Live streaming from the Opéra Royal de Wallonie, Liège

Russell Burdekin, May 15th, 2010

Several companies are putting a toe in the water testing live streaming of opera as a way to expand both revenue and audience reach. The best known is probably the Metropolitan Opera relays into cinemas but there are also attempts to stream directly into homes, although it is too early to say whether it will become a regular feature. Dynamic Records showed *La Gioconda* from Verona last year but don't seem to have followed it up. The Opéra Royal de Wallonie in Liège have also recently started to stream their productions seemingly, from the short introduction to *Rigoletto*, more with the aim of attracting new audiences into the opera house than to establish a new audience outside it.

Thus far, Liège have streamed Bellini's *I Capuleti e I Montecchi*, Verdi's *Rigoletto* and a Donizetti double bill of two lesser-known one acters: *Rita ou Le mari battu* and *Il Campanello di notte*. I've sampled all of these using a 15" screen for which their standard quality stream at 4 euros a show was adequate, although the high quality at 6 euros was definitely better and might well be necessary for a larger screen or if channelled through a large TV screen. In fact, the final streaming was free suggesting, possibly, that it hasn't been a great success. After an initial live streaming, the video of it is made available for viewing in the days following. The procedure for signing on and getting going was straightforward for the initial live streaming and started with a connection test to check what quality you should be able to receive. However, getting the recorded versions was not very obvious.

Only the first act was available for the Bellini by the time that I realised they had started this facility and was a standard quality video recording. This was a pity as it was the most satisfying musically of the three broadcasts although the mainly subdued lighting of the sets did not make for the best conditions for streaming. The cameras handled these satisfactorily in the main but there was sometimes a problem with light levels that was especially noticeable at the end of the act where the protagonists were pictured against a fine backdrop but were plunged into gloom when the cameras did a close-up. There was also some jerkiness and lack of synchronisation. Such effects were less apparent in the later broadcasts as, no doubt, the technicians got to grips better with the process, but even so, they did not detract too much.

Perhaps given the newness of the project or reflecting its live nature, those filming it were content with a straightforward presentation. Each singer wore a microphone so that the voice levels tended to be the same irrespective of the singer's position on the stage or the direction they were facing.

The initial live streaming of *Rigoletto* was watched in standard quality. The whole show was nearly 3 hours and required downloading about 1 gigabyte of data, well within usual broadband limits. High quality would probably have been in the region of 1.5 2 gigabytes.

Once again, the mainly dark set did not make for the most riveting viewing on a small screen but the camera work was an improvement, the only odd moment being when Gilda, sitting on a swing singing "Caro nome", suddenly whizzed towards and past a camera set somewhere in the footlights. The sound was a little more problematic. There was still, occasionally, a slight, probably unavoidable, lack of

synchronisation with the visual, but, once or twice, they seemed to lose a voice, or got the wrong balance between voices, as when the chorus boomed out in Act 3 whereas Rigoletto's responses were much quieter. The female voices were caught well but, sometimes, there was a slight metallic edge to the men's, particularly the Duke's opening "Questa o quella", that was not apparent in the other broadcasts.

There were English subtitles but they were so small and fuzzy as to be unusable and unfortunately the facility to switch them off didn't seem to work. However, they were better, if not of DVD quality, in the Donizetti perhaps because that was viewed in high quality or because it was realised that there were problems.

A major downside with the live streaming was the interval that began with the usual sorts of interviews that one tends to skip on DVD. The camera then wandered around backstage but it hardly aided theatrical illusion to have the Duke waving cheerily from his dressing room door, although it was perhaps reassuring that Gilda and Sparafucile could enjoy a joke together before he does her in. I'm amazed the singers put up with the intrusion.

The Donizetti double bill was seen in high quality the day after its initial streaming using Liège's video on demand facility. This had the advantage that one could sample as much of the intermission as one felt like and one could pause the show if needed. It was the most successful purely from a streaming viewpoint for the set and costumes were much more colourful and brightly lit. Using a realistic, if slightly cartoonish, set also helped to give close-ups a clearer context that wasn't always the case with the more abstract sets in the earlier operas. However, there were still a few gremlins: ankle shots from the footlights camera in the first opera and occasional interference in the sound and a sudden change in sound level in the second opera. The conductor bobbing up and down at the bottom of the screen in some shots was also distracting. *Il campanello di notte* was a happy romp played slightly over the top which suited it well but *Rita ou Le mari battu* was a bit of a disappointment. The latter, a French *opéra comique*, provided a strong contrast in style to the Italian farsa *Il campanello*, which was, presumably, the main reason for including both. Although its cast of three, bolstered by non-singing actors, worked hard, the opera seemed just too slight to sustain a full-blown opera staging.

Obviously streaming is no substitute for a live performance or even a good DVD, but at 4 or 6 euros (for Liège anyway) it was excellent value and, a few hiccups aside, an enjoyable and easy way to try out operas or productions that one wouldn't see otherwise, particularly for those without regular access to live opera. It remains to be seen whether Liège continues this experiment next season. It's possible that some excerpts may still be available at the time of publication on

http://www.operalive.org/en/ .

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