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Calisto and Melibea. Music by Jerome Rosen and libretto by Edwin Honig. World premiere at The University of California-Davis, May 31, 1979.

REVIEWER'S NOTES

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As a work for the stage, *La Celestina* presents a director with two inevitable challenges: first are the technical difficulties that arise from the work's overall length and numerous scenes and settings; second is the need to confront the difficulties of the genre of "tragicomedy" and to establish and develop a definite tone throughout the performance. Composer Jerome Rosen and his librettist Edwin Honig have met these problems in their *Calisto and Melibea*, and have worked toward the creation of a dramatic plot and musical line that progresses ineluctably from the first awakening of erotic passion in the young lovers, through the fatal intervention of the bawd and witch, Celestina, and ending in the deaths of all those caught up in the ever-expanding crossplay of greed, egotism and passion.

Insofar as the work's length is concerned, it would be difficult to imagine cutting the play any more than Honig has done and still maintain the coherence of plot and character development that are necessary to understand the eventual fatal involvement of so many people in what begins, innocently enough, as the casual infatuation of two young lovers. Honig has freely adapted and arranged material from the 1631 translation and stage version by James Mabbe. There are sixteen scenes in Honig's three-act operatic script, with four main locations for the dramatic action: Melibea's garden, Calisto's chambers, Celestina's house, and the interior of Melibea's house and her room. Several scenes are played front-stage left or right to represent action taking place in the streets of the city. The physical movement of scenery is accomplished in this staging with about as much economy and swiftness as can be expected. Three large panels are used as backdrops: the left and right ones are stationary and represent, on one side, an arched gateway on a city street and the wall and domed rooftop of a house, and on the other side, the outside wall of Melibea's house with an exterior stairway leading up to the tower. The center panel is moveable, and is rolled away and replaced with another for each change of scene. The scenes in Melibea's garden are partially screened from the audience's direct view by several trellises draped with cloth to suggest hanging vines, providing a discreet seclusion for the lovers.

The set and costumes are only in the most impressionistic sense suggestive of a 15th-century Spain; their predominant motifs show the influence of Moorish styles of architecture and dress, although Celestina's costume is that of the traditional stage gypsy. The overall result is a somewhat vague exoticism whose effect is ultimately in accord with the apparent intentions of the designers. Their concern is quite obviously less with historical naturalism and more with creating the illusion of a colorful and almost legendary tale of passion and death.

The anti-naturalistic effect is sustained as well by the color scheme and painting style used on the backdrops, and by the lighting. For example, the sets that represent exterior walls of houses are painted a hazy sky-blue that melds into grey, and in places even into a subtle orange or pink -- the effect overall is that of a sky covered by thin billowy clouds, and tinted very slightly by the light of the setting sun. The set is lit at first to emphasize the natural colors, but during the scene of Celestina's conjury, the semi-darkness of the stage glows with red light, and crimson tones begin to stand out in the lighting mix as the play progresses from that point on. The subtle red lighting contributes a particularly ominous atmosphere, for instance, to the scene where Celestina and Melibea are directly engaged in their struggle of manipulation and resistance over the remedy to be offered to the ailing Calisto. The scenes beginning with Sempronio's murder of Celestina and continuing to the end of the play, in Melibea's garden, are even more dimly illuminated, furnishing the progressive representation of nightfall with an ominous tone of doom. All this combines to underscore the fatal complications of plot that result from the intense interlace of eros, greed, revenge and despair.

The composer, librettist and designers, then, are in agreement about their artistic goal, that is, to enhance the meaning and the emotional impact of the characters' words and actions, and thus by extension, to communicate their passions to the audience. In other words, the physical and technical aspects of this production, rather than being background, underscore and embellish the musical and dramatic development of the opera's tone.

But there are ambiguities precisely where the question of tone is concerned that give rise to the principal reservations that I have about this production. The difficulty begins even with Honig's choice of a subtitle: "A *Comedy* (my emphasis) of Love, Seduction, and Death." Composer Rosen in his program notes indicates his own awareness of the crucial problem of tone when he says that, "the ambivalence inherent in this tragicomedy seemed to require clarification for operatic purposes." In the end, the production does not seem to have settled the difficult question of whether this version means to be a comedy, a tragi-comedy, a melodrama, or an amalgam of all of these.

The overture establishes an interplay of tones that will characterize the entire drama, but the emphasis falls strongly on the menacing and foreboding moods that will begin to sort themselves out and predominate from the point where Celestina invokes the Devil's aid, and where she literally winds Melibea up in a web of the crimson yarn she has just sold

her. As I will try to point out though, the coherent progression from a relatively light and comic beginning to what should be an intense and tragic ending is dissipated and perhaps even lost, with serious consequences for the overall impact of the production on its audience.

Rosen's stated intention is precisely to have the musical line carry the drama from a relatively artificial and comic tone at the beginning, toward an "ever darker and more dramatic conclusion." And yet this progression is less discernible through the music than through the visual aspects of the production and through the acting. This perhaps has to do with the difficulty inherent to the music's style, and particularly since the score provides what gives the impression of being a single, continuously flowing musical line that serves as an accompaniment to the characters' every word and action. Thus it is that the two challenges I mentioned at the beginning become closely related -- the somber tone which must be built from the opening scenes risks being lost in the course of the considerable amount of conversation and dramatic business that must go on among the characters. While the musical line works to intensify the drama's tone during acts two and three, the fact that all of the opera's dialogue is sung, resembling thereby a long and uninterrupted recitative, has the effect of slowing the movement of the inherently complicated plot, and the necessary tension fails to build, or builds sporadically at best.

The only arias as such belong to Melibea, whom Rosen presents as vulnerable and touching in her confusion over Celestina's determined intervention on Calisto's behalf. She is the only truly tragic figure in the drama, and effectively captures the audience's sympathy. One other aria is given to Calisto the morning after his arranged meeting with Melibea in her garden. Calisto's fatuous self-absorption and vain posing are successfully emphasized, as he confidently (and with heavy dramatic irony) declares his love to be mightier than death itself. Other prominent solos are given to the swaggering and treacherous Sempronio, to the bawdy but sinister Celestina, and later on, to the engaging and comic Tristan.

But the real problem for librettist, composer and director comes after the death of Celestina. Her figure inevitably dominates all others during the first two-thirds or more of the production. She has set the plot in motion, and the task that remains after her disappearance is to sustain the audience's interest in the fate of the other characters (who must therefore gain what they may have lacked in vividness and individuality), while building swiftly and coherently toward the suicide of Melibea.

Considerable time is devoted in this script to the plotting of Calisto's murder among Lucrecia, Elicia and finally, Tristán, whom they entangle by erotic enticement. By the time Tristan is killed by dogs while guarding the ladder for Calisto at Melibea's garden wall, the dark and threatening atmosphere surrounding this doomed love affair has been diluted to the extent that the lackey's death seems gratuitous to the point of being comic. Likewise, the sudden mistaken killing of the serving girls by Calisto seems excessive, precisely because it is not clear in dramatic terms what the tone of this incident is meant to be, whether

comic, melodramatic, or something in between. From this point on, it is all the more difficult to restore the tragic potential of the production and to prevent Calisto's plunge from the wall from being comic, and Melibea's desperate suicide from lapsing into pure melodrama. If in fact these final incidents are meant to have comic or melodramatic overtones, such an intention would seem to betray the somber and potentially tragic mood that has been building from early on in the opera, in both the music and the staging. The tendency of the sung dialogue to retard the movement of the plot where it should be brisk, combined with the ambivalent effect of the series of deaths at the end of the opera, conspire to distract from the vividness of the characters' emotions and the increasingly intense drama of their situation.

In every sense, this is a "modern" adaptation of the Celestina story. The musical style, the set design, the costumes and the lighting all are carefully designed and coordinated for an expressionistic emphasis on the symbolic representation of mood and emotion. The Rosen-Honig collaboration is not however without its difficulties where the unresolved ambiguities of tone that I have mentioned are concerned. On the whole, though, this production represents an interesting and serious interpretation of this complicated tale; the result is an operatic drama that decidedly emphasizes this enduring story's exploration of the dark side of human nature.

La muerte de Melibea (fragmento),¿Burgos, 1499?

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