

contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Potter, Keith. 1985. 'Martinez' *Sister Aimee*'. *Contact*, 29. pp. 40. ISSN 0308-5066.

Keith Potter

Martinez' 'Sister Aimee'

Odaline de la Martinez, *Sister Aimee*, Tulane University of New Orleans, 12 April 1984

Odaline de la Martinez describes herself as a 'Cuban-American', for she was born and initially brought up in Cuba but emigrated to New Orleans with her parents when she was still a child. After studying mathematics as well as music at Newcomb College (now part of the city's Tulane University), she went to London to study at the Royal Academy of Music; she has lived there for the last dozen years.

Martinez is known these days principally as a conductor. She has for some time now conducted as well as directed the artistic policy and frequently the administration of the contemporary music ensemble Lontano, founded with fellow students when she was still at the RAM. More recently she has formed a chamber orchestra called the Contemporary Chamber Orchestra which performs in the London borough of Islington and elsewhere and is 'resident orchestra' at the Almeida Theatre in the borough.

Martinez is also a pianist (she used to play regularly with Lontano before she took over the conducting) and has undertaken postgraduate work in computer music at Surrey University. Few of those who attend Lontano's concerts or those of the CCO are more than vaguely aware of her as a composer, however, for she has used her performing activities to promote her own music only on the rarest of occasions.

I can recall hearing at least three compositions by Martinez—who is widely known on the London music scene as 'Chachi'—before I had the opportunity of visiting New Orleans to see her opera last spring. Her music seems, from what I know of it, to be simple and direct, often with a strong melodic profile; her concern for direct expression in a context that easily incorporates a more 'avant-garde' attitude, to timbre in particular, has made me think, on at least one occasion—that of hearing some fairly recent songs at the Wigmore Hall—of George Crumb.

I was, however, as unprepared as I think some others were for the essentially very conventional and tonal language of the opera she has written in collaboration with John Whiting, another American resident in Britain, who is well known for other musical activities (though he has also acted on one occasion as librettist for Nigel Osborne). The work's main generating force is a gospel hymn tune of Martinez' own composition: a fairly splendid inspiration, though one that bears a disconcerting resemblance to the 'big tune' in Prokofiev's *War and Peace*. The musical style of *Sister Aimee* is, as its composer herself calls it, 'eclectic' in other ways too: there are one or two 'aleatoric' moments, for instance. A lot of the time, however, the vocal line consists of tonally-based arioso, sometimes even of simply spoken declamation, and the musical accompaniment sticks closely to its sources in the hymn and in jazz and folk idioms too. The music gains, I think, a good deal from the particular sonority of its orchestra: Martinez does away with violins and woodwind and uses a brass quintet, electric organ, and lower strings.

The reason for all this is, not unnaturally, the plot of the opera, which concerns the controversial and indeed outrageous revivalist preacher of the title. Aimee Semple McPherson fought her struggle

between the conviction that she was among God's chosen ones and her apparently rather highly developed carnal lust in the years between the two World Wars; there were even faded photographs of her in the foyer of Tulane's Dixon Hall to prove the outward and visible signs of the former and at least to suggest the latter. Perhaps not surprisingly, Martinez and Whiting chose to concentrate on the spiritual torment, and much of the action took place off-stage; sometimes the on-stage action took the form of a static tableau against which the story was unfolded in words and music only.

While rendering this fairly short, two-act opera more practicable for the conditions under which it had to be mounted—a small stage, limited production facilities, a student chorus but local professional soloists and orchestra—this also focused more attention on character development and on the maintenance of musico-dramatic tension when stripped of all more obvious appeal except the overtly melodramatic than Martinez' first stage venture could really stand. Frank Monachino's occasionally quite bizarrely mismanaged production didn't help matters much; though the cast, which included Sandra Feduccia in the title role and Rita Lovett in the important part of her mother, the orchestra, and (some lapses apart) the chorus, conducted by Michael Howard, coped enthusiastically with this unusual but entirely laudable way of celebrating a university's 150th anniversary.
