

Ainadamar (Review)

Cincinnati Opera offers a brief, brilliant departure from opera tradition

By Tom McElfresh



Critic's Pick

Although it's only 80 minutes long, *Ainadamar* is as well supplied with out-sized characters, monumental events and tragic consequences as any Verdi opera. The leading characters are historical: A martyred leader of a 19th-century uprising against political repression in Spain; a 20th-century tragedienne who kept the martyr's memory alive on stage for 40 years; the poet-playwright who celebrated the martyr in his first successful play and was himself martyred by fascists in 1936 at the start of the Spanish Civil War. He (Federico Garcia Lorca) and his work — especially his “rural” plays, *Blood Wedding* and *The House of Bernarda Alba* — are cherished in Granada and venerated around the world.

Brief but brilliant, the Cincinnati Opera (CO) premiere of *Ainadamar*, repeating Saturday, takes stage with an imposing array of firsts, debuts and departures from opera tradition.

- The Star: Luminous Dawn Upshaw, world noted for her dedication to contemporary music, makes an unforgettable CO debut as actress Margarita Xirgu. The role was written for her. She sang it in *Ainadamar's* world premiere and has repeated it in most subsequent major productions.
- The Work: This is CO's first ever presentation of music by Argentinean-American composer Osvaldo Golijov. The libretto is by David Henry Hwang, author most notably of the play *M. Butterfly*. The opera's three sections or images distill actual events into essences of reality, such as the firing squad execution of Garcia Lorca. Golijov has written several concert works for Upshaw. Their partnership rather reflects the close playwright-actress relationship inside the opera.

When *Ainadamar* premiered at Tanglewood, *New Yorker* critic Alex Ross remarked that Golijov's works “arouse extraordinary enthusiasm in audiences, because they revive music's elemental powers: they have rhythms that rock the body into motion and melodies that linger in the mind.” Such was exactly the case at Music Hall Thursday. The audience whooped approval.

- The Orchestra: It and debuting conductor Miguel Harth-Bedoya are on the stage, not in the pit. It's somewhat smaller than the usual CO orchestra but is enriched with instruments rarely called for in opera scores — guitars, for instance, and percussion instruments unique to the traditional music of Spain that reflect European, Moorish and Jewish influences — to flamenco, samba, rumba and other intricate, enthralling rhythms.

In a pre-curtain speech, CO's Artistic Director Evans Mirageas said the orchestra is on stage because it “almost becomes a character in the drama.” There's no *almost* about it. This orchestra does not just *accompany* — it, the soloists and the ensemble are wholly interdependent.

- The Visual Presentation: Not fully staged but not quite not staged. There are oratorio-like moments when performers both impersonate and describe their characters, simultaneously being and observing, shifting fluidly from first- to third-person discourse. A bit more action might have felt welcome in such sections — not a lot, not enough to impede listening, but a little. The seven soloists, an ensemble of singing females and non-singing males do move about in front of the orchestra, through it and along a curving hillock of platforms behind it. **This is well less than the sumptuous theatricality CO audiences typically see with the exception of one element: Whatever the singers and orchestra do, they do it surrounded by splendid lighting effects and image projections designed by Thomas Hase.**
- The Audio Experience: It's safe to report that CO audiences have never heard anything quite like *Ainadamar*, and not just for its ensnaring rhythms and sensuous melodic lines. An onstage laptop computer generates sound effects (gurgling water, galloping horses) and blends them into the music. Golijov directed that the singers' voices and much of the orchestral sound is to be electronically sampled as it is performed and processed as it is narrowcast to the audience through well-hidden speakers. Some orchestral sounds are made to reverberate and echo. Solo instruments are enhanced. Alterations to voices are subtle but unmistakable. Women's voices are enriched, buttered and slightly darkened. Mezzo-soprano Kelly O'Connor's voice is periodically lowered almost into baritone range.
- Other Debuts: Both O'Connor and soprano Jessica Rivera (as the faithful student who will carry on Xirgu's traditions) are new to CO, as is Spanish flamenco singer Jesus Montoya (as the leader of the fascists). All acquit themselves well, particularly Ms. O'Connor who stands tall, cross-gendered as Garcia Lorca and comes damn close to matching Upshaw's power and subtlety.