

Curtis Opera Theatre Makes Its Mark on

Ainadamar



~ PHOTO: L. C. KELLEY

An original coproduction compels an opera orchestra member to ask, 'How did all of this come together?'

BY RUOKAI CHEN



THE LAST CHORD WASHED AWAY into distant, repeating water droplets. The suspense dissipated, not because of the usual exciting release that follows the final curtain, but due to a different emotion. To this moment I'm not sure if there's a way to describe it fully. It was something unique, perhaps a conglomerate of the emotional anguish of Rachmaninoff, the expansiveness of Mahler, the simplicity and elegance of Mozart, and the lush, serene color of Debussy. Such is the effect of Osvaldo Golijov's remarkable opera, *Ainadamar*.

Ainadamar means "Fountain of Tears" in Arabic and refers to an ancient well near Granada, where the Spanish poet and playwright Federico García Lorca was assassinated by Fascist Falangist forces in 1936. Golijov's opera tells the story of Lorca's murder through the memories of the playwright's muse, Catalan actress Margarita Xirgu. The

libretto was written by David Henry Hwang and translated into Spanish by the composer.

The emotional palette apparent in Golijov's works inspired Mikael Eliassen, artistic director of the Curtis Opera Theatre and the Vocal Studies Department, to produce *Ainadamar* with Curtis. He had been amazed by the extraordinary fusion of South American, Sephardic, and Russian music in *La Pasión según San Marcos*, a piece that placed Golijov among the mainstream of contemporary composers. Soon afterward, in summer 2005, he read about the Santa Fe Opera's performance of *Ainadamar* and listened to the CD immediately. The music, he said, left him stunned.

To Mr. Eliassen the genius of Golijov is the ability to fuse individual elements and form a distinct voice. In *Ainadamar* the traditional sound of an orchestra was enhanced by the addition of flamenco and classical guitars and

a laptop's percussive sound effects, immersing the listener in the spray of a firing squad's flying bullets and the galloping of horses.

Mr. Eliassen's passion for this opera grew into a determination to expose Curtis's singers and instrumentalists to Golijov's work.

At the same time, he realized that a project like *Ainadamar* would be too daunting for Curtis to produce on its own; he started conversations with the Opera Company of Philadelphia and the Kimmel Center. For the past decade, singers from Curtis have had small roles in the Opera Company's productions, but *Ainadamar* marked the first collaboration of this scale. The Opera Company lent its music director, Corrado Rovaris, and provided marketing muscle, while the Kimmel Center provided the Perelman Theater as a performance venue, at reduced cost. Both companies promoted *Ainadamar* to their respective audiences, as well. Altogether

NOTES FROM THE ORCHESTRA PIT

During the first rehearsal of *Ainadamar*, counting measures of rest—a mundane task for every orchestral clarinetist—suddenly became extremely challenging. Whereas in Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* or Puccini's *La rondine* I supplemented my counting with musical intuition (when it “sounds right” to come in after a rest), *Ainadamar* did not offer such luxuries. Surrounding the underlying melody of first trumpet cues was a battery of grace notes, syncopations, and trills. The same ornamentations would appear in my part many times, as they were essential to the sharp and pointed flamenco style of the opera. After a few rehearsals, my ears began to adapt to Golijov's style.

Playing under Corrado Rovaris was refreshing. His youthful energy was perfect for the passionate nature of the opera. As with almost all opera conductors, he filled in for the singers during the orchestral rehearsals, showcasing his vocal versatility—and occasionally providing comic relief in the process.

As we moved into the relatively new Perelman Theater, the orchestra members expressed a consensus that it was a more comfortable venue than the Prince, a converted movie theater. One of the new experiences I had in the pit was the extensive use of at least ten microphones, including one inches away from my clarinet. I immediately felt the added pressure: Any mistake I made would be noticed, and maybe preserved forever in a recording. I'd better count well. ☺

—Ruokai Chen

the nonmusical side of production involved around one hundred people.

The next step was negotiating the grand rights—specific guidelines and regulations that producers must follow—which involved hiring the laptop musician, flamenco guitarist, and percussionist favored by Mr. Golijov. (The percussionist, Gonzalo Grau, was unable to perform with Curtis, but he gave two master classes to demonstrate the techniques and Rolando Morales-Matos, a member of the percussion faculty at Curtis, performed in the opera in his place.)

Stage director Chas Rader-Shieber and Mr. Eliassen began to form their artistic vision for the production with designers David Zinn (set), Richard St. Clair (costume), Mark Barton (lighting), César Abreu (choreography), and Brian Mohr (sound). The concept that emerged would be a fresh start for *Ainadamar*: One set, a theatre dressing room, would provide both a physical and metaphorical backdrop for an active staging of the opera. Mr. Eliassen described the original production, which was repeated in London and the United States, as more like an oratorio than an opera. Mr. Rader-Shieber expanded the role of the chorus—members of Margarita Xirgu's theatre troupe—to be choreographed as participants, not just musical witnesses, to the action.

The cast began its musical preparation in January with private and group musical coachings led by the vocal faculty, followed by a musical run-through. Opera and voice

coaches Lisa Keller, Susan Nowicki, and Donald St. Pierre assisted with musical preparation, along with diction coach Teziana Viera and rehearsal pianist Bonnie Wagner. At the first staging rehearsal, the singers learned about the director's artistic vision for the production. They had only a few weeks to incorporate staging with the music before beginning rehearsals and run-throughs with the orchestra in the theater.

On March 14, 2008, following 90 hours of staging rehearsals for the singers, *Ainadamar* made its Philadelphia debut at a sold-out Perelman Theater.

Like any other opera production, *Ainadamar* posed its share of challenges, such as the body microphone that every performer had to wear. “It is almost anathema to put a mic on an opera singer,” said Ralph Batman, managing director of the Curtis Opera Theatre and Vocal Studies Department. “It's just not done.” Curtis hired a sound designer to create a microphone scheme so that the voices could be audible over the lush orchestration and electronic elements of the score.

Time also represented a major challenge—the production team had half as much time for technical set-up and rehearsal in the Perelman as for its usual productions at the Prince Music Theater. And the mandatory hiring, while common among opera companies, was new to Curtis. Overall the complex collaboration went quite smoothly, Mr. Batman said.

“A lot of people,” said artistic director Mr. Eliassen, “were very interested to see if it was possible that this piece could also exist without that original production. Which, of course, it turned out that it could. And it was completely different than what the original production was about.”

When asked about an artistic assessment of the opera, he said, “I think it was very overwhelming for the orchestra players to participate. The singers had an emotional journey in each performance that was overwhelming. I think that the response—at least what I heard from people and what people wrote to me—was that it was so unexpected, this emotional thing that happened.”

What is this “emotional thing”? I still haven't found a specific word or action to describe it fully, but I've discovered I don't need to. It is a distinct voice. It is Golijov, and it is *Ainadamar*. ☺

Clarinetist Ruokai Chen from Hockessin, Del., is a student of Donald Montanaro and entered Curtis in 2006.

This production of *Ainadamar* was made possible by a grant from The Philadelphia Music Project, a program of the Philadelphia Center for Arts and Heritage, funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and administered by The University of the Arts.

IN THE WINGS: ‘WOZZECK’

The Curtis Opera Theatre will collaborate with the Opera Company of Philadelphia and the Kimmel Center again this season, in a production of Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* on March 13 through 18. The opera is also the focal point of this year's cross-curricular project, which includes a study of the Viennese School of early twentieth-century composers.

Life reels bloodily out of the soldier Wozzeck's grasp as he faces the infidelity of his lover. For the first time, the Curtis Opera Theatre will welcome two alumni back as visiting artists. Tenor and 2003 graduate Jason Collins will play the pivotal role of the Drum Major. Tony Award-winning Broadway star and 1993 graduate Shuler Hensley (*Oklahoma!*, *Young Frankenstein*) returns to his operatic roots to portray the brooding title character. ☺