

Clarín. June 12, 2014

An Authentic Lyric Miracle

By Federico Monjeau

Oscar Strasnoy's opera, commissioned by the Teatro Colón is a superb accomplishment. The mezzo-soprano Jennifer Holloway was exceptional.

***** Excellent

Requiem, Oscar Strasnoy's opera commissioned and produced for its world premiere by the Teatro Colón, is based closely on Faulkner's novel "Requiem for a nun", which the editing house Emecé published in Buenos Aires in 1951 as "Requiem para una mujer". The opera in part follows the novel (naturally omitting Faulkner's forceful prologues which precede each of the three acts), but also seals the surface of the original text and expands certain perspectives that are barely sketched in the novel; especially those of the two tragically opposed female characters: Temple Drake and Nancy Mannigoe, the black maid condemned to be hanged for a sort of pious crime.

But in addition to a plot that in the book holds many unspoken lines and obscure passages, the opera seizes upon what Faulkner provides most readily, almost regardless of the language: the aesthetic idea and metaphysical significance of a novel that not arbitrarily has the generic title of Requiem. With its omnipresent chorus, majestically positioned in an elevated position in the manner of a grand jury, the opera has managed to realize the virtual requiem of the novel.

The aesthetic principal is also reflected by a spatial and musical atmosphere. The three acts of the novel and the two acts of the opera take place in closed environments: Temple's home, the court, the Governor's office, the prison. It's hard to imagine images more perfect than those created by director Matthew Jocelyn, with sets by Anick La Bissonnière and Eric-Olivier Lacroix : tension-filled interiors, with pure yet enigmatic lines, threatened by fatal, haunted surroundings.

The music also provides a connection to the landscape. Echoes of the Deep South reach us as though through a filter, but at times also more exposed and dramatic, as in the meaningful modulation towards the world of gospel at the beginning of the second act, which somehow alludes to the concluding lines of the novel. These nods to a more avowed folkloric colour appear but rarely, however. The music is most often articulated in a language with no specific references, powerful, all-enveloping, of a most poignant beauty. It should be added that the evolution of Temple's romantic-erotic perspective reserves for us in the last third of the first act a miracle of contemporary opera: the aria "Oh, Red! I whisper your name" – absolutely breath-taking in the phenomenal interpretation of Jennifer Holloway.

The great American mezzo is the main figure in a cast that also highlights the soprano Sipiwe McKenzie (Nancy), baritones James Johnson (Stevens) and Brett Polegato (Gowan), plus the Argentines Cristian De Marco (Governor) and Santiago Burgi (Pete). The orchestra was extremely fluid, playing with impeccable detail under the direction of the California-based Argentine, Christian Baldini. The chorus of the Teatro Colon under the direction of Miguel Martínez also lived up to its leading role.