

**Opera review: 'Unicamente la Verdad!'
Unusual 'videopera' deserves a future
By Peter Jacobi Herald–Times Reviewer
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Carmen Helena Tellez is a musical adventurer. As professor of choral conducting and director of the Latin American Music Center at IU's Jacobs School, she's brought Bloomington audiences a series of unusual events over the years, often as world premieres.

And so it was once again this past weekend when she conducted the first performances ever and any place of "Unicamente la Verdad!" (Only the Truth!), a "videopera," with music by the Mexican composer Gabriela Ortiz–Torres and visual content by her artist brother, Ruben Ortiz–Torres.

The premiere production brought near–venue–filling audiences to the Buskirk–Chumley Theater on Friday and Saturday evenings; this reviewer saw the piece on Saturday. He was struck by how smoothly a most complicated show had been put together in what reportedly was a period of days, not counting musical preparation, of course.

There was an orchestra of 15 players, assigned a welter of challenges and aural experiments. There were the 15 singers of the Contemporary Vocal Ensemble, faced with the task of conquering difficult music and singing it while engaged, on stage, in a constant rush of choreographed movement. There were the soloists, intent on capturing their taxing musical and theatrical responsibilities. There were projections — stills, motion shots, and constantly shifting script — underscoring the unfolding story. There were live shots, taken by a pair of cameramen. There were pre–recorded sounds that resonated from various parts of the theater.

In fact, there was almost too much for a receiver of these multiple and often concurrent stimulants to take on during a single encounter. But the impression left was positive. "Unicamente la Verdad!" deserves a future.

The Ortiz–Torres combine has taken the story first used in a corrido, a Mexican folk song of one Camelia la Tejana, who killed her betraying lover after they had smuggled drugs across the border. Is the tale fiction or real? Is Camelia figment or fact? That's what this "videopera" explores, Camelia's path in public perception from make believe to corporeality and to myth, to larger–than–life status.

The plot is operatic, but on analysis, "Unicamente la Verdad!" is more like a staged oratorio. The story is narrated and commented on rather than acted out. Its developments are spoken and sung of. Whatever action one sees is theatrical add–on. The essence is musical story–telling.

That in no way invalidates the project, which — regardless of the shape it has or what one calls it — is gripping. The libretto holds power and poetry. The music, ranging stylistically from exotic avant–garde to lyrical, fits the subject marvelously. The visual elements called for provide an atmosphere at once real and surreal.

The premiere production was in every aspect praiseworthy. Instrumentalists and chorus handled their taxing responsibilities nobly. So did the soloists, the whole lot of them, although one should single out Heather Youngquist as Camelia (Meghan Dewald played the role on Friday) and Chris Lysack as the journalist seeking to uncover the truth or to create a truth of his own making. Tellez held them all together masterfully.

Chia Patino stage directed with a sure sense for the work's emotion-charged story. Konstantinos Mavromichalis made the premiere a visual showcase, handling duties at least as elaborate as his title of "production, lighting, and interactive visuals designer." Rodrigo Sigal and Francisco Colasanto were the sound designers, and sounds they certainly played with to considerable effect. Angela Burkhardt added to the whole with her costume choices.

"Unicamente la Verdad!" proved an auspicious conclusion to IU's Summer Music Festival.