

MUSICAL EVENTS

# “AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE” BECOMES A SPANISH OPERA

*Francisco Coll gives Ibsen’s drama a stem-winder of a score.*

By Alex Ross

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Coll’s romantic neo-modernism is abrasive and rhapsodic by turns. Illustration by Rozenn Brécard



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Opera landed in Spain in 1627, less than three decades after the art first arose, in Florence. That year, Italian expatriates in Madrid presented

“La Selva sin Amor” (“The Forest Without Love”), with a libretto by the towering Spanish playwright Félix Lope de Vega and music by Filippo Piccinini and Bernardo Monanni. No one took much notice. At a time when Lope de Vega, Calderón de la Barca, and Cervantes were weaving verbal spells upon the stage, music must have seemed a superfluous addition—just as, in England, the mighty lines of Marlowe and Shakespeare hardly cried out for melodic elaboration. A few decades later, the first zarzuela operas launched a homegrown music-theatre tradition, although their mixture of song and spoken text proved difficult to export. In the centuries that followed, Spanish opera found little international resonance. To date, the Met has staged only two works from Spain: Enrique Granados’s “Goyescas,” in 1916, and Manuel de Falla’s “La Vida Breve,” in 1926.

To see Spanish opera, then, you have to go to the source. Last month, in Valencia, I attended the world première of Francisco Coll’s “Enemigo del Pueblo,” an adaptation of Ibsen’s “An Enemy of the People.” The setting was the Palau de les Arts Reina Sofía, Santiago Calatrava’s futuristic beached whale of an opera house, which opened in 2005. Despite endless controversy over the design—the building cost hundreds of millions of dollars and required extensive modifications to remain functional—the resident company has found a prominent place on the European scene. Its glory is its youthful orchestra, the Orquestra de la Comunitat Valenciana, which plays with greater fire and focus than many more venerable ensembles.

Coll, a forty-year-old native of Valencia, began his education in Spain and completed it in England, studying there with Thomas Adès, a master of twenty-first-century opera. Coll’s early works, with their prickly eclecticism and their fondness for instrumental grotesquerie, reflect the influence of Adès and György Ligeti, among others. Lately, Coll has found a distinctive voice—a kind of romantic neo-modernism, abrasive and rhapsodic by turns. For the maverick violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja, Coll has written a Violin Concerto that is among the finest recent examples of an overworked form: anarchic virtuosity in the outer movements offsets a central episode of

desperate lyrical power.

“An Enemy of the People” seemed to be a strong choice for Coll’s first full-length piece of music theatre. (In 2013, he wrote “Café Kafka,” a one-act chamber opera.) Strangely, Ibsen’s drama had never been adapted for the operatic stage, even though its primary conflict—a righteous individual confronting society—seems tailor-made for the genre. You can imagine the elderly Verdi seizing hold of the material. The libretto, by Àlex Rigola, who also directed the production, keeps the main narrative intact: Dr.

Stockmann, a scientist connected with a prosperous spa in his town, discovers that the spa’s waters are contaminated and, in his quest to publicize the truth, becomes a pariah. The action is transposed to an oceanside much like Valencia’s; the set designer Patricia Albizu supplies painterly backdrops of sand, sea, and sky. The shift also brings to mind the play’s most famous latter-day progeny, Steven Spielberg’s “Jaws,” although no gliding shark fins or chugging double-basses intrude.

Perhaps Rigola should have been more willful in his handling of the text, since his libretto unfolds more like a selection of highlights from the play than like a freestanding adaptation. Ibsen’s five acts are compressed into two, with a total running time of less than ninety minutes. As a result, the collapse of Stockmann’s crusade feels rushed—especially in the pivotal town-meeting scene, in which his brother, the mayor, outmaneuvers him and fellow-citizens shout him down. We don’t get to see Stockmann losing composure by degrees; instead, he lurches almost at once into his incendiary speech condemning the stupidity of the majority. The final scenes, in which Stockmann resolves to reëducate the people on his own, unfold in even more precipitate, sketchy fashion.

All the same, “Enemigo” made for a gripping evening, largely on the strength of Coll’s stem-winder of a score. The opera begins with a kinetic,

frantic prelude in the form of a paso doble, the quick march often heard at bullfights. Here, though, the meter is mainly a lopsided 7/8, the harmony a mangled G major. Such folkloric touches occur at intervals throughout the work, signalling the popular energies that will consume Stockmann. The doctor himself is characterized sometimes by boisterously chattering lines, sometimes by semi-Wagnerian bombast; at the end, his music turns elegiac, implicitly undercutting his dreams of beginning anew. The crowd scenes, however abbreviated, unleash explosive energy. Pummelling orchestral passages hint at the neutral rage of nature itself.

The opening-night cast, while capable and engaged, struggled at times to make itself heard above Coll's potent orchestration. José Antonio López, as Stockmann, showed a handsome, limber baritone, yet he had trouble breaking through the sonic melee. The American soprano Brenda Rae, as Stockmann's supportive daughter, Petra, managed to hold her own, combining brilliant high notes with an expressive chest-voice. The composer conducted, and, even if he overindulged his players, he led with a clear, confident beat. Not surprisingly, he received the evening's loudest ovation. It wasn't just a home-town audience embracing a native son; it was a cosmopolitan public saluting a significant new creative force in the opera world.

**I**n Madrid, the Teatro Real, Spain's flagship opera house since 1850, was offering an all-Bartók evening: the one-act ballet "The Miraculous Mandarin" and the one-act opera "Bluebeard's Castle," with the first movement of the Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta as a weighty intermezzo. The Teatro Real has vigorously supported contemporary opera in recent decades, mounting twenty world premières since 1997. (The company co-produced Coll's "Enemigo" and will present it in February.) Since 2013, the Teatro Real has been led by the Catalan impresario Joan Matabosch, who has a flair for balancing progressive ideas against conservative tastes while placating political overseers.

The Bartók production was the work of the veteran German director Christof Loy, who has lately moved to Madrid and founded a company dedicated to reviving zarzuelas. Loy's staging, which was first seen in Basel in 2022, has no hint of local color: the sets, by Márton Ágh, evoke a nondescript urban wasteland, with a beat-up telephone booth on one side, a hulking warehouselike structure on the other, and junk strewn about. That milieu is an organic match for "Mandarin," in which desperadoes use a girl to entrap passersby until the indestructible title character complicates their scheme. It's more of a stretch for "Bluebeard," in which Judith, the newest bride of a sinister nobleman, discovers the fate of her predecessors. Still, Loy's gritty minimalism, enlivened with bleak, Beckettian humor, established a convincing continuity for the evening.

Loy choreographed "Mandarin" himself, in a free, athletic style that often suggested a sexualized boxing match. Carla Pérez Mora played the girl with self-possessed ferocity; Gorka Culebras made the mandarin a soulfully suffering martyr. In "Bluebeard," the dominant presence was the perennially riveting German soprano Evelyn Herlitzius, who sang Judith with cutting force and fleshed out her portrayal with pinpoint actorly gestures. Not since Anja Silja have I seen a singer embody the workings of fate simply by folding her hands resignedly in her lap. Christof Fischesser, as Bluebeard, could not match Herlitzius's intensity, but his polished, deep-set bass provided a strong musical anchor. Gustavo Gimeno, in the pit, showed an instinctive command of Bartók's rhythms and colors. Those pioneering Florentines would have found the whole thing incomprehensible, yet it came close to fulfilling their theatrical ideal—a seamless fusion of text, music, image, and feeling. ♦

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