



The Carmelites

Poulenc | Poulenc after Bernanos

Nuns in Gaol

In 1793 the French Revolution turned into a Reign of Terror. Thousands of people were arrested and, among them, 21 English nuns who were turned out of their convent and imprisoned in Compiègne. There they shared a cell with 16 Carmelite nuns in the same plight. The English nuns nearly starved to death, four of them died, but the rest were eventually released on condition they returned to England. The 16 Carmelites were guillotined. The Englishwomen escaped, wearing secular clothes that the Carmelites had left behind in the wash, and one of them (Dame Ann Teresa) wrote an account of what had happened in the prison – emphasising the bravery and devotion of the martyred nuns.

The Reign of Terror

Why were they beheaded at all? Carmelite nuns are committed to a life of prayer and meditation, they live behind closed walls and it is difficult to believe that anybody thought they were a threat to society. But of course it depends what sort of society is outside the closed walls. In 1793 the French Revolution had taken its fatal turn towards totalitarianism. Fanatics headed the government, the rule of law had broken down and anybody, not obviously in favour of the revolution, was hunted down and executed. Aristocrats and royalists were singled out immediately, but so were the men and women in religious orders. All totalitarian regimes hate people having opinions of their own and Christianity, with its detestation of cruelty and injustice, was an obvious threat to the new rulers. Not all the monks, nuns and priests in France were killed, some hid, others were expelled from their convents, but a significant number were guillotined and, as the Carmelites of Compiègne ascended the scaffold in Paris, they caught the imagination of the Europe.

The Carmelites talk

Poulenc's opera is called 'The Dialogues of the Carmelites'. That's a rather odd title. French Revolution stories are usually about disguise, prison, attempted escape and (if you're lucky) an appearance of the Scarlet Pimpernel. But this opera is about the nuns themselves (there are 18 in the cast list) talking and praying their way through the Terror. Oddly enough it makes gripping theatre. It's based on a film script by the French novelist Georges Bernanos. Bernanos was dying as he wrote the story and in it he wrestled with his own fear of death. He was attracted to the Christian idea that you can stand in other people's shoes and do things for them, like pray

for them, suffer for them – even die for them – and made this the running discussion of the opera.

The Characters

Well, it might be radical to have 18 nuns on stage, but opera still needs a couple of lead singers, not to say a soprano, so Poulenc and his librettists used a re-write of the story that centred round a fictional heroine, **Blanche** de la Force (soprano). We see her first amongst her family, the **Marquis** de la Force (bass) her father, and the **Chevalier** (tenor) her brother, but by the second scene Blanche has entered a Carmelite convent. You don't have to remember all the nuns, but notice the elderly **Prioress** (contralto), the cheerful Sister **Constance** (soprano), and Mother **Marie** (mezzo soprano) the rock of the convent. The nuns are looked after by their **Father Confessor** (baritone).

The Music

Poulenc wrote the opera in 1953 and used to apologise (not very seriously) for its old fashioned sound: "It seems," he wrote, "that my Carmelites can only sing tonal music. You must forgive them." As the nuns sing hymns, requiems and psalms it's not surprising they sing tunes, what is startling is the elaborate music which accompanies them. The Carmelites might be vowed to a life of poverty, but their spiritual life is obviously rich and Poulenc describes it with a full sound from the pit. He scored for an opera orchestra with triple wind parts, two harps, a piano – and a guillotine...¹

The Story, Act I

We are hurried straight into the French Revolution. The Marquis and the Chevalier are worrying about Blanche. The revolutionary mob is out and her carriage has been held up by a crowd of rioters. In an agitated aria the Marquis remembers how frightened Blanche's mother was when the same thing happened to her, and how Blanche was born prematurely. Blanche appears at this moment, apparently quite composed, but listen to the orchestra as she sings – it's almost dissonant. In her heart of hearts she's terrified of the violence around her, and the least thing frightens her, a cry, a shadow on the wall. She finishes the scene determined to enter the Carmelite order.

An Interrogation

In the convent the Prioress (the head of the order) interviews Blanche. The old nun is terminally ill, but she has her wits about her and is deeply troubled at Blanche's vocation. She suspects her of fleeing to a convent in the hope of shutting out the Revolution and warns her that the Carmelite order cannot protect her. The business of nuns is not to be safe, but to pray. The music follows every twist of the Prioress's conversation: abrupt, almost violent, when she interrogates Blanche, lyrical and ecstatic as she describes the life of prayer. Blanche survives the ordeal, and the Prioress blesses her.

¹ The guillotine effect is made by the ENO Sound Department. They've recorded the noise of a cabbage being chopped in half with a machete knife – it's extremely graphic and made some of the singers look quite nervous in rehearsal.

In the Convent

The nuns sing offstage, but their plainchant gives way to unexpectedly cheerful music as Sister Constance enters. She is a young peasant, down to earth about life (and death) and relaxed about both. She horrifies Blanche by telling her a premonition she's had that they'll both die young, and on the same day.

A Bad Death

The Prioress is dying. In spite of her fever, she can still run the convent and asks Mother Marie to look after Blanche. As she prepares to commend her soul to God she becomes delirious and some deep seated anxieties surface – why should she bother about God anyway? Does He care about her? The people round the bed are deeply shocked: Catholics pray for a Good Death and this one is turning out to be about the worst that could be imagined. To make matters worse Blanche enters (to receive the Prioress's blessing) and witnesses her appalling end.

Act II Watching the Dead

Blanche has been left in the chapel to watch over the body of the Prioress, an extraordinary job to give to one so highly strung. She frightens herself and runs away, to be told off (and forgiven) by Mother Marie. Talking it over with Sister Constance she discovers that Constance thinks that people don't necessarily die for themselves but for others. Perhaps the Prioress endured a bad death, to release a weaker person from the pain of going through it.

Brother and Sister

The new Prioress (Madame Lidoine) warns the nuns that persecution is imminent. They sing a serene *Ave Marie*, but are sufficiently rattled by the news to panic when a stranger is suddenly announced. However it is only Blanche's brother, the Chevalier. The two are allowed to speak together and they sing the nearest thing to a love duet in the whole opera but, though the music describes their feelings, the words remain anxious. The Chevalier is frantic about the risk Blanche is running, she hasn't taken her final vows and he's come to take her home. Blanche shows unexpected resolve and says she'll stay in the convent.

Expelled

The nuns' Father Confessor leads the nuns in the hymn *Ave Verum Corpus*, and tells them he has to leave: he disrobes and puts on secular clothing, ready to go into hiding. This may seem unheroic, but martyrdom is a vocation, not something you decide for yourself. The Prioress warns the nuns not to put themselves forward as martyrs because, done for the wrong reason, it becomes just a publicity stunt. A crowd burst in, headed by some officials, who read the order of expulsion from the convent. The human side of the Revolution gleams out for a moment as one of the officials murmurs his sympathy; but he's too frightened to help. The nuns are shocked and gather what they can from the convent, Blanche is given a statue of the Infant Jesus to carry but a howl from the mob in the street causes her to drop it: it is smashed to pieces.

Act III A Vow

The nuns return to their ruined convent. The Prioress is away and Mother Marie is inspired to suggest that the sisters take a vow of martyrdom. (There is no such vow, but it makes a good operatic scene). The vow will only stand if all the sisters agree; they take a secret ballot – and one nun vetoes it. Some of the less charitable immediately say that they know who the coward is (it's clearly Blanche) but Constance jumps in to take the blame. She says she voted against, but she's now changed her mind and suggests they vote again. This time the vote is unanimous, however Blanche has no intention of being a martyr and runs away. The Prioress appears and, seeing that the nuns have already made their vow, accepts the fait accompli.

Arrest

Blanche is living in the ruins of her father's chateau. The Marquis himself has been guillotined and her terrors have now become horrifyingly real. Mother Marie arrives, in the confusion she has become separated from the others (dispersed nuns were not supposed to live together anyway). This is no time for easy comfort, and she tells Blanche bluntly that though she may have saved her life, she hasn't necessarily saved her soul. Blanche wanders out into the streets of Paris and, in a spoken section with percussion accompaniment, she hears that the Carmelite nuns have been arrested.

Prison

The nuns are praying as the gaoler enters with their death sentence. Outside Mother Marie is distraught that she is not with her sisters, but the Father Confessor tells her that martyrdom is clearly not her vocation. God presumably has another task for her. (The real Mother Marie lived until 1836 and wrote the story of the Carmelites).

The Guillotine

Crowds assemble at the Place de la Revolution. The top of the guillotine is just visible upstage and the nuns enter, singing, as they walk to the scaffold. It is one of the most extraordinary scenes in opera, 15 women cross the stage, singing the *Salve Regina* and, as each one exits, down comes the guillotine, 14 women on stage, then 13, then 12... It looks as if nobody is going to be left to sing the final 'Amen' but at the last moment Blanche rushes on – transformed and fearless. Constance is overjoyed, she goes to her death leaving Blanche to sing alone before she too mounts the scaffold. The silent crowd melts away.

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