

Oswaldo Golijov

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. “AZUL” FOR CELLO AND ORCHESTRA, WRITTEN FOR CELLIST YO-YO MA AND THE BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA, WAS THE RESULT OF A BSO 125TH ANNIVERSARY COMMISSION. GOLIJOV BEGAN THE SCORE IN LATE 2005 AND FINISHED IT IN JULY 2006. IT WAS PREMIERED BY YO-YO MA AND THE BSO UNDER THE DIRECTION OF DONALD RUNNICLES ON AUGUST 4, 2006, IN THE KOUSSEVITZKY MUSIC SHED AT TANGLEWOOD. JAMEY HADDAD, PERCUSSION, AND MICHAEL WARD-BERGEMAN, ACCORDION, WERE THE “CONTINUO” PLAYERS IN THE FIRST PERFORMANCE (SEE BELOW). GOLIJOV MADE SUBSTANTIAL REVISIONS FOR CELLIST ALISA WEILERSTEIN, WHO GAVE THE FIRST PERFORMANCE—THE “WORLD INDOOR PREMIERE” OF “AZUL”—OF THE REVISED PIECE ON JULY 31, 2007, WITH THE MOSTLY MOZART FESTIVAL ORCHESTRA LED BY LOUIS LANGRÉE IN AVERY FISHER HALL DURING THE SUMMER’S MOSTLY MOZART FESTIVAL AT NEW YORK CITY’S LINCOLN CENTER. THE REVISED VERSION IS PERFORMED IN THESE CONCERTS. THE NEW SCORE IS DEDICATED “PARA ALICIA.”

BOTH THE ORIGINAL AND REVISED SCORES OF “AZUL” CALL FOR THREE FLUTES (ALL DOUBLING PICCOLO), ENGLISH HORN, BASS HORN, FOUR HORNS, THREE TRUMPETS, TWO TROMBONES AND BASS TROMBONE, PERCUSSION, MARIMBA, VIBRAPHONE, CELESTA, HARP, STRINGS (WITH EACH SECTION DIVIDED INTO TWO PARTS), AND “CONTINUO.” THE “CONTINUO” PLAYERS IN THIS PERFORMANCE ARE JAMEY HADDAD AND KEITA OGAWA, PERCUSSION, AND MICHAEL WARD-BERGEMAN, ACCORDION.

Oswaldo Golijov and Yo-Yo Ma are both intensely curious about all things musical, delving into the endless variety of folk, traditional, and classical music, including Western classical music, from around the world, exploring the old and the new; and both musicians are constantly reinventing themselves.* Both are based in the Boston area and have important relationships with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, so it was inevitable that the two would work together in collaboration with the BSO at some point. That point came in 2006, when Golijov finished his concerto *Azul* for Yo-Yo Ma, one of several works commissioned by the BSO to celebrate its 125th anniversary.

While Golijov’s concentration has been on the musical cultures of Europe and the Western hemisphere, Yo-Yo Ma, with the Silk Road Project, has explored music from Japan working east to Europe, as well as Brazilian and North American folk music. Following their collaboration on *Azul*, Golijov and the Chinese musician Wu Tong collaborated to write *Kuai Le* (“Joy”), one of the opening anthems of the 2007 Special Olympics, performed by Yo-Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble in October 2007.

In conceiving *Azul*, Golijov knew immediately that he didn’t want to write a virtuoso solo showcase for Yo-Yo Ma, who has many such pieces already in his repertoire. Rather he chose contemplation over conflict and wrote a work that is *not* a concerto, somewhat in the sphere, Golijov says, of Berlioz’s non-concerto for viola, *Harold in Italy*. Originally the work was written with its first venue, Tanglewood, in mind. The fact that the piece would be premiered at Tanglewood, where Golijov was a Composition Fellow in the early 1990s when the seeds of his first success as a composer were planted, added further meaning to the event. Even Golijov’s choice of title resonates: he describes “*azul*” (which is simply Spanish for “blue”) as being “the color of night,” like the night one sees beyond the lights of Tanglewood. Azul is also the color of the ocean and many other things, along with being a Spanish word of particular simple and sonorous beauty.

The composer describes the orchestra in *Azul* as being an “antenna” for the soloist, a collective body taking in and processing various musical energies and creating auras, halos, around the cello’s music. Each group of instruments has its discrete function. The soloist sits to the left of the conductor, who is in the usual downstage center position. Mirroring the soloist at the conductor’s right is an accordionist, its sound so unexpected within the orchestra, and percussionists at the center directly in front of the conductor—these are Golijov’s “21st-century continuo,” another echo of the Baroque

tradition. The strings are positioned in concentric symmetrical arcs behind these performers. Closest to the conductor on either side are the innermost arcs, each of four violas; behind the violas are the second violins, six per side; behind the seconds are the first violins (again six per side), and in the last arc are the cellos, four per side, connected in the middle rear of the string body by the six basses. (In the revised “indoor” version, the orchestra’s deployment is now more conventional.)

The rest of the ensemble is in smaller groups. The first horn is placed at the front of the stage far to the conductor’s right. Mirroring this lone horn is a group of woodwinds on the other downstage side: three flutes, English horn, and basset horn. Behind the cellos, to the audience’s left, is a brass group: the three remaining horns, three trumpets, and three trombones, conceived as providing musical “interference” to the main proceedings, the part of the antenna receptive to a cosmic radio signal. The corresponding group on the other upstage side is made up of “ringing” instruments meant to stabilize the harmonic world of the soloist: harp, celesta, and pitched percussion.

In the new version of the piece, the floating, ethereal music that was the first part of the original has been replaced by music that has direction and a different kind of energy. Golijov’s decision to make the change was twofold: he was concerned to write something specifically for Alisa Weilerstein, who was to perform the piece at the Mostly Mozart Festival, and he was also drawn to the imagery of a poem by Pablo Neruda, “The Heights of Macchu Picchu” (here translated by Nathaniel Tran):

Someone waiting for me among the violins
met with a world like a buried tower
sinking its spiral below the layered leaves
color of raucous sulfur:
and lower yet, in a vein of gold,
like a sword in a scabbard of meteors,
I plunged a turbulent and tender hand
to the most secret organs of the earth.

Azul began as a reconsideration of Golijov’s earlier *Tenebrae* for soprano and string quartet, which itself is based partly on the melismatic settings of Hebrew letter names in François Couperin’s *Leçons de Tenebrae*. Golijov wanted to “evoke the majesty of certain Baroque adagios”; to recapture for the present the ability of the late Baroque composers to suspend time without stopping motion in their music; and to achieve somehow for himself the special light-filled airiness that one hears in Couperin. Some of this remains in the revised version of the piece, but Golijov’s new approach, leavened in Neruda’s poetic imagery, brings the music out of the ephemeral stratosphere back to earth. (It’s in Neruda’s poem that the title of the first part of the piece, “Paz Sulfúrica”—“Sulfurous Peace”—picks up the earthy image of sulphur.) The composer achieves this grounding with much more defined harmonic movement and more active parts for the solo cello as well as its partner within the continuo group, the “hyperaccordion.” This instrument, invented by Michael Ward-Bergeman, is an electronically prepared and amplified accordion that has an otherworldly sound. Also more prominent are the percussion elements of the continuo: the two players improvise in “conversation” as the section comes to a close. Golijov, as is typical, has placed great trust in the musicians of the continuo group, since he has experience with their taste and capabilities, and vice versa. Percussionist Jamey Haddad was given the freedom to choose from a huge array of instruments from many musical traditions; the selection may change from performance to performance.

The second part, beginning with the slow, atmospheric *Silencio*, evokes Couperin’s slow melismatic lines in the solo part, over a gossamer orchestral accompaniment. From time to time the Baroque form of the chaconne is called up, with “looped” harmonic patterns holding sway for a time before the music’s journey continues on a new path. A substantial and ecstatic written-out cadenza (III. Transit) for the cello accompanied by accordion and percussion, followed by a percussion cadenza, leads into a kind of recapitulation of the start of the piece (IV. Yrushalem), but with new, expansive melody. Two astral codas, aptly titled “Pulsar” and “Shooting Stars,” complete the piece.

In creating this unique sound-world, Golijov's aim for *Azul* is to establish an environment in which the music onstage ebbs and flows through "emergences and submersions" that suggest different levels of focus on the part of the listener. The notion of an orchestra receptive of musical energy is an idea that expands to take in the audience, and with their added energy expands yet further, beyond the auditorium, infinitely out into the blue.

Robert Kirzinger