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A name dropped impeccably

You have to hand it to Ambroise Thomas's librettists Barbier and Carré: they never ducked an opportunity to drag a famous name off his pedestal and make a box office hit of him. They did it to Shakespeare (*Hamlet*) and even had a go at Dante. For *Mignon*, they ransacked Goethe, transforming an episode in his novel about Wilhelm Meister coming of age into a typical Second Empire piece of froth with a happy ending to boot.

Later versions of the work replaced the dialogues with recitatives and restored Goethe's tragic end for performances in Germany. Thomas's music feels overstretched in these grandly conflated versions, so it is a relief to see that the Opéra Comique has gone back to the original, handsomely fulfilling its mission to reinstate the theatre's heritage.

Jean-Louis Benoit's excellent staging so cleverly blends farce and emotion that this is the theatre's most comprehensively successful production since new management came in in 2007. He rolls out an impeccably timed show and his young cast showcases tuneful singing and superb diction to get to the elusive kernel of the *opéra-comique* style. These are not world-beating voices, just the right ones for the repertoire, equally at home in song and in speech.

Marie Lenormand avoids making a meal of *Mignon*'s signature tune, thereby preserving its simple, emotional core. Malia Bendi Merad, a hoot as the maddeningly pert Philine, reels off the coloratura with precision tuning. Christophe Mortagne's bumptious Laërte keeps the comedy on the boil. Ismael Jordi's gauche Wilhelm chokes on the French dialogues but confidently nails all the notes.

In the pit, François-Xavier Roth, better known for forays into contemporary music, does Thomas the biggest favour of all by highlighting the exquisite chamber music subtleties of the score. Excellent playing and not a whiff of condescension. And when the barcarolle, sung by the polished Accentus choir, floats in from the foyer, the effect is pure magic. This resuscitation was well worth the effort.