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The minutes simply sped by: an almost complete performance of Rossini's mammoth *Semiramide*



Rossini *Semiramide*; Albina Shagimuratova, Daniela Barcellona, Mirco Palazzi, Barry Banks, Gianluca Buratto Susana Gaspar, David Butt Philip, James Platt, Opera Rara Chorus, Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, Mark Elder; Opera Rara at the BBC Proms at the Royal Albert Hall Reviewed by Robert Hugill on Sept 4 2016

Star rating: 5.0

Bel canto indeed: Rossini's last opera for Italy at the Proms on the back of Opera Rara's new recording

Owing to its size and sheer technical challenge, Rossini's *Semiramide* doesn't get all that many outings. Covent Garden mounted a concert performance in 1986 with June Anderson and Marilyn Horne, conducted by Henry Lewis, and Chelsea Opera Group performed the work in 1998 with Nelly Miricioiu and Patricia Bardon conducted by Grant Llewlyn. Opera Rara has just recorded it, and conductor Mark Elder brought the cast of the recording, with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment to the BBC Proms at the Royal Albert Hall on Sunday 4 September 2016 to perform the opera. Albina Shagimuratova was Semiramide and Daniela Barcellona was Arsace, with Mirco Palazzi as Assur, Barry Banks as Idreno, Gianluca Buratto as Oroe, Susana Gaspar as Azema, and David Butt Philip as Mitrane. Mark Elder conducted the Opera Rara Chorus and the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment.

Rossini wrote *Semiramide* in 1823 for performance in Venice. It would be his last opera for Italy (all his remaining ones, whether in Italian or French, were written for Paris), it was also the last opera he wrote for the soprano who, since 1815, had been his muse, mistress and wife, Isabella Colbran. Though by 1823 Colbran's voice was not what it had been. The opera differs somewhat from the series nine of *opere serie* which Rossini wrote for Naples between 1815 and 1822. Instead of striking theatrical effects, daring experiments with operatic structure and the introduction of a new romanticism, Rossini and his librettist Rossi returned to a classicism which can be seen as old fashioned. The synopsis of *Semiramide* can read like that of an opera seria from the previous generation, but Rossini brought the opera all the experience he had gained in writing those operas for Naples. So there is a confidence in the handling of his large forces with a substantial orchestra (double woodwind, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones), and banda (18 players at the Albert Hall), and chorus, and the large scale ensemble scenes (notably the two act finales) are by no means static, they build on Rossini's experience in works like *La donna del Lago*. And the sheer size of the piece is not because Rossini and Rossi are trying to get so much plot in, instead it is the size of the individual components. The first act lasts nearly two hours but contains only four solos and duets, but this is a composer whose *Terzettone* in *Maometto II* lasts around 35 minutes.

The performance of *Semiramide* at the Royal Albert Hall was impressive for the way Mark Elder controlled the sheer scale of the piece, keeping a wider sense of the architecture so that the long first act never flagged and we never got overly bogged down in detail. That said, there was plenty of detail to enjoy. All the cast were clearly well into their roles, having spent the previous week or so recording the piece, but there was a real freshness and sense of engagement to this live performance, with the singers clearly reacting to the audience.

That there was going to be much to enjoy was indicated by the opening notes of the overture where we heard pungent wind playing combined with the lovely colours of hand stopped horns. In the overture and elsewhere, Mark Elder kept a firm control on the long passages where Rossini builds the excitement, never allowing the music to gallop away with itself and instead taking the long view.

Albina Shagimuratova was a consummate *Semiramide*. Some of Rossini's later role for Colbran introduced a daring plainness into the vocal writing (responding to her failing voice), but *Semiramide* returns to bel canto singing for singing's sake. And Shagimuratova brought a stunning technique to bear on the role, impressing not just with her technique and her range, but with the strength of her middle and lower registers. She certainly is not just a canary, and drew on a wide range of vocal strengths, but she also brought a fine sense of character to the role and we watched her delight in her new found love of Arsace (Daniela Barcellona) whom we know to be her son. Shagimuratova managed to bring this rather unlovable character to life.

Crucial to the opera is the pair of duets that *Semiramide* has with Arsace, and perhaps here we see Rossini's response to Colbran's decline as the character is shown off in duet rather than solo. Instead of a final showpiece aria the character simply dies, and it is Assur who has the last aria as part of an extended mad scene. So it was with great pleasure that we discovered that Shagimuratova and mezzo-soprano Daniela Barcellona had indeed forged a strong relationship,

so that their duets together were some of the highlights of the evening. Both singers showed themselves well able to cope with the technical demands of the music, and both were able to move from that to using the music for expressive purposes. But that said, there was something simply magical in hearing Shagimuratova and Barcellona in elaborate roulades in thirds.

Shagimuratova's duet with Mirco Palazzi's Assur was equally important, with both singers showing a fine command of dramatic coloratura in thrilling style. Assur is the main villain of the piece and I felt that perhaps Palazzi was simply a little too nice. But you forgave him everything because of the way he used his lovely dark voice with fluent flexibility in the bravura vocal writing. And he really came into his own in Assur's final scene where his nightmare visions approach a mad scene and Rossini's vocal writing, particularly in the recitative, pointed the way for many developments in 19th century Italian opera. The tenor role in the opera Idreno is just not on the same plane, he does not get the girl and rather disappears towards the end. But Barry Banks was impressive with the command of the role's taxing tessitura and gave a graceful account of Idreno's aria, when the character thinks he is going to get the girl. In fact both Banks and Palazzi were relatively last minute replacements

Bass Gianuca Buratto was wonderfully trenchant in the important role of Oroe the high priest who knows everything. The smaller roles were equally well taken. Susana Gaspar was a rather spunky Azema (the girl who rather gets passed around during the opera), with David Butt Philip as a highly supportive servant. James Platt was wonderfully evocative as the ghost of Semiramide's murdered husband.

The Opera Rara Chorus and the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment were both on fine form. Whilst this was very much a soloists evening, there was much to enjoy elsewhere especially in the large scale ensembles where Rossini really took advantage of the forces which he had available. Also, the use of period instruments really told as the orchestra produced a fine transparency and lightness of sound despite the sheer numbers on stage, so that balance was never an issue thus enabling the singers to concentrate on bel canto.

Some thought had obviously gone into the look of the piece, despite a rather straightforward concert performance. Albina Shagimuratova wore a pair of spectacular dresses, as befitted the Queen of Babylon, and Daniel Barcellona sported a smart, dark trouser suit, whilst Gianluca Buratto as Oroe the High Priest wore what looked like a cassock!

Opera Rara has recorded the opera completely uncut (almost unheard of in modern revivals), though the performance at the Proms was slightly cut to bring it in at under four hours (only just). That said, we had all the caballetta repeats, which are very important for the structural integrity of the work and also gave the singers an opportunity to show off in a big way, to great effect.

I did think that the BBC's scheduling of the opera was rather thoughtless. Starting a four hour opera at 7pm on a Sunday evening is not idea and whilst some people never returned after the interval there was also a steady stream of people leaving from 10pm.

Rossini's *Semiramide* is never going to be an everyday opera, and this performance enabled us to

hear it under almost perfect conditions with a strong and highly engaged cast singing the fullest version you are probably ever likely to hear live, supported by the wonderful colours of the sort of instruments Rossini would have imagined. What was truly remarkable about the performance was that, given the right performers and the right conditions, how the size of the opera was really vindicated and rather than dragging on the minutes flew by. I can't wait for the recording but in the meanwhile you have 30 days to listen again on BBC iPlayer.