



down argentine way

by [John Yohalem](#) | 4:44 pm | Mar 16, 2013



It has always puzzled me—and I'm not the only one—that so few successful operas have been composed in Spanish. It is not, heaven knows, a lack of idiosyncratic melody; Spain and its erstwhile colonies burst at the seams with it, and the many dance rhythms lend flavor to whole continents. There is a homegrown style of light opera, *zarzuela*, but that has seldom lurched across ethnic boundaries even within Spain.

When I was in Tarragona, I was severely reprimanded: *zarzuela* was Castilian and should never be sought in Catalunya. In America, in English, *zarzuela* is hopeless. Spanish singers have been among the reigning glories of opera for centuries, but Spanish song is not what they are famous for singing.

Spain's national opera was composed by a Frenchman to a libretto in French based on a French novella: *Carmen*. It is set in Seville, as are famous operas composed by Italians,

Austrians, Russians, even P.D.Q. Bach (*The Civilian Barber*). But who can name a Sevillean opera by a Spaniard? *No se*.

Perhaps the language itself is the problem. Spanish is so full of grandiloquence that when it is pronounced with the proper vital, nostril-flaring impulsion, it hardly requires melody to illustrate a passionate point. Figures of speech, over-the-top *pronunciamentos* and accusations all sound more operatic here, or more than operatic, *other* than operatic. “I shall breast-feed a boot,” cries the masochistic María in **Ástor Piazzola**’s “tango opera,” *María de Buenos Aires*, playing through Sunday at [Le Poisson Rouge](#) on Bleecker Street, in a production by Opéra Hispánica. (I’m quoting the subtitles; they *could* be wrong.)

Too, there all those words ending in “s,” accented esses that close words, plurals, adjectives, pronouns. You can’t sing in the Italian manner if you can’t conclude in vowel outcries, ornamented or merely defiant. Esses shut you down. This is intense and poetic and operatic, but it’s not vocally operatic, at least in the way we are used to.

There are other reasons you might wonder if *María de Buenos Aires* is an opera. No real story is enacted, no characters live within a drama—they merely report. A great deal of the show is spoken narration; other parts are imaginatively danced. The only singers are **Solange Merdinian** (as María) and **Marcelo Guzzo** (a sort of narrator/commentator called El Payador). They have strong voices and their performances thrill; they act up a storm as well.

But the mysterious El Duende (**Gerardo Gudiño**), a “nocturnal spirit” who summons María from nowhere, and summons her again from quick and merciful death to haunt the tango-ridden streets (if I got the story right), is merely a man in makeup, striking poses and reading unmemorized lines with menace. He declaims well, but the notebook makes us doubt they come from his soul.

The faint story: María appears in B.A. (a country girl? a slum girl?), is lost, assaulted, raped, murdered; rises from her wretched funeral (summoned by El Duende), learns to tango, involves herself with more men, is assaulted, raped and murdered. What a difference a dance makes!

This is not clearly acted, and though the attendant dancers are good (**Daniel Fetecua Soto** was the choreographer, **Beth Greenberg** the stage director), we have seen better, or perhaps merely seen such things in less cramped theaters. What Piazzola has written is more song cycle than opera, and the singers must be strong enough to hold interest during the brief duration of the piece. Merdinian and Guzzo are strong, and their emotions, especially’s María’s defiant miseries, affecting. But it is a commentary on the story not an illustration of it.

The purely musical excitement of the event, for me, lay in the orchestration of the songs for an ensemble of nine. **Daniel Frost Hernández Jorge Parodi** led the extraordinary band, and the music was arranged to display their particular gifts.

The violinist (**Sami Merdinian**), the flutist (**Nathalie Joachim**) and the percussionist (**Hector Flores**) made especially intricate and subtle contributions, producing sounds from their instruments that might have emerged from the alleys of Buenos Aires at nightfall, while María had a special relationship indeed with the national folk instrument, the *bandonéon*, a small accordion, wielded by **JP Joffre**.

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