

Tales of oppression and resistance

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The undoubted highlight of the Deutsche Oper's Meyerbeer cycle from a few years back was *Le Prophète*, a production that used the conventions of grand opéra as the springboard for a sprawling, surprisingly modern revolutionary epic. Five years later Olivier Py, the director of that production, has returned to the Deutsche Oper for a new production of *Les Vêpres Siciliennes* in its original French-language version. The opera, which Verdi wrote specifically for the Parisian stage and which was modelled to some extent on the grand scale of Meyerbeer's greatest successes – it even features a libretto by Eugène Scribe, albeit a recycled one – allowed Mr Py similar scope to present a vast canvas of oppression and resistance. With the addition of several great vocal performances and the taut musical direction of Enrique Mazzola, the production turned Verdi's most conspicuous attempt to adapt his style to Parisian tastes into an engaging spectacle.

In fact *Les Vêpres* occupied a world that shared many visual and thematic similarities with Mr Py's Meyerbeer staging. The setting had been updated from thirteenth century Sicily to French-occupied Algeria – colonial oppression is more or less the same regardless of how the oppressors are dressed or which weapons they use – yet the precise geographic location was far less important than the stylised urban landscape of monochrome brick buildings bathed in a cool, pale light. These structures, clearly the work of the conquering rulers, were in their own subtle way more oppressive than the armed soldiers who roamed around them. Even the warmth of the golden boxes and proscenium arch of the on-stage theatre in which parts of the first and third acts took place suggested a luxury both alien and inimical to the oppressed populace.

In addition to creating a distinctive setting for the opera, Mr Py proved himself a master of expansive, intricately choreographed stage action, and he seemed to thrive especially in those scenes accompanied by purely instrumental music, in this case the overture and the 'Winter' section of the ballet music, which was used as a prelude to the fourth act. Freed

Py, *Les Vêpres Siciliennes*
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**Berlin, domingo,
20 de marzo de
2022.** Deutsche
Oper Berlin. Verdi:
*Les Vêpres
Siciliennes.* Olivier

Py, director. Hulkar Sabirova (Hélène), Arianna Manganello (Ninetta), Piero Pretti (Henri), Thomas Lehman (Guy de Montfort), Roberto Tagliavini (Jean de Procida), Michael Kim (Thibault), Andrew Dickinson (Danieli), Jörg Schörner (Mainfroid), Joel Allison (Robert), Andrew Harris (Béthune), Byung Gil Kim (Vaudemont), and Martina Metzler-Champion (Mére Palerme). Chorus and Orchestra of the Deutsche Oper Berlin. Enrique Mazzola, conductor





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from the pressures of sung dialogue, Mr Py was able to create minor masterpieces of visual storytelling – he would undoubtedly have been a great director of silent films – in which the quotidian and the violent followed one another in quick succession. The pantomime that accompanied the overture managed to reenact the execution of Hélène’s brother and offer an overview of the terrors of daily life in an occupied city within the span of seven or eight densely plotted minutes. The ballet was even better: the constant spinning of the stage offered the setting for a roundelay of brutal executions interspersed with the leisure activities of bored soldiers. (Mr Py used a similar technique for the ballet music in *Le Prophète*, but it was so well realised that one was not unhappy to see it again).

If the staging’s visual world was consistently striking, its approach to the drama was somewhat less convincing. Not that Mr Py was ever lazy or inattentive. Each scene was conceived according to a rigorous symbolic logic in which colour and movement were used to frame and underline the action. The opening scene of the third act began with de Montfort removing his bad-guy outfit under the pretext of getting changed for the ball, and it was while still in his underclothes – stripped, as it were, of his villainous surface – that he greeted Henri, who was soon to learn the truth about his familial relationship with his hated oppressor. A dancer with white face paint representing Henri’s dead mother was present throughout the scene to give physical form to the emotional forces that kept Henri estranged from his new-found father, and the movements of the three characters, forever coming together and pulling away, seemed perfectly moulded to the dialogue. Yet it was unmoving; for all the conceptual effort of the scene, the characters remained monolithic and undeveloped, outlined by symbols and ideologies but never entirely real.

Other scenes suffered a similar fate. While Mr Py was clearly inspired by grand tableaux of cruelty and injustice, the staging’s more intimate interactions – the duos, trios and quartets at the heart of the score – often seemed laboured or disinterested. Whether out of deference to the singers or lack of interest in the passions of the characters, the staging seemed unwilling to cultivate a credible relationship between Hélène and Henri, so necessary for their long scene at the centre of the fourth act, and in the crucial fourth act quartet the characters were arranged on different levels of a three-by-three matrix of platforms and scaffolding, disconnected from one another and left to fend for themselves. The relative neglect of the dramatic scenes may not ultimately have been a fatal flaw in a staging with so much brilliantly rendered spectacle, but the oscillation between sequences of great imagination and ones of near-complete stasis gave the evening a slightly uneven quality.



Verdi: *Les Vêpres Siciliennes*. Enrique Mazzola, conductor. Olivier Py, director. Deutsche Oper Berlin, March 2022. © 2022 by Marcus Lieberenz.

While the individual characters may not have been a great concern of the production, a number of the more static scenes were elevated by the vocal performances. Jean de

Procida may be the smallest of the principal roles – he does not appear until the second act and appears only briefly in acts three and four – but Roberto Tagliavini’s ‘Et toi Palerme’ was arguably the evening’s finest moment; his rich tone, absolutely clear but glowing with warmth, his sublime lyrical phrasing, and his authoritative presence came together in a perfect evocation of the exiled revolutionary returning to his homeland after a long absence. Other appearances, although largely in ensembles, were no less distinguished, especially his brilliantly delivered contribution to the trio that precedes the final massacre, in which the sympathetic warmth of the earlier acts was replaced by ruthless calculation.

Although the staging costumed Guy de Montfort in the black suit and long coat of an unrepentant villain, Thomas Lehman’s nuanced performance remained attuned to the complexities and ambiguities of the character; his energetic first act duet with Henri was a promising start, but he reached even greater heights in his solo scene at the beginning of the third act, a tumultuous piece of soul-searching that arrived at a remarkably tender conclusion. By the end of the fourth act, in which he allows Henri to spare the life of his comrades, one could almost believe that paternal feeling had overcome his tendency towards despotism.



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Hulkar Sabirova’s reading of Hélène came into its own as the evening progressed: her song in the first act possessed beautiful tone in the higher notes but seemed to demand greater projection in the lower passages. However her solo scene in the fourth act and especially her sparkling aria at the beginning of the fifth were assured and captivating. The staging treated the complicated romance of Hélène and Henri as something of a subplot and one suspects that Ms Sabirova’s duets with Piero Pretti might have benefitted from a more coherent emotional bond between the two. Although Mr Pretti was strong in these scenes, he was at his best in Henri’s encounters with de Montfort, notably that of the first act in which Mr Pretti’s elegant tone and impassioned delivery conveyed exactly the right mixture of contempt and foolish heroism.

Given the staging’s penchant for dynamic crowd scenes featuring assemblies of revolutionaries and soldiers, it was not surprising that the choir would play a crucial role at several points in the evening. Their calls of ‘Courage’ in response to Hélène’s song in the first act gave the scene a necessary fervour, but their performance was nowhere more impressive than in the conclusions of the second and fourth acts: in both scenes the choir was divided into on- and offstage forces, and the movement back and forth between the two was impressive as much for its heightened energy as its precision.

Enrique Mazzola, who also conducted Mr Py’s staging of *Le Prophète*, presided over a tense, exactingly controlled performance in which there was room for neither excess nor untidiness. The grandly sculpted phrases and finely layered climaxes had an exquisite, sometimes calculating perfection but they were mediated by a spry enthusiasm that prevented them from becoming mannered and cold. The ballet music used as a prelude to Act Four had a graceful effervescence that matched the carefully conceived movements on

the revolving stage.

Neither *Les Vêpres* nor its later Italian version managed to achieve the lasting popularity of Verdi's most successful operas of the 1850s, but the opera is nonetheless an ambitious and frequently inspired attempt to place the desires and duties of its characters against a grandly-scaled backdrop of political upheaval. If Mr Py's staging showed a decided preference for the political over the personal, his light touch and ability to sketch complex situations with a few deft strokes laid the foundation for a production that was rarely less than enthralling.