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Guillaume Tell

MONTE CARLO
Opéra de Monte-Carlo
1/22/15

Opera legend has it that when an admirer of Rossini remarked that he had seen the composer's *Guillaume Tell*, Rossini replied "What! All of it?" It is not clear that Rossini intended his French grand opera to be his farewell to the stage, but fashions change quickly in the French capital, and after the 1829 première Rossini slipped into a thirty-nine year retirement from the stage. *Guillaume Tell* remains a fascinating work despite its length and extravagant vocal demands. The composer sanctioned many revisions of the work and producer Jean-Louis Grinda and conductor Gianluigi Gelmetti did not hesitate in trimming the score for their new staging at the Monte-Carlo Opera.

Grinda made no attempt to disguise the pastoral Swiss background of the work, set against Eric Chevallier's tourist brochure Swiss panels. Local color, or *tinta* as Verdi called it, was a forward-looking musical device and Rossini adopted an authentic Swiss sound to atmospheric effect. Grinda provided a professional, carefully paced evening, climaxing in a finale that celebrated freedom from oppression with Wagnerian zeal. Acting was simple but overdependent on stained glass posturing from the soloists, and folkloric groupings from the excellent chorus, complete with audience pleasing tiny tots. A vital dramatic case for the work remains to be made.

In the title role, baritone Nicola Alaimo has the ideal timbre for Tell and creditable French, but was a little short at the top of his range, which failed to focus on January 22. Tell's son Jemmy, Julia Novikova, timed the apple splitting scene perfectly and her soprano rang out with confident balm in the ensembles, and in duet with her mother Edwige, the deep-voiced contralto Elodie Méchain.

The wide vocal leaps and heady bravura of Arnold were probably reminiscent of melancholic Swiss yodeling as written by Rossini for leading haute-contre Adolphe Nourrit. However shortly after the première, Gilbert Duprez changed vocal history by producing a heroic Italianate upper register, and since that time the role has become a muscular challenge for tenors, transforming the character of Arnold from lovesick romantic to trumpeting hero. Monaco was lucky to have cast Celso Albelo, who sang in good French and triumphed in the high lying passages with little sense of strain and managed some delicate phrasing in duet with his beloved Mathilde from the enemy camp.

Soprano Annick Massis is one of the finest French sopranos of her generation. Always technically proficient, her Mathilde nonetheless lacked poise and sounded fussed and fluttery: more vocal weight is

ideally needed for the role. Evil came late to the stage in the person of bass Nicolas Courjal's Gesler, who relished the text and brought a dangerous power to the evening, well supported by tenor Alain Gabriel as his armed henchman, Rodolphe. Excellent in-depth casting featured bass Patrick Bolleire as Arnold's father Melthal, bass Nicolas Cavallier as Walter Furst, a Swiss patriot, and a valiant performance from tenor Mikeldi Atxalandabaso as the fisherman Ruodi.

Conductor Gelmetti is an experienced Rossinian who led the score with gathering momentum and some beautiful solo cello playing in the overture, whose gallop produced a chuckle of recognition in the audience. Some of the all-important horn playing was rough on opening night and, despite the intimacy of the house — designed by Garnier — the stage to pit balance too often favored orchestra over voices. □

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