

MUSICAL EVENTS

THE LOVE SONG OF FRIDA KAHLO AND DIEGO RIVERA

San Francisco Opera hosts a haunting new work by Gabriela Lena Frank.

By Alex Ross

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Rivera first speaks to Kahlo, who is in the underworld, across a magically spooky texture of xylophone, marimba, celesta, and harp—the river Styx as painted by Monet. Illustration by Cristina Daura



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San Francisco Opera, which just finished celebrating its centennial season, occupies the War Memorial Opera House, a Roman-columned edifice designed after the fashion of the Palais Garnier, in Paris. Across the street is City Hall, another heap of aspirational Beaux-Arts architecture. No other major American city gives such prominence to its opera house; the juxtaposition of culture and power is European in spirit. When I visited last month, Pride festivities had overtaken the Civic Center area, and I thought back to the company's most charged political moment. In 1978, the epoch-making gay politician Harvey Milk was assassinated in his office at City Hall. A lavish memorial was held for him at the Opera House, becoming part of tumultuous demonstrations on behalf of gay rights and against police brutality. Milk had seen "Tosca" there two nights before his death, and wrote to a friend, "The crowd went so wild that Mick Jagger would have been jealous. . . . Ah—life is worth living."

Forty-five years on, San Francisco Opera is facing the same struggles as performing-arts institutions across the country. Subscriptions plunged during the pandemic and show no immediate sign of returning even to pre-2020 conditions—never mind the full houses that prevailed in Milk's time. Nevertheless, the orchestra seats appeared mostly full at two events I attended in June. A program sponsored by the heirs of Ray Dolby, the sound guru, may have helped: at each performance this season, at least a hundred prime seats were made available to Bay Area residents who hadn't been to the opera in the past three years. The tickets cost ten dollars—their price in 1932, when the Opera House opened.

San Francisco Opera has a strong record of presenting new work. John Adams, who resides in nearby Berkeley, has seen five of his operas produced at the house, three of them world premières. For the centennial, the company presented Gabriela Lena Frank's "El Último Sueño de Frida y

Diego,” a magic-realist meditation on the lives and love of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. The opera, which had its première in San Diego last fall, reveals a significant music-theatre talent. Frank, a Berkeley native, has mastered the intricacies of operatic construction on her first attempt, producing a confident, richly imagined score that is free of lapses and longueurs. Let’s hope that more opera commissions come her way.

The libretto, by the playwright Nilo Cruz, is set in Mexico City, on the Day of the Dead, in 1957. Rivera is at the grave of Kahlo, who died three years earlier. A hooded flower-seller glides through the cemetery; she turns out to be Catrina, the Keeper of the Dead. (The skeletal figure of La Catrina appears in Rivera’s mural “Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in the Central Alameda.”) In the underworld, Catrina assembles a motley crew of the dead for their annual pilgrimage. Kahlo, still traumatized by earthly life, at first refuses to join the expedition, but when she hears Rivera’s distant pleas she is persuaded to go. Rivera, on meeting her, decides that his own time is up, and the two artists descend together.

The challenge of intermingling biography and myth might have defeated a less adroit composer; one can imagine a score cluttered with Mexican folkloric effects and supernatural noises. Instead, Frank establishes a dreamlike, liminal mood from the start, with coruscating dissonances that call to mind the late Kaija Saariaho. Spiky trumpet lines hint at mariachi, but for the most part Frank favors an abstracted sense of musical locale. Although a few too many reminiscences of “Peter Grimes” intrude, a distinctive voice emerges: limpid, mercurial, haunting, never heavy. Rivera first speaks to Kahlo across a magically spooky texture of xylophone, marimba, celesta, and harp—the River Styx as painted by Monet.

The production—directed by Lorena Maza, with sets by Jorge Ballina, costumes by Eloise Kazan, and lighting by Victor Zapatero—is as visually seductive as any staging I’ve seen in the past few years. Imagery from Rivera’s and Kahlo’s paintings is integrated into tableaux that seem ready for museum

display themselves. Daniela Mack was lustrous and keenly expressive as Kahlo; Alfredo Daza lent a mournful nobility to Rivera, even if the lower end of his voice sounded faded. Yaritza Véliz delivered a fierce, funny, coloratura-enhanced portrayal of Catrina; the countertenor Jake Ingbar achieved piercing poignancy as Leonardo, a deceased actor who specializes in impersonating Greta Garbo. Roberto Kalb conducted with a sure feeling for pace and balance.

Brilliant color persisted the following night, when the stage was given over to a revival of David Hockney's 1992 designs for "Die Frau ohne Schatten," the monumental fairy tale by Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Richard Strauss. Sadly, this "Frau" has turned out to be Hockney's final opera production; when he was active in the field, his deep pastel tones and light-limbed forms animated everything from "The Magic Flute" to "Turandot." In the case of "Frau," Hockney liberates Strauss's lyrically supercharged music from the reactionary clutter of Hofmannsthal's libretto, which promotes marital concord in the name of efficient childbearing. The other hero of the evening was Donald Runnicles, San Francisco's former music director, who marshalled Strauss's potentially cumbersome score without stinting on its opulence.

"Frau" is a difficult piece to cast, and among the leads only Linda Watson, as the Nurse, exhibited full-on dramatic flair. Nina Stemme, as the Dyer's Wife, was vocally formidable but emotionally cool; Johan Reuter, as Barak, sang with warmth but little fire; David Butt Philip, as the Emperor, fought to project his elegant, focussed tenor over the orchestra; Camilla Nylund, as the Empress, got off to a shaky start, though she later settled into a majestic groove. Strauss's sonic feast remained intact, bewitching the senses even as the brain rebelled.

Across the street, in Davies Hall, the San Francisco Symphony sounds wide awake under the direction of Esa-Pekka Salonen. To be sure, this orchestra was in no need of a renaissance, having prospered during the long,

genial reign of Michael Tilson Thomas and, before that, under Herbert Blomstedt. But Salonen's crystalline technique and passionate intelligence would benefit any ensemble. The question is whether San Francisco knows what a prize it has. There should have been no empty seats at his recent performances of Ferruccio Busoni's Piano Concerto, an arcane masterpiece that happens to be wildly entertaining.

This sublime monstrosity, which had its première in 1904, in Berlin, surfaces rarely enough that each revival turns into an occasion. It lasts seventy minutes, sprawls across five movements, and requires not only a pianist of uncanny powers but also a male chorus. Salonen, who has long been fascinated by the work, has found a suitable collaborator in the volcanically creative German pianist Igor Levit. I've heard the concerto four times live and listened to a dozen recordings; Salonen and Levit's triumph may mark the point at which the piece ceases to be a freak phenomenon and begins to take its place in the repertory.

The dark jewel of the score is the fourth movement, marked "All'Italiana: Tarantella." It is diablerie of the highest order, a bonfire of Romantic vanities, the music Nietzsche wished he could have written. If the preceding forty-five minutes fail to catch fire, though, the night grows long. Salonen succeeded in teasing out a unified symphonic structure. The agitated grandeur that he elicited in the huge middle movement, the Pezzo Serioso, proved so absorbing that the Tarantella came as a delirious jolt. Levit, for his part, supplied not only unflagging virtuoso pyrotechnics but also long-breathed lyric lines: nothing was disjointed or excessive. Above all, the performance was vital; it glowed with belief. The exuberant response of the crowd might not have reduced Mick Jagger to jealousy, but it did make life seem eminently worth living. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated where the new work by Gabriela Lena Frank premiered.

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