

Live review: Mariza at Disney Hall

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By Reed Johnson



The Portuguese-Mozambican chanteuse and her stellar five-piece backing band elevate the fado music of the streets of her native Lisbon into an art form.

When the exquisite Portuguese-Mozambican artist Mariza sings, she often draws her listeners to her with a beckoning finger, addressing the audience with the hushed intimacy one might use toward a lover, as she frequently did during her Wednesday night performance at the Walt Disney Concert Hall.

Bending the final note of a song into a sublime statement of nostalgic longing, she'll fold one of her long, slender arms into her body, as if she were wrapping an otherwise overwhelming emotion deep inside her soul.

At other moments, as her vibrant contralto voice soars and plummets through the yearning sentiments of Portuguese fado music, Mariza glides into a dance step and fixes her gaze on some distant point, as if she were directing her poetic lamentations at the stars.

The young girl who grew up hearing and singing fado in the streets and tavernas of her Lisbon home has taken a musical genre associated with working-class bars and helped raise it to an internationally recognized art form.

Mariza's reputation preceded her at Disney Hall, where she has performed previously. The audience bestowed loud, appreciative applause both on the statuesque singer, alternately flirtily and regal as she strutted and sashayed in her long black dress, and her virtuosic five-man ensemble: Angelo Freire on the pear-shaped, 12-string Portuguese guitar; Diogo Clemente on classical guitar; Marino de Freitas on bass; Simon James on piano and trumpet; and drummer-percussionist Vicky Marques.

The chanteuse and her band evince a warm, generous rapport, and each of the five musicians had opportunity to demonstrate his instrument's contribution to the intriguing mix of earthy sensuality and baroque precision that constitute Mariza's brand of fado.

Among the evening's high points was Marques' vehemently executed solo on "Barco Negro" (Black Boat). Perching herself theatrically near the edge of the stage, like a decorative figure on a ship's prow, Mariza summoned the African vocal and rhythmic influences that are a legacy of Portugal's colonial-era slave trade adventurism.

Marques, fixed in a solo spotlight and a strobe-light effect that was part of Jorge Pato's dramatic lighting design, then picked up the beat and whipped into a percussive froth that turned his arms into blurring batons and left his hair looking as if he'd just survived an ocean crossing through gale-force winds.

Mariza acknowledged this Iberian-African-transatlantic musical diaspora. Introducing her smoky rendition of "Beijo de Saudade" (Kiss of Yearning), she announced that "This song has a little perfume from Cape Verde." She concluded the number, sung half in Portuguese and half in Creole, by blowing a kiss to the audience.

Fado music (the word means "destiny") has a dark undertow that draws comparisons to Argentine tango, but it's buoyed by a spirit of emotional resilience and periodically erupts into a kind of defiant ecstasy. It's also laced with remembrances of things past, as Mariza conveyed with her preamble to a jazzy arrangement of "Tasco de Mouraria" (Tavern in Mouraria), citing her recollections of "the glasses of red wine, the smell of the chorizo" in the family tavern.

Many of the songs in Wednesday's set came from her latest release, "Terra," a poignant evocation of her homeland, or more accurately, of the idea of homeland. But as she told her audience, Mariza's artistic terra firma is steadily widening, as she demonstrated with one of two encores.

It wasn't "Smile," the bonus track on the U.S. version of "Terra," suggested by her friend Frank Gehry, that she performed, but another pop classic, "Cry Me a River." Scaling a peak of elation before avalanching down into a ravine of near-despair, Mariza's voice never fails to rise again.