

Blood, ecstasy and pure theatre

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The Bard Music Festival's annual in-depth investigation of a single composer homes in on Richard Wagner this summer, but don't expect a staging of one of his operas. Instead, its sister festival, Bard SummerScape, provocatively offers *Les Huguenots* by Giacomo Meyerbeer, a composer Wagner reviled. Or did he? While slamming Meyerbeer publicly, no doubt to advance his own career, Wagner lifted one artistic idea after another from Meyerbeer's spectacular brand of operatic dramaturgy.

But forget about Wagner. Let's be grateful that Bard has resurrected this stupendous, seminal opera, the first to achieve 1,000 performances at the Paris Opéra but one that has lacked a big New York staging for 94 mind-boggling years. A tale of seven lives caught up in religious strife culminating in the 1572 Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, *Les Huguenots* in Bard's staging is a thriller from beginning to end. And it could scarcely be so without Meyerbeer's dazzling fusion of diverse elements: alluring vocal melodies that show off the singers, brilliant orchestral colours, dance allied to the drama, striking use of massed scenes, and, not least, an unfailing theatrical instinct - the voyeuristic scene of ladies of court taking a swim has them practically nude in this staging.

Despite bizarre details, Thaddeus Strassberger's modernistic production, with simple but nonspecific sets by Eugenio Recuenco imaginatively lit by Aaron Black, understands the thrust of the opera. It sometimes goes awry - its feeble attempt to depict the massacre on stage detracts in the process from the ecstatic vision of three principals about to die - but the personal conflicts are strongly delineated.

The predominantly young singers do astonishingly well, especially tenor Michael Spyres as the Protestant nobleman Raoul, whose buoyant singing of the French text has a natural ease, plus ardour and suppleness as required. Erin Morley has some brilliant moments as Queen Marguerite de Valois, who vainly attempts a rapprochement of the factions, and Alexandra Deshorties sings impassionedly as Valentine, the lover Raoul wrongly spurns. Peter Volpe brings a hearty bass to Raoul's comically stern retainer Marcel, and Andrew Schroeder is a suave Count of Nevers. Conductor Leon Botstein made the right preliminary decision by settling on an ample performing text - four hours and 20 minutes, with two brief intervals - and, leading the American Symphony Orchestra and an excellent chorus, holds it all together with complete assurance. *****

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