

Enric Palomar

La cabeza del Bautista



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La cabeza del Bautista

(The Baptist's Head)

Opera in one act. Libretto based on the play of the same name by **Ramón María del Valle-Inclán**, adapted by Carlos Wagner. Music by Enric Palomar. World premiere.

Enric Palomar was born in Badalona in 1964 and studied under Benet Casablanca and Joan Albert Amargós. He has been highly active as a composer and arranger in such diverse fields as chamber music, flamenco (with Miguel Poveda), jazz, popular music and, of course, opera. Palomar's new opera is based on the play *La cabeza del Bautista* by Valle-Inclán and follows the original text very closely. Valle-Inclán published *La rosa de papel* and *La cabeza del Bautista*, two «melodramas for puppets» subtitled «macabre novels», in «La Novela Semanal» in 1924. In 1927 he included them in a set of plays entitled *Retablo de la avaricia, la lujuria y la muerte*. This *retablo* (or tableau) seeks to depict a world of human relationships dominated by two of the capital sins — avarice and lust— and the macabre presence of death.

The title *La cabeza del Bautista* (*The Baptist's Head*) is a deliberate reference to Oscar Wilde's Decadent play *Salome* (1891), which aroused controversy all over Europe and was later made into an opera by Richard Strauss (1905). The leading figure in the play, the daughter of Herodias, is so obsessed by her sexual desire for John the Baptist that she passionately kisses the prophet's mouth after he has been beheaded. Valle-Inclán incorporates certain features of Wilde's characters into a gruesomely Expressionist work, set against a sordid background, and converts the tragedy into a perverse, intricate melodrama. The location is the backward, poverty-stricken countryside of Galicia, inhabited by personages without values or convictions who are fighting to survive. Don Igi, the proprietor of the village bar and billiard room, is visited by El Jándalo, a well-built, disquieting traveller from Argentina. He has come to blackmail Igi over a crime he committed in Toluca, the victim of which was the Argentinian's own mother. Igi served a prison sentence, but returned home in the guise of a man who has grown rich in the New World. Igi is convinced that all is over, but the good-looking, ambitious Pepona is determined not to waste one farthing of her protector's wealth and she persuades him to kill the blackmailer while she makes love to him. Igi complies, his dagger strikes home, and Pepona goes on insatiably kissing the corpse she holds in her arms.

Summary and libretto

La cabeza del Bautista, by Enric Palomar, is an opera in one act divided into eight scenes. It is based on Carlos Wagner's adaptation of the «melodrama for puppets» of the same title by Ramón María del Valle-Inclán. The opera will receive its first performance at the Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona on 20 April 2009 with Carlos Wagner himself as stage director and Josep Caballé on the podium. Aside from the omission of a few minor details, the plot closely follows that of the play, which is part of *Retablo de la avaricia, la lujuria y la muerte*. Several popular songs that are merely outlined in the theatrical version are sung by the group of roving singers mentioned by the playwright, a mixed chorus of bar patrons, and a Blind Man and his Boy, who are borrowed from *El embrujado*, another play from *Retablo de la avaricia, la lujuria y la muerte*. The introduction is based on Valle-Inclán's poem *Rosa de llamas*.

Introduction

A choral piece provides a sort of overture foreshadowing the gruesome tragedy that is to be unleashed by the victim's yearning for revenge and money.

Scene I

The setting is El Indiano Gachupín—the bar and billiard room owned by Don Igi, whose nickname evokes the fact that he made his fortune in Latin America. It is a starry– night and the customers are playing billiards while a group of young men tune their guitars and rehearse the songs they are to sing while touring the streets.

Scene II

A blind beggar, El Ciego de Gondar, whom everyone in the bar considers wicked and unscrupulous, comes in. He sings a ballad, «En Quintán de Castro Lés», echoed by the Boy who is his guide and companion. Despite Don Igi's rebukes, he then launches into a chant, answered this time by the chorus, about the misfortunes of the utterly destitute, which also contains predictions about future events. He is ejected by Don Igi, his mistress La Pepona, and the customers.

Scene III

A well-built young man known as El Jándalo arrives on horseback. He says his name is Alberto Saco and he is a foreigner who has travelled all over America. He asks to speak to Don Igi, with whom he has an account to settle, and makes advances to La Pepona while the customers make ironical remarks. Initially Don Igi takes on a brash, self-confident air. But then he begins to display the fear and anguish that mark the beginning of his steady drift into insanity. El Jándalo tells him he has come to demand money, and that if he does not obtain it he is in a position, now that he has been released from prison, to disclose the circumstances of their relationship. He jokes about La Pepona's charms and offers a round of drinks. Then he and the other customers make a noisy departure, singing a mazurka.

Scene IV

Don Igi remains alone with La Pepona. Terrified by the stranger's unexpected arrival, he tells her about a terrible episode from his past: the murder of Baldomerita, his first wife. He denies his own guilt and claims she was killed by El Jándalo, her son by a former marriage, "for the inheritance".

According to this self-serving account, El Jándalo was a bad son and his mother hated him. On discovering that his stepfather had mortgaged her property to obtain more income, El Jándalo denounced him as the murderer to the Mexican judges, who are always hostile towards wealthy Spaniards. Don Igi was found guilty, sent to prison, and had to sell up his business in Toluca. Don Igi feels old and frightened and is prepared to pay up to save his reputation in the village, but La Pepona reacts decisively: she refuses to let him sacrifice a single penny and plies him with drink to bolster his courage and make him forget his deceased wife, whose expression El Jándalo has inherited. The young man has already made a pass at her; she suggests that while she leads him on, Don Igi can kill her by stabbing him in the back. Don Igi is pleased at the idea and Baldomerita enjoys the feeling of boldness La Pepona arouses in him. He decides to carry out the plan and bury El Jándalo under the lemon trees.

Scene V

In the silence of the night the sound of La Pepona digging El Jándalo's grave can be heard. Outside the chorus is singing a ballad full of foreboding while the band of roving singers, among whom is El Jándalo, draws near. La Pepona appears in the doorway armed with a mattock. Don Igi raises his finger to his lips to tell her to be quiet and the drunken young men resume their singing. La Pepona reminds him to have his dagger ready.

Scene VI

La Pepona makes provocative gestures to El Jándalo in the moonlight and he approaches lasciviously. Don Igi looks on in dismay as they talk. La Pepona remains self-assured and in control of the situation, but also glad to be an object of desire. She tells El Jándalo to come back when everyone has left.

Scene VII

Don Igi is jealous of the amorous intrigue between La Pepona and El Jándalo. But La Pepona's plan is clear: she will lure him inside that very night, Don Igi must feign ignorance and do nothing until it is time to plunge the dagger hidden up his sleeve into the young man's back.

Scene VIII

When El Jándalo returns, Don Igi offers him a drink. To his irritation, El Jándalo continues to make up to La Pepona. He also returns to the topic of money: he wants three thousand pesos and intends to take La Pepona away with him. El Jándalo enfolds La Pepona in a passionate embrace and she responds. But at the same time she points towards his back as a signal to Don Igi. Then she swoons in El Jándalo's arms and, once he is dead, keeps her mouth pressed against his as it grows cold. She sings a passionately sensual song to his corpse, calling him «Flor de mozo» (splendid young man) and begging Kiss me again, mouth of—for more kisses («¡Bésame otra vez, boca de piedra!» stone!). She expresses deep remorse over his murder and totally ignores Don Igi, who looks on, dumbfounded. Suddenly the chorus is heard singing a song about bells tolling the knell. Don Igi reminds her they must finish digging the grave and burn the dead man's clothes but La Pepona goes on kissing El Jándalo. Finally, appalled by her behaviour, he insults her («Vil ramera» bitch) and vows he wishes he had allowed himself to be blackmailed.

Musical commentary

Don Ramón María del Valle-Inclán –Ramón Valle Peña, to give him his real name– was one of the foremost exponents of Spanish literature in the first three decades of the 20th century. In comparison with the trends established by the Generation of 1898 –writers such as Azorín, Machado and Unamuno–, Valle-Inclán has a more aestheticist bent, with highly luminous language effects and a concern for formal detail. This current, termed Modernism in literature, was galvanized by Rubén Darío, who was also the most prominent precursor of the blossoming of Ibero-American literature that was to take place many years later.

Valle-Inclán was a prolific writer whose output spans all literary genres: his poetry was a brilliant as it is now forgotten, while good examples of his prose are the *Sonatas* cycle and the novels *Tirano Banderas* and *El Ruedo ibérico*. But it was Valle-Inclán's dramatic works that most clearly marked a watershed: *Divinas palabras* (*Divine Words*), *Luces de Bohemia* (*Lights of Bohemia*) and countless other plays of varying lengths and aesthetic pretensions. Many of these can be designated under a single term which encapsulates his many-sided nature: *esperpento*.

An *esperpento*, generically speaking, is a play that gives off a bitter aroma, with a violent or even macabre plot and characters who are often masks representing a concept or figures depicted with quick, dazzling strokes of the pen, so that they never attain an intricacy that would leave room for normality.

It is truly difficult in any art for an aesthetic concept to be born in a void, in which case it would inevitably give rise to a new genre. So it is worth bearing in mind the influence which Goya and his macabre sketches had on Spanish reality and, as Díaz-Plaja rightly points out, on the literary world of Baudelaire, Rubén Darío and Gautier, among others. But it is also important to stress that *esperpento* was directly related to the revelation –*in situ*– of Latin America, which had a tremendous impact on Valle. The discovery of certain Mexican authors –Díaz Mirón being the most outstanding–, of a literature that employed fresh and innovative resources, and above all of an aesthetic that gave prominence to worlds of darkness, abjection, abstruse passions and sub-reality, was of great importance.

La Cabeza del Bautista is an "esperpentic" recreation of the death of John the Baptist. It is set in Spain at the beginning of the 20th century, in the midst of the devastating torrent that swept over Spanish society following the loss of the country's last colonies. Valle-Inclán turns Herod Antipas into Don Igi, an old man who has grown rich during his years in the Latin America and now runs a bar and billiard room where the patrons sing songs before setting out in a group, still singing, to tour the nearby streets. Herodias –Herod's wicked wife, who had the Baptist condemned to death– is La Pepona, a pleasure-seeking sexpot who behaves in a manner reminiscent of Salome in the first and last scenes. John the Baptist is El Jándalo, who owes the nickname to his accent. He is an old acquaintance of Don Igi's from Latin America, with a boastful air and not much money, and is unashamedly grasping. He ruthlessly blackmails Don Igi until the latter murders him in the last scene with help from La Pepona. Then La Pepona sings a macabre song of longing because El Jándalo, and not Don Igi, was the object of her lust.

The stage director Carlos Wagner and I agreed to make a few alterations to the original text to adapt it to the different dramatic requirements of an opera. We cut out a few repetitions, sentences and ideas that would have been superfluous when sung, but above all we introduced two novelties which we considered essential: we put a blind man into the opening scene in the bar, and we added a "Greek-style" chorus, if I may be permitted to call it that.

The blind man, and his associations in folklore, is almost an archetype in Valle-Inclán's works and a recurrent theme in his native Galicia generally. The actual blind man we added to the opera comes from *El embrujado*, another work by the same author which, like *La Cabeza del Bautista*, is also part of *El Retablo*. In the sombre atmosphere of the play, the blind man acts as an oracle who maliciously predicts the course of events. Thus from the very start he plays a fundamental role in bringing the action to its conceptual conclusion. In the end he is harassed and driven away by the customers and the groups of roving singers, but he has already issued his prediction.

The chorus does not play a leading dramatic role: it is always in the background –even visually– and its mission is to evoke certain connotations from poems by Valle-Inclán. The idea of the chorus occurred to us because we always had the impression that the play had an enigmatic “double layer”: beneath its simple linearity, its genuinely popular and even rude language, a loftier poetic stratum was always perceptible, a sort of living tragedy disguised by false, *costumista* humour. So we felt it was a good idea to add this counterpoint to the action in a bid to create a contrast at certain points.

Having reached this point in our presentation, it is worth remarking that the libretto of *La Cabeza del Bautista* does not contain the standard elements. At no time is there a moment of “stillness” that would allow for arias, in the historical sense of the term. The pace is relentless, it presses forward *scherzandi*, to use a musical term. Moreover, once the climax has been reached –the digging of the grave–, Valle-Inclán rushes into a sort of *precipitato* in which any sign of immobility would prove ineffective. Not until the end does La Pepona accept her strategic error and sing of her morbid craving: “¡Flor de mozo...! ¡Bésame otra vez, boca de piedra! ¡Yo te maté cuando la vida me dabas! ¡La boca te muerdo! ...” (“Fine specimen of a man...! Kiss me again, mouth of stone! I killed you but you brought me to life! I bite your mouth...”). Alongside her and the corpse we observe Don Igi's evil, thunderstruck, madness.

Overall musical aspects

When I was invited to visit the Gran Teatre del Liceu to discuss the possibility of writing an opera on Valle-Inclán's text, I clearly remember the words of the artistic director, Joan Matabosch: “We believe this work is very well suited to your style of musical composition”. Let me stress that I feel comfortable exploring and basing my works on the tradition and the great diversity of our musical and cultural heritage, but always adopting a present-day, contemporary discourse. In the course of my life, situations of convergence have arisen which have led me to immerse myself in the highly varied, rich rhythmic palette, the melismatic properties and harmonies that are characteristic of this fecund world. And I feel even more at ease if the play –and the concomitant aspects of the plot– present the same orientation. In my view, it is not dramatic convention that leads Valle-Inclán to portray this

particular place and set of characters: he singles out and orientates part of the tale towards unequivocally Hispanic parameters. I, in the same way, try to endow my music with signs of identity, with a "*maison connue*" –to quote Lutoslawski– which makes it possible to identify its roots.

For the same aesthetic reason, I made frequent use of rhythms from our peninsular tradition: *fandangos*, *soleás*, *tientos* and *bulerías*. Often they appear in stylized form, or their contours are blurred into a mere sustaining presence.

Opera is a very special genre. A multiplicity of elements come into play and are coalesced and blended into one another by the music. As a composer I declare myself "in favour of the voice", beyond musical conceptions and aesthetic ascriptions. The voice deserves to be taken into account and must be provided with a favourable setting: the need for naturalness, memorizable patterns and orchestral support must be borne in mind; we must not consider the voice an instrument in a void and force it to adopt strategies beyond its reach. What is sung has a musical commitment and a theatrical one too: it is opera.

From this it can be inferred that I always try, in my aesthetic views, to refer to parameters of "communicability": this is the area explored by the composers I admire, those who constantly stimulate me. I avoid major explanatory additions that purport to justify my works or endow them with extra-musical rigour. A work must stand or fall on its own, in its nakedness, without extraneous explanations.

We are the result of our affinities and our rejections. Everything is ultimately stored in a sort of synthesis which may or may not prosper and one of the few things that remain is loyalty to the artistic construction of our own selves. "Reality is immensely generous," says the extraordinary painter Antonio López, and I, as a musician, endorse this.

Enric Palomar
composer

Singing voice

Because of the parallels between Oscar Wilde's *Salome* and Valle-Inclán's play *La cabeza del Bautista* we decided that the voices of the triangle of characters who play the leading roles in the opera should also be similar. Thus Don Igi is a tenor; La Pepona, a soprano, and El Jándalo a baritone. The remainder of the *Dramatis Personae* consists of: Valerio 'el Pajarito', tenor; the Barber, baritone; the Tailor, baritone; the Salnés Dwarf (Merengue), tenor; the *Rondalla* [translator's note: A *rondalla* (or *ronda*) is a group of young men who tour the streets singing. The same term can also be applied to the tour itself], two tenors and two baritones; the Blind Man, baritone-bass; the Blind Man's boy, mezzo; Mixed Chorus (who sing illustrative poems in certain scenes).

The opera opens with an introduction in which the chorus sings Valle's poem '*Rosa de Llamas*' –from his book *El Pasajero*–, a metaphor of decadence, swathed in a mist of lyricism that is highly characteristic of the author.

All the secondary characters appear only in Scenes 1, 2 and 3, apart from the mixed chorus and the roving chorus of young men, which is seen briefly in Scene 5 (the opera, it should be pointed out, is staged in a single act, without interruptions). These are essentially introductory scenes in which Valle depicts the setting, the popular speech, and the first indications of social decadence. The act is described as portraying the preparations for a *rondalla*. I took advantage of this to include a strophe from an old song I heard as a child in Aragon: "*Madre, cuando voy a leña / se me olvidan los ramales. / No se me olvida una niña / que habita en los arrabales.*". (Mother when I go to fetch firewood / I forget the twine. / I don't forget a little girl / who lives on the outskirts.) This whole first scene is a *continuum* midway between mockery and social criticism; even a few political comments are included. Here I felt that supple voices, a flowing rhythm and prosody, and an ambience virtually devoid of lyricism would be suitable.

The end of Scene 1 was the ideal place for a popular song because the patrons of the bar are chatting and making a noise. Valle-Inclán describes this happening at various points. So I thought it would be opportune to include a song I entitled "*Golondrongo*", because of the repetition in the *ritornello*. It comes from the *tonadilla* for three voices from Blas Laserna's *El Cordero perdido*. It was written in 1781 and I found it in Felip Pedrell's *Cancionero musical popular español*. It is appropriate to this dramatic situation and reminds us of the performances that were given in yards and squares in the 17th and 18th centuries. I entirely reharmonized the song and added a few instrumental interludes while the customers hold clearly comical conversations with one another. This song rounds off the preparations for the *rondalla*, which have been taking place throughout the scene.

The arrival of the Blind Man (Scene 2), with his gloomy but ironical air, breaks the apparent of tranquillity of the bar. He has a powerful, dramatic voice and promptly launches into two almost consecutive monologues. The first is a popular *copla* written and turned into verse by Valle-Inclán himself. Though *costumista* in tone, it has a totally disrespectful, roguish air about it. Each stanza from the Blind Man is matched by a more bucolic-style response from his boy. The Blind Man's second monologue operates as a deliberately abstruse prophecy, rife with speculations about betrayal, death and desolation. At this point I introduced a musical dialogue between the chorus and the Blind Man (let me recall that the chorus is not visible on stage). I gave the sentences strong symbolic overtones, which help to keep the prophecy in a "musical retina" which will later be closed. The Blind Man's second monologue is written to an old Spanish rhythm known as *tientos*, which is slow, slightly ceremonious, unsettling and in four-time. It always follows a pattern that comes from

the dance. It is a slower variant of the so-called flamenco tangos, which arose out of a blend between autochthonous Iberian rhythms and rhythms from the Caribbean.

Once the Blind Man has been driven away, the work focuses on the triangle of main characters (Scene 3). El Jándalo arrives with his boastful, arrogant air, like an archetypal inhabitant of the Río Plata region. He introduces himself as a gentleman who has visited every possible corner of the earth and starts flirting with La Pepona as soon as he meets her. Valle-Inclán describes El Jándalo in the following terms: "*sobre un caballo tordillo, con jaeces gauchos (...), altas botas con sonoras espuelas. Se apea con fantasía de valentón.*" (riding a piebald horse, with gaucho-type harness(...), tall boots with clinking spurs. He dismounts with swaggering air). This description prompted me to introduce El Jándalo to a *farruca* rhythm (type of flamenco), with two beats and a highly characteristic stress pattern (every eight quavers). The animal magnetism between El Jándalo and La Pepona is instantaneous. The customers notice it and sing the last lines of the poem "Rosa de Túrbulos", which expresses a whole range of lyrical thoughts about femininity.

Thus at the end of Scene 3, the work enters *in medias res*. El Jándalo and Don Igi, standing face to face, have an altercation in which the reason for the former's visit is made clear: he has come to blackmail Don Igi over an obscure episode of his life in Latin America. Don Igi reacts histrionically while El Jándalo and the customers leave "*singing a village mazurka*". This annotation, which is by Valle, gives me an opportunity to resort to folklore once more by adapting an old Castilian song with words that provide an apt commentary on the situation:

*A los árboles altos / los lleva el viento
Y a los enamorados / el pensamiento.
El pensamiento, ay vida mía, el pensamiento.*

*Corazón que no quiere / sufrir dolores
Pase la vida entera / libre de amores.
Libre de amores, ay vida mía, libre de amores.*

(Tall trees / are tossed by the wind / and lovers / by thoughts. / Thoughts, ah my life, thoughts. // A heart that is adverse / to pain and suffering / must go through life / free of love. / Free of love, ah my life, free of love.)

Once El Jándalo and the customers have gone, Don Igi remains alone with La Pepona and can give vent to his deepening anxiety (Scene 4). This is quite a long scene –about 20 minutes– with only these two characters on stage. Melodically it alternates between Don Igi's growing anger and La Pepona's cold, calculating determination. When they have agreed on their plan, they become wildly amorous: *Dáme un besito. / Eres muy rica. / No seas renuente, niña. / Luego tendremos la fiesta.* (Give me a little kiss. / How gorgeous you are. / Don't be shy, little girl. / We'll have our party afterwards.). But La Pepona implacably keeps her distance: *No quiero. / Luego. / No estás poco gallo.* (I don't want to. / Later. / You're very cocky.).

The approval of the plan leads into the dramatic climax (Scene 5), which is a veritable intermingling of different forms of depravation. In the middle La Pepona is digging the grave for the future corpse; El Jándalo and the *rondalla* are approaching the bar, singing popular songs by Valle-Inclán off-stage. Superimposed on all this we hear the chorus intermittently singing lines marked by a gloomy, lyrical unreality from the poem "La Rosa del Reloj".

At this point Valle-Inclán sets off a *precipitato* (Scenes 6, 7 and 8). All three scenes are marked by a frenzied rhythm and the *crescendo* of Don Igi's madness and El Jándalo's caustic attitude. The opera ends (Scene 9) with a solo by La Pepona, who sings lines from the poem "Vista madrileña", *pianissimo*, over the voices of the chorus. She is expressing a sort of macabre nostalgia, for she was sexually attracted by El Jándalo, not Don Igi. The words of Don Igi, as he sinks into madness and solitude, bring the opera to a close.

Enric Palomar
composer

Enric Palomar :

The search for the creative authenticity

Agustí Charles

In a world like today's, marked by diversity and eclecticism in the fields of culture and artistic working methods, it is becoming hard to reach a clear definition of the very notion of composition. The difficulty has been further accentuated since the 1950s by the persistent creation of musical myths, personalities akin to gurus or prophets who, more than ever before, have been occupying a privileged place

Thus the quest for authenticity has become a path fraught with difficulties because many composers have found themselves outside a creative framework of norms and patterns of conduct which made it compulsory to compose in a particular way and discard other ways than were considered inferior. From the second half of the 20th century onwards, the course of events –and more specifically, in the musical field, the influence of composers linked to the Darmstadt composition courses– turned A. Webern into the foremost contemporary musical myth and marked out a practically univocal direction for new music. This influence is so powerful that those who fail to follow Webern's principles are not even considered composers. The trend also affects many other fields, but it is music that has suffered the most from this resistance to change, which in many cases still endures. Many composers who were not in harmony with these dictates found themselves excluded and this isolation was to have a very negative effect on them; alternatively, if they wanted to join the mainstream, they were compelled them to choose paths that were unfamiliar to them. This raises the question: is it possible to be a true creator if, instead of doing what one wants to do, one does what one wants to seem? Of course, making sincere decisions –regardless of the obstacles raised by our surroundings– has always been a difficult and burdensome task because it often meant going against a part of society which had already traced a particular path. But not doing so is still worse because it leads inevitably to creative inanition.

The reader will be wondering where these remarks are leading to, but in our opinion they are relevant to Palomar because his career profile diverges from the canons of so-called “contemporary music”. Palomar belongs to a –not very numerous– group of composers (J. A. Amargós, M. Camp, F. Gasull and others) who arose from the experience of contact with types of music outside the classical field, though this provenance does not imply the lack of a solid musical background. Composer such as A. Llanas, E. M. Izquierdo, A. Charles and R. Humet are other members of his generation in Catalonia, while their counterparts elsewhere in Spain include D. del Puerto, J. Rueda, M. Sotelo and C. Camarero. What most of these composers have in common is a personal musical discourse in the field of contemporary classical music.

Palomar's music has a different setting. It was influenced by his environment and linked to the roots of Hispanic music, first and foremost that of the nationalist composers of the first half of the 20th century –Falla, Albéniz, Granados and Turina– and that of Gerhard in the 1940s. These Hispanic associations have been reinforced by his collaboration with the masters of *cante jondo* (flamenco), including *cantaores* such as M. Poveda, J. Menese and G. Ortega, and they are decisive in that they give rise to a fresh discourse with rhythmic and expressive connotations in which the dividing line between popular and cultivated elements is hard, not to say impossible, to distinguish. An even more crucial factor is the treatment the composer gives his music, a treatment untrammelled by the intellectualism that is superimposed, layer upon layer, in so much present-day music. Palomar's aim is to make himself understood and to achieve intelligibility.

All Palomar's concert music is marked by this need to communicate by means of a discourse that is elucidatory and springs, first and foremost, from the roots of our own musical idiom. *Introducción y Bailete* for bassoon and piano, inspired in the dance known as the *bailete* that was used in the *Comedias del Retiro* (16th and 17th centuries) and published by F. Pedrell in his book on Spanish folklore, and *Thamar y Amnón*, a choreographic fantasy for soprano, mezzosoprano, bass, four pianos and four percussions, to a text by F.G. Lorca, are two good examples. Other works –*Locus Amoenus*, for two pianos and percussions; *Tres canciones de Yerma*, for violin, cello and piano; *Homenaje a Pablo Neruda: "Me peina el viento los cabellos"* and *Poemas del exilio* for *cantaor* and orchestra; and *Homenaje a Manuel de Falla*, for violin, double bass and piano– provide further eloquent proof of the composer's affiliation to a Hispanic musical idiom, which he claims as his individual creative offering.

But the genre in which Palomar has clearly distinguished himself in recent years is opera. The first of his operatic works, *Ruleta (ópera para un fin de siglo)*, was written in 1998 to a libretto by Anna Maria Moix and Rafael Sender. It was premiered at the Mercat de les Flors in Barcelona –as part of that year's Festival of Pocket Opera– and subsequently at the Teatro de la Abadía in Madrid. His second opera, *Juana* (2005), has a libretto by Rebecca Simpson and it too was commissioned by the Festival of Pocket Opera. It was staged at the Halle Opera (Germany) and at Barcelona's Teatre Romea in 2005. Both works feature a musical discourse with Hispanic roots and considerable expressive content which guides the listener through the musical itinerary. Palomar's third opera, *La cabeza del Bautista*, is about to receive its world premiere at the Gran Teatre del Liceu. It is based on Carlos Wagner's adaptation of the play of the same title by Ramón del Valle-Inclán and is set in rural Galicia. Valle-Inclán's text was influenced by Wilde's *Salomé*, which was also turned into an opera by Richard Strauss. In many passages of Palomar's opera the mode of expression is akin to Romanticism and the nationalism of the first half of the 20th century, though the rhythmic, melodic and harmonic roots have affinities with the Hispanicism that so fascinates the composer.

Writing an opera, as everyone is aware, is no simple task, and never has been. Matters are further complicated today by the clear gap between contemporary and traditional concert music, a gap that is even wider in the case of opera because operagoers are more attached to tradition than audiences of symphonic music. It is perfectly "normal" nowadays to hear Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, but the same is not true of *The Rake's Progress*, which still has difficulty gaining acceptance. And this is to say nothing of strictly contemporary opera, which often arouses scepticism and scorn outside the circuits of major contemporary music festivals. Opera is a genre midway between drama and music –the two being of equivalent importance– and must be able to communicate, beyond the purely musical structure, without ever renouncing a present-day idiom. An entirely different matter are the aspects to do with the singers, the orchestra, and so on, which often dominate the performance, though this problem is infrequent in new opera. An excessively intellectual discourse can lead to the failure of an opera owing to lack of intelligibility, as also happens in symphonic music.

Thus for the audience an opera is a complete performance. They sit in their seats, the eyewitnesses of a journey in which the text, music and interpretation are the basic and inseparable components. It is the music that binds these components together and occupies the most important place, because it guides listeners through different moods, stimuli and sensations, all of which are capable of moving them. Palomar's music is well suited to an art in which communication with the listener is vital: it is dominated by contrast and expressiveness, colour and timbre; it draws on a kindred musical idiom with Hispanic roots; and it is devoid of superfluous ornamentation. Some might see this as a defect, but it is Palomar's chief personal hallmark and lends great naturalness to his music, pervading his entire output and ridding it of the obstacles that often distort the message of the music.

Agustí Charles
composer



Enric Palomar

Enric Palomar (Badalona, 1964). He studied at the Barcelona Conservatory and completed his training under Benet Casablanca and Joan Albert Amargós. His piece *Interludio Alegórico* (tribute to Claude Debussy) received an honourable mention in the Xth Composition Awards organized by the Catalan Government. He has written numerous chamber works for different ensembles and soloists, including the operas *Ruleta*, with a libretto by Anna Maria Moix and Rafael Sender, premiered at Mercat de les Flors, Barcelona, in 1998 and *Juana*, based on the life of Juana I of Castile, with a libretto by Rebecca Simpson, premiered at Oper Halle, Germany, in 2005, and performed afterwards at the Teatre Romea, Barcelona, and Staatstheater Darmstadt, Germany.

The Opera House of Barcelona, the Gran Teatre del Liceu, commissioned him to compose *La cabeza del Bautista*, based on the play of the same name by Ramón María del Valle-Inclán. It will be premiered on 20th April 2009.

He is also involved in jazz and popular music, specially flamenco, areas in which he is active as a composer, arranger and music director. His works include *Lorca al piano* a gypsy suite for four pianos, percussion, voice (flamenco and opera) and dance, as well as his collaboration with the flamenco singer Miguel Poveda in *Poemas del exilio* for which he wrote the music to poems by Rafael Alberti. *Poemas del exilio* was awarded the **City of Barcelona Prize**.

He is currently the artistic Director of the *Taller de Musics*.



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