

IN REVIEW

## CINCINNATI — *Ainadamar*, Cincinnati Opera, 6/9/09

Cincinnati Opera presented the regional premiere of Osvaldo Golijov's *Ainadamar* as the third offering in its season of Spanish-themed operas. *Ainadamar* ("Fountain of Tears") is the Arabic name given to the well outside Granada where Federico García Lorca was killed in August 1936, one of the earliest victims of Fascism in Spain. Although Lorca's death is at the center of the opera, the central figure is Margarita Xirgu, the actress who introduced many of Lorca's plays and continued to champion them during her long exile from Spain following his death. The action opens in Uruguay in 1969, as she is preparing to perform the role of Mariana Pineda, a Spanish political martyr of the 1830s. In a fluid series of recollections shared with her student Nuria, Xirgu relives key moments of the past: her first meeting with Lorca, her failed attempts to get him to leave Spain, his arrest and execution at *Ainadamar*. As she envisions Lorca's death, Xirgu collapses, dying, and in the final moments of the opera, she is joined by the spirit of Lorca. At last her voice is transformed into the voice of *Ainadamar*, "I am freedom, wounded and bleeding hope."

The term "eclectic" is inescapable in trying to describe Golijov's music, though it should be stressed that the various musical traditions or styles upon which he draws are unflinchingly absorbed into his own distinctive voice. *Ainadamar* is infused with the music of Spain, particularly the flamenco tradition, which Lorca loved so deeply. The opera opens with the sound of water and offstage trumpet calls. Soon recorded hoofbeats are heard, the rhythm gradually picked up by percussion and leading into the ballad of Mariana Pineda ("What a sad day it was in Granada"), the opening chorus of the play Margarita Xirgu is about to perform. A version of this ballad recurs at the beginning of each of the two subsequent scenes or images (as Golijov and his librettist David Henry Hwang call them). This repetition not only helps define the dramatic structure of the piece but also anchors Xirgu's recollections in the present moment in 1969.

The score contains many memorable episodes. Particularly haunting is the aria in which Lorca (here a trouser role, sung by a mezzo) tells Xirgu how a statue of Mariana Pineda inspired him as a child. A lighter contrast is heard in "A la Habana," a seductive dance number composed for the opera by Gonzalo Grau, in which Xirgu tries to persuade Lorca to go with her to Cuba. The central episode of the opera—Lorca's arrest and execution—is a powerful amalgam of many elements. It begins with the accusations by Ramón Ruiz Alonso (voiced by a flamenco singer), who ordered the arrest and execution of Lorca. After Lorca has been surrendered to him, Lorca and the two men who will be shot with him are given an opportunity for a final prayer. Here Golijov incorporates an earlier piece ("K'in Sventa Ch'ul Me'tik Kwadulupe") in which the voices of indigenous Mexicans are heard praying over the glassy sound of marimbas and string glissandos. The eerie stillness suggested by this music is eventually broken by a gunshot, and many more follow, the barrage eventually topped by the wailing voice of the flamenco singer lamenting the present and future victims of the

The death of Xirgu, the passing of her legacy to Nuria, Xirgu's reunion with the spirit of Lorca, and her final transformation comprise the final section of the opera. Although nothing in the melody, harmony, or orchestration directly recalls the music of Richard Strauss, the sumptuous treatment of the three female voices in this section does suggest the conclusion of *Der Rosenkavalier*. In Xirgu's final moments, her voice rises higher and higher, intertwining with those of the other two characters. The opera ends, as it began, with the sound of water.

Jose Maria Condemí's Cincinnati Opera production was stark, with the orchestra placed center stage and the action taking place in front of the orchestra and on a series of risers behind it. ***There were no sets, only the atmospheric lighting of Thomas C. Hase. Costumes, too, were extremely simple. This approach was highly effective, emphasizing the ritual aspect of the theatrical experience and highlighting the music.*** The performance was superb, including the company debuts of the three singers who created the leading roles. Dawn Upshaw as Xirgu gave a committed dramatic performance and sang the high-lying final moments with purity of tone. Kelly O'Connor was a moving Lorca, the rich lower register of her voice often in evidence. As Nuria, Jessica Rivera also sang beautifully. Flamenco singer Jesus Montoya was chilling in Alonso's denunciations of Lorca, and smaller roles were all handled well, including an ensemble of eight women who portrayed a variety of parts, including the voice of *Ainadamar*. Members of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, supplemented by a number of flamenco musicians, gave a powerful performance under Miguel Harth-Bedoya, who conducted the premiere of the revised version of this opera in 2005. □

JOE LAW

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