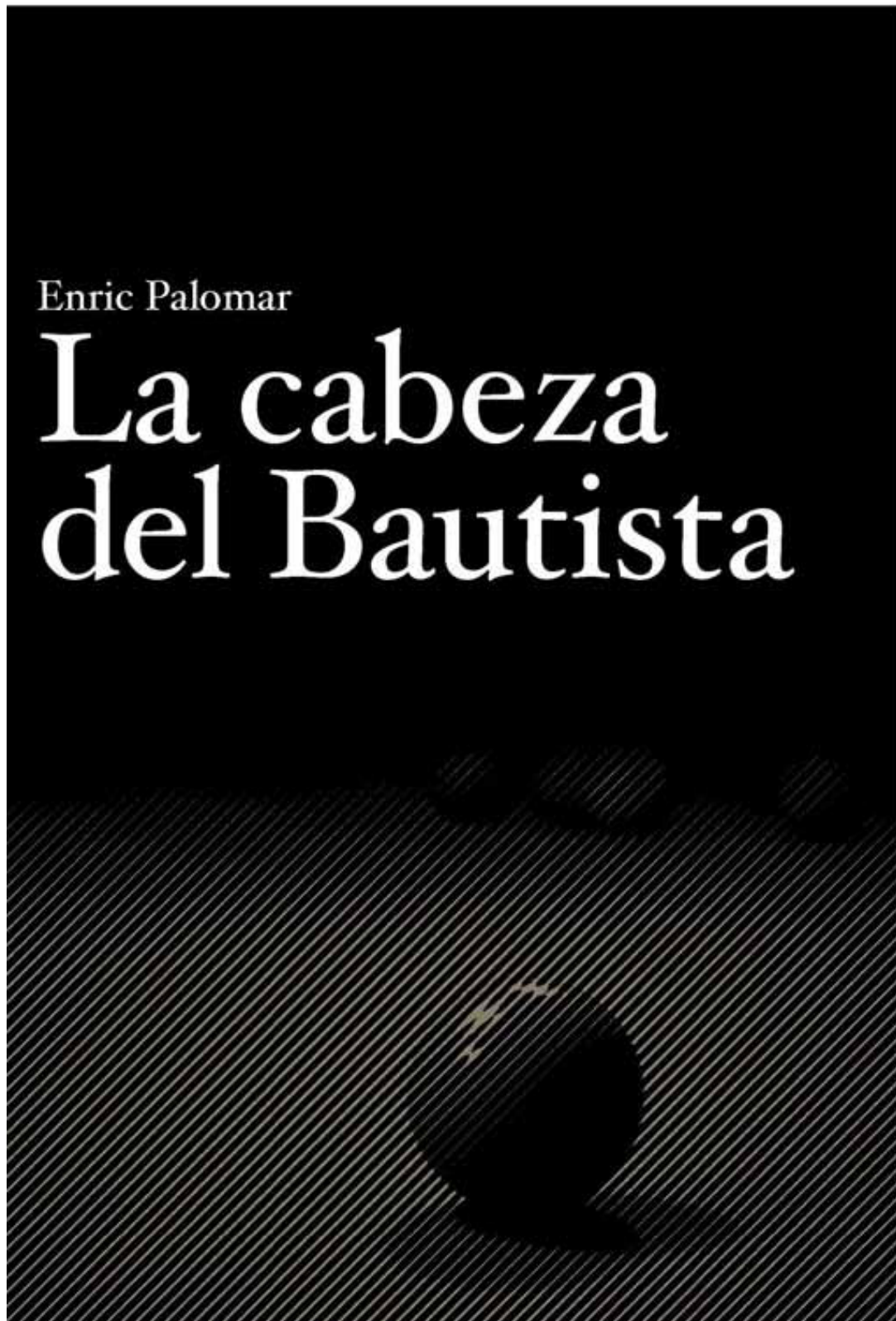


Enric Palomar

La cabeza del Bautista



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***La cabeza del Bautista* – Review’s summary**

A Pitiless View of Human Misery

Barcelona - An Opera Europe conference here, April 17-19, offered attendees a preview of “La cabeza del Bautista” (the Baptist’s Head), a new opera by Spanish composer Enric Palomar. (...) Palomar uses recurring themes and other unifying devices from the classic tradition. **Lacking neither symphonic vigour, sustained pace, nor the proper amount of dissonance to rank as “modern”, or even “post-modern” or “minimalist”, his writing is strongly rooted in the Hispanic dance and folksong rhythms** that originated in the Renaissance and later percolated through works by such non-Hispanics such as Domenico Scarlatti, Bizet and Rimsky-Korsakov. True, the score’s vocal lines are as much word-driven as in any Britten opera, which makes a bit of a problem even for native speakers because of the libretto’s multi-layered discourse, which mixes dialect and underworld lingo with lofty poetry. On the other hand, while Palomar’s music the dividing line between popular and high-culture elements is hard to trace, its national flavour is unmistakable and free of intellectualism superimposed on much contemporary music.

The largely international audience that filled the Liceu (regular patrons alongside theater managers and their staffs, critics, composers, and performers) responded with thunderous applause far beyond mere courtesy. Credit is due as well to the principal. As wicked Blind Man, bass-baritone Michael Kraus towered in the extended prologue; soprano Ángeles Blancas lent La Pepona remarkable flexibility of utterance, as well as sensual color and physical sex-appeal, tenor José Manuel Zapata (hitherto noted for his bel canto feats) was duly neurotic, greedy desperate Don Igi (...)

Conductor Josep Caballé-Domènech and director Carlos Wagner boosted the work’s surrealistic black humor with mercurial twists of pace among the landscapes, thunderstruck trees and hosts of billiard tables turned into coffins by set designer Alfons Flores.

Carlo Vitali, **MusicalAmerica.com** - New York 30 April 2009

***La cabeza del Bautista* makes very pleasant listening**

... A real opera, with a solidly organized plot and strongly drawn characters, all put together in a ninety-minute production without any interval. The framework and the editing of the libretto, in Spanish, bringing to mind the realist universe of verismo (...) Giordano, Mascagni, Leoncalvallo, Cilea, or even the Puccini of *La Fanciulla del West* or *Il Tabarro*, would have love to set *La cabeza del Bautista* to music.

Inevitably listening to the score recalls to one aspects of the work of the composers just mentioned. One notices as well the influence of Falla, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Janacek, Bartók ... in short, of all the memorable musicians of the first three decades of the 20th Century. (...)

So *La cabeza del Bautista* makes for very pleasant listening: it is openly tonal music, well constructed and well organized. In the course of the ninety minutes one does not become bored for an instant. And all the more one is captivated by the way that Carlos Wagner organizes the mise en scène, perfectly following both the tones and the inflections of the text and the music. (...) Under the baton of Josep Caballé-Domènech, who takes great care to respect the kaleidoscopic nature of the score, the casting has not one weak point. Absolutely beautiful on stage, Ángeles Blancas soars in a custom-tailored role. At her side, a special mention for the remarkable Don Igi sung by the tenor José Manuel Zapata.

We should mention that this world premiere was offered on the night of its final dress rehearsal on 17 April to delegates from 110 opera houses in the context of the Opera Europa Association Forum being held at that time.

Richard Martet, **Opéra Magazine’s news editor, Paris** June 2009

Palomar showed himself to be a real craftsman in the world of sound. His structures are clear; he doesn’t think a lot of the avant-garde and the experimental; atmosphere is to his liking and an Iberian element always sounds through his work, a tone that mixes the clear night with the absolute, that evokes intense emotions without ever sacrificing elegance and intelligibility. **Palomar knows how to suggest blackmail, pleasure, eroticism and ferocity with marvellous subtlety through the orchestration**, and here the conductor, Josep Caballé Domenech, and the orchestra of the Liceu are convincing throughout their performance. Domenech never exaggerates or portrays too glaringly this strange intertwining of lust and greed ... a barrage of sound, as it were, persistently emerges from the orchestra pit, only to fade discreetly every time a singer comes in. José Manuel Zapata gives us a wonderfully devious Don Igi and Alexander Marco-Buhrmeister a spirited Jándalo ...

Reinhard Brembeck, **Süddeutsche Zeitung - München** 23 April 2009

Music in harmony with breathtaking texts

The Gran Teatre del Liceu of Barcelona has once again made its contribution to opera creation with *La cabeza del Bautista* (The Baptist's Head), an opera with an introduction and eight scenes, by the Catalan composer Enric Palomar. The libretto, signed by Carlos Wagner, is from the text of the same name (1924), subtitled "macabre novel" by Don Ramón María del Valle-Inclán (1866-1936), with a few added poems from the same writer (...)

Carlos Wagner himself directed the staging. Drawing strength, style, mystery, lyricism and wealth, in sum, from Valle-Inclán's texts – with full respect - he confirms that he is a rising star among the directors of his generation. The stage movements - sex and violence - even they exceed sometimes the conventional drama of the early 20th century of its creation and found their perfect place in our era (...).

Enric Palomar's music entrenches itself in the harsh tone of the dialogues that the singers carry to the limits of their range. Expressive and melodic, quiet and even lyrical at times, his music does not disdain classical harmony, but neither does it avoid dissonance when the dramatic situation requires it.

Enric Palomar made Pepona the central character of the piece and **Ángeles Blancas** – whom the Liceu remembers with emotion for her *Human Voice* in 2008 – **honoured it by creating a multi-faceted character, full of colour**. Her tone, not exactly pleasant, can be charming, and her treble on the edge of scream, are always in tune. The text is understandable and well performed. At her side **the audience paid tribute to José Manuel Zapata's performance** (Don Igi) and Alejandro Marco-Buhrmester in the role of Jándalo. Michael Krauss gave an exceptional version of the Blindman.

The Liceu's orchestra under the direction of Josep Caballé Domenech measured up to the circumstances, which meant considerable work for an orchestra little accustomed to such exercise.

Strong applause greeted the work of the artists (...)

By Jaime Estapà i Argemí, **Webthea.com - Paris** 13 May 2009

... The first full-scale opera of the multi-award winning Catalan composer [Enric Palomar] did not turn out to be academic, atonal or difficult to access. On the contrary: **the work, which lasts an hour and a half, is, because of its content, musically compelling and fascinating. It is easy on the ear**, because Palomar weaves elements of Spanish music into the composition. Under the baton of Josep Caballé Domenech, the orchestra of the Gran Teatre del Liceu handles both the rhythmic character of the work and its lyrical and romantic features convincingly. José Manuel Zapata succeeded in his interpretation of the main character both as an actor and as a singer ... Ángeles Blancas, with her full and feminine soprano voice and her attractive appearance, has converted Pepona's role into an event ...

B. Frakele, Opernglas, Hamburg, June 2009

"The right track in contemporary creation"

It seems that contemporary opera is going in the right direction, as evidenced by two composers as diverse as Cristobal Halffter with his *Lázaro* and now Enric Palomar with his *Baptist's Head*, which was commissioned by the Liceu and has now been premiered. **Palomar has progressed step by step and if his earlier works suggested some interesting things, now with his third one, he is well and truly established....**

The composer has created Head music that while being contemporary does not reject the melody. Its more relaxed moments are reminiscent of Kurt Weill, while in those of greater dramatic force he imposes a dense orchestration full of vitality that reflects the strength of the drama, the contrasting feelings of fear and passion, the threat of blackmail, all in a sordid atmosphere where all sorts of passions are unleashed...

The work of the conductor, Josep Caballé-Domenech, who had studied the score in great depth, has been very important: he managed to bring out all the detail, the subtleties and the necessary intensity, getting a very interesting performance from the orchestra, and also from the chorus which had a far from easy task before them.

Albert Vilardell, *El Mundo*, 22 April 2009

After two chamber operas, *Ruleta* (1998) and *Juana* (2006) - the composer Enric Palomar has taken a giant step forward in the consolidation of his work in the field of opera with this world premiere of a full-scale work at the Liceu.

... A score of brilliant colour and symphonic vigour that Josep Caballé recreates with great results in the pit ... The opera, unquestionably successful on many scores, and the quality of Carlos Wagner's staging, were very well received in a debut that ended with almost unanimous applause... Ángeles Blancas leaves no loose ends in her vigorous creation of Pepona. At her side the tenor José Manuel Zapata rises to the occasion in a role, Don Igi, far from his bel canto field. Palomar achieves in the chorus part -well managed by the chorus of the Liceu- suggestive nuances with a clever game of dissonance. But it is in the pit, well-controlled by Caballé-Domènech, where the resources shine at their best, with **a language of great force and rhythmic narrative** that has been nurtured by many influences and follows the language of Falla and Gerhard in the use of themes and expressions from popular music.

Javier Pérez Senz, *El País*, 24 April 2009