

Opera on CD

Der fliegende Holländer, Wagner

Ingela Brimberg (*Senta*), Helene Schneiderman (*Mary*), Eric Cutler (*Georg*), Bernard Richter (*Steuermann*), Yevgeny Nikitin (*Holländer*), Mika Kares (*Donald*)

Le Vaisseau fantôme, Dietsch

Sally Matthews (*Minna*), Bernard Richter (*Magnus*), Eric Cutler (*Erik*), Russell Braun (*Troil*), Ugo Rabec (*Barlow*), Mika Kares (*Schriften*), Eesti Filharmonia Kämmerchoor, Les Musiciens du Louvre Grenoble, c. Marc Minkowski. Naïve V5349 (four CDs)



Modern biographers have dismissed as self-dramatization Wagner's claim that Pierre-Louis Dietsch's *Le Vaisseau fantôme* (1842) was based on his own *Fliegende Holländer* scenario, which he had been forced to sell to the Paris Opéra in 1841. The article on Wagner in *New Grove* flatly asserts that Dietsch's librettists, Foucher and Révoil, drew primarily not on Wagner but on Captain Marryat's novel *The Phantom Ship* and Scott's *The Pirate*. Quite recently, though, Wagner's receipt surfaced in the Opéra accounts. And now Marc Minkowski's Naïve label has released a new double set: the first recording of *Le Vaisseau fantôme* alongside the original 1841 *Holländer*, as yet without the famous redemption

motive, and still set in the Orkneys. The results are revelatory.

Minkowski does his best for *Vaisseau fantôme*, casting it strongly and infusing it with jaunty vitality. Sally Matthews is a bright-voiced, touching heroine (here named Minna) to Russell Braun's 'Dutchman' (here Troil, a Norwegian), a dramatic baritone in quintessentially French style. They are well supported by Rabec's rascally Barlow (father) and Richter's Magnus (lover); Erik, sung by Eric Cutler, is here the Steersman's counterpart. Dietsch's score is, not unexpectedly, professional, polished and urbane, somewhere between Auber and Meyerbeer, with a touch of Donizetti and some conventional maritime nature-painting; but, as this suggests, one listens in vain for a really individual voice, let alone Wagner's primal energy.

There's any amount of that in Minkowski's *Holländer*, which is superlatively swift and exciting, outclassing his period-instrument rival Bruno Weil. Minkowski's instrumental colouring is much better judged, with warm string tone and some superb brass snarls and sinister fanfares. Yevgeny Nikitin is a black-voiced, bitterly emotive Dutchman, singing very good German. The Ballad's high pitch brings out an edge in Ingela Brimberg's keen soprano, but she's admirably passionate, and Mika Kares's Donald (the Daland role) sounds characterful, if rather young. This time, just to be confusing, Eric Cutler sings

Georg (the Erik role) to Richter's Steersman. The chorus is excellent in both.

Still more fascinating, though, is what *Vaisseau fantôme* reveals about its sources. The Minkowski set's booklet cites Marryat and Scott, and even Thomas Grey's detailed *Cambridge Opera Handbook* survey describes the Dietsch's resemblance to Wagner as 'exaggerated', allowing it to consist of only a few points. His summary lists, roughly, the heroine's ballad; the greedy father marrying off his daughter to the mysterious stranger; the choral clash between the two crews; the heroine's suicidal leap; and the mutual, skyborne apotheosis. Even this, one might think, is quite substantial. But when we encounter *Vaisseau fantôme* in actual performance, still more of Wagner stands out: particularly, the duet in which the heroine first affirms her love for her mortal suitor, Magnus/Erik, but then turns to thoughts of redeeming Troil/the Dutchman. In *Vaisseau fantôme* that extends into a solo, losing Wagner's emotional conflict, but it's the same sequence nevertheless. And as in Wagner, the tenor then describes her father's arrival with the mysterious stranger—though in Dietsch this becomes a narration, not a vision, and is delegated to the lesser Erik. Then, again as in Wagner, the father introduces the Dutchman with a *buffo* aria, which is flagrantly cynical in its French incarnation. In Dietsch this is followed by the clash of choruses that opens Wagner's Act 3; but then heroine and Troil meet and fall in love in a duet, corresponding to Wagner's in Act 2. Again as in Wagner, the father interrupts this to affirm the match, while Troil prays that she will be his redeemer. The closing events are substantially identical.

Of course there are differences in execution. Wagner's opening scene is only narrated; Magnus/Erik becomes the son of the Dutchman's murdered crewman. But Wagner's outline remains dominant throughout. Foucher and Révoil's libretto, in fact, reads rather as if somebody had clumsily attempted to reconstruct Wagner's libretto from memory.



Against this, what is there of Marryat? His novel, once as popular as its near-contemporary *Frankenstein*, is a supernatural farrago whose main character is the Dutchman's son, Philip Vanderdecken. The Dutchman himself barely features. Philip and his wife Adeline desperately roam the world, hindered by the diabolical Schriften, facing the Spanish Inquisition and supernatural menaces, in order to lift his father's curse by showing him a holy symbol. The resemblance to Wagner's plot is nil: no Dutchman on land, no visionary heroine, no trial of constancy, no rival, no self-redemption, none of the core features. If Marryat might have inspired anything, it's *Pirates of the Caribbean*. All Foucher and Révoil owe to Marryat is the name Schriften; the Dutchman as murderer (which may owe something to the story of Captain Kidd); and the title itself—minor changes, hard to account for.

And Scott's *The Pirate* doesn't concern the Dutchman at all. The heroine's name is Minna, and her landholder father, a secondary character, is Magnus Troil;

there's literally nothing else. The *Vaisseau fantôme* characters that bear those names are entirely Wagner's.

Vaisseau fantôme, then, is indeed Wagner's scenario—more, in fact, than could be really accounted for by the short sketch he submitted to the Opéra. A more likely source would be his longer German scenario, only fragments of which survive. Could it be, then, that Wagner did rather more work for his 500 francs than just the sketch? And could that perhaps explain why Foucher and Révoil went to the trouble of tacking on the Marryat title and the borrowed names—as window-dressing, to prevent Wagner making any further claims upon the piece?

If so, it would certainly add weight to Wagner's bitterness at the Opéra—as would frustration at seeing how clumsily and conventionally his ideas were rendered. At any rate, this splendid new recording now demonstrates that those ideas were not in the least bit Marryat's or Scott's, and that even the most confidently repeated biographical shibboleths can stand questioning. MICHAEL SCOTT ROHAN

