

Sebastián Durón, composer & José de Cañizares, librettist


Cupid's New Weapons of Love, ca. 1700

(Las Nuevas Armas de Amor)

Feb 14 & 16, 2013

Dallas, Texas

Modern première by

Orchestra of 
New Spain
Grover Wilkins 3d Music Director

Conductor, Grover Wilkins

Director, Gustavo Tambascio

Costumes, Antonio Bartolo

Sets, Nicolás Boni

Choreography, Jaime Puente

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City Performance Hall

Dallas Arts District

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The Classical Note: Ambitious Production Bodes Well for The Orchestra of New Spain's Future



Author: By Wayne Lee Gay, for D Magazine *Front Row*

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The Orchestra of New Spain and music director Grover Wilkins III won a permanent place of honor on the local music scene—and permanent admiration from this listener—last week with a masterful and constantly delightful production of eighteenth-century Spanish composer Sebastián Durón's zarzuela *Las Nuevas armas de amor* (*Cupid's New Weapons of Love*) of 1711 at City Performance Hall. The production marked the first modern performance of a work that deserves to be ranked as a masterpiece.

Zarzuela is the vernacular operatic form of Spain and Latin America—roughly, the equivalent of the American Broadway show or the British light operetta. But it boasts a much longer history, flourishing as early as the 1630s and continuing in an unbroken tradition through the middle twentieth century, with revival as a popular commercial art form in recent decades.

The modern opera connoisseur is most likely to be struck by the similarities of *Cupid's New Weapons* to Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. And while one wouldn't quite place the former on the pinnacle of the latter, *Cupid's New Weapons* is remarkable for its boldly assertive symbolism as well as for the consistent craftsmanship and engaging quality of Durón's music. In *Cupid's New Weapons*, the conflict of the desires for erotic pleasure and the equally strong compulsion for order take the form of a war between Cupid and Jupiter. Diana joins forces with Cupid, resulting in a surprising defeat for the King of the

Gods. And, as in *The Magic Flute*, loftier philosophical quandaries are constantly set against unbridled “low” passions.

The production, spoken in English and sung in Spanish, was both simple and authentic, with extraordinary attention to reviving the acting styles, costumes, and sets of early eighteenth-century Spain. Mezzo-soprano Carla López Speziale in the title role of Cupid was first among many spectacular artists in the cast, which also featured remarkable performances by soprano Irasema Terrazas as Diana and soprano Anna Fredericka Popova as Jupiter. Stage director Gustavo Tambascio succeeded in bringing the stylized acting of the early eighteenth century zarzuela to life in a way that was never dull or pedantic, while Wilkins conducted an engaging reading by the small but tightly concise orchestra and chorus.

Director Wilkins has international ambitions for this unique Dallas-based ensemble. This superb fully-staged production should inspire further local support for and attention to his efforts.

Review: Cupid's New Weapons of Love | Orchestra of New Spain | Dallas City Performance Hall



All Aquiver

The Orchestra of New Spain deftly stages the Spanish Baroque zarzuela *Cupid's New Weapons of Love* at Dallas City Performance Hall.

by Gregory Sullivan Isaacs

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by Sebastian Duron <http://www.orchestraofnewspain.org/>

Dallas City Performance Hall

Recently in the news there have been stories about long-lost mailed valentines and dusty love letters that came to light after decades of being missing. Similarly, there is a 300-year-old valentine being delivered in Dallas: The modern premiere of *Cupid's New Weapons of Love* (*Las Nuevas Armas de Amor*), a zarzuela (Spanish comic opera with dialogue) by Sebastián Durón on a libretto of José de Cañizares.

Durón was the greatest composer of stage music in Spain of his era. He was also a prominent musician. In 1691, he was appointed master of the Royal Chapel of King Charles II in Madrid. He held this prestigious post until 1706 when his involvement in the

wrong side of the War of Spanish Succession got him banished to France. This particular work is not even listed in most biographies of the composer. It was discovered by the musicologist Gordon Hart, who made a performable edition. Grover Wilkins, the genius behind the **Orchestra of New Spain**, found it and was determined to bring it to the stage in a production as close to what you would have seen at the time as possible.

When a Baroque opera is staged in a modern opera house, most directors strive for either modern character development or some fantastical take, like moving the action to the men's room at Grand Central Station.

There are two recent cases in point. One is *The Enchanted Island*, a Baroque pastiche assembled by the Metropolitan Opera. Here, all the Baroque conventions were followed, from the elaborate costumes to the entrances of the gods on flying clouds. However, the singers portrayed their characters in a modern method that wouldn't have been out of place in a production of *Tosca*. The other is Calixto Bieito's production of Rameau's *Platée* at the Stuttgart Opera, in which anatomically enhanced singers ran around naked pontificating.

What historical accuracy means here is that those of us in attendance on Thursday evening at the new City Performance Hall had to make a quick adjustment in our thinking about opera within the first few seconds. On Thursday, when the first characters came out on stage in their plumed costumes and struck a graceful balletic pose to sing, the first reaction was to laugh. You were immediately put in mind of the era of "park and bark": singers where the only difference in physical characterization between say, Butterfly and Tosca, was the costume. However, once you stepped back mentally and looked at the stunningly beautiful *tableau vivant* that stage director Gustavo Tambascio created with the way his singers were posed, you immediately understood what is meant by the "Baroque style of acting."

In some ways, it was like a first exposure to the acting style in the Beijing opera, which came to fruition about the same time. While the music is radically different from anything that Western ears have ever heard before, the acting style of poses and gestures that are used to illustrate things like physical confrontations or riding a horse don't seem all that different from the Western Baroque era. You have to change your thinking away from the realism of modern productions and, even more so in films, to appreciate the subtle inferences of emotions by gesticulation and beauty of stage pictures created by balanced poses of marvelously costumed and graceful actors.

This is not to say that the music didn't pack an emotional wallop. It did. Mexican mezzo Carla López Speziale, as Cupid, brought us all nearly to tears in the aria when the god mourned the loss of his arrows.

This brings us to the sticky problem of pronouns. In this production, women take the major male roles of Jupiter and Cupid. At the time in Italy, these would have been castrati, who combined the range of a female voice with the power of a male. However, that was mostly an Italian thing. In a recent email from Hart, he explained it this way.

"Jupiter and Cupid were not sung by castrati. Castrati were more an Italian custom that never caught on in Spain. Female roles were sung and acted by women, and mythological characters, i.e., gods, were also typically performed by female voices. This is evidenced in payment records to actors and singers with roles listed on them."

In this production, Jupiter is ably sung by Anne Popov. She is completely convincing as she walks around holding her long golden cape. The role of Diana, a female god sung by a female, was beautifully sung by Irasema Terrazas. Other members of the large cast also includes Dennis Raveneau as Palemón (also the Dance Master), Jakeem Powell as the servant Zéfiro, Anastasia Muñoz as both Sirene and Olvido, Tyler Crim as Anteo, Jeffrey Colangelo as Silvio and Ivan Jasso as the barber.

Jendi Tarde, Miller Pyke, Fernando Hernadez and Delilah Buitron all played multiple roles and were also dancers. Internationally renowned Spanish dancers Jaime Puente and Yolanda Granado Requena were a wonder to watch and to hear as they gave a virtuoso performance with their castanets.

The set, by Nicolás Boni, is reminiscent of all of the drawing of Baroque opera sets of the era. It is resplendent in Baroque detail and grandeur (at least as much as the relatively small stage will allow). In a theater of the era, Diana would have flown in on a winged chariot. Here, due to the limitations of the venue, she arrived on a cloudbank that was pulled on the stage. Nevertheless, it was still quite a *coup de théâtre*. Costumes by Antonio Bartolo are appropriately elaborate with gigantic feathered headdresses and crinolined skirts—and that is just for the men.

After intermission, Wilkins presented a between-the-acts comedy. These were all the rage in the era. They were broad to the point of slapstick and gave the audience a *sorbet intermezzo* before resuming the opera. Here, it was just silly and made the evening too long.

However, that reservation aside, every opera and theater fan should attend this production. If you are not able to adjust your expectations away from *verismo* operatic staging, and find it to be stiff and overly stylized, at least you will have seen a Baroque opera (in this case a Spanish *zarzuela*).

It is beautifully sung by artists who specialize in Baroque performance practices, directed and brought to the stage by experts in recreating the experience as it was seen by the Spanish court, accompanied by an orchestra made up of performers playing on the original instruments (forerunners of today's modern ones), and conducted by one of the nation's leading experts on Baroque music. If you are able to make that critical adjustment, you are in for a moving allegory about the dangers of unrealistic expectations, the reality of love and the futility of revenge. **TJ**

Reviews
“Nuevas arms de amor”

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Wayne Lee Gay, D Magazine on line

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Gregory Sullivan Isaacs, Theater Jones