

***Alexina B.*, Contemporary Opera as Consolation**

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Review-Essay of the opera *Alexina B.* Music by Raquel García-Tomás, libretto by Irène Gayraud, stage direction by Marta Pazos. Gran Teatre del Liceu, Barcelona, March 2023.

With stage direction by Marta Pazos and libretto by Irène Gayraud, composer Raquel García-Tomás' opera *Alexina B* tells the striking story of the eponymous Alexina B., the first recognized intersex person, based on her handwritten memoirs *Mes Souvenirs*, discovered after her death in 1868. *Alexina B.* opened at the Gran Teatre del Liceu on 18 March 2023 to great critical and audience acclaim and has since become one of the most successful Spanish operas of recent years, despite being a contemporary work. This article analyses the key parameters that connect music and stage in *Alexina B.* within the framework of the new operatic paradigm in contemporary music.

Raquel García-Tomás's Musical Career

Born in Barcelona in 1984, Raquel García-Tomás is an interdisciplinary musical composer and creator. She earned a bachelor's degree in music in the specialty of composition at the Catalonia College of Music before completing a master's and doctoral program at the Royal College of Music in London, where she resided for six years. There she gained a deeper understanding of the various aspects of interdisciplinary creation, a focus that has since defined her approach to composition. Raquel García-Tomás has garnered several awards in recognition of the talent of her purely personal language, which combines a distinct vision of the music of the past with her own writing infused with electronics and the use of audiovisual media.

This way of conceiving composition is evident in works such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (2014; for piano, electronics, and video) or in *Estudio sonomecánico N° 1* (2018; for ensemble, electronics, and video). Her awards include the National Music Award of Spain in 2020 for her opera buffa *Je suis narcissiste*, which played in Madrid, Barcelona, and Seville. García-Tomás's work has been performed at the National Music Auditorium in Madrid, L'Auditori in Barcelona, the Palau de la Música Catalana, the Palau de la Música in Valencia, and in auditoriums and concert halls across Europe, Latin America, and Japan.

Raquel García-Tomás is the first female composer to première an opera at the Gran Teatre del Liceu in the twenty-first century and the second to do so since it was founded in 1847, after the première of Matilde Salvador's *Vinatea* in 1974. The composer has been drawn to opera and the various genres of theatre music since her beginnings, putting her own spin on a recreation of *La serva padrona* in 2010, *DIDO Reloaded* in 2013, and *Go, ÆNEAS, Go!* in 2014, the latter two being collective works. In 2015 she tackled the consequences of gentrification with the chamber opera *Displace*. Composer Joan Magrané wrote the first act, while García-Tomás wrote the second one. The aforementioned *Je suis narcissiste* reflects humorously on the trivialization and anaesthetization of post-industrial societies—a work with a dramatic and aesthetic approach that is very different from *Alexina B.*, with stage direction also by Marta Pazos. *Per precaució* (2020) is a micro-opera for soprano and harp that explores the problem of loneliness in the elderly over just 20 minutes.¹

García-Tomás' music is characterized by its luminous aesthetics, which is particularly evident in her post-pandemic oeuvre, such as *Sonic Canvas* for orchestra, or *Suite of Myself* for orchestra and choir (both from 2021); it also features an interdisciplinary conception of composition, combining traditional music genres (whether classical, jazz, cinematographic, etc.) with urban sounds, electronics, and contemporary audiovisual forms; finally, it is defined by a vintage musical aesthetic and a peculiar articulation of old and new musical codes through her use of rhythmic, harmonic, and timbre modulations. Her *métier* is also known for the original use of microtextures that play off broad chords—i.e., the use of repetition of melodic motifs laid down on liquid harmonies; this repetition is however fully per-

¹ *Per Precaució* is one of the six micro-operas that are part of the *Sis solos soles* project co-produced by the Liceu and Òpera de Butxaca i Nova Creació, consisting of six monodramas for female voice and solo instrumentalist.

sonal and immune to the rhythmic/melodic schemes of current minimalism. In short, Tomás is known for creating her own code that immediately reaches the listener's perception.

The Opera "Alexina B."

Composer Raquel García-Tomás and stage director Marta Pazos bring to the present the complex tale of Alexina B., transferring to the stage the intense beauty and overwhelming tragedy of feelings trapped in a body which was, at the time, unacceptable. Taking the form of a *literaturoper*, the libretto, by French writer Irène Gayraud, faithfully conveys the memoirs left by Abel Barbin (formerly known as Herculine Barbin or Alexina B.) which make for an exceptional legacy both for their narrative quality and for being the first autobiographical text written by an intersex person, that we know of.

Alexina B. is based on the life of Herculine Adélaïde Barbin, known as Alexina B. Born in 1838, she committed suicide on 2 February 1868 in a Parisian attic, leaving as her only legacy *Mes Souvenirs*, the echo of her female and male voices, unrecognized and unrecognizable by a society that saw no room for her. The libretto allows for a plethora of interpretations, as if it were a palimpsest about Barbin's life: it is the story of her tragic fate; an inordinate story of impossible love and of the oppression of a normative society. It is, more than anything, a heartrending attempt to define a person from, rather than in spite of, their own sexuality.

Alexina B. is a work of approximately 140 minutes, divided into three acts and 22 scenes. To build the opera, the three creators considered the nature of the story; Alexina, as Abel Barbin, writes her memoirs in the mid-nineteenth century, in a well-educated tone for the constraints of that time, which were both moral and religious. However, these memoirs also reveal the diversity of people whose behavior went outside the stereotypes for the era. Alexina coexists with characters who understand her and others who condemn her; however, the social machine operates monolithically in only one direction and, as with many other operas, it acts like a destruction factor for the person living on the outskirts of society.

Plot

Alexina B. is educated at a girls' convent, where she meets Léa, her first intimate friend. Later, she works as a governess at a reputed boarding school,

where she begins a bewildering love affair with Sara, the daughter of the Principal, Madame P.

After spending their first night together, and since the model of loving relationships was exclusively heteronormative, Alexina begins to present as a man, and changes her name to Abel, a name given by Sara. Upon telling the boarding school confessor of her love for Sara, Alexina is cast out and shamed. Alexina suffers from excruciating abdominal pains, which had already appeared in childhood and eventually became unbearable. After visiting a physician, she is left with a shocking diagnosis: she is a hermaphrodite. To find a place in society that dignifies her love for Sara, Alexina embarks on a struggle to be recognized as a man at the Civil Registry. This is how he puts it to Monsignor in his hometown, who understands and supports him, and to his mother, who accepts that decision and who tells him that, man or woman, he will always be “*mon enfant*.” Alexina/Abel decides to go through a harrowing medical examination for a court to declare him officially as male. There was no other way out for his situation in that time. Following his official sex change, Abel leaves Sara to prevent any dishonor from falling on her

and the boarding school. He starts working on the Paris Railways but is unable to adapt to his new identity. Abel knows nothing of the world of men and is reduced to solitude. He ultimately kills himself, leaving only his memoirs behind, symbolized in the last words of the opera “*le monde a fait de moi une femme; puis l’amour et mon désir on fait de moi un homme mais je ne veux aucun de ces noms! Je suis un ange immortel, immatériel, un angel lumineux dans l’espace sans bornes.*”



Fig. 1 – Alexina B. and Sara. Scene 6, *La construction de l’amour*. Gran Teatre del Liceu, ©A Bofill

The figure of *Alexina B.*

It is Michael Foucault who recovered the memoirs in 1978—minus the parts removed by Tardieu, the physician who guarded them—and published them as *Herculine Barbin dite Alexina B.* in France as part of the Gallimard collection entitled *Les vies parallèles*, directed by himself. In the prologue to the North American edition, he broadened his reflections on this autobiographical account of Alexina. Foucault's theories in this section were heavily criticized years later by Judith Butler, who focused much of the discussion on the consideration of the terms “bodies and pleasures” and on the consideration of their being historical or ahistorical.² It could be roughly said that Barbin's body, once a scientific battleground, is now one for theorists of contemporary culture and sexualities.

Of all the theoretical approaches and from our point of view, the opera is most closely tied to the vision of Herculine that Foucault gives in the 1980 introduction to the English translation of her text, with his affirmation that before falling into the webs of the apparatus of sexuality, Alexina lived in a “world of feelings—enthusiasm, pleasure, sorrow, warmth, sweetness, bitterness—where the identity of the partners and above all the enigmatic character around whom everything centered, had no importance.”³ In fact, Gayraud's libretto embraces what all these positions have in common about the significance of sexual assignment for Alexina, particularly as regards the thought “sexuality is always situated within matrices of power.”⁴ This statement is valid for both Butler's and Foucault's theses. Alexina's character remains open to all the social, normative, theoretical, vital, biological, and ethical conundrums that give meaning to the question of the contemporary being, with the same burden of certainty or uncertainty that it brings with it.

2 See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990). See also André Duarte and Maria Rita César, “Foucault y Butler en torno a Herculine: ¿Qué significa resistir al dispositivo de la sexualidad?” *Reflexiones Marginales* 54 (2019): 10–20, <https://revista.reflexionesmarginales.com/foucault-y-butler-en-torno-a-herculine-que-significa-resistir-al-dispositivo-de-la-sexualidad/>. French sociologist Éric Fassin has also taken a theoretical stance on the lived-body experience of Alexina B.; see his “Post-face” to Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin, dite Alexina B* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).

3 Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin. Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, trans. Richard McDougall (New York: Pantheon, 1980), xiii.

4 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 97.

The Inclusion Imperative: Other Forms of Sexuality in Opera

The gender roles shown in the world of opera have changed radically in the twenty-first century, as feminine stereotypes are being left behind—e.g., the ideal (represented by Isolde, or Rusalka), the victim (Violanta, Lucia di Lammermoor), the sacrificial (Tosca, Santuzza), the vestal virgins (Lakmé, Blanche de la Force) and women of ill-repute who are redeemed by death (Violetta), by marriage (Zdenka), by faith (Suor Angelica) or by the conjugal good above love (Tatiana). None of these scripts would fit into the understanding of today's world. Thus, among the many lines of thought considering the immenseness of the sexual condition of the contemporary being, gender studies help focus more precisely on the broad meaning of the new presence, vindictive of the new identities that have risen to the musical scene, expressed outside binary identification parameters (man/woman; love/hate; surrender/greed, etc.) Unconventional sexual identity as a construct and human inquiry is one of the paths that contemporary opera explores, as you'd expect from an art form that expresses itself through visual art, text, music, and audiovisual material. The next paragraphs explore the twenty-first century operas that have expanded the normative canon, to contextualize on the one hand the common road travelled by Alexina B. and some of the most socially committed operas of today, and at the same time to underline to what extent this road is still untraveled.

For example, one opera that breaks with the standardized sexual imperative is *Lessons in Love and Violence*, which focuses on the romantic relationship between the English King Edward II and his lover Piers Gaveston, a work by George Benjamin which premièred at Covent Garden in London in 2018. The tagging, directed by Katie Mitchell, brings to the forefront references to Francis Bacon, another gay Briton, so the work unfolds like a huge palimpsest. Peter Eötvös's *Angels in America* (Paris, Théâtre du Châtelet, 2004) is about two troubled couples, one gay, one straight, and, like García-Tomás' opera, also uses amplification for the voices and is of similar length. The same denouncement of compulsorily repressed male homosexuality is the theme of the opera *Brokeback Mountain* by composer Charles Wuorinen, premièred at the Teatro Real in Madrid in 2014 with a libretto by Annie Proulx, who also wrote the novel on which it is based. Composed for a large orchestra, the composer chooses a small instrumental ensemble for the two main characters' pieces, who are also caught up in an impossible love story—a similar format to the one used by Raquel García-Tomás in

Alexina B. Before Night Falls is a two-act opera by Cuban composer Jorge Martín, premièred at Fort Worth Opera (Texas) in 2010, which follows the life of writer Reinaldo Arenas, who was exiled by the Cuban regime for being gay.⁵ *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf's novel about the eponymous gender-fluid character, was brought to the opera in 2019 by Olga Neuwirth, the first woman to have a premiere at the Vienna State Opera, in which she also places an angel on the stage.

Confronting this same question but from a different perspective is the opera *Three Way*, written for eight soloists and orchestra by American composer Robert Paterson. Premièred in 2017, the opera explores different experiences of sexuality, love, and desire in contemporary society in three acts: in the first, the bond between a woman and her android lover; in the third, a party without sexual taboos; and in the second, the relationship between a dominatrix and her client. Indeed, Georg Friedrich Haas, who has already crossed all the conventions of the historical context, and is now considered one of the greatest composers of our times, has narrated his sadomasochistic sexual experiences and the non-conventional relationship of domination and submission with his wife Mollena Williams in *The Artist & the Pervert*, and is virtually one of the only current composers who has spoken openly about how a non-normative sexual condition influences the life of a musician, a theme that has been sidelined from the music of the twenty-first century.

In terms of precursors to *Alexina B.*, Paula M. Kimper's opera *Patience and Sarah* narrates the same-sex love between two women, focusing not on the denouncement but on the joy of a relationship between women. It premièred at New York's Lincoln Center in 1998 with a libretto by Wende Persons to great acclaim. The courtship between the protagonists, two nineteenth-century women, is put into music with an express desire for lyricism and musical introspection in pursuit of beauty (something which García-Tomás accomplishes in a different way). It received unanimous praise, with the *New York Times* lauding it with some of the best reviews of the decade, commending the work's musical affirmation of the transcendental beauty of life and love.⁶ Unfortunately, neither the Italian nor the Spanish press reported on this work. Bringing to the opera the biography of two nine-

5 Arenas' autobiography was also adapted into a film in 2000 by director Julian Schnabel, starring Javier Bardem.

6 Anthony Tommasini, "Festival Review/Opera—Romance Colored by Danger and Ecstasy," *New York Times*, July 10, 1998.

teenth-century women, the emphasis on the beauty of the voices as a direct translation of the personality of the protagonists, and the musical form linked to the great aria, connect with the deeply personal version of *Alexina B.* A piece far removed from Raquel García-Tomás's opera that deals with inter-sexuality is the queer opera buffa *Papaguenes* (2021), a transgressive version of *The Magic Flute* in which the characters of Papageno and Papagena are dissolved into one. Finally, the score written by American composer Laura Kaminsky *As One* cannot be ignored in this section. Premiered in Brooklyn in 2014, it has been performed in more than fifty opera houses. It portrays the life of Hanna, a transgender person, from her early years as a man (baritone voice) until becoming Hanna the woman (mezzo voice, the same vocal register as Alexina/Abel). It shares with *Alexina B.* the moving of the action through flash backs and flash forwards and the use of a small orchestra. In a more abstract sense and moving away from the stage, Sylvano Bussotti's 1999 guitar solo *Ermafrodito* is a dreamlike and evocative piece that, although related to the world of Alexina, does not strictly depict it since Alexina was not a hermaphrodite person, despite being referred to as such.

Alexina B.: The Poetics of Reparation

*Only modern art, art after the death of
art, being unable to be anything but self-conscious,
is in a position to inhabit beauty freely*
Rafael Argullol⁷

Alexina B. tells the tragedy of a misunderstood being, the ordeal that an intersex person goes through in a hostile society. But above all, it narrates Alexina's love and how she lived it. Alexina's memoirs exude as much intelligence as goodness, as much honesty as desire to affirm her identity. It is that desire for historical reparation for the figure of Alexina as she was that led Marta Pazos to build a set full of delicacy and Raquel García-Tomás to compose music that soars above life, taking Alexina and twenty-first century listeners to ultimately raise above that medical table and especially the

⁷ "Sólo el arte moderno, el arte posterior a la 'muerte del arte,' al no ser, o al no poder ser, otra cosa que *autoconsciente*, está en condiciones de habitar libremente la belleza." Rafael Argullol, "Introducción. El arte después de la 'muerte del arte,'" in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *La actualidad de lo bello. El arte como juego, símbolo y fiesta*, trans. Antonio Gómez Ramos (Barcelona: Ediciones Paidós, 1991), 17; orig. ed. *Die Aktualität des Schönen* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1977). English translation mine.

bed in which she dies. Pazos or García-Tomás' previous works did not have beauty as a constructive imperative, beauty as a creative horizon to which not only the character, but the entire audience must tend; nor did they in their previous collaboration, *Je Suis Narcissiste. Alexina B.* is a new quest for sounds and sets that poetically free the figure of Herculine Barbin and make amends for her. Alexina's understanding of the world and her problems are not the same as for these creators, who have full ownership over their careers and decisions. It is not the same as for the many women inhabiting the intellectual or artistic world of the twenty-first century, but it was and still is the framework (and the prison) for many other people. Making amends for Alexina in her own language was a premise that was desired by the creators. Hence the impulse of beauty, delicacy, and exquisiteness that permeates the whole opera.

The Sound World Of "Alexina B."

Alexina B. is written for five singers (two sopranos, two mezzos, and one countertenor), a female choir of ten, an ensemble (flute, piccolo, and alto flute; oboe and English horn; clarinet and bass clarinet; bassoon; horn; string; harp and piano, the latter two omnipresent throughout the score) and pre-recorded electronics.

Short note on the vocals in *Alexina B.*: a cantabile contemporaneity

*That "something can be held in our hesitant stay"
- this is what art has always been and still is today.*
Hans-Georg Gadamer⁸

Alexina's libretto is extremely extensive, so it can be said that the whole opera is made up of words—words that take shape through singing, with only a few moments being spoken or recited. Singing is thus the dramaturgical dimension that builds not only the characters, but their memories, their desires, and their projections. In *Alexina B.*, no adornment, embellishment, or effect of the voice prevents this decisive communication of the text, which is clearly heard in both the solo characters and the female choir. This has to do with García-Tomás' particular way of composing. She defines

⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 53.

herself as a test ground for vocal experimentation; she sings what she composes and in the same way, composes what she sings, which gives her music a ground of absolute identification between the voice of the character and the composer.

Raquel García-Tomás conceived the roles of Alexina/Abel for a single singer, with a score that could accurately reflect a female character who adopts the masculine identity after a night of passion with her lover Sara—this versatility made possible by the mezzo voice. She also built the entire vocal spectrum in female registers, with Alexina's girlhood milieu also being mezzos, as well as her first childhood love at the boarding school, Léa, and the student at the boarding school, incarnated by the same soloist, while the sopranos are Sara, Alexina's lover, and the characters of the police officer, Madame P., Alexina's mother, and Sister Marie-des-Anges, all four interpreted by the same singer. The only male voice is that of a countertenor who interprets six characters: the three doctors, the Abbot, Monsignor, and the judge.

In *Alexina B.*, the attractiveness of singing goes beyond its aesthetic appeal; its beauty, purposefully slowed down and drawn out, especially in the big arias and in the long duet in scene 8, not only expresses the tangible world, but also reflects the entire utopian universe that these characters bring with them, which their repressive society prevents from revealing. *Alexina B.* brings to the stage Plato's life-giving principles of truth, beauty, and goodness, which in a luminous way pierce the entire opera.

With electronics, Raquel García-Tomás virtually enlarges the physical spaces and builds emotional ones, outlining the characters' state of consciousness and helping to emotionally entangle the character and the audience in specific situations (the storms Alexina is caught up in, the gasps, the heartbeats, the sounds of the forest, or the echoes of the convent). It is this intention to provide greater resonance that justifies the voices being amplified, with two purposes; on the one hand, a purely musical one: to create echoes, resonances or to help the lines be heard better when sung, spoken, sighed, or whispered; and on the other, a symbolic aim: to transport to the present, to every seat and to every twenty-first century spectator, all the events that defined Alexina's life.

Musical approach to *Alexina B.*

On a global level, the score is presented as a broad unique form, in which all the scenes are formally closed yet connected to each other through el-

ements that, like creative sediments, reappear in the scenic, literary, and musical dramaturgy at different levels of significance.

In this work, the ascensionality of the character of Alexina/Abel is approached by García-Tomás through a succession of lines in *anabasis* in constant transformation and regeneration, such as the one developed through a harmonious rhythm that always moves forward in scene 8, a symbol of the ascensional transport of both protagonists to the world of love through their first sexual relationship. The following paragraphs describe “what the music and *libretto* narrate,” as a palimpsest of the next chapter, “what the stage shows,” taking into account that were conceived at the same time by the three creators and that they go closely together. It was decided to discuss them separately so as not to mix the levels of significance that go hand in hand in the opera.

The soundscape we are introduced to in the *Ouverture*, with a storm in D minor in descending harmonic progression, is echoed in the scenes *Abel* and *L'orage*, with a similar approach but now a little more serious, heavier, more otherworldly. In the *Ouverture*, the children’s choir—with which we relive Alexina’s first years as an intern at the girls’ convent—appears singing a popular French Renaissance song, *Compagnons de la Marjolaine*,



Fig. 2 – Alexina B., Sara, and the children. Scene 5, *La forêt*. Gran Teatre del Liceu, ©A Bofill

which will reappear in other scenes, rearranged and always starting from the next verses in different stanzas, thus signifying the advance of time.

Abel's tragic end is pre-empted in a flash forward in scene 2, so as not to lead the opera to the eye of the storm; the three authors thus commit themselves to the figure of Alexina by taking her to that immortal, immaterial place in which she longed to live through a risky scenic journey of death towards the light. This scene therefore forms an isolated part, connected through electronics with the previous scene with the sounds of rain and bass frequencies and with the next, with the resonant sounds that also linger with the listener. It is interesting to consider how the composer dramatically treats the reading of the suicide letter in this scene. The policeman lists the reasons why Abel commits suicide in a *declamato*; the composer strikes a balance between the aseptic, declarative tone of an official doing his duty and the emotionality in narrating Abel's fatal destiny through an expressive song, hence the vocal style. Another aspect that the song brings to the listener's attention in this scene is the interruption in the second part by the doctor, Dr Goujon, who is excited to have found a rare *specimen* in his medical examination. García-Tomás wanted to recreate through this piece the mentality of a character who has found in an intersex person a mere object of scientific scrutiny.

Scene 3, Alexina's grand introduction aria, combines singing and recital. It contains some of the melodic and expressive motifs that define the score (such as the quick motif in the *adieu*). In that same constructive approach of interconnecting materials, in scene 4, *L'internat*, the children's song *Compagnons de la Marjolaine* reappears with a different orchestration, other strings harmonics combined with a canonical score in the choir and over other parts of the poem, because it is no longer the girls who sing it but the young pupils at the boarding school where Alexina moves as a governess. The composer portrays the character of Madame P., the Principal of the boarding school and Sara's mother, in a modal sound environment, which on the one hand draws from French impressionism and on the other from a certain archaic sound, mimicking the archaicness you'd expect of a rural woman educated within the constraints of the nineteenth century. The abbot is expressed with a darker and harsher harmony, which contrasts with the first words that open the relationship between Sara and Alexina, "votre coeur est généreux," on a sonorous echo of Franz Liszt's *Sposalizio* from *Années de pèlerinage*. This moment contrasts widely with the musical portrayal of Alexina/Abel's farewell letter to Sara in scene 17, which is much more lyrical, open, and volatile, greatly contrasting with the judge's aseptic,

inhumanly neutral reading in scene 19, *Le Tribunal*. Scene 5, *La construction de l'amour*, features a waltz sound, created *ex professo* by the composer, to depict this turning point in Alexina's life, while at the same time there is an echo of the popular song used in the previous scenes 1 and 4, now differently, lengthier, and stopping at a perfect fifth interval that will later be the starting point of the choir in scene 8, the first night of love-making. As a metaphor for a relationship that evolves from friendship to love, the waltz also grows harmoniously and in intervals until asserting itself and washing over the orchestra.

This orchestral atmosphere is transformed when the protagonists enter the forest, *La forêt*, in a symbolic entrance connected with the mysticism of San Juan and with the medieval literature that recreates the lovers' *locus amoenus*. The orchestral motives expand progressively, the simplest preceding chords (triads, quadriads) are filled with tensions and a sense of greater tension is created: friendship has transcended to the deep dimension of that forbidden love; echoes of Liszt's *Sposalizio*, orchestrated differently (and with a tempo and dynamics that here no longer belong to the original work but to the story of Alexina), accompany their first kiss, in the universe of the enigma. Sara begins her big aria in the next scene paralyzed by fear (represented by repeated *staccato* notes); this anguish is transformed little by little until reaching firm conviction from the moment that first kiss becomes present in the *libretto* and in the music. The key scene in the opera is N. 8, *Première nuit*, as it represents a transcendental change for both, because a new world opens up in them and because from this first physical encounter, Alexine, as he was called, begins to refer to himself as a man. Formally, it has two large sections. The first part begins with a very simple harmonic-rhythmic ascension progression with very pure sounds as an analogy of the two characters, until Alexina affirms her desire to be Sara's lover, partner, and husband, at which point the sounds devised for the forest scene return, thus functioning not as a *leitmotif* but as sediments that rise to the surface in key moments. Their unwavering decision is fixed through a moment held musically by penetrating the sound universe of the chords E major and A minor, which, following the constructive logic of this work, reappear from before and are introduced by adding instrumental layers. The expressive aim of both creators at this time in the scene is to convey to the audience, through the exquisite beauty of the singing, the beauty of existing in a non-normative body such as Alexina's, which is desired, as it is, by Sara. The scene culminates in a long and daring moment with amplified electronics breathings, which are used with the two-fold intention of mak-



Fig. 4 – Alexina as an angel. Scene 1, Overture. Gran Teatre del Liceu, ©A Bofill

in the pain scene, which paralyzes Alexina, Marta Pazos' directing introduces actions that are desynchronized, going from the present to the past, symbolizing a mind that cannot think clearly).

The border is a space often explored by Pazos; in *Alexina B.*, the border becomes porous with back-and-forth paths and the metamorphosis takes the stage as a metaphor of transformation (Alexina as Abel in view of the audience, Alexina the ghost, the embodiment of pain and suffering, and Alexina the angel, immaterial, immortal). This concept of the border is intimately linked with that of enlargement of the scenic significance, which in *Alexina B.* unfolds in an allegorical direction. A clear example occurs in the scene *Les adieux*, in which Alexina and Sara bid their final farewell. Pazos sets this sad moment on a carnival day in the forest, with the symbolic meaning of the mask and its consequent display of the occult. All the girls' costumes have one thing in common: they are all about transformation (Pierrot, Red Riding Hood, a butterfly, Alice, and so on). This broadening of meanings continues in the next scene, *Le tribunal*, in which the girls no longer represent these luminous and innocent childhood beings but the mute and accusatory witnesses, socially conditioned by the morality of the time.

ing those whispers of that first night, reprehended by the whole of society at that time, be heard from the uppermost circles of the theatre in a symbolic reparation that comes in the twenty-first century to humanize the experience and place it outside the singing, giving it an element of physicality, of tangibility.

The next scene is set to an E—alternately minor and Phrygian—composition, which, in that iconic perfect fifth interval, introduces a part of the medieval responsory *Favus distillans* by Hildegard von Bingen, whose text permeates the lived experience with symbolism and places us in the physical space, since the moment occurs in a religious boarding school. This pure interval pushes Madame P.'s entrance into that same E note with which she made her appearance in scene 4, *L'internat*, now becoming more and more chromatic and dark, like the voice of morality; normative morality makes its appearance also through the girls' choir, which acts as a reprobating conscience. *Doutes*, which closes the first act, brings back the sounds of the forest on the word *Dieu*, in a kind of palimpsest that tears Alexina between her pious and loving identity. That suffering thought is swift and memories appear in it, including people from his childhood such as his dear Léa, and his doubts about how to act with Sara and society. These doubts are transferred to the score in a few rhapsodic microsections; finally, his solitude is expressed through an *a cappella* song inspired by Hildegard's chants sung by the choir at the beginning of scene 12 in an anticlimactic piece that emphasizes Alexina's solitude, which reaches act II in the same melodic outline. The girls' choir acts as an off-stage narrator, almost unreal, insistently referring to Alexina in third person, singing the same text sung before by Alexina and emphasized by the electronics. Alexina enters *in media res*, confessing her love for Sara. The girls' singing turns into shouting, hurling insults, like the echo of the abbot's words upon hearing her confession.

Pain as sound and stage material is the all-consuming focus of scene 12, in which the use of electronics, with long whistling sounds and the orchestral *arrabbiato*, accompanies Alexina's *adieu*, with the same melodic motif with which she bids farewell to the boarding school. The pain-induced hallucinations continue, the characters involved in Alexina's life such as Madame P. and Sara become involved in the pain, agitated; a double bass repeating a deep, constant E introduces the cool calm of the doctor in the next scene, *L'examen médical*. In this medical examination, there are no harmonies accompanying the singing, Alexina is alone with her amplified breathing, and it starts from the girls observing, as happens often in medical examinations of intersex people, next to the deep, dragged sound of the

previous scene that gradually takes over the entire orchestra. This scene of pain is concentrated in the vocal quartet, divided into two parts: first, Alexina and the doctor on the one hand and after, Sara and her mother, on the other, together with electronics-like girls' whispers and the soloist, the inner voice, underscoring the question "*quelle est la cause de son mal?*" That core of physical pain, suffered by Alexina, moves to a virtual terrain, towards a storm of nature made up of electronics together with a series of descending scales in the orchestra.

The passage of time is the subject of scene 14, *L'été*, in which Alexina's concerns about the future as well as her decision to go through with the affirmation are the theme of the duet with Monseigneur, with archaic sounds (here Alexina has gone back to her village). A slightly baroque counterpoint accompanies the entire text in which Alexina tells the priest of her desire to marry Sara. There, she is not musically alone; she is accompanied by the second theme from Liszt's *Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude* (from the piano cycle *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*), a leisurely and calm piece. Scene 15 begins with a duet with her mother, in a melancholic atmosphere in which she recites her new reality; the first theme of the *Bénédiction de Dieu*, a more passionate and romantic melody, can be heard, as befits this other aesthetic intention of the composer. The mother's big aria displays a wide lyrical intensity, where previous elements appear, evocative of her childhood and culminating with an affirmation of delicate beauty over the words "*tu es mon enfant.*" With the support of Monsigneur and her mother, Alexina faces her last medical exam while she is alive. To portray the coldness with which she is treated and the objectification of her body, Raquel García-Tomás uses a *sprechgesang* for the doctor, alternated with repetitive and serious singing.

Electronics, recreating a garden, introduce Sara in scene 17, *La lettre*, in which Alexina tells her of her situation; instrumental echoes of the first Sara from scene 4, then unaware of the burning heat of love, reappear. The musical narrative has two different parts, as we move from the happy declaration of love to the realization that it is impossible. Abel's determination to become bound by marriage sounds over a brief rendition of the *Sposalizio*, always orchestrated differently. The last scene of this act, *Les adieux* is also the last duo by the protagonists, who will never meet again. Their intense encounter reuses materials that had appeared in previous scenes, (7, 9—with Madame P.—and particularly scene 8—the lovers farewell), being only accompanied by the sounds of the garden, which opens and closes the scene with electronics and a use of strings that are slightly resonant of Salvatore

Sciarrino. Alexina, as Abel, is the sole character in the whole of Act III, in which he is hurtling towards the void. The ending (scene 20, *Abel*) is particularly striking, with the overture and its storm reappearing in a certain way in the form of echoes of Alexina's childhood. Abel is built on a new sound environment, a deeper and darker G minor, over the strings in D minor that colored Alexina's character as a child in the first scene. Abel's solitude in a hostile world is translated into an emphasized chant that ends in an anguished chant over thunderstorm sounds, just before a grand orchestral *tutti* which brings rain and sets the stage for the next scene, *L'orage*. Hildegard's *Ave Maria* is cited here and a canon is built with the help of the electronics accompanying Soeur Marie des Anges and Alexina Enfant's duet.

The opera ends with *Je suis un ange*, a scene in which Abel, loudly amplified, tenderly recalls his loved ones and then remarks, in a solo with electronics, how impossible it has been to live as a man in this world, he who had been brought up as a woman. His farewell ascends towards that transcendence desired by Alexina, with a deeply stylized instrumental use with a transparent texture.

Conductor Ernest Martínez Izquierdo also plays a decisive role in this musical rendering of the characters, transferring to the pit the clean and crystalline environment composed by García-Tomás and holding all the singing lines of the score with the intelligence and understanding necessary to undertake this work that is so difficult to qualify.

Staging "Alexina B."

Stage director Marta Pazos has been one of the most influential figures in the renewal of Spanish theater and opera in recent years. Her unmistakable aesthetic and her particular way of working, underpinned by concepts from eco-feminism,⁹ have led this Galicia-born artist to become a pioneer in the contemporary Spanish operatic scene. Pazos had already worked with García-Tomás on the opera *Je suis narcissiste* (2019), in which she brought to life melodramatic characters and buffos, shaped both by vibrant colors and *joie de vivre*. In an opera as radically different as *Alexina B.*, her hallmarks endure, tinged by the demands of such a powerful story and with

9 The director has been developing her own understanding of eco-feminism in her work for years, which roughly leads her to consciously put life at the center and legitimize this as a way of rethinking how the craft is formulated, treating an artistic project as a living project.

so many connotations for the contemporary world. In fact, her previous works like *Othello* already centered around deprived characters, as well as themes of homoerotic sexuality, like in *Safo*; *Alexina B.* is the culmination of this work.

Pazos approaches the sets of *Alexina B.* from a meticulous hermeneutic analysis of the libretto, treating all the elements of the scene as a whole, not from a naturalistic perspective, but from a highly symbolic one. This allows her to maximize the expressive possibilities of the story and provide greater resonance to the text, the cornerstone of this opera. Her scenic conception aims to put the listener in the emotional state of the characters, especially Alexina, in the most objective way possible, alongside memories and characters brought back from the past to accompany and highlight her loneliness. Everything happens in two complementary, non-antagonistic planes of reality/abstraction, a way of working that the director had already put into practice in her previous opera *A amnesia de Clío* (2019), by composer Fernando Buide, in which an abstract and mythological character, Clio, interacts with real-life characters, such as George W. Bush and Angela Merkel. Pazos carefully studies the possible scenic criteria, since she has to recreate physical places—the doctor’s office, the boarding school, Abel’s room or the courtroom—, those moments that alter Alexina’s consciousness, real and virtual spaces/times—the passage of time, the beach or the forest—and endlessly open mental spaces—her childhood as her happy place, in which she forged her understanding of the world. In the scenic creation of these environments as “structures of the open,” the original curtains rethought by Pazos and the video projections by García-Tomás play a crucial role. To remain faithful to the libretto, the sets depict a real dimension (events, people, and places) and a virtual one (people from the past, split realities, and the passage of time). Thus, the stage acts as a multi-resonant space, which aims to connect the meaning of the words with each viewer’s imagination: what meaning it has for each person, the actions, memories, projections for the future, and the characters’ dreams. From this dramaturgic *desideratum*, the Galician director builds her work from “desire” as a constructive methodology that gives meaning to the minimal objects that appear on the stage, to the lights, movements, and above all to the symbols, doing away with literalness to go to the depths of dramatic significance. In this significance the dramaturgical symbology plays a special role, which goes beyond the scenic meaning of the objects and gestures and reaches other parameters such as movement (for example, in scene 12, *la douleur*, the journey that Alexina makes in the scene follows the golden ratio).



Fig. 3 – Alexina B. Scene 11, *La Ioi*. Gran Teatre del Liceu, ©A Bofill

Pazos approaches stage design from her training as a painter, so the study of set design art is one of the main characteristics when it comes to understanding her visual language. Notable is the use of color, which, like another character, crosses the stage, endowing it with multiple meanings. Here it is the color green which appears on all scenic levels. With it, both indoor, institutional places (such as the boarding school or a medical office) and outdoor spaces take shape, an opening metaphor in the boarding school garden or the forest. Color must speak and manifest, must raise the temperature of the action or succumb to the tearing of feelings. Thus, green lichen chisels the narrative of the opera as something that permeates the entire narrative.

The characters that belong to the system are also wrapped in this hue; not so the characters belonging to the world of freedom, such as Alexina, or Sara, dressed in red terracotta, conveying love, sparks. The word *structure* has a special scenic significance. Alexina is someone who is crushed by the wheels of power: the clergy, the normative family, the law, and medicine. That is why the space is a structure, which closes in as the story unfolds. The visual narrative not only reflects what the characters experience but also resizes them beyond the strict logic of the temporal discourse (for example,

Finally, it is worth highlighting the role played by the girls' choir in the visual construction of this opera; their gestures and the choreography of the movements work in all possible directions: as angels, off-stage narrators, dark bullies, Alexina's peers, and friends. Pazos places them on different planes, real and virtual, forming part not only of the unfolding of the story, but of the unraveled consciousness of the protagonist's world.

Travel to the Centet of the Debate: Too Much or Too Little?

*The decisive question is this: how far can
we go without betraying the past and what
must we keep without betraying the future?*
Erich Itor Khan¹⁰

The “contemporary opera / opera of the contemporary” dichotomy triggers a multitude of questions. What is the musical language in which contemporaneity must speak? Should it be extremely radical in all its dimensions? In this piece, the delicacy of the libretto and the exquisiteness of the sets and music were widely praised; for a few, it was a missed opportunity, citing a lack of radical ambition. An opera that breaks the molds of the accepted society, from the very core of this society—as is an opera house like the Grand Teatre del Liceu—is explained only through the conditions of self-criticism that the art of the present assumes as part of its responsibility in the twenty-first century, which makes opera houses the place where the works that are part of the social transformation—and aporically of the eternity of history—enter. With *Alexina B.*, the Liceu departs from a single meaning of what an opera house usually means, no longer proposed as a space of memory but as a space of restlessness, of the future.

Alexina B. opens, once again, the debate of what contemporaneity is and how it is constituted; musicology rethinks it from its side, too. The work of art does not come to resolve social conflicts, but to raise them, to legitimize the debate and to reformulate in its own field what art is supposed to do (the eternal Benjaminian reformulation of the anaesthetization of politics or the politicization of art). It is along this line that the musical and visual perspectives of *Alexina B.* connect. Art can work in addition to the value *per se* but *has* a value *per se*: it speaks from the unique, specific, and autonomous languages of its creators. Instrumentalizing the art of today (beyond the

10 Quoted in Juan Manuel Viana, “Erich Itor Kahn (1905–1956)”, *Scherzo* (April 2023), 80.

debate on *art pour l'art* in its different formations) is one of the widespread trends in twenty-first century stagings inherited from epic theater. *Alexina B.* is in no way immune to this, it is no stranger to constituting an opera of a political nature. Yes, it criticizes without raising its voice, without silencing it; this work is not the result of the creators' desire to turn it into a projectile that impacts the viewer, but it does try to redeem consciousness.

Alexina B. is also a testimony of the present times; in its reception, it has also been a seismogram of the social processes of reception. It would be perverse to value only the ethical legitimacy or social functionality of a work of art; in this case, we should remember the imperative with which Karl Kraus conceived the function of art, which was not to put order into chaos, but rather quite the opposite. This article does not come to solve the unsolvable, but only to expose the key factors with which a necessary work like *Alexina B.* is part of today's world.

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