

FROM THE INTIMATE TO THE UNFATHOMABLE: UNEXPECTED AFFINITIES IN BRUCKNER AND GOLIJOV

by Thomas May



It may seem hard to believe that the Los Angeles Master Chorale is performing the two works on this program for the very first time in its 55-year history. Though vastly different in outlook and in the very sounds they demand from the chorus, Anton Bruckner's Mass No. 3 in F Minor and *Oceana* by Osvaldo Golijov (pictured above), might have been tailor-made for the Master Chorale's signature aesthetic. When combined on the same program, they allow the ensemble to showcase its remarkable versatility.

"On the surface, Bruckner and Golijov sound absolutely nothing like each other," says Grant Gershon, Kiki & David Gindler Artistic Director of the Master Chorale. Returning from leading the Master Chorale's acclaimed performances at the Salzburg Festival of *Lagrime di San Pietro*, the Peter Sellars production that opened the 2016–17 season, Gershon explained the thinking behind this unusual juxtaposition of composers.

"Each one is so specific in terms of its individual sound world and has such a clarity of vision and intent that I thought it would be exciting to put them together. To me, as a concertgoer, that kind of variety is something I really enjoy. I embrace how different they are." At the same time, Gershon points out that the more he's been living with the Bruckner and Golijov scores, the more he has found that, "For all their uniqueness, they each combine moments that are very intimate and personal with global statements and an epic quality."

BRUCKNER'S MASS IN F MINOR: RETURN FROM A CRISIS

If Anton Bruckner's symphonies are frequently approached as secular, wordless masses, immersive experiences that transform

the genre into a vehicle for abstract spiritual contemplation, the F-minor Mass contains musically ambitious moments that anticipate his mature symphonies.

Even had Bruckner never written the symphonies with which his name is first and foremost associated, Mass No. 3 in F Minor would stand as a masterful achievement. It bridges the Viennese Classical tradition with this composer's singular vision—a vision influenced in part by, but never truly congruent with, later 19th-century Romanticism—and marks the pivotal moment in his career just before he resettled in Vienna, where he made writing symphonies his project.

This is the third and final complete setting of the central Roman Catholic liturgy that Bruckner completed. All three of his masses date from the 1860s, though in 1875 he contemplated writing a requiem, for which he sketched only 18 measures; a setting of the *Te Deum*, his best known choral work, dates from the early 1880s. He composed the Mass No. 3 in F Minor between September 1867 and September 1868 and made numerous minute revisions over the years, even up to the period when he was working on his Symphony No. 9.

Bruckner undertook the F-minor Mass shortly after his release from treatment for a nervous breakdown. For three months in 1867, until early August, the composer had been confined to a sanitarium in Bad Kreuzen in his native Upper Austria. Biographers only have been able to speculate about the specific reasons that precipitated the crisis. According to Bruckner authority Paul Hawkshaw, "Overwork was certainly a factor. The stress of years of study followed by a period of intense compositional activity as well as the performances of the D-minor Mass must have contributed to it." Alongside such burnout, the composer's failed attempts to establish a personal relationship are also cited as a potential cause.

Bruckner's condition presented as an obsession with numbers. Hawkshaw observes: "He is reported to have counted such things as beads on necklaces, dots on clothes, windows in the town, leaves on trees, and even stars." This is a manifestation of Bruckner's famous "number mania," which left its mark on his compositional thinking in such techniques as the so-called Bruckner rhythm, a combination of two and three that permeated many of his compositions.

Despite his doctors' orders to avoid the exertion of composing, Bruckner completed the Mass No. 3 in F minor in an effort that on one level represented a declaration of renewed creativity following his stay at Bad Kreuzen. For the devoutly Catholic Bruckner, creativity was inextricably bound up with his faith, and finishing his work would have been an act of devotion, his own *heiliger Dankesang*.

Bruckner had already committed himself to taking up a post teaching counterpoint at the Vienna Conservatory while still working on the F-minor Mass. He resettled there in the fall of 1868 to begin his teaching duties. Vienna became the composer's home thereafter, though he was ill-suited to life in the Habsburg capital. The Mass remained unperformed for several years—Bruckner recalled years later that a prospective conductor found it “too long and unsinkable”—and was not premiered until June 16, 1872, under Bruckner's own baton, at the Augustinerkirche.

Unlike the premiere of his Mass No. 1 in 1864, the first performance of the F-minor Mass met with a tepid response. In his review of the Mass No. 3 in F Minor, the formidable critic Eduard Hanslick, a fan of the first Mass, criticized the preparation of the performers, and hoped the new work would receive a better-rehearsed performance in the concert hall to attract a larger audience. This must have come to pass, as the Mass No. 3 in F Minor was among Bruckner's most frequently performed works in Vienna during his lifetime.

A LINK TO TRADITION, FORECASTING THE FUTURE

Mass No. 3 in F Minor is a setting of the typical six movements that make up the Roman Catholic mass. Bruckner calls for a standard classical orchestra with trumpets and trombones, along with mixed chorus and four solo singers. In his setting, one can hear in the integration of chorus and orchestra particular similarities with Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* and the masses in A-flat and E-flat by Schubert, as well as Haydn's great mass settings.

The Kyrie begins with an aura of shadowy, humble intimacy, introducing a core motif of four descending notes that are germinal to the work. Following his luminous setting of the Christe, the Kyrie's return is enriched by a remarkable a cappella section. Bruckner transforms the descending figure into a jubilant gesture at the start of the Gloria (anchored, like the Credo, in C major). Throughout its sections, the division of labor between the chorus and soloists is especially appealing, as in the Gratias agimus and the Quoniam. Bruckner wraps up the movement with a monumental fugue.

The Credo, not surprisingly, offers the greatest musical variety and is rich in musical symbolism, such as the homophonic acclamations of faith and the Beethoven-inspired solo tenor setting of Et incarnatus (reminiscent of the lofty violin solo in the Benedictus of the *Missa Solemnis*). Despite his adulation of Wagner, Bruckner had no interest in the dramatic side of opera, but he shows a flair for word painting here that is worthy of the old masters. The miniature Passion narrative at the center explodes with joy at Et resurrexit. At the fugal end of the Credo, he finds a way to top the all-powerful fugue that had already come before in the Gloria, the counterpoint this time shot through with shouts of “Credo!”

Set in F major, the Sanctus uses powerful dynamic contrasts. Bruckner shifts to an intensely lyrical mode (in A-flat major) for the Benedictus—the equivalent of one of his lofty slow movements—and ends with a very brief reprise of the extroverted Hosanna. Sudden harmonic turns in the Agnus Dei point ahead to the symphonic Bruckner, as does the structure of this movement's climax at “Dona nobis pacem.”

Gershon observes that the Mass in F Minor contains many such moments that anticipate Bruckner's signature sonorities in the

mature symphonies, such as “block-like passages that seem to exist in their own space, followed by another. But at the same time, some listeners may find surprising how intimate and personal so much of this music feels—especially the pleading and quiet sonority of the ending.” It is in the conclusion of the work where Bruckner reconnects us to the Kyrie, reprising its descending four-note motif, now in the major.

COMBINING IMPULSES FROM NERUDA AND BACH: GOLIJOV'S *OCEANA*

A link to spiritual themes figures significantly in the music of Osvaldo Golijov as well. His breakthrough work, *The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind*, is a chamber composition from 1994 merging string quartet and klezmer traditions. It was inspired by the work of Yitzhak Saggi Nehor, a 13th-century Kabbalist mystic from Provence. *Dreams and Prayers* was followed two years later by *Oceana*. The Bach expert and choral conductor Helmuth Rilling commissioned *Oceana* for his Oregon Bach Festival, which premiered it in June 1996 as part of the series Cantatas of the Americas, with Maria Guinand conducting.

That connection to Rilling later led to the creation of what remains Golijov's best-known work: *La Pasión según San Marcos*, one of four Passion settings commissioned in 2000 by Rilling as contemporary responses to J.S. Bach's Passions (alongside contributions by Sofia Gubaidulina, Tan Dun, and Wolfgang Rihm). As it happens, one of the most affecting passages in Golijov's St. Mark Passion is the episode recounting Peter's tears, an aria titled *Lúa descolorida* (“Colorless Moon”)

Born in 1960 in La Plata, Argentina, to parents of Russian and Romanian origin, Golijov absorbed early memories of his ancestors' Old World Yiddish background and was deeply influenced by his mother's Orthodox Jewish faith. He sang in the choir at his local synagogue from an early age and later formulated his artistic outlook from a highly varied blend of traditional classical music, klezmer, the tango innovations of fellow Argentinian Astor Piazzolla, and electronic and experimental directions. He found mentors in George Crumb and the late Oliver Knussen after moving to the U.S. in 1986. Golijov settled in New England, where he is still based.

Golijov's love of poetry is evident in such works as his 2003 opera *Ainadamar (Fountain of Tears)*, which sets a Spanish libretto by David Henry Hwang that explores the life and legacy of the poet Federico García Lorca. *Oceana* fuses this love of poetry with the presence of J.S. Bach as a model. Its textual source is from Pablo Neruda (1904–1973), who personally knew Lorca before the latter's assassination by right-wing forces during the Spanish Civil War. Bach serves as the structural inspiration for *Oceana*. The guiding idea behind Helmuth Rilling's Cantatas of the Americas—foreshadowing the Passion 2000 project—was to juxtapose contemporary composers who worked within a New World context and their responses to the spirituality of Bach's cantatas.

Oceana has no place for actual biblical texts, but there is a similarity to Bach's procedure insofar as his cantata texts also incorporate the work of contemporary poets meditating on the spiritual themes at hand. Neruda, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1971, was a member of the Communist Party of his native Chile and an outspoken atheist, yet his odes to nature exude such fervent passion that they might at the same time be compared to a pantheistic outlook.

"Immersed in these memories, I suddenly have to wake up," writes Neruda in his *Memoirs*. "It's the sound of the sea ... The ocean—rather than my watching it from my window, it watches me with a thousand eyes of foam ... Years that are so far away! Reconstructing them, it's as if the sound of the waves I hear now touched something inside me again and again ..." The poet and Neruda translator Ben Belitt posits a link between the Chilean master and Homer: "No reader of the lives of Pablo Neruda can miss the singing of his Sirens ... His insular and oceanic gods work themselves into the very fabric and time of his story as persistently as Poseidon and Athena weave their theophanies into the fortunes of Odysseus."

Oceana (often translated into English as *Ocean Lady*) is one of the ten poems Neruda published in his 1961 collection *Cantos ceremoniales* (*Ceremonial Songs*). Likening the Latin American poet to Bach in his ability to make art of the most daily elements surrounding us—including the environment we take for granted—Golijov has stated: "My aim in *Oceana* was, like Bach, to transmute passion into geometry. This is, in my mind, the clue to both Bach's and Neruda's work." In the listener, Golijov hopes to elicit "the emotion of hearing order, inevitable and full of light: every note in its place, as in Bach, every word in its place, as in Neruda."

Thomas May, program annotator for the Los Angeles Master Chorale, writes about the arts and blogs at memeteria.com.

LOS ANGELES MASTER CHORALE

The Los Angeles Master Chorale is widely recognized as the country's leading professional choir and one of Southern California's most vibrant cultural treasures. Hailed for its powerful performances, technical precision, and artistic daring, the Master Chorale is led by Grant Gershon, Kiki & David Gindler Artistic Director, and Jean Davidson, President & CEO. Created by legendary conductor Roger Wagner in 1964, it is a founding resident company of The Music Center and choir-in-residence at Walt Disney Concert Hall. Chorister positions are highly sought after and the fully professional choir is a diverse and vocally dynamic group showcasing the many voices of L.A.

The Master Chorale performs 13 concerts during its 2019–20 season as a resident company of Walt Disney Concert Hall. Performances include Bruckner's Mass No. 3 in F Minor and Osvaldo Golijov's *Oceana*, Rachmaninoff's *All-Night Vigil*, and Fauré's Requiem. Also on the season are world premieres of music by Gabriel Kahane and Derrick Spiva, and music by Caroline Shaw, Nilo Alcala, Shawn Kirchner, and Diana Syre as part of a tribute concert to choral legend Alice Parker; the West Coast premiere of Nilo Muhly's *The Faire Starre*, commissioned by the Master Chorale; music by Dale Trumbore, Morten Lauridsen, and Matthew Brown; and the world premiere of a new soundtrack by Emmy Award winner Jeff Beal (*House of Cards*) to the classic 1927 movie *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans*, directed by F.W. Murnau. Christmas offerings include annual Festival of Carols and *Messiah* performances.

The Los Angeles Master Chorale has performed in more than 500 concerts with the Los Angeles Philharmonic at both Walt Disney Concert Hall and the Hollywood Bowl, and has toured with the orchestra to Europe and throughout the United States.

Golijov develops a seven-movement structure for the five stanzas of *Oceana*, which depict the varied facets of this all-embracing element. His cantata mirrors a Bach cantata in the interweaving of solo aria and chorale into the larger structure. Overall, the chorus is given an even greater role, for, as the composer writes, "Neruda's voice is a chorus, too powerful for a single voice to handle ..."

The soundscape lies worlds apart from that of a Bach cantata: a battery of flutes, amplified guitars, harp, strings, and percussion (talking drums, dumbek, rain stick, shekere, and maracas) serves as the instrumental ensemble, while the words are sung by double chorus, girl soprano, and a singer employing Brazilian jazz style.

Composed in 1996, when the threat of global climate change still seemed relatively abstract in comparison with our situation in 2019, *Oceana* celebrates what Golijov describes as "water and longing, light and hope, the immensity of South America's nature and pain" by transforming all this "into pure musical symbols, which nevertheless should be more liquid than the sea and deeper than the yearning that they represent."

Since the 2018–19 season, the Master Chorale has been touring its production of *Lagrime di San Pietro*, directed by Peter Sellars, with performances in London and Paris, and at the Salzburg Festival.

Praised for its definitive performances, the Los Angeles Master Chorale is also committed to recording the choral repertoire. Its esteemed discography includes seven recordings under Gershon, the most recent being *the national anthems / the little match girl passion* by David Lang on Cantaloupe Records. Albums released under former music director Paul Salamunovich on RCM include the Grammy Award-nominated *Lauridsen: Lux Aeterna*, a recording that helped to secure the work's place as a modern masterpiece. The Master Chorale is featured with Gershon on the soundtracks of many major motion pictures, including *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*.

Committed to community engagement and fostering music education in schools, the Los Angeles Master Chorale's education programs include Voices Within residencies that encourage students to write and perform their own songs, and an expansive Oratorio Project for high school students. The Master Chorale also presents an annual High School Choir Festival, which brings teenagers from around the Southland to perform in Disney Hall. In May 2019, the High School Choir Festival celebrated 30 years as one of the longest running and wide reaching arts education programs in Southern California. In July 2018, the Master Chorale presented Big Sing California, the largest group singing event in state history, encompassing a concert in Disney Hall that was broadcast live to venues in five other cities in California and livestreamed online.