

Rossini's William Tell

(Part II)

Berlioz's analysis of the first act of William Tell begins and ends with strong praise but amounts, for the rest, to an exercise in frustration: a composer of Rossini's stature should not fall prey, Berlioz charges, to such elementary faults as an excess of static scenes, and of dominant tones and pedals. Tested throughout according to Gluckian standards, Rossini is often found wanting, though he rises magnificently to those standards when he chooses. There is a certain brash courage in Berlioz's frankness toward so celebrated, indeed venerated, a contemporary. As usual, we learn as much about his own musical tendencies as about the composer in question: Berlioz would not have so disregarded local color as to put harps, a Nordic instrument, in the Swiss Alps.



October 19, 1834
Gazette musicale de Paris

Act I opens with a chorus beautiful and noble in its simplicity. Gentle joy was the feeling that the composer had to depict, and it would be hard to imagine anything at once better, truer, or more delicate than the melody to which he set these lines:

*Quel jour serein le ciel présage!
Célébrons-le dans nos concerts.¹*

1. "What a clear day the sky forecasts!/Let us celebrate it in our music."

The vocal harmonies, sustained by an accompaniment in the style of a *ranz des vaches*,² breathe forth happiness and peace. The modulation from G to E-flat at the end of the piece is presented in an original way and produces an excellent effect. The romance that follows:

*Accours dans ma nacelle*³

does not strike us as reaching the same level; the melody does not always have the artlessness suitable to an Unterwald fisherman's song. Several phrases are spoiled by the mincing style and banal embellishments that singers have unfortunately made popular.⁴ Besides, why that double-harp accompaniment for a Swiss song? Can't say. William, silent throughout the introduction and the fisherman's first stanza, comes in with a monologue full of character in measured recitative; it has all the concentrated indignation of a lover of liberty, a great, proud soul. The orchestration is perfect, as well as the modulations, although the vocal part includes a few intervals that lead to intonation problems. An overriding flaw in the whole work starts to emerge at this point, for the scene is too long, and its three parts lack sufficient variation in color; the result is a wearisome monotony, reinforced by the orchestra's silence during the romance. In general, unless the stage comes to life with some powerful dramatic interest, it is rare for such orchestral inaction not to produce a fatal chill, at least at the Opéra. The theater, moreover, is so spacious that a solo voice from the back reaches the ear of the spectator stripped of the warm vibrations that are the very life of music, and without such warmth a melody can seldom come through clearly and achieve its full effect.⁵ After a *ranz* call echoing back and forth, in which four horns in G and in E represent the Swiss shepherds' alphorn, an *allegro vivace* reawakens our attention. This chorus, full of passionate spirit, would be admirable if the verses said the opposite of what they actually do. It is in E minor, and the melody is so agitated and fearsome that I could not hear the words—which happens almost always in big theaters—and I thought it must be news of some catastrophe, such as the murder of Father Melcthal at the very least. But far from it, for the chorus sings:

2. A Swiss cow call.

3. "Hurry into my boat."

4. Berlioz seems to be targeting the singers, but Rossini implicitly shares the blame.

5. As so often, we find Berlioz preoccupied with issues of proportion and space in the projection of musical sound.

On entend des montagnes
Le signal du repos;
La fête des campagnes
Abbrève nos travaux.⁶

This is the first time Rossini has ever committed an absurdity of *this nature*.⁷ Following this chorus, the *second* in the same scene, come the obligato recitative and then a *third* chorus, *maestoso*, notable above all for a soprano run from middle B to high B that cuts through the orchestral texture with unusual effectiveness. But the action is at a standstill, a problem rendered much more obvious by a *fourth* chorus, violent in nature rather than joyful, again sung in full voice, with continuously full orchestral backing, and accompanied by loud beats on the bass drum at every accented note in the measure.⁸ This section, absolutely pointless dramatically, offers little of interest musically. Ruthless cuts were made in the score; in this case, where a cut would have made good sense, the cutters were careful not to act, for they know only how to excise only the good things. Castration indeed entails removing the noble parts.⁹ And so, all told, we have four choruses, with all their developments, to sing of *the peaceful day and country fair*, celebrate *labor and love*, and speak of *horns echoing o'er the streams in our dreams*. Such monotony of means is a clumsy mistake, especially at the beginning. It is unexcused even by the requirements of the plot, whose progress is thus halted quite pointlessly. Many parts of the score seem to have been controlled by the noisome influence that led the composer down this path. Yes, I fault the composer, because a man like Rossini always gets

6. "We hear in the mountains/the signal for rest;/the feast in the countryside/shortens our labors."

7. Rossini's absurdities—that is, what Berlioz considers his disregard of Gluckian principles of dramatic fitness—are legion in his tragic operas, but the disconnect Berlioz points out here is an extreme case.

8. Such use of the bass drum to emphasize the main beat of the measure arouses Berlioz's frequent ire; he considers it crude and inelegant, and in this case the very epitome of the disconnect between music and dramatic situation that, to him, amounts to a crime against art and reason.

9. Berlioz speaks clinically, both as a former medical student and as a child of the post-Revolutionary years when people were obsessed with the guillotine, whose decapitations were regarded in fact as a kind of castration. It was after the Revolution that the operation productive of the lead singers of Italian Baroque opera, only of marginal concern for ancien régime sensibilities, became an object of widespread revulsion.

his librettist to do what *he* wants, and we know that for *William Tell* he asked M. Jouy for a whole host of revisions, and got them.¹⁰

Even the melodic style lacks variety. Numerous holds on the dominant mark the vocal line. The composer seems drawn almost irresistibly toward the fifth step in the musical scale, which he keeps circling mercilessly. Examples in the first act:

During the four-horn fanfare in E flat, Arnold sings:

Mais quel bruit. . . mais quel bruit. . .
Des tyrans qu'à vomis l'Allemagne
*Le cor sonne sur la montagne.*¹¹

All those words are sung on a single note, B-flat. In the duet that follows, Arnold again sings almost entirely on B-flat, the dominant of the key of E-flat, the two lines:

Sous le fardeau de l'esclavage
*Quel grand coeur n'est pas abattu?*¹²

Further along, after a modulation to D, William and Arnold alternate on the following words in A, the dominant of the new key:

Soyons hommes, et nous vaincrons.
Et comment venger nos affronts?
*Tout pouvoir injuste est fragile.*¹³

Through the constant droning of that dominant, it is barely possible to make out the five syllables set to D, F, and C-sharp at the ends of the lines. Then comes F. The dominant, C, immediately resounds:

Songe aux biens que tu perds!
Qu'importe!—Quelle gloire espérer des revers? . . .
Ton espérance?—Est la victoire.
*La tienne aussi, j'ai besoin de le croire.*¹⁴

10. As critic, Berlioz will often use the faults of the libretto as a diplomatic way to exonerate a composer who is found lacking; here he speaks his unvarnished opinion.

11. "But what noise . . . what noise . . ./The horn of the tyrants that Germany has spewed forth resounds through the mountains."

12. "Under the burden of slavery/what great heart is not crushed?"

13. "Let us be men, and we shall win./And how can we avenge our insults?/All unjust power is fragile."

14. "Think of the possessions that you lose?" "No matter!" "What glory is there in hoping for setbacks?"/"Your hope?" "Is victory."/"Yours too; I need to believe it."

Elsewhere:

*Du danger quand sonnera l'heure,
Ami je serai prêt.¹⁵*

Still the same dominant. When the horn fanfare sounds again, in E-flat, William cries:

*Qu'entends-je? . . . c'est Gessler . . . Quoi! tandis qu'il nous brave,
Voudrais-tu, volontaire esclave,
D'un regard dédaigneux implorer la faveur?¹⁶*

These four lines are entirely on B-flat, the dominant. Faithful to his favorite note, Tell again uses it exclusively to sing, toward the end of the same piece:

*Entends au loin les chants de l'hyménée;
N'attristons pas la fête des pasteurs;
à leurs plaisirs ne mêlons pas des pleurs.¹⁷*

So serious a flaw greatly mars the general effect of this beautiful duet. I say beautiful because, despite the carillon of dominants, the duet is really admirable in every other way. It is orchestrated with remarkable care and delicacy; the modulations are varied; Arnold's line:

Ô Mathilde, idole de mon âme!¹⁸

moves with remarkable smoothness; many of William's other lines are filled with dramatic accents; and, with the exception of:

Mais à la vertu je me rends,¹⁹

15. "For danger when the time comes,/friend, I shall be ready."

16. "What do I hear? . . . It's Gessler . . . What! while he confronts us,/do you want, as a willing slave,/to implore his favor with a disdainful glance?"

17. "Hear in the distance the wedding songs;/let us not bring sadness to the shepherds' feast;/let us not blend our tears into their pleasures."

18. "O Mathilde, idol of my soul!"

19. "But I surrender to virtue." In other words, Berlioz finds this passage unequal to the rest.

everything bespeaks great nobility.

The following sections are all noteworthy, especially the chorus in A minor:

*Hyménée,
Ta journée
Luit pour nous,*²⁰

which would be new and striking, were it performed as might be rightly expected of choruses at the Royal Academy of Music. The *allegro* of the archers' pantomime is also very energetic. Several dance numbers are notable for their fresh melodies and highly polished orchestral work.

The grand finale concluding this act seems to us much less satisfying. First of all, the dominant holds in the voices and orchestra, which had disappeared for a while, are now back. After a few exclamations by the Swiss chorus, we hear Gessler's soldiers:

*De la justice voici l'heure.
Malheur au meurtrier!
Qu'il meure!*²¹

That is all sung on B, the dominant of E minor, which has already been used as a bass pedal in the orchestra throughout the first *nineteen* measures of the opening. Seeing the composer's persistence in returning to the most worn out, most monotonous of musical forms, one is tempted to think he could have done so only out of laziness. It is indeed very convenient to write an orchestral phrase that harmonizes only with the two basic chords of a key and then to place whatever words you have to set on the note common to the two chords: the dominant. The composer is thus spared a good deal of time and labor.²²

This introduction is followed by a prayer:

*Vierge que les chrétiens adorent.*²³

20. "Marriage,/your day/shines for us."

21. "This is the hour of justice./Woe to the murderer!/Let him die!"

22. Laziness is indeed one of the main faults Rossini's antagonists accused him of.

23. "Virgin whom Christians adore"

It is slow—it almost drags—and is accompanied in so pedestrian a way as to suspend both action and musical interest, very unsuitably. The syllabic asides with which the soldiers' chorus interrupts the women's song come off poorly.

*Les vois-tu tous tremblants?
—Obéissez! il y va de nos jours.*²⁴

The music for these words is neither menacing nor ironic; it is simply a series of filler notes, there to round out the chords, without expressing scorn or anger. When the women have at last concluded their long prayer, Rudolf, Gessler's most ardent auxiliary, bursts out in violent fury. The orchestra rushes forward headlong; the trombones roar; the violins are sharp and shrill; the instruments all vie with one another to depict the horrors of the pillaging and ravaging that threaten the Swiss. Unfortunately, it is all copied from the finale of *La Vestale*.²⁵ Bass and viola motifs, strident brass chords, biting first violin scales, syllabic accompaniment by the second chorus to a broad soprano vocal line—it is all in Spontini. Still, let's add that the *stretta* of this chorus contains a magnificent effect due to Rossini alone: a syncopated descending scale in octaves by the entire chorus, while the high voices, flutes, and first violins forcefully hold the major third E–G-sharp against the quivering D-sharp, A and F-sharp of the lower voices. This idea alone, grand and powerful, suffices to blot out all earlier parts of the finale, consigning them to oblivion. At the beginning, we were bored; at the end, we are moved. The composer appeared to lack inventiveness; now he stands up and surprises you with something truly unexpected. Rossini is full of such contrasts.

(To be continued in the following issue)

24. "Do you see them all trembling?"/"Obey! Our lives are at stake."

25. As with Mozart's borrowings from Gluck (see website essay on *Iphigénie en Tauride*, fourth article, note 1), Berlioz is keen to remind his readers of Rossini's borrowings from his beloved Spontini. The Finale of the second act of *La Vestale*, which includes the storm music echoed in Rossini, was one of Berlioz's most admired works. See *Evenings*, 13th Evening, pp. 161-3.