

IHMSG Newsletters

A Review of Ex Machina's Production of Torrejón y Velasco's *La Púrpura de la Rosa*

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In the aftermath of the Columbus quincentenary celebrations of 1992, a number of major musical organizations and recording companies have finally begun to explore the wealth of Hispano-American music that has previously been so sorely neglected. At last, the dedicated Hispanist, musicologist, or general music lover can readily acquire good recordings or attend credible performances of this heritage-what a refreshing trend! No company or group has better succeeded in capturing the verve and splendor of this repertoire-while simultaneously adhering to rigorous scholarship and historical accuracy-than the baroque opera company Ex Machina. They mounted a glorious production of Tomás de Torrejón y Velasco's and Pedro Calderón de la Barca's opera *La púrpura de la rosa* (*The Blood of the Rose*) in the Aveda Institute in Minneapolis on October 28-30, 1994. The Saturday performance was a featured event at the annual convention of the American Musicological Society that was simultaneously meeting in Minneapolis. James Middleton served admirably as the production's director/designer, making decisions that were historically justified and-more importantly-artistically elegant. All the details (such as scenery, costumes, dance, orchestration, blocking, acting, phrasing, etc.) came together to form a unified and aesthetically cogent whole. He assembled an all-star team of collaborators: choreographer Bob Skiba, music director Barbara Weiss, producer Mark Ellenberger, and musicologist/adviser Louise Stein. The many laudatory aspects of this production are owing largely to their talents.

A few words concerning the historical context of *La púrpura de la rosa* are in order before delving into the details of this specific performance. The opera was first produced in 1659 as a theatrical pageant in honor of the marriage of Louis XIV and María Teresa with music by Juan Hidalgo and a libretto penned by Calderón. Louise Stein elucidates in her recent book *Songs of Mortals, Dialogues of the Gods: Music and Theatre in Seventeenth-Century Spain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) that the work also was intended to commemorate the treaty between France and Spain, the Peace of the Pyrenees. She shows how Calderón crafted the plot for the specific political situation and marriage as "an exhortation to fidelity and caution against vengeance (p. 215)." The drama was staged again in 1680 for yet another wedding that joined

together French and Spanish monarchs: Charles II and Marie Louise d'Orleans. In 1701 Calderón's libretto was set yet again-this time by Tomás Torrejón y Velasco in Lima-to celebrate the reign of the newly crowned Philip V on the occasion of his eighteenth birthday. The Viceroy of Peru, Don Melchor Portocarro Lazo de la Vega, commissioned the opera and drew upon the talents of Lima's distinguished *maestro de capilla*, Torrejón y Velasco, who had arrived in Lima on November 21, 1667 as a member of the Conde de Lemos's entourage. [Further details concerning *La púrpura de la rosa* can be gleaned from the excellent Ex Machina program notes authored by James Middleton and Louise Stein, as well as the scholarly publications: Stein's *Songs of Mortals*; Guillermo Lohmann Villena's *El arte drámatico en Lima durante el virreinato* (Madrid: Estades, 1945); Torrejón y Velasco's *La púrpura de la rosa* with a study and transcription by Robert Stevenson (Lima: Instituto Nacional de Cultura & Biblioteca Nacional de Lima, 1976); and Torrejón y Velasco's *La púrpura de la rosa* edited by Ángeles Cardona, Don Cruickshank, and Martín Cunningham, Series "Teatro del Siglo de Oro," Ediciones Críticas, 9 (Kassel: Reichenberger, 1990).]

There are two extant scores for Torrejón's opera, one in the Bodleian Library in Oxford (MS. Add. A.143, folios 170-93) which serves as the basis for the 1990 edition published in Kassel; and the other in the Biblioteca Nacional in Lima (MS. C 1469) upon which Robert Stevenson draws his 1976 publication. Neither of the scores is divided into scenes, and it is unclear why Middleton decided to print the libretto in the program with scene divisions inserted into the text. Robert Stevenson has explained the problems arising from this practice (See Stevenson, *La púrpura de la rosa*, p. 28). Fortunately, Middleton and music director Barbara Weiss-along with music assistants Brian Link, Cléa Galhano, and Ginna Watson-did not depend solely on the Lima manuscript in their reconstruction of what might have been heard in the Conde de Lemos's palace nearly three centuries ago. For instance, the Lima copy is missing most of the music for the rambunctious *jácaras* in Venus's garden (beginning at lines 1570, measure 2847 of the Kassel edition). This is one of the more fetching scenes in the entire work and is severely truncated in the Lima manuscript, probably owing to missing pages. Ex Machina's production fortunately included a more complete version of this *jácaras*, although they did abbreviate the section slightly with the deletion of a few lines and the elimination of Belona and Libia from the scene altogether (See pp. 422-23 of the Kassel edition).

The sets were colorful, nicely painted, and historically accurate. There was a single flat at the back with an opening about twelve feet above the stage level that allowed for the appearances of Apollo in his chariot, Belona "astride a rainbow," and Cupid when he is about to shoot his arrows. On either side of the center were two pairs of symmetrically-arranged flats; the entire arrangement resembled very much the iconographic depictions of stage productions from the early eighteenth century. Middleton also took advantage of the Aveda

Institute's architecture by occasionally placing one of the two choirs in one of the balconies. The choral exchanges between vocalists on stage and others in a balcony were particularly effective.

In a brilliant stroke, Middleton adapted Calderón's stage instructions for the finale to the physical space and opportunities provided by the Aveda Institute's hall. Calderón's directions state that Venus and Adonis should ascend by opposite ends of the stage, he as the "flower of heroic sacrifice" and she as the "evening star." Ultimately, Calderón has the two lovers ascend to where Cupid is located, after which the three characters vanish, the sun disappears, and only the star remains. In his production, however, Middleton had Venus and Adonis hold hands, pass down the audience's central aisle, and then ascend up the back bleachers of the hall, at which point the spectacular stained-glass sun of the Aveda Institute was back-lit, glowing over the united lovers. This effect was spell-binding.

Mention should also be made of the costuming. All principal characters had sumptuous and opulent costumes, and even minor characters such as peasants or soldiers were well presented. Calderón's hints regarding the costuming of the five Afflictions were scrupulously observed. These oppressive characters were frightening and exotic with their masks covered with flames-and the singers' performance styles matched the costumes and dramatic moment with their nasal and frightening timbres. Fine touches abounded. For instance, Calderón specified that Suspicion was to carry a telescope (that would magnify the smallest thing way out of proportion): the costume designer placed an extra set of eyes on Suspicion's mask, thus underscoring the looking, prying, and voyeuristic eyes of one who is always looking for "clues" and "evidence" to support or confirm an all-consuming suspicion. Dragón's costume provided another clever example. From his first moments on stage, the laughable Dragón exuded an air of foolish buffoonery: his costume consisted of a cooking pan and scrub brush for a helmet, with an accompanying mixing bowl for a breast plate. He had a collar of sausages which he snacked upon whenever he had the opportunity. The costuming-as well as Douglas Shambo's stage presence-perfectly captured the gracioso tradition of Spanish theater. The audience knew instantly that we were dealing with a humorous side-kick in the vein of da Ponte's Leporello or Calderón's Clarín from *La vida es sueño*.

The cast and orchestra were stellar. Maria Jette as Venus and Ellen Hargis as Adonis were particularly expressive with inspired phrasing and ornamentation, impeccable stage presence, and lovely voices. Their singing communicated the nuance of *each* line of text. For instance, Venus has paired melodic lines (beginning at line 1862, "¡Un Adonis! ¡Ah de mí!"), but Jette captured the sentiment of each line through slight variances in tempo, timbre, stage movement, and phrasing. She would press forward, hold back, pause, and move once again into the next phrase. The gentle rubato and arched phrases were extremely expressive-and were *perfectly* coordinated with the continuo

ensemble-making one of the most tender and effective moments of the evening's entertainment. Remarkably, Hargis and Jette were able to match each other's virtuosity and delivery whenever they were on stage together. Their ensemble was superb.

The evening had one near catastrophe: David Henderson (cast as Mars) had a sudden attack of laryngitis before Saturday's show and could not eke out a sound. His silence threatened the show's cancellation, but the incredible harpist Andrew Lawrence-King volunteered to step in and sight sing the entire role from the pit while realizing the continuo! Henderson mimed the part on stage while Lawrence-King tossed off the part flawlessly with apparent ease—a bold and impressive feat. My amazement at Lawrence-King's abilities was matched only by my frustration that I did not get to hear Henderson's true voice; his excellent reputation preceded him. I will just have to wait for some other performance.

The other roles were well executed as well. The bellicose Belona was powerfully played by the talented Yolanda Williams. The comedic Chato (Brian Link) and his saucy girlfriend Celfa (Lauren Beaty) were charming and delighted the audience with their keen sense of theatrical timing. Chato came across as funny and boorish, whereas Celfa was spunky and vulpine, especially in the mountain scene with Mars and Dragón (line 1711 onward). At times they even stepped above the two-dimensional stereotypes of the *gracioso* and *graciosa* traditions of Spanish theater, becoming sensitive and even verisimilar (such as their exchange in Venus's garden beginning at line 1447). Douglas Shambo was hysterical as the oafish Dragón, and Angela Malek performed the role of Cupid with aplomb. As the allegorical figure Disenchantment, Brian Manlove strolled out on stage on stilts as if they were natural parts of his body at birth. His voice was menacing, and the continuo group growled around in the low register perfectly reflecting Disenchantment's infelicity. The remaining cast (Marita Link, Diana Kenney, Anne Schaefer, Melanie Germond, Mary Boehlke, Lila Olson, and Lisa Habeck) performed splendidly in a variety of roles that required not only vocal artistry, but impressive acting and dancing skills as well. The scene featuring the Afflictions was particularly impressive: each vocalist matched the phrasing of the other perfectly. Fear (Brian Link), Suspicion (Yolanda Williams), Envy (Marita Link), and Anger (Angela Malek) each tossed off short snippets as they introduced Mars to their comrade in misery, Disenchantment—and in each instance the four vocalists sang a crescendo that precisely replicated each other's dynamic contours. Lila Olson (who played the minor roles of Cintia and Melpomene) has a voice that merits a major role in a future production.

The orchestra could not have been better. Baroque violinist David Douglass (along with Ellen Hargis and Andrew Lawrence-King) had performed earlier in the week with Douglass's remarkable violin band, *The King's Noyse*. Violinists Margaret Humphrey and Ginna Watson and viol player Suzanne Mudge filled out the string ensemble, joined

by Barbara Weiss on recorders and harpsichord and David Edminster who doubled on bajón and recorder. Their musicality was breathtaking. Lines rose and fell as if they were played by a single player on a rich multi-stringed instrument. I have rarely heard better ensemble playing.

The continuo group deserves special mention. First, the group emphasized baroque harp and plucked strings-and that unquestionably was the preferred sonority in the New World in the early 1700s. The acclaimed harpist Andrew Lawrence-King was joined by Rebecca Root on harp, Phillip Rukavina on vihuela, Gregory Hamilton on theorbo, and music director Barbara Weiss on harpsichord.

Most enjoyable was the way that the orchestra filled out and realized the bare harmonic skeleton that constitutes the extant scores of *La púrpura de la rosa*. The continuo resources shifted to match the specific performers. In the opening scene, for instance, Venus was supported by theorbo and harp: when Adonis entered, however, the continuo grouping mirrored the new character with the new addition of the harpsichord to the continuo sonorities. This sort of "orchestration" was judicious and extremely effective. When Cupid appeared high in the elevated opening on stage, high harps accompanied her as she began singing to Venus and Adonis, "No tienes que prosigue (line 1139)." When Disenchantment came onto stage with his long black beard and shackled in chains, the continuo group captured the moment with brutish, low sonorities. The strings also adapted to portray the action on stage. Amorous moments were painted with soothing legato bowings, but if Chato or Dragón were blustering about, the bowing became more brusque and rustic. The recorder timbres also artfully underscored romantic moments, such as in Adonis's reverie (line 947 ff.) when he sang of pleasant dwellings, sleep, and love. In spite of the remarkable instrumental details, there were moments where I would have enjoyed the sparkling sonorities of a treble-strung baroque guitar. (Of course, my objectivity here is colored by the fact that I am a baroque guitarist!)

One of the most laudatory aspects of the evening was the inclusion of flawless and artful Baroque dance. The depictions of dance steps so often reproduced from the treatises of Pécour, Feuillet, Dézais, Minguet y Yrol, Ferriol y Boxeráus and Pierre Rameau came to life in Bob Skiba's brilliant choreography. He and fellow dancer Jeffrey Annis-as well as every member of the cast-provided this essential element that is so often short-changed in modern revivals of Baroque opera. Although Torrejón's music constantly repeats major sections of music, Skiba did not allow himself to simply replicate the same dance steps over and over. Instead, he choreographed scenes that were imaginative, ever changing and unfolding and-at least in this reviewer's opinion-scrupulously appropriate to the dramatic necessities and historical context. Kudos for Skiba and Middleton. Their collaboration here was stunning.

Although I enjoyed Ex Machina's production immensely, in closing, I must express one significant regret. I lament that this glorious production was seen only in Minneapolis and not nationwide. It really should be aired on PBS as part of *Great Performances* or some similar venue. After all, James Middleton and Ex Machina have brought to life this entertaining musical wonder, the *first* American opera! This event is of national and international significance-and it demands a wider audience through a national tour and/or national broadcast. If ever there was a production worthy of major corporate and governmental sponsorship, it is this one.

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