

# Review: L.A. Master Chorale revives Golijov's startling prophetic, globally warmed 'Oceana'



Luciana Souza sings with the Los Angeles Master Chorale performing Osvaldo Golijov's "Oceana."  
(Jamie Pham)

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OCT. 22, 2019 6 AM

"Give me," Pablo Neruda beseeched the gods of metaphor in a 1961 poem, "the secret wine kept in each syllable" — the help to conjure images of our oceans receding into myth.

Thirty-five years later, Argentine-born American composer Osvaldo Golijov turned "Oceana" into a wine-drunk cantata. On Sunday night, the Los Angeles Master Chorale, conducted by Grant Gershon and featuring

incomparable Brazilian jazz singer Luciana Souza, gave “Oceana” an intoxicating performance at Walt Disney Concert Hall.

This is a startlingly prophetic work. In his text, Neruda bequeathed a timely monument where “crashing waves have disappeared, seas that passed away with chant and travelers.” Painfully, he also might have been describing Golijov’s career, which has mimicked the “coming and going of surfs, of races of honey fallen into the marine jug upon the reefs.”

“Oceana” was a breakthrough for a 36-year-old composer: the heady use of Latin rhythms, jazz scat singing, an orchestra highlighted by a pair of amplified guitars and percussion instruments evocative of those crashing waves, along with choral writing that has elements of Palestrina and Bach. The premiere was at the Oregon Bach Festival, and it presaged Golijov’s most famous work, his “St. Mark Passion” in 2000, which made him seem the perfect voice for the start of a multicultural new century.

It was evident that over the next two decades, Golijov’s music would be ubiquitous and that he would be at the center of our cultural life. But after his opera “Ainadamar,” the song cycle “Ayre” for Dawn Upshaw and the cello concerto “Azul” for Yo-Yo Ma, the composer entered a fallow period that has lasted a dozen years.

An overzealous journalist mistook compositional transformation for plagiarism, only adding to Golijov’s insecurities. He scored a couple of Francis Ford Coppola films that never caught on, but there have been few new works, and nothing major. He never completed a violin concerto commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic or an opera for the Met. Performances of his music have become less prominent. A prestigious recording contract dried up. His once opulent website became a digital shadow of its former self.

The good news is that it sounds like Golijov is back. At the end of the month in Worcester, Mass., the Silkroad Ensemble and soprano Nora Fischer will premiere the composer’s first big new work since 2006, “Falling Out of Time,” based on a novel by Israeli writer David Grossman. Meanwhile, a few chamber pieces have retained their advocacy, particularly “The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind,” which had a recent performance at the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts in Beverly Hills. But a

big-deal production like the Master Chorale’s “Oceana” was a rare and very important revival.

“Oceana” is a reinvention of the Bach cantata form for a modern age, Golijov celebrating the oceans and dramatizing their demise with the same transfixing death-and-transfiguration emotions and musical resourcefulness that Bach employed to celebrate God and render the last days of Jesus. The structure is a series of “calls” — vocal effusions and scat songs for Souza, accompanied by a Latin-tinged ensemble of guitars, harp, percussion and flutes. That’s followed by three “waves” for the chorus and orchestra that set Neruda’s stanzas.

“O-ce-an-a” is chanted back and forth by double chorus. The syncopations and intricate counterpoint create great complexity. The score looks impossibly difficult. But everything sounded natural, the ear following the rhythmic waves just as the eye follows the ocean’s at the beach.



The Los Angeles Master Chorale revives Osvaldo Golijov’s “Oceana” in Disney Hall.  
(Jamie Pham )

A remarkable aria for scat singing calls for a boy soprano to intone the text. Kristin Haegelin, 17, described as a “girl soprano,” produced a clean, boy-like tone with the chops of an accomplished singer. The cantata ended with

an a cappella chorus, “Chorale of the Reef,” that had the character of a Bach motet. The chorus was ethereal in its quiet patterning, meant to deify Neruda’s “Spondylus” (better known as spiny oysters) as “heroes crowned with thorns.” Music, water and all that lived within faded into shimmering, precious ether.

The Master Chorale did not ostensibly make the concert, which opened its season, about “Oceana.” It titled the program “Bruckner’s Great Mass.” Bruckner wrote his Mass No. 3 in F Minor when he was 44, eight years older than Golijov was when he composed “Oceana.” But the Austrian composer was a slow starter and still finding his voice. He had just begun to write symphonies, which would be his crowning glory.

The Mass lasts an hour. It has its adherents and it has its merits, particularly the big moments in the Credo, where there are hints of the great symphonist to come. But much of the Mass is formulaic text setting by a religiously devoted composer whose great strength was producing symphonic cathedrals of sound and convoluted melodies that work their way into your consciousness like a drug.

Gershon pulled out all the stops, and this was most effective in Bruckner’s ecstatic revelation of Resurrection. But Sunday’s real resurrection was of “Oceana” and its choral benedictions on our dying coral reefs.