

Italiano, ma non troppo...

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The importance of foreign composers in the construction of the national genre of French opera has often been remarked upon – and rightly so. From Lully to Gluck, from Spontini to Rossini, from Meyerbeer to Verdi, the great paradigm shifts in the French operatic aesthetic indisputably took place under the leadership of creators imported from elsewhere. Cherubini represents a special case in this context. Though trained in the Italian manner, he formed a link between the Vienna of Mozart and Beethoven and the Paris of Méhul and Grétry rather than with the composers of his native land. Whereas Sacchini, Piccinni, Paer and Paisiello were viewed as pleasant melodists, Cherubini was admired for his dramatic outbursts, which did not shrink from harshness or radicalism: the ‘Revolutionary’ *opéra-comique* *Lodoïska* foreshadowed in 1791 what *Médée* realised to the full in 1797. It is hardly surprising that Beethoven and Weber should find they could relate to this music which conveys the violent emotions of the heroine in so modern a fashion. In *Les Abencérages* another genre submits to Cherubini’s conceptions of opera: the old *tragédie lyrique*.

In the years between 1775 and 1780, Gluck had magnified a genre whose classicism is almost invariably deployed in the setting of ancient Greece or Rome. The German composer succeeded in wringing from this framework sentiments that disturbed an audience accustomed to somewhat unemotional plots, which the generation of Rameau persisted in

interspersing with lengthy divertissements. Gluck's muses – Alcestis, Iphigenia, Armida – poured out their hearts, but the cold columns and austere pediments amid which they did so long stifled the victims' cries. One could not identify completely with such characters, kept at a distance as they were. The epic quality of the Napoleonic era was to stimulate composers to push their exploration of the emotions further: the exoticism of the settings, the picturesque nature of the social traditions and the violence of the religious obligations depicted in their plots evolved in parallel with the emancipation of the recently established genre of melodrama and added a more terrifying dimension to the tragic destinies of heroines who had become truly Romantic. Spontini's *La Vestale* (1807) is generally regarded as the point of bifurcation between old-fashioned *passion* and new-fangled *sentiment*, but it is still a deity (Vesta) who causes the complications, a high priest who further inflames them, and a *deus ex machina* who resolves them. With *Fernand Cortez* (1809) and *Les Bayadères* (1810), Spontini and Catel opted to set their respective operas in more distant lands, but in more recent times and firmly in the modern era. The cathartic effect was vastly increased; a form of realism began to emerge.

It was in this context of experimentation that Cherubini was assigned Étienne de Jouy's libretto for *Les Abencérages*. The composer, very much in tune with his time, seized upon the best of his contemporaries' inspirations and made them his own. The Overture alone seems to sweep away at a single stroke the often bland preambles which even Spontini had not really managed to avoid. It might already be Weber or Mendelssohn we hear crackling under the bows of the strings as they launch into a hectic *Allegro spiritoso*, while it seems to be the spirit of Beethoven that has been conjured up in the preceding *Largo*, fraught with harmonic and dramatic excursions. There is no *italianità* in all this. The voices do not incline towards the art of the *prime donne* of Naples or Milan any more than the orchestra copies Sacchini and Piccinni. The vocal ranges and styles were meticulously conceived to fit the Paris ensemble: the very high tessitura of Noraïme testifies to the qualities of Caroline Branchu

at her peak, as do the emotional palette required to interpret the role of Almanzor and the stamina necessary to tackle the character of the fearsome vizier Alémar. Not a single burst of coloratura is present to divert the audience, and even the *coryphées* who emerge from the chorus dispense with the usual over-expansive praises of some character or other. The instrumental scoring is commensurate with this approach: though rich in brass instruments, it also cultivates a sense of detail, taking full advantage of the excellent soloists of the Opéra orchestra, foremost among them the harpist François-Joseph Naderman and the principal horn Nicolas Duvernoy.

On the occasion of this recording, the Palazzetto Bru Zane has edited and published for the first time the complete set of performing materials (full and vocal scores, orchestral parts), which had remained in manuscript form until now. Before this, a German-language score for voice and piano, supervised by Spontini in the 1820s, was available, but this presents a certain number of modifications that are irreconcilable with the first version given in Paris. The two principal sources used for the modern edition are the composer's autograph conducting score, now preserved in Berlin, and the copyist's score from the Paris Opéra. The latter, unfortunately, includes numerous erasures and amendments deriving from a substantially abbreviated revival of the work shortly after its first run, at which time it was reduced from almost three hours to only an hour and three quarters. This recording returns to the original and presents the sung sections in their entirety, so that listeners can hear all the vocal music written by Cherubini. Only some of the ballets have been shortened, in particular the plethoric numbers at the end of Act Three, whose titles are enough to demonstrate that they served above all to satisfy the egos of the star dancers without contributing anything to the plot of the opera, which is finished by this stage of the narrative.

It was important to restore Cherubini's music to its full lustre by decking it in the bold, incisive timbres of period instruments. In György Vashegyi's Orfeo Orchestra we found the ideal partner for the work's resurrection. The Purcell Choir, created and directed by the same

conductor, also contributes its characteristic tone colour and the stylistic accuracy of a tenor section divided into *hautes-contre* and *tailles* 'à la française'. Cherubini's music is never so modern than when one hears in it the era that preceded it – the time of Gluck and Beethoven – more than the one that followed. To perform this composer like a Romantic of 1860 condemns him to appear austere and Classical when he was exactly the contrary in his day.



Étienne de Jouy.
Palazzetto Bru Zane Collection.

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Collection Palazzetto Bru Zane.



Luigi Cherubini.
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

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