

An overview of the work

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Premiered at the Opéra de Paris, *Olympie* was most unfairly shunned by a public that had been looking forward for months to a new *Vestale* or *Fernand Cortez*. The work was performed only seven times, until 12 January, with dwindling box-office returns, despite a cast of first-rate singer-actors, including Caroline Branchu (Statira), Nourrit père (Cassander) and the bass Dérivis père (Antigonus). The assassination of the Duc de Berry a month later, followed by the demolition of the theatre, ensured there would be no further performances.

The librettists Michel Dieulafoy (who had already collaborated with Spontini on *La Petite Maison* and *Milton*) and Charles Brifaut had found among Voltaire's tragedies, then enjoying renewed favour, a work that had fallen into total neglect, even though its subject was one to fire the imagination. Voltaire had conceived it in a single burst of inspiration over just one week in 1761, and said he had put in it 'all that is most august in ancient religion, most moving in the greatest misfortunes, most dreadful in heinous crimes, most heartrending in the passions, and most authentic in the depiction of human life'. This did not prevent Spontini and his translator E. T. A. Hoffmann from turning the denouement upside down for the Berlin premiere of *Olimpia* (as it became there) on 14 May 1821: not only do Alexander the Great's widow Statira and their daughter Olympias not kill themselves, but the latter marries Cassander, who has proved his innocence.

When the work, revised in this manner and still basking in its success elsewhere in Europe, returned to the Académie Royale de Musique in

February 1826, its reception was no more favourable than before. Following the premiere, staged as a benefit for M^{me} Branchu, who gave her farewell performance before a capacity audience and pocketed 14,000 francs, neither the presence of Nourrit *fils* (Adolphe), *Dérivis père* and M^{lle} Cinti nor the emphasis placed on the novelty of the third act could urge the work beyond a total of five performances. According to the poignant article Berlioz wrote about Spontini shortly after his death (in the *Journal des Débats* of 12 February 1851), the Parisians, then busy discovering Rossini, had lost their taste for the splendours of French *tragédie lyrique*. By that time, the *dilettanti* could hear no more than ‘plainchant’ in works written in that aesthetic tradition. There has been little attempt since then to question the view that the undeniable qualities of the vocal and orchestral writing in *Olimpie* are outweighed by the defects of a libretto which falls far short of its ambitions. Where has this negative consensus come from? From the fact that we have been looking at the creative process the wrong way round. A libretto that can inspire such flights of lyrical inspiration has achieved more than half its objective, and it is entirely possible to agree with Charles Bouvet, the composer’s first biographer, who wrote of the opera’s subject:

Spontini found there exactly what was best suited to his artistic temperament: characters depicted with striking relief, violent opposing emotions, the clash of tumultuous passions, fast-moving events; and, along with this, combats, ceremonies, celebrations, episodes calling for large-scale crowd scenes amid splendid décors.

(*Spontini*, 1936, p. 57)

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the happy ending deprives the piece of its tragic dimension, so that the grave events we are led to expect by the music of the first act – and the Overture in particular – do not occur with the same degree of intensity.



A GLANCE THROUGH THE SCORE

By turns heroic, religious and passionate, the Overture is very clearly laid out, with its sharp contrasts (between the harmonic military element, *Allegro marcato assai* in D major, and the sacred contrapuntal one, *Andantino religioso* in F major), in both character and instrumentation (the religious march on muted strings, as if coming from the distance, then coming closer with the successive entries of the wind). The overall cohesion derives from the irresistible impetuosity of the reiterations/variations. The very grandeur of this number allows us to focus on just a single detail here: the echo effect of the opening bars. The echo, or even the echo of an echo, has been a fertile source of inspiration since the Renaissance. But this one doubly contradicts the regularity of the natural phenomenon. For one thing, the first echo occurs after two and a quarter bars of silence, the second after a bar and a quarter, the third after only a quarter of a bar. For another, the different scoring of each echo prevents the realisation of the expected diminuendo, leading instead to a kaleidoscopic effect. The reason for this composed (and not imitated) echo is to be found in the unexpected arrival of the religious episode, which, after an abrupt silence, must be heard as an echo of the warlike tutti. Now, not only does this *Andantino religioso* (which will be heard again in the marriage scene: 'Dieux, auteurs de nos êtres') present the ear with a succession of repetitions/variations (varied echoes); it also ends with the reiteration of a three-note cell moving from the high woodwind to the violins, to the lower wind and finally to the lower strings. When one observes the obsessional character of the ensuing *Allegro molto agitato*, with its recurrent figures, it is impossible not to be struck by the powerful originality of the overall conception.



Act One. After such flamboyance, modern listeners who have perceived here the first stirrings of the *Symphonie fantastique* or the early overtures of Berlioz may be surprised, as the curtain rises, by the mildness of the

chorus of popular rejoicing, especially if they are aware of the composer's marking: 'The prevailing movement in the instrumentation of this number represents the disorderly, joyful movement of the people as they run in all sides, singing and dancing.' The tonal straightforwardness of this Handelian chorus, which embroiders the triad of G major while the approving trumpets and timpani peal out the tonic and dominant, in fact reflects the joy of a populace naïve enough to believe in the reconciliation of Antigonus and Cassander. The march of the priests emerging from the temple, a third lower in E flat major, is all the more impressive: not only does it break the rhythm, it also introduces unsettling chromaticisms; what we have here is the terror of the sacred, which few composers take care to represent. After this, the solo for the Hierophant seems in tune with the naïveté of the people: he believes in what he declares. From 'Il a permis' onwards, the rising woodwind figures illuminate his discourse (a prefiguration of the motif of Olympias?), but chromaticisms creep into the orchestra, and the pungent harmony of the diminished seventh at 'sa *noble destinée*' is so prominent that Spontini specifies 'toujours même mouvement grave' (still the same grave tempo), for what follows is no less ambiguous.

The protestations of friendship that the former enemies Cassander and Antigonus exchange for the benefit of their soldiers ('Vous, amis de la gloire') form the material for a problematic duet: even allowing for the insolent treachery of Antigonus, the harmony and the mimesis with Cassander are too perfect and the deception lasts a little too long. A few bars of dialogue would have grasped the attention more effectively. All the same, the pervasive charm of the middle section (the invocation to Diana 'Fille du ciel') on the degrees of the triad, like a horn melody, the need its development creates for a fiery stretta ('Que périssent'), the tight-knit relationship between the soloists and the chorus that echoes and amplifies them – all of this defies criticism. Cassander's extremely tormented air 'O souvenir épouvantable', expressive and varied, surprises the listener with the persistence of the dotted rhythms that give it a tone more heroic than desperate. Equally surprising is the obscurity of its text, modelled on a passage in Voltaire, who, however, placed it in the

opening scene of his tragedy, thereby throwing the emphasis on the mystery and giving the speech greater appeal. Worth noting in the dialogue between Cassander and Antigonus is the rising arpeggio in the violins, which seems to be a transposition of the line 'Hélas, vœux superflus' or perhaps an expression of the duplicity of the discourse. Then the contradictory harmony of the diminished seventh recurs at 'à sa noble candeur'.

Amenais/Olympias is preceded by a ritornello assigned to the wind instruments, which will return regularly as her musical reflection in the instrumental accompaniment. Her recitative is punctuated with echoes of it, as if Cassander were mutely approving her words, and her air 'Auprès d'un amant si tendre' introduces a tone of sensuous intimacy, of emotion (the frequent recurrences of 'larmes', tears), which will find its most complete expression in the extended duet that follows, connected to the air by the 'mirror' ritornello. The love duet possesses links with Olympias' air that are quite difficult to perceive, aside from the leap of an ascending sixth that typically symbolises passion. The Hierophant's declamatory solo 'À la voix de vos dieux', full of vigour and directness, is the highlight of his role. Without a conclusion to permit applause, it leads into the Marche religieuse by means of a highly original *diminuendo* transition: on a single note (D) in unison or octaves, the trumpets are the first to fall silent, followed by the horns, the bassoons, the oboes and the clarinets. It is in contrast to the smooth background of the march that Antigonus reveals his true plans. For the central section of the march, in which Olympias, Cassander and the Hierophant sing as an offstage trio, Spontini divided the string desks into two, one with mutes, the other without, playing different parts.

It is not without premonitory intent that the Hierophant's invitation 'to the altars of Hymen' is punctuated by a painful harmonic appoggiatura, and that he continues in *F minor* ('heureux amants') a phrase begun in *F major*. But this darkening of tone also facilitates the lead into the *Andantino religioso* in D major (already heard in the Overture). Although the sudden switch from *F minor* to *D major* is not very orthodox (but cruder tonal shifts are to be found elsewhere), the effect is imbued with

a suspended mystery prolonged by the entry of the vocal trio with its wonderfully buoyant texture. When Antigonus and his soldiers intervene (“Trahison!”), they are accompanied by the half of the strings that play without mutes. The progression that follows, dramatically static though it is (since each protagonist joins in in turn, then follows his or her own path without paying any attention to the others), is driven by an irresistible inner force. Following on in the same vein, a sequence of strongly rhythmic dances and a brilliant Bacchanale with chorus lead into the Finale.

The Hierophant calls a halt to these profane rejoicings in order to greet the high priestess Arzane. The deep melancholy of her entrance surprises all present (brief ensemble *sotto voce* in imitative writing) and her measured recitative, darkened by a number of plaintive instrumental touches, is pathetic in its very restraint. At the name of Cassander a mood of extreme violence replaces the tension, marking the beginning of the Finale, for which Spontini specifies: ‘Extreme care should be taken for the entire duration of this finale that dance and singing always occupy the stage with movement dictated by the action.’ At the end of a series of imprecations that progress unhurriedly, keeping up the suspense right to the end, Arzane/Statira reveals her identity. The response comes in chromatic rising and falling figures from the orchestra and chorus. Finally Alexander’s widow dooms to death ‘the assassin of [the world’s] king’: general stupor, Neapolitan sixth, interrupted cadence... Here begins the concluding ensemble, superbly managed *crescendo e stringendo*, as syncopations, then dotted rhythms succeed equal notes, and luminous diatonicism replaces chromatic contortions.



Act Two. The imperiousness of the fast rising string scales, the occasional muffled timpani rolls, the implacable rhythmic regularity over which fervent melodies and wandering counterpoints emerge, suggest the gravity of the moment: in the temple of expiation, Statira must justify the

insult she has proffered to Diana. The sonority of the cor anglais and the divided violas and cellos combine to create the gloomy tone colour of this prayer, its Gluckian austerity as it were wreathed in garlands of flowers and clouds of incense. The likeness to the prayer 'Fille du ciel' is apparent if not deliberate. Pride and despondency: the conflicting sentiments of Statira, conveyed by the orchestra that accompanies the dumb show of her entrance, are continued in the dialogue with the Hierophant, in which pathetic ariosos ('Ô déplorable mère') alternate with more neutral recitative style ('À l'aspect de l'auteur de toute ma misère'). The words could well have been set the other way round, for Spontini plays on the dynamic of contrasts ('La gloire et la misère') with the aim of achieving variety rather than unity of inspiration. He was quite deliberately chaotic, notably in modulations or unexpected juxtapositions of distant keys, and was severely criticised for it; and it is true that this does disperse the attention rather than focusing it. But the effect creates surprise and does not leave the listener unmoved. Statira's air 'Implacables tyrans', on the other hand, flashes and scorches like lightning, underpinned by the struggle between rage and constraint. The initial *Allegro impetuoso* in D major, centred on high F#, is a severe test for the singer. Then Statira breaks off, conscious of her blasphemy: the *Andante sostenuto*, in which the other singers on stage intervene after the manner of the ancient chorus, portrays the character's solitude. The stormy, richly scored *Allegro agitato con moto assai* ('Dieux! pardonnez à mes injustes plaintes') in F minor, in which the queen beseeches the gods to give her back her daughter, unfolds in broad phrases over a syncopated rhythm. This is the climax of the role, infusing it with the energy of despair.

Her confrontation with Olympias will contribute to Statira's evolution: the sombre tremolos betray her unspeakable anguish in the face of the girl, whose more expressive vocal line, supported by 'smooth' strings, even risks a *gruppetto* on the word 'sentiments'. The variety of the instrumental interjections – anger (rushing scales), impatience (dotted rhythms etc.) – reflects that of the affects. With the evocation of Olympias' mother, the vocal lines join forces, first in imitations then in parallel thirds and

sixths. Statira's intuition grows more certain, and even though the entrance of Cassander to confirm it ('Oui, c'est votre Olimpie!') is an artificial *coup de théâtre*, it is so well placed as to defy criticism; what is more surprising is that the duet then continues as if nothing had happened. The tensely dramatic exchanges in recitative from which the Trio emerges make use of the same family of loud, unpredictable punctuations. The arioso 'Chère et tendre Olimpie', introduced by a chromatic progression, suspends the tension for a moment. But the densely packed dialogue resumes ('Que veux-tu?' – 'Vous m'aimez?' – 'Autant que je le hais'), centring on the third (D flat) of B flat minor, and leading to Statira's change of heart: 'Ma fille, ma fille, et toi, Cassandre, approchez'. The queen's sudden 'Non!', which throws everything into question once more, serves as a spring-board for the Trio's peroration.

The Rossinian freshness of the general chorus ('Accourons') provides a useful diversion before the air of Antigonus ('Auguste épouse d'un héros'), whose agitated orchestral accompaniment reveals the ferocity lurking beneath the formal expression of protocol. A brief dialogue in recitative, tight and intense, sums up the dramatic situation before the Finale into which it leads. The tension quickly reaches its height when Antigonus exclaims 'La mort!' However, Statira's arioso 'Soldats de mon époux', commencing *pianissimo subito*, seems quite out of place expressively, and can only hope to produce an effect if the audience has just applauded 'et le crime est puni!' – which may well happen, of course. Nor is there any greater dramatic realism in the syllabic chorus 'Tes-for-faits-sont-con-nus' chanted by Antigonus' warriors while he sings 'Rampe au pied des autels' (Grovel at the foot of the altars), imitating the movement of a serpent. This finale moves forward like an unstoppable war machine. Cassander, who rises up with a defiant 'Je brave ta puissance', adds his share of imprecations to keep up the general exhilaration.



Act Three. The sombre dragging motifs and the long appoggiaturas as the curtain rises at once install a mood of dramatic urgency and suffering. For the Hierophant, come to lead Olympias to a safe refuge from Cassander's soldiers, it is the threat of carnage that is the most pressing issue, while for Alexander's daughter it is her turmoil at the idea of reunion with her lover, whom she has striven to flee. To conclude this eventful scene (in which the double repetition of a rising motif in the violins abruptly changes the atmosphere), she sings one of the most inspired airs in the work, 'Ô saintes lois de la nature'. This mobile and fluid number, Italianate in its coloratura and richly inventive, leaves more room for development than for its reprise, which is no more than sketched out. After such depth of feeling, the casual cheerfulness with which Antigonus addresses the queen to request Olympias' hand borders on caricature. But this tinselly glitter offers a suitable point of departure for a gradual darkening of mood in the course of the arguments that now confront each other.

In the same melodious vein as Olympias' air, the first part of the Trio sees Statira express sincere compassion over her daughter's frustrated marriage vows; in imitation, Antigonus contradicts her, then proceeds to trot out his arguments once more in compressed form, producing strange mutterings in counterpoint with the tender phrases of Statira as she reiterates her lines. Finally, Olympias joins her in free imitations and the female duo, in parallel thirds, soon forms an effective opposition to Antigonus. The arrival of Hermas, announcing that Cassander is free, disrupts the material of the Trio: almost conventional up to this point, it now bristles and grows tense at the imminence of the assault. Rage and hope oppose each other while at the same time combining in the service of exciting vocalism.

Cassander now appears, and the stubborn ferocity of his opening exchanges with Olympias is underlined by the reiteration of a rising dotted arpeggio figure. The ensuing duet ('Voilà donc ton amour') is driven by a desperate, breathless inspiration; painfully introverted, the central *Andante* deplores the 'merciless cruelty' (*rigueur impitoyable*) of the situation in parallel thirds. Before the reprise of the opening section is

over, a brass fanfare heralding the combat gives rise to a blazing stretta imitating trumpets ('Mais déjà retentit le signal'). As their voices unite in parallel thirds, she begs him to take pity on her or else kill her, while he calls for vengeance or death...

A further fanfare terrifies Olympias and the people, who suddenly pour into the temple, where the Hierophant announces that blood will flow in abundance; then begins a prayer (regularly punctuated by the baleful strokes of the tam-tam) whose subdued dynamics suggest horror rather than religious contemplation. As the second fanfare rings out, a shout of 'Périssent les tyrans!' is heard from off stage, without our knowing who is the tyrant in question. It recurs in counterpoint to the sustained cries of the chorus for an avenging god and the imperious waves that shake the orchestra. A third, more modulated fanfare announces the victory that brings the combat to an end. A hymn in four voices ('Gloire au héros') is heard in the distance, but the Hierophant, not knowing which hero is being glorified, continues to predict carnage and profanation; then, in a long solo, he instructs the priests as to their conduct. Scarcely has 'Gloire au héros' been reprised at full volume than the wounded Antigonus appears and rushes towards the altar, cursing Cassander; but it is a thunderclap that greets him on the steps. Then, calling the infernal divinities to witness, he publicly reveals his crimes. This supernatural scene, absent from the tragedy of Voltaire, was added for Berlin, and if the kinship with *Der Freischütz* (premiered a month later in the same theatre) might seem rather too obvious, in fact the spectacular death of the villain was by no means rare on the post-Revolutionary French stage. The common ground between the two operas is emphasised by a predilection for chromatic progressions of the diminished seventh, rushing scales and a shrill piccolo.

The tension drops when the Hierophant takes over to relate what has just occurred. He calls on Cassander to wed Olympias and restores the imperial sceptre to Statira.

Whereas the subtitle of the Finale – 'Serment' – might seem to announce solemn, hieratic music, Spontini shows his fidelity to the

Classical aesthetic, which makes the denouement of a work not its dramatic highpoint but rather a return to real life. Although the movement is not a *vaudeville* in the strict sense, the refrain form reminds us of one, as do the successive interventions of the protagonists in various groupings. And if the percussion thunders away merrily, the sonority remains clear, the tone amiable and joyful.

Title page of the libretto of *Olimpie* printed in 1826.
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Page de couverture du livret imprimé d'*Olimpie* en 1826.
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TRAGÉDIE LYRIQUE

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