

SalonEra: The Phoenix of Mexico Premieres Monday, Oct. 18

by Mike Telin



In Greek mythology the nine Muses were the source of knowledge and inspiration for poets, musicians, and philosophers. “They inspired everybody,” bassoonist Catalina Guevara Viquez Klein, said during a telephone interview. “That’s the reason Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz is called the 10th Muse, because she too inspired everybody.”

In the next episode of Les Délices’ SalonEra, Catalina Klein will be joined by violinist Karin Cuellar Rendon, and mezzo-soprano Raquel Winnica Young, who delve into their personal connections to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and explore her legacy as a poet, composer, and

profeminist. “The Phoenix of Mexico,” premieres on Monday, October 18 at 7:30 pm, and will be available on-demand afterwards. Click [here](#) to register.

Born *Doña* Inés de Asuaje y Ramírez de Santillana in 1648 in San Miguel Nepantla, Mexico, she was an enthusiastic reader as a child. She composed her first poem at eight years old and by age thirteen had studied Greek logic, and taught Latin to young children. She also spoke and wrote in the Aztec language of Nahuatl. As a young woman who was not interested in marriage, only in furthering her studies, she entered the Convent of the Discalced Carmelites of St. Joseph, but soon moved to the more liberal Convent of the Order of St. Jérôme, where she would remain until her death.

“In South America, Sor Juana is as big of a presence as Frieda Kahlo,” Raquel Winnica Young said by telephone from her home in Pittsburgh. “She was a poet and an artist whose reputation went far beyond the boundaries of Mexico — there was a movie made about her in Argentina. My mother would read her poetry to me when I was a child. I

remember her reciting — *you men who accuse women without reason*. She was a cosmopolitan woman who was ahead of her time.”

Viquez Klein said that she first encountered Sor Juana as a teenager. “I went to the French school in Costa Rica and you were able to choose to study science, arts or literature, and I chose literature. The teacher had us analyze the works of all the important poets from the Golden Age (the Baroque) and Sor Juana is one of them. Once you look deeply into her poetry you begin to understand what she’s saying. I did and said ‘WOW, what a genius.’”



For Viquez Kline, it’s Sor Juana’s desire to learn that she connects to most. “She wanted to learn about everything — music, math, science, and poetry. She spoke Spanish, Latin and Indigenous languages. She was obsessed with reading and had four thousand books in her library. She also understood that it is knowledge that gives us freedom. But at that time, religion was that path to knowledge — she didn’t want to follow the path of marriage. She was a visionary who thought that women should be taught by women, not men.”

Although Winnica Young was introduced to Sor Juana’s poetry as a child, she was recently re-introduced to her. “During COVID I was taking some classes online at a university in Guatemala — Spanish linguistics and the Golden Age of Spanish American Arts. So it was this scholarly work that brought her to me again. Some people are born with extra genius, an extra spark, and I think she was one of them. She was more than just a nun, but entering the convent was her only way of being able to fulfill her desire for knowledge. She wrote plays for the nuns, and people came to visit her to talk about the cultural things in the world, so she was considered to be a person of knowledge. And

her poetry was very well known during her lifetime. She had a Renaissance brain and was inspired by Aristotle and Plato, and her knowledge about the human condition was above and beyond anything.”

The program's musical selections will feature Sor Juana's only surviving work “Madre de los Primores,” as well as pieces that were inspired by her poetry. Winnica Young noted that because her output was so vast, creating a program that highlighted all the aspects of who she was, was not an easy task.

“We devised the concert as a song-cycle, so between the music we'll recite verses from her most famous poem *Primero sueño* (first dream).” During its 975 lines, the soul attempts to leave the body to go in search of all the knowledge that exists in the world.

Viquez Kline and Winnica Young said that they were thrilled to be asked by Les Délices' artistic director Debra Nagy to create The Phoenix of Mexico. “It takes a woman to open the doors for other women,” Kline said, “I believe Sor Juana put me, Raquel, and Karin together, and Debra Nagy is the medium.”

Published on ClevelandClassical.com October 15, 2021.

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