

OPERA NEWS

VÁZQUEZ, SIERRA LIANG, PAREDES: *Cuatro Corridos*

CD Narucki; Karis, piano; Gómez, guitar; Kataoka, percussion. Texts and translations. Bridge 9473



WHEN

JORGE VOLPI, the librettist of *Cuatro Corridos*, received a commission from soprano Susan Narucki, an esteemed champion of new music who now teaches at the University of California at San Diego, he knew he wanted to write about human trafficking, a subject that had tormented him for years. Volpi's libretto consists of one monologue for each of four characters, and he enlisted four different composers to set each. Reflecting the bi-national nature of the project, two of the composers are Mexican, and the

other two are from the U.S.

In the first monologue, with music by Hebert Vázquez, we hear from Azucena, a prostitute. The piece starts as a Mexican folk ballad, a simple waltz tune on the guitar, with an overlay of creatively dissonant piano. After two stanzas, however, it turns ominous and distorted. "Off you go, daughter," Azucena recalls her father saying. The music is still rhythmic, but syncopated, jagged and much more discordant. It's like warped calypso music, mirroring the horrible life into which the young woman is about to be forced. There's a return to the more comfortable rhythm and harmony of the beginning, but then it turns slow, shard-like and menacing with rapidly oscillating guitar figures, bowed marimba and insinuating upper register piano figures. After a Bartókian frenzy for piano and percussion, the cheery song accompaniment returns in E major, and it's devastating.

In the second monologue, with music by Arlene Sierra, we hear from Dalia, a former prostitute who is now a trafficker herself. This movement doesn't bother, like the first one does, with familiar harmonies and rhythms. Sierra makes calculatedly spare use of the instruments, emphasizing bleakness and pessimism. Dalia reacts with shame and bitterness to what her life has become. The movement dies away with quiet despair.

The third section, by Lei Liang, is the only one in English. Now we hear from a policewoman announcing that the Salazar brothers, ringleaders of the real-life Tenancingo trafficking network, have been arrested (this actually happened in 2001). The first stanza is spoken to the stern rhythmic accompaniment of a drum; the character doesn't sing until the end of the second stanza, on the phrase "a gang of criminal pimps." This fragmented and frenzied monologue seems inspired by Chinese opera in its use of percussion and swooping vocals; it gives the policewoman a blazing characterization.

In the final monologue, with music by Hilda Paredes, a woman (Violeta) sings about her friend Iris, who did not survive the ordeal. The musical language is economical, anguished and almost anarchic; then it builds to savage pounding and thrashing, giving the impression that societal norms have disintegrated. The syllabically intoned final line ("I wither from sadness / a flower without dew") is heartbreaking.

Narucki is a Ninja warrior in her ability to traverse this unrelentingly difficult (both musically and emotionally) hour-long work with such immersive passion and intensity. All four composers make brilliantly imaginative use of the instrumental forces, and the astoundingly virtuosic players—Pablo Gómez on guitar, Aleck Karis on piano and Ayano Kataoka on percussion—are vital to the success of the performance. This piece is bracingly fresh, continuously fascinating and deeply disturbing; somehow, though, you emerge with a sense of optimism that, in the proper hands, ghastly human tragedies can result in great art. —*Joshua Rosenblum*

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