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Music Review | Mariza

Adding New Colors to the Tradition of the Portuguese Blues

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Like any traditional folk music, Portuguese fado has its purists and its iconoclasts. Only the most agile performers can negotiate the middle ground. Mariza, the Lisbon contralto who performed Friday night at Carnegie Hall, brings a modern sensibility to the form, a cafe-music blend of Gypsy, Jewish, Arabic and Andalusian influences sometimes called the Portuguese blues.

Of the young divas to emerge since the death in 1999 of the revered fado singer Amália Rodrigues, Mariza is the most recognizable. As if to underscore her departures from fado's vocal and instrumental orthodoxies, the statuesque singer, who is half Portuguese and half Mozambican, augments the traditional "fadista" mourning garb with flashes of vivid color. Taking a cue from Madonna, she also dyes her close-cropped marcel a striking platinum blond.

Mariza has pushed boundaries on her albums, adding piano, strings and African-tinged percussion to the traditional fado accompaniment of the lute-like, 12-string Portuguese guitarra, acoustic guitar and bass. She has also commissioned lyrics from poets, working outside fado's roughly 300-song standard catalog. Her Carnegie Hall band included a violin, viola and cello. A percussionist played the floor drum and sometimes the floor itself. Aiming to please all constituents, Mariza played a two-hour set, venturing to the edge of pop and concluding with an encore of requested traditional songs.

To devotees, the ideal fado expresses the condition of saudade, or raw yearning, while also indulging an exquisite joy that accompanies the most rapturous sadness. Onstage, Mariza conjured this blend at points. She is a master of the tempestuous inhale and huffed release. Her forcefully spat lyrics would sound like recriminations if not for her subsequent upward spiral into asphyxiated whimpers. When she lets these caught cries open into Streisand-like bellows, it's the acute sound of pained resilience.

Standing in front of her seven backing musicians, Mariza garnered applause with confident arm motions and widow's-walk poses. But for the most part during the show, she seemed too genuinely happy to convey anything but the most gestural saudade. She danced, asked the audience to clap on upbeat songs, talked easily about her upbringing, joked about her vain search for good porto and professed honest awe at playing a hall graced by Maria Callas. Her newest songs, too, hinted at a certain exhaustion with fado's sad theatrics. In "Recusa," from her latest album, "Transparente" (EMI), she sang, "If the fado exists for pain and hurt/ then I am not a singer of fado."

Friday's highlights included "Montras," which began with a muezzin hum and accelerated into an uptempo dance, and "Cavaleiro Monge," a taverna waltz turned vocal tour de force with Bjork-like melodic intervals. During the encore, when a fan asked for a fado from the town of Coimbra, Mariza snapped that in that city, only men are allowed to sing fado. She then tore into the Coimbra fado "Hilário," fueled perhaps by a renewed sense of her quest to fashion fado in her own image. This is the project she laid out in the night's feisty "Meu Fado Meu," emphasizing the lines, "In search of my fado/ My own fado."