

Music

Henry VIII at Bard SummerScape — an engrossing new production of Saint-Saëns' operatic rarity
Performed at New York's Fisher Center, this is a work of depth and sophistication

George Loomis



Alfred Walker as Henry and Lindsay Ammann as Anne Boleyn © Stephanie Berger

Camille Saint-Saëns' *Henry VIII* has recently been recorded by Boston's Odyssey Opera and staged at La Monnaie in Brussels, showing that the composer's operatic output extends beyond *Samson et Dalila*. With its illuminating new production, the Bard SummerScape festival gives another boost to the composer's second most successful opera, first seen at the Paris Opera in 1883. Saint-Saëns' measured admiration for Wagner is evident in its leitmotifs, but its historical subject allied it with French grand opera, then on the decline. The composer's well-known conservatism of musical style — he had no use for impressionism — is thus wedded to a passé genre.

The sneers of musical progressives doubtless impeded its fortunes, but *Henry VIII* is a work of depth and sophistication with a libretto by Léonce Détroyat and Paul Armand Silvestre that traces the demise of Henry's first two wives, Catherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn. We don't actually witness Anne's fall, but at the end the suspicious Henry vows vengeance should Anne betray him. Contrary to history, the queens confront each other. Anne desperately seeks a letter now in Catherine's possession — evidence of a prior love of hers. Siding with her rival rather than the king, Catherine burns it.

In an attempt at local colour, Saint-Saëns includes antique melodies in the style of the period. This, plus the music's autumnal glow, emphasises the opera as a retelling of history. Sometimes this distances from the drama. Saint-Saëns' skill at characterisation is nevertheless sure and incorporated in music that is consistently rewarding. Bard's performing edition traces back to a 2012 concert performance there, which, as with other recent efforts, restores music omitted from the truncated version, unsanctioned by the composer, in which the opera was frequently performed. The running time is close to four hours.

Unlike La Monnaie's convoluted staging, here an excellent production by Jean-Romain Vesperini presents the action lucidly and engrossingly. Costumes, designed by Alain Blanchot, are handsomely of the period, while Bruno de Lavenère's imaginative sets, enhanced by Christophe Chaupin's lighting, are arrestingly novel. Much of the action takes place on a skewed rectangle bordered by linear lighting, and particularly striking are Étienne Guiol's projections, which sometimes depict architectural details, at one point interacting to seemingly construct a rose window.



Imaginative sets enhance a lucid production © Bruno de Lavenère

Alfred Walker sings potently as the flighty, morally challenged monarch, though a metallic edge sometimes detracts from his imposing bass. In the sympathetic role of Catherine, soprano Amanda Woodbury is superb, particularly in conveying the queen's reversals of fortune at the judicial Synod. Lindsay Ammann's voluminous mezzo conveys Anne's conflicted emotions, and Josh Lovell excels as the object of her earlier love, Don Gomez de Féria. Leading the American Symphony Orchestra and Bard Festival Chorale, Leon Botstein conducts as if he believes in the work.

★★★★★

To July 30, fishercenter.bard.edu/whats-on