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Wagner's Dream Comes True

By **GEORGE LOOMIS**

VERSAILLES, France — For once “The Flying Dutchman” was programmed the way Wagner conceived it: on a bill with something else. The opera was devised as a curtain raiser to a ballet at the Paris Opéra, but Wagner never got the hoped-for commission and sold his scenario to the theater for 500 francs. Enter Pierre-Louis Dietsch, an otherwise forgotten French composer whose superior connections with the Opéra management — he was chorus master there — won him the job. In November 1842, two months before “The Flying Dutchman” finally premiered in Dresden, “Le Vaisseau Fantôme” (The Phantom Ship) took to the stage of the Opéra in an evening that also included ballet.

The conductor Marc Minkowski, apparently regarding each opera as a work in search of a companion, had the inspired idea to pair the two in concert performances with his period-instrument orchestra Les Musiciens du Louvre Grenoble at Opéra Royal in the Château de Versailles. The Wagner-sized evening lasted nearly five hours, including a 40-minute refreshment break. For the record, Dietsch’s opera was the shorter by about 20 minutes.

In selling his scenario Wagner struck a handsome deal for himself, given that his opera was allowed to be produced elsewhere and the Dutchman legend had already been treated by numerous writers, including Heinrich Heine and Sir Walter Scott. In broad outline, Dietsch’s opera corresponds to Wagner’s: A young woman, urged on by her financially-motivated father, forsakes her local lover and follows her passion for a ship’s captain condemned to traverse the seas in perpetuity. Her self-sacrificial death releases him from his fate, and the two are united in death, as an apotheosis in the heavens reveals.

But “Vaisseau Fantôme” also draws on other sources. Like “Dutchman” it has a tenor named Eric, but the young woman Minna (no relation to Wagner’s then wife) is initially in love with Magnus (a sailor not a hunter), whose father served as pilot for the condemned captain, known as Troïl, and, following a dispute, was thrown overboard by the latter, but not before inflicting on Troïl’s hand a wound that will not heal (shades of “Parsifal”). Rejected by Minna, Magnus enters a monastery and, as fate would have it, presides in his priestly capacity at the wedding of Minna and Troïl (whose identity is known only by Minna). As rings are exchanged, Magnus spots the wound, general uproar ensues and Minna throws herself into the sea.

It makes you appreciate Wagner's streamlined plot, which allows all the essential dramatic points to be made without the clutter about the pilot and the wounded hand. Musically, the gulf between the operas is even greater, but Dietsch's opera has its rewards, including several melodically appealing, dramatically apt numbers. Berlioz found the work excessively solemn, but at least Dietsch made an effort to characterize Troil as someone out of the ordinary. Formally conventional, most musical numbers conclude with a cabaletta or similar quick movement. Dietsch's music, while generic, is pleasant to hear.

Yet with the first turbulent bars of the "Dutchman" overture, it was as if Dietsch's well-crafted schooner of an opera were swamped in the wake of a vast ocean liner. Instantaneously, you sensed the depth of Wagner's dramatic vision and the superior musical vocabulary that transformed that vision into reality. Dietsch's routine approach to form heightened awareness that the same structural patterns were at work in "Dutchman," yet in a more flexible, less doctrinaire way. And, yes, there was a sense of organic unfolding absent from "Vaisseau Fantôme."

Mr. Minkowski performed "Dutchman" in the earliest extant version, which differs only in a few musical details from what we usually hear, but the setting is Scotland (Wagner shifted it to Norway in a late-hour decision during rehearsals for the premiere); accordingly, the names of certain characters are different. Both casts were strong, that for "Vaisseau Fantôme" consisting of voices of a more lyrical type than were heard in "Dutchman," which largely conformed to today's Wagnerian norm.

Sally Matthews's velvety soprano and polished delivery brought Minna to life, not least in her big solo scene that began with a prayer for Troil and concluded, following news of her father Barlow's safe return from the sea, with a bouncy cabaletta. The soprano Ingela Brimberg negotiated Senta's treacherous Ballad excitingly and endowed the emotionally charged heroine with generous, penetrating, if occasionally raw sounding, tone. As Barlow and as Donald (otherwise known as Daland) in "Dutchman," the basses Ugo Rabec and Mika Kares each sang with good-natured confidence, the latter with somewhat more tonal weight.

The baritone Russell Braun sang Troil with vocal warmth, nuanced phrasing and an air of mystery. In a gripping portrayal, Vincent Le Texier, also a baritone, plumbed the depth of the Dutchman's anguish and sang with haunting, richly resonant tone. Appearing in both operas, the sweet-voiced tenor Bernard Richter made a sympathetic figure of Magnus and sang Wagner's Steersman with uncommon beauty of sound. As Wagner's Georg (later known as Erik) Eric Cutler sang well but needed more seasoning in the role; he also sang ably as Dietsch's Eric.

Drawing on his expertise in French opera, Mr. Minkowski proved a strong advocate for “Vaisseau Fantôme,” but when the time came seemed eager to plunge into the Wagner. He led an exhilarating performance of the latter that put more emphasis on dramatic sweep than fineness of detail. The orchestra’s period instruments, while not flawless, were an asset in both operas but were especially arresting in the Wagner, with the rather abrasive string sound proving especially stimulating. Like “Dutchman,” “Vaisseau Fantôme” has significant choral content, including a choral confrontation in which Troïl’s crew scares off the locals. The Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir performed excellently.

This was a truly meaningful way to observe the Wagner bicentennial. Hearing Dietsch’s opera gave a vivid picture of the Parisian milieu that “Dutchman” grew out of, allowing one to experience Wagner’s genius from a new perspective. We are unlikely to hear “Vaisseau Fantôme” often, but it lives on in one respect. In France, Wagner’s opera is known not, as in English, by a title literally translated from “Der Fliegende Holländer,” but as “Le Vaisseau Fantôme.”

Le Vaisseau Fantôme and The Flying Dutchman *will be performed again at Vienna’s Konzerthaus on June 1.*