

## Music

### Work in Progress: A New Mexican Opera

Fifty-two years have gone by since the Theater of Fine Arts, Mexico's main opera house, staged Puccini's *Tosca*, its first operatic production. Since then, nearly 180 operas have been performed there. Of these, only ten have been by Mexican composers, such as Carlos Chávez, José Pablo Moncayo, Ricardo Castro, Carlos Jiménez Mabarak and others.



Composer Mario Lavista at work

Elsewhere in Mexico, notably at the National University, there have been a few performances, including works such as *Leoncio y Lena* and *Orestes parte*, both written by Federico Ibarra. Many of these operas were never staged again after their opening seasons, and there are some Mexican operas, like *En la encrucijada*, by Manuel Enríquez, that have never been shown. It would seem, then, that opera is not very well established in Mexico's music circles. Thus, a new Mexican opera is always a curiosity.

Years ago, American composer Samuel Barber wrote a short piece, *On waiting for a libretto*, describing the agonizing years

spent looking for a suitable story for an opera until Gian Carlo Menotti provided him with the text for *Vanessa*. Similarly, Mexican composer, Mario Lavista (born 1943), has been waiting for several years to start work on an old, cherished project of his. Lavista chose his text years ago, *Aura*, a short story written in 1962 by Carlos Fuentes, Mexico's best known writer abroad.

Traditionally, composers have chosen texts that offer strong characters, a clear narrative, some twists of plot and a dramatic ending. In this case, Lavista has set a very difficult task for himself and his librettist; Fuentes' story follows none of those traditional lines.

What, then is *Aura* about? Felipe, a young, sensitive historian, is drawn by a classified ad to a dark, mysterious house in downtown Mexico City. There he is met by a bedridden old lady who, for a very good salary, asks him to edit the memoirs of her late husband, General Llorente. The young man takes the job and agrees to live in the old lady's house until he finishes. Once in the house, Felipe

meets *Aura*, ostensibly the old woman's niece and becomes fascinated with her. Slowly, the encounters between Felipe and *Aura* drift away from the real world and move into the realm of fantasy. At the same time, Felipe's work on General Llorente's memoirs bring him ever closer to the family secrets: wealth, power, romance, love...and madness.

In the end, the images of Consuelo, the old woman, and *Aura*, the young girl, become blurred into a single being, and Felipe is trapped in a twilight zone between fact and fantasy.

Why was Mario Lavista drawn to a story apparently devoid of operatic qualities? The composer him-

## odds and ends

self answers this and other questions for us.

“Ever since I read Fuentes’ story, I was fascinated by the atmosphere of confinement created by the author and by the way real people and ghosts mingle in the narrative. I have found several examples of this in Oriental literature, especially in ancient Chinese stories and in the plays of Yukio Mishima; there may also be some influence from Henry James. I think the main theme in *Aura* is the eternal expectation of love and the idea that love can transcend death and that lovers can meet after death.”

The libretto will be done by Juan Tovar who has written consistently for film and the theater. How will the librettist and the composer approach such a difficult story?

“The first problem confronting Juan Tovar is the fact that *Aura* is basically a non-verbal story, so he has to start by creating dialogues that aren’t there, dialogues to be spoken and sung in the opera. There are three main characters in the story: Felipe, Consuelo and *Aura*, and we must take *Aura* to be the personification of Consuelo. There is another character, General Llorente, who never really appears in the story; but we learn a lot about him through the fragments of his memoirs read by Felipe. Juan and I have reached the conclusion that the General must indeed appear in the opera as a flesh and blood character, even though he is a ghost. Moreover, we think that the General himself should read his own memoirs aloud. Thus, we would have a nice balance: *Aura* as Consuelo’s personification and Felipe as General Llorente’s personification.”

What about narrative continuity and the cast?

“We are thinking of a one-act opera, with four singers who must be, above all, very good actors. My idea is of an opera with a lot of acting, a lot of dialogue, a lot of whispering and a little singing; that is, an opera in which we use vocal resources more appropriate to the story’s mood.”

Will the opera be scored for a big orchestra?

“Definitely not. I want the characters in this opera to move inside a sort of closed aural vault, which will be provided by the music. Thus, I am thinking of using a small instrumental ensemble that will allow me to write in the same style

that I’ve been using these past few years, emphasizing the newest virtuoso techniques for wind instruments and string. This would be impossible with a big orchestra, but in a small, chamber-like ensemble I can count on having soloists in every chair. So far, I have a pretty good idea of the kind of ensemble I’ll use: flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, probably two French horns, trumpet, a pair of trombones, celeste, string quintet and maybe a couple of percussion instruments to add a bit of color, a vibrâphone, a gong.”

Will *Aura* follow traditional operatic structures?

“On the contrary, I have always thought of writing the work without the usual division into arias, duets, trios and the like. The idea is to build a unity, a whole, without pauses, from beginning to end. In fact, I could say that in planning this opera I have certain role models. Specifically Debussy’s *Pelleas et Melisande*, a work in which the music creates a vault that the characters move, act and sing in, but in which voice is not of paramount importance, as is the case in Italian opera. I would also like to play with the time element. In Fuentes’ original story everything happens in just three days and two nights. I have talked with Juan Tovar about this, and for the libretto I want no clear divisions between day and night, only a continuous flow of time and space, in which ghosts can appear, come and go about their business in a normal way. The moment Felipe comes into the house, he must know that time has been suspended.”

*Aura* will be Mario Lavista’s first opera, although he is no stranger to the world of vocal music. To date, he has written no fewer than six works featuring the human voice; one, for baritone and chamber ensemble, another for three unaccompanied choirs and four others, for mezzo, either with piano or orchestra. Lavista has had his idea for *Aura* since 1980. Only recently, after finding Juan Tovar to write the libretto and convincing Ludwig Margules to do the staging, has the project really gotten off the ground.

Despite the fate of so many other Mexico operas, even at this early date it is safe to assume that *Aura* will not go unheard. The Fine Arts Opera has officially commissioned the work from Lavista, making it certain that the opera will be staged.★

Juan Arturo Brennan