

MUSIC REVIEW

Oswaldo Golijov's old wine in new vessels

By Jeremy Eichler, Globe Staff | December 8, 2007

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We often imagine new pieces of music arriving like pristine dispatches from Olympus - unique, inviolable, and born whole from the depths of the composer's imagination. Not so for Oswaldo Golijov. The Boston-based Argentine composer works more like an 18th-century man of the theater: writing, revising, and recycling to suit the occasion, and often soliciting input from the performers in the process.

This week's program at the Boston Symphony Orchestra, led by Miguel Harth-Bedoya, is a perfect example. The first half is all-Golijov, including a work called "Azul," which he wrote for Yo-Yo Ma and the BSO. It was premiered at Tanglewood in 2006, and was conceived with the open air and deep sky of the Berkshires in mind. This year, Golijov overhauled the work for its "indoor" premiere as part of the Mostly Mozart Festival at Lincoln Center, working closely with another soloist, Alisa Weilerstein. Thursday night in Symphony Hall, Ma returned to the piece, taking on its newest version. But what music should go along with "Azul"?

When asked that question by BSO artistic administrator Anthony Fogg, Golijov proposed stitching together a short solo cello piece he had written in 1991 called "Omaramor" with one half of another work, a Piazzolla-inspired nonette called "Last Round," which he had later arranged for string orchestra. Fogg agreed, and presto, there is now a new hybrid piece called "Ausencia." Thursday night was its first performance, but Golijov asked the BSO not to call it a premiere. He doesn't pretend this is new music - just two older works given new life for the occasion.

They work decently well together, with "Omaramor" coming off like an extended opening cadenza. Ma laid into it with his customary intensity and a wonderful sense of freedom. The piece itself is a soulful homage to the legendary Argentine singer Carlos Gardel, and it is richly textured and colorful, with passages of furious string crossings giving way to meditative stretches that suggest a slow movement from a Bach suite wandering into a tango song. To these ears, the second half of "Last Round" is more persuasive in its chamber version, but the BSO strings certainly gave the sound an undeniable heft and warmth.

Meanwhile, even the indoor version of "Azul" still has a lot of rumination and night sky. The solo cello part is full of lyrical deep-breathing lines; the orchestra moves in massed, primal gestures. Two percussionists draw from a vast world of traditional instruments, and the cello wistfully converses with a digitally enhanced accordion. The fusion of the many parts did not always feel as seamless as it does in other Golijov works but there were some entrancing moments, especially when Ma and the percussionists cut loose, and when he interwove his lines with those of the accordion. The audience loved it, and gave the performers and Golijov a prolonged ovation.

After intermission, Harth-Bedoya led a lively and well-judged account of Dvorak's Eighth Symphony. His gestures were clear and incisive, and both qualities came through in the orchestra's playing.

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