

Opera review: 'Ainadamar'

New generation of performers earns its standing ovation

By Peter Jacobi

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The Chicago Symphony has just announced that tickets are now on sale for four performances in February of "Ainadamar," the opera by Osvaldo Golijov, the orchestra's current composer-in-residence.

Heading the cast will be soprano Dawn Upshaw, for whom the starring role was written.

All well and good, but Bloomington audiences had an opportunity to experience this sizzling work on Thursday and Friday evenings. They heard and saw it free of charge rather than for all the pretty pennies that the Chicago curious will have to shell out for admission.

Granted, no Upshaw here, but Meghan Dewald, who sang the lead in riveting fashion on Thursday (this reviewer could not attend the second performance), was ample compensation in what was billed as not only the college premiere of "Ainadamar" but the first without the cast that first did it four years ago.

Our privilege was the result of negotiation between the composer and IU Jacobs School of Music conductor Carmen Helena Tellez, who persuaded Golijov it was time for a new generation of performers to take on the opera, thereby expanding its access.

Well, Tellez not only convinced Golijov; she convinced Thursday's audience in Auer Hall that both had made the right decision. The standing ovation awarded at the end of this 80-minute emotional blockbuster was thunderous and long, in obvious recognition of a brilliant new music drama sung and played with uncommon and matching brilliance.

This was an affair to remember.

"Ainadamar," meaning "Fountain of Tears," tells the story in three scenes, called images, of poet and playwright Federico Garcia Lorca, murdered near a fountain in Granada by fascist Falangist forces during the Spanish Civil War. Lorca had been a voice of freedom and sanity. His death came to symbolize the artistic conscience, its constant, history-spanning struggle to be heard against societal forces out to suppress and destroy it.

The central character is Margarita Xirgu, an actress for whom, in scene one, Lorca has written a play about a 19th-century martyr for Republicanism, Mariana Pineda; who, in scene two, fails to persuade the poet to leave Spain and come to Cuba with her for safety, and who, in the final scene, set 30 years later, dies with the poet still much on her mind and while striving to perform the Lorca play a final time.

Not only was Meghan Dewald as Margarita outstanding, but so was Wayne Hu, he of a virile baritone, he also being the first male to play Lorca, a part originally written as a trouser role for mezzo soprano.

Hu made an awfully strong case for baritones. Suna Avci, as Margarita's student, and Ulises Solano as Death, the voice of evil, added noteworthy characterizations to the performance.

The women of the Contemporary Vocal Ensemble, the IU Chamber Orchestra and members of the Latin American Popular Music Ensemble all contributed significantly in realizing Golijov's amazingly fertile score — in which one could hear Latin and flamenco influences, the melancholy of Jewish musical traditions, contemporary classical elements and even computer-generated sound effects, encompassing water and warfare.

Conductor Tellez remarkably brought it all together. Her goal was fusion, and she accomplished it.

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