

**VÁZQUEZ; A. SIERRA; LIANG; PAREDES *Cuatro Corridos*** • Susan Narucki (s); Pablo Gómez (gt); Aleck Karis (pn); Ayano Kataoka (perc) • BRIDGE 9473 (53:24 📖)

The first necessity here is to explain the odd headnote. This is a four-scene chamber opera where each scene is written by a different composer (there is, though, one librettist: Jorge Volpi). The opera is for soprano, guitar, piano, and percussion, and Susan Narucki is listed not only as the soprano, but the Artistic Director of the project. The work deals with the difficult subjects of abuse, prostitution, and human trafficking, subjects that are central to how we are judged as a civilization. Susan Narucki commissioned the work to get four different perspectives on the subject, utilizing different tales; she turned to two Mexican composers (Hebert Vásquez and Arlene Sierra) and two American composers (Lei Liang and Hilda Paredes). Because the disc comes with superb notes by her and the librettist, I will not take a great deal of *Fanfare* space with excessive details. Librettist Volpi writes of a legend from pre-Hispanic times concerning the inhabitants of Tenancingo who have devoted themselves to the singular profession of prostitution, and he ties it to the discovery in 2001 of the Salazar Juárez brothers who for years have been forcing young Mexican women into prostitution in Tijuana and southern California. Volpi has been almost obsessed with the topic. He began with a film, though he ultimately left that project because of disagreement with its director David Pablos (the film was *Las eligidas*). Then came this opera in 2013, and in 2015 a novel, *Las elegidas*. In this opera, what we really have is a collection of four related monologues, each a portrait of one of four women, all trapped, all victims.

Clearly, *Cuatro Corridos* is not for the faint of heart. This is powerful, compelling, excruciatingly dramatic music. Although each composer has his or her own voice, the fact that they share both the subject and the instrumentation manages to give the work a strong artistic unity. One should not look for memorable tunes here, but the music in all cases is well written for the voice and is quite remarkable in its imaginative and colorful employment of a wide range of percussion instruments. Those who look to music to be an escape from everyday problems will not find that escape here. *Cuatro Corridos* is music that demands your full attention, listening while follow the libretto that Bridge provides. The music of all four composers is similar enough, particularly because the human issues they are confronting are the same, so that the work has a surprisingly strong overall shape.

The first, Herbert Vásquez's *Azucena*, begins with music that clearly is rooted in the folk music of Mexico, but it turns more percussive and the line turns more fragmented as Azucena describes her life of being sold to the American farm workers day and night for their pleasure. The music is painful and poignant when it becomes clear that she is telling her story to her daughter, preparing her for a similar life. Vásquez's vocal writing is particularly effective and powerful.

*Dalia* is next, by Arlene Sierra, and is the most starkly dramatic scene in some ways. Dalia is now an older woman, luring younger girls into the profession, and she knows what their future will be and she knows that she is trapped in her situation, with no real control that would enable her to change it. Her inner torment, guilt, and pain is searingly reflected in Sierra's music.

*Rose* is an interesting scene—because she is a police officer giving a press statement about the arrest of the Salazar Juárez brothers, and a description of their crimes, while at the same time recognizing that nothing will really change for these girls rescued from this gang of pimps and drug dealers. Rose's monologue covers a huge range, starting out with a simple recital of facts, but morphing into a lecture to us all questioning what will happen to the women set free

from the evil brothers: “what will happen to these señoritas, illegal, without their papers, who were freed by us today? They will go back to their homes now...back to where their mothers and their fathers are waiting for their return.” The implication we are left with is that they will be re-sold into prostitution. Liang’s music is unbearably searing, making wide use of the colors available to him in the percussion instruments and writing a jagged vocal line that conveys the bitterness and frustration in the text.

Last is *Violetta*, who tells a story of both herself and a murdered friend, Iris. This is the most horrible of all the stories, the immediacy of its impact made conveyed by both the words and by Hilda Paredes’s music. At times, when Violetta is recalling something pleasant, the music is actually quite lovely. But then it turns on itself for scenes like the murder of Iris by the traffickers who first raped her and then caught and killed her when she tried to escape. A touching memorial to Iris concludes this work, and with it the entire opera.

The biggest surprise for me was the unity of these four scenes. Perhaps the importance of the often-avoided subject of human trafficking unified these composers. The notes do not indicate the degree of cooperation or communication during the project, and certainly each composer does retain a singular voice. Nonetheless, there is an organic unity and flow to *Cuatro Corridos* that carries the listener through from the beginning to the end.

The performance seems ideal. Narucki manages the huge vocal and dramatic demands with ease, displaying an ability to sing softly and at full throttle without ever losing tonal body, and an equal ability to invest what she is singing with meaning. Her instrumental partners are completely committed and perform brilliantly. The recording is well balanced, though I would have preferred just a bit more focus on the soprano. That is a minor reservation. Very helpful notes are included, along with full text and translation.

This is a work of art that demands engagement, requires that you give it 100% of your intellectual and emotional attention. If you do, I believe you might find it as rewarding as I did—chilling, at moments horrifying, but, yes, rewarding. It is clearly not music for everyone. But for those with an adventurous soul, open to various strands of music being written today, this one is highly recommended.

**Henry Fogel**