

NEW YORK POST

ELOQUENT MARTYRS

By JAMES JORDEN

August 4, 2009 --

A blockbuster hit opera of the 1800s, Meyerbeer's "Les Huguenots" fell out of fashion a century ago. Now a revival at Bard SummerScape offers a hint of what the fuss was all about.

Over the years, the opera's music has been slashed by as much as an hour. But on Sunday, conductor Leon Botstein restored the work to its original running time of nearly 4½ hours.

Even heard in its entirety the opera sounds patchy. Thrilling musical ideas rapidly alternate with banalities, as if Meyerbeer feared he was writing for an audience with the attention span of a gnat. But when the composer is at the top of his game, in the Act 4 love duet, "Huguenots" can hold its own with the best of Wagner or Verdi.

The opera unfolds against the backdrop of the 1572 massacre of French Protestant Huguenots by Roman Catholics. Protestant Raoul (tenor Michael Spyres) and Catholic Valentine (soprano Alexandra Deshorties) are lovers caught in the crossfire of intolerance.

Director Thaddeus Strassberger takes this story seriously as a nightmare vision of faith-based bigotry. The court of do-gooder Queen Marguerite sashays about in couture ball gowns and stratospheric spike heels. Noblemen sip brandy while casually crucifying a half-naked Protestant. Even the audience is drawn into the conflict when a Protestant mob pelts the auditorium with trash.

The large cast of young American singers, although lacking superstar vocal glamour, rose to the virtuosic vocal moments. Spyres leapt with power and grace to the score's many high B's and C's, fading only in a grueling last-act aria. Deshorties limned her character's romantic anguish with a large, driven dramatic soprano.

In the contrasting role of the Queen, Erin Morley trilled and dithered like a born diva. Among the lower male voices, Peter Volpe stood out as the crusty old Protestant Marcel, ascending to lyric eloquence as he prepared for martyrdom.

"Les Huguenots" may not be a masterpiece, but Botstein conducts it with the fire and precision befitting one.