

COMPANY FOCUS

Les Talens Lyriques

Review by Colin Clarke

Les Talens Lyriques are having a busy year in the lead up to their 30th anniversary in 2022/23. I was lucky enough to attend two highlights earlier in the summer both showing the style, range and versatility of this extraordinary and unique ensemble.

Given in a concert performance at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, *La Vestale* (The Vestal Virgin) by Gaspare Spontini is a Tragédie Lyrique that takes a French libretto by Étienne de Jouy (after Winckelmann) to spectacular heights. It was first performed in 1807 in the presence of the Empress Joséphine (Napoleon himself was at war). Although the work is largely out of favour now, one has to remember that Maria Callas made the title role of Julia her own (her live 1954 performance with Franco Corelli remains a transfixing experience). The celebrated Turkish soprano Leyla Gencer was also a notable interpreter of Julia. In more recent times, Muti's recording gained traction

while, live, some UK readers may recall ENO's 2003 production.

La Vestale's obscurity is all the more flummoxing given its initial success. It was in Napoleonic France that Spontini made his reputation, and there is a case for drawing parallels between that Empire and Rome, perhaps specifically between the opera's Roman General Licinius and Napoleon himself. The opera concerns the love of Julia and Licinius (the principal tenor); while Licinius was away on a campaign, Julia became a virginal Priestess of Vesta. When the two are reunited, the sacred flame expires; despite questioning by the High Priest, she refuses to name Licinius and is sentenced to death for 'licentiousness'. Julia approaches the moment of her death, but the sacred flame is reignited by the Gods and Goddesses via lightning; Julia is released, free to couple with Licinius.

Christophe Rousset persuades us it is inconceivable that we should have forgotten this opera, much less that it is not part of our central repertoire. Jouy is known for his libretti for Rossini (*Guillaume Tell* and *Moïse et Pharaon*); but he should be celebrated for this, also. Spontini reacts to, and illuminates, Jouy's words.

La Vestale was first published by Érard in 1808, a score which diverged significantly from the manuscript; Rousset uses the 1994 Ricordi critical edition. Spontini's scoring is unfailingly inventive, and Les Talens Lyriques rose to every challenge (including some spectacular natural horn playing in Act III's 'Toi, que j'implore avec effroi' ending with the most perfect lip trill).

Rousset has repeatedly shown his flair for casting. Here, it was Latvian soprano Marina Rebeka who took the title role; she certainly has all the power and intensity required for Spontini's heroine. Stanislas de Barbeyrac impressed recently with a searing Florestan *Fidelio*, and previously as Max in *Freischütz* (both for Insula). His Licinius confirms him as tireless, his almost baritone voice completely at one with his character's emotions.

The most impressive cast member though was mezzo Aude Extrémo, heard most frequently in duet with Julia. From the beginning of Act I's 'Pour la dernière fois', it was clear Extrémo is a singer of great import, and of huge range. One wishes Spontini had written more for Cinna, given baritone Tassis Christoyannis' secure delivery.

Nicolas Courjal was an incredibly strong bass as Le Grand Pontife (unsurprising, given that he took on the role of Hunding in Opéra de Marseille's *Walküre* in February); baritone David Wiczak (Consul/Chief of the Aruspices) made the most of his opportunities.

Look out for Rousset's recording of *La Vestale*, which will be released on the Palazzetto Bru Zane label (in its characteristic book form).

MUSIC ★★★★★

Concert performance staging



Soprano Marina Rebeka with Christophe Rousset kneeling in admiration at the curtain call of *La Vestale*

Impressive singing from mezzo Aude Extrémo in *La Vestale*



Marc de Pierrefeu's videos providing an atmospheric backdrop to Nicola Raab's production



The superb cast of *Le amazzoni nell'isole*, fortunate at the Potsdam Sanssouci Music Festival

First performed in 1679, Carlo Pallavicino's Venetian 'drama per musica con prologo' *Le amazzoni nell'isole fortunate* (to a libretto by Francesco Maria Piccioli) presents an orientalist fantasy of an island populated exclusively by females (the Amazons). Inevitably, male presences destabilise any equilibrium; and so it comes to pass, leading (inevitably) to twists and turns of the plot. Pallavicino (c 1630-1688), we know, worked in both Dresden and Venice (at least three operas have his surname as 'Pallavicini'). He penned more than 20 operas; *Le amazzoni* was premiered at Villa Contarini, Piazzola sul Brenta, for the inauguration of the private theatre of the procurator Marco Contarini.

The Venetian style is predominantly lyric, but often carries a hint of the burlesque. While this opera would have been a great spectacle at court at the time of its premiere (including apparently hundreds of extras, and Amazons on horseback), the cosier confines of the Schlosstheater im Neuen Palais in the magnificent palace of Sanssouci, Potsdam, provided a more intimate setting for a performance in the safe hands of Christophe Rousset and his Talens Lyriques.

The cast was young, offering a freshness to the experience – bringing to life not only the lives and loves of the characters but also creating a properly contemporary

resonance, not least of gender fluidity. As director Nicola Raab explains in a booklet interview, the piece thrives on the unexpected and the modern; something brought viscerally to life. The instrumental ensemble was small but vibrant, except for the odd brass mishap (two violins, two trumpets, drums, one cello, lute/guitar and harpsichord/organ). Rousset directed with great verve, not least in the occasional extraordinary harpsichord effect. The manuscript is vague as to what instrumentation should be used; the present line-up is Rousset's construction and was perfectly judged for the small space of the Schlosstheater Neues Palais Sanssouci.

Raab opted for a sparse set: a desk, focused lighting. With a fair amount of video. Video can be a real boon to opera productions, but it can also be distracting and, for all its excellence in delivery and in symbolism, the latter was more the case here. There was no doubting the beauty of Marc de Pierrefeu's conception, and the technical expertise, but the sight of a rose blossoming and then shattering into a thousand pieces did rather detract from the music and indeed the stage itself. Videos that 'placed' the action – moonlit shores and the suchlike – were more successful. De Pierrefeu has worked with Les Talens Lyriques on clips and film, but this is his first work for the stage.

Musically the opera is what might be termed recitative-heavy – what arias there are pass rapidly. Rousset has placed the style of the opera as taking off from the 'recitar cantando' of Monteverdi and Cavalli and moving to the operas of Vivaldi or early Handel.

The prologue features 'Il Genio,' (later Auralba), sung by Clara Guillon and 'La Difficoltà' (later Cillene) sung by the stunning Eleonore Gagey, a singer full of vocal and stage energy. The principal female role, the lion(ess)'s share, is Pulcheria, Queen of the Amazons, brilliantly and dramatically projected by soprano Axelle Fanyo, a human dynamo with a background in musicology from the Sorbonne). We lived the Queen's strategic manoeuvres and machinations. Pulcheria's daughter, Jocasta, was taken by the superb Anara Khassenova. The two male singers found the tenor Marco Angioloni as Numidio superb in his vocal strength; and strong baritone Olivier Cesarini as Il Timore (Fear) and the Sultan. Iryna Kyshliaruk was a pure-voiced Florinda.

Le Amazzoni offers fascinating insights into the development of opera; and this set of performances certainly helped to illuminate Venetian opera of the late 17th century. **ON**

MUSIC ★★★★★
STAGING ★★★★★