

## Oswaldo Golijov

### “Ausencia” (“Absence”) for solo cello and string orchestra (2007)

OSVALDO GOLIJOV WAS BORN ON DECEMBER 5, 1960, IN LA PLATA, ARGENTINA. HE MOVED TO THE UNITED STATES IN 1986 AND NOW LIVES IN NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS. HIS “AUSENCIA” IS IN TWO PARTS, COMBINING THE SOLO CELLO PIECE “ÔMARAMOR” AND THE STRING-ORCHESTRA PIECE “DEATH OF THE ANGELS” (BOTH ORIGINATING IN 1991; MORE ON THIS BELOW). TO CREATE “AUSENCIA” THE COMPOSER HAS WRITTEN A NEW SOLO CELLO PART FOR YO-YO MA TO PLAY IN THE SECOND PART.

THE SCORING OF “AUSENCIA” IS FOR CELLO ALONE IN THE FIRST PART (ABOUT EIGHT MINUTES) AND CELLO WITH STRINGS IN THE SECOND (ABOUT SEVEN MINUTES).

Each of Oswaldo Golijov’s major works has a different source of musical inspiration. His first really well-known piece, *The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind* for clarinet and string quartet, invoked klezmer to speak of Golijov’s Eastern European Jewish heritage; he has tapped into Sephardic music for the folksong cycle *Ayre*, flamenco, gypsy, and Arab musics for the opera *Ainadamar*, and a potpourri of different Latin American traditions for *La Pasión Según San Marcos*.

Golijov’s inherent curiosity, his ability to find inspiration throughout many facets, musical or otherwise, of many cultures, was nurtured by studies with the similarly exploratory composers Mark Kopytman in Israel and George Crumb in the United States. A fellowship to the Tanglewood Music Center led to relationships with the St. Lawrence and Kronos string quartets, both of whom have championed his music for more than fifteen years. In a very real sense, his music and his career as a composer have developed parallel to the careers of many of his colleagues, these close connections creating feedback loops that spur everyone involved to new accomplishments. Golijov has also found a fan in the soprano Dawn Upshaw, for whom he wrote *Ayre* as well as the role of Margarita Xirgu in *Ainadamar*. Atlanta Symphony Orchestra music director Robert Spano has programmed many of his works and recorded two CDs of the composer’s music with the Atlanta Symphony: the opera *Ainadamar* and a disc including his Three Songs for soprano and orchestra and *Oceana*. Golijov’s interests, and his collaborations, also extend to other arts. He wrote the soundtracks for Sally Potter’s film *The Man Who Cried* and, more recently, for Francis Ford Coppola’s *Youth Without Youth*, which debuted at the Rome Film Festival this past October. (Coppola’s film will be released in the United States next week, on December 14, 2007.)

Golijov’s eclectic influences, which also include other world music, as well as, naturally, Western classical music (the French Baroque composer Couperin holds a special place for him), are constant catalysts for a musical style that ultimately is consistently his own. His style, in a broad sense, is in part a network of resonances, some more, some less apparent to the listener, existing in dynamic equilibrium with the composer’s own individual voice, characterized by a strong penchant for lyricism and an ear for unusual and brilliant instrumentation. (The latter quality can be heard particularly clearly in the cello concerto *Azul*.)

Beyond strictly musical allusion, Golijov is also undeniably sympathetic to the individuals behind the cultural moment, for example the actress Margarita Xirgu and the poet Federico García Lorca in *Ainadamar*, or the humanizing of Jesus Christ and his apostles in *La Pasión*. *Ausencia* for cello and strings rests on the music of the country of his birth, Argentina, and two of its greatest musical lights, Astor Piazzolla (1921-92) and Carlos Gardel (1887-1935). Gardel was a phenomenally charismatic tango singer, composer, and actor who helped bring the genre to mainstream tastes. The composer and performer Piazzolla’s expansion of the musical substance of the tango rivals Chopin’s elevation of the mazurka.

Gardel is memorialized in the first half of Golijov’s piece, the solo cello work *Ômaramor*, which is also performable by itself. The title comes from yet another level of homage. The piece was

commissioned in 1990 by Saville Ryan to celebrate fifteen years of the Omar del Carlo Tanglewood Fellowship, established by Ms. Ryan in memory of the exiled Argentine playwright Omar del Carlo. The piece was premiered by Michal Schmidt. It is a rumination on the iconic Carlos Gardel tune “My Beloved Buenos Aires.” Golijov described the relationship between his piece and Gardel’s in a letter to Saville Ryan: “So there it is, the transfigured harmonies of Gardel’s ‘Mi Buenos Aires querido’ lying like stones over which the water of the cello’s stream is running.” The title, of course, elides the name “Omar” with the Spanish word for love, “amor.”

The basis for the second half of the work, *Death of the Angels*, was conceived by Golijov in 1991 when he heard that Piazzolla had had a stroke, but it wasn’t completed until five years later, when it took its place as the second half of *Last Round*, a piece for double string quartet plus double bass written for a commission from the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group. (It was premiered by the group under Stefan Asbury’s direction on October 25, 1996.) Golijov reworked *Last Round* for string orchestra at the suggestion of Boston Symphony Orchestra artistic administrator Anthony Fogg a few years later, and the BSO premiered the new version under Seiji Ozawa on March 3 and 4, 2000. The string orchestra version of the second movement of *Last Round* is the foundation of the second half of *Ausencia*. Golijov wrote that the piece is “a final, seemingly endless opening sigh (it is actually a fantasy over the refrain of the song ‘My Beloved Buenos Aires,’ composed by the legendary Carlos Gardel in the 1930s).” Both halves of *Ausencia*, then, are related to “Mi Buenos Aires querido,” which Golijov hears quoted in Astor Piazzolla’s tango, *Milonga del Angel*. (A *milonga* is another Argentine dance.) The new cello line, written for Yo-Yo Ma, ties the two movements together with its sound, part of but extending the body of the strings, almost like a singer improvising over a known melody and lending another voice to this triple homage already saturated with melancholy and memory.

Robert Kirzinger