Minnesota Orchestra
Maria Guinand, conductor | Marcela Lorca, stage director
Jessica Rivera, soprano | Luciana Souza, mezzo
Reynaldo González-Fernández, vocalist and dancer
Gonzalo Grau, piano | Michael Ward-Bergeman, accordion
Mikael Ringquist, percussion | Marcus Santos, percussion
Aquiles Báez, guitar | Jeff Bailey, bass
Guerreiro, capoeirista and berimbau | Ahmed Anzaldúa, choral preparation
Border CrosSing, chorus
Minnesota Chorale, Kathy Saltzman Romey, artistic director
Alumni of Schola Cantorum de Venezuela

Friday, August 2, 2019, 8 pm | Orchestra Hall
Saturday, August 3, 2019, 8 pm | Orchestra Hall

Tonight’s concert will be performed without intermission.

Osvaldo Golijov
La Pasión según San Marcos (The Passion According to St. Mark) ca. 87’

Los materiales del programa de esta noche están disponibles en español; solicite un folleto al acomodador.

Profiles of tonight’s performers are provided in an insert, which also includes program notes and artist profiles in Spanish.

An English translation of La Pasión según San Marcos text will be projected as surtitles.

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Osvaldo Golijov

La Pasión según San Marcos
(The Passion According to St. Mark)

Premiered: September 5, 2000

The start of our century coincided with a major anniversary in the classical music world, as 2000 was the 250th anniversary of Johann Sebastian Bach's death. In the Baroque composer's homeland of Germany, the Bach Academy of Stuttgart marked the occasion by commissioning four composers of international repute to write settings of the Passion—the Biblical story of the final days in the life of Jesus Christ on earth.

The choice of Argentine-American Osvaldo Golijov (born 1960) as one of the four participating composers was hardly intuitive. When the Academy's founder Helmuth Rilling offered him the commission, Golijov was surprised. “Why are you asking a Jewish composer?” he queried. He did not even own a copy of the New Testament.

Unfazed, Rilling offered considerable artistic latitude with the project. Golijov accepted. “The process was long,” he told an interviewer in 2000. “I studied the New Testament, and tried to divest the text and the story from the use of the Passion through history as an instrument of anti-Semitism.”

Golijov’s breakthrough came via a reproduction of a painting that hung in his grandmother’s kitchen: Rembrandt’s Jeremiah Lamenting the Fall of Jerusalem. “Rembrandt wasn’t Jewish, but he portrayed the Jewish soul better than any other painter,” Golijov points out. That gave him his direction. “The drama in my Pasión comes not from my Jewish part but from my Latin American part,” he says. He made a conscious effort to embrace and include the multiple cross-pollination inherent throughout Latin America, ranging from African native music in the Nigerian Yoruba tradition, to Cuban rhythms and dances, to music from the vast expanses of South America.

The Stuttgart premiere of Golijov’s La Pasión según San Marcos (The Passion According to St. Mark) in September 2000 caused a sensation in the music world. Audience reaction was electrifying and has remained enthusiastic in subsequent performances. Critics raved, too: The Boston Globe called Pasión “the first indisputably great composition of the 21st century.”

about the composer

Golijov, who is of Eastern European and Jewish descent, was reared in La Plata, Argentina. He emigrated to Israel in 1983, studying with Mark Kopytman at the Jerusalem Rubin Academy, and he came to the U.S. in 1986 to pursue a doctorate in composition with George Crumb at the University of Pennsylvania.

Golijov’s career has flourished in the years since Pasión’s premiere. In 2003 he was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, the so-called “genius award.” From 2006 to 2010, he was co-composer in residence of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. He currently serves on the faculties of Boston Conservatory, Tanglewood, and Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts.

The Minnesota Orchestra was prescient in its recognition of Golijov’s talent. It programmed his Last Round at the 1999 Sommerfest and several times since, and it premiered Golijov’s Three Songs for Soprano and Orchestra in 2002; both of these works are reprised at this year’s Sommerfest. This week’s performances of Golijov’s Pasión are a Minnesota premiere.

the Passion in history

In the Christian tradition, the Passion of Jesus Christ has traditionally been observed from Palm Sunday to Good Friday of Holy Week. (It precedes and does not include the Easter Resurrection narrative.) Essentially it tells the story of Jesus’ crucifixion, based more or less strictly on one of the four New Testament gospels. Thus, according to which scriptural text is selected as a basis, the narrative tale focuses on Christ’s betrayal and arrest, trial and interrogation, flagellation and other sufferings, death, burial and farewell.

Musical retellings of the Passion in the Roman Catholic liturgy extend back as far as the fourth century A.D. By the 16th century, Passion settings had evolved to a dramatic approach, with an Evangelist as narrator, Christ and other major characters (such as Judas, Peter and Pilate) in singing roles, and the crowd represented by a chorus. In Western musical culture, Passions are most closely associated with Johann Sebastian Bach. Both of his surviving settings, the St. Matthew Passion and the St. John Passion, are masterpieces.

breaking from tradition

Golijov’s Pasión broke from tradition on multiple levels. To begin with, it is as much a theater piece as it is a musical work. The production includes lighting, some costumes, dancers, and stage direction that involves some interaction among the performers. Another unusual aspect is linguistic. Most of the text is a Spanish translation of the Gospel of Mark; however, there are two significant exceptions. Golijov also sets a poem by Rosalia de Castro, Lúa Descolorida (Colorless Moon), as an aria of lamentation for Peter. The concluding Muerte and Kaddish (performed without pause, as is nearly all of Pasión) are a combination of Spanish and Aramaic, the language that Jesus is believed to have spoken.

Golijov’s vocal casting is fluid, often going against type and embracing multiple folkloric and popular Latin traditions. In some cases he even references specific influential contemporary
musicians. Mark has three interpreters: a male vocalist whom Golijov specifies “sings in Babalao style”; a high tenor (“Cuban, Beny Moré style”); and to announce the arrest, “Four Hot Cuban Tenors” who descend from the chorus. The role of Jesus is even more diverse, sung in various numbers by a soprano (“light, early music style”), an alto (“South American, Mercedes Sosa style”), and—briefly—baritone (“Middle Eastern, Muezzin style”). Golijov placed Christ’s words in multiple female voices as what he calls a “collective monologue.” He explains: “In Latin America, women suffer the most. In Argentina, they have the most courage.”

Early in the project, Golijov’s vision for the Pasión took shape as a metaphor for Latin America and the challenges it faces. He notes: “Jesus’s last words are, ‘My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?’ And yet: faith persists. The most important thing in the Passion is the hope that life can be better. This is the cry of Latin America: hope for the future.”

Golijov’s instrumental complement is unconventional. His score calls for only a few standard orchestral instruments—a pair each of trumpets and trombones, with solo roles for piano, double bass, accordion and guitar. The string complement omits violas, and uses the violins, cellos and basses primarily as connective tissue rather than to carry the thrust of the musical argument. Golijov’s overwhelming instrumental emphasis is on percussion, specifically world percussion. Few of the percussion instruments you see on stage at today’s performance are conventional to a symphony orchestra. Many of them are indigenous to Africa, South America and Cuba.

**Expert guidance**

For guidance on the percussion, Golijov sought out Mikael Ringquist, an expert in Latin and African instruments. Ringquist became an active collaborator in Golijov’s creative process. His encyclopedic expertise with folk instruments helped the composer identify specific sounds he sought. Ringquist describes some of the exotica and their far-flung geographical origins. “Caxixi looks like a woven rattan basket, with seeds in it. It’s sort of a rattle-shaker, with a gourd surface at one end. It’s Brazilian, but very common in Africa. Ago-gó is a West African two-pitched bell. Quitiplás is a Venezuelan folkloric instrument made of bamboo pieces that you hit against the ground. You can change its sound with the hand. Cajón is a box with some strings resting on the side. It’s played by striking on the side, and used in flamenco.”

Ringquist says that the family of Batá drums was particularly important to Golijov. “As played in Cuba,” he explains, “they are a set of three drums: iyá, Okónkolo and Itótele. All three are of Yoruba [West Africa] origin. Their main purpose is to praise and communicate with the deities—Orishas—of the Yoruba pantheon. Many of the beats that are played are actually speech, using abbreviated Yoruba phrases. This is a way to directly communicate with the Gods. During the Anuncios in Pasión, not only the choir but also the Batá drums are making the announcements.”

**How and why**

Golijov’s musical approach is eclectic, drawing heavily on Latin dances and rhythms. Here again, he flouts convention. One of the most memorable movements is Por qué, for double chorus and the alto Jesus, in mambo style. It posits the central question of the entire Passion: how and why could this happen. Insistent maracas, bongos, bell, congas, piano and trumpets drive the rhythm. The march to Golgotha, the hill on which Jesus died, is a parade, emerging as more of a folk fest in samba than a somber occasion. Yet Golijov is equally masterful at plumbing the depths of this wrenching story, as in Peter’s melismatic and tender aria, Lúa descolorida.

Only rarely does Golijov make a nod to traditional church music. When he does, the impact is searing, as in Eucaristía for Mark, Jesus and women’s chorus. Sung a cappella, it has the ebb and flow of chant, what Golijov describes as “the flexible, flying quality of Gregorian melodies.” Over the course of Pasión, Golijov’s traversal of Afro-Cuban, samba, tango and other Latin styles with more introspective and traditional movements is riveting. Now primordial, now transcendent, the tragic events of the Gospel according to St. Mark unfold with blistering power.

**Instrumentation:** soprano, mezzo and male vocal soloists, 4-part mixed chorus, 2 dancers and orchestra comprising 2 trumpets (1 doubling piccolo trumpet), 2 trombones, 6 percussionists (see below), piano, guitar (doubling tres), accordion, solo bass, violins, cellos and basses

Percussion instruments derive from the following ethnic traditions:

**Afro-Caribbean:** batá drums (iyá, itótele and okónkolo), bombo, 2 bombos legüeros, bongos, claves, congas, guagua, guataca, guiro, maracas, shekeres and timbales

**Afro-Venezuelan:** quitiplás (cruzao, pujao and prima)

**Afro-Brazilian:** agogó, berimbau, caixa, caxixi, cuica, repinique, surdos (marcação, resposta and cortador) and tamborim

**Spanish:** cajón

General percussion: snare drum, bass drum, suspended cymbal, cowbell, sea shells, shaker, spring drum, tambourine, wind chimes, bells and chimes

**Program note by Laurie Shulman ©2019. First North American Serial Rights Only.**

Ahmed Anzaldua, who prepared the choruses for these performances, provided his own thoughts and descriptions of La Pasión según San Marcos at minnesotaorchestra.org/showcase.