

# Beyond the myth

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Gaspare Spontini's *La Vestale* (1807) cannot complain of having utterly disappeared from the history of music. However, if knowing something only slightly is tantamount to misunderstanding it, then this work (at least in its original guise) has not yet truly emerged from the limbo of oblivion. In the first place, its composer's name still suggests that the work is an opera in Italian and that it follows the canons of Rossini, piling on the coloratura and cabalettas with the avowed aim of virtuoso display. Such is not the case, which no doubt disappoints and frustrates many aficionados. For *La Vestale*, composed in Paris during the most glorious years of Napoleon I's reign, is fairly and squarely a *tragédie lyrique* in the manner of Gluck, which does not shrink from lengthy recitatives and prolix ballets 'à la française', nor from renouncing the bel canto style that French writers regarded as frivolous as soon as it turned its attention to cadenzas and roulades. In their view, none of the text must be lost, and the minimum of concessions must be made to any element that might slow down the narration of the drama.

The work was a huge success, which endured for at least the first two thirds of the nineteenth century. But it did not survive the upheavals caused by Verdi and Wagner, and the new trends in French opera which, in the hands of Gounod and later Massenet, abandoned the aridity of long recitatives and the juxtaposition of numbers with monolithic emotional content. After a period of relative obscurity, though, a red-letter day marked the return to favour of *La Vestale*: on 7 December 1954, Maria Callas took on the title role in Milan, in a production directed by Luchino Visconti.

That memorable moment was recorded and the work re-entered posterity. However, listening to those discs again today raises a fair number of stylistic questions. It confirms that the 1950s and 1960s were obsessed with a verismo heritage in which power of vocal delivery was combined with massive tempi and compulsive use of rubato. Virtually all the versions recorded since then still bear the stigmata of this tradition, as if it were impossible to question its approach, which may be summed up in one sentence: the dramatic tension resides mainly in the superhuman efforts of the singers to fight their corner against the orchestra.

It was not until some thirty years after Callas that the work began occasionally to revert to its original French language. However, other fundamental questions still remain to be resolved today, starting with the distinction between the vocal ranges of Licinius and Cinna, sometimes tenor, sometimes baritone. The ensuing articles will enlighten the reader on this particularly complex issue, which has baffled many a casting director. The French-language version recorded by the Münchner Rundfunkorchester under the baton of Gustav Kuhn in 1991, for example, opts for two Italianate tenors with a brassy ring to their timbre. The result is very little different from the performing practices of which Riccardo Muti is probably today's most distinguished surviving exponent. Far be it from us to deny anyone the pleasure of listening to this sort of operatic joust, but it would be fair to say there was still one last rung to climb before anyone could hope to rediscover the Spontinian idiom of 1807. Especially since the published score, even in the Ricordi critical edition of the 1990s, perpetuates oddities inherited from the nineteenth century: the layout of the solo vocal lines is misleading, while the scoring of the choruses disregards the *hautes-contre* (first tenors) of 1807 and assigns their part to contraltos thrust down into an almost unattainable bottom register. Even such details as the *ossias* for the Chief Vestal arouse scepticism as to their origin and legitimacy.

The use of period instruments was the obvious choice in order to get back to the incisive energy and breakneck tempi mentioned by the reviewers of the time. Christophe Rousset and Les Talens Lyriques have this

style at their fingertips thanks to their long-standing familiarity with other works from the same period, including Cherubini's *Médée*, Sacchini's *Renaud*, Méhul's *Uthal* and Salieri's *Les Danaïdes*. The Flemish Radio Choir once again shines with its meticulous approach to the score, displaying its purity of intonation and the precision of a perfectly pronounced text.

It was also – and above all – necessary to assemble a cast of singers prepared to serve this repertory with zeal and fervour. Marina Rebeka's Julia may well be one of the finest incarnations of the role, a subtle combination of strength and gentleness. This recording also places Licinius and Cinna in their proper relationship, the former in the low tenor (or 'baritenor') range, the latter a high baritone. Paired in this way, these two voices of similar colour perfectly convey the heroic bond between two friends ready to face death together. In Aude Extrémo, the Chief Vestal finds an interpreter capable of confronting both the lofty peaks and the abyssal depths of a role written for Mademoiselle Maillard at the height of her career. As for the Supreme Pontiff, at last he throws off the rags of the static scarecrow he has all too often been in the past and comes to life thanks to the flexibility of Nicolas Courjal's singing, at once ample and lively.

Thus rejuvenated, *La Vestale* paradoxically reveals a less revolutionary – but no less interesting – aspect than the work we have known until now. Moreover, the music can now be compared with other operas from the same period, which have only become available on disc in the past few years: *Sémiramis* and *Les Bayadères* (Catel), *Uthal* and *Adrien* (Méhul), *Phèdre* (Lemoine), *La Mort d'Abel* (Kreutzer), *Les Abencérages* (Cherubini), among others. When they are placed in this new context, the moments of evident modernity – the passages anticipating Bellini, for example – stand out even more vividly, and the link between Gluck's French works and *La Vestale* is obvious. No, decidedly, the only geniuses to have 'emerged from nowhere' are those whom history has dishonestly mythologised.



Portrait of Caroline Branchu by Louis-Léopold Boilly, c.1810.  
Musée Carnavalet, Paris.

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