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

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 Guínand), 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.