

Opéra Bastille

BY MARILYN AUGUST

French President François Mitterrand's ambitious plan to build a "modern and popular opera" to make culture affordable for the masses has been plagued by controversy from the beginning. When the 2.6 billion French franc (UK £247 million, US \$460 million) project was unveiled in 1981, it unleashed passions recalling the patriotic fever of revolutionaries who stormed the forbidding prison on the site 200 years ago.

Unfortunately, Parisians are still ready to storm the Bastille. Many are disappointed with the design of Canadian architect Carlos Ott — a hulking glass and steel structure which looks more like an ocean liner waiting in dry dock than the high-tech wonder which is undoubtedly is.

The Opéra Bastille's biggest headache, however, has been a personnel problem. Daniel Barenboim, the Israeli concert pianist and conductor hired by a different government two years ago as artistic director, was fired in January 1989 reportedly because of a million-dollar price tag and highbrow ideas about opera. So much for the official version of Barenboim's dismissal, which was executed by Pierre Berge, the financial genius behind the Yves Saint Laurent fashion empire and the man appointed by Mitterrand to supervise the management of the project during its final months. The inside story is that this was basically a clash of artistic egos between Barenboim and Berge.

This backstage ballyhoo is being felt on stage. The once-ambitious opening soiree on 14 July celebrating the Bicentennial of the French Revolution, to be performed before visiting heads of state and assorted VIPs, has been scaled down to a concert consisting of selections from French opera classics staged by American avant-garde director Robert Wilson. What's more, the production of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, originally scheduled to debut in January 1990 as the Opéra Bastille's first bona fide opera production, was severely compromised by the departure of its director, Patrice Chéreau, who sympathized with Barenboim.

Despite the political cacophony, the technical potential offered by the gleaming new house is a harmonious blend of sophistication, good taste and common sense. As former Paris Opera director Rolf Liebermann put it, "it's a stage director's dream come true."

The Opéra Bastille is everything the ornate Palais Garnier is not, and never could be. The 100-year-old landmark, famous for its baroque design and Chagall-decorated ceiling, has been hopelessly inadequate for decades, with problems ranging from virtually no backstage and a scant 1,600 seats.

The Opéra Bastille serves up twelve stages. The main stage, with its iron fire curtain positioned in front of the orchestra pit instead of behind it, is flanked by five stages (compared to the Metropolitan Opera's three), a rehearsal stage behind the main stage and identical to it, plus five more stages on a different level. All are fitted with electroni-

■ Almost five years in construction, costing 2.6 billion French francs (UK £247 million, US \$460 million), the Opéra Bastille, designed by Canadian architect Carlos Ott, officially opens on 14 July 1989, celebrating the Bicentennial of the French Revolution, with a concert consisting of French opera classics staged by Robert Wilson.

● *Après cinq ans de construction et un coût de 2,6 milliards de francs (UK £247 million, US \$460 million) l'Opéra de la Bastille, conçu par l'architecte Canadien Carlos Ott, ouvrira ses portes le 14 juillet 1989 en célébration du Bicentenaire de la Révolution Française. Le programme sera constitué d'oeuvres d'opéra lyrique français mises en scène par Robert Wilson.*

▼ *Nach fünf Jahren Bauzeit und Kosten von 2,6 Milliarden Francs (UK £247 Millionen, US \$460 Millionen), wird die Opéra Bastille, die von dem kanadischen Architekten Carlos Ott entworfen wurde, offiziell am 14. Juli 1989 zu Ehren des 200. Jahrestages der Französischen Revolution, mit einer Aufführung, von Klassikern der französischen Oper unter der Regie von Robert Wilson, eröffnet werden.*

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