La Esmeralda fully dressed in all her glory.

My title may confuse because it implies that up till now audiences have only been able to experience Louise Bertin's *La Esmeralda* in an 'unclothed' form. But that's not really what I mean. All we have been able to enjoy of this elusive opera is the skeleton, the bare bones of the music: not the opera as conceived and performed in 1836. The young bourgeois lady, daughter of a highly politicised journalist-father during the see-saw politics of post-Bonaparte France, stood little chance of being treated fairly. But surely she must deserve better treatment now. This was the immediate and overwhelming conclusion from the first 'complete' performance with chorus and orchestra since 1836 at the Radio France Montpellier Festival on 23rd July this year.

This one-off concert performance (due to be issued on CD, probably about this time next year) was a revelation: musical ideas that sounded awkward when played on the piano in the Liszt transcription were shown to carry an emotional charge when given instrumental colour and articulation to the melodic lines. Laurence Foster's fully committed conducting played a big part in achieving this well-rehearsed feat. So will the recent performance change critical perceptions of a work that up till now has been treated as outside even the margins of operatic history?

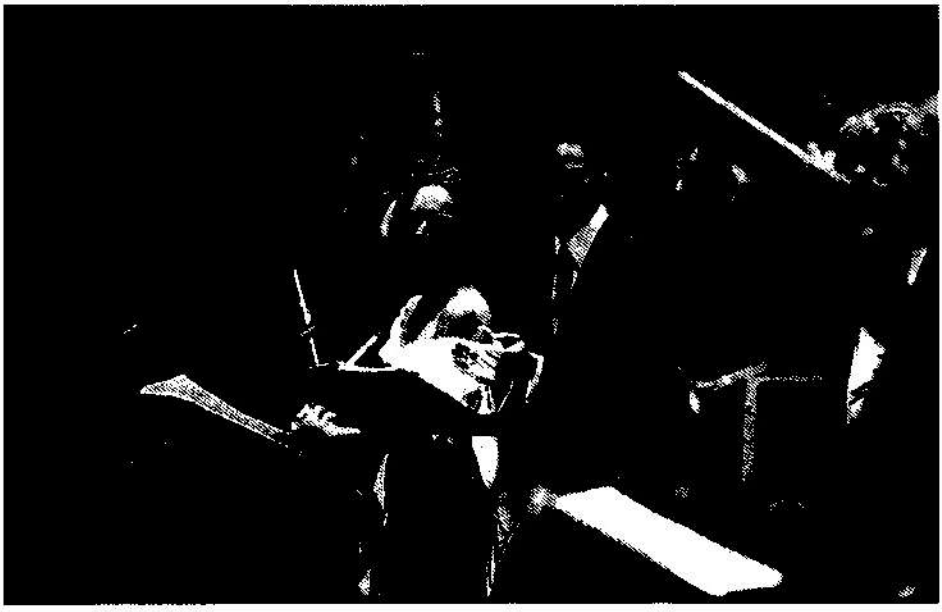
Mlle Louise Bertin's musical style also has some oddities that have allowed commentators to belittle her work: uneven phrase lengths, wayward bass-lines and accompaniments that mercilessly work against the melody. All these could be called fingerprints of the 'Romantic' style, but in the aftermath of the 'Classical' period they were just brickbats to be used against less loveable composers such as Berlioz. But now the music sounds appropriate to the drama, and the evolution of each scene and character believable within the limits of a concert performance. In particular the tenors were generally not well served by the acoustic of the *Salle Berlioz* in Montpellier. From my Balcony seat their voices were somewhat lost, but the Friday broadcast on *France Musiques* restored the balance. Only one item, Quasimodo's Bell Song, still came off worse: my memory of the sound with piano accompaniment and the singer in Besançon (Christophe Crapez) tells me it seemed better suited to the music.

It was Esmeralda (Maya Boog) who carried all before her on in Montpellier. She looked and sounded like the gypsy girl of Hugo's novel and in doing so transformed Bertin's opera from an interesting byway of Parisian operatic history (in a period usually relinquished to the supremacy of Rossini) into more, and possibly into a little gem. But can it survive on stage? That is different question. The evidence from 1836 (only 6 performances, the last in an abridged, 3-Act form) might indicate otherwise, but there are the political factors to consider. Perhaps the failure, if it can be called that, had nothing to do with the merits of the work. The evidence from the concert performance in Montpellier is that it seems unlikely it could survive in concert form as a sort of oratorio: key moments in the drama seem unmotivated and therefore difficult to comprehend. Why?

The impact in the theatre is affected by factors other than just the music. One is dramatic timing: Esmeralda is not a long opera by Grand Opéra standards (even allowing for some cuts, the Montpellier the performance indicates about 2¼ hours), but the dramatic pacing looks wrong: Act 1, 35 minutes, Act 2, 25 minutes, Act 3, less than 25 minutes, Act 4, nearly 45 minutes. The impression given is that after 3 coherent acts, and a good opening to Act 4 (imprisoned Esmeralda's *preghiera* just before the bad priest Frollo arrives to press his evil demands) the whole thing seems to lose its way dramatically. At the same point in Besançon the surtitle *'Un prêtre? Quelle surprise!'* raised a laugh amongst the younger people distracting the audience

in a different way. In Montpellier the lack of such inappropriate humour didn't avoid growing frustration about what was actually happening.

The correspondence between librettist (Hugo) and the composer bears witness to the agonies over the dramatic denouement. It can make a big difference to a composer: a musical strategy set for one outcome might be completely wrong for a different ending. In this case various schemes closer to the novel seem to have been rejected, probably to satisfy the censor. The final solution in which the lovers reunite only for Phoebus (and maybe Esmeralda, the text is unclear) to expire to cries of *'Fatalité'* seems dramatically weak, and inspires nothing too dramatic in the music.



But that may not be the end of it. The novel (and the opera, at first) carries the title 'Notre Dame de Paris' for good reason. The cathedral really has to be thought of as a character in the drama, and to hell (literally) with the censor! The solution, if one should be sought, may lie in that other key aspect of Parisian Grand Opera; the *spectacle*. The third scene in Act 4 should have brought onto the stage the massive frontage of the cathedral for the first time. The effect was hinted at in Besançon, but little more. Without the 1836 censors to worry about, the link between church (rotten priest) and perverse justice (the fate of Esmeralda) can be made totally overt, and thus bring out all the dramatic irony with which such a conjunction is redolent.

That leaves but one unfortunate victim in putting this opera on stage: Quasimodo. He never really has his chance in this opera; the Bell Song is little more than a piece of musical scenery and his role in the drama is largely peripheral. But properly staged he has a much better chance than in the Salle Berlioz in Montpellier to make an impact.

Let us hope the *Société des Amis de Victor Hugo* continue their campaign and we get a chance to make up our own minds how well this opera 'works'.

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