



confident that we will hear more of his music on account of Sobel and Ciliberti's efforts. My gratitude for their contribution, however, is tinged with regret over the serious flaws that compromise its reliability. Those wishing to use it must cast a sharp and critical eye over the editorial interventions and accept that some of the surviving music is missing.

GREGORY BARNETT



RECORDINGS AND PERFORMANCES

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GEORG BENDA (1722–1795)

ROMEO AND JULIET

Bampton Classical Opera, London, St John's Smith Square, 13 September 2007

Long before Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* captured the imagination of composers such as Bellini, Gounod and Tchaikovsky, Mozart's Bohemian contemporary Georg Benda composed an operatic setting of the play, in 1776; this was chosen by Bampton Classical Opera as its main production of 2007. During its fourteen-year history, the company has gained a deservedly high reputation for presenting a range of eighteenth-century operas that are either by almost completely unknown composers or are neglected in the output of famous composers (Haydn and Mozart are specialities). The company performs at a number of venues around England, including the Buxton Festival, the Bampton Deanery in Oxfordshire (where the company gave its first performance, hence the name) and St John's Smith Square; it is financed by the generosity of donors and counts on an entirely voluntary administrative staff. Bearing that in mind, the company does extraordinary work exploring a repertory that still contains many riches to be uncovered, always performing in English in an attempt to relate to the audience. Nevertheless, Benda's *Romeo and Juliet* is no masterpiece. Even in an ideal performance the work would probably not stand up to even efficient second-rate operas of the same period. As it was, the mixed quality of Bampton's performance meant that it was difficult to feel inspired by the piece.

Benda was clearly interested in writing various types of opera. After his appointment as Kapellmeister at the Thuringian town of Gotha, he wrote an opera seria, *Xindo riconosciuto*, and two Italian intermezzi. His most significant stage works, however, are the three one-act pieces he wrote for the famed Seyler troupe in 1775: the farce *Der Jahrmarkt* and the melodramas *Ariadne auf Naxos* and *Medea*. These melodramas so inspired Mozart that he said he carried them about with him; their impact on his work is generally agreed to show clearly in *Zaide* and the incidental music to *Thamos, König in Ägypten*. Having written melodramas – where text is declaimed against an orchestral accompaniment – Benda must have relished the chance to write a Singspiel, again allowing a combination of spoken and sung passages. Together with his librettist Friedrich Wilhelm Gotter, with whom he had already written *Der Jahrmarkt* and *Medea*, Benda turned Shakespeare's complicated five-act tragedy into a three-act 'ernsthafte Opera', *Romeo und Julie*. The theatre at Gotha played host to a number of other English plays, both by Shakespeare and some of the Restoration playwrights, so the new opera was written in the context of the dissemination of English texts in the area rather than branching out in a different direction.

However, not only were the plays translated, they were also severely adapted and modified, so much so that they sometimes barely resemble their original form. This is the case with Benda's *Romeo and Juliet*. The highly populated Shakespearean version (which was itself freely adapted from Arthur Brooke's poem *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*) is pared down to six soloists, two of whom have little to sing. Romeo



and Juliet are already married before the curtain goes up; there is no balcony scene and very little evidence of the feud between the Montagues and Capulets; and the lovers survive at the end. Inasmuch as all the clichéd elements of the story are eradicated, the opera has the potential for foregrounding important themes and intensifying the Romeo–Juliet relationship. In practice, though, it is exceedingly static (taking place in only two settings), has little character development and emasculates the key conflicts and tensions through the removal of most of the familiar characters (Benvolio, Mercutio, Tybalt, Lady Capulet and the Montagues). What is more, to an audience raised on Shakespeare's play, the vision of Romeo and Juliet springing back to life at the end was just plain comical. To me, the laughter at the final curtain underlined the fact that this version is difficult to take seriously; Thomas Bauman reports in *New Grove* that this aspect of the opera 'was criticised even in its own day'.

Benda was undoubtedly restricted by the fact that there were few singers available to him in Gotha for his production of *Romeo and Juliet*. From the two-dimensionality of the characterization of Romeo and the greater emphasis on Juliet and even her confidante Laura, it is easy to infer that the theatre must have been stronger on sopranos than it was on tenors. Juliet gets the lion's share of the score, not only in terms of the length of her part but also the amount of technically and dramatically demanding music she has to sing. The opening recitative and aria (following on from a short spoken prologue) immediately demonstrates the fluidity of form with which Benda approached the piece. A three-movement introduction flows without a break into a multi-movement recitative, whose sharply contrasted tonalities, orchestration and tempos vividly evoke Juliet's psychological shifts between her love for Romeo and her fears for their relationship. The aria itself is attractive but not especially compelling: resembling an aria from an opera seria, it demands a wide range of the soprano but neither paints the words vividly nor presents a distinctive melody. As the performance proceeded, Benda's lack of melodic facility and his inability musically to distinguish between the characters became increasingly obvious; not only is the drama static, but there is little musical variety either. On the other hand, the orchestration is imaginative – for instance, the bassoon is used sparingly to increase its impact when it does appear, often in contrary motion with the flute at the opposite extreme – but the amount of stepwise movement in most of the vocal lines is extremely dull. The problem at this performance was compounded by a trite translation: Romeo's line 'Yes, the lark has started singing with the dawning of the day' is followed by Juliet's 'No, the nightingale is clinging to the hope that you will stay'. And yet, amidst the similarity of much of the music, there is an extraordinary choral elegy in C minor, which opens the third act with a darkness that is unexpected after the monotony of the previous two acts. The sombre mood, the soaring oboe line over a dense string texture and the punctuation of the largely unaccompanied vocal writing with stabbing orchestral interjections is remarkably intense; if only the same could be said of the rest of the opera.

Having been hugely impressed with Bampton Classical Opera's production of Haydn's *L'infedeltà delusa* a couple of years ago, I was a little disappointed by the standard of this performance of *Romeo and Juliet*. The set was serviceable – a bed, chair, trees and so on indicated the domestic location sufficiently to transport us from the church setting of St John's. But it undermined the production to hire foreign performers in two of the three main roles to sing in English translation. Portuguese soprano Joana Seara was convincing as Juliet despite struggling with the high tessitura at first, but she made little of the words in the sung passages and could not really do justice to the spoken dialogue. Similarly, Russian soprano Ilona Domnich tried hard but did not bring the character of Laura to life; she also had some severe intonation problems and could not negotiate the fioritura writing with much precision. By contrast, Mark Chaundy had a lyrical tenor voice but was rather bland as Romeo, and there was no chemistry between the two lovers. By far the most experienced and convincing singer was Adrian Powter as Capulet, who projected much more strongly, showed more stylistic awareness of the music and tried to enliven the drama. By a stroke of ill fate the singer playing Lorenzo (the Friar Laurence character of the play), Ian Priestley, was delayed on a flight from Amsterdam and only arrived in time for the second half of the opera. As it happens, the character is not required to sing until the closing stages of the drama, so the director, Jeremy Gray, valiantly took over and delivered the spoken dialogue in the earlier acts. Alice de Ville and Caroline Kennedy, the two female members of the



ensemble who played the Capulet family mourners, seemed to have more of a sense of the style of the piece, not to mention brighter voices that were better suited to the period. Perhaps that is why the funeral set piece, when they make their first and only appearance, had more impact than the rest of the opera. The production, too, was more imaginative here (though obviously the libretto does not allow much scope for dramaturgical imagination elsewhere): the mourners entered ceremonially from the back of the church, which itself became a more appropriate venue for the opera in this ‘tomb scene’. On the whole, Matthew Halls’ conducting was sympathetic to the singers, if a little rigid at times. The playing of the London Mozart Players was well balanced and the textures were always lucid; the highlight was the final number in D major, when the trumpets entered the galleries to play their fanfare-like parts.

On the whole, then, it is hard to be convinced about the quality of both the opera and the performance, but that is no reason not to look forward to the company’s 2008 productions, a revival of Haydn’s *La vera costanza* and the UK premiere of Paer’s *Leonora*.

DOMINIC MCHUGH



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JOSEPH BOULOGNE, CHEVALIER DE SAINT-GEORGES (c1745–1799)

VIOLIN CONCERTOS. CONCERTO IN D, OP. POST. NO. 2, CONCERTO NO.10 IN G, CONCERTO IN D,

OP. 3 NO. 1

Qian Zhou, Toronto Camerata, conductor Kevin Mallon

Naxos, 2004, 8.557322; one disc, 65 minutes

This is an excellent disc to swell the burgeoning Saint-Georges discography. Saint-Georges’s star began to rise with an early Erato LP of the beguiling symphonie concertante in G, Op. 13 (LDE 3037). The LP linked his name to Mozart’s but gave an incorrect opus number. Barry S. Brook’s 1962 score ensured wider recognition. On this *Contemporains Français de Mozart* LP Saint-Georges quite eclipsed the other composers, Guénin and Bertheaume, whose fortunes have not risen. ‘Le Mozart noir’ proclaims Jeanne Lamon’s 2003 disc of music by Saint-Georges. Another under Martin Gester sports the familiar portrait of the elegant fencer (as on Naxos) with the title ‘Un Africain à la cour’. Well, admittedly, his mother was Senegalese. ‘Le nègre des Lumières’ is the subtitle of a 1999 Forlane disc, while an internet posting seeks the burial location of the Black Mozart. Such marketing hyperbole and fanciful metonymy distort the reality. Saint-Georges’s core output was not abundant, comprising above all ten concertantes, at least fourteen violin concertos, eighteen string quartets, some sonatas, songs and some (mostly lost) stage works. Questions arise regarding his name, his paternity, his date of birth: Joseph de Boulogne or Boullogne or Bologne, chevalier de Saint-George(s) – he signed without an ‘s’. The death certificate gave his age as sixty but it has been argued that he was born in Guadeloupe in 1745 or 1748. Some uncertainty shrouds his works too. Chappell White (*From Vivaldi to Viotti: A History of the Early Classical Violin Concerto* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1992)) could locate only eleven violin concertos, but fourteen have now been recorded. Confusion surrounds the numbering of the concertos – for example, Naxos’s No. 10 in G is Avenira’s Op. 8 No. 11, while an Arion LP gave this work as Op. 7 No. 2, which was not corrected on the CD reissue. Op. 7 No. 2 is a fine work in B flat with a marvellous muted Andante (available on Forlane). Gabriel Banat (*The Chevalier de Saint-Georges, Virtuoso of the Sword and the Bow* (New York: Pendragon, 2006)) offers a new numbering whereby Naxos’s No. 10 becomes Op. 12 No. 2 (472). Despite these problems Saint-Georges has been fortunate on disc, with almost all his extant output recorded, except the two symphonies concertantes Op. 6. Several violin concertos boast four versions and 2005 saw two recordings of the final set of string quartets Op. 14 (1785).