

TODAY'S ZAMAN

'Man of La Mancha' opens at Süreyya Opera

The classic American Broadway show, "Man of La Mancha," opened at Süreyya Opera House on Feb. 1 in its second incarnation since 2002. Its wonderful Turkish translation by Güngör Dilmen was every bit as much the star as the singers.

In many ways it was more musical than the original English. The cast, headed by veteran character actor/singer Suat Arıkan in the title role of Don Quixote on this night, was a superb lineup of singers who brought composer Mitch Leigh's music to vibrant life. The famous "To Dream the Impossible Dream" is the immortal hit song from this show.

Director Murat Göksu staged the show in a way that allowed the characters to move organically through the many scenes that interchanged reality with pretend reality. "La Mancha" was premiered in 1965, and some of the script feels a bit archaic and slow. The director's challenge is to put some vitality into the parts that feel musty and frankly, a bit silly. The colorful Spanish 1600s style costumes by Gizem Betil added authenticity and visual delight. The musical score is chock full of great melodies and catchy rhythms. The biggest stumbling block for casting singing actresses in this show is the role of Aldonza. Her vocal range is unusually wide, and the singer must be as secure in the operatic range as the deep "belting" zone. Şebnem Usanmaz successfully handled all this as if it weren't even an issue.

Don Quixote, who is a mythical figure cooked up in the imagination by the protagonist Miguel de Cervantes, has survived the Spanish Inquisition and has been thrown into jail along with his servant Sancho Panza. The pair's adventures in and out of capture, aided by the Don's capacity for theatrical changes of identity, provide a combination of inspired comedy and soulful realizations, chiefly about love. When Quixote lays eyes on Aldonza, a prostitute with a lot of rough edges, he calls her "Dulcinea." His naive romantic vision serves to transform her hardened heart into gold.

Musically, in addition to Usanmaz and Arıkan, singers Çağrı Köktekin as Sancho, Serkan Bodur as the Priest, Ali Murat Erençül as Dr. Carrasco were outstanding. There was only one problem sonically with this production -- a serious one. The band, which was behind the set, was miked; the singers, as far

as I could tell, were not miked. As a result, the band, which should function only as accompaniment, was much louder than the singers. In many cases (like the trio in the first act with Antonia, the Priest and the Innkeeper's Wife) the audience was resigned to watching lips move. I truly hope this can be quickly remedied because the production is otherwise a delight.

Hezarfen Ensemble's Three Visions

The Hezarfen Ensemble returned to the Borusan Music House on Feb. 3 to present "Ethnic Roots, Mystic Visions," a program of recent compositions from Russian composer Lera Auerbach, Palestinian composer Samir Odeh-Tamimi and Argentinean-Israeli composer Osvaldo Golijov. The core ensemble of violinists Ellen Jewett and Özcan Ulucan, violist Ulrich Mertin, cellist Erman İmayhan and pianist Müge Hendekli were joined by clarinetist Nusret İspir, who is a member of Ankara's Bilkent Symphony Orchestra.

Director Michael Ellison verbally introduced the links that the three composers have to each others' work, but after listening to them, I made my own conclusion. All three are examples of compositions that don't follow standard formats; in fact, each seems to have no beginning and no end. All felt suspended in mid-air: one is a glacial and transfixed vision, another in the midst of a primal scream, and the next an endless journey without guideposts.

Auerbach's String Quartet No. 2 "Primera Luz" (First Light) was an intimate and tender piece, moving from exquisitely wrought solos to simmering chordal textures. The six sections, intended to be six prayers, explored quietness with great intensity throughout. It seemed to describe primordial sources of light and darkness shining through a prism. It was an extraordinary piece, and one that I want to hear again and again. It used another, almost extraterrestrial language.

Odeh-Tamimi's "Shatilla" is written for clarinets (B-flat and bass), violin, cello and piano. It is a short, stark requiem for 30,000 Palestinians that were killed in a refugee camp in 1982 during the Lebanese Civil War. Odeh-Tamimi's musical language takes no prisoners: the screaming clarinet stabs right into the center of incredible wrath and horror, and the strings mirror the tension. At the end, the piano plays muddy clusters produced by angry fists, over and over, descending into a dirty, dark hell. Pianist Hendekli dramatically executed these clusters with perfect intention -- never over the top. İspir's spiky solos on both instruments perfectly vocalized the still-animate ghosts of the murdered Palestinians.

Golijov's "The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind" is based on the legend of a rabbi from Provence, who, 800 years ago, dictated a kabbalistic document that Jewish mystics and scholars have attempted to interpret throughout the centuries. Similarly, Golijov has created a many-layered composition that can be also interpreted either for its entertaining face-value or historical depth. Its three

movements are in different musical languages: "as if written in three of the different languages as spoken by our people throughout history... Aramaic, Yiddish, and Hebrew," explains the composer in his program notes.

Written for string quartet and clarinet, this piece has frequent Klezmer-inflected phrases, with the clarinet's serio-comic slurps dancing around the strings' alternately dreamy and feisty underlay. Moments of extreme despair are offset by wild and somewhat unhinged dance rhythms. "I try to imagine how a blind person would touch his environment," said violist Mertin. "The colorful match of these instruments and the unexpected volume changes are the embodiment of how Isaac might have responded to it."

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Muhabir: Alexandra Ivanoff
