

MARIANELA: THE FIRST COSTA RICAN OPERA (1957)

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Since the early 1960s, students from Costa Rica (a country with which our university has especially close relations) have shown a special enthusiasm in the Galdós seminar for the novel *Marianela*.¹ Initially they might volunteer to write a research paper or give a report on *Marianela*, saying, «I saw the opera» or «a teacher of mine in Costa Rica wrote the opera.» Even in the 1980s, the mention of Galdós' *Marianela* still brings spontaneous remarks such as «that was our country's first opera» or «my parents saw the opera.» Because this unique enthusiasm for *Marianela* has lasted so long and because other *galdosistas*, whom I have queried, seem not to have heard of the matter, I finally decided to satisfy my long-standing curiosity and investigate the Costa Rican reincarnation of Galdós's beloved Nela.²

A brief discussion concerning the opera *Marianela* in Bernal Flores's *La música en Costa Rica* (San José: Editorial Costa Rica, 1978) is helpful; it also contains a photograph of the soprano Albertina Moya in the role of Marianela (p. 97). In addition Flores reports that «el barítono Emer Campos, el tenor Gustavo Silsky y los bajos Claudio Brenes y José Rafael Ochoa» had the other major roles in the opera. He also gives a biographical sketch of the composer, labeling *Marianela* «una obra de juventud, de factura romántica, que augura lo que podrá producir después» (p. 98).

The composer, Benjamín Gutiérrez Sáenz (notwithstanding his complete agreement with Flores that *Marianela* was indeed a youthful work beyond which he has long since matured) graciously agreed to provide additional information. Accordingly, he granted two interviews in his office at the Universidad de Costa Rica (22 and 26 July, 1982) to my former student Martha Souza (Shawnee Mission West High School, Shawnee Mission, Kansas) and her husband Raymond (University of Kansas). The remainder of this study is based on information from these two interviews, as well as newspaper reviews supplied by Señor Gutiérrez.

Costa Rica's much esteemed composer first read Galdós' *Marianela* in 1955, while still a secondary school student, and he was especially moved by the lyric quality of Galdós's novel in general, as well as by don Benito's masterful creation of the title protagonist. While subsequently studying at the Conservatorio de Música in Guatemala City (at age eighteen), Benjamin Gutiérrez's Guatemalan friend Roberto Paniagua urged him to write the music for an opera. Gutiérrez agreed, provided Paniagua create a libretto based on Galdós's character Marianela. The result of this collaboration became Costa Rica's first opera, *Marianela*, which had its premier in San José's Teatro Nacional on 7 October, 1957 (when Gutiérrez was only twenty years of age).

The plot of the two-act opera is as follows:

Act One

Scene one: Nela and Pablo are seen conversing. Nela (as in Galdós' novel) serves as Pablo's eyes and interprets things —especially nature— for the blind youth. When Pablo, seeking a positive answer, inquires regarding Nela's physical appearance, she affirms that she is beautiful. This declaration is overheard by Centeno, who, as a loyal servant, feels duty bound to inform Pablo's father that Nela is misleading his son.³

Scene two: Centeno approaches Nela and Pablo and announces the arrival of Doctor Golfín and Florentina in the company of Pablo's father, Don Pedro.⁴ Centeno asks Marianela to leave and escorts her off the stage; but he stops and listens to the conversation between Doctor Golfín and Don Pedro concerning the possibility of an operation on Pablo's eyes.⁵

Scene three: All alone on the stage, Marianela sings of her great love for Pablo, «su única razón de vivir,» and what the loss of his love would mean for her. Then Centeno comes and, acting on behalf of Pablo's father, tells Nela that Pablo will have an eye operation and that she is to leave Socartes.

Act Two

Scene one: A great *fiesta* is being held at Don Pedro's house to celebrate Dr. Golfín's successful operation, which has restored Pablo's sight. The main entertainment is provided by Sofia at the piano, who is the *grande dame* and the special focus of the scene. Then Pablo asks for Marianela, and Centeno goes off to one corner of the stage to discuss this problem with Pablo's father. The conversation between these two men becomes quite agitated, Pablo becomes more insistent in his request, and these difficulties are noticed by the merrymakers. As tensions increase, the *fiesta* starts to dissolve; finally Pablo's father and Centeno are alone on the stage. They decide to have Nela brought to the garden so that Pablo may actually see her and contrast her homeliness with the beauty of the night and his earlier vision of Florentina.

Scene two (following a musical interlude): Centeno brings Nela to the garden of Don Pedro's residence. Centeno lies to Nela, telling her to sit down and wait for Pablo here, because the entire household is upset that Pablo's operation was unsuccessful. When Centeno goes to fetch Pablo, Nela falls asleep and her dream is presented in the form of a ballet, with the protagonist trying to flee and struggling with shadows. Meanwhile Pablo's father invites his son into the garden to see the beauties of the night. Nela awakens at Pablo's approach, starts to flee, but stops when Pablo asks who she is. At this point the opera climaxes with a mass chorus, all the characters come out of the house and into the garden, the ballet returns, and then the final curtain falls —leaving the spectator to furnish his own denouement.⁶

The critics, as well as the spectators in the Teatro Nacional, enthusiastically proclaimed *Marianela* a great success. For example, Rafael Barrantes Herrera wrote, «Hay momentos en que nos parece estar escuchando trozos de las óperas de Giuseppe Verdi. Pero no al Verdi de *La Traviata*, música un

tanto ligera, casi diríamos mundana. Más bien al Verdi de *Rigoletto* o de *Otelo*. Con manifestaciones de estilos wagnerianos en sus arranques explosivos, para terminar en melodías suaves, sentimentales.»⁷ Another critic, Federico Nora C., affirmed, «Desde los primeros compases de la obertura de la ópera, me sentí verdaderamente captado... Hay cierto clasicismo muy semejante al empleado por Beethoven en su ópera *Fidelius* [sic]... Todas sus romanzas, sus arias, duetos, tercetos, el joven las desenvuelve, imprimiendo en ellas frases ricas en armonía y melodía, desde los pasajes más sencillos hasta los trágicos, adaptándolos admirablemente a las escenas desarrolladas, entre los personajes.»⁸

The success of *Marianela* immediately brought honors and new opportunities to Benjamín Gutiérrez Sáenz. He accepted a scholarship (unsolicited) at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston (1958-59), spent the following summer in Aspen, Colorado, and then returned to Boston (1959-60). After further study in Argentina, Gutiérrez returned to his native Costa Rica and has been composing and teaching in San José, where his latest creation, the opera-ballet *El pájaro del crepúsculo* had its premiere 12 August, 1982.⁹

Consistently recognizing his *Marianela* as a youthful work, Gutiérrez has preferred not to have it performed again in its original version. Nevertheless, he believes that a rewritten form of it—especially one including Galdós' social criticism—may be a viable possibility. Should the right collaborator come along, Gutiérrez might well be tempted to consider creating a new version of *Marianela* (for which he has already written an overture), thus giving Galdós's beloved Nela yet another reincarnation.

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NOTES

¹ This was true even before the establishment of the University of Kansas Junior Year in Costa Rica in 1959.

² For the first reincarnation in a play by the Quintero brothers, and Galdós' emotional reaction to it, see H. Chonon Berkowitz, *Pérez Galdós: Spanish Liberal Crusader* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1948), pp. 439-42.

³ This is, of course, the elder Centeno (not Celepín), who has been changed from a «capataz de ganado en las minas» (Benito Pérez Galdós, «*Marianela*,» *Obras completas*. Madrid: Aguilar, 1960, IV, p. 692).

⁴ Paniagua probably changed this name to avoid that of Verdi's well-known title protagonist in *Don Carlos*.

⁵ Doctor Golfín's role in the opera is quite minor in comparison with that in Galdós' novel.

⁶ This is, of course, at complete variance with Galdós' *Marianela*.

⁷ «Benjamín Gutiérrez Sáenz y *Marianela*,» *La Nación* (Suplemento Puntarenas), marzo de 1958, n.p.

⁸ Unidentified newspaper clipping, supplied by Benjamín Gutiérrez Sáenz.

⁹ Bernal Flores gives the following biographical sketch of *Marianela's* composer:

Benjamín Gutiérrez nació en Guadalupe y comenzó sus estudios musicales en el Conservatorio Nacional, continuándolos en 1955 en el Conservatorio de Guatemala, mediante una beca. Posteriormente hizo sus estudios en el New England Conservatory (Master of Music), también estuvo en Aspen, Colorado, estudiando con Darius Milhaud, entre otros, y luego con una beca vivió dos años en la República Argentina, estudiando con Alberto Ginastera en el Instituto Torcuato di Tella. Ha sido profesor del Conser-

vatorio Nacional de la Universidad de Costa Rica, en el Conservatorio de Castella y la Facultad de Educación de la Universidad de Costa Rica. Participó como profesor en la Escuela Superior de Música y de 1972 a 1975 fue Director de la Escuela de Artes Musicales de la Universidad de Costa Rica, en donde actualmente desempeña el cargo de Coordinador de Extensión Cultural. También ha sido Subdirector de la Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional.