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Casablanças — *L'enigma di Lea* premiere: Barcelona

By Malcolm Miller

For an opera about morality and mortality, freedom and control, reason and emotion and a quest for utopia, there was also much to enjoy by way of lyricism, excitement, passion and allusive humour in *L'enigma di Lea*, a new opera by the Catalan composer-librettist team of Benet Casablanças and Raphael Argullol, premiered on February 9 at the Gran Teatre del Liceu de Barcelona. I attended the third of the four performance run which received an enthusiastic reception, impressive for both its challenging subject matter and its superb production. The three parts (not 'Acts') last one and three quarter hours, which went by swiftly thanks to the superb singing of an international cast led by British soprano Allison Cook as Lea, supported by the stirring Liceu opera orchestra and choir under Josep Pons, enhanced by Carme Portaceli's energetic, provocative staging, Paco Azorin's vivid sets, Antonio Belart's colourful costumes, visually impressive videography (Miquel Raió) and imaginative contemporary choreography (Ferran Carvajal).

This is the first new Spanish opera to be commissioned by the Liceu in some 10 years, and the first opera by Benet Casablanças, currently director of the Barcelona conservatoire, and a leading composer in many genres, whose works recently featured in a CD released by the London Sinfonietta (Sony Classical 88985468422). Much of the engaging quality of the opera emanates from Casablanças's score, symphonic, highly characterised, contemporary while accessible, vividly orchestrated, alternating rhythmic drive with broad lyrical tableaux, well suited to the moods of Argullol's rather allegorical libretto.

The storyline is complex and perhaps might be compared to a medieval mystery play, symbolic rather than dramatic. The publicity summarising the plot, described how "Lea, a creature who has belonged to God and exists to serve the divine pleasure ("pure instinct, crystalline sensuality"), lives in a place beyond time and cannot reveal her secret. The bearer of immortality, she is under surveillance from two monstrous beings who guarantee morality in opposition to individual freedom." Indeed the opera begins when Lea, an archetypal woman, experiences a 'divine rape', an act which draws on myths such as Leda and the Swan, suggestive of a myriad of potential interpretations. The rape is musically depicted by a moving soliloquy for flute, and an orchestra outburst, set against a violent videographic backdrop.

A Greek-styled chorus of 'priests', blacksuited businessmen, prophesy that Lea will be forced to keep her secret through the ages. Lea's voice is introduced in a plangent lyrical aria that hits at her passionate nature, here rendered with intensity by the outstanding mezzo soprano Allison Cook, the very high spiralling vocal writing projected thrillingly, her expertise in contemporary opera evident through her balance of complex vocal lines with effective, alluring stage action. Two guardians help Lea endure the 'legend of the secret', and avoid human love, their characteristic lines resiliently sung by baritone Felipe Bou and coloratura soprano Sonia de Munck. After Lea's melancholic aria she meets Three Ladies of the Frontiers (soprano Sara Blanch, and mezzos Anais Masllorens and Marta Infante), modelled on a similar threesome in *The Magic Flute*, who encourage her in a series of contrasting ariosos, to confront her search for love. At the edge of the world Lea meets Ram, a wandering blind man, projected nobly by baritone José Antonio López in an aria that relates his forbidden glimpse of immortality, which has led him to renounce the world of the senses. Their lyrical love duet is curtailed by the guardians, only to flower again at the climax of the opera, where Lea's passionate fire thaws Ram's icy reason. Here the production was especially effective, the two singers at first on opposite sides of the stage gradually reuniting following an interpolation for the Three Ladies, their duet adorned with raunchy choreography for the body-suited corps de ballets (literally) creating a Venusberg-style contemporary dance within one of the stage cages.

The contrasting middle part of the opera is highly-charged and pointedly scene, like a symphonic Scherzo. The setting is abstract, an "institution for outsiders" in 2019, introduced by a splendidly expressive (seventy-strong) ad mixed chorus of doctors in white coats. The institution is presided over by the charismatic Dr Schicksal, chief psychologist, former circus ringmaster, whose flamboyant leaping and exotic, erotic virtuoso lines were resiliently sung by counter-tenor Xavier Sabata. Schicksal's entrance in a slowly descending cage is symbolic, perhaps, of his control of social and moral constraints. Schicksal introduces Lea, and highlights her 'enigma' – that men shy away from her as they come close. Illustrating his point are three artists 'from different ages', a witty three-tenor team of David Alegret, Antonio Lozano and Juan Noval-Moro who each sing about a different aspect of love: spiritual, mystical and sexual. The music ironically alludes to madrigal, cavatina and arietta, each ineffectual in winning the key to Lea's secret.

The final part is an expansive *Adagio*, with a love duet that offers symmetry to the opening, Lea's horrific violation by the divine cleansed through her passionate consummation with Ram in the final scene, eloquently choreographed for the corps de ballet. The soliloquy that opened the opera for solo flute also formed a moving epilogue, that instrument symbolically associated throughout with Lea during her arias. The formal symmetry alludes, almost as homage, to a Monteverdi model, its mythical allegory unfolding in arias, ensembles and especially large scale choruses which enact ideas with stylised characterisation rather than development. At the same time there are allusions to operas from different eras, from the fairy-tale quality of *Magic Flute*, to the visceral eroticism of *Wozzeck*.

A particularly intriguing innovation is that the opera is bi-lingual, sung in Italian except for the three main choruses from each part, specified to be performed in the local language of each production: at the Barcelona premiere, in Catalan. The notion of linking an international *lingua franca* of opera with direct appeal to local audiences means that the chorus, as in classical Greek drama, is there purely to comment. Indeed, in the final part the chorus remove their white coats to reveal multi coloured 'everyday' costumes to underline their representation of society. Yet the fluidity of the Italian well suits the lyricism of the extended arias and duets, particularly the climactic love duet culminating, aptly, in a subtle allusion, though vocal ornamentation, to the climax of Monteverdi's *Poppea*.

Throughout the opera, the Orquesta Sinfónica del Gran Teatre del Liceu under the dynamic command of Josep Pons brought out the evocative, enthralling colours of a richly allusive, dense yet at the same time lucid score, with many solos for woodwind and strings, echoes of Debussy and Ravel in the often shimmering textures, and shades of Berg and Stravinsky in the angular rhythms and excitable fast sections. If overall the allegorical aspects of Argullol's plot and the symbolic nature of the characters countered conventional notions of dramatic development, the opera achieved a powerful impression, enhanced by the highly expressive qualities of Casablanca's score, alongside a visually stunning production. One hopes for a chance to experience the work again, hopefully in a British opera house, in the not too distant future.