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A Triumphant Massacre

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The Bard SummerScape festival has mounted some pretty unlikely operas, but this year's choice seemed particularly rash. Meyerbeer's "Les Huguenots" deals with the 1572 St. Bartholemew's Day Massacre when Catholics, in a carefully orchestrated campaign, slaughtered Protestants (Huguenots) all over France. The opera was a big hit in Paris in 1836 but, since it has five acts and four hours of music and requires seven virtuoso principal singers and an enormous chorus, it hasn't had much of a life in the modern era.

But Bard's gamble paid off. Strongly cast and insightfully directed, "Les Huguenots" proved mesmerizing. Its sprawling length (trimmed to four hours and 15 minutes, including two intermissions) and juxtaposition of musical styles made a fascinating bridge between the singer-driven operas of Rossini that came before and the complex political dramas of Verdi that came later. Remarkably, elements of both coexisted, creating their own tension, in the opera's slow buildup into violent explosion. The opera's subject is profound, irreconcilable religious hatred, and while Thaddeus Strassberger's production evoked the specific historical period, it was abstract enough to make that festering hatred universal and communicate it viscerally.

"Les Huguenots" (its libretto is by Eugène Scribe and Emile Deschamps) combines historical and fictional characters. In Acts I and II, moderates attempt a reconciliation between the two factions. The (historical) Catholic Marguerite de Valois—sister of Charles IX—who is marrying the Protestant Henri of Navarre in an attempt to unite the two religions, tries to create a similar match between the (fictional) Protestant Raoul de Nangis and Valentine, the daughter of the Catholic Count de Saint-Bris. The two young people have met by chance and fallen in love, but Raoul does not know who Valentine is. He also believes her (incorrectly) to be the mistress of his Catholic friend Nevers, and he angrily refuses the match, offending Saint-Bris.

Matters deteriorate in the three concluding acts. An attempted duel between Saint-Bris and Raoul sets off a street skirmish between Protestants and Catholics. Saint-Bris organizes the massacre and the moderate Nevers, now married to Valentine, refuses to take part. Valentine and Raoul finally confess their love, but Raoul tears himself away in order to warn his Protestant comrades. With the massacre in full swing, Valentine runs away to find Raoul. She converts, and Saint-Bris, finding them on the street and seeing only a pair of Huguenots, kills them both.

Aided by the sets of Eugenio Recuenco, costumes by Mattie Ullrich and lighting by Aaron Black, Mr. Strassberger's production clearly evoked this dramatic arc as well as the simultaneous sense of historical period and universality. Each act had its own look. In Act II, Marguerite descended to the stage in a glowing green box, seemingly symbolic of her attempt to create a garden of peace in an otherwise black world of strife. Act III was played in a forest of girders,

standing in for church pillars that shelter both Catholics and Protestants. And Act IV updated the living room of Valentine and the Count de Nevers with modern black leather furniture, its very ordinariness making it a sinister place to hatch a bloody plot. (In case you missed the analogy, Saint-Bris also gives Nevers, who refuses to participate, a Godfather-style kiss.) Ms. Ullrich's stark, sculptural costumes similarly fused elements of period style and abstract details. For example, the voluminous court skirt of Marguerite's Act II costume was asymmetrical and had a slit that revealed her leg.

Mr. Strassberger directed intimate moments and crowd scenes with equal skill, making smooth segues from the personal into the political. Act IV, for example, went from the plotting of Saint-Bris and his Catholic friends to a huge chorus scene in which three robed priests, backed up by a mass of robed enthusiasts carrying large black crosses, blessed the undertaking and stabbed a Christ figure with the tip of a processional cross. It then concluded with a ferocious love scene, with Valentine attempting to keep Raoul with her and the conflicted Raoul tearing off her dress before running off to join his fellow Protestants. Painting and dance also played a role: Aided by skillful lighting, the director created some striking tableaux that looked like Old Master paintings, and his choreographic style with crowds made the final massacre, with cassocked men slitting the throats of women, into a horrific dance of death.

"Les Huguenots" requires both bel canto virtuosity and dramatic singing—sometimes from the same singers—and Bard secured an able cast of principals. Soprano Erin Morley was a spectacular Marguerite (once a Joan Sutherland signature role), navigating the extreme coloratura and the mix of dignity and coquettishness with great flair. Michael Spyres's tenor had both the bel canto beauty and dramatic weight for Raoul's music, making the rhapsodic, high-flying Act I aria in praise of his unknown love and the forceful encounters of later acts stylish and convincing. As Valentine, Alexandra Deshorties seemed to be holding back at first, but her fervent, dark-hued soprano caught fire in Act IV. Baritone Andrew Schroeder sang with warmth and fluidity as Nevers and bass-baritone John Marcus Bindel was a ferocious Saint-Bris. Marie Lenormand contributed bright comedy and playfulness to the role of Urbain, Marguerite's page, and Peter Volpe brought a sonorous bass to the role of Raoul's friend and loyal retainer Marcel, the uncompromising Huguenot soldier who intimidates a roomful of celebrating aristocrats with the Lutheran anthem, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."

The production was also a triumph for conductor Leon Botstein, who is also a festival co-director and the president of Bard College. After a slightly shaky start in Act I, Mr. Botstein capably balanced the grandeur and the intimacy of the score and fused its varied musical styles into a grand, architectural sweep. Chorus master James Bagwell did a magnificent job of molding the chorus of 50 into a powerful character in the drama, both as weighty, massed sound and as the battling, contrapuntal factions whose eternal differences are the tragic heart of the opera.

—Ms. Waleson writes about opera for the Journal.

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