

Minnesota Orchestra's passionate performance of Golijov masterpiece closes Sommerfest

REVIEW: Minnesota premiere of "Pasión" is powerful, primal.

By Terry Blain Special to the Star Tribune AUGUST 3, 2019

Oswaldo Golijov's "La Pasión según San Marcos" ("The Passion According to St. Mark") is a work like no other in classical music, except perhaps Leonard Bernstein's Mass.

First performed in 2000 to mark the 250th anniversary of J.S. Bach's death, it throws Bach's traditional template for telling the story of Christ's trial and crucifixion in music out the window.

A teeming cornucopia of world-music ingredients takes its place, in a score with percussion instruments and ethnic vocal styles from the Latin American and African traditions.

Golijov's "Pasión" had its Minnesota premiere Friday evening at the Minnesota Orchestra's Sommerfest, in a performance that looked and sounded startlingly different from the orchestra's usual concerts.

About 30 regular Minnesota Orchestra players were on the platform, but complementing them was team of dancers, vocal soloists, percussionists, accordion, guitar, string bass, piano and a choir of 50 voices.

The choir's contribution was a highlight of the evening. Most of its members came from Border CrosSing, a Twin Cities group whose director, Ahmed Anzaldúa, prepared the singers for Friday evening's performance.

Golijov demands much more than standard singing from his chorus. In addition to a switchback ride through styles from samba to Gregorian chant, the singers act, too, striking poses and gyrating in response to the evolving drama of St. Mark's narrative.

Their integration of music and movement was totally convincing, at times riveting. They bayed across the stage at one another as Christ was sentenced, then crouched and whined like malevolent animals as his crucifixion beckoned.

The job of playing Jesus is shared by three separate singers, two of them women. Soprano Jessica Rivera and mezzo-soprano Luciana Souza radiated conviction in the deeply expressive music Golijov gives them, and vocalist Reynaldo González-

Fernández combined dance moves with a galvanizing musicality in telling his part of the story.

Nonsinging dancers were also used to illustrate other sections of the narrative, nowhere more movingly than in the crucifixion scene.

For all the visuals, it was the power and primal impulses of Golijov's music in "La Pasión" that really ripped through forcibly.

Fueled by a formidable battery of percussion instruments, it hummed and shrieked and babbled with the chaotic energies of life itself — one moment meltingly tender, the next lacerated with violent intentions.

Maria Guinand is a veteran of more than 50 performances of "La Pasión," including the premiere, and understands its seething mix of styles and idioms like no other conductor. She led a coruscating performance, binding the multiple strands of the music together in a masterly fashion. No wonder Osvaldo Golijov looked so happy when he came on stage for a curtain call afterward.

His "Pasión" has been called "the first indisputably great composition of the 21st century," and in this outstanding Minnesota Orchestra performance the claim seemed fully justified.

Its scream for tolerance and its defiant integration of musical elements usually deemed incompatible have a relevance to our current moment that scarcely needs underlining.