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## Madrid, ESP: Das Liebesverbot

2016-02-23

☆☆☆☆☆

by **Richard Wagner**, directed by **Kasper Holten**

**Teatro Real, Madrid, ESP**

**February 19, 22, 25, 27, 28, March 1, 3, 4, 2016**

Chorus: "Wir wollen gnäd'ger sein als du!"

The Teatro Real of Madrid, the Royal Opera Covent Garden and the Teatro Colón of Buenos Aires have teamed up to produce a major rarity to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death. It is a production of Richard Wagner's first-ever produced opera, *Das Liebesverbot* ("The Ban on Love") from 1836, with a libretto by Wagner based on Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. That the evening comes off largely as a success is due entirely to the passionate conducting of Ivor Bolton and the committed singing of the cast. Kasper Holten's stage direction is a mistake from start to finish and shows little understanding of Shakespeare's play or of Wagner's adaptation of it.

One reason *Das Liebesverbot* is so seldom performed is that it had one of the most disastrous premieres in opera. The opening itself conducted by the 23-year-old, then-unknown composer was poorly attended, a lead singer forgot the words and the opera had to be cancelled before the second performance never to be staged again in Wagner's lifetime. Another reason for its neglect is that the work very obviously does not sound like the Wagner people know from *Der fliegende Holländer* (1843) onward. For people who want Wagner to sound like Wagner, this would be a problem, but for others it is fascinating to hear what Wagner sounded like before he found his voice. The dominance of Italian and French opera is surprising whereas the influence of Carl Maria von Weber is more expected.

Given how much a play by Shakespeare has to be cut and condensed to become an opera libretto, Wagner succeeds in creating a version that is eminently stage-worthy and truer to the original than one might suppose. He shifts the action from Shakespeare's Vienna to Palermo, Sicily, in the 16th century. Shakespeare's Duke Vincentio is not the chief power in the city but the absent King of Germany. His representative is the German Friedrich, thus taking the place of Angelo in Shakespeare. Contrary to what one expects from Wagner, these changes make the story deliberately anti-German. In Act 1 the Chorus sings about Friedrich "Der deutsche Narr, auf, lacht ihn aus, / das soll die ganze Antwort sein; / schickt ihn in seinen Schnee nach Haus, / dort laßt ihn keusch und nüchtern sein" ("The German fool, just ridicule him, that is the only answer; send him back home to his snow and let him be chaste and sober there"). Wagner turns Shakespeare's play into a satire of a strict and austere ruler attempting to curb the natural desires of a fun-loving and exuberant people.

Like Angelo in Shakespeare, Friedrich has to impose someone else's rules on the populace, though still rules he agrees with. Sex itself is condemned and Claudio, as in *Measure for Measure*, is to be made an example. As in Shakespeare, Claudio's friend Luzio ("Lucio" in Shakespeare) convinces Claudio's sister Isabella, a novice in a cloister, to plead with Friedrich for Claudio's life. Unlike Shakespeare, Mariana is introduced right from the start. Wagner makes her Friedrich's wife whom he abandoned and Isabella goes to her first meeting with Friedrich armed with this knowledge. When Friedrich agrees to free Claudio if Isabella will sleep with him, Isabella herself thinks of the bed-trick of substituting Mariana to reveal Friedrich's hypocrisy. The greatest injury Wagner does to Shakespeare is to have Isabella fall in love with Luzio, thus drawing her rather too easily back into the sinful world that one supposes she hoped to leave behind by entering the cloister.

As would become standard in later German operetta, Wagner pairs the serious conflict of Friedrich and Isabella with the comic conflict of Friedrich's Chief of Police Brighella and Isabella's former maid, now a prostitute, Dorella. Brighella is Wagner's expanded version of Shakespeare's Elbow and Dorella is a version of Lucio's future wife Kate Keepdown, who never appears in the play. Rather than Mistress Overdone running a brothel as in Shakespeare, Wagner has Danieli running a wine bar where both Dorella and his enforcer Pontio Pilato (replacing Shakespeare's Pompey) are employed.

*Das Liebesverbot* is often criticized as a mishmash of Italian, French and German opera, but under conductor Ivor Bolton's baton it did not appear like a mishmash at all. Instead, Bolton made it clear that Wagner associated the various operatic traditions with various types of characters. Thus, the music for the Palermo populace unsurprisingly recalled the wilder music of Donizetti and is not that different from music that characterizes the corrupt court of the Duke in Verdi's *Rigoletto* (1851). The lower class characters like Brighella and Dorella also sing in the Italianate style. When the comedy turns toward satire the music turns toward France and begins to anticipate the style of Jacques Offenbach.

For nobler characters like Isabella, Claudio, Mariana and, importantly, Friedrich, Wagner's music harks back clearly to German Romantic opera. Bolton linked Isabella's ardent, high-lying arias back to Weber's Agathe in *Der Freischütz* (1821) and, when Isabella's fervour pushed her into more ecstatic realms, Bolton linked her forward to Senta in *Der fliegende Holländer* and Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser* (1845). What is especially fascinating is how Wagner does not treat Friedrich's inward struggle between duty and desire as comic at all. Though the role is written for a baritone, Friedrich provides foretastes of such tortured

heroes as the Dutchman himself and of Tannhäuser, who, after all, begins his opera in the clutches of Venus herself. Friedrich's central debate with himself in Act 2, "So spät, und noch kein Brief von Isabella?", becomes the most traditionally Wagnerian aria of the opera.

Bolton's insight into Wagner's score reveals that Wagner was already at the outset of his career associating certain styles of music with certain themes and types of characters. This kind of typing of music to reflect meaning, of course, is a step towards the creation of *Leitmotifs*. *Das Liebesverbot* even uses a full-blown *Leitmotif* related to impending doom which, as in Wagner's later work is introduced by the brass.



The great pity of this production is that Bolton's insights into the nature of Wagner's musical language should be obscured by the insensitive, anything-for-a-joke direction of Kasper Holten. Things get off to a bad start right from the overture when a portrait of the young Wagner is projected on a drop in front of the set. As the music plays, we discover the portrait is really an animation which has Wagner raising his eyebrows, winking, grimacing and nodding along with the music. This sets the tone for the entire production where Bolton and the orchestra try to present the opera in the best light, while Holten does not.

The overture completed, the drop rises to reveal Steffen Aarving's unattractive set. For unknown reasons he has decided that Wagner's Palermo looks like one of M.C. Escher's architectural paradoxes in three dimensions. The main flaw with this concept is that the reason why Escher's graphics succeed as paradoxes is because they are in two dimensions, not three. Aarving has costumed the people of Palermo in modern dress with allusions to the Renaissance. In a vain attempt to be up to date, Holten has Friedrich announce "the ban on love" (i.e., sex, liquor, drugs and the Carnival) via Twitter with a projections of the iPhone announcement on either side of the Palermo set.

Holten seems to have no notion of the dark nature of Shakespeare's play or of the ways that Wagner has preserved it in his opera. Shakespeare's play may be classed as a comedy, but it treats the themes of misuse of power and Puritanic opposition to natural desire seriously. Even its supposedly happy ending is not all that happy.

Holten ignores the fact that Wagner has given Friedrich and Isabella comic

parallels so that the scenes between the high-born characters can retain their seriousness. Holten shows us how Brighella (Ante Jerkunica) very comically succumbs to the sultry charms of Dorella (María Hinojosa), but doesn't realize that the following scene between Friedrich and Isabella is meant to contrast with it. Wagner means to have two contrasting scenes on the same theme, not the same scene twice. One feels sorry for Christopher Maltman as Friedrich, whom Holten repeated has polishing his glasses so low down on his robe that it looks like he's masturbating. Luckily, Manuela Uhl's radiant Isabella remains untouched at least in this scene by Holten's search for cheap jokes.

Uhl is not so lucky in a couple of Holten's more foolish scenes. We first meet Isabella and Mariana (Maria Miró) in their shared cell singing a beautiful Weber-like duet in prayer. Holten has decided that Mariana is given to binge-eating to assuage her grief over Friedrich's abandoning her. Therefore, during the duet, Uhl has to keep removing a bag of potato chips from Miró, who then sneaks them back for munching. First of all, why distract us from the singing? Second, why trivialize Mariana's grief? And third, where does Mariana get her junk food in the convent?



Worse is the scene in the opera corresponding to Shakespeare's Act 3, Scene 1, when Isabella visits Claudio (Ilker Arcayürek) in prison to tell him she will not give up her virginity to save him. Holten decides that this confrontation of utmost importance should be sung via cellphone. In no way does two people singing into cellphones begin to equal the drama of a face-to-face confrontation, and one that would make more sense since Holten shows us that Isabella does know how to use a cellphone. (Besides, how is it that Claudio has one in prison?) As if this were not distracting enough, Holten has Claudio's cell suspended over the stage so that when Claudio mistakenly does a celebratory dance, the whole cell sways back and forth.

Another example of Holten's wilful substitution for his own childish sense of comedy for the more sublime comedy in Shakespeare and Wagner is Holten's staging of Friedrich's aria "So spät, und noch kein Brief von Isabella?", the most serious and most traditionally Wagnerian in the opera. Holten has Friedrich address his distress at the plight of his soul to his teddy bear that he sleeps with at night.

Finally, in Wagner after the Palermitani stage a rebellion against the ban, Friedrich is exposed as a hypocrite and the ban rescinded, we're told the German King is arriving. In Holten's version the King is Angela Merkel, a man

in drag wearing a plastic Merkel mask, and she and her staff shower the populace with euros. As with other items thrown at the opera at random from Holten's ragbag of ideas, this makes no sense. If Merkel ordered Friedrich to enforce austerity and he fails, why are the Germans rewarding Palermo's disobedience?

At least the singing of most of the cast is superlative. Despite being characterized as a second Professor Unrat out of Heinrich Mann and being burdened with all sort of business to make Friedrich look as stupid as possible, Maltman gives a glorious vocal performance. Manuela Uhl makes the taxing role of Isabella seem effortless as she is required to extend her rich voice higher and higher into her upper register. Maria Miró's bright soprano provided a fine contrast with Uhl's darker hued voice and she seems justifiably uncomfortable with the foolish stage directions she had been given. Ante Jerkunica has a strong baritone and a fine sense of comedy that would make him an ideal Figaro. On the other hand, María Hinojosa's Dorella, Peter Lodahl's Luzio and Ilker Arcayürek's Claudio all had fine voices but ones that did not match the other principals in strength and did not always cut through Wagner's sometimes heavy orchestration.

The new production of *Das Liebesverbot* is thus both a joy and a frustration. It is a joy because Ivor Bolton's obvious insight and enthusiasm for the opera galvanized both the Coro y Orquesta Titulares del Teatro Real and the soloists to produce a musically and dramatically impressive performance that swept away conventional dismissive notions of the work. In Bolton's hands the opera turns out to be an eminently enjoyable and dramatically effective adaptation of a continually timely play by Shakespeare that does not deserve its obscurity whether it does or doesn't sound like later Wagner. The production is also a frustration because Kasper Holten seems intent on undermining through his simplistic, muddleheaded direction all the good will Bolton generates for the work. If only the three opera companies involved could have chosen a director with a greater knowledge of the work and of Bolton's insights, then *Das Liebesverbot* would stand a better chance of convincing people of its virtues.

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Note: This review is a *Stage Door* exclusive.

Photos: (from top) Manuela Uhl as Isabella and Christopher Maltman as Friedrich; Palermo before the ban; Christopher Maltman at desk and Manuela Uhl in white. ©2016 Javier del Real.

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