



The *Passion* According to Golijov

OBF's main feature wows audiences worldwide.

In 2001, something extraordinary happened at a concert in Stuttgart, Germany. At the end of the world premiere of Osvaldo Golijov's *Passion According to St. Mark*, the crowd stood and cheered. And cheered. And cheered. They kept on shouting and applauding for more than 15 minutes as the grinning composer made his way to the stage and exchanged *abrazos* with the performers and conductor Maria Guinand.

You don't see reactions like that to most brand new pieces of contemporary classical music. Instead of the polite, obligatory respect accorded an angst-ridden modern work, the audience gave heartfelt thanks to the composer who has written the first real musical masterpiece of the new millennium.

The audience's passion is easy to understand. Golijov had intentionally reached out to them with music that teemed with dramatic emotion, powerful dance rhythms, Latin American colors, theatrical staging and choreography and a story they all knew, but had never experienced in such a thrilling way. It was a visual as well as auditory treat, and a visceral as well as intellectual achievement. And now it's coming to Eugene — a musical phenomenon that promises to draw new audiences to the Bach festival and to classical music.

An Outsider's View

Eugene audiences met Golijov's music when he wrote one of the "Cantatas of the Americas" commissioned by OBF

Music Director Helmuth Rilling for the 1995 festival. *Oceana* drew on Bach as well as Golijov's Argentine heritage. A few years later, Rilling asked Golijov and three other composers to each write a new setting of the biblical passion story — the tale of Jesus' betrayal and crucifixion — as J.S. Bach had done in his St. John and St. Matthew Passions.

Golijov wasn't sure he was up to the task. Not only was he not German or even European, he wasn't even Christian. What could the son of a Communist atheist and a Jew say about a story that had become central to European Christianity? But Rilling didn't want just an update of Bach — he asked Golijov (and the Chinese composer Tan Dun, whose *Water Passion After St. Matthew* was a hit at the 2002 Oregon Bach Festival) to draw on his ethnic and national heritage, to bring new life to an old story.

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Jesus was embraced most strongly by the poor people of Latin America, so for his texts, Golijov used versions of the story distributed by street preachers, along with a standard new testament, and even a poem. And because the figure of Jesus means so many different things to so many different people around the world, he is portrayed by different singers throughout the *Passion*, including both genders and various races.

For the music, Golijov looked throughout Latin America, focusing especially on the two regions where the most interaction among different cultures — African, Native American, and European — had produced the richest

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Golijov, who has lived and taught near Boston for the last 15 years, seized the opportunity to learn more about the Christian culture he'd looked at from the outside while growing up in Argentina. As Pope John Paul II discovered, some of Christianity's most energetic practitioners live in Latin America. Recalling Latin America's colorful Holy Week pro-

music. So rumbas, sambas, bossa nova and other styles, including actual folk tunes, from Cuba and Brazil percolate through the *Passion*, alternating with European flamenco and Gregorian chant.

He called for actual performers from Latin America (including the brilliant Schola Cantorum of Caracas, whom

he'd worked with on *Oceana*, and Brazilian singer Luciana Souza, who we saw in Eugene last month) and percussion instruments native to the continent as well as guitar, brass band and strings.

But Golijov is, after all, a modern composer, with a doctoral degree in composition, so he was able to use the techniques of classical music (and even music inspired by contemporary art music composers like Steve Reich) to construct an architecture for his dances, scenes and popular tunes. And he drew on his own (and Jesus') Jewish heritage at the *Passion's* climax: a Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, which Jesus' own disciples would likely have chanted after his crucifixion.

Reaching Out

For the Bach festival, Golijov's *Passion* presented another opportunity to reach out beyond its core audience. "It's in line with the mission of the Bach Festival, our desire to build bridges to various ethnic groups," said Executive Director Royce Saltzman. "It reaches to people who like jazz, dance, world music. So it has a broad outreach to different audiences." The *Passion's* Latin American flavor inspired the festival to create a committee to reach out to Oregon's Latino community.

The Schola Cantorum will sing excerpts in local churches, and the festival also sponsored various talks, house meetings, even a journal of writings about the piece and its context. And by conducting an open rehearsal and an inexpensive preview performance on June 23, the festival hopes to draw listeners who might otherwise be discouraged by the price of admission to the main performance.

As it is, ticket prices don't come close to covering the cost of bringing the original performers, including a salsa band, the Venezuelan choir, Souza and the rest. Grants from various arts organizations helped pay for the production, the most expensive in Bach Festival history.

In many ways, the *Passion According to St. Mark* is the ideal work to broaden the audience for the festival and classical music — it's contemporary, multicultural, accessible, theatrical, even danceable. But none of that would matter if it weren't also magnificent. While its broad palette makes the work a landmark in music history, its ultimate value is simply

that the music is powerful, beautiful, passionate. Even for listeners who don't buy into its religious background (its composer doesn't), Golijov's *Passion*, like other masterpieces by Bach and musicians throughout history that used religious stories or themes, will touch the heart of almost anyone who experiences it. ■