

## ARTS



A gangster from the Cité Soleil ghetto in Haiti. Danish director Asger Leth has managed to film the lives of two of the ghetto's chief gang leaders

## Giving a stage to wicked men



**FILM REVIEW**  
Freddie Sayers

The 200-year history of the Caribbean state of Haiti is one of the most desperate and turbulent on the planet. Formed in 1804 after a uniquely successful slave rebellion against French, British and Spanish forces, the second independent state in the Americas was subject to a total blockade from the slave-holding powers for the first 50 years of its existence. Even the Catholic Church withdrew its priests until 1860.

A brutal dictatorship was imposed on the country in 1957 and only ended after a Catholic democracy movement grew up in the 1980s, culminating in a revolution and the 1990 election of former priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide as president.

When first-time Danish director Asger Leth took his cameras there in 2004, the country was on the verge of yet another revolution. The 13-year on-off rule of Aristide had turned nasty. Haiti has the third-highest rate of hunger in the world, its life expectancy

is lower than Sudan's, and 80 per cent of its population live in abject poverty. President Aristide had taken to employing gangs from the slums – known as *chimeres*, or "ghosts" – to terrorise his opponents in a bid to maintain power.

Incredibly, Leth managed to infiltrate and film the lives of two of the five chief gang leaders in the largest of these ghettos, the Cité Soleil, during the period up to and after Aristide's late night escape in February 2004.

Not only is the Cité Soleil described in a UN report as "the most dangerous place on earth", but these are the most violent people in it – in terms of privileged access and a documentary scoop, I have never seen anything like it. Leth is the son of Danish film giant Jørgen Leth, who has lived in Haiti for years, but the access to these warlords is extraordinary: we watch them kill, cry and even bathe naked.

The two young men are brothers, both powerful figures within the slum, but with very different outlooks. Bily has a political mind; he professes to believe in President Aristide and want development and education for Haiti; he sees the "security" he offers Aristide as a route up through the Lavalas party and would like to be president himself.

2Pac is entirely cynical about the prospects for his country; he has a realistic but sad view of the power struggle within the slum: "It's Haiti, baby, it's the way it is." 2Pac instead has dreams of fleeing to America and becoming a rap artist like the Haitian-born star Wyclef Jean, who at one bizarre point

(he is a co-producer) calls him and listens to his songs over the telephone.

The most enigmatic figure – and the one whose presence goes to the heart of my misgivings about the whole film – is "Lélé", a white French woman who is described as an aid worker. From the outset she is clearly heavily involved in the *chimeres* leadership, speaking to both brothers on the phone, nursing their soldiers when they are wounded and eventually sleeping with 2Pac and becoming his "girl". In this way she is the epitome of the whole film: profes-

*The real ghosts are the director and co-director, neither of whom we see. Who's holding the camera?*

ing to help, but in truth sucked in by the glamour and danger of it all; at once unquestioningly devoted to these wicked men, and using them for her own high-octane experience.

The scenes with her are some of the most powerful, and also troubling. Lying in bed with 2Pac, curiously well lit, she snuggles coquettishly as if the camera was not there; at another point she chooses to inform Bily (with whom she had been flirting) of her nascent relationship with his brother. She seems to revel in the power she holds over these brutal underworld figures, and plays it up for the camera.

The real ghosts of this movie are the

director and co-director, neither of whom we ever see. Who is holding the camera all this time? How did they gain the trust of these notorious gang leaders? What do the gangsters think they are going to get out of it? Fame? Money? A record contract? How really is Lélé and what is her role in setting this up? When we witness a shooting between rival factions, how much of it is played up for them?

The final 90-minute result is suspiciously smooth. It looks, and often sounds like, a hip-hop video, lingering over the ripped black torsos of the gangsters and hearing their testimonials inches from the camera. The set-up (two very different brothers, rival gangs, one woman) is so Shakespearean, so high-tragic. There are never any shots missing – even the historic telephone call with the leader of the rebels on the morning after the president's escape is captured, and as always Lélé is there, grinning. I am not suggesting it is staged, but surely manipulated, in the way that documentary so often are.

As for the treatment of these vicious men, I doubt the director would even claim journalistic independence. He offers them a stage, and they play to it. They present themselves as the victims of tragic circumstance, and to a great extent they must be. But it is only in the moments between their grand gangsta philosophising, when they let their guard down, that you see what they really are: ignorant, cunning, frightened men, haunted by bad decisions and the total absence of hope.

## When opera tried to undermine the pope



**MUSIC REVIEW**  
Igor Toronyi

Benvenuto Cellini

BARBICAN, LONDON

Popes have rarely made it into operas. For the first few hundred years this was down to prohibition: the representation of a pope on stage was simply not allowed. While the Church often acted as patron and guide to opera's development, it also became its censor and rival.

Some popes nurtured the entertainment, others took to censorship and restriction. The Church had an underlying suspicion of opera's Christian ideals and origins. Opera was a potential competitor and even an alternative centre of worship, one in which Christian morals were not necessarily present.

As the Church's temporal power waned, control became less easy. By the beginning of the 19th-century anti-clerical libretti were slipping through the net and the soon-to-be stock Catholic villains, like the Grand Inquisitor, were popping up everywhere – in Donizetti's *Don Sebastiano* and Verdi's *Don Carlo* for example. No one, however, had yet gone for the jugular. No one, that is, except for Berlioz.

Berlioz's opera "semi-seria", *Benvenuto Cellini*, about the life of the eponymous papal sculptor, was a full-frontal assault on papal supremacy. He was demanding nothing less than the substitution of art for religion, the artist for the pope.

Here was musical terrorism to match anything from our own age. In the Paris of the early 19th century, however, stage representations of the pope were still proscribed, and for the 1838 premiere the character of Clement VII was replaced by that of Cardinal Salviati, and the switch remained.

In Sir Colin Davis's recent performance at the Barbican the pope was reinstated. It makes the confrontational covenant at the centre of the work even more troubling. Cellini can't complete his sculpture tomorrow. Pope Clement will commute his death sentence – a sentence Cellini has rightly earned for murder. The inference is that great art and great artists are more important than divine justice or the lives of lesser men, and the pope is encouraging this perverse moral code. The pope laments his own weakness, his anger and frustration and debilitating devotion to beauty. It is perhaps a measure of the papacy's modern PR success that one is quite shocked by Berlioz's

pope. Is it possible to imagine today's pope with a furrowed brow or raised voice or a thought gone astray, let alone a weakness? It's like believing Nelson Mandela steals sandwiches. So the unrelenting anti-clericalism of the 19th century appears inappropriate to us. Why would you attack a kitten?

Of course, for Berlioz, Catholicism was no kitten. But neither was it corrupting or stifling or a menace – or that's not the message in *Benvenuto*. Rather, his problem with religion was that it was not as potent or intoxicating or noble a cause as art. Art was the true religion, not the sclerotic Church. The pope's disabling attachment to the beauty of Cellini's sculptures only serves to demonstrate art's power.

As if to prove art's religious credentials, Cellini manipulates Christian tropes. He turns his workers into the chosen ones – "Hail to the master metal-workers" – and on the day of the cast he talks of leading his "wandering flock".

In the end, Cellini deposes papal supremacy. As the whole of Rome watches on, he wins his task. God has blessed Cellini and the pope must now waive his moral authority. Who, one wonders, is God's representative on earth now?

Certainly Gregory Kunde, the tenor who sang the part of Cellini, had no noticeable divine dispensation, unless you count the peculiar smugness in his manner. His voice was that of a croaker, husky and strained, fitting neatly with his car salesman appearance.

The rest of the cast were much better, though Fieramosca (Derron Jeffrey) had a tendency to sing with his second chin than his voice. Laura Claycomb was a delight, cleverly deploying her bright coloratura for more than just effect. Peter Coleman-Wright's Fieramosca was strong as was John Relyea's Pope Clement.

Best of all was the acting. Alexander Elliott's tiny, though no less memorable, scene-stealing performance as Cabaretier Teresa, Cellini and Fieramosca's verbal runaround in the manner of the Marx brothers in the first tableau; the recitative – spoken French that could be as tedious – camped up just enough to keep it entertaining without it descending into vulgarity. Much of it resembled an excellent episode of *Atto*.

Ultimately, there was no real doubt who had supplanted the weak-willed Pope Clement as God's representative. Sir Davis, one of Berlioz's greatest advocates, fashioned the music to near perfection, stretching and relaxing the dedicated London Symphony Orchestra across a fantastical terrain, where bassoonists mope and tambourines and timpani drums. There are moments in the Second Act when one understands why some had concerns about the drama under-neath. But, equally, with Davis at the helm, you also know why Berlioz thought it the best thing he ever composed.

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## Lyrta's buried treasure

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I have just put Cyril Roodham's First Symphony on my iPod. It sounds terrific: bouncy, argumentative and glowing with orchestral colour. What do you mean, you've never heard of Cyril Roodham? All right, I'll be honest: neither had I, until my *Daily Telegraph* colleague Simon Heffer very kindly presented me with six CDs from the reissued Lyrta catalogue. Simon has been walking around in a state of excitement ever since this label, dormant for 15 years, started reissuing its catalogue last year, and now I understand why.

Lyrta specialised in English music of the 20th century: a typical LP featured obscure music (Cyril Scott's piano concertos, say, or the lesser-known works of Finzi) in performances by musicians of the calibre of John Ogdon and Sir Adrian Boult, recorded in superlative sound. The reappearance of these treasurable recordings as CDs is an event to celebrate. But it also induces feelings of guilt in people (like me) who have talked rudely in the past about "the compact disc" of English music.

I doubt that any country in the world was producing finer symphonies in the 20th century than Britain. I'm not just talking about the Vaughan Williams cycle, whose stature has continued to rise, but individual works



**E.J. Moeran**

such as E.J. Moeran's Symphony in G Minor. Moeran (1894-1950) did not cut an especially remarkable figure: he was a bumbling, boozey transporter. But the soaring melodies, tight counterpoint and gossamer instrumentation of his only symphony are irresistible once you hear them in a fine performance – and it's hard to imagine any finer than the Roodham First Symphony, with the New Philharmonia Orchestra (Lyrta SRCD 247).

Almost equally magnificent is the Roodham First Symphony, whose dancing pastoral style conceals rigorous sonata-form argument (Lyrta SRCD 269). The work is paired with a lovely symphonic poem, *The Birds of Rhinowen*, by Josef Holbrooke, a now forgotten composer who, the liner notes inform us, insisted on the German spelling of his Christian name "although born in Croydon and claiming no Teutonic ancestry".

The Roodham and the Holbrooke are performed by the London Philharmonic under the great Vernon Handley (who has not been knighted?) who also

conducts Ian Partridge in a plangent reading of Gerald Finzi's *Farwell to Arms* (Lyrta SRCD 237). This, of course, is not obscure music: it is a "perfectly realised work", characterised by a "magnificently sustained flight of lyrical counterpoint".

But Finzi was not alone in using a palette of traditional English colours to produce works of great originality. The shame is that so many British composers were writing music of structural as well as lyrical beauty after the Second World War, yet their work was overshadowed by the continental avant-garde (and, worse, by third-rate British atonal composers whose feeble imitations of Boulez and Stockhausen could be heard even on Radio 3).

For that we partly have to thank Sir William Glock of the BBC, whose prejudice against total English music poisoned the minds of a generation against "old-fashioned" (but actually strikingly ambitious) composers such as George Lloyd, whose tremendous Fourth Symphony has just been reissued by Lyrta in a reading by Edward Downes and the Philharmonia (Lyrta SRCD 2258).

As more of these marvelous discs appear, there is a tangible sense of damage being undone and of a heritage being rediscovered. Is there a lesson for the Church here, I wonder?

**Damian Thompson**

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