



20 AOÛT -  
3 SEPTEMBRE  
MMXXIII

# MYTHIQUE!

FESTIVAL BERLIOZ

LA CÔTE-SAINT-ANDRÉ  
- ISÈRE

An impressive number of Berlioz Society members attended Mythical! - this summer's splendid Festival Berlioz - in the composer's birthplace of La Côte-Saint-André in deepest Dauphiné. The festival, fully recovered at last from the Covid epidemic, is thanks to artistic director Bruno Messina and his team now one of the leading musical events of its kind in France, a country otherwise abounding in summer festivals. M. Messina, a musician by training, took over a floundering Festival Berlioz in 2009; through imagination and brilliant organisation – coupled with generous support from the *département de l'Isère* (the local county administration) – the Festival Berlioz now attracts some of the biggest names in French and international orchestras, soloists and musicians of all kinds.

The main highlight of this year's event which involved some 30 concerts at various venues running for a fortnight in late August-early September was the performance – over two concerts - in the local Château - of Berlioz's masterpiece, the opera *Les Troyens* (The Trojans) by John Eliot Gardiner and his famed Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique & Monteverdi Choir. The first evening – Acts 1 & 11 – dubbed *La Prise de Troie* (The Capture of Troy) – sees the fall of Troy to Greeks concealed inside a Wooden Horse – a disaster of which the fateful Cassandre has serious forebodings; after a slow start, mezzo-soprano Alice Coote delivered a fine, solid, concentrated performance here, if not perhaps quite in the same epic league as other mezzos who have excelled in this challenging part in recent years, notably Anna-Caterina Antonacci (Covent Garden 2012) and Marie-Nicole Lemieux (Strasbourg 2017) but electrifying in its own way. In the strong cast, baritone Lionel Lhote (Chorèbe), bass-baritone Ashley Riches (Panthée), tenor Laurence Kilsby (Iopas/Hylas) and bass William Thomas (Priam/Narbal) deserve particular mention while Michael Spyres, the quite extraordinary American tenor, sang the key male role of Énée (Aeneas), the Trojan prince, whose destiny it was to leave Troy to found Rome. Acts 11, 1V & V – *Les Troyens à Carthage* - take Aeneas to Carthage where he falls in love with the queen – Didon (Dido) – sung by the excellent Irish mezzo Paula Murrihy – a short-lived affair as the fates called Aeneas on to Italy. Murrihy was especially moving in Didon's final valedictory aria before facing suicide and the pyre “Adieu, fière cité”, her broken-hearted, bitter denunciation of her parting lover Énée. and her prediction that Hannibal would one day avenge her demise; Anna, Didon's sister and confidante, was sympathetically rendered by Scottish mezzo Beth Taylor. It must also be noted that the Monteverdi Choir performed near perfection, their articulation in French faultless, distinct and clear throughout, matching the outstanding performance of the orchestra under Gardiner – and later – his assistant, the Portuguese conductor Dinis Sousa.

On a far from positive side, it must be reported that the final three acts of the opera had to be directed on the second evening by the (absolutely first class) Sousa after an incident in which Gardiner (aged 80 now and apparently suffering from the extreme heatwave which engulfed south-east France) allegedly punched William Thomas because he left the podium in the wrong direction at the final call of the concert. Bruno Messina said in a statement that he was “devastated by the incident”, while Gardiner said he “deeply regretted” losing his “temper” and announced his withdrawal from the *Les Troyens* project which continued on its triumphal way to Salzburg, Versailles, Berlin and the BBC Proms in London under the baton of Sousa.

The following evening saw French conductor Jérémie Rhorer’s Cercle de l’Harmonie perform Berlioz’s second symphony *Harold en Italie*, an impressionistic work for viola and orchestra based on Byron’s *Childe Harold*, with vibrant *Marche des pèlerins* (Pilgrims’ March), colourful *Sérénade d’un montagnard des Abruzzes* (reflecting the local *pifferari* music he must have heard during his frequent wanderings in the Abruzzi mountains during his stay in Rome), and a flamboyant final *Orgie des brigands*; Paul Zientara was the viola soloist. Bizet’s delightful, rarely heard, Schubertian Symphony in C, composed when the composer was a mere 17 and not discovered until the 1930s – full of charm and melodies pointing to his future production - concluded the evening.

*La Damnation de Faust*, a légende dramatique in four parts – not an opera – is one of Berlioz’s finest pieces, perhaps most popular in France, and it was very fitting that Swiss maestro Charles Dutoit, long considered a specialist in this vast work, a mixture of symphony, oratorio and song for soloists, huge orchestral and choral forces and overflowing with great tunes, should conduct it at the festival, with the fine Suisse Romande Orchestra. Inspired by Goethe, the plot centres on the frustrated student Faust and his pact with Méphistophélès (the devil) to find happiness and love (with Marguerite), a manoeuvre which ends in his eternal banishment to hell. Under the riveting direction of an agile Dutoit (now aged 87 and totally in control down to every detail), this concert was a triumph with tenor Marc Laho a convincing Faust, bass John Relyea a suitably evil Méphistophélès, bass-baritone Edwin Crossley-Mercer as Brander and the matchless mezzo Stéphanie d’Oustrac (great niece of Poulenc) as Marguerite, a performance of infinite nuance and sensitivity; the choirs, led by the Choeur de Radio France and Les Petits Chanteurs de Lyon, were superb.

Also at the Château, a Homage to Pauline Viardot concert saw an initially rather nervous Marina Viotti, the otherwise brilliant Swiss-French mezzo-soprano, quickly settle down to sing extracts from works by Gluck, Rossini, Donizetti, Berlioz, Massenet and Gounod relating to Pauline Viardot (1821-1910), the brilliant French diva, composer and society figure who worked with Berlioz; dressed in shocking pink attire - Viotti – a name to watch – was accompanied by the impressive Les Talens Lyriques under the strict direction of Christophe Rousset.



Of the many exciting recitals held in the local church where Berlioz was baptised, several of them by talented young up-and-coming musicians, much enjoyment was had to hear 33-year-old Benjamin Grosvenor play Chopin, Liszt and Ravel – a powerful pianist, while at the Musée Hector Berlioz in the composer’s actual birthplace in town, a timely *Enfer & damnation* exhibition on *La Damnation de Faust* was staged (running until end-2023).

**Christopher Follett**

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