

## Eurovisual Song Contest

*Mark Berry's verdict on the Paris 'Tannhäuser' is mixed*

*Tannhäuser*. Christopher Ventris (Tannhäuser), Nina Stemme (Elisabeth), Sophie Koch (Venus), Stéphane Degout (Wolfram von Eschinbach), Christof Fischesser (Herrmann, Landgrave of Thuringia), Stanislas de Barbeyrac (Walther von der Vogelweide), Tomasz Konieczny (Biterolf), Eric Huchet (Heinrich der Schreiber), Wojtek Smilek (Reimar von Zweter), Maîtrise des Hauts-de-Seine, Chorus and Orchestra of the Opéra National de Paris/Mark Elder, Robert Carsen (director, lighting), Paul Steinberg (designer), Constance Hoffman (costumes), Peter van Praet (lighting), Philippe Giraudeau (choreography). Opéra Bastille, Paris, 29 October 2011

A weekend in Paris took in two German operas, both possessing special associations with the Paris Opéra. *Lulu*, seen here in a fine revival of Willy Decker's 1998 staging, had received its first full performance at the Palais Garnier in 1979 from the dazzling Bayreuth pairing of Pierre Boulez and Patrice Chéreau. The case of *Tannhäuser* in Paris is, to put it mildly, less unambiguously positive, though we should recall that, whatever the disgraceful scenes at the Salle Le Peletier, it is to Paris that we owe Wagner's revisions, which for many of us render the work a still more fascinating proposition than in its 'Dresden version'. As is usual for performances of what we have come to call the 'Paris version', Wagner's further modifications for Vienna were followed, but the crucial changes had already been made for Walter Benjamin's 'capital of the 19th century'. Whichever version or conflation is selected, there will always remain a problematical element: that is part of the work's enduring attraction, though it has troubled some, the composer included. Cosima famously recounted just twenty days before Wagner's death: 'He says he still owes the world a *Tannhäuser*.' We, though, must make the best, and its best is very good indeed, of what we have.

Mark Elder seemed most at ease with the new, Parisian music for the Venusberg, the first act the strongest in terms of conducting. Perhaps it was his recent experience of conducting *Götterdämmerung* with the Hallé that led him perceptively to highlight the intimations of that work, Gutrune's music in particular. Elder's reading looked forward, then, yet also seemed to refer to Wagner's harmonic recollection – arguably quotation – in both works of the *opéra comique* of Auber, still honoured across town from the Bastille, on the façade of the Palais Garnier, under construction as the Salle des Capucines at the time of the 1861 débâcle.<sup>1</sup> An estimable performance was heard throughout from the Paris Opéra Orchestra, its strings golden in Viennese style and the woodwind characterful, especially during the otherwise often lugubrious third act.

If the first act, however, could be heard more or less in a single span, with a nod to necessary disjunctures, the second and third acts offered more of a bumpy ride. There may be a case for bringing to the fore Wagner's debt to *grand opéra*, not least in Paris, but the Arrival of the Guests sounded less akin to *Rienzi* or even to Meyerbeer than to excessively-driven early Verdi. There were, moreover, several glaring discrepancies

<sup>1</sup> On Auber's *La muette de Portici* and *Götterdämmerung*, see Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Wagner Androgyne: A Study in Interpretation*, tr. Stewart Spencer (Princeton, 1993), 86–7 and Mark Berry, *Teacherous Bonds and Laughing Fire* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT, 2006), 167–8.

between pit, stage and offstage brass. The (marked) tempo change near the end of the act, shortly before we hear the pilgrims, was excessive, coming as jolt rather than intensification, the hurtling onward that ensued chaotic in its fraying ensemble. Line frayed too in the third act, though Elder was commendably alert to its wandering hints of *Parsifal*. There will always remain tensions between the various musico-dramatic components of the work, but they register more meaningfully if a greater, or at least more successful, attempt is made to engender unity – or Hegelian ‘totality’, as Adorno would doubtless have accused in reverse panegyric mode. Such was certainly the case in the Venusberg, the ‘new’ *Tristan*-esque music sounding involuntarily – at any rate, such was the impression – as a restless critique of Wagner’s earlier thoughts, musical and ‘dramatic’, however false the distinction. Last year at Covent Garden, however, Semyon Bychkov proved more successful in permitting the material to enact its own self-critique, rather than harrying it in the unduly interventionist, sometimes reductionist, fashion Elder favoured here.

There was much to admire vocally. Christopher Ventris, already an accomplished Parsifal in Bayreuth, Paris, London and elsewhere, showed no evident strain as Tannhäuser. The role is difficult for a number of reasons, not least its lack of a personal voice: Tannhäuser tends to adapt to the situations in which he finds himself, less the ‘absolute artist’ than perhaps Wagner thought. Ventris shaped his lines with sensitivity and projected them with strength. Sophie Koch was quite magnificent as Venus, probably the best I have ever heard: tonally and physically alluring, sweetly seductive and increasingly unhinged, dramatically truthful at no cost to the vocal line, taking full advantage of the greater scope the Paris version offered her. Venus, not inappropriately, is the greatest winner of the Paris *Tannhäuser*, making Tannhäuser’s rejection of her more meaningful: Kundry, rightly, did not seem far away. Making her Paris Opéra debut, Nina Stemme presented a sterling, untiring Elisabeth. Hers was for the most part an ‘old-school’ reading, eschewing the possibility, explored more recently by artists such as Eva-Maria Westbroek (for Bychkov), of a more evidently tempted – and tempting – character. If Elisabeth can probably be more interesting than this, the role remains unlikely to be sung with more detailed attention to the text. After a somewhat uncertain start, Stéphane Degout grew into the role of Wolfram: it is doubtless unreasonable to expect anyone to match or even to approach the astounding *Lieder*-reading of Christian Gerhaher (again for Bychkov), though I felt the lack of something that might elevate the character into more than a stock character and plot device. There were, though, no real weaknesses in the cast, save for an apparently uncredited Shepherd, whose music soon passed into strange bitonal realms. Mention should be accorded to the sweet-toned, intelligently-voiced Walther of Stanislas de Barbeyrac: on this evidence, we are likely to hear much more from him.

What, then, of Robert Carsen’s production, first seen in 2007, now receiving its first revival? (A quarter of a century, incidentally, had passed between the previous Paris production and this, a haunting similarity with this perplexingly unfashionable work’s absence from the London stage.) At its heart lies the substitution, notably predating that of Katharina Wagner’s Bayreuth *Meistersinger*, of portraiture for song. Tannhäuser is a painter; the work bearing his name progresses from a host of attempts to paint Venus to the final hanging of his picture in a gallery of celebrated female nudes in reproduc-

tion. (You name it, from the predictable Botticelli *Birth of Venus* to Manet and Picasso, it will most likely be present.) It is strongly implied through a final joint pose that the climactic image draws upon both Venus and Elisabeth, though since we never actually see Tannhäuser's *Meisterwerk*, that must remain supposition. Substitution of painting for music does no grave harm; perhaps it is intended to appeal to a city often noted more for its thirst for the visual arts than its musical judgment. By the same token, however, it does not seem especially warranted: the multitudinous references to song make more sense when actually dealing with *Minnesänger*. The *Konzept* is nevertheless carried through coherently and the *Personenregie* is intelligently accomplished: two welcome contrasts with *Die Meistersinger bei Katharina*.

There are moments, however, when Carsen appears to resort to 'effect without cause', Wagner's celebrated accusation against Meyerbeer, which Nietzsche would then less convincingly turn upon his antagonist. The appearance of Elisabeth in the amphitheatre at the beginning of the second act certainly startles: at a distance of five or six feet from me, Stemme initially appeared to be a disruptive member of the audience. (There were certainly many of those too: in a nod to the Jockey Club's revenge, barely a bar of the third act went uninterrupted by the bronchially assertive, the 'Song to the Evening Star' cruelly near-obliterated.) Other characters followed suit, a practice for which there seemed no obvious justification. Occasional subsequent forays in and out of the stalls retained that sense of the arbitrary, heightening irritation. Elisabeth's trench coat is another wearisome cliché. I wonder, too, whether it will some day be possible to see the guests arrive unaccompanied by flunkeys with champagne flutes. Carsen's is a lively enough production, then, if not entirely innocent of veering towards the merely fashionable; yet it falls considerably short of this director at his dazzling best, for instance, the more convincing theatrical extravaganzas of his Salzburg *Rosenkavalier* and Munich *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Perhaps that was the point, a nod to the problematic nature of the drama, but, as with the score, critique proves more convincing if it emerges from within, rather than being imposed from without.

