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living@thenews.com.mx

To commemorate the birth 150 years ago of Italian composer Giacomo Puccini, the Compañía Nacional de Ópera will stage two performances of his oft ignored opera "Edgar." Mexican mezzo-soprano Encarnación Vázquez is set to perform the role of Tigrana, an amoral gypsy who battles for the love of Edgar, a neurotic young man.



Mezzo-soprano Encarnación Vázquez is well-known in Mexico and abroad for her lovely lyric voice and intellectually acute interpretations.

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"Edgar" was Puccini's second opera. It premiered at La Scala in Milan in 1889.

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PUCCINI'S 'EDGAR'

A RARE CHANCE TO HEAR A RARE OPERA

BY JIM JOHNSTON
Special to The News

Giacomo Puccini's rarely performed opera "Edgar" will be presented by the Compañía Nacional de Ópera on Thursday and Sunday in commemoration of the composer's birth 150 years ago. Even people who claim to hate opera will be familiar with music of Puccini, some of whose best melodies have been turned into pop songs and elevator music.

His most famous operas, "La Bohème" (1896), "Tosca" (1900), "Madama Butterfly" (1904) and "Turandot" (1924) have been performed regularly at the world's major opera houses since they first appeared. Puccini's operas are loved by millions, and the quantity of tears shed at the endings of "La Bohème" and "Madama Butterfly" alone could fill a small lake.

But even he was capable of writing a flop.

"Edgar," Puccini's second opera, premiered at La Scala in Milan in 1889 to tepid response. Attempts to revise the opera in 1890, 1891 and again in 1905 did not help and the work has languished in oblivion ever since. The weakness of the libretto accounts in part for its failure.

The story, which takes place in medieval Flanders, tells of a confused and neurotic young man, Edgar, torn between the love of Fidelia, the chaste girl next door, and Tigrana, a passionate, amoral gypsy.

It's one of those opera stories the Marx brothers might have parodied, and none of the characters are particularly sympathetic. But if we judge opera libretti too harshly, some of the world's greatest music would never be heard.

In his later operas Puccini developed a keen sense of dramatic and mu-

sical propulsion, with events and music moving forward with captivating logic. In "Edgar," the composer's second opera, he hadn't yet found his distinctive personal style, although hints of it shine through the score, especially in the Act 3 funeral scene with its moving aria for soprano and chorus, one of Puccini's finest moments. At times the music seems to wander and lurch, but a bit of aimless rambling in Puccini-land is not the most unpleasant of experiences.

Listening to "Edgar" provides a fascinating look into the workings of Puccini's mind.

Like studying the early sketches of a great painter, listening to "Edgar" provides a fascinating look into the workings of a great composer's mind. In fiction, evil characters are often



Giacomo Puccini was a prolific operatic composer famous for works like "Tosca."

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more interesting than good ones, and in "Edgar," the character of Tigrana is really, really evil – think Salome on steroids. It's just the kind of thing opera singers love to dig into.

So, I spoke to mezzo-soprano Encarnación Vázquez, who will perform the role of Tigrana.

The singer is well-known in Mexico and abroad for her lovely lyric voice and intellectually acute interpretations. She invited me to her cozy home in the Del Valle neighborhood of Mexico City.

Pretty and petite, fashionably dressed and sporting a beret that accentuated a Piaf-like quality, she's nobody's idea of a sex-mad sadist. And she has a much kinder interpretation of Tigrana than I do.

"She's not really a bad person, just a product of her circumstances," Vázquez said. "She's an orphan, brought up on the streets, scorned by everyone." The role is also a rare op-

portunity for the singer: "Because of my size, I'm often cast as a child or 'the sweet young thing.' I love playing a hot-blooded seductress for a change."

As a girl, Vázquez sang in the church choir, but had no serious exposure to classical music until she reached college. While auditioning to study piano, a teacher asked to hear her sing. Startled by the big sound she made, he encouraged her to study voice. At 21, she won the prestigious Carlo Morelli competition, and her career took off soon after that. Winning another school competition, she received a ticket to Bellas Artes, which allowed her to attend her first opera, Puccini's "Turandot."

"I left the theater in a daze, walking on air through the Alameda," she said. "Why hadn't anyone told me about this before? I thought. From that moment on I was hooked."

"We received very thorough train-

ing in vocal technique at school, which is why my voice still works so well after a career that began 27 years ago," Vázquez said. "I sing everything from Mexican popular songs, Bel Canto opera, German lieder, and even dissonant 20th-century music. Today, for example, I rehearsed 'Edgar' in the morning, then practiced Schubert and Mahler songs in the afternoon."

Recently she sang a Japanese opera with an all-Mexican cast, touring across Japan to rave reviews. "They were amazed at how good our pronunciation was. And of course, being Mexican, we were so much more emotional than the Japanese are used to. The audiences loved it!"

Her best recordings? "I made a CD of French songs entitled 'Chansons Sublimes' with Jorge Federico Osorio playing piano. He's a great artist and the collaboration was magical. And I'm proud of my recordings of the music of Manuel Ponce, one of Mexico's great composers."

I asked her advice for people who are interested in opera but don't know where to start. "You have to give yourself over completely to the performance," she said. "But by far the most important thing is to understand the meaning of the words. Without that, a high note can sound brutal or violent. Once you know the meaning behind the sound it takes on a whole other dimension – it becomes art."

Clearly excited about performing this rare opera, the singer added, that "while 'Edgar' may not be the perfect first opera experience, it has some exquisite moments, and for lovers of Puccini, it should not be missed."

Jim Johnston's blog is www.mexicocitydf.blogspot.com.



A popular Puccini opera is "Madama Butterfly." Here, in the title role, is Chinese soprano Liping Zhang, with Franco Farina.

BLOOMBERG PHOTO/ROBERT MELLANO

OPERA ZEO

Don't miss the chance to hear Encarnación Vázquez interpret the evil Tigrana.

Puccini's "Edgar" will be performed only twice at the Sala Nezahualcōyotl on the UNAM campus: Thursday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 5 p.m.
Tickets: 100-200 pesos. Are available at the box office.
Encarnación Vázquez will give recitals in:
 • Oaxaca on Nov. 26
 • La Paz, Baja California, on Dec. 5
 • Morelia on Dec. 12
 Mexico City on Dec. 13.