THE DREAMS & PRAYERS OF ISAAC THE BLIND
(1994) By Osvaldo Golijov

PROGRAM

Prelude: Calmo, sospeso
I. Agitato -- Con fuoco -- Maestoso -- Senza misura, oscillante
II. Teneramente -- Ruvido -- Presto
III. “K’Vakarat” -- Calmo, sospeso -- Allegro pesante
Postlude: Lento, liberamente

Kenji Bunch
Lament for Clarinet in A and String Quartet

PERFORMERS

Teddy Abrams, Conductor
Andrea Levine, Clarinet
Julia Noone, Violin
Robert Simonds, Violin
Jack Griffin, Viola
Allison Olsen, Cello

Notes... from Osvaldo Golijov on The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind

Eight centuries ago Isaac The Blind, the great kabbalist rabbi of Provence, dictated a manuscript in which he asserted that all things and events in the universe are product of combinations of the Hebrew alphabet's letters: 'Their root is in a name, for the letters are like branches, which appear in the manner of flickering flames, mobile, and nevertheless linked to the coal'. His conviction still resonates today: don’t we have scientists who believe that the clue to our life and fate is hidden in other codes? Isaac's lifelong devotion to his art is as striking as that of string quartets and klezmer musicians. In their search for something that arises from tangible elements but transcends them, they are all reaching a state of communion.

Gershom Scholem, the preeminent scholar of Jewish mysticism, says that 'Isaac and his disciples do not speak of ecstasy, of a unique act of stepping outside oneself in which human consciousness abolishes itself. Debhequth (communion) is a constant state, nurtured and renewed through meditation'. If communion is not the reason, how else would one explain the strange life that Isaac led, or the decades during which groups of four souls dissolve their individuality into single, higher organisms, called string quartets? How would one explain the chain of klezmer generations that, while blessing births, weddings, and burials, were trying to discover the melody that could be set free from itself and become only air, spirit, ruakh?
The movements of this work sound to me as if written in three of the different languages spoken by the Jewish people throughout our history. This somehow reflects the composition’s epic nature. I hear the prelude and the first movement, the most ancient, in Aramaic; the second movement is in Yiddish, the rich and fragile language of a long exile; the third movement and postlude are in sacred Hebrew.

The prelude and the first movement simultaneously explore two prayers in different ways: The quartet plays the first part of the central prayer of the High Holidays, ‘We will observe the mighty holiness of this day...’, while the clarinet dreams the motifs from ‘Our Father, Our King’. The second movement is based on ‘The Old Klezmer Band’, a traditional dance tune, which is surrounded here by contrasting manifestations of its own halo. The third movement was written before all the others. It is an instrumental version of *K’Vakarat*, a work that I wrote a few years ago for Kronos and Cantor Misha Alexandrovich. The meaning of the word klezmer: instrument of song, becomes clear when one hears David Krakauer’s interpretation of the cantor’s line. This movement, together with the postlude, bring to conclusion the prayer left open in the first movement: ‘...Thou pass and record, count and visit, every living soul, appointing the measure of every creature’s life and decreeing its destiny’.

But blindness is as important in this work as dreaming and praying. I had always the intuition that, in order to achieve the highest possible intensity in a performance; musicians should play, metaphorically speaking, ‘blind’. That is why, I think, all legendary bards in cultures around the world, starting with Homer, are said to be blind. ‘Blindness’ is probably the secret of great string quartets, those who don’t need their eyes to communicate among them, with the music, or the audience. My homage to all of them and Isaac of Provence is this work for blind musicians, so they can play it by heart. Blindness, then, reminded me of how to compose music as it was in the beginning: An art that springs from and relies on our ability to sing and hear, with the power to build castles of sound in our memories.
Osvaldo Golijov was born on December 5, 1960 in La Plata, Argentina in an Eastern Jewish household (the family had emigrated from Romania to Argentina). His father was a physician and his mother a piano teacher, so early on Golijov was introduced to not only the classical repertoire but also Jewish liturgical and klezmer music as well as the music of Argentina and tango composer Astor Piazzolla. Golijov studied at the local conservatory in La Plata before eventually moving to Israel in 1983 to study at the Jerusalem Rubin Academy. In 1986, Golijov moved to the United States for his Ph.D. work at the University of Pennsylvania where he studied with George Crumb (Ancient Voices of Children, Black Angels) and also attended Tanglewood where he studied with Oliver Knussen (Where the Wild Things Are opera).

In the early 1990s, Golijov began work with two extraordinary string quartets; St. Lawrence (the resident quartet at Stanford University) and Kronos (specializing in diverse repertoire). Both quartets have recorded and released several works of Golijov (Kronos recorded The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind with David Krakauer on clarinet in 1997 and St. Lawrence with Todd Palmer in 2002). In 1994, Golijov composed The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind for the Cleveland String Quartet and clarinetist Goira Feidman.

In 2000, Golijov (along with Wolfgang Rihm, Sofia Gubaidulina and Tan Dun) was commissioned by the Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart’s Passion 2000 project to compose a Passion piece based on one of the four gospels to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the death of Johann Sebastian Bach. Golijov composed La Pasión según San Marcos after the gospel of St. Mark. In 2003, Golijov tackled his first opera with Aïnadamâr ("Fountain of Tears") based on the life and death of Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca. Working with...
librettist David Henry Hwang (M. Butterfly), Golijov included elements of flamenco and also allowed him to continue his partnership with soprano Dawn Upshaw who premiered the role of Lorca’s muse Margarita Xirgu. In addition to Ainadamar, Golijov has written several works for Upshaw including Three Songs for Soprano and Orchestra (2002), Ayre (2004), She Was Here (2008) and as part of the soundtrack for Francis Ford Coppola’s film Tetro (2009).

Golijov has been the composer in residence for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (2006-2010) as well as Debs’ Composer’s Chair at Carnegie Hall (2012-13). In 2010, Golijov was commissioned by the League of American Orchestras to compose a piece in honor of Henry Fogel (a long time champion of classical music through his leadership with numerous orchestras as well as the League). Sidereus was premiered in October 2010 and was based on the observations of Galileo as recounted in his book Sidereus Nuncius. Golijov holds a position as Loyola Professor of Music at College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, MA (a position he has held since 1991) as well as continuing his partnership with Tanglewood Festival and the Sundance Composers Lab.

ABOUT RABBI YITZHAK SAGGI NEHOR “ISAAC THE BLIND”

Isaac ben Abraham of Posquières (Rabbi Yitzhak Saggi Nehor aka Isaac the Blind) was born in 1160 in Provence (now part of France) to the famed Talmudist scholar Abraham ben David. He was given the Aramaic nickname of “Saggi Nehor” meaning “much light” as in having excellent eyesight, an ironic twist on his blindness. Because of its ideal location in southeastern France, Provence’s history dates back to the earliest human settlements in Europe (1 million years B.C.). Throughout its history, the Provence region has had waves of settlers (and conquerors) from throughout Europe. During Isaac’s lifetime, the region was under the control of the Catalan dynasty out of Barcelona, Spain (they built cathedrals, abbeys and monasteries throughout the region). From the 12th to the early 15th century in Posquières (aka Vauvert), there was a small but influential group of Jewish scholars, mystics and masters of Kabbalah including Abraham ben David and his son Isaac.

Scholars from the region flocked to Abraham’s school and Abraham became not only an influential teacher but also a writer of code of Jewish law and a respected critic. Isaac was also an influential teacher and scholar who expanded the reach of Kabbalah through his student Azriel ben Menahem into Girona, Spain (throughout the 12th century, Girona had one of the most important Kabbalistic schools in Europe). According to David Ariel in his book Kabbalah: The Mystic Quest in Judaism, Isaac “despite his blindness, he personifies the mystic quest to transcend the limitations of the human intellect as it meditates upon the divine mind in colorful visual images. For Isaac, God is the “incomprehensible”, the universal mind that is the source of all thought and being and whose scrutiny is the object of the penetrating mind of the mystic.”