

From Magdeburg to Leipzig, via Palermo

Mark Berry assesses Leipzig Opera's bicentenary staging of 'Das Liebesverbot'

Das Liebesverbot. Reinhard Dorn (Brighella), Martin Petzhold (Pontio Pilato), Mark Adler (Luzio), Daniel Kirch (Claudio), Dan Karlström (Antonio), Jürgen Kurth (Angelo), Sejung Chang (Daniele), Tuomas Pursio (Friedrich), Lydia Easley (Isabella), Olena Tokar (Mariana), Magdalena Hinterdobler (Dorella); Chorus of the Leipzig Opera, Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra/Matthias Foremny; Aron Stiehl (director), Jürgen Kirner (set designs), Sven Bindsell (costumes), Christian Schatz (lighting), Christian Geltinger (dramaturg). Leipzig Opera House, 13 October 2013

If only in one respect, *Das Liebesverbot*, Wagner's second completed opera, marked a signal advance upon his first, *Die Feen*. It was performed in his lifetime – once, in Magdeburg, on 29 March 1836, in what Wagner, in *Mein Leben*, would describe as a 'totally muddled performance', such that the 'material [...] remained utterly obscure to the public'. For the second performance, there appeared to be only three people in the stalls, 'Frau Gottschalk with her husband and a very conspicuous Polish Jew in full costume.' Drama of a rather different kind, however, ensued behind the stage:

There, Herr Pollert, the husband of my leading lady (who was taking the part of Isabella), had run across the second tenor, Schreiber, a very young and handsome man who was to sing my Claudio, against whom the offended husband had long nursed a secret rancour born of jealousy. [...] My Claudio took such a pasting [...] that the unfortunate fellow had to retreat into the dressing-room, his face bloodied. Isabella received news of this, and plunged after her raging husband in desperation, only to be so soundly cuffed by him that she went into a fit. The uproar among the ensemble soon knew no bounds: people took sides, and it wouldn't have taken much more to produce a free-for-all, for it seemed that this unhappy evening offered everyone a suitable occasion to pay off mutual grievances once and for all. It was soon evident that the two who had been subjected to Herr Pollert's 'ban on love' were quite incapable of mounting the stage that day. The stage director was sent before the curtain to advise the curiously select gathering in the auditorium that 'owing to unforeseen difficulties' the performance of the opera could not take place.¹

With that came 'the end' of Wagner's 'career as conductor and composer of operas in Magdeburg'. The story might make rather a good opera in itself, or at least a metatheatrical conceit for a staging of Wagner's own 'ban on love' opera: *Die Novize von Palermo*, as it had to be called, in order to satisfy the Lenten censor. (Wagner's assurance that it had been 'adapted from a very serious Shakespearean play', *Measure for Measure*, also seems to have helped.²) Such, in this co-production with Bayreuth – two performances took place there not in the Festspielhaus as part of the Festival proper, but in the Oberfrankenhalle, in July – was not, however, to be the case. There were,

¹ Richard Wagner, *My Life*, tr. Andrew Gray, ed. Mary Whittall (New York, 1992), 118–19.

² *Ibid.*, 118–19.



Mark Adler as Luzio and Magdalena Hinterdobler as Dorella in the Leipzig production of *Das Liebesverbot*. Photo Kirsten Nijhof

moreover, many more people in the Leipzig audience than in Magdeburg; indeed, the stalls on this occasion were close to full.

Let us leave, though, on one side my *Konzept*, which, I am happy to let another company have for nothing. The Leipzig staging has some powerful moments, though some that left me a little bewildered too. Jürgen Kirner's set designs provide an impressive backdrop, especially for the monochrome coldness of the hypocritical viceroy Friedrich's office, and the convent scene, in which Isabella, newly admitted, receives news from Luzio of her brother Claudio's impending 'death penalty for an amorous escapade'.³ There, relative abstraction and a sign of the Cross strike just the right balance

³ Ibid., 114.

between the serenity of the setting and a warning that Wagner's Young German concerns wish to promote a 'victory of free sensualism over puritanical hypocrisy', as the composer put it in his 'Autobiographical Sketch' for Heinrich Laube's *Zeitung für die elegante Welt*.⁴ (Laube's own influence was of course apparent on this and subsequent Wagner's dramas, *Tannhäuser* included.) That, presumably, was also the justification for a recurring screen emblazoned with what seemed to be photographs of a lush, tropical rainforest, complete with insects. Sicilian heat might, however, have been more clearly expressed with something a little closer to home. Giant masks for the forbidden and ultimately victorious carnival – though is it ultimately to be victorious? – offer an intriguing hint that apparent licence may cast its own dialectical authoritarianism.

Without a stronger overall directorial conception, though, a post-modern aesthetic, with hippyish costumes for the apostles of free(-ish) love, older dress for the forces of authority, something more 'timeless' for Isabella and her friend Mariana in the convent, and so on, does not necessarily add up to the sum of its parts, let alone something more than them. For Aron Stiehl, in his direction of the work, sometimes seems more intent upon ironising it than engaging with Wagner's concerns; irony and Wagner are if not quite impossible partners then bedfellows for whom comfort is of little concern. In what is perhaps, in musical terms, the composer's weakest completed opera, he probably needs more help than this. (Judicious cuts, such as are introduced here, are not necessarily a bad thing, however infrequent our opportunities may be to hear the work.) Silly dances for the chorus send up rather than probe Wagner's not-entirely-successful attempt at Italianate levity. The score itself insists that, whatever his would-be libertinism, he cannot let go of the Germanic roots that had served him so well in *Die Feen* and would soon do so again.

Such is, of course, at odds with Wagner's alleged dramatic concerns, wherein Friedrich and German regulation are very much the enemy. The concluding surprise, in which Friedrich re-emerges, apparently to take command once again of the situation and meet the King, is an interesting step, quite at odds with Wagner's crowd-dispersed justice, in which the viceroy is permitted by the crowd, far more clement than he, to lose himself in the carnival celebration. It would, however, register more powerfully as a questioning of the work – in any case, something of a difficult task, when relatively few in the audience will know the opera – were it better prepared. Rather than convincing dramatically, it jars; such, at any rate, was my experience in the theatre, as opposed to my *post hoc* attempt at explication. Still, *Personenregie* is in itself accomplished.

The Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra offered a typically deep and burnished sound, though there were moments when ensemble was not as tight as one might have hoped for. Conductor Matthias Foremny may well, however, have been at fault in that respect, for his reading often seemed a little unsure whether to stress the Teutonic or the Italianate, not only falling between two stools – which, given Wagner's score, might well be fair enough, even fruitful – but also hesitant. The (relatively) well-known Overture, in which most of Wagner's more memorable melodic ideas put in an appearance, was a case in point. It may be unfair to draw a comparison with Wolfgang Sawallisch's

⁴ Wagner, 'Autobiographische Skizze', *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen*, ed. Richard Sternfeld and Hans von Wolzogen, 16 vols. in 10 (Leipzig, 1912–14), i.10.

excellent Munich recording (or indeed, his Philadelphia recording of the Overture alone), but the conviction required to harness disparate elements, to channel them into a more-or-less convincing sequence, if not quite an organic whole, was missing. Foremny's stopping and starting was to a certain extent overcome as the performance progressed; I could not help but wonder, though, what might have come from a less *Kapellmeister*-ish account, such, for instance, as Ulf Schirmer had offered earlier in the year, for Leipzig's splendid production of *Die Feen*.⁵

Christiane Libor had played Isabella on the first night; for this second-night performance, she was replaced by Lydia Easley. It seemed to take a little while for Easley fully to get into her stride, and there were a few questionable moments of intonation when it came to coloratura, but hers was on the whole an impressive, convincing performance. Olena Takor made a fine impression as Mariana, the wronged, abandoned wife of Friedrich, especially in a beautifully-sung account of her second-act aria. Daniel Kirch and Mark Adler offered much to admire as Claudio and Luzio; it would be good to hear more of them in later, more substantial Wagner roles. Reinhard Dorn's Brighella (the Sbirri chief) was stronger on comic action than vocal beauty; perhaps that was the point. He certainly contrasted well with the more malevolent and indeed more complex Friedrich of Tuomas Pursio, whose stage presence and vocal delivery exerted a fascination perhaps beyond the strict merits of the score. Choral singing was of a high standard throughout, especially so in the second act. We can safely assume, then, that, whatever reservations might be voiced concerning the production, the Leipzig audience had a far better opportunity to see and to hear something approaching Wagner's conception, however flawed, than the bewildered citizens of Magdeburg ever did, or Wagner ever would.

⁵ Reviewed in *TWJ*, vii/3, 57–60.