

## *A Warning from the Past*

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If one wanted to make an argument for the continued relevance of Meyerbeer's grands opéras in the twenty-first century, *Les Huguenots* would be a good place to start. The story, which concerns the love of a protestant gentleman for the daughter of a catholic count and culminates in the St Bartholomew's Day massacre, is a tragedy of religious intolerance that is arguably even more topical now than when it was written. As a work of drama, David Alden's new staging – which opened at the Deutsche Oper as the second instalment in their new Meyerbeer cycle – was something of a missed opportunity, a mix of intriguing and uninvolved scenes that were never quite able to delineate the tense antagonism at the heart of the story. The singing, however, was of such a consistently high quality that it was often able to offset the production's moments of narrative slack.

**Berlin, domingo, 13 de noviembre de 2016.** Deutsche Oper Berlin. Meyerbeer: *Les Huguenots*. David Alden, director. Patrizia Ciofi (Marguerite de Valois). Olesya Golovneva (Valentine). Juan Diego Flórez (Raoul). Ante Jerkunica (Marcel). Derek Welton (Saint-Bris). Marc Barrard (Nevers). Irene Roberts (Urbain). Paul Kaufmann (Tavannes). Andrew Dickinson (Cossé). John Carpenter (Méru). Alexei Botnariuc (Thoré / Maurevert). Stephen Bronk (De Retz). Robert Watson (Bois-Rosé). Ben Wager (Night Watchman). Adriana Ferfezka, Abigail Levis (Two Catholic Girls). Chorus and Orchestra of the Deutsche Oper Berlin. Michele Mariotti, conductor

*Les Huguenots* was not, during the twentieth century, subjected to the same levels of obscurity as most of Meyerbeer's other operas; but while the ornate and frequently inspired vocal writing has continued to attract high profile champions throughout the last fifty years, the oddly structured narrative concocted by librettists Eugène Scribe and Émile Deschamps can pose some challenges for the modern director. David Alden's staging was not without its moments of visual and dramatic interest, but for the most part it did the story few favours: if the political machinations and dramatic reversals are difficult enough to follow on paper, this production amplified them into a source of genuine confusion. To judge from conversations during the opera's two intervals, there were more than a few people in the audience unsure of what they had just witnessed.

In fact, the first two acts were quite promising. Although the set – a series of yellow rafters and a giant church bell suspended above a drab interior, which gave the impression that the entire opera was taking place within the function room of a local community centre – and the twenties-inspired costumes neither enhanced nor detracted from the action, the opening act at least managed to set up a plausible opposition between the licentious Catholics and the fun-abhorring Protestants, as well as illustrating the personal unease of the Protestant Raoul as he attempted to advance within the Catholic milieu of the French state. One could perhaps have done without the dancing butlers and cabaret girls making with the jazz

hands, but it was hardly offensive. The second act, which used a crumbling neo-classical façade and a bathtub to transform the set of the first act into the queen's private chamber, was also able to move the plot forward with some efficiency.

It was in the third act that things began to fall apart. The opening tableaux, ballet and all, was gripped by a stasis that verged on indifference; the intrigue of Saint-Bris was poorly elaborated, the long scene with Marcel and Valentine, despite wonderful performances, seemed to weigh the action down, and the climactic duel went from being a bunch of people standing around, to even more people pretending to fight in slow motion. While the fourth act duet of Raoul and Valentine offered a more familiar dose of operatic drama, the preparation of the Catholics for the massacre – which occurred under a banner with the sinister motto 'Dieu le veut' – demanded a far more dynamic treatment. The burning crosses and occasional bursts of gunfire that punctuated the final scene came across as an uninspired short-hand for brutality, unable to convey the sense of horror that should rightfully accompany perhaps the most infamous massacre in French history.

On its own, the staging made few convincing arguments for the dramatic value of *Les Huguenots*. The singing, however, managed to redress the balance. Meyerbeer's taxing arias can still pose a challenge to the technical mastery of even the finest modern singers, and the opportunity to hear the vocal parts executed successfully offers a unique thrill of its own. This was most apparent in the performance of Patrizia Ciofi as Marguerite of Valois, who dominated the second act to such an extent that all subsequent scenes without her – which is to say, most of the opera – seemed somehow lacking. It was through Ms Ciofi that the very idea of Meyerbeerian grand opéra seemed most appealing.

'Ô beau pays de la Touraine', which opens the second act, was performed with such assurance, such grace and such purity of tone that the question of why anyone would write an aria with so much frantic ornamentation seemed suddenly irrelevant. The following cabaletta, with its consummate dynamic swells and effortless coloratura passages -including a solo passage that seemed almost to mock the very tradition it was executing so perfectly- offered to the audience a kind of exquisite craftsmanship that demanded to be appreciated in all its unsubtle glory. Yet what made Ms Ciofi's performance so extraordinary was its ability to fold that vocal ostentation into a characterisation of great complexity, a queen whose capricious inner life -articulated in the wonderful exclamations of 'Ah, si j'étais coquette' in her duet with Raoul- could be hidden just as quickly behind the severe façade of royal duty.

Although the most substantial appearances of Queen Marguerite were limited to the second act, the rest of the opera was never wanting for strong performances. Ante Jerkunica was consistently excellent as Raoul's faithful servant Marcel; his initial appearance, full of god-fearing piety, was enough to kill the buzz at Nevers' bachelor party, and his Huguenot battle song 'Piff Paff' was appropriately black and humourless. Yet the emotions behind his fearful presence rose to the surface in a wonderfully elegant third act duet with Valentine, and even in the fifth act he had enough strength left to deliver a commanding benediction of the doomed young lovers.

Juan Diego Flórez brought impeccable control and vocal confidence to the central character of Raoul. His finest moment, an impassioned warning to Marguerite's wedding guests of the impending slaughter, came late in the opera, but his first act aria - accompanied by an onstage viola d'amore- and an exceptional duet with Ms Ciofi, in which the two strong voices proved both complementary and accommodating, were notable for their finely etched tone and sensitive phrasing. The Valentine of Olesya Golovneva did not really establish herself as a major figure in the action until the third act, but soon revealed a voice of great expressive depth. She opened the fourth act with a delicate, searching account of 'Parmi les pleurs,' and brought the act to a highly charged conclusion in her extensive love-versus-duty duet with Raoul.

The character of Urbain, the queen's page, all but disappeared mid-way through the second act, but Irene Roberts made the most of the role, performing the cavatina late in the first act with exceptional animation, a rich middle-range and several gleaming high notes. Derek Welton's strong Saint-Bris gave the massacre preparations of the fourth act a necessary urgency and focus, while the Nevers of Marc Barrard had an exceptional first act, convincing as the life of the party whose fortunes are suddenly shattered. Under the direction of Michele Mariotti, the orchestra sounded lean and controlled, rising to dramatic peaks when necessary, but generally preferring to remain in the service of the singers. The choir, too, spent the evening on excellent form.

The question of 'relevance' may not be central to the Deutsche Oper's new Meyerbeer cycle, but it has hovered quietly in the background of both last year's production of [\*Vasco da Gama\*](#), and this year's *Huguenots*. While the exoticism of the former seemed very much of its time, the tale of a community torn apart by a mistrust and arbitrary differences is one that will bear repeating for as long as intolerance exists. If the new production never seemed wholly committed to placing the historical lessons of the story on prominent display, it was, as an evening for singers, an undoubted triumph.