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Meeting the Challenge: Olympie at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées

2016/06/04 · by operatraveller · in Live Reviews, Opera review ·
Spontini – *Olympie*

Olympie – Karina Gauvin
Statira – Kate Aldrich
Cassandre – Mathias Vidal
Antigone – Josef Wagner
L'Hiérophante – Patrick Bolleire
Hermas, un Prêtre – Philippe Souvague

Vlaams Radio Koor, Le Cercle de l'Harmonie / Jérémie Rhorer.
Concert performance.

Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris, France. Friday, June 3rd, 2016.

Tonight's concert was a coproduction between the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées and the Palazetto Bru Zane which has done so much to revive little-known music of the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries. There is currently only one commercially available recording of *Olympie* – a decently-sung but verbally incomprehensible set from Berlin, hampered by laid-back conducting – and a recording will follow on from this performance together with a further concert in Amsterdam in late October. This evening, they assembled what was certainly a very exciting cast and we were rewarded with some truly life-enhancing music making.



(<https://operatraveller.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/jc3a3c2a9rc3a3c2a9mie-rhorer-par-yannick-coupannec2054.jpg>)

Jérémie Rhorer. Photo: © Yannick Coupannec

Spontini was a major influence on Berlioz and the big martial fanfares and crowd scenes definitely foresee the younger man's operas and choral works. Each act ends in a big ensemble finale but there is also some highly introspective writing for the title character, as well as some set pieces for the tenor that require great fluency of technique with heroic strength. I must admit to being perplexed by *Olympie's* absence from the repertoire. It's a splendid piece that offers some nicely meaty roles for the soloists, is a fantastic choral showpiece and offers some incisive instrumental writing. The plot isn't perhaps the most interesting – the usual soprano loves tenor but baritone gets in the way and soprano's mother has issues – but it's a fabulous romp and really does deserve to be more widely heard.



(<https://operatraveller.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/le-cercle-de-l-harmonie.jpg>)

Le Cercle de l'Harmonie. Photo: © Alix L

Jérémie Rhorer set out his stall from the very opening measures with a spectacularly big, raspy sound from the orchestra. Attack was sharp and precise, and the playing was wonderfully extrovert with the period brass sound making a tremendous noise. There was something so visceral and exciting about

Rhorer's conducting. Tempi were fast and rhythmically pointed – which I imagine might not be to everyone's taste – but I found it absolutely exhilarating. Moreover, there was an unerring sense of line to his conducting that meant that despite the strong rhythmic impetus, the performance seemed to physically take over the listener and make the entire room vibrate and live with the life force of the music. Yet there was also genuine introspection where required, as in the ensemble 'Hymen, dieu prospère', where there was a stillness and beauty that contrasted nicely with the exciting brassy finale that followed. There were a few moments when the horns misbehaved but otherwise the quality of the brass playing was excellent. The entire orchestra played as if their lives depended on it and gave us playing of striking accuracy. The string sound had body, but the lack of vibrato also made the texture much more transparent allowing the delightfully characterful winds to emerge.



(https://operatraveller.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/vlaams_radio_koor_1_c_frederik_vercruysse.jpg)
Vlaams Radio Koor. Photo: © Frederik Vercruysse

The 32 voices of the Vlaams Radio Koor also sang with distinction and theatre-filling sound. There was something so refreshing about their perfectly-blended tone and immaculate homogeneity of articulation. The sound itself had a tantalizing hint of vibrato in the sopranos, giving it an irresistible fizz. Ensemble was spot on all night and the focus of the tone meant that the sound carried extremely well over the orchestral tumult. There was a classical beauty to their singing that was ideally matched to the demands of the music. This really is a classy group.



(https://operatraveller.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/atma_karinagauvin-291_dxo-419x630julien-faugc3a8re.jpg)

Karina Gauvin. Photo: © Julien Faugère

The role of Olympie is a major challenge for the soprano taking her on. There is florid writing, some soft high sustained passages and it also requires a soprano with enough metal in the tone to cap the ensembles. Tonight, Karina Gauvin more than met the challenge set for her by Spontini. She started a little tentatively, the florid writing of her opening lines sounding perhaps a little inhibited, but she quickly bloomed to give us a glorious account of her role. Her contributions to that Act 1 ensemble were magical with some ravishing, sustained high singing. There was a limpid beauty to the line and the voice seemed bigger and more resonant in the middle than I have previously heard it. Gauvin was radiant in her Act 3 duet with Cassandre, pinging out easily at the top. She also sang her big set piece 'ô saintes lois de la nature' with generosity of feeling, endless breath control and impeccable diction.



(<https://operatraveller.files.wordpress.com/2016/01/kate-aldrich-c-fadil-berisha.jpg>)

Kate Aldrich. Photo: © Fadil Berisha

The quality of the diction was undoubtedly a defining feature of this performance and certainly another reason why the evening lived even more. Kate Aldrich sang Statira with commanding ease. This is a role that requires the singer to launch immediately into some big, register-crossing declamatory music right from her very first entry. Spontini also gives her the gift of a magnificent big

scene in Act 2 which Aldrich dispatched with great confidence. The initial 'ô déplorable mère' was sung with warm, chestnut tone, a good legato and inner strength; the following 'implacables tyrans' was dispatched with generous force and an ease around the corners that was ideal.



(https://operatraveller.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/67ed44_0081075f5af54943b05cf249f852b64c.jpg)
Mathias Vidal. Photo: © Bruno Perroud

Mathias Vidal was a late replacement for the scheduled Charles Castronovo. I don't know how much notice he'd had and whether he'd even seen the role before but he sang the entire part with great assurance and ease. So much so that if one hadn't been able to see him with eyes focused on the score and the conductor, one would have said he'd been singing it all his life. The voice is on the lighter side but the registers are ideally integrated and he also turns the corners nicely. He rose to the challenge of the big Act 2 finale effortlessly. His Act 1 aria 'ô souvenir épouvantable' showcased his easy top and evenness of emission. Vidal also blended well with Josef Wagner's Antigone in their opening duet.



(<https://operatraveller.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/josef-wagner-steinen-haider.jpg>)
Josef Wagner. Photo: © Steven Haider

Wagner has a very attractive velvety baritone of a good size and he blustered effectively, but always musically, where required. He had strength of tone for the declamatory writing and everything he did sounded healthy and always stylistically appropriate. Patrick Bolleire's Hiérophante was implacably sung in a warm and rounded bass.



([https://operatraveller.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/p-bolleire-portrait-](https://operatraveller.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/p-bolleire-portrait-1.jpg)

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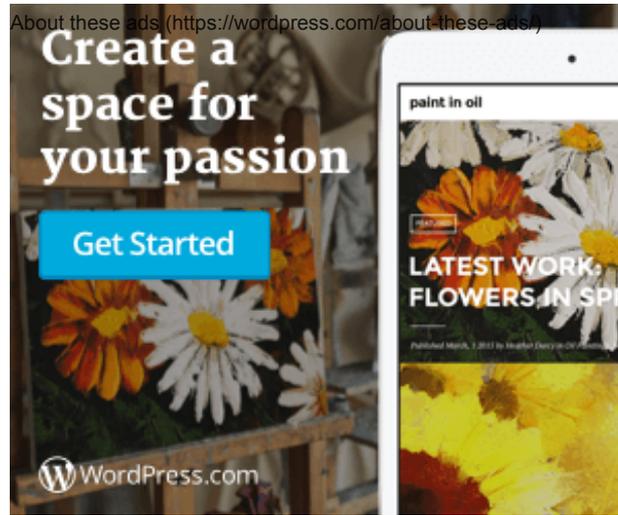
Patrick Bolleire © Loïc Fontaine

This was a tremendous performance of an unjustly neglected work, one that I am most eager to see again, though it would be hard to imagine a musically stronger one. In every respect – soloists, chorus, orchestra and conducting – this was an unbeatable evening. We were given a performance that was visceral and alive and did the work the justice it deserved. Outstanding.



(https://operatraveller.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/3770377898_7490254487_o.jpg)

The Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris © Elliott Brown



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