

Bon Journal Review 23 June 2008

**The passion of Golijov: Dutch premiere of La Pasión según San Marcos,
The passion according to Saint Mark,
St Mark's Passion**

Argentine Jewish composer Osvaldo Golijov's "Saint Mark's Passion" received its Dutch premiere on Sunday 22 June, at the last night of the Holland Festival in Amsterdam. His passion was one of four commissioned by the International Bach Academy in Stuttgart in the project "Passion 2000" and first premiered in September 2000 in Stuttgart. The others were Wolfgang Rihm's Dues Passus (St. Luke), Sofia Gubaidulina's Johannes-Passion, and the Water Passion after St Matthew by Tan Dun.

This one-and-a-half hour work for orchestra, choir, and soloists was, for me, an exotic potpourri of Latin American rhythms and melodic motifs that pulled me back to my first and only trip to Colombia and Peru just over ten years ago ---- a taste of life so vivid and exciting that I decided to learn Spanish upon my return to London. The religious theme hardly came to bear (or rather, was totally forgotten) as I savoured the salsa beat, got lost in the Cuban drumming, and sync'd to the choir's crisp flamenco clapping. Indeed, Latin America is a kaleidoscope of colours, rhythms, and cultures, just as Golijov had chosen different musical styles and instruments to tell his biblical story, in a collective manner. Even the choir metamorphosizes: from angels to demons, from the common people to Jesus himself.

Without understanding the Spanish lyrics or the Dutch text on the libretto screen, one has only to immerse herself in the music. And sometimes that is a good thing --- experiencing the music without understanding the words or the context and thus be free from trying to make sense of something that's meant to be enjoyed. One then questions whether the text and context are necessary at all.

It began with the five-man percussionist team, drumming the life beat into the soul of the story. The choir sang. What connected one song to the next is a single type of instrument, lagging behind while the

others are silenced. One instrument remains or emerges from the crowd after the rest dies out, so that one has to "beg" to listen. This method of connecting the passages *attaca* introduces different solo instruments: first the drumming, then the piano/keyboard, and then the violin and so on. It is a clever way to continue the sound, prevent the audience from applauding or getting nervous, while giving time for the other musicians to turn the page and get ready for the next piece.

This first visit to the Theatre Carré coincided with Princess Maxima's presence with all the Dutch television crew working to broadcast it live. I couldn't help noticing, no matter how good the broadcast, nothing beats experiencing it live. For there you are, in the same space as the performers, breathing the same air, occupying the same area of the earth, and seeing and hearing it without any screening device.

As with all passions, operas, orchestras, and works involving many performers, one has to experience it more than once to appreciate its full worth. The first time gives you an impression, nothing more. I cannot remember it well enough to write a deserving review. The second time is always different from the first. And that is perhaps why John, the opera aficionado who in driving me home after a dinner in a Barbican flat in London said, "After I go to the opera, I buy a CD and listen to it on my way home. Once I get home, I play it on my stereo and listen to it again."

Without the CD, I must visit youtube.com to remember it or at least some of it. And then I must rewind a few hours back to Messiaen's 4-hour opera: St Francis of Assisi, which I savoured that same afternoon.

--- Anne Ku
<http://www.bonjournal.com/entries/j080623.htm>

- Osvaldo Golijov official website: <http://www.osvaldogolijov.com/>
- Full Blooded Passion by David Conway <http://www.socialaffairsunit.org.uk/blog/archives/000814.php>
- Classical music the next big thing by Greg Sandow <http://www.gregsandow.com/golijov.htm>
- Resurrection by Alex Ross http://www.therestisnoise.com/2004/05/golijovs_pasin.html
- La Segun San Marcos (2000) http://brothersjudd.com/index.cfm/fuseaction/reviews.musicdetail/music_id/6
- Osvaldo Golijov: Pasión según San Marcos <http://theomniscientmussel.com/2008/03/osvaldo-golijov-pasion-segun-san-marco/>
- Holland Festival <http://www.hollandfestival.nl>
- Bon Journal Reviews <http://www.bonjournal.com/reviews>