

Knowledge and Instinct: Semyon Bychkov on Verdi's Don Carlo [The Royal Opera, 15 September-1 October 2009]

Written by Mansel Stimpson

Mansel Stimpson talks to the Russian conductor as he prepares to conduct Don Carlo at Covent Garden...



As his website attests, Semyon Bychkov's life is one rich in incident. To win a major conducting competition, the Rachmaninov, by the age of twenty-one would be sufficient in itself to mark out his early life as something out of the ordinary. However, a year later, in 1974, this young man from Leningrad would emigrate to America to escape the constraints of Russian life at that time and in 1983 he would become an American citizen. By then he had built a career in the States, but when he started to record for Philips his first three recordings were with the Berlin Philharmonic. The next ensemble to feature prominently in his life was Orchestre de Paris of which he was music director from 1989 to 1998 and the 'French connection' continued with his marriage to the pianist Marielle Labèque. Hardly less significant is Cologne where, since 1997, he has been chief conductor of an orchestra that he has transformed, the WDR Sinfonieorchester.

Bringing his story up-to-date, we find Semyon Bychkov in London where I meet him at Covent Garden where last season he conducted *Lohengrin*. Now he returns for the first revival of Nicholas Hytner's production of Verdi's *Don Carlo*. His engagements for the rest of the year tell its own story: London and Cologne apart, you will find him in Berlin, Turin, Amsterdam, Dortmund, Munich and San Francisco.

Bychkov has much to say about *Don Carlo*. Verdi's opera is one with an unusual history. It started out as a French-language work in 1867, was subjected to substantial cuts and changes, and by 1884 was being performed in Italian in a version that eliminated the original first Act. Ultimately, however, for Modena in 1886, Verdi sanctioned further changes which included the restoration of the Act which had been removed. It is this five-Act Italian version that is being presented at Covent Garden, so I start off by asking Semyon if this form of the opera is the one that he likes best.

"All the versions are legitimate, but I have to say that I like very much the five-Act form with its opening scene in Fontainebleau, and that's because it shows us this island of happiness found by the hero and heroine which they will never experience again. To have that makes everything that comes afterwards even more stark and tragic, and this drama is the more heartbreaking when the opera is presented in this form. That is because you no longer know of their experience at that time merely by being told of it: by seeing it you have actually been part of it. It's true that this first Act is not derived directly from Schiller's verse-drama, but so too the real *Don Carlo* was not like the personage we have here and Verdi quite validly gave us something that is all his own."



Semyon's endorsement of the opening Act stresses the personal side of the plot, the story that begins when the French princess Elizabeth of Valois, having been promised in marriage to Don Carlos the son of the Spanish king Philip II, is delighted on meeting him to find that it is by chance a true love match. She is then devastated when she learns that the treaty arrangements between the two countries have been altered and that she is now to marry not Don Carlos but his father. The tragedy in their lives stems from this and from Elizabeth's acceptance of her fate and her determination to be faithful to Philip despite her feelings for his son which he comes to suspect. But even this description shows the State's role in this story and wider social, political and religious issues are crucial to this work. In that respect, *Don Carlo* recalls but goes beyond Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra* and I ask Semyon what, length apart, distinguishes this piece from Verdi's other operas.



"I think that what is special here lies in the fact that we see how the State and the Church are completely interdependent and intertwined. The affairs of state affect personal destinies in a way that makes the work remarkably complex: it's at one and the same time a great political drama and no less intensely a personal drama of individuals. If you think of *La traviata*, which I love deeply, there you have one element: that of personal tragedy. But here you have a tragedy that exists on every imaginable level. It contains the whole universe, the whole of human

existence both individual and collective. Consequently we are dealing with an exceptional richness of subject-matter, all of which we must address."

The psychological depth of this work shows just how far Verdi succeeded in this ambitious project and I mention to Semyon that in my own experience the opera is at its greatest in Act Four. It's here that for the first time we are invited to see things from the viewpoint of Philip II whose own position is far more agonised than we might have guessed, and in what is a master stroke this complex portrait is then followed by the introduction of the most relentless and terrifying figure in the opera, the Grand Inquisitor. Does Semyon too regard this Act as the highlight?

"I agree with what you say about the characters, but I would not necessarily categorise that Act as the deepest. Look at the complete opera and you can find greatness in any part of it, the Second Act, for example, or the Fontainebleau scene, or indeed that final section starting with Elizabeth's aria and going on to her last duet with Carlos: I don't see any of that as less deep. But it's true that with Philip we have this full dimension of his personage and he's trapped. In their own way, all of the characters are trapped, but he is trapped more completely than anybody else. That's because he has the absolute power of a ruler and they don't, and yet he discovers that this power of his isn't truly absolute after all because there is a power that is greater than his. That's the power of the Church to which he has to give in. So he's a trapped animal and that's powerful stuff, but think too of the depth of feeling in the last Act over the issue of Carlos putting his duty to help the people of Flanders before his love for Elizabeth. The fact is that in listening to this opera we don't have to measure things on a scale: it's all so integrated."

When Benjamin Britten wrote *Gloriana* he was following Verdi's example in seeking to amalgamate personal and State concerns and in this respect the second scene of Act Three of *Don Carlo* is something of a miracle. Here we have



a most cunning blend, for it offers the spectacle of a procession, savage social comment (this is the occasion of an *auto-da-fé*) and another step in the personal drama as Don Carlos is betrayed by his friend Rodrigo. It's so persuasive, this scene, that if done well it seems to play itself, but is that really the case? "Well, let's say that Verdi takes care of it, but we have to take care of Verdi. It's a challenge but nothing is there by accident. Interestingly enough, when you study Verdi's metronome marks in the score, some of them are absolutely startling. Most of the time they are quicker than what one is accustomed to hearing, but some are much slower. There are probably just two occasions in the entire opera when I go with my own instinct because I cannot bring myself to understand the marking. For the rest, though, everything is justified both by the dramatic sense and by the flow of the music. So, yes, in a way Verdi does it all, but the reading of it, the deciphering of it, is the challenge: to bring all these elements together so that it all sounds inevitable. Getting that sense of inevitability is the most difficult thing to achieve – and it has to be inevitability and not predictability, there's a huge difference between the two."

There's no doubt as to who the villain in this opera is, for the Grand Inquisitor is a fearsome figure – and more so, not less, because he happens to be blind. But the attitude that we are invited to take to religion itself is less clear-cut. The scene of the *auto-da-fé* briefly features a voice from heaven inviting the souls of the dying to fly up and enjoy the peace of the Lord, but as the pyre is lit, it is voiced in questioning counterpoint. Furthermore, where Beethoven's *Fidelio* recognises the horrors that a State can perpetrate but allows us to believe in the ultimate triumph of the oppressed, here the hopes of Carlos to aid the Flemish people are quashed, and in the last moments of the opera Carlos is led into a cloister by a friar identified with his late grandfather, the emperor Charles V, adds only further questions. So what stance on religion do we have here?



"I have my personal views on religion. But everybody should be free to believe in whatever they believe so long as others are not hurt by it. In any case, there's a difference between religion and religious institutions and also between spirituality, something which allows for constant rejuvenation of thought and feeling, and dogma. The scene showing the *auto-da-fé* poses the same question that Jews ask every day: if God exists, how could He allow the Holocaust? To that there is no answer. What is certain is that we can recognise what we have in the Grand

Inquisitor because we know exactly where such figures have led in the history of humanity. Elsewhere there's ambiguity in this work. How did Verdi feel about it? Well, we know that he would accompany his wife to church for a Sunday service, but we know also that he himself would wait outside. There must have been some reason."

In passing we touch on Act Two and the Spanish number from Princess Eboli whose own feelings for Carlos lead her to betray him when she discovers that he is in love with Elizabeth. Semyon points out how cleverly the words of this appealing song innocently provide a precursor for what will happen later in the opera, and I ask him about the work involved in shaping the opera as a whole: is what is involved the same as when preparing a symphony? "The issue is always the same to the extent that either way you are building a cathedral. The process is always one that develops. When you are first learning a piece, you try to get the whole story. It's like reading a book: you read it from beginning to end and then reread it, and this time you will notice further details. Essentially it's the same for a symphony or an opera, for a work lasting thirty minutes or five hours. It's again that sense of inevitability that you are after: each note has to happen when it is meant to happen, not before and not after, and the next note has to be determined by the one that precedes it. And all this has to take place in the character of the music, so it's a huge challenge and the greater the score the more elements there are that have to find their place and live together."

How much of this comes from instinct and how much from conscious knowledge? "Instinct is decisive for a young conductor starting out, but then in the succeeding years you come to accumulate knowledge: knowledge is experience. It grows like a snowball because you absorb and absorb and that is what turns you into what you become. I am almost fifty-seven and I have to say that growing older is a beautiful and amazing thing. In my own case I have had the opportunity to live with Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony since the age of seventeen, and it's so much better to have lived with it for forty years or so. Furthermore, for all music a moment arrives when it has become so much a part of you that you feel free with it. That's when the music unfolds and begins to pour out of you, seemingly by itself. That's the point at which instinct comes back into play, and it is instinct that makes you do something different that you had never done before but which proves equally convincing."

My final question to Semyon Bychkov takes us back to this production of *Don Carlo* since I wonder if he feels in any way constricted by the fact that he is newly entering a production already acclaimed and with several artists – Marina Poplavskaya, Simon Keenlyside and Ferruccio Furlanetto among them – reprising their roles. "When you have colleagues who have lived with this work and who have themselves absorbed it and made it part of them, then that is all gain. Even when a production is established and is a good one, as is the case here, it is always a case of changes coming about with a fresh focus on things, and that is what is expected of us. It is our way of life and we are all equally obsessed. That's what happens when you work with artists like Furlanetto, our Philip II, and John Tomlinson, our Inquisitor. And then I see the young Poplavskaya burning with desire to identify herself even more closely with the music and the text. All these things provide the beauty in working on a production like this."
