

OPERA & MUSIC THIS SUMMER

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The venerable first century Roman Theater in Orange now hosts grand opera each summer. Called the Chorégies d'Orange, these operas have become nearly as venerable as the theater itself. Old, in fact very old are these Chorégies, the first ever spectacles beginning in the 1860's, though then they were spoken tragedies. But these days operatic tragedies have supplanted classical tragedies, operas performed on the mega-scale of the more famous Roman arena in Verona. This summer both operas in Orange just happen to be French -- *Carmen* and *Faust*. Titles in Orange never stray outside the top twenty, the big Verdi and Puccini operas are the more usual fare both there and in Verona.

It was not always that way. The first opera performed on the massive Roman stage was in 1869, *Joseph*, by Étienne Méhul. This fine composer (a contemporary of Beethoven by the way) is known to opera historians as the most popular opera composer of the French revolution when the macabre spectacles of daytime were supplemented by his "horror" operas (a popular genre of the time) at night. Méhul was among the first to identify characters with musical themes, a fine idea that was soon taken on and exhausted by Richard Wagner.

Méhul's *Joseph*, biblical as its name implies, is a late work and some say his masterpiece. It was premiered in 1807 but quickly fell out of the repertory. The 1869 revival in Orange apparently responded to the mid-century tastes for Christian/biblical subjects, Saint-Saëns composing his *Samson et Delilah* in 1868 for example, and, well, Gounod's *Faust* having its premiere in 1859. No one has ever been fooled into thinking that Gounod's opera is an enlightened document as it is a pure Christian operatic thriller – boy meets devil, devil helps him seduce girl, girl gets pregnant and goes mad, boy is dragged off to hell, girl repents and goes to heaven.

Never mind Goethe's *Faust* confronting good and evil, sexuality and morality, science and religion, Gounod's *Faust* confronts some very beautiful tunes (to be rendered at their most eloquent in Orange by *tenorissimo* Roberto Alagna), Marguerite confronts some spectacular coloratura, and both join Mephistopheles for a fervent, indeed sublime final trio that will surely trigger one of Orange's huge, spine-tingling scenic gestures. In his later years Gounod became deeply devout rather than operatic, his mostly religious music of that period now known only to church organists.

On the other hand Olivier Messiaen, born in Avignon in 1908, and one of the giants of twentieth century music, was a devout Catholic his entire life. In his youth he became the organist at the Église de Sainte-Trinité in Paris, a post whose humble duties he upheld to the end of his long life (he died in Paris in 1992). His centennial is celebrated this summer by the Roque D'Anthéron's Festival International de Piano with performances of three of his most loved works, *Visions de l'Amen*, *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*, and *Quatour pour la fin du Temps*.

It is no exaggeration that New Yorker magazine music critic Alex Ross in his fine book *The Rest is Noise* describes the two hymns of praise to Jesus in the *Quatour pour la fin du Temps* as excruciatingly

beautiful. Composed in a Nazi prison camp where he was interned, with his poet wife terminally ill in a hospital, this brief quartet for clarinet, violin, cello and piano is emotionally and musically exhausting, and incredibly beautiful. Yet two of its now cataclysmic movements are adaptations of an earlier work, a pre-war work called *Fêtes*, in which women dressed in white played Messiaen's music to fireworks and fountains, the formal musical divisions dictated by hydraulic engineering requirements, the quartet's first long cello line originally accompanying a tall jet of water. More extended works, still from the 1940's are the *Visions* for two pianos and the *Vingt Regards* for piano solo. The *Visions* are splashy and plush harmonic expositions competing in complex layers. Its overflowing richness is akin to swashbuckling film scores, with the ecstasy of the divine never far away. The *Vingt Regards* even hold moments where ecstatic visions emerge from slinky lounge music, for example a four-note motif, nothing less than Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm" builds the *Regard de l'Esprit de joie*, and the *Regard du baiser de l'Enfant-Jésus* is Gershwin's "Someone to Watch Over Me." Messiaen finds his Christian god everywhere, in the humble, the trivial, the sexual, and, particularly in his later music, in the songs of birds, though the first use of birdsong was in the *Quatour pour la fin du Temps* with an extended solo for clarinet that quotes the nightingale and the blackbird. God spoke to Messiaen through all worldly sounds, His true realm manifesting itself finally in huge, thunderous, harmonious climaxes.

While Messiaen unabashedly makes the trivial profound, critics say Gounod has made the profound trivial. But beautiful music is never trivial, as the huge crowds that will attend Roberto Alagna's *Faust* in Orange know (August 2 and 5), and the much smaller audiences (too small) that will hear Messiaen at the Roque d'Anthéron perhaps will know more profoundly (July 27, August 18 and 19). Piano superstar Michel Béroff will perform the technically formidable *Vingt Regards*, the Hungarian two-piano team Dezső Rànyi and Edit Klukon play the huge *Visions de l'Amen*. The group performing the *Quatour pour la fin du Temps* is led by violinist David Grimal of the Entrecasteaux Festival. www.choregies.com, www.festival-piano.com.

Reviews by Michael Milenski of Opera throughout the Mediterranean region can on his websites: www.capsuopera.com & www.festivaltour.org