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Review: Yo-Yo Ma masters Golijov's "Azul"

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(<https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/.shared/image.html?/photos/uncategorized/2009/01/12/yoyobig.jpg>)

Yo-Yo Ma (<http://www.yo-yoma.com/>) was the bait for a Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra (<http://www.laco.org/>) gala concert at UCLA's Royce Hall on Sunday night. The famed cellist, just named Musical America's musician of the year, appeared to excited applause. He wore a sensible, elegant black suit, as opposed to the orchestra and conductor Jeffrey Kahane in typically dated white tie and tails.

Ma then proceeded to play Fauré's elegant "Elegy" as something not elegant at all but rather as a carnival of raw emotion and flamboyant white-tie virtuosity of old. A great artist still exists somewhere in the anointed Great Artist, but Ma has gotten very slick at (and very wealthy by) hiding it. Witness his new CD, "Songs of Joy and Peace" -- a clichéd crossover collaboration with jazz, pop, country and classical stars.

Some of America's finest composers have tried to bring Ma out of his shell of compromise with challenging, meaningful work. But after an uninspired premiere by Ma, other, more devoted cellists were needed to give life to, say, Elliott Carter's Cello Concerto or Lou Harrison's "Rhymes With Silver." And it had looked as if the same would be true for "Azul," a cello concerto that Osvaldo Golijov (<http://www.osvaldogolijov.com/>) wrote for Ma and the Boston Symphony two years ago. The score did not find its true form until Golijov rewrote it a year later for another cellist, Alicia Weilerstein, inspired by her youthful passion.

But for the West Coast premiere of "Azul" on Sunday, Ma took on the new version and made it utterly his own. His playing was brilliant. He was, once again, the Yo-Yo Ma of legend. Of all the music written for Ma, this one captures him most fully. It is a fabulous score.

In a sense, Ma and Golijov are artists made for each other. A composer of multiple personalities, Golijov has drawn his voice from the Argentina of his birth, his Eastern European roots, his Israeli education, and America, where he has chosen to live. Golijov thinks in grand terms and then chaotically brings everything he knows to a project.

"Azul" (blue in Spanish) is in four connected movements: "Paz Sulfurica" ("Sulfuric Peace"), "Silencio," "Transit" and "Yrushalem" (Jerusalem). Some of the imagery comes from Pablo Neruda's poem "The Heights of Macchu Picchu."

The concerto, in fact, begins in Neruda's "sleep of sulphur" with the cello arising from a rich orchestral chord with an engulfing melody that never seems to end. That first sensation is of layers, layers that when peeled away reveal ever more layers.

Perhaps in tribute to Ma's Silk Road Project and the cellist's curiosity about music from everywhere, Golijov introduces a second small group of soloists (like a continuo in a Baroque concerto) made up of a hyper-accordion (the instrument's range extended electronically) played by its inventor, Michael Ward-Bergeman, and a collection of exotic percussion instruments played by Jamey Haddad and Keita Ogawa.

At the center of the concerto, Ma and the continuo improvise. They cooked. Ma often appears to be possessed by the music he plays, but this time I suspect he really was.

Golijov gives the cello plenty to do throughout the score, be it to express a soulful Jewish melody or take a tango step or two. What is remarkable is how smoothly Golijov ties everything together and the chunky richness of his sonic soup. After nearly half an hour, the composer has nowhere to go but up. "Azul" has not one but two codas, titled "Pulsar" and "Shooting Stars." Blue sky becomes black space and a million points of ecstatic light.

If Ma missed nothing here, the same could be said of the accompaniment. Kahane sometimes selects Romantically tinged new work that little reveals his musical depth and flexibility. Like Golijov, Kahane understands and (if we can forget the Fauré for a minute) brings out the best in Ma. Inspiration came, on this gala occasion, from everywhere.

For the second half of the program, Kahane conducted Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. It is well known as a riot of rhythm, but the symphony sounded a tad tame after "Azul." Kahane seemingly did everything right. He is a specialist at achieving classical balance. The playing was very good. But maybe a larger ensemble was wanted after the big sounds of "Azul." Maybe Kahane just needed to let go. Maybe nothing could follow "Azul."

"Azul" has yet to be recorded. KUSC broadcast the LACO gala, and it would only make sense for Sony, which has surely made a mint off "Songs of Joy and Peace," to plow some of those profits into releasing Sunday's performance. This was a Ma moment for history. I wonder if the same will be true next week when the peripatetic cellist joins Itzhak Perlman and John Williams to perform at the Obama inauguration.

-- Mark Swed

Photo: Jeffrey Kahane, right, conducts Yo-Yo Ma on cello and Michael Ward-Bergeman on hyper-accordion in Osvaldo Golijov's "Azul." Credit: Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times

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