

Étienne Nicolas Méhul - Stratonice (1996)



1 Overture 6:25 2 "Ciel! ne sois point inexorable" [Chorus] 2:30 3 "Mes amis, retenez vos plaintes" [Antiochus] 0:31 4 "Ciel! ne sois point inexorable" [Chorus] 1:13 5 "J'échappe enfin à leur foule importune" [Antiochus] 0:22 6 "Insensé, je forme des souhaits" [Antiochus] 8:39 7 "Mon cher Antiochus" [Séleucus, Antiochus] 2:19 8 "Quelle funeste envie!" [Séleucus] "Ah! gardez vos trésors" [Antiochus] 4:49 9 "A mes conseils, unissez votre voix" [Séleucus, Stratonice, Antiochus] "Seigneur, Erasistrate arrive en ce moment" [Séleucus, Stratonice, Antiochus, A Guard] 2:06 10 "Seigneur, prenez soin de vos jours" [Stratonice, Antiochus] 1:17 11 "Qu'ai-je entendu?" [Antiochus, Erasistrate] 2:02 12 "Parlez. Achevez de m'apprendre" [Erasistrate, Antiochus] 5:25 13 "Je ne puis résister à mon impatience" [Séleucus, Erasistrate, Antiochus] 4:10 14 "Je tremble, mon coeur palpite" [Stratonice, Erasistrate, Antiochus, Séleucus] 3:16 15 "Seigneur, allez au temple" [Erasistrate, Séleucus, Stratonice] 1:03 16 "Seigneur, on croit que ma présence" [Stratonice, Antiochus] 2:10 17: "Eh! bien, Seigneur, que faut-il que j'espère" [Erasistrate, Stratonice, Antiochus] "Ils s'aiment" [Erasistrate] 2:30 18 "Sur le sort de son fils" [Erasistrate] 4:52 19 "Le Roi s'avance, il faut dissimuler" [Erasistrate, Séleucus] 4:25 20 "Vous mon fils, approchez" [Séleucus, Stratonice, Antiochus, Erasistrate] 2:00 21 "O mon fils, quel moment pour moi!" [Séleucus, Stratonice, Antiochus, Erasistrate, Chorus] 2:29 Stratonice - Patricia Petibon (Soprano) Antiochus - Yann Beuron (Tenor) Seleucus - Etienne Lescroart (Tenor) Erasistrate - Karl Daymond (Baritone) Cappella Coloniensis William Christie - conductor

In 1816, the great German writer and music critic E.T.A. Hoffmann wrote of Mehul's operas: "Serious, dignified, harmonically rich and thoughtfully fashioned, they should not be allowed to disappear from the stage". Sadly however, Hoffmann's advice was not followed in the twentieth century and nowadays they have vanished almost completely, despite being admired by (and influencing) Beethoven, Wagner, Berlioz and Weber. French opera in general has been rather neglected on disc compared to its German and Italian counterparts, and whole areas have been left to gather dust on the shelves. The era between the retirement of Gluck and the emergence of Berlioz (roughly 1780 - 1825) has been particularly badly ignored, really only represented in the mainstream repertoire by Cherubini's "Medee" in a mangled Italian version which attempts to turn it into a bel canto opera. Now, with the appearance of "Stratonice", Francophiles at last

have the chance to hear a real rarity.

Etienne Nicolas Mehul, along with his friend Luigi Cherubini, was the most important French composer of the Revolutionary era. "Stratonice", a one-act work from 1792, is a short example of the most popular genre of the time, 'opera comique' (though this work is not in the least bit comic - the phrase simply means it has spoken dialogue, and rather a lot of it, between the arias). The story, set in ancient Syria, concerns Prince Antiochus, who is secretly in love with his father the king's, fiancée, Stratonice. The king can't understand why his son is pining away but the canny doctor, Erasistratus, finds out the truth and everything is resolved happily. Mehul was a pupil of Gluck and the older composer's influence clearly shows in the cool, classical chorus which opens the work. But he was also the first composer to be described as a Romantic and his music is often a lot less balanced and more wayward and stormy than Gluck's, as can be heard in the next piece, Antiochus's tortured monologue, where the music follows the prince's changing moods from resignation to suicidal despair. The most impressive movement is a big ensemble (praised by Berlioz), some 15 minutes long, which starts as a duet, then builds to a trio, ending up as a quartet between all four soloists. Mehul's orchestration was famous for its originality and examples of his imaginative scoring are not hard to find- the orchestra is cut down to just the cellos for the trio in the ensemble; the dark, brooding woodwind in the middle section of Antiochus's monologue sounds almost like Rameau but the rushing strings which precede it look forward almost thirty years to "Der Freischuetz". In fact, Mehul had a big influence on Weber and the early Berlioz and it's intriguing to come across those influences here.

So all in all, a fascinating discovery by a sadly neglected composer who deserves to be heard more (his symphonies, which have been recorded by several conductors, are also well worth seeking out). Christie conducts a punchy period ensemble and the cast is young and fresh (though the two tenors, father and son, sound confusingly alike). Patricia Petibon and Yann Beuron are now rising stars (Beuron was particularly good in Minkowski's "Iphigenie en Tauride" last year). Finally, the packaging, with its cover by Ingres apparently inspired by this very opera, is some of the most beautiful I have ever come across. Recommended to adventurous lovers of French or early Romantic opera. ---Kicek&Brys, amazon.com

Stratonice is a one-act opera-comique, on a serious, classical theme with a subject taken from antiquity. It was a huge success at its premiere, and a favorite of Cherubini and Berlioz. The story of Stratonice comes from the writings of Lucien. A popular legend in France, it was turned into a variety of theatrical genres, some of them comic, but many serious. Among the serious

works in the French tradition are plays by Corneille, Quinault, and de Brosse. It is the serious traditions which Hoffman and Mehul followed. Hoffman composed a libretto of incomparable literary worth, giving Mehul the perfect vehicle from which to compose a moving, passionate opera with no extra melodramatic action. It is a classical libretto, with heroic alexandrine verse and with the unities of time, place, and action observed. The life of the story stems from the profound character development given each of the players, their motivations, loves, and passions. At the premiere, the libretto was lauded by French critics because Hoffman had created a poetic play on a known story that kept the audience's interest throughout.

The opening chorus derives from the traditions of Gluck. It sets the mood with stark orchestrations and a melancholic use of the semi-tone and diminished seventh chord. The vocal writing is simple, but with a rich harmonic vocabulary and an expressive use of timbres. The sombre chorus leads into an opening soliloquy for Prince Antiochus, who is filled with unbridled despair, and is physically dying from emotional tortures. In the original legend, the conflict is oedipal, for Stratonice is Seleucus' wife, not just his fiancée. Antiochus's aria is a masterpiece of passionate conflict. Its opening is introduced by the stark timbres of four horns, a cello, and a bass. The words "death will close my eyes" is set at the lowest portion of Antiochus's range, in unison with the other instruments. Daring dissonance and an intense, declamatory style give this piece a unique character, and Mehul adapts the form to fit the emotions of the verse.

This opera belongs to a new category of opera-comiques that were based on serious subject matter. There is dialogue between the musical numbers, rather than through-composed recitatif, but everything else about the opera's construction follows the traditions of serious opera. Each of the arias is preceded by an expressive recitatif which sets up the motivation for the music. The arias are intensely melodic and their lyricism has been compared to that of Sacchini, a famous Italian composer of the day. Mehul adapted the lyrical style of the Italians to express the tender emotions of a concerned father, and the noble emotions of Doctor Erasistrate, even using Italian appoggiaturas and ornamentation. However the complexity of the textures beneath the vocal writing is Mehul's own. He believed that all musical elements were important to dramatic expressiveness, and had experimented extensively in earlier works. In this opera he makes use of his discoveries to create a compact drama.

The most renowned composition of Stratonice is the quartet, "Parlez, parlez," which uses a modified sonata form in the first half, and includes a complete development section and an orchestral interlude. The piece begins as a duo, becomes a trio, and finally a quartet. Each of the characters has solo music at their entrance, and dialogue creates dramatic momentum. This is one piece whose origins are not found in serious opera. The dramatic function of this ensemble is closely allied to the vocal ensembles of the Comédie-Italienne, in which dynamic interactive music for multiple characters heightens the perception of action in a work. ---Rita Laurance, allmusic.com

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