

# A curtain of silence over Auber's *La Muette de Portici*

Alexander Weatherson

The idea of having a dumb prima donna is too tempting I fear. A *La Vestale* recently, would have been...but I won't go on...it is too painful. How is it possible that this truly astonishing opera by Auber, his masterpiece, is dumbed-down almost worldwide? The most radical, the most influential work of its day - irrespective of Rossini, Meyerbeer and all the rest, staged in the heart of Paris at the Académie Royale de Musique in 1828 with the most brilliant cast imaginable, the very matrix of the emergent pseudo-historical blockbuster we call *grand opéra*, magical, a miracle of sorts sowing the seeds of an insurrectional mode replete with parades, pomp, empurpled religiosity and the kind of prancing ballet the French call "*poitrinaire*". An operatic mode enlarged to monstrous dimensions it is true, prodigious, a portent, inflammatory, a signal of alarm no less - encompassing some of the most extraordinary scenes ever to be seen on the lyric stage and leaving audiences cowering before a triple-alliance of sound, spectacle and social conscience. A trump-card that could not or should not be ignored. How can such an opera be so neglected?

Why is it not in the repertory? Who keeps pulling away the stool? There have been fleeting revivals known only to the persevering: in Ravenna, in Linz and Karlsruhe, but not very recently and not in England or Belgium of course, but with one revival in Marseille in 1991. One revival in Marseille! Is this how you do justice to a cornerstone of the repertoire?

Aachen, with its leaning towards the fringe, at least should have the credit of grasping the nettle with a handful of performances entitled '*Die Stumme von Portici*' (but sung in French) in June 2002. Real gratitude for the event, for the live experience of this wonderful score, alas, has to be tempered by a staging not less than harking back to the dustbin. How we were made to suffer! A kindergarten *Muette*, replete with the dying doctrinaire garbage of the Iron Curtain - the Neapolitan fishermen reduced to a chorus of "wage-slaves" (got up as waiters and waitresses) alternately cowed, and hiding under the tables of their restaurant at the first sign of trouble: Elvira as a whip-lashing "aristo", her hidalgo-husband Alphonse (played by an actor) his role was sung from the side - reduced to reeling about in an alcohol daze in a battered tuxedo, white silk scarf worn Lavender-Hill-mob fashion down to his knees and puffing at a cigar [Soviet-style cliché to the last puff]. Both these paragons trumped by a

Masaniello got up as an Indian Chief: face painted-red, tomahawk and feather in his hair. [When, in an unprecedented reference to Scribe's version of the plot he renounces his revolutionary mission, he puts on a waiter's apron and serves drinks to his pals]

This might be thought enough had it not been for Fenella, the dumb-girl of the title. In Aachen she was a *garce*. I don't really imagine that Scribe and Auber intended her to be amusing but in this "production" it was thought otherwise: Fenella, "*Fenellone*" might be better, was played by a plump man in ankle socks clutching a bowl of boiled potatoes. A Fenella un-seduced by Alphonse (one can only presume), and no dancer (a shot at a tango notwithstanding), while atypically actually capable of a few unsolicited grunts and groans.

You may ask, like me, what all this has to do with Auber's *La Muette de Portici*? The answer is: **Nothing at all.** The score was beautifully played by the Sinfonieorchester Aachen under Jeremy Hulin and was as intact as we had every right to expect under the circumstances. The cast sang Scribe's text as if the words had some kind of reference to the action going on around them despite the waste-land in which it found itself. Auber's sensitive musical setting of the anguish, guilt, generosity and remorse of his well-contrasted characters, the passion of his brilliant evocation of rebellion, his tragic portrayal of heroism and betrayal went for nothing whatsoever. Was not even considered. Fenella gave rise to no spark of conscience, no contrition, no elevation of the spirit, and far-from terminating the drama in the redemption of despair with a leap into the crater of Vesuvius she/he sank his/her head gently into her/his pot of boiled potatoes in the final bars of the music (which Auber conceived as an Armageddon-eruption of the volcano) in a gesture suitably emblematic of operatic incompetence all over the world.

The unfortunate cast confronted all this with astonishing stoicism, as though the *grand opéra* of Auber actually survived somewhere on an invisible cloud and that the mayhem around them was someplace else. "Elvire" for example downed her whip and joined the congregation in a non-existent "*temple*" for her non-existent "*wedding*" to an Alphonse seated at a desk in the wings, leaving behind Fenellone choking on the potato she had thoughtfully spiked with one of her hairpins! In trailing green satin Kristina Totzek did rather well with her brilliant but heavily-cut role; Alphonse - in the person of Jeff Martin - did even better from his battle-station in the wings with exemplary diction and a really Gallic timbre leaving his decadent doppelgänger double cavorting to the actor Uli Hass.

The tenor Robert Woroniecki we remember so well from the *Dom Sébastien* he offered earlier on this same stage in the poignant edition of Elio Boncompagni, managed to be almost convincing as Hiawatha-Masaniello, in full and confident voice, but the personage he was obliged to represent had no substance at all and faced with the challenge of the sublime ‘*Ferme tes yeux*’ (addressed to his unusual sibling who stared at him bug-eyed like a Monster from Outer Space) his voice naturally failed to achieve the soaring sweetness which makes this one of the true masterpieces of French cantilena (the *cavatine* was intact however with its wonderful prelude). Everyone else made a good impression and even seemed to enjoy the high jinks, turning-on their tormentors, tearing off their badges of servitude (caps and aprons) and drenching the recidivist Masaniello with buckets of water (which washed off his red paint - geddit?).

The primadonna “Mulette” of Walter Raffeiner, an actor of course, at least managed to hog the show. Fascinating (as Auber intended) - for whatever reasons - at once horrid, diverting and truly memorable. What happened in the end? It sort-of tailed off. The "liberated" populace simply distributed blankets all round, and settled-down to sleep joining “Elvire” and the thespian “Alphonse” prostrate under the tables.

I should confess I enjoyed this *La Mulette de Portici*. The music stayed with me for days and triumphantly survived the very worst that producers can do. Can there be any better recommendation?