Daniel Catán's *Florencia en el Amazonas*
Libretto by Marcela Fuentes-Berain

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Daniel Catán Porteny (1949–2011) was a Mexican composer, writer and professor. His second opera, *Rappaccini's Daughter*, was the first Mexican opera to be produced by a professional opera company in the United States. With a libretto by one of his pupils, *Florencia en el Amazonas*, his next opera, became the first in Spanish to be commissioned by an opera company in this country. Catán has received a Plácido Domingo Award and a Guggenheim Fellowship Award for his contributions to music. In September 2010, his opera *Il Postino* was premiered by the Los Angeles Opera, with Plácido Domingo singing Pablo Neruda, a role written specifically for him. Catán died while working on his next opera, *Meet John Doe*. *Florencia* has had many American and international productions.

In the words of the composer:

> "Because I had lived so many years in Britain and in Europe and in the States, I assimilated the operatic tradition of the West," Catán told the Cincinnati Opera on the eve of *Florencia*'s performances there in 2008. "I respect and love that tradition very deeply, but at the same time I wanted to reconnect with my own roots and not only write operas in Spanish, but to use a Spanish that evoked our whole culture—otherwise, they would sound like translated operas. The works of great writers like Gabriel García Márquez, [...] were a great inspiration to me to try and do the same thing in opera."

I discovered an African drum called a djembe that can capture the crisp rhythms of the tropical rain as well as the deepest rumbles of a fearful storm. ... I thought of the marimba, its luscious wooden sounds and the way they would combine with flutes, clarinets, and harp. The sonorities of these instruments seemed to me to capture the sound of the river, the way it changes its timbre as it flows, transforming everything in its path.

The Met's production is widely praised:

> The production by theatre professional Mary Zimmerman […] she prefers to call it 'mythical realism,' which she defines as "all the experiences that are not completely logical, but come from passion."] was for me her most successful at the Met, capturing the Amazon Basin and the strangers making their way to the opera house in the middle of the jungle for various reasons. The setting by Riccardo Hernandez with projections by S. Katy Tucker and lighting by T.J. Gerckens was lush and the magical figures—dancers, choreographed by Alex Sanchez, and costumed by Ana Kuzmanic as fish and floating flora, puppeteers as monkeys and alligators—were, indeed, fascinating.
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> <div align="right">BroadwayWorld.com, Richard Sasanow Nov. 18, 2023</div>

Your view of this opera depends on your perspective. if you are enthralled by spectacle, fantastic costumes, lush scenery, and simple lyricism, you will be enthusiastic, as many audiences have been, about this work. An enthralled reviewer:

> It's a true grand opera with familiar-feeling characters who appear in enchanted landscapes that take inspiration from the magical realist works of Latin-American writers like Gabriel García Marquez. […] Catán's opera bursts into life in resplendent—dare I say magical?—fashion, giving us one of the Met's most visually stunning and emotionally affecting outings of recent seasons. […] *Florencia* is a feast for the eyes. Certain visual flourishes—a heron-dancer unfurling his spectacular wings, a puppet alligator that seemed to swim through the stage, the black floor now black river water, the final transfiguration of Florencia—were beautiful enough that tears sprang to my eyes.
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> <div align="right">Observer.com, Gabrielle Ferrari, 11/21/23</div>

There is, however, an opposing view:

> The piece exudes homogeneous, interchangeable, anesthetized prettiness; you get the sense that any character's music could just as easily been transferred to anyone else. While it's not an unpleasant way to spend a couple of hours, there is nothing approaching vivid characterization or compelling drama — the things that mattered to Puccini, that his supreme lyrical gift was serving. And while the baritone Mattia Olivieri, in his Met debut, sings Riolobo, the narrator, with firm, juicy tone, the staging struggles to capture his status on the blurry boundary between real and magic.
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> <div align="right">Zachary Woolfe, The New York Times, Nov. 17, 2023</div>

The Broadway World reviewer continued thus:

> Yet, I wish I could say that it worked better for me as a whole. True, the score was easy on the ear, but didn't really go anywhere, though it had some lovely stops along the way, thanks to the best efforts of conductor Yannick Nezet-Seguin and the Met Orchestra. The Met's chorus, under Donald Palumbo, had its grand moments as well.

I saw the Eastman Opera Theater's production of *Florencia*, and, except for the comments on the Met's production, which I haven't seen, this sums up my reaction to the work. Granted, I am not a fan of 'magical realism' and I go to opera for the music and the drama, not the spectacle. It was not the singing, costumes, or the staging at EOT that failed to please, but I left the theater unsatisfied, if not actually put off. Catán has been compared to Puccini, but that was certainly not my first thought.

I leave you with a review that sums up the opera's strengths, particularly at the Met:

> Catán's opera is not a perfect creation, but the score is an ideal vehicle for Yannick Nézet-Séguin and the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. He drew playing from the orchestra that is full of energy and passion, yet with careful attention to detail.
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> Pérez, alone on stage and attired in an iridescent black gown, was at her most compelling giving voice to Florencia's fear of never again seeing Cristóbal [her lover who disappeared in the Amazon many years ago]. Suddenly she was transformed into a beautiful butterfly with the appearance of softly, fluttering wings as luminous as her singing. As her spirit hovered off to join his in the jungle, the effect was simply magical.
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> Newyorkclassicreview.com, by Rick Perdian, Nov. 20, 2023