Out of Hours

Opera:

Rossini leads the way to Verdi

Rossini (1792–1868) seems indelibly associated with fun; many people's first opera experience is his fizzy *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (*The Barber of Seville*, 1816), a rom-com for its time, a brilliant piece of propulsive theatrical and musical construction, composed early in his career. Or, we know the theme tune of *The Lone Ranger* — again with propulsive energy as a deep, characteristic part of the *William Tell Overture*, Rossini's operatic swansong. For many, this is all they know of the composer who shook up 18th century operatic form, and prepared the way for the great Verdi. Recent times have allowed us to enjoy and understand more of his work; the 2014–2015 season has been particularly rich, and there is a glorious opportunity in the middle of March, at a cinema near you — read on ...

In September 2014, *The Barber* opened the season in London and Paris. Meanwhile, The Welsh National Opera had a double bill of *Guillaume Tell* (*William Tell*) and his earlier *Mosè in Egitto* (*Moses in Egypt*); apparently very different works, brought together to strengthen their message. Both deal with a nation under the yoke of a mighty empire, and personal struggles of leadership. Rossini used the chorus as a character in its own right, foreshadowing the big Verdi choruses in *Nabucco* and *Macbeth*, articulating growing frustration in the populace. Both pieces address the personal cost of rebellion, with love affairs between members of opposing sides, in one case doomed and tragic (pre-echoing Verdi's *Aida*) in the other, redemptive. *Tell* contains that heart-stopping moment: shooting at the apple placed on his own son's head. Rossini has the music for all this yet can concentrate our attention in an intense moment of stillness. How different from *The Barber*; you may think; but he did it there, too, right in the middle of the piece.

In July 2014, Buxton Festival had a concert performance of Rossini's *Otello*, which held the stage until Verdi's masterpiece eclipsed it. In October, the young artists at

Covent Garden showed us their promise in a very early piece, *La Scala di Seta* (*the Silken Ladder*), which, like *The Barber*, requires comic timing, musical flexibility, and accuracy. Rossini's music calls on the singer to produce beautiful singing — *bel canto* — and amazing vocal decorations — *fioritura/coloratura*. A good example will come in the middle of March 2015, when New York's Metropolitan Opera is broadcasting the dark

and serious rarity *La Donna del Lago*, based on Sir Walter Scott's *The Lady of the Lake*, to cinemas worldwide — with a truly amazing cast and a bargain for £30. In April the Royal Opera revives *Il turco in Italia*, in a wonderful production evoking *La Dolce Vita* with its scooters and sunglasses, and in July after a gap of 20 years, *Guillaume Tell*.

In various cities in Europe this spring, several other rarities are getting an outing, so you may ask, why this rush of Rossini? Currently, internationally, there's a clutch of Rossini tenors, without whom his work is difficult to perform; they're the ones who can reach great heights in full voice, ('the Kings of the High Cs'). Juan Diego Flórez from Peru is probably currently the world's favourite, and there are also some marvellous mezzo-sopranos like Joyce DiDonato and Daniela Barcellona. Flórez, DiDonato, and Barcellona are all in *La Donna del Lago* this month.

It's true that Rossini's comedies are more often played than the serious works which outnumber them in his output; something about their energy means they 'speak' to us. The serious pieces need a little more effort to tune into his musical sensibility,

The Welsh National Opera. Moses in Egypt (Miklós Sebestyén as Mosé). Richard Hubert Smith (photographer).

but they do reward that effort. Rossini was treading what would become a familiar path; formative years in Naples followed by commissions in the North; some pieces made originally in Italian were refashioned for Paris. All these were the stepping stones to *Guillaume Tell*, his masterpiece of 1829, a full-scale French Grand Opera.

After that, silence. Well, it seems so; but actually Rossini lived on in Paris for 30 years, held court, and carried on changing opera; not by his own compositions, but by influencing others. Importantly, he invited Gaetano Donizetti (an Italian composer) to Paris; but that's another story.

Rossini was able to fully show the humanity at the heart of his comedies, the tension of *Tell*, the anger of the Israelites, and the drama of Scott's *Lady*. Listening to his music, and to Donizetti's, one can hear pre-echoes of the Verdian glory. To understand more about mid-19th century opera, listen to someone who stopped in 1830; he had laid the foundations.

So, if I've whetted your appetite, or you fancy a virtual trip to the red velvet seats in New York, google 'MetOpera la Donna del Lago' and book a cinema ticket for 14 March.

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