Il viaggio a Reims (à Liège)

This *pièce d'occasion* (Paris 1825), dismembered like Orpheus by the Meneads (by its author) and scattered to the four winds (S. Cecila in Rome and the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra in Paris), partly reassembled (as *Le Comte Ory*, Paris 1828) and then boldly reanimated *in toto* in Pesaro (1984), has been the imaginative subject of a sparkling revival by the Opéra Royal de Wallonie. The nineteenth century was full of *cantate sceniche* dedicated to the arrival and departure of fleeting monarchs, their weddings, *accouchements*, christenings and namedays, coronations and so on just like this one. Rossini and company indiscriminately fêted Emperors, Kings and usurpers (Coccia commended successively the King of Naples, Murat, Napoléon, the King of Rome, the viceré Eugène, two Emperors of Austria, the Pope, the King of the Two Sicilies, the King of Sardinia-Piedmont and his successor the King of a united Italy without, apparently, any qualm of conscience); Rossini, ultra-orthodox (one has to say this sort of thing discreetly) was all too



willing to offer a celebratory *Dramma giocosa in un atto* to SM Charles X, last of the real Bourbon kings of France, to mark his splendid coronation at Reims. He got together every great singer then in the capital and wrote a string of pearls - supplying some of the very greatest music he was ever to compose. It would have been lost completely had not he used

some fifty-per cent in *Ory*, leaving behind another fifty-percent to be forgotten. Happily the manuscript of the discarded music - in no way inferior, rather the reverse, to the music he chose for the French opéra comique of 1828 - was discovered in Rome and the whole brought back to life thanks to Janet Johnson and the Fondation Rossini di Pesaro.

Liège, with an exploratory courage quite beyond Brussels or Antwerp got together a cast who could *sing* this Apotheosis of the Cantata Scenica, under the baton of the master stylist Alberto Zedda. The results were worthy of its original Parisian coup. Deprived of any real plot, and with one single setting, it came over as a *sublime Musical* - sublime because no Musical ever written had music of this quality, a concert-in-costume fit for the Gods, set in a White Horse Plombières (more *tutti frutti* than the gelato we know), camped-up with flowers and erotica, a neo-naked Marianne (?) and honoured - though King Charles X would not have credited it - with the presence of an incredible Chinese acrobat, Nero, Napoléon, and a *sans-culotte* -- who together with the assembled cast, sang 'Viva' to the Bourbon King while waving little flags in *bleu, blanc, rouge* (any legitimist in the house would have fainted). Nice but quite dotty.

Surely *Il viaggio a Reims* was conceived as a superb entertainment, and this is what we got. Fun to watch, full of verve, fine costumes, never a dull moment.

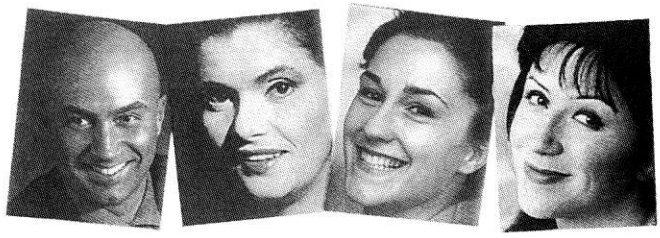


Frankly it would have been, as Rossini knew well immediately after the première, quite impossible to recover the original cast and mood of 1825. The reign of King Charles X was brief, it began gloriously enough, the economic climate brightened daily, all seemed set fair, but Revolutions - like the world - go on turning willy nilly as France was soon to know to its cost, five years later he was constrained to set off for the shelter of the King of England whose "wood-sawing" he had so despised - and lived for some time in exile in Britain like every other French sovereign from Louis XVIII to Charles de Gaulle. The fervent loyalty of 1825 soon vanished, hence *Le Comte Ory*. of three years later. But the text still incorporates compliments to the *Duchesse* de Berry (daughter-in-law of the King) and to

SAR the (never to succeed to the throne) *Comte* de Chambord, forgotten by all but the historically minded. At Liège, as at Pesaro, an heroic attempt was made to reclaim this long-lost loyalty to a long-gone leader but tempered by modern inconsequence. To replace Giuditta Pasta (Corinna), Laura Cinti-Damoreau (the flighty Comtesse de Folleville), Ester Mombelli (the inn-keeping Madame Cortese), Adelaide Schiassetti (the Marquise Melibea of the *cuisse-legère*), Domenico Donzelli (Belfiore), Marco Bordogni (Libenskof), Carlo Zuchelli (Lord Sydney), Felice Pellegrini (Don Profondo), Francesco Graziani (Trombonok), Nicolas-Prosper Levasseur (Don Alvaro) - to mention only the stars of the 1825 staging, all required to sing music of the utmost difficulty - is a feat testing beyond belief even for the greatest stages today, but Liège did astonishingly well throughout with a cast that was comprehensively excellent: Corinna was sung by the twenty-five year old Anne-Catherine Gillet, the Contessa by Felicia Filip, Madame Cortese by Rossella Ragtzu, Melibea by Anna Maria Di Micco, Belfiore by Jean-Luc Viala, Libenskof by Mario Zeffiri, Lord Sydney by Nicolas Cavalier, Don Profondo by Marco di Felice, Trombonok by Olivier Grand, and Don Alvaro by Marc Barrard, each one of these roles was sustained with a vocal confidence that was exceptional as too were all the more minor ones. A long long series of arie and duetti was each given precise and indeed delicate attention as to setting and delivery as *this* music - these Rossinian pearls - require. Almost all the first half had the cast in *déshabille* - saucy bloomers or passion-killing culottes - the inhabitants of the Inn fresh from their baths; the second half - that is - after the news that a journey to Reims is out of the question - was in a fancy-dress, it having been decided to fête the coronation on the spot. A very peculiar party, in fact, emerged in the second half, with all sorts of passing pleasures and colour-supplement frivolity.

Of course the big pleasure is hearing the music not in *Le comte Ory*, as well as hearing this enchanting confection with its pair in another context entirely. In general of hearing it more expansively too, as a Rossini unconstrained by any plot is able to indulge in vocal athletics to his audience's heart's content. We had some really high-flying singing, it is invidious to single-out individual talent in such a line-up but I especially enjoyed the ladies - Felicia Filip's stylish Contessa, Anna Maria Di Micco's earthy Marchesa and the wonderfully confident and accomplished Corinna of Anne-Catherine Gillet who brought down the curtain at the end with an ecstatic star-burst of fioriture. No easy feat as this terminal *Improvviso* is a very strange offering indeed. And the men too, especially the "catalogue aria" of Marco di Felice's Don Profondo delivered - to maximum effect - from the middle of the stalls and the very funny and lecherous duet between Corinna and the Belfiore of Jean-Luc Viala. There was some wonderfully shameless deportment: this *Viaggio* was suffused with sex, fit to make any straight-laced Charles X sit up, delight the *pesarese* , and leave the Liégeois of 21 March 2000 blushing but which proved an ingenious thematic device in what could otherwise have been simply a necklace of wonderful vignettes. The mise-en-scène was deft if zany, the rehearsal standards left nothing to chance or to be desired. The real star - to my mind - was the orchestra. Alberto Zedda turned the Orchestra de l'Opéra Royal de Wallonie into a real Rossinian band, with the delicacy, absolute precision and rhythmic certainty that is the absolute hallmark of the great composer. The instrumental solos which abound were perfection. The evening too.

Alexander Weatherson



Marco di Felice/Felicia Filip/ Anne-Catherine Gillet/Anna Maria Di Micco