Rossini's William Tell *[Acts III and IV] (Part IV)*

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We left Arnold in despair, craving only war and revenge. His father's death brings him new responsibilities, tearing him away from the love that would gradually have drawn him into the camp of his country's foes. He is full of dark thoughts, and his words to Mathilde at the beginning of the third act reveal his somber, fierce preoccupation:

Je reste pour venger mon père.—
Qu'espérez-vous?—C'est du sang que j'espère;
Je renonce aux faveurs du sort;
Je renonce à tout ce que j'aime,
à la gloire, à vous-même. . .—
à moi, Melcthal?—Mon père est mort.[1]

The expression of these tumultuous emotions governs the whole long ritornello that precedes and sets the stage for the entry of the two lovers. After a brief but energetic recitative, which includes another five-bar phrase sung by Arnold entirely on E, we have Mathilde's great *agitato* aria. In its choice of melodies as in its dramatic feeling, this piece begins less successfully than it ends. The composer seems to have started rather tepidly and then gradually warmed to his subject. The initial phrase is of the sort we might call sectioned; it belongs to that massive family of eight-bar melodies, with four measures on the tonic and the other half on the dominant, like the opening melodies of almost all concertos by

1. "I am staying to avenge my father." / "What do you hope for?"—"I hope for blood. / I renounce the favors of fate; / I renounce everything I love, / Glory, yourself . . ." / "Me, Melcthal?"–"My father is dead."

Viotti, Rode, Kreutzer, and their imitators.[2] In composing his last and perhaps most important work, Rossini should, I'd say, have definitively abandoned this all-too-predictable style. Moreover, the two lines that follow:

Dans ma cour quelle solitude!
Tu ne seras plus près de moi.[3]

are far from being set to music with the sensitivity that they absolutely require. They are frigid and conventional, despite an orchestration whose overabundant richness might gain from less agitation. As if to efface this somewhat schoolbook beginning, the concluding section is admirably original, graceful, and full of feeling. The most exigent imagination could not ask the composer for moments more convincing or noble than when he has Mathilde sing with melancholy abandon:

Sur la rive étrangère
Si je ne puis à ta misère
Offrir mes soins consolateurs,
Mon âme te suit tout entière;
Elle est fidèle à tes malheurs.[4]

I am not as satisfied with the two-voice ensemble that concludes the scene. The farewell of two lovers parting for all time should have been heart-rending. Apart from Mathilde's chromatic vocalise on the name Melcthal, it is merely slick, overburdened with wind instruments, and devoid of oppositions or contrasts. It is nevertheless highly regrettable, if only because of the lovely flights of inspiration just noted, that this whole scene should have been cut from the performance. The act now opens with the chorus of Gesler's soldiers crudely and haughtily celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the conquest of Switzerland and its annexation by the German empire. Then there is

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2. Three of the great violinists of the age, especially Giovanni Battista Viotti (1755–1824), Italian-born virtuoso, composer, and theater director, author of twenty-nine violin concertos; Pierre Rode (1774–1830), French violinist, author of thirteen violin concertos, Viotti's star pupil; he collaborated with Baillot and Kreutzer on the official violin method for the Conservatoire (1802). Kreutzer composed nineteen violin concertos.

3. "What solitude in my courtyard!/You will never be near me."

4. "On the foreign shore / though I cannot offer / your distress my consoling care, / my entire soul follows you; / it is faithful to your misfortunes."

dancing. Of course. The Opéra would find a pretext for a ballet even in a performance of the Last Judgment. No matter; the dance melodies, imbued with Swiss material, show a rare elegance and were all—with the exception of the *allegro* in G major called *Pas de soldats*—composed with care. The middle of this ballet is where we find the famous yodeling piece now so popular and so remarkable for its modulations and the vocal rhythm that serves as its accompaniment. Before Rossini, no one had brought *to the theater* rapid successions of clearly distinct tonic chords, such as the series at the thirty-third measure, where the melody arpeggiates into a B-natural major chord and then immediately drops into a true G tonic. This little piece, no doubt dashed off one morning over breakfast, has brought Rossini a truly incredible success, while beauties incomparably superior garner quite limited praise. It is true that this limited praise differed substantially from that lavished upon the *lovely* yodeling. In the eyes of some composers, the crowd's approbation is useful, but not very flattering. For these artists, the only opinion that matters is that of cultivated minds. Others care about quantity much more than quality. Like the natives of America before ties with Europeans were close enough to teach them the value of currency, they'd rather have a hundred sous than one gold coin.

After the dances comes the famous apple scene, with its generally vigorous, dramatic style. One sentence of Tell's strikes us as particularly elegant—his response to Gesler's exclamation:

C'est là mon prisonnier.
—Puisse-t-il être le dernier![5]

What I find absolutely false in both feeling and expression, on the contrary, is Tell's behavior when, fearing for his son, he takes him aside, embraces him, and orders him to flee. Instead of:

Espoir de ma race,
ô toi que j'embrasse,
Porte au loin tes pas.[6]

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5. "That is my prisoner."/"May he be the last!"

6. "Hope of my people, / O you whom I embrace, / go far away."

he should only make a quick sign and whisper "Sauve-toi!"[7] Plodding into an *andante* with this idea would perhaps be of no consequence in an Italian, truly Italian, opera, but in a creation such as *William Tell*, where reason is an acknowledged value, where everything is not exclusively devoted to highlighting the singers, such a passage makes not just poor sense, but no sense at all.

The recitative that follows perfectly illustrates the conditions just indicated:

> *Rejoins ta mère, je te l'ordonne;*
> *Qu'au sommet de nos monts la flamme brille et donne*
> *Aux trois cantons le signal des combats.*[8]

This hurried speech further underscores the flaw in expression that is startling the first time the idea occurs.

But what a change the composer effects in the touching counsel that William gives to Jemmy:

> *Sois immobile, et, sur la terre,*
> *Incline un genou suppliant.*[9]

How wonderfully the cello accompaniment weeps under the words of this father, his heart breaking as he embraces his son! And the orchestra, silent but for pizzicato chords interrupted by half-bar rests and for the bassoons' *pianissimo* holds on long, plaintive notes! It is all so full of emotion and anguish as it forecasts the great event about to occur! The final phrases of the piece:

> *Jemmy! Jemmy, songe à ta mère;*
> *Elle nous attend tous les deux.*[10]

express an irresistible, gut-wrenching truth. Whatever the partisans of popularity may say, this sublime inspiration, though it occasions only thin and

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7. "Flee!"

8. "Rejoin your mother, I order you; / may the flame glow at the top of our mountains and give / the three cantons the signal for combat."

9. "Remain still, and on the ground/bend your knee in supplication."

10. "Jemmy, Jemmy, think of your mother; / she is awaiting us both."

cold applause, encompasses something nobler and higher—more rightly conducive to a manly sense of accomplishment than any lilting yodel applauded by countless hands and sung by the women and children of all Europe. There is a difference between the pretty and the beautiful! To feign sympathy for the crowd and favor little niceties at the expense of the deepest sentiments of the heart is to show oneself a canny businessman, not an artist conscious of his dignity and his independence.

The first part of the third-act finale includes a passage of remarkable energy, which has always been ruined at the Opéra by the singer's insufficiencies. I refer to timid Mathilde's sudden outburst:

> *Au nom du souverain je le prends sous ma garde.*
> *Quand tout un peuple vous regarde,*
> *Osez, osez l'arracher de mes bras.*[11]

This indignation is as happily rendered by the orchestra as by the voice. It has the truthfulness of Gluck and Spontini.[12] The syllabic theme of the men's chorus "Quand l'orgueil les égare,"[13] which accompanies the very ingeniously modulated singing by the sopranos, produces an excellent effect. The concluding *stretta* of this chorus, in contrast, comprises only furious cries; true, these are motivated by the words, but they have no emotional impact on the audience, whose ears they assault to no purpose. There again, the libretto should perhaps have been revised, it being very difficult, if not impossible, to render "Anathème à Gesler" with anything but raging shouts whose violence, lacking melody or rhythm, overcomes any sense of the harmony.[14]

The fourth act brings back individual passions and consequently provides a necessary rest from the turbulence of the preceding act. Arnold returns to visit his father's deserted cottage. His heart filled with hopeless love and thoughts of revenge, his senses in turmoil from the scenes of blood and carnage ever present in his mind, he succumbs, crushed beneath the weight of the most torturous contrast. All is calm and silent and at peace—the peace

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11. "In the name of the sovereign, I take him under my protection. / With a whole people watching you, / just dare tear him from my arms!"

12. The ultimate praise, and an open reference to the implicit standard Berlioz has all along been applying.

13. "When pride leads them astray."

14. "Curse Gesler!"

of the grave. And the breast on which he would find it so sweet at such a time to shed tears of filial piety, the only heart that could soothe his own—it is all an infinity away. Mathilde will never be his. . . . The situation is poetic, poignantly sad, and so it inspired the composer to write an aria than we don't hesitate to call the most beautiful in the opera. It pours forth the whole racked soul of the young Melcthal. The most painful memories echo in ravishing melodies; harmony and modulations are deployed only to reinforce the melodic flow, never out of musical caprice. The choral *allegro* that follows is full of ardor, a worthy crown to such a beautiful scene. To judge by the ensuing applause, however, the piece does not have much of an effect on the public. It is too refined, too delicately nuanced to be appreciated, as is often the case. . . . If only we could reduce the audience to an assembly of fifty sensitive, intelligent persons—what a joy it would then be to compose!

The trio accompanied by woodwinds alone and the prayer during the storm, both of which follow the aria just discussed, were deleted before the opening performance. The cut is truly regrettable, especially for the prayer, which strikes me as pure charm. Besides, the musical concept was new enough to justify an exception in its favor. There were, no doubt, at the time of the staging, a few mechanical or set problems that led to the deletion of that interesting part of the score. The solution was obvious: we know that at the Opéra the directors only *tolerate* music.

From that moment up to the final chorus, we find hardly anything more than filler. There are orchestral outbursts as William struggles on the lake during the storm; there are fragments of recitative mixed with choral material, etc.—all things that the composer writes with the certainty that no one will listen. The final chorus, however:

> *Tout change et grandit en ces lieux . . .*
> *Quel air pur*![15]

shows a fine harmonic expansion. Various *ranz des vaches* float gracefully over the broad harmonies, and the solemn hymn to Swiss liberty rises calmly and nobly toward heaven, like the prayer of a righteous man.

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15. "Everything changes and grows in this place. . . / What pure air!"