text most likely refers to the latter which includes a series of choruses for Iphigenia's companion priestesses.
10. Le triomphe de Trajan, opera in 3 acts by Lesueur and Persuis; text by Esménard, Paris 1807.

I MARTIRI,

(THE MARTYRS);

A Lyric Tragedy, in Four Acts,

THE MUSIC BY

DONIZETTI.

THE LIBRETTO BY E. SCRIBE.

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY

MANFREDO MAGGIONI,

AS REPRESENTED AT THE

ROYAL ITALIAN OPERA,

COVENT GARDEN.



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