Emmanuel Chabrier – Le Roy Malgre Lui (2005)

1. Act I 2. Act II 3. Act III Minka - Magali Léger (s) Le duc de Fritelli - Laurent Naouri (br) Henri de Valois - Nicolas Rivenq (br) Le comte de Nangis - Yann Beuron (t) Laski - Franck Leguérinel (br) Alexina - Maryline Fallot (s) Le marquis de Villequier - Bertrand Chuberre (bs-br) Un soldat - Jacques Gomez (bs) Basile/Liancourt - Didier Roussel (t) Elbeuf - Brian Bruce (t) Maugiron - Paolo Stuppenengo (br) Le comte de Caylus - Charles Saillofest (br) Comédiens - Bruno Andrieux, Olivier Sferlazza, Jean-Benoît Terral Orchestre et Chœurs de l'Opéra de Lyon Evelino Pido – conductor Opéra National de Lyon 04.III.2005 Broadcast Radio 4 (NL) 07.V.2005

"I would rather have written Le Roi malgré lui than the Ring of the Nibelungen." So wrote Maurice Ravel of Emmanuel Chabrier's comic opera Le Roi malgré lui, or The Reluctant King. Chabrier's previous opera, Gwendoline (1885), to that time his most ambitious score, had been premiered in Brussels, Belgium, on April 10, 1886. It was very successful, but after just two performances the theater went bankrupt. Disappointed but not disillusioned, Chabrier launched straight into the writing of a new comic opera. Writers Emile de Najac and Paul Burani were given the job of turning Ancelot's 50-year-old play Le Roi malgré lui into a libretto. The result, however, was a confusing mess, so Chabrier had his poet friend Jean Richepin rewrite it. Richepin got well into the job but eventually gave up, disgusted, and Chabrier himself had to complete the revision. The music, however, proceeded with much less strain, and Chabrier completed it in early 1887 after just nine months of work, producing a lively and melodic score as well as a diverse one -- patter song, love music, a bit of heavy Wagnerian drama (reflecting Chabrier's love of the music of the German master), and energetic dances are all part of the mix.

The opera is based, loosely, on historical figures and events. After the death of King Sigismund of Poland in 1572, the country became an elective monarchy and chose as its new king the Frenchman Henri of Valois, Duke of Anjou. Henri didn't really want to leave France, however, and Chabrier's opera deals with Henri's machinations to avoid becoming Poland's king. The

opera ends with Henri's decision to become King of Poland after all; the historical Henri reigns there until 1574, at which point he returns to France to become its King on the death of his brother, King Charles IX.

Le Roi malgré lui was premiered by the Opéra-Comique of Paris on May 18, 1887. Despite the complexities of the plot, Chabrier's music won the day and the performance was very well received, with several numbers encored (although the librettists were booed). But, shades of Gwendoline, the theatre burnt down after just three performances. Six months later the opera was taken up again at the Théâtre Lyrique, Place du Châtelet, and thanks to the support of the noted Wagnerian conductor Felix Mottl, the opera was also performed several times in Germany. But the work seemed to lose favor with the public, to a large extent due to the poor libretto (which was revised substantially for revivals in 1888 and 1929), and it has seldom been performed since that 1929 revival. Some excerpts from the opera, notably the Fête polonaise from the beginning of Act II, have taken on their own life in the concert hall, ensuring that the work Chabrier once referred to as a "comic opera with elaborate undies" has not disappeared completely from view. --- Chris Morrison, Rovi

Henri de Valois, le futur Henri III, est bien loin de la France où règne son frère aîné. Pour l'heure, il a été élu roi de Pologne, par la volonté de sa mère, et à son grand regret. Car sa nouvelle patrie l'ennuie et lui fait regretter une aventure galante vécue naguère à Venise. Pour se distraire, le roi va échanger habit et identité avec l'un des de ses chevaliers, et prendre part à une conspiration contre… lui-même. Quiproquos et coups de théâtre se succèdent jusqu'à un dénouement, évidemment heureux, qui voit Henri de Valois, retrouver avec plaisir son trône et ses sujets polonais. Emmanuel Chabrier, le plus truculent des grands compositeurs français, a réussi là une partition éblouissante. L'orchestre éclabousse de mille couleurs cette musique qui doit un peu à Berlioz, un peu à Rossini et un peu au « grand » opéra ici copieusement parodié, mais garde, avant tout, la saveur inimitable et reconnaissable entre toutes des chefs-d'œuvre d'un compositeur trop rarement à l'honneur. Pour cette ouvrage débordant d'entrain, mais aussi de tendresse, l'Opéra National de Lyon réunit un tandem inédit formé par le chef d'orchestre Evelino Pidò et le metteur en scène Laurent Pelly. --- opera-lyon.com

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