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Review: A powerful Passion closes Minnesota Orchestra's Latin Sommerfest



Venezuelan conductor Maria Guinand led the Minnesota Orchestra in its Sommerfest-closing performances of Osvaldo Golijov's "La Pasion segun San Marcos." (Courtesy photo)

By Rob Hubbard | Special to the Pioneer Press
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Which came first: Did the Minnesota Orchestra decide to devote its 2019 Sommerfest concerts to the music of Latin America and then look for a fitting finale? Or did it decide to close Sommerfest with the Minnesota premiere of Argentine composer Osvaldo Golijov's evening-length masterpiece, "La Pasion segun San Marcos," then chose to make Latin America the theme of the festival?

It's easy to envision the latter after Friday's first of two performances of the Golijov "Passion According to St. Mark." For this is a monumental work that daringly breaks down boundaries between classical and jazz, sacred and secular, concert and theater.

It's a 90-minute masterpiece that moves both the heart and the hips, employing a choir astute in several styles, a clutch of percussionists, graceful, athletic dancers, and some spine-tingling vocal soloists. It felt big and beautiful, audacious and awe-inspiring.

The work was one of four Passions commissioned by Germany's Bach Academy of Stuttgart to be premiered in 2000 in honor of the 250th anniversary of J.S. Bach's death. At first, Golijov was hesitant, as he wasn't sure that he, a Jewish composer, was an appropriate artist to tackle the task. But what he created was inspired by the faith of the Latin American people and the many musical styles of their cultures. While it does tell the story of the last days of Jesus' life, it feels more like a fantasia upon its themes than a conventional narrative. In fact, there's nothing conventional about this piece.

Where you might expect to find the weighty sadness of sorrow and guilt are instead often swirling sambas and buoyant merengue. That may sound jarring for traditionalists, but this performance under the direction of Venezuelan conductor Maria Guinand — who also led the work's 2000 premiere — was so full of, well, passion that I felt compelled to meet it on its own unique terms. It's a work that disarmingly reimagines all we know of the form.

The choir is assembled from members of two Twin Cities groups — the Minnesota Chorale and the adventurous multicultural choir Border CrosSing — augmented with nine alumni of La Schola Cantorum de Venezuela, which also participated in the original premiere. In addition to stylistically diverse harmonizing, the members moved theatrically and sent soloists downstage to act as singing narrators, characters and mood enhancers. Within and around them spun two expressive dancers, Reynaldo Gonzalez-Fernandez and Guerreiro, acting as something of a silent Greek chorus.

The performance featured one arresting moment after another. The choir holding haunting long tones while a drum jam broke out. Festive dance music abruptly ending, leaving the lone sound the surging voice of a soloist. A last supper that whispered reverently. Drums that quietly rumbled with menace as Judas contemplated betrayal.

Among the many soloists, mezzo Luciana Souza and soprano Jessica Rivera were both spellbinding. A renowned Grammy-winning Brazilian jazz singer, Souza succeeded in grounding the drama in reality in one section and offering ethereal transcendence in another. And Rivera's aria of Peter's post-denial darkness was sparse, chilling and deeply touching.

Golijov, who was present for the performance, once said that the question, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" was something of a starting point for the piece, a sentiment he felt echoes the feelings of many of the faithful in Latin America as they've withstood oppression, violence and poverty. It helps bring this inspired Passion to a solemn conclusion, resolving in a mourner's Kaddish from the composer's Jewish tradition. It was a finish that I wanted to absorb for a few seconds longer, but I can't blame the audience at Orchestra Hall for immediately rising to its feet and showering the performers with a 10-minute standing ovation. It deserved even longer.