

One, two, a thousand *Olimpies*

Federico Agostinelli

Olimpie (the spelling with ‘i’ instead of ‘y’ is attested by all the librettos, all the posters, all the musical sources published in Spontini’s lifetime, and even the autograph manuscript) is of all Spontini’s works probably the one that had the most tormented genesis: the composer continued to make significant corrections and changes with almost every production over some twenty years. The first stage on this long and tortuous road began at the Académie Royale de Musique of Paris, where *Olympie* made its debut on 22 December 1819, a few months later than the date originally scheduled, because of a series of problems, the principal one being the difficulties that Spontini’s complex score posed for the performers.

This first version saw the light of day only after what were already numerous modifications to the original musical design. It ended tragically with the suicides of the two female protagonists, Statira and Olympias. Thus the libretto by Brifaut and Dieulafoy closely followed the plot of Voltaire’s tragedy *Olympie*, which had inspired its subject, deviating from it only in the final scene: Cassander’s suicide in Voltaire is replaced in Brifaut and Dieulafoy by the transfiguration of the shades of Olympias and Statira, which rise up to heaven in the ‘temple of memory’ and are reunited with the shade of Alexander. But the work did not achieve the expected success and was taken off after the seventh performance. A few months later, in May 1820, Spontini left Paris to take up the position of Generalmusikdirektor in Berlin: on 14 May of the following year,

Olimpia, a new version of the opera in a German translation by E. T. A. Hoffmann, was produced at the royal opera house in Berlin, this time with great success.

The plot and indeed the actual spirit of the dramatic action were profoundly modified from those of the first Paris version: Antigonus now becomes the true assassin of Alexander and reveals his crime himself shortly before his death, in a fit of madness after being mortally wounded in a duel with Cassander. The latter, proved innocent beyond doubt of the Macedonian king's murder, is able to marry Olympias, while Statira ascends her late husband's throne.

This change to the finale meant Spontini had almost totally to rewrite the third act, to shift numerous scenes, to add or delete airs and recitatives, in addition to other interventions and modifications of lesser importance in the second act and, much more sporadically, in the first. When he was asked to return to Paris for a new production of *Olimpie* in February 1826, he decided to conserve the structure of the Berlin version, which had enjoyed great success, but to introduce a number of further changes, eliminating several numbers, adding new ones, and making small cuts and adjustments throughout the score. The work was greeted even less favourably than in 1819 by a public now in the grip of a veritable craze for Rossini, which regarded the grandiloquence and splendour of Spontini's theatrical and musical apparatus as obsolete.

The composer, now back in Berlin, then made further corrections and adjustments for German revivals in the following years, initially with a synthesis of the last two versions ('Berlin 1821' and 'Paris 1826'). Each time he subsequently conducted *Olimpie* – with the preoccupation of constantly updating his score – he retouched myriads of details, principally concerning performance (tiny changes in the orchestration, dynamic markings, explanations of the proportions in the subdivision of the different sections of violins or violas, tempo or metronome markings). Unfortunately, he noted all these changes directly on his autograph manuscript, which in its present state is a tangle of crossed-out gatherings, cut or sewn pages, glued labels and added folios that make it very

problematic – and sometimes almost impossible – to reconstruct the different superposed variants and to assign a modification to one or other of the successive layers.



The wordbooks for the various performances of *Olimpie*/*Olimpia* are useful for determining which pieces of music were included in the different versions of the work, but not for establishing the internal cuts within each of them or for clarifying all the details of musical interpretation. Luckily, we possess printed musical sources that were certainly realised under the direct supervision of Spontini and enable us to retrace the stages in the evolution of his work. These are:

- the vocal score published by Schlesinger with dual French-German text, printed after 1823 and almost certainly before 1826: this source reflects the Berlin version (1821). A very important copy of this score, with an autograph dedication from Spontini to Adolphe Nourrit (who sang the role of Cassander in Paris in 1826), is conserved in the archives of the Museo Gaspare Spontini in Majolati, the composer's home town;
- the full score published by Delahante-Érard (undated): this source reflects the Paris version of 1826;
- the vocal score published by Érard (undated): this source also corresponds to the version given in Paris in 1826;
- the vocal score published by Brandus et Dufour (undated, but issued a few years after Spontini's death) with French text, which reflects the Berlin version of 1821 but with insertions drawn from the 1826 version: it is therefore the final stage in the long process of revision. This last version is the one that has been used – often with cuts – for performances and stagings of *Olimpie* over the past 150 years.

No musical source now survives of the first version, with the tragic finale: Spontini physically removed from his autograph all the pages containing the original numbers replaced in subsequent versions, and only a few pages of recitative have remained sewn into the gatherings of the manu-

script. By contrast, the printed editions of the full score and vocal score published by Érard allow us to establish with precision the version given in Paris in 1826, the last performed in France in the composer's lifetime. For the present recording, the Fondazione Pergolesi Spontini of Jesi, in collaboration with the Palazzetto Bru Zane in Venice, commissioned me to prepare a new critical edition of this 1826 version, a highly complex operation carried out by comparing the printed sources with the autograph manuscript of the score.

This recording follows the critical edition exactly, with the exception of two cuts. These are the final section of Act One, Scene 7, containing the Ballet and the Bacchanale performed during the marriage ceremony between Olympias and Cassander, and the first part of Act Three, Scene 9 (the final scene), containing the grand Marche triomphale and the dances that follow (Pas de Cinq and Pas de Trois).



Sketch of the set for Act Two.
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Esquisse pour le décor de l'acte II.
Bibliothèque nationale de France.