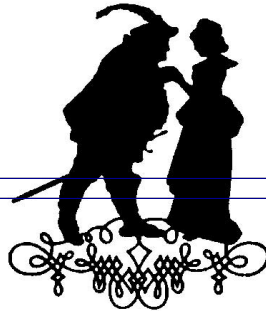


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



Grétry's *Guillaume Tell* Charms in Liège The Opéra Royal de Wallonie, June 2013

The year 2013 marks special anniversaries for many composers – most prominently, it represents the bicentennial of the birth of the two who most shaped the landscape of Romantic opera, Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner. Opera houses around the world are celebrating enthusiastically. Likewise, opera houses in many countries are celebrating the centennial of the birth of the preeminent English composer of the twentieth century, Benjamin Britten.

But it is the enterprising Opéra Royal de Wallonie in Liège, Belgium, that is properly paying homage to its native son, French composer André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry. Born in Liège in the waning days of the Baroque era (1741), he died in 1813, the year Verdi and Wagner were born, just as the Romantic era was burgeoning. The Liège opera company, with its newly renovated house, not only marked the occasion of this bicentennial landmark with a charming production of his 1791 *opéra comique*, *Guillaume Tell*, but also will continue the celebration in the fall of 2013 with numerous additional concert performances of works by Grétry.

Guillaume Tell was an especially apt choice not only to feature a delightful and rarely performed *opéra comique* by Grétry, but



The final celebratory scene from *Guillaume Tell*

Photo: Jacques Croisier

also to showcase the beautifully renovated Théâtre Royal de Liège, with its acoustical improvements, expanded storage area and modernized stage machinery. The opera itself had its premiere in Paris at the Comédie-Italienne (Salle Favart) on April 9, 1791. Grétry's many *opéra comiques* (and recitative comedies for the Paris Opera) had enjoyed unparalleled success in the two decades leading up to the French Revolution. Indeed, in choosing to write an opera based on the play

Guillaume Tell by Antonie-Marin Lemierre, revived in Grétry's time in Paris with great success, he was clearly trying to move from being a court composer to one acceptable to the Revolution's supporters, with a subject heralding the revolutionary principals of liberation from tyranny and celebration of freedom.

Grétry of course would have no idea that within a year of the premiere, Mozart would die (on December 5, 1792) or that on February 29, 1792, a composer named Gioachino Rossini would be born, a composer who would eventually close his illustrious career with an opera of the same title (in this case based on Schiller's play of 1804), a grand opera that would eclipse Grétry's once immensely popular *opéra comique*. But this fact should not diminish our delight in Grétry's charming piece. Indeed, as esteemed philosopher and writer Susanne Langer writes of Schiller's *Tell* (a comment that equally applies to Grétry's work), "Tell appears as an exemplary personage in the beginning of the play, as citizen, husband, father, friend and patriot; when an extreme political and social crisis develops, he rises to the occasion, overcomes the enemy, frees his country, and returns to the peace, dignity and harmonious joy of his home. The balance of life is restored."

Both Mozart and Rossini were masters of a comic style that expressed both humor and vitality. And so was Grétry, although it was the fresh, simple and homey quality of Grétry's music that the Liège production, led by the venerable Claudio Scimone, so admirably captured. The charm and innocence of the work was evident from the first notes of the overture, which describes the sunrise over the Swiss valley. On a solo clarinet, a *ranz des vaches* echoes over the stage, empty except for a background scene of distant mountains. Simple baroque-style scenery slides in from the sides and then the rear of the stage, leaving the snow-capped Alps still visible in the back. The



Anne-Catherine Gillet as Madame Tell, Marc Laho as Tell, and Natacha Kowalski as their son Photo: Jacques Croisier

effect is simple but magical, indeed endearing, as the colorful painted flats of trees, hills and buildings emerge.

During the opera various other painted flats slide onto the stage. At various points, rocks, castles, grazing cows, a farmer milking, an alpine horn appear – all sustaining the naiveté and homey good feelings of the work. Occasionally, a real herding dog (well trained indeed) mingles calmly with the crowd. In contrast, a handsome live horse at one point steals the scene.



Lionel Lhote as the villain, Gessler, on his handsome live steed Photo: Jacques Croisier

At the climax of the action, when the Swiss set ablaze the castle of the oppressive Austrian Governor, Gessler, we see a young Swiss man (Melktal's son) cranking machinery that triggers an animated battle of puppets representing the rebels against the forces of the evil governor. In stilted puppet fashion, the governor himself soon appears, shot through with an arrow by Tell. The Austrians are defeated; peace and liberty return to the canton.

Missing at the rather perfunctory choral close, if one knows Rossini, is the glorious hymn to nature and liberty, with the myriad *ranz des vaches* entering quietly in the horns, making his final scene one of most uplifting moments in all opera. But to compare in this way is to miss both the delights of Grétry's score, with its simple tuneful melodies and spoken dialogue, and the charm of the Liège production, so faithful to the spirit of this score with its minute attention to illustrative details. With some irony, however, Rossini is not that far away. Maestro Scimone wrote a brief essay in the Liège program book documenting his hypothesis that indeed Rossini must certainly have heard Grétry's opening *ranz des vaches*, a somewhat generic traditional Swiss herdsman's melody, and then developed the tune as a quasi leitmotif in his own more expansive and romantic opera of 1828.

Be that as it may, Maestro Scimone engendered much expressive nuance of the French text, with the words of both dialogue and song pronounced in idiomatic French and clearly projected, bringing also a refined elegance to the often Italianate melodies of Grétry's richly textured score. A fine and convincing cast supported him. Especially engaging were tenor Marc Laho as Guillaume Tell and baritone Lionel Lhote as his antagonist, Gessler. The women were led effectively by the rich-toned soprano Anne-Catherine Gillet as Mrs. Tell, Liesbeth Devos as Mary, and the expressive young soprano Natacha Kowalski as Tell's son. Most effective too, was the comically exaggerated dialogue that dovetailed with the often-brief musical numbers.

Two years ago, in the spring of 2011, I had the good fortune attend a performance of a Donizetti comic double bill, *Rita* and *Il Campanello di Notte*, in Liège. During the restoration of the opera house, performances took place in Outremeuse, in an attractive tent called the Palais Opéra de Liège. It was thus a treat to attend this performance of *Guillaume Tell* in the elegant, newly renovated opera house itself. It was also a delight to encounter once again not only the same conductor, the distinguished Claudio Scimone, but the same production team, led by director Stefano Mazzonis di Pralafra (the General and Artistic Director of the Opéra Royal de Wallonie) and including set and costume designers Jean-Guy Lecat and Fernand Ruiz. Noteworthy again was the colorful authenticity of his tradition-based production, with its simple painted flats and old-fashioned machinery. This is no small point, since a stated objective of Opéra Royal de Wallonie is to bring opera productions to a diverse audience, especially young people. And Grétry's *Guillaume Tell* is indeed the perfect vehicle for the childlike wonder that the production evoked.

As is common today, this three act opera was performed in just two acts. Especially effective and entertaining, however, was the way in which this production team broke the opera for intermission. Grétry's second act shows a colorful square in a market town where in the center Gessler's cap is displayed on a pike, or in this production on what rather looks like a large striped Maypole. In the most famous scene in the drama, Tell

refuses to bow before the cap as Gessler required. As punishment for his disrespect, Gessler orders Tell to shoot an apple from his son's head.

In this production, with Tell's bow drawn, the curtain suddenly falls. After intermission, the curtain rises to reveal the scene, right where we left it. Tell releases the arrow, which glides in slow motion on a guide-wire through the air to split the apple. The chorus celebrates joyfully. This moment caught the essence and the artifice of this buoyant *opéra comique*, which is, after all, not intended to be taken too seriously. The *tinta* should remain, as it did in this production, tellingly fresh, naïve, and enchanting, if occasionally a touch sentimental. Indeed the mechanics of the traditional production become a vital part of the action itself, and the audience laughed and cheered with the chorus at the moment of victory for Tell. It was all such a delightful afternoon at the opera... a bit like being back in Paris in the year Mozart died and Rossini was born.

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Marc Laho as William Tell prepares to shoot the apple from his son's head Photo: Jacques Croisier