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OPERA REVIEWS

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Reviews

An all Spanish concert

by Steve Cohen

A tu Corazón

Lyric Fest

Academy of Vocal Arts, Philadelphia

18 November 2012



American politicians are discovering that the nation's population is becoming increasingly Hispanic. Opera companies seem slower. At the Metropolitan, for example, productions have been sung in Chinese (Tan Dun's *The First Emperor*) Sanskrit (Philip Glass's *Satyagraha*) and Latin (Igor Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*), but nothing lately in Spanish.

This all-Spanish concert at the Academy of Vocal Arts revealed some of the rich repertoire that's available.

It ranged from Moorish roots through Hebraic-heritage Ladino song to music of the Latin-American cultures enslaved by the Spaniards, to Cuban and Mexican ballads and arias from the Iberian Peninsula. Well-known composers such as Manuel de Falla, Enrique Granados, Joaquin Turina and Astor Piazzolla were represented.

The performers were Maria Aleida and Diego Silva, who are current resident artists at AVA, joined by Luis Ledesma, a 1998 graduate, and Carla Dirlikov, a 2009 graduate, with pianist Laura Ward.

A surprisingly large diversity of styles came from the mixing of disparate cultures. After the Moors invaded the Iberian peninsula in the year 711 a Middle-Eastern Muslim influence predominated for the next eight centuries, affecting architecture, language and mode of dress. This was exemplified in Silva's plaintive singing of *El Pano Moruno* (The Moorish cloth.)

The decade of Columbus's voyages to the New World also saw Jews and Muslims banished from Spain and heretics burned at

the stake, and Aleida beautifully captured that mood with the sad *¿Con quella lavare?* (With what shall I wash the skin of my face?)

Juan de Anchieta was the court composer for Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492 and he wrote *Con amores, la mi madre* (With love, my mother) which Ledesma vocalised affectionately.

When the Spaniards arrived in Argentina they conquered primitive farmers and hunter-gatherers. Their indigenous culture inspired over 100 songs by Carlos Guastivina, including *Pampamapa*, a paean to the land that was powerfully belted by Ledesma.

The Conquistadores colonized Columbia, Panama and Ecuador and the Columbian musician and historian Hans Federico Neuman evoked the original civilizations in *Rumbo Estelar* (Starry Way) where Dirlikov sang moodily about the solitude of empty ports. Aleida then dreamed of the far-away Pampas in Lecuona's *Cancion del amore triste* (Song of Sad Love.)

Spanish invaders subjugated the Aztecs and Mayans but composer Manuel Ponce evoked their spirit with *Estrellita* (Little Star), a romantic ballad which Silva crooned in the pleasing style of Mario Lanza.

The most colorful performances of the afternoon were *Cuba dentro*, Ledesma's world-weary evocation of fandangos and a parrot at the piano in old Cuba, and a ballad of a black slave in Cuba, *Canto Negro*, smokily chanted by Dirlikov, a dramatic mezzo whose mother, incidentally, is Mexican.

The most unusual was the brief Sephardic *Yo boli de foja en foja* (I flew from leaf to leaf) sung tenderly by Silva. And the most spectacular was Aleida's *Escucha al Ruisenor* (Listen to the Nightingale) which included dazzling high coloratura leaps.

Ledesma summed up the spirit of the program when he told the audience, "This is our culture; this is our language."

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