
Jessica Rivera

soprano



“Rivera's great asset is her combination of a plush, throaty timbre and the sort of laser-like technical precision that usually only comes with a thinner and more silvery sound ... Rivera's singing was crystalline and rounded throughout.” – *San Francisco Chronicle*



JESSICA RIVERA
Soprano
2025-2026 Full Biography

Praised by the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* for her voice's "ravishing fullness," GRAMMY® Award-winning soprano Jessica Rivera "has established herself as a singer of uncommon vocal luster and musical intelligence" (*San Francisco Classical Review*). The dimension and spirituality with which she infuses her performances on international concert and opera stages has garnered Ms. Rivera unique artistic collaborations with many of today's most celebrated composers, including John Adams, Osvaldo Golijov, Gabriela Lena Frank, Jonathan Leshnoff, Nico Muhly, and Paola Prestini, and has brought her together with such esteemed conductors as Gustavo Dudamel, Sir Simon Rattle, Esa-Pekka Salonen, James Conlon, Robert Spano, Markus Stenz, Bernard Haitink, Teddy Abrams, and Michael Tilson Thomas.

A champion of new music, Rivera recently gave the world premiere of Nico Muhly's *The Right of Your Senses* alongside the National Children's Chorus and the American Youth Symphony at Walt Disney Concert Hall. A major voice in the rich culture of Latin American music and composers, Rivera also performed Antonio Lysy's *Te Amo Argentina* at the Broad Stage in Santa Monica in May 2023. She sang Gabriela Lena Frank's *Conquest Requiem* in its premiere with the Houston Symphony, and later with the Nashville Symphony and Columbus Symphony Orchestra.

Recent orchestral highlights include Golijov's *La Pasión según San Marcos* with the Minnesota Orchestra, Gabriela Lena Frank's *La Centinela y la Paloma* with the Aspen Philharmonic, Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* at the Grand Teton Music Festival, Detroit Symphony, and Rhode Island Philharmonic, and Mozart's *Requiem* with the Louisville Orchestra and San Diego Symphony. She has sung Mahler Symphony No. 4 with Colombia's Orquesta Filarmónica de Bogotá and Mahler Symphony No. 2 with the Columbus Symphony, Strauss's *Orchesterlieder* with Orquesta Sinfónica Portuguesa, the role of Eileen in Bernstein's *Wonderful Town* with Seattle Symphony, and Górecki's Symphony No. 3 with Gustavo Dudamel and the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Rivera has worked closely with John Adams throughout her career and received international praise portraying Kumudha in the world premiere of *A Flowering Tree* directed by Peter Sellars at Vienna's New Crowned Hope Festival. Under Adams's baton, she subsequently sang the role with the San Francisco Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Orchestra of St. Luke's at Lincoln Center, and London Symphony Orchestra. Rivera made her European operatic debut as Kitty Oppenheimer in Sellars's production of Adams's *Doctor Atomic* with the Netherlands Opera and joined the roster of the Metropolitan Opera for its production of *Doctor Atomic* under the direction of Alan Gilbert.

Ms. Rivera made her Santa Fe Opera debut in the summer of 2005 as Nuria in the world premiere of the revised edition of Osvaldo Golijov's *Ainadamar*. She reprised the role for the 2007 GRAMMY® Award-winning Deutsche Grammophon recording of the work with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra under Robert Spano, and bowed in the Peter Sellars staging at Lincoln Center and Opera Boston, as well as in performances at the Barbican Centre, the Adelaide Festival of Arts, and the Ojai, Ravinia, and New Zealand International Arts Festivals. Additional recent opera roles include Margarita Xirgu in *Ainadamar* with the Casals Festival and Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni* with Cincinnati Opera.

Rivera's extensive discography includes releases on the Deutsche Grammophon, Nonesuch, Naxos, Telarc, Urtext, VIA Records, Opus Arte, CSO Resound, and ASO Media labels. Her most recent recording, *An Homage to Victoria de los Angeles*, was released in 2022 on Urtext. Ms. Rivera serves on the vocal faculty at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. www.jessicarivera.com

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Jessica Rivera

Critical Acclaim



“Vocally luminous”

The New York Times

“There’s a challenge in trying to describe her voice. It’s the richness and the warmth and the depth just in the sound itself that’s so mesmerizing. But it’s not just the quality of the voice, it’s also her sensitivity and intention. It’s her use of text, the way she connects with language. And her very refined sophisticated understanding of how things are unfolding musically, so it’s this marvelous combination of heart, mind and vocal cords that’s just incomparable. There’s something special about what she does that only she can do.”

Robert Spano

“Jessica Rivera was outstanding. She has a voice of almost miraculous evenness and control, with the most attractive, elegant colour and flawless production through every note of her range. Combine this with sensitive, intelligent, urgently communicative musicality, and this is a singer I would happily listen to in any repertoire.”

Artsfile

“The vocal lines took on a hallucinatory power as sung by the silvery soprano Jessica Rivera.”

Chicago Tribune

“Jessica Rivera created an intimacy unparalleled by anything else on the program. With great placement of each note, her beautiful tone resonated without being too powerful. She presented a maternal quality of reassurance in both sound and gentle gestures.”

KCMetropolis

“In a string of brilliant appearances with the San Francisco and, most recently, Berkeley Symphony orchestras, soprano Jessica Rivera has established herself as a singer of uncommon vocal luster and musical intelligence.”

San Francisco Classical Voice

“Her soprano soared ... A young singer who has worked closely with Upshaw, she now owns Górecki’s Third.”

Los Angeles Times

“Hers was a voice of ravishing fullness.”

Cleveland Plain Dealer

“The vocal highlights of the evening came from soloist Jessica Rivera, who brought Malinche to life. A radiant presence on stage, Rivera’s soprano projected effortlessly and with tonal variety—from a sensitively sung ‘Song of Malinche’ to a howl in the Rex Tremendae. Rivera’s committed and imaginative performance was a large part of the success of this new work.”

Texas Classical Review

“[John Adams] gives silvery singing to Ms. Rivera, who delivers on the gift.”

The New York Times

“Rivera sailed a slow, high, sustained melody over the orchestra like a reassuring beam of light in an ominous sky.”

Chicago Classical Review

“Vocally, the evening's star was soprano Jessica Rivera, who sang Kumudha with a stunning blend of tonal warmth, emotional depth and precision.”

San Francisco Chronicle

“Rivera's great asset is her combination of a plush, throaty timbre and the sort of laser-like technical precision that usually only comes with a thinner and more silvery sound ... Rivera's singing was crystalline and rounded throughout.”

San Francisco Chronicle

“Jessica Rivera struck an angelic presence to the eye and ear, her voice floating over the strings’ spare and mournful waves.”

Boston Classical Review

“Rivera, who has become Spano’s ‘go to’ soprano, is a joy to watch, her beatific gaze reinforcing the gentle, unforced sound that projects so wonderfully across the hall.”

ARTS ATL

Features

May 30, 2017

Cincinnati Opera's Jessica Rivera: From 'Valley Girl' to the Miami Valley

By Thom Mariner



It's nearly impossible to include "diva" and Jessica Rivera in the same sentence. The 42-year-old soprano has established herself as an international opera star. She has worked with the finest conductors and stage directors in the world, receiving rave reviews.

She has premiered several compositions, some written just for her by – as she calls them – "the Mozarts and Puccinis of our time." She has won a Grammy Award. She will play Musetta in Cincinnati Opera's upcoming performance of "La Bohème."

So what is she doing living in Middletown, Ohio? Driving herself to an interview? In a minivan? What kind of opera diva is she? It turns out, she's actually more of an un-diva. Rivera makes her third visit to Cincinnati Opera this summer. In 2009, she performed in "Ainadamar," by Osvaldo Golijov, and returned two years

later for "A Flowering Tree," by John Adams. This year, she treads more traditional ground in Giacomo Puccini's "La Bohème," one of the most beloved operas of all time.

And what brought Rivera to live in Middletown?

"Love," she said.

In 2011, Rivera came to Cincinnati to perform in John Adams' "A Flowering Tree." A friend encouraged her to connect with a man the friend knew who had been widowed 18 months earlier. Rivera reached out. They had dinner in Mariemont, which turned into dessert at Graeter's, then coffee at Starbucks. "We talked for six hours straight. ... I did not expect that!" she said.

They "just hung out" for the next week or so, but it became apparent to both that some form of chemical reaction was happening. By the end of that second week, he – his name is Barry Shafer – said, "I know what this is. I had it for 17 years and thought I'd never experience it again." To which she replied, "Well, I've never had it, but I think this is pretty much IT!"

A door had opened. She walked through. They married three months and two days from the day they met.

The challenge was deciding who would move where. She had begun remodeling her grandparents' house in the San Fernando Valley north of Los Angeles. Barry had been in Middletown many



years, with strong church ties and a home of his own. The thought of trying to maintain both residences, in addition to all her travel “was just too much,” she said. Middletown won out.

The first three years she questioned her move. It was more of an adjustment than she had anticipated.

Being a self-described “Valley Girl,” Rivera’s sense of community had been centered around “the mall.”

“It was where I had my first job,” she said. “It was where my friends gathered. It was where community happened.” In Middletown, no such mall existed. She had to redefine her sense of community. Eventually, a combination of active church involvement, neighborhood friends and small-town living “locked me in,” as she described it, to Middletown. While it took some time, “it was great to find a place where it felt like home, and that is very alive.”

She has even begun to teach voice lessons within the community.

Rivera began taking voice lessons herself at age 9. At 14, when she saw Jeanette MacDonald portray an opera singer in an old movie, Rivera instantly knew that’s what she wanted to become.

After high school, she attended Pepperdine University on a music scholarship. Rivera captured the attention of arts patron Flora Thornton,

who opened a significant career door by funding graduate studies at the University of Southern California.

Soon after USC, while a member of the Los Angeles Opera Chorus, Rivera received her first big break. While she was covering the role of Susanna in Mozart’s “Marriage of Figaro,” the lead soprano was called to Spain for her mother’s funeral – during the first dress rehearsal.

Rivera took over, finished that rehearsal, then completed the run of performances. Within a few days, having heard rave reviews, company director Plácido Domingo (perhaps you’ve heard of him?) offered her a three-year contract as resident artist. Another door opening ...

Coincidentally, her last role there happened to be Musetta in “La Bohème,” her only performance of the part until now.

Soon after her debut with LA Opera, the “new music” door opened, as she became acquainted with Osvaldo Golijov, composer-in-residence with the LA Philharmonic. She performed some of his music and later was invited to Santa Fe Opera in the summer of 2005 to sing in the premiere of the revised version of Golijov’s opera, “Ainadamar” (which brought her to Cincinnati for the first time in 2009). While in Santa Fe, she became close with soprano Dawn Upshaw and stage director Peter Sellars, who later connected her with composer John Adams.

These relationships and the resulting opportunities would shape her career as a performer of new works.

Adams wrote his opera, “A Flowering Tree,” with Rivera in mind. He asked her to perform the role of Kitty Oppenheimer (wife of physicist Robert Oppenheimer) in his “Dr. Atomic” at Chicago’s Lyric Opera, and then to portray Pat Nixon in “Nixon in China” at The BBC Proms. She later sang more music of Golijov, his groundbreaking “St. Mark Passion.” In just the past few weeks, she sang the premiere of Gabriela Frank’s “Conquest Requiem” with the Houston Symphony, as well as John

Harbison's "Requiem" (2002) with the Nashville Symphony. After "Bohème," she'll perform as part of Roberto Sierra's "Missa Latina" (2006) in Chicago.

Contemporary music is her realm.

She feels new music chose her, however; she just "...walked through the open doors." But working in uncharted waters really helped her grow as an artist. "To not have to worry about the practices and the standards of the past," she said, "gave me incredible freedom."

Marcus Küchle, director of artistic operations at Cincinnati Opera, believes Rivera – along with her close friend, mezzo soprano Kelley O'Connor – has led what he calls a "dramatic shift" in the path young singers can take to establish their careers. "They have been the first really visible exponents of careers that were made entirely on new music, by affiliations with composers," Küchle said. "They did this without going through the usual 'tour' of singing smaller roles in bigger companies, to bigger roles in smaller companies, then finally singing larger roles in big companies. (Rivera) totally circumvented all of that because of her huge success (within new music).

"This goes along with the resurgence of this real marketplace for new music in North America," he said. "And that's the best sign, to me, that the opera art form is healthy."

Singers who specialize in contemporary music often are known more for the accuracy of their voices than their beauty. Yet while Rivera is often praised for her "laser-like technical precision" (San Francisco Chronicle), it is the beauty of her voice that is mentioned time and time again by critics: "luminous" (New York Times), "voluptuous" (Financial Times), "gleaming" (Boston Globe), "rapturous" (Los Angeles Times), "radiant" (Fort Worth Star Telegram), "delectable"

(New Zealand Herald), just to mention a few.

With two young children (Reade, approaching 3, and Rachel, just 2), Rivera is happy to do more concert work than opera right now, being away for a few days rather than a few weeks.

While we were talking, she proudly greeted a man she introduced as the best friend of the father of one of her students, a 19-year-old tenor. She seems to love being part of this close-knit community and recently joined the board working to restore Middletown's shuttered Sorg Opera House, hoping to add her professional perspective. She is happy to come back to "La Bohème" now, 13 years later, more mature as a singer, with more "life experience," as a mother, and as a fledgling voice teacher. As Musetta, she will play a vain, flirtatious, sometimes bombastic woman who happens to be a singer, but who also possesses a big heart. Only the last two characteristics apply to Rivera, and that's what most attracts her to this role.

"Musetta is so NOT my personality," she said, with a laugh. "That's the fun. People who know me may be very surprised!"

Cincinnati Opera artistic director Evans Mirageas described Rivera as "serene" and "centered."

"One of the reasons I love engaging Jessica, beyond her artistry," he added, "is that other singers gravitate to her – almost like a mom. Jessica is still a 'young singer,' so to speak, but she exudes a kind of warmth and inclusiveness."

"I fell in love with 'Bohème' thanks to 'Moonstruck,'" Rivera recalled, the 1987 movie during which Nicolas Cage and Cher attend a performance at the Met. "It's my favorite opera. I'm a sucker for a love story."

Jessica Rivera

TheAtlanta
Journal-
Constitution
ajc.com

June 22, 2017

ASO music director releases recording of his own music

By Andrew Alexander



Some musicians love to compose new music. For better or worse, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Music Director Robert Spano says he's not that sort of musician.

"I always find it really daunting and challenging and nauseating," he says of the composing process. "I think it's because, as a performer, every moment you look to the next thing. You just have to keep putting it out there, and you can't second-guess yourself. When you're composing, it's the opposite. Everything you do is subject to scrutiny

and examination ... I find that process very painful."

Nonetheless, the conductor, best known to Atlantans for his work behind the podium, has just released a recording of his own music on the orchestra's label, ASO Media. The recording encompasses two of Spano's piano works that he performs himself: "Hölderlin-Lieder," settings of three poems by early Romantic German poet Friedrich Hölderlin recorded with soprano Jessica Rivera performing the text, and "Sonata: Four Elements," a



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piano work in four movements based on the symbolic elements of the ancient Greeks: earth, air, water and fire.

Composing may not always be the most pleasant process, Spano says, but getting the music in his mind down onto paper is crucial. "There's a sense that there's something there you want to capture," he says. "There's something in the air that's asking to be born, and you want to be sure that it's cared for in its most pristine and pure state. As you whittle away and work and change it, you get closer and closer to the sense of 'That's it, that's it!'" in the early 1990s when he was teaching at Oberlin. "I was just enraptured," he says of his first encounter with the work, which he happened upon in a bilingual translation in a bookstore. "It's not just the beauty of the poetic language, it's his sublime ideas. ... That history of philosophy intersecting with poetry is especially beautiful to me."

He says that he began setting a few poems to music back then, but other responsibilities forced him to put the project aside. It wasn't until the recent past he thought to pick it back up again. In 2012, a residency at the Hermitage Artist Retreat in the Sarasota, Fla., area gave him the rare opportunity to devote significant time to focus on composing.

"I intended to write the piano music that's on the CD," he says. "The day I was going to leave, those two songs were sitting on the piano. I thought, 'Those would be really good for Jessica Rivera. I should really finish what I started.' I didn't tell her about the idea then. I just thought, 'I'll take it with me, maybe on the side I'll do some fooling around with this really old material.'"

The songs turned out to be a preoccupation during his residency, and with Rivera in mind as his muse, he was able to complete the series of songs.

"There's a challenge in trying to describe her voice," he says of the soprano, who has performed frequently with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. "It's the richness and the warmth and the depth just in the sound itself that's so mesmerizing. But it's not just the quality of the voice, it's also her sensitivity and intention. It's her use of text, the way she connects with language. And her very refined sophisticated understanding of how things are unfolding musically, so it's this marvelous combination of heart, mind and vocal cords that's just incomparable. There's something special about what she does that only she can do. I thought of her singing those songs. I knew I just had to write more."

Spano and Rivera recorded the songs in the studio with longtime ASO Media producer Elaine Martone in the booth. Spano also recorded his solo work "Sonata: Four Elements," a meditation on the elements and their symbolic meaning.

"Jung was very much on my mind," he says. "No one element in this larger metaphysical sense is easy to pin down. They're all multivalent, as any symbol is. ... Certain physical aspects were also very much on my mind at different times. I would think of shafts of light on the water, or the way the waves rolled or the gurgling sounds that water makes, or the kind of refraction that crystals have." Overall, the project was so long in gestation and creation Spano says he's still in disbelief the project is now complete. "I'm still rubbing my eyes," he says. "It's the result of things that came out of such different parts of my life and different places. When it's finally done, it's not even quite believable."

As for what's ahead now that the recording is a reality, Spano says he's working on setting some poems by German poet Rainer Maria Rilke for mezzo-soprano Kelley O'Connor, and he's also creating a violin sonata

specifically for ASO Concertmaster David Coucheron based on an infamously challenging Baroque piece called the “Devil’s Trill.”

“It is a phoenix-like experience,” Spano says of the recent path of the orchestra, which managed to survive a difficult labor battle marked by a devastating lockout in 2014. “Even though it’s been a couple years now, it’s a coming out of the ashes. We have a new executive director, and soon we’ll have a new

board chair, a new head of the Woodruff Arts Center. And there’s the incredible excitement with the influx of new musicians. In recent years — not all of it due to the strife, some of it has been natural attrition — there have been a lot of openings to fill. ... There’s this whirlwind of activity. We have these new faces and new talents and new sounds. This is a whirlwind of change at every level of the organization. That’s exhilarating. Scary and exhilarating.”

June 7, 2017

What two opera leading ladies did for love

By Janelle Gelfand



Our bohemian friends are sharing a bottle of wine at a sidewalk table at Café Momus in Paris. The flirtatious Musetta is making her lover, Marcello, extremely jealous. Soon, her male admirers hoist her to a perch to sing her famous aria known as “Musetta’s Waltz.”

While she sings, the lovely but consumptive Mimi murmurs to her lover, Rodolfo.

“Mimi is saying, ‘I know this beautiful woman. I know what she’s after. I know she’s in love with Marcello. I know what love is,’ ” said soprano Nicole Cabell, singing the role of Mimi in Cincinnati Opera’s “La Bohème.”

“La Bohème” opens the season on June 15 in Procter & Gamble Hall at the Aronoff Center.

Just 10 days before opening night, the cast of “La Bohème” was rehearsing Act II to piano accompaniment in Fifth Third Theater at the Aronoff Center. The bustle of Café Momus and the joie de vivre of its patrons was evident, even

though they were not yet in costume and only singing at half strength.

The story about young lovers in Paris resonates, believes Jessica Rivera, who is singing Musetta, because it is about real people who experience real things: Poverty, love and tragedy.

“These people are people that you know, that you’ve lived with,” Rivera said. “You have a friend like Musetta. You’ve known someone like Mimi.”

Rivera and Cabell chatted about their characters over lunch, which was wolfed down in a dressing room before each had to dash away for costume fittings and other duties. Although both sopranos hail from Ventura County in Southern California, their paths had never crossed until they met in Cincinnati last year.

Mimi and Musetta are strong women, each in her own way, they agreed.

Mimi, an impoverished and sickly seamstress who eventually dies in Act IV, is the most vulnerable character. But she’s not naïve, Cabell said.

“She’s vulnerable in the way that, if she loves somebody, she lets them in and she’s completely herself. The vulnerability comes from letting those walls down,” Cabell said. “Her strength is in her ability to survive and be a self-sufficient woman for periods of time.”

The glamorous, flashy Musetta offers a stark contrast. But Rivera, who last sang the role about 13 years ago, is careful not to make her a caricature.

“In Act II, she is very much flamboyant, wanting all of the attention. But later, she would give up all of this because she knows it’s not as important,” Rivera said. “What’s important is to have that deep connection with somebody. If I do it right, then you’ll see that, while she is the life of the party, she really has a heart of gold.”

Does she see any of her own personality in Musetta? She laughed.

“Oh, I’m discovering there might be a little more than I thought,” she said.

“Ever since I was a child, I wanted to be a performer. ... I don’t think I’m quite the exhibitionist that (Musetta) is. But I definitely have that sort of desire to perform and to really entertain.”

Jessica Rivera



July 20, 2016

First-ever virtual reality concert coming to Prospect Park

By Andrew Frisicano



You'll be able to see the stars—light pollution be damned—at Prospect Park on Saturday, August 6th. That's when *The Hubble Cantata*, a virtual reality film paired with live music, debuts as part of BRIC Celebrate Brooklyn! Festival. For the music, a 30-piece ensemble and a 100-person choir (as well as Met soprano Jessica Rivera and baritone Nathan Gunn) perform composer Paola Prestini's music with words by librettist Royce Vavrek. For the visuals, directed by filmmaker Eliza McNitt, all 6,000 attendees will be given a cardboard VR headset, which they can use with their phones, to take an immersive look at the Hubble Telescope's images of the Orion Nebula (you'll also need to download a free app before you go). It'll be the first event to combine a VR space show and a live-music experience for free, organizers say. To sweeten the deal even further, captivating percussion trio TIGUE opens.

The app will be available post-premiere for anyone who'd like to take a look at the far reaches of the universe but can't make it to the show—but really, Prospect Park, a.k.a. Brooklyn's backyard, seems like the ideal venue for this type of thing. You can support the project's post-premiere release at Kickstarter.com.



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Jessica Rivera

URBAN MILWAUKEE

October 7, 2014

The Joys of Performing a Requiem

World class soprano Jessica Rivera, guest soloist with MSO in Brahms' "Requiem," loves the music.

Jessica Rivera has performed professionally for almost 20 years – she joined the L.A. Opera Chorus right out of college – but this weekend marks her first time performing Brahms' "Requiem." She will perform as a guest soloist with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra and Chorus.

"A German Requiem," the full name of the piece, is considered one of the composer's greatest works. Brahms began composition on the requiem in 1865 and premiered it four years later. Said to be inspired by the death of his mother, its text expresses a theme of counsel and comfort to those who are suffering.

Singers can sometimes feel pressure to interpret the sorrow Brahms felt for his mother's loss in a credible way to audiences. Rivera says she draws on personal experiences to fully capture the work's grand themes. But that can be tricky, she adds.

"When (a piece) does become personal to you, (there's) obviously a lot of emotion involved, and you want to be able to give it that emotion without making you emotional during your performance," Rivera explains. "Because it comes from a very personal place for him, it makes it very poignant for me to be able to interpret it."

Brahms' intent was to create a very accessible work influenced by Martin

Luther's movement to implement German liturgies instead of Latin ones. Brahms chose to set his requiem's text in the vernacular German, keeping in mind Luther's push to make sacred texts accessible to average citizens.

Of course, that works differently for an English-speaking audience.

"German may not be (the audience's) native language," Rivera says, " (but) I think it's something worthwhile to share with them because it will give them an insight into what it means to take hold of something musically from a personal standpoint and make it your own."

The text is based on passages from the Holy Scripture, drawing from the Beatitudes, psalms and gospels. Rivera has a solid understanding of the source material from her Christian upbringing.

"I very much identify with that. I grew up in the church, and so I'm quite familiar with that, having gone to Sunday school and studied the Bible. It brings me great peace to actually sing about something that is very true for me personally."

Beyond the text, meanwhile, is the masterful music Brahms created for his requiem, which can have a powerful impact on audiences of all religious persuasions.

The globe-trotting Rivera has performed with top orchestras nationally and internationally, in Berlin, Spain, Vienna

and New Zealand. Based in California, she has worked with baritone Nmon Ford, another guest soloist in the Brahms work, in performances of the opera *Carmen* and in Haydn's "Creation" at the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles.

Both have collaborated with conductor Robert Spano throughout their careers. Last year, Rivera recorded some of his original compositions and completed a national duet recital tour with him. She also makes a point to see him perform at least once a year with the Atlanta Symphony.

That close history with other musicians, according to Rivera, has a "beautiful effect" on any collaboration.

"That's one of the benefits of the job we have," she says. "We get to reconnect with people that we enjoy performing

with from time to time, and that's certainly the case with this experience."

Connections with MSO music director Edo de Waart also ease any anxiety about her debut with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, knowing his successful history with the organization.

"It'll be nice to work within an orchestra that I know is a wonderful group of musicians because Edo would accept no less," Rivera says.

Ultimately, she sees the Brahms work as something special for audiences. "To be able to give it as a gift to the people who are experiencing (loss) in the audience and help them maybe deal with whatever loss means to them," she says, "it's a very comforting thought when you lose somebody."

Jessica Rivera



January 26, 2014

Jessica Rivera on *Ainadamar*

By Alexander Bisley

The American soprano introduces us to Osvaldo Golijov's powerful opera ahead of its one-off New Zealand Festival performance.

"THE VOCAL LINES took on a hallucinatory power," the *Chicago Tribune* rhapsodised "the silvery soprano Jessica Rivera" for one *Ainadamar* performance.

Interviewing Rivera via phone from a Boston hotel, her vocal luminosity is clear. The empathetic opera star gives discerning responses on Lorca, artistic transcendence, and anti-L.A. snobbery.

* * *

ALEXANDER BISLEY: Listening to composer Oscar Golijov's commentary on *Ainadamar*'s Atlanta Symphony recording, there's the idea of the Fountain of Tears being a place for Christians and Muslims and Jews coexisting, which is powerful.

JESSICA RIVERA: Very powerful. Kelly O'Connor, who will sing Lorca in New Zealand, she and I made a pilgrimage to that fountain, *la Fuente de lagrimas*, a little bit North of Granada. It's not very easy to find and it takes asking a few people very specific questions about this place. Once you get there you realise that you're on holy grounds, that people had lost their lives there for the cause of peace, for the perpetuation of peace, which is such an interesting dichotomy.

AB: Lorca was a life-altering inspiration for 15-year-old Leonard Cohen. How has Lorca influenced or inspired you?

JR: I think Lorca has inspired me to think outside of the box. He has a very innocent and childlike quality that sometimes when we grow up we lose because we become very involved in the rudimentary tasks of life. And I think Lorca has inspired me to remember that imagination we possess as children, and the playfulness. I think of a couple of his poems that recall his own childhood attribute certain colours and certain personality to objects that we would never put together in our adult thinking minds. But he has a way of capturing the innocence and the truth and the beauty of life. I think that is something I've always been inspired by and interested in. So he helps me remember to not forgo having an imagination and the creativity, to be who you are, and not worry about what other people have to say about that, but truly inhabit your own being.

AB: That's something you hope people would take away from seeing your performance of *Ainadamar*?

JR: Absolutely. I would hope so. One of the special things about my own specific journey with *Ainadamar* is that I started singing in the student role of Nuria, and it came at a point in my life when I had lost my very first voice teacher about a year before we did the production in Santa Fe. I was the student; Dawn

Upshaw was playing Margarita. It was a cathartic experience for me because I went through the loss of my mentor on stage. Margarita dies and passes the baton onto Nuria, so it was a very special experience. Then when I assumed the role of Margarita, it was with a special sort of responsibility to then become the artist that the teacher unleashed in me. It is my hope that people encounter this opera experience within the course of the opera, but also within the course of their own selves, and that they're able to find their own inner artist and explore, no matter what their profession, the human being they were created to be.

AB: Lorca's poem 'King of Harlem' rhapsodises his experience in Harlem: "Oh, Harlem! Oh, Harlem! Oh, Harlem!" New York in 1929 was a wonderful experience for him that changed his idea of poetry, the theatre, and the social role of the artist. Is Lorca's experience of Harlem explored in *Ainadamar*?

JR: Not specifically, no. But I think that certainly a lot of his experiences abroad, and definitely in New York, shaped who he was as an artist and a playwright, and certainly informed much of what he did post that time. Mostly the references are to his childhood. Especially the big area that happens in the beginning where he talks about seeing the statue of Margarita Xirgu when he was a small child out from the window, and seeing the moonlight on her and how it inspired him as a young boy. That's a very poignant moment in the opera because it recalls Lorca's first meeting with Margarita Xirgu, and she's very excited about the possibility of doing a politically charged drama about this heroine and Mariana Pineda. And he said, "No, it wasn't the political things that inspired me. It was the fact that I saw her statue and she called to me and she inspired beauty and love and the things that are most important in life." So it's a very powerful moment in the opera between Lorca and Margarita Xirgu.

AB: He first met her in a bar in Madrid and they drank whisky?

JR: Yes, exactly. It's a very fun scene when they first meet because Margarita is sort of telling the story in flashbacks to her young student Nuria, and she's able to recall the first meeting and how inspiring that was for her to actually meet this young man who was rather slight and so child-like and yet with an incredible imagination and someone who thought very much outside of the box, which I think was very intriguing to Margarita.

AB: I was talking to a leading Australian soprano about *Madame Butterfly* and she said—of being a professional opera singer—"It never stops being tough but then the flip side is there are moments of shared joy that you hang out for, it's like heroin." You find that it can be a tough job but it's worth it?

JR: Yes, absolutely. I've never done heroin but I definitely understand her reference to the high that you can get to when you're performing because it is a difficult life. There are a lot of sacrifices made. You spend at least ten months out of the year away from home. For a long time I was single, so that makes it easier, but if you do have a family then that means that you sacrifice time away from them and the people that you love, to go around the world and share with other people the music that is part of who you are. But that is very true what that soprano said. There are moments that you cannot even describe in words. They are so powerful and so transcendent that when you experience them, you think, "the sacrifice is worth it." Because it's a very special thing that we are truly honoured to participate in, and that we can do it on such a high level with other artists who are so gifted and inspiring.

AB: Tell me about one of those moments?

JR: One of my favourite pieces is the John Adams oratorio called 'El Nino', which is the nativity oratorio about the Christ child. I remember it was a very difficult score to learn, but I live for a moment in that piece where the chorus sings with all their might, "And He will fill this house with glory,"

and every time it's like God enters the room.

All the hair on the back of my neck stands up and I just imagine... it gives me a glimpse of what being in the presence of God truly is like. To be able to experience those kinds of moments—we have music, and we can sing and play instruments, and some brilliant composer has come up with this way to write it down and express it—there's nothing like it in the world. And as wonderful as it is to hear it on recordings, to be able to experience it in a live performance is life-altering. Yeah, it's life-altering [*laughs gently*].

AB: Having been privileged to see him in Berlin at the Philharmonie, there is a wonderful emotionally expressive quality to Simon Rattle's conducting, isn't there?

JR: Amazing. If I had to make up a top five list of experiences in my life that changed me as an artist, that would be one of them. Performing with him John Adams's *A Flowering Tree* was very special.

AB: The acoustics there are incredible.

JR: Yes, they are. I've seen a lot of really wonderful places but there's something quite unique about the acoustical atmosphere of that building.

AB: I saw him conduct a piece of music I wasn't familiar with, a requiem Berio wrote for his wife. I was in tears.

JR: I believe that. It has that effect on people.

AB: I was at the Met in New York, which is beautiful and beguiling as well, watching *The Nose*. You've performed there too, haven't you?

JR: I have. Well, I was one of the national semi-finalists in their competition, the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions. That was the one performance I've actually had on the stage. But I have understudied there a couple of times, first in *Doctor Atomic* then in *Nixon in China*. It's an amazing thing, the industrial operatic complex the Metropolitan Opera is, because to put on the lavish productions that they do within the course of their season, and to do them back-to-back...

it's a pretty impressive undertaking. I'm grateful that people are committed to it the way they are because it's a phenomenon to witness, and yet I think that people who come for the artistic experience don't realise all of the nuts and bolts that go in to making it work, but that's the beauty of the Met.

AB: Do you have a favourite filmic opera moment you enjoy? Say, for example, in Woody Allen's *Hannah and Her Sisters*.

JR: I think one of my favourites is *Moonstruck*. With Cher and Nicholas Cage, because out of all the opera that I've ever experienced, I still cry when I see *La Boheme*. I don't know whether that's the music or the story or the combination of both, but that is the power of the drama of opera. I think that's probably my favourite reference because you get to experience through these characters what opera is capable of in moving people and inspiring them and touching them. And that's why I became an international opera singer, so that I could be part of that.

AB: The artistic idea in *La Boheme* is romantic.

JR: Yes, exactly. There's a lot of beauty in that. I just adore it [*Laughs*].

AB: What's musically special about *Ainadamar* composer Osvaldo Golijov?

JR: He has a gift for writing modern music that is capable of touching people in that same way that Puccini was able to do through *La Boheme*. It's the combination, specifically for Osvaldo, of his Latin upbringing and the fact that he uses those influences of the Latin rhythms and also from his Jewish heritage. There's a lot of influence there as well upon melody, and the way he's able to use the combination of the melody, the harmony, and the rhythm to communicate a great depth of the story that he's trying to tell. That's a very special gift. He's a very eclectic composer, musically speaking, and I think it's amazing that he is able to combine all of the influences that he's had to draw out something that inspires and touches people.

AB: Los Angeles receives some criticism, but you have a lot of enthusiasm for L.A.?

JR: Oh, absolutely. L.A. gets a bad rap as far as the arts and the classical music scene are concerned because it is obviously very Hollywood and the entertainment industry is the driving force of Los Angeles. However, there are many cultural institutions: the L.A. Philharmonic, of course; the L.A. Opera; there's beautiful museums in Norton Simon and Pasadena, MOMA, MOCA, all these wonderful museums. The musical scene may not seem as culturally outstanding as other major cities in the world and in the United States, but I think that's a huge misconception. There is a wonderful music scene in Los Angeles, classical music scene that is. I remember as a teenager when I was in high school, having the opportunity to go down to L.A. Opera and see an opera and that changed my life. There's an incredibly vibrant scene, it just doesn't get the attention sometimes that other orchestras and opera companies in other cities do because it's overshadowed by the Hollywood effect.

AB: And anti-Hollywood snobbery!

JR: Yes, exactly [*laughs gently*]. You know, I think we can all coexist and appreciate each other's talents. I don't think it has to be one or the other. And I think that is one of the unique things about Los Angeles is that you have incredible music forces both from a traditional classical sense and from the Hollywood filmmaking world. I think the people who are savvy about it can actually be involved in both. I've certainly seen that.

AB: The L.A. Philharmonic Concert Hall is stunning.

JR: Yes, it's an architectural marvel and it's quite beautiful. Of course the summer home of the Philharmonic is also a landmark, the Hollywood Bowl.

AB: A beautiful backdrop behind the venue.

JR: Yeah, it's gorgeous. I'm sure it's not so much of a secret. I think it's unexpected for people who have certain expectations of Los Angeles being all glitz and glamour of Hollywood, and yet you have this jewel of a concert space in this gorgeous outdoor venue. It's a very special place. I've been to a couple of Easter services at the Hollywood Bowl because the church that I attended when I lived there had the opportunity to have their Easter services at the Bowl, which is incredible.

AB: As a performer your faith is important to you?

JR: Absolutely. I grew up in the Protestant Church and it's been a very important force in my life. It's given me a lot of grounding in a business that can—I hate to say this because it's sad—sometimes be superficial. But it's helped me remember what's most important—that every individual has been given special gifts and that they have the ability to create and inspire and bless. That has certainly been one of my most important purposes, to be able to share what I have learnt and what I have been given and be able to inspire and bless other people. It might sound kind of simple, but that is my hope. I'm grateful that I have had opportunities through pieces like *Ainadamar*... to be able to share with audiences around the world the things that speak to me and are important to me on a fundamental level. ■

Jessica Rivera



February 9, 2010

Jessica Rivera: Singing From the Soul

By Jason Victor Serinus

Soprano Jessica Rivera first made her mark internationally when she created the character Kumudha in Peter Sellars' production of John Adams' opera *A Flowering Tree*. After repeating the role in the San Francisco Symphony's Bay Area premiere, her success helped land her the role of Kitty Oppenheimer in the European debut of Sellars' production of Adams' *Doctor Atomic*. She has since sung the part with Lyric Opera of Chicago and the Metropolitan Opera.

Rivera, who is also associated with several major works by Osvaldo Golijov, also sang Anastasia in the premiere of Deborah Drattell's *Nicholas and Alexandra* at the Los Angeles Opera, where she was a artist in residence. Her calendar for 2010 includes a number of prestigious engagements as soloist in recital and with orchestras, two of which are in the Bay Area.

On Feb. 11, Rivera joins the Berkeley Symphony under Music Director Joana Carneiro for Esa-Pekka Salonen's *Five Images After Sappho*. She returns to Berkeley on April 1 to perform Samuel Barber's beloved *Knoxville, Summer of 1915*.

You live in the Los Angeles area?

Yes. I was born and raised in the San Fernando Valley, so that technically makes me a Valley Girl. I didn't go far away for my education, because who would want to go far away from

beautiful Southern California? So I earned a bachelor's at Pepperdine, and my master's at the USC School of Music shortly before it was christened the Thornton School.

Do you come from a musical background?

Not a professional one. My mother studied piano when she was a girl, and my father's sister is a professional organist who earned her degree from Peabody in Baltimore. She was actually the person who recognized my talent when I was 2 or 3. She was visiting, and said to my family, "You know, this girl can actually sing in key!" They started me with piano lessons when I was about 5. I started voice lessons when I was about 9.

At what point in your career did you feel that you had the potential to become a leading soprano?

When I went to Santa Fe, one of the best pieces of advice I got was that "slow and steady wins the race." It's a great jewel of wisdom that I still hold onto to this day. There are a lot of people who make their mark real early, but people like Christine Brewer and Ben Heppner did the family thing first, *then* had their big success. I think a good, steady course is always the best one.

I had the great fortune to be in the right place at the right time and to be prepared to step in as an understudy at Los Angeles Opera. After Santa Fe, I was

singing in the chorus at L.A. Opera and working at my alma mater in an arts facilitator position for education programs. I was covering Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro*. With literally a moment's notice, I had to go on in the final dress rehearsal period.

That was the longest audition of my life, and people sat up and took notice. Three days later, I was in Plácido Domingo's office joining the Resident Artists program, studying, covering, and performing. My time there opened a lot of doors for me, specifically at the L.A. Philharmonic and to Osvaldo Golijov.

Joyce DiDonato told me that when she first entered the program at Santa Fe, her teacher interrupted her a few minutes into her first lesson to tell her that her voice wouldn't last, unless she changed her technique.

Right. I had a similar experience with my teacher, Nina Hinson. I actually met her when she was visiting Santa Fe, and a colleague of mine who had studied with her and really progressed came into the dressing room and said, "Nina's here. When do you want a lesson?"

She didn't give me a way out of it, because she knew Nina could help. Later that summer, when I was in my first lesson with Nina, she said, "You know, we can fix what's wrong with your voice. You need to heal your spirit." And I thought, "OK, I think this lady knows what she's talking about."

Voices can be built. But as artists, we're all sensitive souls. Sure, young artists are probably more sensitive than most because they're being bombarded by so many different opinions, and they don't have the experience and perspective to know within themselves what is the right answer for them.

What in your spirit did you have to heal?

I went into Santa Fe knowing who I was as a singer and as a person, and I was met with a lot of ideas and opinions. I realized that I was no longer a whale in a puddle, but rather a tadpole in a vast ocean of very talented singers. It really threw me, because I had to redefine how

I fit in this new world. As we're always evolving and growing as artists and people, it was a matter of understanding that I was still who I was, but we were going to make a better version of me.

On your recordings, I've been struck by your soulful quality. You have the ability to tap into a common well of emotion that speaks universally. Did this come from something that happened to you as a child, such as your parents' divorce?

Thank you for this huge compliment.

For me, singing is an extension of my soul. That's why it was so poignant when my teacher, Nina, said I had to heal my spirit.

I do feel like I have a deep soul, in that I was raised in the Presbyterian Church and I have a deep connection to God. I've always felt that, since I was a young child. My singing is sort of like me allowing myself to be a vessel, and to channel that love and communicate what I have experienced in my relationship with God. So, for me, it is a very deep thing.

It's also very tied into my family, including people I haven't actually met. A few years ago, I was on the phone with my dad, who asked me to sing for Uncle Lucho, who lives in the jungle of Tingo María in Peru. After I sang, my uncle was very quiet.

My dad called me later to say he was quiet because he was choked up. He said, "The timbre of her voice is exactly like our mother's." That was my grandmother, who I only met a couple of times when I was a child because she lived in Peru. She died in 1991. But I understand that I'm a lot like her. So I feel my voice is an extension not only of my spirit, but also of my ancestry, genetics, and heritage. They say some of the ways I look are like hers. And she was a deep lover of opera. She played opera and zarzuela and a lot of things in her house. So my voice is an extension of who I am — my family, my experiences in life, and my own very deep faith in life.

Let's jump to Salonen's *Sappho*. What are we hearing?

Having sung a lot of new music, especially the music of John Adams, I know that you have to learn the language of a composer. This is my first time doing any of Esa-Pekka's music, even though I've seen him many times and worked with him once or twice.

I find that he likes to create a certain atmosphere that the singer lives within and around. Some of the lines are actually quite atonal. That tends to be a challenge. But the greater blessing or prize in that challenge is to figure out how to make it tonal or resonant so you can communicate it.

Esa-Pekka's music is inspired by some of the poetry of Sappho. He's made five what he calls "images." The first one he calls "Tell Everyone." It's about someone who is singing for her friends' pleasure. It's really beautiful, with a lot of dissonance that is quite resonant, if that makes any sense.

Number five is "The Wedding." It starts with a declamation. There's a refrain that comes three times that says, "Raise up the rafters high, hurrah for the wedding!" Then there's this conversation between the bride and someone in which she expresses her fears of stepping over the line into marriage. After she's encouraged to enjoy the bridegroom, the music becomes orgasmic. The song talks about how, after the consummation, they were exhausted; it then reflects on the experience.

It's a really big step from this to *Knoxville*, *Summer of 1915*.

Completely. Last night, when I was going through that score, I was trying to figure out how to do certain things. Some of the singers who have done it have perfect pitch, and I do not. So I have to figure out how I'm going to fit things into the texture and harmony.

I'm really excited to be doing these pieces with Joana. When we first met and spoke about all the things we wanted to do, one of the first things on

the list was *Knoxville*. I cannot wait to do it with her in April.

How did you connect with Adams and Golijov?

I first met Osvaldo through the L.A. Phil's Green Umbrella series. I was asked to perform some of his chamber music and excerpts from his *La Pasión según San Marcos*. That was a very powerful performance, and connected the two of us. Osvaldo then asked me to do [his opera] *Ainadamar* as part of the original cast, but it didn't work out until I could join the cast in Santa Fe in 2005 singing Nuria.

Then Osvaldo introduced me to Peter Sellars in Santa Fe. The following summer, Sellars' office called to say that he wanted to meet with me, as he was flying to London. We just missed each other, but two days later, I got a call from John Adams. I knew who he was, because when I was in high school, my whole class went to see *Nixon in China* at L.A. Opera, except that I didn't see it because I was doing a competition the same exact day. But I knew who he was.

It was the most surreal experience to have him on the other end of my cell phone. He told me that Peter had suggested me for a piece he was writing, and he wanted me to come up and sing for him. I said I was on my way to sing *Ainadamar* at Ojai, and then heading to Chicago to sing it at Ravinia. So I worked it out so I could stop in Berkeley to audition on the way to Chicago.

Oh my God, that's an on-the-fly audition if there ever was one!

It was literally on the fly. I flew Burbank to Oakland, and he picked me up at the airport. I still to this day have this voicemail saved saying, "Hi. This is John. I'm at the Oakland Airport. Just come out of the terminal, and I'll be waiting for you. I'll be driving around in circles, which is appropriate for a composer. I look forward to your call."

He picked me up and drove me to his house. He brought a pianist in, and I think I sang Mimi's aria and Susanna's "Deh vieni." Then he said he needed

something in English, so I sang “This Is My Beloved” from *Kismet*. And John gave me one of the most genuine responses I’ve ever received from singing for another person. He just said, “Wow. Wow.”

My darling, did you even have time to warm up?

I’d been singing all weekend. It was crazy. I don’t even know that I was in

great voice that day. I just kept praying that something was going to come out. [Laughs] But I think what he saw and heard, and what you heard, is my soul. Although it’s hard for me, because I’m my worst critic, to say I have a beautiful voice, I think what I’m able to give the world is my soul. That’s what I hope comes through, and that’s what I think he saw that particular day.

Reviews

Jessica Rivera

Shepherd
Est. 1982 E X P R E S S
Milwaukee's Alternative News Source

June 19, 2023

MSO Ends Season with Exaltation

By Brendan Fox

The Milwaukee Symphony's Classics series ended in epic fashion this weekend with a performance of Mahler's 90-minute Symphony No. 2. This is one of the Big Deal Concerts in the classical music world. It's life-affirming music, following a trajectory from darkness to exaltation in its choral finale. Though originally planned for the end of the 2020-21 season, the pandemic forced a change of programming. The years-long wait for Mahler 2 in the new symphony hall further heightened the sense of occasion.

From my seat close to the stage, I could sense the excitement from the musicians too. Lots of smiles as Maestro Ken-David Masur strode out to begin. His conducting in the opening minutes was some of the most intense I'd ever seen from him, producing an explosive reaction from the cellos. Overall, the first movement's 30 minutes came off very well. Good tempos, heartfelt playing, muscular climaxes.

The second movement had all the Viennese charm one could hope for. Cellos shone again here, relishing some of (I think) the greatest lines in symphonic literature. I really heard the struggle between life and death in this performance, with the darker contrasting material bearing down on the quaint country tune.

After the customary pause for the vocal soloists to take their places onstage, the orchestra seemed to lose its groove in

the ensuing movement. The ensemble was disjointed from the outset in this quick triple-meter music and continued to pull apart. It was distracting and a tad disappointing.

The *Urlicht* is a crucial moment in any performance of this symphony, when the text arrives to bring new meaning to the ongoing program. Mezzo-soprano Anna Larsson sang beautifully, but what I remember more is the power of her face. As a vessel for text that speaks of longing for heaven, she did an admirable job conveying the inexpressible. After her last words, she continued to stare upward in reverie.

The finale flew by in a blur of event. Maestro Masur guided the orchestra through many mood shifts and tempo changes with a steady hand. As in the first movement, he conducted with authority, showing thoughtful intent behind his choices. Principal flutist Sonora Slocum gave vivid readings of some key solos. The home stretch was a real treat. Soprano Jessica Rivera offered a sophisticated tone and duetted well with Larsson. As the orchestra and chorus swelled with greater and greater emotion into the climax, it became one of those live moments to remember. Very satisfying indeed.

Mahler 2 always has the potential for catharsis, and the Milwaukee Symphony delivered the goods. Aside from some technical issues in the third movement, this felt like a landmark performance in



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the recent history of the group. It really doesn't get much better than hearing an orchestra and chorus playing/singing

their hearts out, with supertitles showing unabashedly Romantic expressions of cosmic hope.

Jessica Rivera

OPERA WIRE

April 7, 2023

Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center 2023 Review: Voices of the Americas

By Logan Martell

On March 17, 2023, Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center presented its “Voices of the Americas” concert at Alice Tully Hall. The program was a rich assortment from the last century which explored and celebrated music through Latin America and beyond, curated by pianist Michael Stephen Brown and cellist Nicholas Canellakis, joined by percussionist Ian David Rosenbaum, pianist Gilles Vonsattel, and soprano Jessica Rivera.

Opening the concert was Aaron Copland’s “El Salon Mexico” for piano and percussion, arranged by Leonard Bernstein, and said to be influenced by the composer’s visit to a dance hall of the same name in Mexico City. From its snappy, opening chords to the relaxed but expressive themes which were established and reprised with breathtaking affection, this piece wonderfully set the stage for what was to ensue over the rest of the night.

Following this was [Bernstein’s](#) own “Three Meditations from Mass” for cello, piano, and percussion. The languid cantabile of the cello which led the first meditations was wonderfully accented by tapering chords and delicate chimes, whereas the second was a tidal wave which swelled from a gentle pizzicato to a dark and urgent trio of frantic tones and back down again towards a light, murmuring conclusion capped with one final drum beat. The last meditation powerfully expanded these themes as the three wove a dense texture of

expression for their modest number, all building back into the silence it came from.

A Soprano Takes the Stage

The next portion of the program saw [soprano Jessica Rivera](#) take to the stage for a refreshing mix of songs, accompanied by Gilles Vonsattel. The first of her set was Carlos Ginastera’s “Cinco canciones populares argentinas,” which made for a quick and flighty romance of both the “snub-nosed girl” as well as the narrator’s homeland, through Rivera’s lighthearted but present patter. The second, Carlos Chavez’ “North Carolina Blues,” saw Rivera engage in a more extended journey through the imagery laden with sensuality, nature, and danger, all revolving around the metaphor of the night air as human skin.

Returning to Ginastera for “Gato,” from the same cycle, the piano’s running introduction was taken up well by Rivera’s whimsical phrases over the circling prow of the accompaniment.

Riding the energy of the previous number, the opening of Manuel Ponce’s “Estrellita” had a little more strength on the initial fermata as Rivera outlined the starry sky of the text, but subsequent passes of this idea were prepared and delivered with great beauty and gentle admiration. Closing the first half of the program were two famous numbers from Bernstein’s “West Side Story.” The first, “I Feel Pretty,” saw her employ a calm yet bubbly demeanor which

unfolded with much charm through her more operatic rendition. The second, "Somewhere," made for a tender invocation that grew into a soaring prayer which ended the first half on a beautiful and uplifting note.

The Second Half

Opening the second half was Argentine composer Osvaldo Golijov's "Mariel" for cello and marimba. The piece was introduced by Brown, sharing a quote from the composer: "I wrote this piece in memory of my friend Mariel Stubrin. I attempted to capture that short instant before grief, in which one learns of the sudden death of a friend who was full of life: a single moment frozen forever in one's memory, and which reverberates through the piece, among the waves and echoes of the Brazilian music that Mariel loved." The earthy tones which were softly beaten out to create a somber ambience were joined wonderfully by the sorrowful cello phrases as they outlined this pensive, tonal elegy.

The program returned northward, to Brazilian composer Heitor Villa-Lobos' "A mare encheu" from "Guia pratico," and "O Polichinelo" from "A prole do bebe." Both played by Vonsattel, the first

alternated between a beautifully-articulated lullaby and a jaunt through memory lane, whereas the second was a brief flurry of crossed-hands executed with utter dexterity.

Bringing an end to the concert was George Gershwin's "Cuban Overture," for piano, four hands, and percussion. The piece was introduced with the story of its inception, when George Gershwin spent a vacation in Havana and, it is said, a 16-piece band serenaded him outside his hotel at 4 AM, inspiring the rumba which would become this work. The selection represented the completion of the journey through Latin America, and all the influences and meaning drawn therein. What resulted was a marvelous showcase as Brown, Vonsattel, Rosenbaum, and Canellakis laid out the exotic texture with passion and panache, making for an utterly thrilling finale.

Throughout the program was a wonderful sense of not only exploration for some of the contemporary works, but rediscovery for the more famous pieces, with the artists of the Chamber Music Ensemble doing so to splendid effect.

Jessica Rivera



June 14, 2021

Robert Spano and the ASO close 2020-21 season on hopeful note

By Mark Thomas Ketterson



The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra brought its 2020–21 *Behind the Curtain* concert series to a joyful, yet peculiarly poignant conclusion with two pieces that explore the fragility of human existence through the bright, hopeful eyes of children. The event marked the house return of the largest contingent of instrumental forces heard at Symphony Hall since COVID-19 arrived — all in excellent form under Robert Spano, who was making his final appearance as the orchestra's music director. Next season, he'll begin his tenure as music director laureate. The ASO has not yet announced his successor.

Samuel Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* must be one of the most moving works in the American canon. Based on the prose-poem by James Agee (written as a freestanding piece in 1938, though it later became more widely known as the preamble to Agee's Pulitzer Prize-

winning novel, *A Death in the Family*) the work presents a nostalgic description of a hot summer evening by a trusting child. Remembrances of familial love and security morph into musings on mortality and impermanence in a 15-minute narration that grows ever more profound.

As the young unnamed narrator, soprano Jessica Rivera displayed a lovely lyric voice graced by an easy fluidity in the upper register. Rivera's sensitive word-painting was unfussy and intelligently rendered, and she made a lovely thing of the notoriously difficult passage "Now is the night one blue dew," which has brought grief to more than one interpreter. The child's final plea for identity was heartrending. Spano and the ASO wove an aural blanket of lilting, summer ambiance as ingeniously suggested in Barber's score. Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 4 had been announced in a reduced chamber version, but the easing of pandemic restrictions happily opened the door for a performance of the full score. The Fourth is one of the more lightly orchestrated of the composer's symphonies, but we are still talking Mahler here — there are more than 70 players involved. The work premiered in 1901, and as with his earlier symphonies, draws upon melodies first composed as song settings for the collection of German folk poetry *Des*



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Knaben Wunderhorn. One of those earlier songs “Das himmlische Leben” forms the basis for the symphony’s fourth movement, as a soprano soloist describes a child’s vision of heaven.

There is a touching allure in the symphony’s first movement as its ostensibly naïve melodies ripen through an increasingly complex orchestral texture that elevates them into something quite special — rather like nursery music *in excelsis*. Atlanta’s players captured this deceptive simplicity beautifully before moving into the rather darker scherzo in which Death essays a disquieting dance on his fiddle, a mesmerizing interlude delivered by concertmaster David Coucheron on an alternate violin tuned up a step for the purpose.

The thrill of hearing the symphony in full orchestration was abundantly clear as the players coursed through the third movement’s solemn march and mammoth climaxes. Rivera then rejoined the orchestra for the glittering final movement as a child fairly gloats about the glories of heaven compared to all the pain we slog through here on Earth. This tricky movement can become a trifle coy in the wrong hands, but Rivera handled the ingenuous description of juicy grapes and delicious, crisp veggies with a guileless charm that was irresistible.

Spano guided his players through the affective layering of these pieces with precision and insight, most notably in his response to the sweeping emotionalism in the third movement of the Mahler.

The concert was creatively presented for the screen with projections of vintage photographs of turn-of-the-century small-town life in the Barber, while the Mahler brought sepia-toned suggestions of the cosmos, which then burst into vivid color with the final movement’s celestial imaginings. The ASO’s banner media production team got its well-deserved due with a delightful, filmed montage of the various technicians at work, concluding the program.

Film director Hilan Warshaw spoke in a brief interview of what he perceptively termed a “Mahlerian progression” created by the unexpected allowance for a full cadre of performers onstage just as this challenging season reached its finale — an interesting bit of synchronicity. It felt almost mystical, as well, that this of all seasons concluded with music that alludes to the ephemeral nature of the human condition yet does so with such childlike optimism one can’t help but feel that everything is going to be OK. We are still here, and the music is, too.

The concert is available to stream for the next 30 days.

Jessica Rivera

PIONEER PRESS
TwinCities.com

August 3, 2019

A powerful Passion closes Minnesota Orchestra's Latin Sommerfest

By Ron Hubbard

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 CrossSing — 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.

Jessica Rivera

Palm Beach Daily News

March 26, 2019

Soprano offers stellar salute to Spanish star in Palm Beach

By Ken Keaton

Spanish song reigned Sunday at The Society of the Four Arts when soprano Jessica Rivera and pianist Mark Carver presented an “Homage to Victoria de los Angeles,” the great Spanish singer, in works that she championed — indeed, defined — during her illustrious career.

Rivera made no attempt to mimic de los Angeles’s style, which was a wise choice. Her voice is different — bigger and darker than the exquisite sweetness of the older artist. Indeed, she does works including the Strauss “Four Last Songs” and Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. She is a champion of new composers, particularly of women, which is refreshing. And she has an impressive list of concerts with some of the greatest orchestras and conductors today.

And she has the artistry to scale down that voice for the intimacy of songs. She even changes the color of her singing to match the content and mood of the songs — sometimes a deep, mezzo quality; sometimes light and delicate. And Carver matched her with an exquisite sense of coloration and emotional support.

That emotional commitment was apparent from Rivera’s voice, and indeed her presentation; she was obviously affected by the music, and there was a wide range of emotions. Sadly, the audience had no texts for the music — a conscious decision, apparently. There were notes, and the artists introduced the music and the poetry with a few phrases translated, but

no song names. In a recital that had four song cycles, that is a decided disadvantage.

All of the cycles were specialties of de los Angeles. The first half included Joaquín Rodrigo’s “Cuatro madrigales amorosos” and Fernando Obradors’ “Canciones clásicas españolas.” Both of these set light, humorous poetry, and Rivera used a lighter voice that fit the text.

The second half began with Joaquín Turina’s “Poema en forma de canciones.” This was the closest in style to Andalusian Flamenco. It began with a piano solo, expertly handled by Carver. Rivera was darker in this music, sounding more like *el cante jondo*, the Deep Song. Though her description of the text sounded almost like something tongue in cheek, the full text is chilling: “I confess that all those I have hated, I forgive; but you, whom I have loved with all my soul, I shall never forgive.” Her singing matched the depth of emotion — nothing overwrought, but terrifically intense.

Catalonian composer Frederic Mompou is a master of the miniature; few composers can put so much beauty in such small packages. His “Combat del Somni,” Dream Battle, was sung in his native Catalan — here, translations would have been especially welcome in this subtle, exquisite music.

And the recital ended with a showpiece, Federico Moreno Torroba’s “La petenera.” The *petenera* is a flamenco

form, thought to be cursed by the gitanos. But this is light music, and Rivera obviously thinks it's bad luck to be superstitious, and it was a delightful

conclusion. And it naturally deserved an encore, Manuel Ponce's evergreen "Estrellita." It was a delightful, charming afternoon.

Jessica Rivera



June 17, 2018

Seattle Symphony Celebrates Centenary with Bernstein Extravaganza

By Erica Miner



Among the plethora of celebratory events surrounding the centenary of America's favorite musical son Leonard Bernstein, Seattle Symphony music director Ludovic Morlot gave last weekend's audience an evening of toe-tapping fun with two of Bernstein's much-loved works: a concert version of his Broadway musical, *Wonderful Town*, along with his jazz concert piece *Prelude, Fugue and Riffs*.

Morlot, who counts Bernstein among the important influences along the route of his conducting journey, brought things full circle by paying symphonic homage to his former mentor. He opened the program with the world premiere of *Significant Others*, a new work by another American composer, SSO Composer in Residence Alexandra Gardner, to create what Morlot calls "a mini festival of American music."

Gardner is actively involved in leading the Merriman Workshop, a community composition project for local high school composers. A large youthful contingent in the audience reflected the draw of Gardner's commitment to the youth of the city, as well as of the perennial appeal of the works of a young Bernstein. Gardner's first SSO commission in 2012 was *Just Say Yes*, written for Alan White, the drummer of the band YES. She also has a wide background in electronic music, which she adeptly mixes with acoustic music.

Like Bernstein, whose visits to Key West, Florida, provided inspiration for the Latin rhythms in *West Side Story*, Gardner also became enamored with those rhythms, especially those rendered by Afro-Cuban and West African percussion, and uses that battery of instruments extensively in *Significant Others*. The piece begins with a "starry sky" sweep of percussion, piano and winds creating sweet sounds. Throughout the piece, which pleases the ear with harmonious chords and melodies, Gardner shows her in-depth knowledge of the works of other significant American composers such as Charles Ives and Aaron Copland with her sensitive melodies, open harmonies and lively rhythms.

Morlot took a gentle approach with this atmospheric piece, allowing the lush sounds of each section its own prominence. The change in the setup of the orchestra, with the string basses lined up along the back and the heavy brass placed at stage left, seemed to be done to prepare the ear for a Broadway pit sonority.

In keeping with the theme of the evening, Gardner connects her new work with Bernstein's personality by describing it as "a party with a bittersweet streak running through it," evoking Bernstein's daughter Jamie's depiction of her father in her new memoir, *Famous Father Girl: A Memoir of Growing Up*

Bernstein(/article/BWW-Review-Famous-Father-Girl-Window-into-a-Legend-20180613): "A man with a

motor, my mother used to say...The last guy standing at the party."

Ms. Bernstein, who names *Prelude, Fugue and Riffs* as a personal favorite among her father's works, points out that it is not often heard and that programming it with *Wonderful Town* works superbly, since the two pieces are closely related: "There's some music that cross-pollinates between the two," she says, and adds of the jazz piece, "It's so cool. It goes by in a blinding flash" (/article/BWW-Interview-Part-1-Jamie-Bernstein-Celebrates-Remarkable-Centennial-20180611).

The piece is a perfect union of classical music and jazz: a "written-out" jazz-in-concert-hall composition for an ensemble prominently featuring the solo clarinet. Completed in 1949 for Woody Herman's big band, the exuberant work was part of a series commissioned by Herman, including Stravinsky's *Ebony Concerto*. In 1952 Bernstein revised the score, from its original instrumentation to that of a more conventional pit orchestra. The work was then incorporated into a ballet sequence in the first draft of the musical comedy *Wonderful Town*.

The revised version of *Prelude, Fugue, and Riffs* did not survive and the majority of the music was cut from the final version of the *Wonderful Town* score with the exception of a few phrases in the musical's "Conquering the City" and "Conversation Piece." It later was transcribed for clarinet and orchestra by one of Bernstein's colleagues in Koussevitzky's original conducting class at Tanglewood, Lukas Foss.

The world premiere took place in 1955 on Bernstein's *Omnibus* TV show, with Al Gallodoro as solo clarinet. The piece was ultimately dedicated to Benny Goodman, with whom Bernstein worked extensively. The first movement *Prelude* and second movement *Fugue*, both baroque forms, are followed immediately without a pause by third movement, a series of "riffs"--a jazz

idiom for a repeated and short melodic figure.

The SSO winds, brass and percussion brought a uniquely American flavor to the piece that Bernstein himself called, "a serious piece of American music." The fanfare-like first movement, highlighting the brass, was spectacularly played and well-articulated, and the second movement's five saxophones were mesmerizing. The third movement--with "riffs for everybody," according to the composer, and rhythms presaging *West Side Story*--was deftly rendered by the entire ensemble.

Newly appointed SSO Principal Clarinet Benjamin Lulich showed great virtuosity in the many difficult and complex solos, displaying what Bernstein called "the special beauty of jazz" he felt in writing the piece. Every instrumentalist, in fact, showed impressive skill, which made the entire performance a huge hit with the audience.

After this, it was a revelation to hear *Wonderful Town*. Having promised his mentor Serge Koussevitzky to concentrate on "serious" music, Bernstein could not resist the challenge of a 4-week deadline-which he met-and said yes to impresario George Abbott. Based on the 1940 play *My Sister Eileen*, with a book by Joseph A. Fields and Jerome Chodorov, and lyrics by Bernstein's longtime friends Betty Comden and Adolph Green, the show premiered on Broadway in 1953 and went on to win five Tony awards, including Best Musical, Best Leading Actress (Rosalind Russell), and Best Choreography (Donald Saddler). The London production won the Olivier Award.

Some of the most well-known songs are *Christopher Street*, *Ohio*, and *One Hundred Easy Ways*, though these are not as popular as those in *Candide* (one hears its influence) and *West Side Story*. The ebullient music and clever

lyrics make the piece a celebration of New York as a magnet for young people. And no wonder: in the 50s, audiences found the easy swing of *A Little Bit in Love*, the familiar lilt of *Ohio*, and jiving swing of *Swing* irresistible. Even the Mozart "Musical Joke" dissonances of *The Wrong Note Rag* won over fans night after night.

The performers were comprised of a stunning array of vocal and dramatic talent, starting with the lush baritone of Christopher Kenney as the Guide. As the two leads, mezzo-soprano Kristen Choi (Ruth) and soprano Jessica Rivera (Eileen) were perfectly matched and carried the show beautifully. Choi was vocally robust and both amusing and riveting in her every scene, and Rivera's well-defined soprano rang out clearly and distinctly. Baritone Kevin Deas rendered the role of Ruth's love interest with vocal opulence.

Panoplies of other immensely talented singers, including tenors M. Scott Spalding and Ross Hauck and baritones Ryan Bede and Charles Robert Stephens, and mezzo-soprano Sheila Houlihan, performed magnificently, both vocally and comedically.

Katy Tabb's lively choreography showed a clear knowledge of traditional Broadway campiness; both the *Conga* and Irish jig scenes brought down the house.

Morlot rendered the vibrant score with both energy and tenderness, bringing out the sentimentality of the big band tunes, punching out the rhythmic syncopations, and plumbing the orchestra's full potential for maximum sound. The luxury of having a full as opposed to a pit-sized orchestra added to the overall extravagance of the evening.

It doesn't get more American and Broadway than this, and the SSO demonstrated their ability to swing these very American scores to the rafters of Benaroya Hall.

February 9, 2018

Osorio shines with Beethoven, ASO Chorus sublime

By Jon Ross

Jorge Federico Osorio strode to the center of the Symphony Hall stage Thursday like a man at home in his surroundings. The pianist has spent the past few weeks performing concerts with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra that stand together as an in-depth look into Beethoven's five-composition cycle of piano concertos. He presented the nearly 40-minute Piano Concerto No. 1 Thursday, and will perform the finale of his programmed cycle, Piano Concerto No. 4, next week.

Playing the concertos from memory, in collaboration with conductors ranging from music director Robert Spano to Thursday's guest conductor Roberto Abbado, he's shown the piano pieces to be sweeping, grand flourishes of musical excitement.

Beethoven's shimmering piano concertos are meant to be impressive and elicit cheers from the audience; they are also intensely musical and, at times, heartbreaking in their beauty. During his readings of four concertos, Osorio's playing has remained buoyant and bubbly; he has expertly dispatched even the trickiest of Beethoven's fingers-in-knots barrages of notes. A delight to hear every night, Osorio has given appropriate verve to each composition.

Thursday, this first-half performance of Beethoven's first concerto paired with

Mozart's "Requiem." Mozart died before completing work on the "Requiem," but he left enough musical content behind for others to complete the masterpiece in his absence.

This concert was the first time Abbado's edition of the Mozart score had been heard in the city. In its 2006 recording, the chorus performed a score edited by Robert Levin. Abbado's edition — which uses pieces of Levin's work, combined with other sources and the conductor's own interpretation — could seem unfamiliar to "Requiem" listeners accustomed to more canonical versions of the score, but it may be difficult for casual listeners to pick out distinct differences.

While Osorio's Beethoven exploration is an important part of the season's offerings and Osorio has been the highlight of many of those concerts, most performances featuring the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra

Chorus overshadow everything else on the program. Thursday was no exception. Though the "Requiem" seems to be an ASO Chorus evergreen, the group hasn't sung Mozart's Mass since an unofficial concert in October 2014, which occurred, due to the protracted lockout, at Oglethorpe University with a reduced ensemble and under the baton

of Richard Prior, Emory University's director of orchestral studies.

The most immediate comparison would be an ASO chorus performance of a very different "Requiem" during the first half of the season. With principal guest conductor Donald Runnicles leading the way, the combined ensemble rolled out Verdi's operatic "Requiem," a much flashier choral composition that makes wider use of a quartet of soloists. The Mozart work is largely given over to the chorus — and with the ASO Chorus, prepared by Norman Mackenzie, there never seems to be a criticism — with the guest singers given brief time to shine in solo, quartet and duet settings.

Soprano Jessica Rivera and tenor William Burden stood out in the array of

guest soloists. Rivera, a frequent ASO collaborator, has a crystalline voice made more elegant by a ruddy, rich resonance. Burden, in solo and as part of vocal ensembles, sang with bright authority.

Abbado is a firecracker of a conductor, exuding intensity and deliberate attention in each movement. He's a familiar presence in Atlanta, but he hasn't led the ensemble since the closing months of the 2014-15 season. Making up for lost time, he returns to Symphony Hall next week to lead the orchestra in Schubert's Symphony No. 8 and Osorio's final Beethoven concerto performance.

December 23, 2017

Mozart's version of Handel's Messiah makes for a magical evening

By Natasha Gauthier

When the headlines are dominated by stories of legendary classical stars engaging in the worst behaviour imaginable, it helps to just focus on the life-affirming power of the music itself.

Friday night I broke my own rule of never reviewing Handel's Messiah for Alexander Shelley's first performance of the work with NACO, in the rarely heard Mozart arrangement from 1789. With such fresh orchestral colours and stirring singing, it was worth the personal transgression.

The most striking difference in Mozart's version is the expanded parts for woodwinds and brass. The addition of the clarinet, a new-fangled, seldom deployed instrument in Handel's time but a fixture by Mozart's, was especially noticeable. The new palette and textures add an element of discovery to the familiar movements. There was sinuous, chromatic writing for the winds in the the tenor aria Thou shalt break them, and a wonderful bassoon accompaniment in Ev'ry valley. Having the trombones double the basses in their solo opening statement of the final Amen fugue was a stroke of genius. Overall the colour reminded me of the Mozart Requiem, particularly the opening Introit, or even the beautiful woodwind parts in the Symphony No. 40.

Mozart also does some Austrian kung-fu on the solo arias, such as giving the

famous alto aria But who may abide to the bass, or the soprano showpiece, Rejoice greatly, to the tenor. This topsy-turvy lineup didn't always eclipse the original; for example, I found the plangent tenor aria, Behold and see, sat in an awkward, unflattering register for the alto. And handing some of the choicest choral entrances over to the solo quartet was just not cricket.

It's the choir that makes or breaks Messiah, and on Friday it was solidly in MVP league. The Cantata Singers were joined by the Capital Chamber Choir and the Ewashko Singers, as well as a surprise ringer in the form of Governor General Julie Payette, her curly mane unmistakable at the end of a row of sopranos (and I should know, I sang next to her for years in Montreal). Attack was pingy, tuning immaculate, the melismatic singing crisply defined.

Shelley, who never falls back on clichés, conducted with thrilling attention to counterpoint, colour, and especially narrative impact. Tempi were just so, neither breakneck (as with some period instrument groups) nor plodding. I wish he had allowed for a bit more florid Baroque ornamentation, both from the vocal soloists and the instrumentalists, but no doubt this was done for musicological reasons (that style would have been out of fashion in Mozart's day)

Among the four soloists, soprano Jessica Rivera was outstanding. She has a voice of almost miraculous evenness and control, with the most attractive, elegant colour and flawless production through every note of her range. Combine this with sensitive, intelligent, urgently communicative musicality, and this is a singer I would happily listen to in any repertoire.

Mezzo Susan Platts is consistently superb, although I felt that some of this music sat very low for her. Baritone Tyler Duncan has power and expression in spades, but his vibrato can be wildly

uncontrolled — his triplets in Why do the nations had no shape or clarity at all, and just sounded like one broad tremolo.

Young tenor Isaiah Bell was musically in his element, impressing with the natural refinement of his phrasing and his exceptionally beautiful middle register, which has acquired more depth and velvety warmth as he matures. But his usually easy, light high notes sounded tight and dry, almost strangled at times. I hope this was due to a passing bug, and not indicative of more serious, long-term technical issues.



November 6, 2017

Impressive remembrances

By Anthony Rodgers

When I was a high school senior, my band director handed me a CD of a work that he believed I would enjoy, because the music was “German and about death.” (I promise you, I wasn’t as angsty as this story makes me sound.) On my first play of it, I found myself transfixed, this being the first piece of classical music to which I consciously listened. The work: *Ein deutsches Requiem* (A German Requiem) by Johannes Brahms. This weekend, Robert Spano, music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, conducted the Kansas City Symphony along with the Kansas City Symphony Chorus and guest soloists Jessica Rivera and Nmon Ford. Featuring this emotionally charged masterpiece programmed with a pairing of French Impressionist works, the combined ensembles performed with incredible blending and magnificent musicality.

Originally written for solo piano in 1899 by Maurice Ravel, *Pavane pour une infante défunte* (Pavane for a Dead Princess) was orchestrated by the composer in 1910. Regarding the title, Ravel himself proposed not putting too much thought into the naming of the work, saying he was just pleased with how the words sounded together. However, he did state that the work could be imagined as reminiscent of the past through the ‘pavane,’ a stately, processional dance dating back to the 16th century, that a young princess might have performed. Taking a leisurely

tempo, Spano led the orchestra through a transcendent performance with marvelous blending by the entire ensemble. Horn solos by Alberto Suarez were beautiful and focused, soaring through the upper registers of the instrument, while the muted strings moved as a single unit with a lush, velvety sound that was simply dreamlike.

Returning to the year 1899, Claude Debussy completed a set of three *Nocturnes* for orchestra that focuses, in the composer’s words, on “all the various impressions and the special effects of light that the word suggests,” rather than taking from the typical implications of soft, expressive music inspired by the night. The Symphony’s performance of the first two *Nocturnes*—the third, “*Sirènes*” (Sirens), features a wordless female chorus and was therefore not programmed by the orchestra this weekend—was captivating and full of energy at various levels. “*Nuages*” (Clouds) had a sense of tranquility with an element of suppressed power that simulated an overcast sky that could break at any moment into sunshine or storm. Uniform woodwinds and muted strings created a hazy feel, shifting together as slow-moving clouds themselves, never fully settling on a single tonality—a beautiful feature of Impressionist music. Interjections from the English horn (Dieter Koch) were sneaky and added to the ambiguous feel

of the movement, and the pairing of flute (Michael Gordon) and harp (Deborah Wells Clark) created a delicate timbre near the end. “Fêtes” (Festivals) was quite a ride from start to finish. The orchestra maintained great energy in sound across the various sections of the movement and matched articulations well throughout, especially with the triplet rhythms that keep the piece rolling forward. Brass fanfares were exciting, including the muted trumpet trio that had a sinister feel over the steady pulse of the strings.

Johannes Brahms is one of the most prolific composers of the Romantic period, and it is no surprise that his Requiem, a Mass for the dead, would be full of emotion and have a much greater personal connection than a more traditional Mass setting. Suffering the loss of his dear friend Robert Schumann in 1856, and later his mother in 1865, Brahms conducted the premiere of this large, cathartic work on Good Friday in 1868. As the title suggests, the text comes from German translations of the Bible instead of the Latin Mass ordinaries. The result is a stunning tribute that still resonates today as both harrowing and hopeful.

Coming off the cohesive sounds achieved during the French works, the beginning of the Requiem was not as unified within the orchestra and the chorus, in both of which individual voices stuck out as not matching in quality of sound and pitch. But, at the first strong and full-voiced declaration of “Denn alles Fleisch es ist wie Gras” (“For all flesh is as grass”) in the second movement, everything aligned in a glorious fashion. From this point forth, the overall blends and balances were great. Connecting the two musical ensembles, Spano was fun to watch as he dictated syllables in the choral parts at times while also indicating steady beats for the instrumentalists. A more vibrant timbre in the strings and a playfulness in the winds created some incredible moments in the fourth movement as the chorus tenderly sang,

“Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen” (“How lovely are thy dwellings”), leaning into suspensions for a little extra dissonance to tug at the heart. In the sixth movement, the orchestra played triplet figures crisply, yielding to triumphant declarations of victory over Death, and I was pleased with the chorales by the low horns and trombones—Brahmsian chorale writing for low brass is a personal favorite. The fugues in the third and sixth movements were also presented with great highlighting of the thematic material in both orchestra and chorus, and the excellent hemiolas in the sixth moment were gritty and propelling. After the initial premiere of the work, Brahms added two additional movements, one of which was the fifth movement, which features a soprano soloist declaring, “Ihr habt nun Traurigkeit” (“You now have sadness”). This movement is one of the most sensitive of the entire work, and soloist Jessica Rivera created an intimacy unparalleled by anything else on the program. With great placement of each note, her beautiful tone resonated without being too powerful. She presented a maternal quality of reassurance in both sound and gentle gestures; this movement was perhaps influenced by the death of Brahms’ mother, highlighting the passage, “As one whom his mother comforteth, so I will comfort you” (Isaiah 66:13). Nmon Ford, baritone, took great command of the stage during his featured moments, singing with a direct authority that was hypnotizing. His physical portrayal of the text was subtle and welcome in this performance, treated like an operatic role rather than that within a more strict concert setting.

At first, the programming of French Impressionist works with Brahms’ Requiem seemed a little strange to me; however, the juxtaposition in real life was a beautiful testament to the power of music to both sooth and energize the soul.

June 16, 2017

Moving performances impress in 'La Bohème'

By Rafael de Acha

Both the uninitiated and inveterate opera fans will be impressed by the lovely singing of soprano Nicole Cabell and tenor Sean Panikkar and by the antics of the quartet of bohemians that provide the Cincinnati Opera audience with as much humor as can be expected in an opera based on the novel "Vie de Bohème" by French writer Henri Murger.

In "La Bohème" there are neither bad guys nor hard-hearted gals, just plenty of passion and heartbreak in 1840s Paris, and Puccini's librettists Illica and Giacosa deliver a *now feel happy/now feel sad* libretto tailor-made for Puccini's music.

The story is straightforward: Rodolfo, a struggling writer (Panikkar) and Mimì, a seamstress (Cabell), encounter each other in an unheated attic after Benoit, the landlord (baritone Marco Nisticò) has cut off the electricity until he gets paid for the monthly rent of the rundown quarters shared by Rodolfo and his friend Marcello, a painter (Rodion Pogosssov). Tentatively at first, and then impulsively, Mimì and Rodolfo swear to love each other.

It is Christmas Eve, and Marcello, Schaunard (Edward Nelson), a musician, and Colline (Nathan Stark), a philosopher have gone down to the Café Momus. The two lovers soon join them, but the celebration is interrupted by the arrival of Marcello's ex, Musetta (Jessica Rivera) who makes a grand entrance in

the arms of Alcindoro (Marco Nisticò), her sugar daddy du jour.

After the fun and games of Act II are over, the action takes us to winter, a year later. Mimì and Rodolfo have parted company because of her flirtatiousness (says he) and his jealousy (says she). The real reason is that she is wasting away due to an unnamed disease and Rodolfo is terrified to lose her.

While Marcello and Musetta hurl insults at each other, Mimì and Rodolfo vow to stay together until spring comes. But spring comes and they again break up, and it is only at the end of the opera that Mimì returns to die in the arms of Rodolfo.

The production – the same one seen here in Cincinnati a few years ago – has a set that evokes a black-and-white movie of Paris of the 1930s, a backdrop for the mostly black and gray costumes of both chorus and principals. An unabashedly romantic opera that premiered in 1896, originally conceived to be set in the 1840s Paris of Murger's novel, it could be an uncomfortable fit into the Paris of the 1930s, but as conceived by Jonathan Miller, this production's original director, the concept works. Natascha Metherell does a splendid job of directing her principals and chorus on a two-tiered set where space is at a premium. She makes things work while keeping everyone on stage away from any kind of operatic posturing.

Making his Cincinnati Opera debut, CSO Music Director Louis Langrée elicited terrific playing from his musicians, but many ragged moments in which coordination and balance between pit and stage were at loggerheads kept the evening from what could have been a great performance. The choral passages, however, were perfectly sung by Henri Venanzi's choristers, including the children in the Café Momus scene. Cabell sang and acted an impassioned Mimì, her big lyric soprano voice

soaring when soaring was needed, most notably in her third-act encounters with Marcello and in the ensuing farewell aria and duet with Rodolfo. Panikkar was the perfect Rodolfo: good to look at, sincere in his acting, and rock solid vocally in his big solo moments. Pogossoff and his fellow bohemians, Rivera, Nelson – one of the best Schaunards I have ever seen – and Nathan Stark were a terrific quartet of bohemians.

Jessica Rivera

TEXAS
CLASSICAL REVIEW



May 6, 2017

Frank's "Conquest Requiem" receives stirring premiere from Houston Symphony

By Lawrence Wheeler

The concert by the Houston Symphony at Jones Hall Friday night featured many colors. First on the program was the world première of Gabriela Lena Frank's *Conquest Requiem*, a seven-movement work for soprano, baritone, chorus and orchestra commissioned by the Houston Symphony. Music Director Andrés Orozco-Estrada conducted, following the Frank premiere with Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 on the second half.

This *Conquest Requiem* debut marks the high point of Frank's tenure as the Houston Symphony's composer-in-residence. Frank's work often draws on her multicultural background, especially her Peruvian heritage. This work interweaves traditional Latin and Meso-American texts with contemporary settings by Pulitzer Prize-winning Cuban-American writer Nilo Cruz.

Frank wrote: "While a requiem in the traditional sense in that it speaks generally of life and loss, this requiem is positioned from the vantage point of the Spanish Conquest of the New World in present-day Mexico. Specifically, we hear the voices of Malinche, the multi-lingual concubine of conquistador Hernán Cortés, and their son Martín, one of the first 'mestizos' of the New World, as they describe the destruction and rebirth of their land."

Conquest Requiem is written for a large orchestra, including prominent bass drum and harp parts. Frank's orchestration offers a vast variety of

instrumental combinations and textures. The music shows a brilliant musical mind seeking an ideal combination of sounds to express emotions or to illuminate the text. The variety of the scoring is both fascinating and captivating and Orozco-Estrada led the Houston Symphony and chorus in an energetic and well-executed performance.

The vocal highlights of the evening came from soloist Jessica Rivera, who brought Malinche to life. A radiant presence on stage, Rivera's soprano projected effortlessly and with tonal variety—from a sensitively sung "Song of Malinche" to a howl in the Rex Tremendae. Rivera's committed and imaginative performance was a large part of the success of this new work.

Making his Houston Symphony debut was baritone Andrew Garland. Following a tentative first entrance, his voice never quite found its center.

The Houston Symphony Chorus has a substantial role, singing in Latin with added humming and half-sung exclamations. There were occasional balance issues, particularly during long vocal lines. But for the most part the singers exhibited their customary excellent preparation, greatly contributing to the operatic qualities of the work.

One of the most popular and hotly debated works of the 20th century, there is little consensus as to the composer's actual intent in Shostakovich's Fifth

Symphony. But given the dangers he faced in Stalin's Soviet Union one can find much that is hidden in plain sight. The symphony is an emotional powerhouse filled with vivid orchestral colors.

The symphony began with incisive and cohesive playing from the Houston Symphony string section. Contrasting this were high delicate melodies in the first violins and violas. For their part, the violas played this notoriously difficult melody flawlessly. There were outstanding wind solos and the brass section provided power, especially at the movement's frenetic climax.

In the heavy-footed second movement, Orozco-Estrada brought out the music's gruff and sardonic character. This was contrasted with a delicate and flexible

trio section, featuring well-played flute and violin solos.

The third movement is one of the most intensely emotional in all music. The second violins often take the lead, and the section was wonderfully expressive and together. Flutist Aralee Dorrough played beautifully, and when joined by flutist Judy Dines, the combination was gorgeous.

The fourth movement was characterized by brilliant string playing, expressive winds and richly powerful brass and percussion. Orozco-Estrada took the loud final section at a steady pace allowing for the expression of mock triumph.

Jessica Rivera



March 24, 2017

ASO showcases its finest with Theofanidis' landmark oratorio "Creation/Creator"

By Mark Gresham



On Thursday evening at Symphony Hall, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus performed "Creation/Creator" by Christopher Theofanidis, one of the original members of the ASO's Atlanta School of Composers. Led by ASO music director Robert Spano, the concert was a reprise of the ASO's highly successful premiere of the oratorio in 2015.

The program will be repeated on Saturday night at Symphony Hall in advance of the ASO taking the production on tour to the Kennedy

Center in Washington, D.C., where it will be performed on March 31 as the focal presentation of the SHIFT Festival, a new festival of American orchestras co-presented by the Kennedy Center and Washington Performing Arts.

As with the 2015 premiere, Thursday's performance featured a panoply of guest artists: soprano Jessica Rivera, mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke, tenor Thomas Cooley, baritone Nmon Ford, bass Evan Boyer and actors Steven Cole and Shannon Eubanks. The ASO Chorus was

prepared by ASO director of choruses Norman Mackenzie. James Alexander provided stage direction. New to this production is scenography created by artist Daniel Arsham, whose installation, *Hourglass*, is currently on exhibit at the High Museum through May 21.

“Creation/Creator” is a landmark work for Theofanidis, who has made only a few changes to the score since it was premiered and recorded two years ago. Although Franz Joseph Haydn’s oratorio “Creation” is a classical precedent in theme and scope, Theofanidis brings a broader tapestry of cultural creation stories to the work; even more importantly, he brings human creativity to the fore, rather than only as a subtext. That he draws these texts from ancient, classic and modern sources found in religion, science, philosophy and literature gives the work considerable contemporary interest. As a result, the greater theme is one of creative impulse, both on a human and a cosmological scale, and how sharing of knowledge spreads the seeds of creativity.

Given that some meaningful prose texts are more easily spoken than sung, Theofanidis is wise in how he has deployed them throughout: sometimes melodically set, sometimes sung in a declamatory manner, and a few movements that present texts in plain narration.

The vocal quintet, a splendid ensemble, was a kind of reprise itself. All but mezzo-soprano Cooke were involved in the premiere performance and the recording. The five soloists, in all-white attire, sang from a raked diamond-shaped platform in front of the chorus, in the middle of the orchestra. Except for Ford, who held a luminous blue globe, they sang the opening movement, “Elephant in the Dark,” blindfolded.

However, it was the second movement, “God Tapestry,” which really kicked the oratorio into gear, with exciting music, texts from the Rig Vedas and the 15th-century Indian mystic poet Kabir, and

the most complementary and convincing of Arsham’s video sequences of the evening. The combined energy had a staying power that set up and permeated the rest of the evening’s performance.

The ASO Chorus was at the top of their game. Like the soloists, the chorus wore white clothing. They also wore round, reflective silver stickers on their foreheads, as if each chorister was sporting a third eye with which to view their scores. That was easier to see in the premiere, but not so noticeable this performance.

In contrast, Spano and the orchestra were dressed in black, but not formal wear. The actors were attired in a manner appropriate to their roles: Eubanks, as the 17th-century English aristocrat, philosopher and writer Margaret Cavendish, dressed in a dark period costume; Coleman in a simple suit, reading words of Langston Hughes, finally ascending the podium as if a pulpit, preaching to the assembled with emphatic evangelism.

Theofanidis’ music is very attractively melodic and dramatic, not only in serving the continuity of oratorio’s eclectic assemblage of literary sources, but also in its own right — including a couple of notable movements that are purely orchestral.

To quote my own review of the premiere: “Creation/Creator” is the kind of work that brings out Spano’s best strengths as conductor and as artistic director, and that of the ASO and Chorus overall as well. It is exactly the kind of project that the ASO should be pursuing and presenting more, not less. That assessment still stands true for Thursday’s performance and surely will for Saturday as well.

It also bodes well for the SHIFT Festival at the end of the month, when the ASO has again an opportunity to showcase to a more national audience what we are doing as a creative community in a major city — not simply preserving great art, but *creating* great art.

Jessica Rivera

The New York Times

August 9, 2016

A Musical Tale of the Cosmos, Birth and Death

By Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim



Projections: From left onstage at the Prospect Park Bandshell, Jessica Rivera, Julian Wachner and Nathan Gunn at the premiere of Paola Prestini's "The Hubble Cantata."

Within the life span of our galaxy, the premiere of Paola Prestini's "The Hubble Cantata" at the Prospect Park Bandshell on Saturday night barely registers as a blip. And yet its 50 minutes of ponderous texts set to fluffy nebulae of diatonic music sometimes felt endless.

The work is a laudable attempt to glam up astrophysics through music, poetry and gadgetry. But with forces including an orchestra, choir, children's chorus,

solo soprano and baritone, with additional voice-overs, electronic sound installations, still photo projections and a brief virtual-reality film, it fell victim to its own overreaching ambitions.

Most disappointing, perhaps, was the missed opportunity to convey the exploratory thrills of contemporary classical music to the diverse audience that had assembled in the park for the BRIC Celebrate Brooklyn! Festival. A high-octane performance by the

percussion ensemble Tigue earlier in the evening had energized a crowd of more than 6,000. Many must have been drawn by the promise of a virtual-reality element late in the cantata when listeners were invited to use specially provided pop-up viewers to watch a five-minute film based on imagery captured by the Hubble Space Telescope.

Ms. Prestini is the creative and executive director of National Sawdust, a triumphantly successful new performance space in Williamsburg that stands for a hip, sophisticated brand of new music. The texts for the “Hubble Cantata” were by Royce Vavrek, who wrote the librettos to some of the most exciting recent operas, among them “Dog Days” and “27.” There was no weak link among the performers, who included the baritone Nathan Gunn, the soprano Jessica Rivera and the conductor Julian Wachner at the helm of a 20-strong instrumental ensemble (including players from 1B1 and Novus NY) and 100 singers from the Washington Chorus and the Brooklyn Youth Chorus.

And yet the resulting work had an amateurish feel, the music flat-textured, the libretto trite in its efforts to mimic the language of archaic myth.

Interspersed with recorded voice-overs by the astrophysicist Mario Livio, the

cantata offers an anthropomorphic tale of cosmic birth and death. “Oh life spent cradling infants, mourning at the funerals of stars,” went one line that sent some audience members near me scurrying toward the exit.

References to “luminous matter turned dark” elicited predictable orchestration from Ms. Prestini: chocolaty cellos; a high tinkling of metallic percussion. A reflection on artificial intelligence was accompanied by recorded garbled whispers of an erotically aloof female voice, while a thrumming electronic drone threatened to engulf the sounds produced by the live musicians.

At that point, late in the evening, I was wishing it would get on with the job.

The virtual-reality bit, when it came, offered a welcome distraction. (Unlike the moody black-and-white photographs of the dancer Wendy Whelan that added little to the cantata’s dramatic cohesion.)

Pressing the cardboard viewer that held my smartphone to my eyes, I became engulfed in strawberry-tinged clouds streaking through a wide inky expanse. A turn of the head opened up new vistas — orbs of light; a milky stream of lavender — in a virtual journey through the Orion Nebula that was beautiful and surprising, and over far too soon.

Jessica Rivera



December 16, 2016

The ASO brings back its joyous holiday staple, Handel's "Messiah"

By Mark Gresham

On Thursday evening the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and ASO Chamber Chorus, led by director of choruses Norman Mackenzie, performed Vivaldi's *Gloria in D major* and Part I of Handel's *Messiah* to a sold-out house, with soprano Jessica Rivera, mezzo-soprano Kelley O'Connor, tenor Cullen Gandy and baritone Gerard Sundberg as guest soloists. The concert will be repeated on Sunday at Hodgson Hall, on the University of Georgia campus in Athens.

Performances of Part I of Handel's *Messiah* (also known as the "Christmas portion") have had a nearly ubiquitous presence in the Anglo-American choral music community during the holiday weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas. The ASO used to mount a Christmastime *Messiah* annually, each time pairing it with a different, shorter piece for the concert's first half. Last year, which was heavy in choral repertoire anyway due to the Robert Shaw Centennial celebrations, the ASO skipped over its annual Christmas *Messiah* presentation. The tradition was restored this week, this time paired with Vivaldi's *Gloria*.

The chamber chorus and vocal soloists shone well in both, underpinned by the

relatively small orchestral forces required. The reduced complement of strings evidently allowed some of those principal stands of players a deserved night off: subbing in the concertmaster's seat was violinist Anastasia Agapova, who has gained local public attention since she joined the orchestra in the 2013-14 season; sitting in the principal cello seat for the evening, with important responsibility as part of the "continuo" part in both works, was assistant principal Karen Freer. Both served as excellent reminders of the depth of the ASO team's bench.

Vivaldi wrote two settings of the liturgical *Gloria* text in the key of D major. This one, by far the more familiar one, is tagged with the catalog number RV 589. It is a favorite choice for performance by community, school and church choruses, even if a bit behind the Christmas portion of *Messiah* in overall public popularity, but about half as long. Of the vocal soloists, the *Gloria* only required the soprano and mezzo. Two Atlanta audience favorites, Rivera and O'Connor excelled in both works. Rivera was sparkling and agile, and O'Connor warmly expressive. In the *Gloria*'s lilting "Domine Deus, Rex coelestis" movement, principal oboist Elizabeth Koch Tiscione came forward on the

stage for a lovely, lyrical featured duet with Rivera.

In *Messiah*, Atlanta-born Gandy's lyric tenor well-suited his rendition of "Comfort ye my people" and "Every valley shall be exalted" without becoming strident. Sundberg, who has a long history of performing *Messiah* with Mackenzie and the ASO, demonstrated his lyrical quality of baritone without being overbearing in the heaven-shaking drama Handel placed in his solos.

It all came to a climax with the famed "Hallelujah!" chorus, typically appended to performances Part I, although it is actually the conclusion of Part II when

performed outside of the entire oratorio. It was, of course, the number the crowd was waiting for all evening. In another longtime tradition, if of apocryphal origin, the audience stood as its signature strains began — a few timidly singing along, perhaps wondering if it was okay to do so. What came from the stage, however, was the most robust performance of the evening and a clear signal of the concert's imminent conclusion. It was an especially joyous conclusion to what was a consistently joyful concert.



May 3, 2016

The Shaw 100th: ASO makes it a night to remember at sold-out Carnegie Hall

By James L. Paulk



In a programming coup, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra showed up at Carnegie Hall on April 30, the exact 100th birthday of Robert Shaw, the man who did so much to shape the orchestra and who built its chorus into an international phenomenon. On the program was Brahms' magnificent *German Requiem*, with which Shaw was clearly obsessed. Shaw twice conducted the *German Requiem* here at Carnegie, in 1990 and again in 1997, both times with the renowned Orchestra of St. Luke's. The first of these visits was the grand finale of the first of his choral workshops, which became a regular feature at Carnegie for nearly a decade. The 1997

sojourn showcased the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chorus. That concert took place on the 100th anniversary of Brahms' death. It was to be Shaw's final performance of the Requiem; he died in 1999.

Shaw's 1983 Telarc recording of the Requiem with the ASO and its chorus, joined by the immortal soprano Arlene Auger and the fine baritone Robert Stilwell as soloists, survives as one of his, and the orchestra's, most significant contributions.

In the years after Shaw, the orchestra has come under the influence of two powerful forces. Yoel Levi, who followed



him, brought a new level of precision to the orchestra and gave it a signature sound, anchored by burnished woodwinds. Then came Robert Spano, who brought the orchestra a swashbuckling image and cemented its reputation.

Through it all, Norman Mackenzie, who worked as Shaw's assistant, guarded the legacy of the chorus using Shaw's unique techniques to sustain the chorus's special qualities.

Though this concert is ostensibly all about Shaw, it is also an opportune time to assess the orchestra and chorus, his greatest legacy. The last few years have been rather stormy with budget cuts, two lock-outs and a drastic shrinkage in the orchestra's complement (the number of permanent players), followed by a truce late in 2014 which restored some, but not yet all, of the cuts.

Reviewing a 2010 ASO performance of the Requiem, I remarked, "The ASO Chorus seems to have been created by God especially to sing the Brahms *German Requiem*." That is still the case. It is a work that showcases the chorus's special qualities: its astonishing unity; its total dynamic range, from whispered pianissimos to thundering fortes; and the unique lack of vibrato, especially from the Sopranos, that gives it such tonal purity.

The 2010 performance was led by principal guest conductor Donald Runnicles and marked a vivid contrast to Shaw's version: opulent and spacious compared to the stormy, energetic approach of Shaw.

At this concert, Spano's approach was closer to Runnicle's in its pacing. Spano gave the work an elegiac, sometimes ponderous feel. An intense sadness ran through the performance, along with a

sense of majesty. Well, it is a requiem, after all. Whatever you might feel about the drawn out tempi, one effect was to fully expose both orchestra and chorus. With less gifted forces, the approach would not have worked. But here it seemed to affirm their exalted status. Spano's phrasing was exemplary. He accelerated artfully into satisfying crescendos in the second movement ("For all flesh is as grass") and the joy at the return of "the ransomed of the Lord" was complete.

I don't think it's heresy to say this on Shaw's centenary, but to my ear both chorus and orchestra sound better today than at any point in the Shaw era. Shaw was, first and foremost, a teacher, and the ultimate compliment one can pay him is that his students and successors, especially Mackenzie, have built on his extraordinary legacy to the point that they have surpassed his own efforts. The chorus may be stronger than ever, but its central qualities are a testament to Shaw's vision and a direct result of his drills. The orchestra, more polished and precise from the work of Levi and Spano, is a thrilling legacy.

Experiencing this singular Requiem with Spano and the ASO forces is an immersive, strangely peaceful experience, regardless of your view of spirituality. Both Jessica Rivera, the soprano soloist, and Nmon Ford, the baritone, have distinctive tremulous voices that contrast nicely with the smooth surfaces of the ASO chorus. Rivera, who has become Spano's "go to" soprano, is a joy to watch, her beatific gaze reinforcing the gentle, unforced sound that projects so wonderfully across the hall.

The Brahms can easily stand on its own, and usually does. But ASO's planners decided to go overboard with this one night stand, throwing in a full-length commission. The new work, "Zohar," by Jonathan Leshnoff, was written to take advantage of the same forces as the Requiem, right down to the soloists. With all this freight — the Shaw centennial, the Brahms, the Carnegie trip — this could easily have turned into a pretentious mess. Instead, the result is



an attractive and joyous compliment to the evening.

Like Shaw, Spano has a special affection for new music, which he programs regularly. These are almost always safe neo-Romantic composers like Leshnoff.

A cantata, this work is based on the “Zohar,” which the program notes tell us is “a commentary on the Pentateuch” (the five books of Moses). The texts for three of the six movements come directly from the Zohar and are clearly hymns of praise, using exalted language and music that borders on the ponderous. The other sections “explore the human side,” and these are simpler and more joyous. Ford, the baritone, got the most interesting segment, about the answered prayer of a mere shepherd boy.

Everything sounds better in Carnegie Hall, in this case, at capacity, the audience bolstered by a healthy contingent of Atlantans: the “away game” crowd of hardcore fans. It was easy to spot them — they’re the ones who abruptly jumped to their feet at the end of every piece.

The Carnegie visit is always a special occasion, but this was singular because of the Shaw focus and the Brahms. Saturday also saw the New York premiere of the *Robert Shaw: Man of Many Voices* documentary at the Paley Center for Media here in New York. The film was produced by Kiki Wilson, herself an ASO Chorus member.

This trek, an ASO ritual, showcases the orchestra here in the nation’s music capital. Atlantans are proud of their orchestra, and this is its biggest chance to show off. New York gets an annual parade of orchestras from all over the world, all here for the same purpose. An exalted few (Boston, London, Vienna, Chicago, and Philadelphia, for example) stick around for a few days or a week for a mini-residence, always featuring their best chops.

Jessica Rivera

The New York Times

May 1, 2016

Premieres, a Tribute and an Anniversary at Carnegie Hall

By Anthony Tommasini

The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra made its Carnegie Hall debut in 1971, four years after Robert Shaw had taken charge as music director.

Mr. Shaw, who died in 1999 at 82, would lead the Atlanta Symphony a dozen times at Carnegie Hall during his acclaimed 21-year tenure with the orchestra.

So, it was appropriate that on Saturday night, the exact day of his centennial, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, conducted by the music director Robert Spano, paid tribute to Mr. Shaw with a program offering impressive performances of Jonathan Leshnoff's "Zohar," in its New York premiere, and Brahms's "A German Requiem," a score Mr. Shaw revered.

The orchestra has made fairly regular appearances at Carnegie over the years, unlike the Utah Symphony which, before Friday night, had not performed at the hall in 41 years. After a financially precarious period in recent times, worsened by the recession, that orchestra has been on a roll. Under the dynamic leadership of Thierry Fischer, now in his seventh season as music director, the ensemble has been attracting audiences, donors and crucial government support. For this concert, the orchestra's 75th anniversary, the mood in the hall was celebratory. Gary Herbert, the governor of Utah, as well as Mitt Romney attended. Crews from two

Utah television stations came to report the big news. The inspired players excelled in an ambitious program that featured the New York premiere of Andrew Norman's "Switch," one of several recent Utah Symphony commissions.

The concert began with a fresh, lively account of Haydn's Symphony No. 96 in D ("Miracle"). The stage was already set up, however, for Mr. Norman's piece, a percussion concerto, with dozens of instrument of all kinds arranged in two groups on either side of the conductor's podium.

Like "Split," Mr. Norman's piano concerto that received its premiere in December by the New York Philharmonic, "Switch" explores nonlinear, narrative-scrambling techniques borrowed from video games. His restless music gurgles and explodes in often fragmented phrases, leaping breathlessly from one thing to another.

"Switch" actually begins calmly, until slicing chords startle you. Only after the piece had been going for a minute or so did the percussion soloist, Colin Currie, sneak onstage and pick up mallets. The piece unfolded with bouts of frenetic activity, volleys of percussion and gnashing chords. As the title "Switch" suggests, the soloist's riffs are like triggers, turning other players on and off, including other percussion in the rear.

This technique of quick cuts could easily result in just jumbles of sounds and rhythms. But the pitches Mr. Norman piles up came across as precisely chosen for their astringent beauty and impact. Also, stretches of subdued, if taut, music provided relief from the frenzy. Mr. Currie brought stunning virtuosity and tireless energy to the solo part, which required him to dash constantly among groups of instruments onstage.

Perhaps wanting to make up for lost decades of playing Carnegie, Mr. Fischer and the orchestra played two demanding early 20th-century works after intermission: selections from Prokofiev's "Romeo and Juliet," and Bartok's Suite from "The Miraculous Mandarin." Both received exciting, colorful and fervent performances.

For the Atlanta program, Mr. Leshnoff, 42, wrote a 30-minute choral work, "Zohar," scored, as with the Brahms requiem, for soprano and baritone soloists, chorus and orchestra. The text for "Zohar" — a pillar of Jewish mysticism, the composer suggests — is a commentary upon the Five Books of Moses, here presented as six movements reflecting on the nature of man, Judaism and life.

Mr. Leshnoff has been called a leader of the contemporary American lyricism, though Neo-Romantic would be a

simpler description of his stylistic approach in "Zohar." The opening movement was somewhat pontifical, with ominous, weighty orchestral chords and repeated choral exclamations. I was more drawn into the reflective, poignant sections of the score, like "What is Man?," when piercing harmonies and delicate orchestral textures cushioned supple, lyrical writing for the fine soprano soloist, Jessica Rivera. Another movement, about a shepherd boy who cannot read, began with tender music for the baritone, here the earnest, youthful Nmon Ford, and built to a pummeling outburst for the full forces. If not innovative, "Zohar" revealed the composer's technical skills and personal voice.

Shaw, who founded the Atlanta Symphony's volunteer chorus in 1970, would have been proud of the remarkable contribution the choristers made to the Brahms requiem performance. Their sound was full-bodied, warm and penetrating without ever seeming forced. Inner details of the music came through with clarity and crispness. Ms. Rivera and Mr. Ford sang affectingly. Mr. Spano drew a glowing, spacious performance of this Brahms masterwork from the orchestra, marking a great return visit for both him and this essential ensemble.

April 24, 2015

Theofanidis's "Creation/Creator" is sprawling success at ASO

By James L. Paulk

Christopher Theofanidis's far-ranging work, "Creation/Creator," is the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's most ambitious undertaking so far this season. A 75-minute semi-staged piece that straddles the territory between oratorio, opera, and music theater, it brings together a large orchestra, full chorus, singers and actors.

The great strength of the work, which premiered Thursday, is Theofanidis's imaginative score, an extravagant tapestry of very different sounds over the course of 15 movements. His power has always come from the breadth of his palette, with many "sound worlds," as he described them. "But this is the first time they've been brought together all in one piece," he commented.

And if there was a mid-20th Century neo-romantic feel to his sounds, with echoes of composers like Samuel Barber, Theofanidis brought his own voice, or voices, to the mix. We even got a few sections that echoed Philip Glass's early works, with references to Albert Einstein thrown in for emphasis ("Einstein on the Beach" remains Glass's iconic masterpiece).

Few living composers are better at writing for a large chorus, and the best sections of "Creation/Creator" come when the ASO chorus is most engaged,

especially in striking complex á capella harmonies which bring to mind the thrilling sounds of a Russian vespers service.

Jessica Rivera is an ASO regular but has never sounded better than in this work, with numerous passages seemingly written for her high, floating, ethereal soprano. Baritone Nmon Ford did double duty as a fine actor/speaker and singer, with a bit of choreography thrown in for good measure. Evan Boyer sang with a rich, gravelly bass voice. Mezz-soprano Kelley O'Connor, another ASO favorite, brought her characteristic warm sound to her parts. Tenor Thomas Cooley and actors Shannon Eubanks and Steven Cole were similarly satisfying. But Cole, as a preacher delivering a monologue on the biblical creation story, especially suffered from Symphony Hall's unique ability to swallow diction, rendering almost all of his words unintelligible. The same went for all the spoken portions of the work but most, unlike Cole, got projected titles.

The orchestra has had a roller-coaster year, but here, under music director Robert Spano, it was in excellent form in dazzling, shimmering passages. One memorable section played around with key signatures and the edges of tonality.

The text for "Creation/Creator" is a vast assemblage of quotes concerning the various creation stories and questions. Unfortunately, Theofanidis was unable to exclude anything, resulting in a lot of speeches, as there were too many words to set musically. It often felt like a

college class where you were trying to get down all those quotes for some exam. They never stopped coming.

Director James Alexander added effective lighting, simple projections, and attractive costumes. A few moments seemed stagey, but mostly it worked.

October 11, 2014

Milwaukee Symphony delivers powerful rendition of Brahms' 'German Requiem'

By Elaine Schmidt

We all feel and express grief differently, but very few of us have done so as eloquently as Brahms did with his "German Requiem."

The requiem, which Brahms referred to as a requiem for all humanity, is not based on the Catholic requiem Mass and its Latin text, but relies instead on passages from Martin Luther's German Bible.

Guest conductor Robert Spano joined the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, MSO Chorus, soprano Jessica Rivera and baritone Nmon Ford in a thoughtful, expressive performance of the work.

Spano's direction of the piece sounded more like a process of sculpting than leading the combined ensembles, eschewing a heart-on-the-sleeve interpretation for a more inward-looking rendering built of detail and clarity.

He brought tremendous shape to choral phrases, creating moments that were profoundly intimate — no small feat when working with an ensemble of well over 100 voices.

Within the orchestra too, a focus on details, such as the blending and dovetailing of phrases and exquisite shaping of individual phrases as well as

entire movements, drew the audience into the piece.

The attention to details, along with slow, deliberate crescendos, restrained tempos and powerful, articulate performances by Rivera and Ford, brought weight and gravitas to the piece. The audience responded with an enthusiastic standing ovation.

The evening opened with Jennifer Higdon's elegant "river sings a song to trees," written about the rivers that run through her home city of Atlanta.

It takes very little imagination to get from the piece's title to hearing its delicate, shimmering opening moments as the trickle of a stream.

Higdon uses traditional orchestral voices along with such gentle effects as bowed percussion instruments to create what amounts to a stirring sonic tribute to Atlanta's host of large and small waterways and the spaces they define.

Long, graceful crescendos and decrescendos along with exquisite shifts and changes in orchestral textures create colorful, compelling music.

Spano and the MSO handled the piece with clarity and musical purpose, bringing pure, ringing, beautifully balanced sounds to a vivid performance of the piece.



January 10, 2014

Spano leads soloists and BSO members in Golijov's energetic, eclectic "*La Pasión*"

By Aaron Keebaugh

"Death to the King of the Jews! Hail, Christ, save thyself," the crowd snarls as they follow Christ to Golgotha, their zeal captured through the zesty rhythms and raucous brass shouts of a mambo.

It's not the typical way to portray this scene from Christ's Passion. But, then again, Osvaldo Golijov's *La Pasión según San Marcos* is not a typical work. Driving minimalism, spare dissonances, fiery timbres, and toe-tapping rhythms are the frames through which Golijov sets his portrait of Jesus' final days. The composer's inspired retelling of the story returned to Symphony Hall Thursday night when Robert Spano led a fine ensemble comprising members of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Orquesta La Pasión, and the Schola Cantorum de Venezuela in the first Boston performance of Golijov's oratorio in over a decade.

Spano, who serves as music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, directed the first U.S. performances of *La Pasión* in Boston and Tanglewood in 2001. Since then, the work has been heard around the globe to critical acclaim. Today, it stands as Golijov's greatest achievement.

Composed as part of the "Passion 2000" project in celebration of Bach's 250th birthday, *La Pasión* is a multi-faceted work for singers, instrumentalists, and dancers that recasts the festive and anguished sides of St. Mark's Passion

through the lenses of Spanish vernacular speech and Latin-American music.

The ninety-minute piece is as much a theatrical spectacle as a musical one. The narrative is bookended with musical scenes that depict Christ hanging on the cross, as if he is recalling, in his final moments, the events that led to his crucifixion. Chief among these scenes is Jesus' face-to-face with Peter, portrayed with excitable and commanding presence by singer and Afro-Cuban dancer Reynaldo González-Fernández. When the apostles forsake Christ upon his arrest, González-Fernández danced with energetic and flailing movements to match the music's angular and repetitive riffs. Elsewhere, capoeirista Deraldo Ferreira seemed to glide on the stage as he performed graceful handstands and sweeping kicks.

But it is the score's deft vocal writing, flourishes of Spanish flamenco melody, and swirling Afro-Cuban and Brazilian polyrhythms that make *La Pasión* so appealing. Much of the score resembles Latin-jazz jam sessions that are thick with a spiky brass licks and collage of shakers, bells, and batá drums.

Yet in other places, the music dissolves into a cold sheen of chords in the strings. The percussionists of Orquesta La Pasión, led by Mikael Ringquist and Gonzalo Grau, supplied a high and steady energy. Kudos too to the brasses—Thomas Siders (trumpet), Michael

Martin (trumpet), Toby Oft (trombone), and Stephen Lange (trombone)— who pumped the music with enough octane precision playing that would suit any big band.

The stars of the evening, though, were the singers of the Schola Cantorum de Venezuela. With raw, powerful, and uniform blend, the chorus brought palpable and exotic flair to the chilly dissonances of Golijov's vocal writing. Light choreography and staging—the ensemble frequently split into two groups to flank the instrumentalists—made for an engaging performance. Their affecting moment came in *Amanecer: Ante Pilato*, (Morning: Before Pilate), where, crouched on one knee, the singers rendered the story of

Jesus' bounding with piercing, nasal tone and mesmerizing focus.

The most beautiful music of the evening came in the *Aria of Peter's Tears*, the text taken from a Galician poem by Rosalía de Castro. Here, soprano Jessica Rivera struck an angelic presence to the eye and ear, her voice floating over the strings' spare and mournful waves.

Biella Da Costa, with an alto that is both rich and feathery, found the sweet agony in the *Aria of Jesus*. She offered her finest and most haunting singing in the final chorus, which mixes the gospel text with the *Jewish Mourner's Kaddish*. Da Costa and the chorus traded phrases with awe-inspiring blend and resonance. The lines of the Aramaic verse echoed and faded in the hall as would a voice in the wilderness.

Jessica Rivera

Los Angeles Times

July 20, 2013

Memorable performances highlight Colburn SongFest program

By Mark Swed

It may take a while for Mary Magdalene to catch up in song with the Mary music history knows so much better. But thus far, this has been the year of the other Mary. The Los Angeles Philharmonic mounted a production of John Adams' "The Gospel According to the Other Mary" at the Walt Disney Concert Hall. San Francisco Opera premiered Mark Adamo's "The Gospel of Mary Magdalene."

Along with those West Coast Mary Magdalenes, Libby Larsen's "The Magdalene" for soprano and piano had its premiere in Texas, and Friday night it came our way. Written for soprano and piano, it opened a SongFest program devoted mostly to Larsen at the Colburn School's Zipper Hall. There's more, though. The evening also included a glorious new piece by the animated Bay Area composer Gabriela Lena Frank for two singers and piano. One of those singers happened to be mezzo-soprano Kelly O'Connor, who had been Adams' intensely dramatic Mary Magdalene across the street at Disney in the spring. Larsen's "Magdalene" is a 13-minute monologue in which Mary describes the redemption of a female deity known as Sophia. The printed text, though, was not meant to be the point on Friday, since the hall was darkened for dramatic effect and intelligibility, beginning with the production of consonants, did not appear a priority to composer or performer.

But if little could be understood (even when, once or twice a few lines of text were projected for further dramatic effect), Clarissa Lyons' luxuriant large soprano made much of Mary's liquid vocal lines full of Middle Eastern melisma, while Leann Osterkamp achieved the desired flashiness for the piano accompaniment. I would have thought that seduction was part of the plan. In fact, Magdalene's text extols the anguish of abuse as the price for radiance.

Frank's "Honey, the first song of a projected song cycle, "Cantos de la Cocina" (Songs of the Kitchen) went for another kind of radiance. Commissioned by SongFest and written for O'Connor and soprano Jessica Rivera with a text by playwright Nil Cruz, it is a dialogue, affectionately barbed and wonderfully affecting, about a jar of spilled honey and a mother/daughter relationship that won't allow for spilled dreams.

And if there is vocal music that mimics the viscous sweetness, the fragrance and headiness of honey, this is it. In L.A., we've been able to watch both Rivera and O'Connor blossom from students into I suspect two of the most able and astonishing young singers of their generation. They here expressed both the said and the unsaid that are essential in all loving relationships.

Frank particularly relished an intoxicating acoustic phenomenon these singers can produce singing together,

where they seem to amplify each other's voice, causing the whole hall and everyone in it to vibrate on their intersecting wavelengths. Raquel Gorgojo was the fine pianist. Frank, a composer who is herself coming of age, has begun something special here.

The rest of the evening involved the coming and going of many singers and pianists in various Larsen song cycles, all but one for women and concerning love and/or loss. The cycle for baritone, however, concerned murder.

In "The Peculiar Case of H.H. Holmes," Larsen enters into the head of Herman Webster Mudgett, a 19th-century Chicagoan who built a hotel in which he killed his guests. The score may not precisely penetrate the psychology of the macabre, but Michael Kelly (who was accompanied by Pierre-André Doucet)

proved a fairly seductive Mudgett. That was apparently the point. Elsewhere there were Larsen songs serious and light. The composer almost always put the voice first, urging on voluptuous singing, and that was most effective in mezzo-soprano Loralee Songer's performances of the cycle "Love after 1950," slightly humorous songs about stolen kisses, makeup, moonlight and magic in the era of "Mad Men."

The somber final cycle, "Sifting Through the Ruins," written for mezzo Suzanne Mentzer and violist James Dunham with Liza Stepanova as Friday's pianist, sifts through the detritus of 9/11. Larsen cannot here escape the maudlin, but since the music was meant as a memorial, she's allowed.

Even so, pass the honey.

Jessica Rivera

The New York Times

March 11, 2013

A Rousing ‘Pasión,’ This Time Spanning Generations as Well as Cultures

Oswaldo Golijov’s ‘Pasión Según San Marcos’ at Carnegie Hall

By Anthony Tommasini

For all of its popularity since its triumphant premiere in Stuttgart, Germany, in 2000, Oswaldo Golijov’s “Pasión Según San Marcos” (“The St. Mark Passion”) is not likely to become a standard repertory work. Reimagining the Bach Passions, Mr. Golijov tells the story of the Crucifixion as it has been lived and felt every day in Latin America. This heady, polystylistic, genre-blurring work blends Brazilian, Afro-Cuban and other styles of Latin American folk and pop music into a 90-minute theatrical score that includes elements of ritual and dance. Any presentation requires performers steeped in the musical traditions from which Mr. Golijov draws.

Since its premiere, the “Pasión” has been championed by a touring company of choristers (the Schola Cantorum de Venezuela, directed by María Guinand), instrumentalists (Orquesta La Pasión) and stellar soloists headed by the Grammy Award-winning Brazilian jazz singer Luciana Souza. The “Pasión” road show came to New York for the Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2002, for a Golijov festival at Lincoln Center in 2006 and the Mostly Mozart Festival in 2007, all conducted by Robert Spano.

But on Sunday afternoon at Carnegie Hall the singers of the Schola Cantorum were joined by students from the Forest

Hills High School Concert Choir (Robert Koch, director) and the Frank Sinatra School of the Arts Concert Choir (Heidi Best, director), as well as young members of Songs of Solomon, an inspirational ensemble that draws from New York, New Jersey and Connecticut (Chantel Wright, director). The performance was a Carnegie Hall Creative Learning Project, which pairs New York students with professional musicians.

It must have been deeply gratifying for Mr. Golijov to see his “Pasión” performed with such enthusiasm and joy by a chorus of nearly 160 that mixed New York-area high school students with the impressive Venezuelan artists. The choristers were similarly dressed, in white with Holy Purple sashes, all singing and shouting, bobbing and weaving.

Mr. Spano was again the conductor. The 14 core members of the Orquesta La Pasión, who play Latin American instruments, including various drums and Brazilian rattles, were joined by a roster of freelance string players.

Mr. Golijov is a musical polyglot, an Argentine Jew equally immersed in South American music and klezmer, who studied in Israel and has explored diverse contemporary styles. For me the most musically involving sections of this work are those in which Mr. Golijov

draws upon elements of Western classical heritage, as in the mesmerizing “Lúa Descolorida” (“Colorless Moon”), which describes Peter’s disowning of Jesus. Here the “Pasión” departs from biblical texts and substitutes a meditative 19th-century Galician poem, blending elements of French Baroque sacred music with a plaintive vocal line, sung radiantly on Sunday by the soprano Jessica Rivera.

But for long stretches the “Pasión” shook the hall with pummeling Latin American percussion riffs and vibrant choral outbursts. Ms. Souza, as always,

brought soulful emotion and elegant vocalism to her performance. The singer and dancer Reynaldo González-Fernández was riveting in “Cara a Cara” (“Face to Face”), singing a heated duet with himself, playing both Jesus and Peter in a tense exchange.

The most affecting moment of the tremendous ovation came when the directors of the youth choruses took the stage for a bow, a couple of them looking teary. It is so seldom that these dedicated educators receive the attention they deserve.

Jessica Rivera

The New York Times

February 6, 2013

Music Seems Familiar, Even When It's Not

By Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim



Osvaldo Golijov Biella Da Costa, center left, and Jessica Rivera singing Mr. Golijov's "Ayre" at Zankel Hall.

The Book of Kohelet, or Ecclesiastes, contains one of the most frequently quoted phrases from the Bible: "There is nothing new beneath the sun." The world-weary author of the text then continues, "Sometimes there is something of which one says: 'Look, this is new!' — it has already existed in the ages before us." "Qohelet" is the title of an instrumental work by the Argentine composer Osvaldo Golijov, which the St. Lawrence String Quartet performed on Monday evening at Zankel Hall as part of an all-Golijov concert that attested to his profound interest in Middle Eastern and Mediterranean spiritual traditions. Mr. Golijov holds this season's Richard and Barbara Debs Composer's Chair at Carnegie Hall.

The choice of text seems doubly apt. Mr. Golijov makes frequent use of musical

material that "has already existed in the ages before us," including folk songs, prayer melodies and lullabies. Sometimes he incorporates more recent music. Discarded cuttings of a film score he had written with the composer Michael Ward-Bergeman found their way into Mr. Golijov's "Sidereus"; a popular Brazilian Carioca tune is built into "Qohelet." Both of these instances led to charges of plagiarism, with some critics arguing that Mr. Golijov did not sufficiently identify the extent of his debt. Was he not abusing the trust of the listener who expects a composer to say, "See this, it is new"?

Plagiarism was not part of the brief conversation at Monday's concert between Mr. Golijov and Jeremy Geffen, Carnegie Hall's director of artistic planning. But Mr. Golijov explained that

he had decided to rework an earlier version of “Qohelet” that received its premiere in 2011 when he discovered that the Carioca tune was instantly recognizable to a Brazilian music critic.

“I wanted the Brazilian song to be like that painting by Salvador Dalí of a watch melting on a table,” Mr. Golijov said. “And it wasn’t melted enough.”

There is no question that Mr. Golijov’s highly melodic music draws much of its emotional immediacy from the sense of familiarity it creates as it taps into a communal subconscious. The concert opened with the mesmerizing “K’vakarat,” a work he originally wrote for the cantor Mikhail Alexandrovich and the Kronos Quartet. Here the cantor’s music was given over to the clarinetist Todd Palmer, who, with the St. Lawrence players, gave a performance of shamanic intensity.

In its newly melted version (I cannot compare it with the first), “Qohelet” opened with airy, almost colorless, harmonics that gave way to elegiac, thick-flowing melodies. In the second movement that flow continued uninterrupted in one of the violins, while the other three musicians dug into a propulsive, rhythmic groove.

The final work on the program was “Ayre,” a song cycle for female voice, laptop sampler and an array of acoustic instruments played with infectious abandon by the excellent Zankel Band.

The luminous soprano Jessica Rivera and the flamboyant mezzo Biella Da Costa took turns with Mr. Golijov’s settings of texts from pre-Expulsion Spain, as well as Christian Arabic hymns and a reflection on exile by the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, in a performance that felt more like a ritual than like art.

Jessica Rivera

The New York Times

April 1, 2011

Divine Life Force, Please Meet Truth and Existence

By Vivien Schweitzer



Jessica Rivera performing at Zankel Hall on Tuesday night.

The lyric soprano Jessica Rivera has become a respected purveyor of contemporary fare, making a splash in (among others) Osvaldo Golijov's "Ainadamar" and John Adams's "Doctor Atomic."

On Tuesday evening at Zankel Hall she joined the pianist Molly Morkoski and Ensemble Meme, conducted by Donato Cabrera, for the premiere of "Atash Sorushan" ("Fire Angels"). Mark Grey wrote the work in honor of the 10-year anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks.

Set to a text by the writer and theater artist Niloufar Talebi, this tale of love, connection and transcendence meshes ancient Eastern and modern traditions

to relay a story about Mana (the Persian term for divine life force) and Ahsha — an Avestan (East Iranian) term that signifies truth and existence in Zoroastrian theology.

Ms. Talebi endowed these philosophical concepts with human characteristics to create the characters of Mana, "the beautiful daughter of light," represented by rhythmically firm sounds, and Ahsha, "son of ancient empires proud," embodied by more elaborate vocal lines. The elegant texts were woven into four scenes featuring solo live voice, recorded voice and electronic soundscapes.

"Invocation," the first section, began with wild and unearthly recorded vocals, with Ms. Rivera singing with radiant conviction over the turbulent instrumental canvas. In "Voyage," the ensuing section, the text was complemented by colorful orchestration and words that evoked the events of Sept. 11.

Ms. Rivera sang with commitment and ardently delivered the lyrical, exuberant and agitated vocal lines. While colorfully scored, with vivid instrumental underpinnings, the work has moments that veer toward the saccharine and even the hokey, like the prerecorded voice in "Transformations," the third section. "Restoration," the concluding part, features a verse in Persian by the Iranian modernist poet Sohrab Sepehri. Ms. Rivera also wielded her lovely voice to expressive effect in the first half of the

program, which began with Schumann's "Frauenliebe und -Leben" ("A Woman's Life and Love"), set to poems by Adelbert von Chamisso that relay a woman's journey through love, marriage, motherhood and widowhood.

Ms. Morkoski was the sensitive pianist here and in Debussy's "Ariettes Oubliées" — set to poems by Paul Verlaine, including "C'est L'Extase" and "Il Pleure Dans Mon Coeur."

Jessica Rivera

The New York Times

December 17, 2007

Tweaking a Definitive Moment in History

By Anthony Tommasini

John Adams's "Doctor Atomic" enjoyed a major success during its premiere production two years ago at the San Francisco Opera. Yet even among the work's champions, the consensus was that this ambitious opera — about the physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, who presided over the Manhattan Project to build the first atomic bombs — needed some tweaking.

Mr. Adams wrote the opera with his longtime colleague Peter Sellars — who directed the production and assembled the unconventional yet surprisingly fluid libretto from interviews with project participants, history books, transcripts of conversations, declassified documents and poetry, notably "The Holy Sonnets" of John Donne. The creators made some significant changes, though, as the opera found its way to the two companies that have co-produced it with the San Francisco Opera: first De Nederlandse Opera in Amsterdam in June, and now Lyric Opera of Chicago, where the production opened to a packed house on Friday.

Once again "Doctor Atomic" came across as the most complex and inventive of Mr. Adams's works, an engrossing operatic drama, even though very little happens. Yet by the end the entire world has changed forever.

The opera begins in June 1945, as the scientists and military personnel working on the project in Los Alamos, N.M., are poised to test the first atomic

bomb. Most of the story takes place on the night before and the morning of July 16, the day of the first test. For the two and three-quarter hours everyone just waits for the inevitable. The characters adjust last-minute details and fret about the gusty winds and lightning storms. The physicist Enrico Fermi (who does not appear) has been taking bets on whether the detonation might set the Earth's atmosphere on fire. But the internal dramas are excruciating as the participants grapple with their consciences.

Gerald Finley, the Canadian baritone who created the title role, was back as Oppenheimer, and his portrayal is even stronger. He sings with melting richness yet lucid diction. Puffing away on cigarettes, his suit forever rumpled, full of bravado yet plagued with doubts, Mr. Finley's Oppenheimer is a tragically flawed and Faustian figure who dares to push science into unknown and potentially catastrophic realms.

Questioned about the moral implications of the project work by his pugnacious colleague Edward Teller (portrayed, as at the premiere, with chilling authority by the husky-voiced baritone Richard Paul Fink), Oppenheimer deflects the matter. "The nation's fate should be left in the hands of the best men in Washington," he says. The role of Kitty, Oppenheimer's wife, originally for mezzo-soprano, has been rewritten for soprano, here the radiant

lyric soprano Jessica Rivera in a vulnerable and intense portrayal. A crucial early scene takes place in the Oppenheimers' bedroom, where Kitty, full of fears about her moody, brilliant and distant husband, cozies up to him in bed and voices her feelings in lines by the poet Muriel Rukeyser: "A world is to be fought for, sung, and built/Love must imagine the world."

More music has been added to Kitty's part. Still, some of her scenes seem too languid and drawn out. For one, an episode in Act II when Kitty, shaken with fear, sits in a lawn chair drinking whiskey as her American Indian maid, the all-knowing Pasqualita, a kind of Erda of the American Southwest (the earthy contralto Meredith Arwady), watches the Oppenheimer children.

Three notable singers also recreate roles from the premiere. The fresh-voiced lyric tenor Thomas Glenn gives a disarming portrayal of the earnest, idealistic young physicist Robert Wilson. The robust bass-baritone Eric Owens is the blustery Gen. Leslie Groves, who ferociously commands a bedraggled meteorologist, Jack Hubbard (the veteran baritone James Maddalena), to assure him that the weather will be suitable for the big test of "the gadget," as people keep calling the bomb.

The choristers are costumed mostly as support staff at Los Alamos: cafeteria workers, custodians, technicians, clerical aides. Mr. Sellars has devised some highly stylized and effective ensemble movements for the chorus

members, as when they shuffle en masse across the stage, filled with anxiety. I still do not find that the dance elements by the choreographer Lucinda Childs add much. When the dramatic tension threatens to lag, eight dancers in T-shirts and khakis dash on to the stage and twirl around in the background.

Mr. Adams conceived the opera for an orchestra that included electronic instruments and recorded sounds. To make sure the singers could perform subtly and still be heard, they wear body microphones. In San Francisco on opening night the balances were not right; here they were. The amplification was minimal and unobtrusive, though those who think of opera as an art form for natural sound will have to adjust.

In this revival Mr. Adams's score seemed even more ingenious. The tremulous surface of the orchestra music is deceptively calm, allowing the vocal lines to dominate. Just below, though, the orchestra teems with fractured meters, intertwining contrapuntal elements, fitful bursts and Mr. Adams's most tartly dissonant, boldly unmoored harmonies. The conductor, Robert Spano, was the master of this score, ably guiding every metric shift and fractured meter, conducting with inexorable sweep yet telling detail.

Perhaps there will be more changes before "Doctor Atomic" arrives at the Metropolitan Opera in its own production, details to be finalized. It will surely be just as grimly relevant.

Disc Reviews

Jessica Rivera

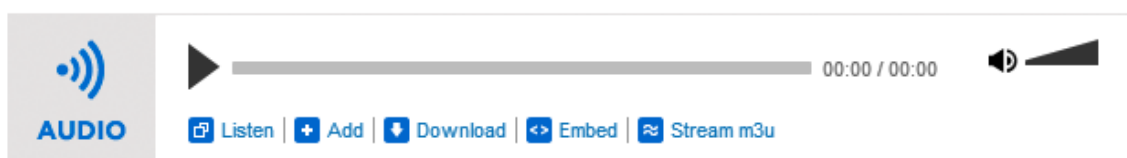


May 15, 2017

Q2 Music Album of the Week

The Shimmering Nebulae of Paola Prestini's 'Hubble Cantata'

By Daniel Stephen Johnson



Click to listen or visit <http://bit.ly/2pQPEEr>

Paola Prestini is more than a composer. Co-founder of the production company VisionIntoArt (VIA) and its recording offshoot VIA Records, her latest institutional triumph is National Sawdust, the audiophile listening venue in Williamsburg that instantly became Brooklyn's not-just-classical hotspot.

And her new VIA Records release, *The Hubble Cantata*, is a more than a piece of music. It is a new kind of collaboration: a nexus of art and science.

On the scientific side, the piece features spoken narration by astrophysicist Mario Livio, exploring the place of Earth and its passengers among the stars and generally asking the Big Questions provoked by our view of the heavens. A stereo recording, unfortunately, cannot fully convey the 3D virtual reality sound – designed by Arup, the same firm that created the acoustics of National Sawdust and, among other high-profile projects, New York's new Second Avenue Subway – that accompany live performances of the work, but vestiges of the experience remain in the atmospheric electronic elements of the score.

And the project's other collaborators are no less – and there is no other word for them – stellar. The libretto is by Royce Vavrek, the wordsmith behind the 21st-century's most acclaimed American operas (*Breaking the Waves*, *Dog Days*), and soprano Jessica Rivera's passionate solos transmute the scientific stuff of the text into pure theater. Baritone Nathan Gunn's voice reminds you why he is one of opera's biggest names, and Julian Wachner steers not only his own Washington Chorus and Novus NY but also the Brooklyn Youth Chorus and the Norwegian string ensemble 1B1 through Prestini's shimmering nebulae of sound.

For a piece that explicitly takes as its subject the seeming insignificance of mankind against the sublime and infinite expanses of outer space, *The Hubble Cantata's* focus is very much on the human. This studio recording is not awash in reverb but as raw and clear as a live recording, allowing us to hear the minutest details of these terrestrial voices as they lead us on a voyage through the stars.

Jessica Rivera

 Oberon's Grove

May 10, 2017

Music by Robert Spano

A disc of music by Robert Spano has come my way, and I am pleased to report that it makes for a truly satisfying listening experience. Maestro Spano is Music Director of the Atlanta Symphony; with that orchestra, he has made a number of excellent recordings (their Vaughan Williams *Sea Symphony* is a particular favorite of mine). On this latest release, from ASO, we experience Spano as both an imaginative and evocative composer - with a special gift for writing for the voice - and a poetic pianist.

Soprano Jessica Rivera sings Spano's *Hölderlin-Lieder*: settings of three poems by the German Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin. Hölderlin's persona was steeped in Greek mythology; he viewed the gods of Greece as manifesting themselves to humanity thru nature: the sun, earth, sea, and sky. The first of the three songs, *Liebeslauf* ("The Course of Life"), begins ecstatically. Spano immediately shows himself as a composer who cherishes the voice; eschewing quirky and (ultimately) distracting gimmicks in his vocal writing, Spano instead evokes the great *lieder* composers - from Schumann and Schubert to Korngold and Zemlinsky - in his melodic persuasiveness. Yet his style is thoroughly contemporary. The piano supports, sustains, and wraps itself around the voice, all to distinctive effect. From its euphoric start, *Liebeslauf* soon descends to a reflective state: love, the singer says, has drawn her down...and grief, still further. The piano gently underscores her acceptance of these

setbacks, yet the mood rebounds to an almost rapturous state as she senses the opportunity for a new beginning. Ms. Rivera's appealing lyricism, in which she combines a soft-focus of tone with verbal surety, makes her a skilled vocal painter.

In *Socrates und Alcibiades*, Hölderlin's connection to the ancient world is evinced. The song is pensive to begin with, the singer adapting an insinuating colour as she wonders why Socrates is so entranced by the young Alcibiades. Here again, Ms. Rivera's sensitivity to the words is keen yet free of over-emphasis; she's a wonderfully natural interpreter. There is a mounting of passion in the music, yet it stabilizes into a more thoughtful state: "In the end, the wise will often bow to beauty." Mr. Spano brings in some absolutely gorgeous measures for the piano, and he plays them so lovingly.

The Rivera/Spano collaboration excels further in the final song - the longest of the three - *An die Parzen* ("To The Fates"). Here the Hölderlin text and the Spano music converge ideally: the poem seems to allude to Orpheus. A feeling of both resignation and longing fills the air, and Ms. Rivera yet again finds lovely hues, now in her lower register. The song conveys a sense of the mysteries of life and death in the ebb and flow of the mingled voice and piano.

Following a rise of passion, the pensive piano takes over. Soaring, the singer returns in a greeting to the realm of the spirits. Then the voice takes on a colour of serene reflection: "For once I lived as the gods - and I need nothing else." Ms.

Rivera's final note is like a benediction, which the piano softly affirms.

I heartily suggest that lyric sopranos everywhere have a listen to these songs; they will make a very worthy "21st century" addition to recital repertoire.

The excellence of Mr. Spano's pianism assures a persuasive performance of the *Sonata: Four Elements*. Right from the shining, isolated high tones of the first - and longest - movement ('*earth songs*'), the pianist's sense of mystery proves a key element to the appreciation of the piece. The music is gentle at first, drawing upon images from nature from droplets of dew or shards of crystal; a more animated passage evokes streams and breezes with cascading notes. Trills in the higher range sing of rainbows before a plunge to deeper notes underscores the pull of gravity. The music fades on high.

The composer describes the second movement ('*air born*') as a *scherzo*. It begins with a touch of irony: an almost cabaret feel. A repeated high motif has a hypnotic effect; then the introductory theme is presented again. A very delicate passage and the gentle wit of subtle *grupetti* and trills played softly (and then more forcefully) draw on to the *scherzo's* deft conclusion.

'*under water*', the sonata's slow movement, has a meditative quality. Dreams of Debussy hover on the air, with Mr. Spano's playing at its most ravishing. Contrasting deep tones and sparkling shimmers of high notes are heard; the music then simply evaporates.

A deep, jazzy rumbling pulse opens '*on fire*', the concluding movement. Trills and delicate flourishes alternate with deeper motifs, displaying by turns the attraction and danger of fire.



February 11, 2017

A sampling of recent Baltimore-centric classical, jazz recordings

By Tim Smith

JONATHAN LESHNOFF: "Zohar," Symphony No. 2 ("Innerspace"). Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus; Robert Spano, conductor. ASO Media.

Baltimore composer and Towson University faculty member Jonathan Leshnoff has increasingly infused his works with references to his Jewish faith. His Symphony No. 2 ("Innerspace") is deeply rooted in Judaic philosophy, specifically that of Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, but never sounds dryly academic.

The fast movements are propelled by infectious syncopation and orchestral sparkle. The 12-minute slow movement at the center of the symphony finds Leshnoff in deeply lyrical form, but there's tension, too, underlined by Shostakovich-like growling brass and heavy timpani. The finale is a clarinet note followed by more than a minute of silence — extraordinary and affecting.

Leshnoff's impressive "Zohar" for soloists, chorus and orchestra has its roots in Jewish mysticism; the text reflects on the unknowable nature of God. The score is packed with appealing elements — minimalist reiteration and propulsion; jazzy angularity (Bernstein's spirit seems present); an Elgar-like radiance; a wonderful choral fade-out at the conclusion, a la Holst's "The Planets."

Robert Spano conducts both pieces with evident authority and care. The Atlanta Symphony and Chorus are in top form, as are silvery-voiced soprano Jessica Rivera and eloquent baritone Nmon Ford.



Jessica Rivera: List of Repertoire

John Adams

A Flowering Tree

Doctor Atomic

El Niño

Nixon in China

Samuel Barber

Knoxville: Summer of 1915

Ludwig van Beethoven

Symphony No. 9

Hector Berlioz

Les nuits d'été

Leonard Bernstein

West Side Story excerpts

Georges Bizet

Carmen (Micaela)

Johannes Brahms

Ein Deutsches Requiem

Benjamin Britten

Spring Symphony

Joseph Canteloube

Chants d'Auvergne

Aaron Copland

12 Poems of Emily Dickinson

Selections from *Old American Songs*

Claude Debussy

La damoiselle élue

Donnacha Dennehy

That the Night Come

Henri Dutilleux

Le Temps l'Horloge

Manuel de Falla

Siete Canciones populares Españolas

Gabriel Fauré

Requiem

Gabriela Lena Frank

Holy Sisters

La Centinela y la Paloma

Osvaldo Golijov

Ainadamar

Ayre

La Pasión según San Marcos

She was here

Three Songs for Soprano and Orchestra

Henryk Górecki

Symphony No. 3

Mark Grey

Ātash Soroushān

Grieg/Sibelius/Rachmaninoff

Songs of Norway, Finland & Russia

Sofia Gubaidulina

Hommage à T. S. Eliot

George Frideric Handel

Messiah

Joseph Haydn

The Creation (Eve)

Agustín Lara

Solamente Una Vez

Jonathan Leshnoff

Hope: An Oratorio

Zohar

Gustav Mahler

Symphony No. 2 "Resurrection"

Symphony No. 4

Federico Moreno Torroba

La petenera

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Exsultate, jubilate

Mass in C minor

Requiem

Francis Poulenc

Gloria

Paola Prestini

The Hubble Cantata

Sergei Rachmaninoff

The Bells

Maurice Ravel

2 Mélodies hébraïques

Shéhérazade

Rodgers & Hammerstein

Pops program

Esa-Pekka Salonen

Five Images after Sappho

Richard Strauss

Four Last Songs

Die Orchesterlieder

Christopher Theofanidis

Creation/Creator

Michael Torke

Book of Proverbs

Ralph Vaughan Williams

A Sea Symphony

Dona Nobis Pacem

Serenade to Music

Heitor Villa-Lobos

Bachianas Brasileiras No. 5

Antonio Vivaldi

Gloria



Jessica Rivera Discography

URTEXT

- (2022) **Hommage to Victoria de los Ángeles** (Jessica Rivera, soprano; Mark Carver, piano.)

TONSEHEN

- (2022) **Strauss and Villa-Lobos** (Jessica Rivera, soprano; Grand Rapids Symphony; Marcelo Lehninger, conductor.)

NAXOS

- 8.559877 (2020) **Krouse: Nocturnes / Invocation** (Jessica Rivera, soprano; Vladimir Chernov, baritone; Christopher Hanulik, double bass; Maryanne Kim, piano; Antonio Lysy, viola; Richard O'Neill, viola; Richard Moses Pogossian, violin; Guillaume Sutre, violin.)
- 466986 (2018) **John Harbison: Requiem** (Jessica Rivera, soprano; Giancarlo Guerrero, conductor; Nashville Symphony and Chorus.)

VIA Records

- (2017) **Paola Prestini: The Hubble Cantata** (Jessica Rivera, soprano; Nathan Gunn, baritone; Julian Wachner, conductor; 1B1; NOVUS NY; The Washington Chorus; Brooklyn Youth Chorus.)

ASO MEDIA

- CD-1008 (2017) **Robert Spano: Hölderlin-Lieder & Piano Sonata "Four Elements"** (Jessica Rivera, soprano; Robert Spano, piano.)
- CD-1007 (2016) **Jonathan Leshnoff: Zohar & Symphony No. 2 "Innerspace"** (Jessica Rivera, soprano; Nmon Ford, baritone; Atlanta Symphony Orchestra & Chorus; Robert Spano, conductor.)
- CD-1005 (2014) **Vaughan Williams: Dona nobis pacem, Symphony No. 4 & The Lark Ascending:** (Atlanta Symphony Orchestra; Robert Spano, conductor.)

URTEXT

- JBCC242 (2015) **Spanish-American Songs:** Felix Mata, Miguel Bernal Jimenez, Rodolfo Halfter, Blas Galindo, Salvador Moreno, et al (Mark Carver, piano)

JBCC158 (2012) **Jessica Rivera Sings Romantic Music For Soprano, Clarinet And Piano:**
Schubert, Krouse, Golijov, Spohr, Salazar (Eleanor Weingarter, clarinet; L. Mark
Carver, piano)

DEUTSCHE GRAMMOPHON

477 746-1 (2010) **Golijov: La Pasion Segun San Marcos** (CD+DVD): Orquesta La Pasi3n, Biella Da
Costa, Reynaldo Gonz1lez-Fernandez, Gioconda Cabrera, Manolo Mairenam, Alex Alvear,
Schola Cantorum de Venezuela

477 616-5 (2007) **Golijov: Ainadamar.** Dawn Upshaw; Kelley O'Connor; Jessica Rivera; Jesus Montoya;
Ladies of the Atlanta Symphony Chorus; Atlanta Symphony Orchestra; Robert Spano,
conductor.

CSO RESOUND

(2009) **Ravel: Daphnis et Chloe / Poulenc:** Chicago Symphony Orchestra; Bernard Haitink,
conductor

OPUS ARTE

7020 (2009) **John Adams: Doctor Atomic** (DVD+Blu-Ray): Netherlands Opera; Peter Sellars, director

NONESUCH

(2008) **John Adams: A Flowering Tree:** London Symphony Orchestra; Schola Cantorum De
Venezuela; John Adams, conductor

TELARC

CD-80676 (2007) **Vaughan Williams: Symphony No 5 / Tallis Fantasia: Serenade to Music:** Cecylia
Arzewski, David Arenz, Reid Harris, Christopher Rex, Kelley O'Connor, Thomas
Studebaker, Nmon Ford; Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Atlanta Symphony Chamber
Chorus; Robert Spano, conductor.









