

Musical archaeology, fine talent bring 'Macias' to life

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IT WAS A great pleasure to see a new old opera last weekend—and one grown right here on the island, at that. The opera is, of course, “Macias,” by the Puerto Rican composer Felipe Gutierrez (1825–1899), and the company which recently brought it out of a century’s deep sleep is Opera de San Juan.

For newcomers to the island’s game of opera-group-watching (as distinguished from opera-watching), it should perhaps be pointed out that this company, under its original name of Opera 68, was the one which showed the others how to do it here ten, eight, six years ago. At a time when locally produced opera seemed to have about as much future here as cross-country skiing, Opera 68 took the risks, raised up a public, generated an atmosphere of confidence in advertisers and backers, and began to create performance opportunities for island singers. In the subsequent decade a number of other lyric-theater groups and off-shoots have come into existence, and all have profited by Opera de San Juan’s early spadework in what was fertile but untilled soil ten years ago.

With its resurrection of the forgotten “Macias,” Opera de San Juan has performed a number of other deeply significant services to the island’s cultural life. The most obvious of these has been to bring to life an important work of Puerto Rican art of the past century. As very often occurs in a sort of chain reaction, this act, while solving one scholarly-artistic problem, has generated ten or fifteen more. These will provide fascinating grist for the research mill for many years to come, as Puerto Rico’s hidden history of music becomes painstakingly elucidated.

On the more immediately effective plane of public perception, a very healthy effect of the resurrection of “Macias” has been to quietly refute a misconception perpetrated here and abroad during the past two decades by the promoters of an annual music festival which takes place in Puerto Rico. According to this self-serving dogma, art music arrived in Puerto Rico only with the festival management itself, the previous four centuries of benighted island history having passed without knowledge of great musical art. The falsehood of this bit of flackery has long been known to specialists, and now a considerable segment of the citizenry has seen proof that it just isn’t so.

And a third healthy effect of this labor of musical archaeology has been to turn attention, if only briefly, toward a work of art itself and away from whoever happens to be performing at the moment. How, then, is this “Macias” of Felipe Gutierrez?

First of all, and make no mistake about it; this is real opera, not zarzuela, operetta, or any other popularly conceived relative. The story, set in 15th-century

Spain, is very characteristic of the romantic 19th-century opera plot. Aida, Tristan, and a host of other famous works immediately come to mind, for example, in the redemption-through-death of a pair of doomed lovers. The dramatic and musical demands of "Macias" would be a challenge to any opera company, while the music itself is on a par with probably 85 or 90 percent of the European opera music composed in the 19th century.

The music of "Macias" is securely planted in the mid-century style; so much so, in fact, that it can only be recognized as the tip of an iceberg. For a largely self-taught local composer (and one who had not traveled abroad) to have written such a work means that Gutierrez lived within and thoroughly absorbed the European tradition—but here, during the 1850s and 1860s. For this to have occurred, there must have been a much richer musical life in San Juan than has been documented or even imagined, and Gutierrez would have had an important (or at least continuous) part in it.

Some of the more direct influences on Gutierrez' work are obvious: Donizetti and Rossini, for example, can be seen rather clearly in harmony, vocal style, and instrumental usage. Gutierrez would have received these influences through acquaintance with European scores performed by visiting and native companies, but which . . . who? . . . when? . . . where? . . . how often? . . .

Yet at the same time "Macias" is definitely an original work and one which deserves to become much better known both in itself and as the tip of that tantalizing iceberg.

