

26 February – 4 March 2024

7pm

Silk Street Theatre

GUILDHALL
SCHOOL

A Star Next to the Moon

music by **Stephen McNeff**

libretto by **Aoife Mannix**

Based on *Pedro Páramo* by Juan Rulfo

Licensed by arrangement with Peters Edition Limited, London

With support from the **Vaughan Williams Foundation** and the **Hinrichsen Foundation**

The performance duration will be approximately 2 hours and 20 minutes, including one interval.

Martin Lloyd-Evans director

Dominic Wheeler conductor

Anna Reid designer

Anthony Doran lighting designer

Raniah Al-Sayed intimacy director

Jonathan Waller fight director

William Byram assistant director

Laurie Slavin assistant director

Michael Rose assistant conductor &
chorus master

Pedro Páramo

Jacob Harrison

(26 February & 1 March)

Alaric Green

(28 February & 4 March)

Susana San Juan

Holly Brown

(26 February & 1 March)

Ana-Carmen Balestra

(28 February & 4 March)

Juan Preciado

Steven van der Linden

Fulgor

Emyr Lloyd Jones

Dorotea

Rachel Roper

Abundio

Joe Chalmers

Dolores Preciado

Shana Moron-Caravel

Eduviges Dyada

Vladyslava Ionascu-Yakovenko

Father Renteria

Jonah Halton

Damiana Cisneros

Yolisa Gngwexana

The Sister

Ana-Carmen Balestra

(26 February & 1 March)

Holly Brown

(28 February & 4 March)

Justina

Shana Moron-Caravel

Doña Faustina

Vladyslava Ionascu-Yakovenko

Doña Angeles

Shana Moron-Caravel

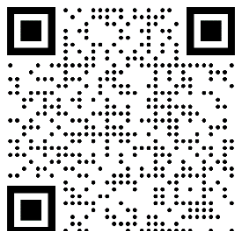
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Director's Note

If time, our challengingly mysterious fourth dimension, were to be squeezed, to be crushed and flattened so that it joined its more familiar spatial siblings, we could visit the past by simply crossing the room. We could sit alongside our past selves, our histories, watch them like strangers at a café and be puzzled and dismayed, intrigued and repelled by their preoccupations. Were we to find some lofty viewpoint, the horizon wouldn't sit at the limit of our vision, but at the limit of our time, our experience – our entire lives visible in one terrible eye-ful. And finally, if death were to offer no release, no escape from this lived landscape, we would sit enthralled and appalled in an ever-present eternity of our own deeds, permanently in communion with our misdeeds, unable to shake the reality of our selves.

This is the world the novel *Pedro Páramo* inhabits. It quite deliberately flies in the face of the passage of time. Just at the point you think you have differentiated 'now' from 'then', 'next' from 'previous', and even 'life' from 'death', the story undercuts your clarity and demands you rethink. The effect of this continual undermining of reader perspective is to drive our attention away from narrative, away from the linear flow of time and the need to uncover 'what happens next', so that we focus more on an abiding, immanent energy or atmosphere that seems to pervade everywhere and all times. At the heart of that energy is Pedro Páramo himself, a cruel and violent landowner who lays waste to everyone and everything in his orbit. And so the piece, episode by episode, builds a devastating picture of the cloying inescapability of despotism and how its venom poisons all those within its reach.

Within this collage of despair, individual scenes have coherent timelines and consequences. But though, like fragments of shattered glass, we cannot rationally join adjacent scenes together, we can all-too-clearly feel the primal violence that created them. In this way, a scatter diagram of part-connected episodes slowly builds a single picture. Helpfully, the opera broadly divides these emerging patterns into two sections. Firstly, the search of Juan Preciado for his father, and then the back story of Pedro himself.

To translate metaphors and images is always reductive, but maybe, with a book so hell bent on undermining the reader's assumptions, a little travel guide might be forgiven. The name Pedro Páramo roughly translates as "stone of the barren plain". He is the force of despotism that has assaulted and despoiled since it 'inherited' the land. Every woman Pedro encounters has suffered abuse of one sort or another at his hands, and there is a sense in which they are the land, the natural unexploited region which has suffered at the hands of invading profiteers. The nation was forged by brutal domination of the land. Caught under Pedro's influence, they all are forced into deeds for which they face an eternity of punishment. The only exception is Susana, his childhood sweetheart, whose abuse happened long before Pedro got to her. Pedro's loss of Susana finally drives him to drag the whole town into annihilation. Pedro's end feels like he has poisoned the entire land with his despotism, a perverse original sin that no-one ever can, or will, be able to escape or absolve.

Although *Pedro Páramo* is very much a Mexican novel, its themes are universal and all too contemporary, and the opera very much seeks to give space to resonances beyond the Mexican border. Despotic entitlement and the violence it spawns poisons everyone. There is no escape. It drags its innocent victims into unwilling complicity and leaves them staring at the shreds of their lives – in this case, for eternity. This four-dimensional music poem articulates the *feeling* of oppression, its awful, asphyxiating, violent, intimate invasion into ordinary lives. And it leaves the sickening taste of hope forever laid waste.

Composer's Note

I first became aware of Rulfo's novel *Pedro Páramo* in 2006 when I was invited by the Mexican-American pianist, Ana Cervantes to write a short piece for her forthcoming CD, *Rumor de Páramo/Murmurs from the Wasteland*. The resulting *Pavane for Dona Susanita* was premiered at the Guanajuato Festival that year. Closer reading of the novel suggested striking operatic possibilities as it moves between realities, plays with time, and through its memorable characters investigates the boundary between life and death.

Juan Rulfo was, as Susan Sontag notes in her introduction to *Pedro Páramo*, a man of many silences. Critic Mark Swed reminds us that the great Mexican writer and seminal influence on Latin-American literature in the second half of the 20th century produced little (the slim novel in 1955 and, before that, short stories), and what Rulfo produced says little, "Yet he wrote magnificently between the lines in a prose magical and musical even in translation."

I took the opera idea to John Lloyd-Davies, then running the Royal Opera House's Opera Development programme, and in 2010, with Dominic Wheeler directing the music, we workshopped five scenes from the opera. This was a promising start, and in 2012 I went to Mexico to meet the Rulfo Foundation to talk about the opera. Unfortunately – as sometimes happens in the creation of opera – discussions were protracted. Apart from a little more development work at Guildhall School in 2014, we let the project hibernate until 2019, when the opportunity to write a new work for the Guildhall Opera Programme became possible. We reopened discussion with the Foundation who were now more amenable provide we adopted Rulfo's original title for the work, *A Star Next to the Moon*. But then the pandemic intervened...

Oddly, this was not all bad as Aoife Mannix, who I'd worked with on numerous projects and approached about adapting *Pedro Páramo*, contacted me to say that whilst recovering from Covid she had drafted a libretto "in a strange, feverish, breathless state". This formed the basis for the libretto. We were both drawn to the idea of a world where, against the tyrannical bullying of Pedro, the barrier between the living and the dead is highly porous. This spoke to us through the vivid characterisations rather more than any idea of a specific time or place. Aoife's version, which translated Rulfo's fantastical and magically terrifying world into highly musical verse, allowed me to develop and expand the earlier sketches into the full opera. It has taken nearly two decades and I'm grateful to everyone who has helped get it here.

– *Stephen McNeff*

Thank you to the **Hinrichsen Foundation** and the **Vaughan Williams Foundation** for support. To **John Lloyd Davies** and the **Royal Opera House** for early development work. To **Dominic Wheeler** for believing in the opera and to **Guildhall School of Music & Drama** for the development opportunities. Also, to **Katie Tearle** at **Peters Edition** for support, and especially to **Maud Hodson** who worked on the orchestral part extraction and score editing with such thoroughness and precision.

Synopsis

Summary

Juan Preciado, as a deathbed promise to his mother, sets off to visit the town of Comala to find his father, Pedro Páramo. Comala is not as his mother described, and appears desolate, no longer a living town. Strange and disturbing encounters with the mysterious inhabitants start to build a picture of a place trapped in its own past as the nightmarish stories drive Juan towards a feverish loss of sanity. The present becomes overwhelmed with re-lived horrors from the past, while in parallel the narrative of Pedro Páramo emerges. We learn of a brutal despot, and how his ruthless rise to power poisoned all who came within his orbit. Pedro's one glimpse of humanity is Susana who, despite her long absence and his tyranny, he has loved since childhood. However, she is now beyond his reach and her decline into sickness and death drive Pedro to despair and his final act of malice.

Prologue

Juan Preciado makes a promise to his dying mother that he never meant to keep.

Scene 1

Fulfilling his mother's wish, Juan is on the road to Comala to find his father, Pedro Páramo. He is lost. He meets Abundio who gives directions and reveals that Pedro Páramo is his father too.

Scene 2

The Media Luna. Fulgor, the foreman, and Pedro Páramo, now the owner of the Media Luna, discuss the state of finances and debt. Pedro tells Fulgor that, to solve his financial problems, he's to go to affluent Dolores Preciado and, on Pedro's behalf, propose marriage to her. Dolores accepts – with reservations...

Scene 3

Eduviges Dyada welcomes Juan to her house and tells Juan about his mother as a young woman. A series of strange nightmares and visitations frightens Juan and he rushes from the room. He meets Damiana, the woman who cared for him as a baby, and she leads him away from the house – but then she vanishes.

Scene 4

Juan is wandering the streets in confusion and hears two women (Doña Faustina and Doña Angeles) gossiping about him. He is also sure he hears strange voices, but The Sister reassures him it happens all the time. She invites him to her house to join her and her brother in bed. Juan dreams and wakes in a fever. He runs to the square.

Scene 5

Dorotea explains that he was collapsed in the square. He still hopes to find his father, but she tells him that hope is something that she has given up on. She asks if he can hear the walking above.

Interval (20 minutes)

Scene 6

At the Media Luna, Pedro is angry as his son, Miguel, goes out on the rampage again. Fulgor is critical of Miguel's bad ways. Damiana hears the voices of Juan and Dorotea and warns them to stay away.

Scene 7

Miguel has been killed in a riding accident. Pedro acknowledges that this could be the point at which he starts to pay. Father Renteria says that they have all sinned and that there can be no mercy for any of them.

Scene 8

Justina sings in the rain while Susana dreams she is a child again. Dorotea and Juan hear them. Pedro exclaims that he has waited thirty years for Susana to return – but her torments have affected her mind.

Scene 9

The People try to make an impoverished living out of the land and are driven to revolution. When they confront Pedro, he makes hollow promises – and is distracted by his obsession with Susana.

Scene 10

Susana imagines that she is swimming and dreams of her first husband.

Scene 11

The Revolutionaries make more demands. Pedro believes he can still win, but Damiana says that he never knew when to just walk away.

Scene 12

Father Renteria tries to hear Susana's last confession, but she rejects him and withdraws herself from Pedro and the world.

Scene 13

The Travelling Circus comes to Comala much to everyone's delight, but Pedro is outraged by this seeming lack of respect to Susana and damns the town to destitution. After the murderous reappearance of his estranged son, Abundio, Pedro understands that he is finally alone and without salvation.

Orchestra

Violin I

Heidi Kim*
Zoe Hodi
Mario Gutiérrez Gorriá
Ludwika Borowska
Malgorzata Podlinska
Nia Lecheva
Grace Powell

Violin II

Mateus Modafferi
Dandalo*
Kristine Kwok
Laia Francés Pont
Clemmy Germain
Erola Masqué
Tanya Perez Jovetic

Viola

Dom Stokes*
Jake Montgomery-Smith
Holly Woods
Iva Durkovic

Cello

Natalie Alfile-Cook*
Daniel Mihailiuc
Josh Lucas
Emma Cox
Double Bass
Caetano Fernandes
Oliveira*
Melisande Lochak

Flute

Stratty Ryan* (alto flute)
Lucy Walsh (piccolo)

Oboe & Cor Anglais

Lidia Moscoso

Clarinet

Sofia Mekhonoshina*
Teah Collins (bass clarinet)

Alto & Soprano Saxophone

Charlotte Arthur

Bassoon & Contrabassoon

Izzy Cave

Horn

Jack Reilly*
Henry Ward
Dan Hibbert

Trumpet

Noah Bailis*
Alice Newbould

Trombone

Ben Loska

Timpani

Lauren Bye

Percussion

Bogdan Skrypka*
Beier Li

Harp

Emily Sullivan

Guitar

Matilde Freiria

Piano, Harmonium & Harpsichord

Henry Reavey
(26 February & 1 March)
Meghan Rhoades
(28 February & 4 March)

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Orchestra Librarian

Anthony Wilson

Music Stage, Logistics & Instrument Manager

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Iris Farquharson

Alice Friend

Hawks Gómez

Jasmine Green

Rohan Green

Finn Irving

Toby Ison

Meg Jordan

Finn Karat

Talia Servadio Kenan

Hollie Lester

Koren Little

Imogen Marinko

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Daniel McDermott

Walter Nash

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