Clarinet In Osvaldo Golijov’s The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind

Osvaldo Golijov’s The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind is a 20th century masterpiece scored for klezmer clarinet and string quartet. This essay will explore how intercultural music, modern notation systems and the Americanisation of klezmer combined create this work. Commissioned in 1994 for the genre defining Israeli Clarinettist, Giora Feidman, this klezmer-inspired piece reflects the history of Judaism through means of quotation and imitation (Crispino, 2015, p. 8). The following quote is a sentiment towards Golijov’s compositional innovation:

About every hundred years or so, somebody writes a clarinet quintet that defines their era,” says the Kronos’ first violinist and music director David Harrington. “First there was Mozart, then there was Brahms. Now I think we have Osvaldo” (Smith, 1999, para. 6).

Giora Feidman directed the commission with support from the Schleswig-Holste Festival in Germany and approached the Cleveland Quartet - who were frequent guests at the festival - to perform the premier of the work. Feidman’s father was a traditional Jewish clarinettist and Giora often cites a mystical definition of klezmer music as being a simple vessel for inspiration that comes from the Divine source (Slobin, 2002, p.2). Sometimes referred to as “Yiddish” music, klezmer is derived from the Hebrew words kli and zemer which translates to “instrumental song”. This genre originally consisted largely of dance tunes and display pieces for weddings and other Jewish celebrations. Golijov recalls Feidman’s musical passion and flare through the way he would frequently call the composer in the early hours of the morning to discuss ideas for the work (Kozinn, 1995).

Golijov’s compositional language is derived from Jewish heritage and Latin influence. This was a result of his upbringing, where he spent his adolescence in Argentina after his family emigrated from Romania. His role in making klezmer accessible to the more traditional chamber setting was also a notable achievement, as highlighted by this source:

Golijov’s ability to find profundity in the folksiest of material was evident in ‘Dreams and Prayers’ from the beginning. Less obvious was his success at turning the klezmer style into a chamber work for all players, since Feidman’s performance was a certified star turn (Smith, 1999, para. 9).

After studying with George Crumb at the University of Pennsylvania and attaining his Doctor of Philosophy, Golijov’s first notable work is Yiddishbbuk (1992). This was written for string quartet and premiered at Tanglewood, where it grasped the attention of Kronos Quartet’s David Harrington and ultimately lead to the commissioning of Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind. Following the explosive success of the premiere at the Schleswig-Holste festival with the Cleveland Quartet in 1994, the Kronos Quartet recorded the work with klezmer clarinet specialist, David Krakauer, who “was amazed by the young composer’s epic distillation of Jewish musical culture, from his own specialty, klezmer, to sacred Hebrew chant” (Smith, 1999, para. 1). Golijov claims Dreams and Prayers was the first time he began to write the music he lives, where the music’s architecture and listening experience leaves one in a different state by

the end of the piece. As expressed by Golijov; “…before, I was self-conscious that showing a sense of humour might make the music seem cheap. Now I am cheap without fear” (Smith, 1999, para. 8).

The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind is a very early work in Golijov’s oeuvre and is a direct reflection of the sound world and lifestyle he was exposed to as a child and his time spent living in Israel for three years before moving to the United States. His interest in the theme of timelessness is expressed here:

I am trying to invent -- or maybe not invent but discover -- what I call a 'galactic folklore.' To give you an idea, the other day I was listening to Ligeti's Violin Concerto 1989–1993, and, especially in its slow movement, there is a weird convergence of the already known and the entirely new. It could have been written three million years ago or three million years from now. (Kozinn, 1995, p. 34)

Golijov describes the vividness of some ethnic music and states his hope is not to imitate them but to find their essential qualities. “I did not want to create a postcard of klezmer. I wanted to create an X-ray… with two such strong traditions -- klezmer and the string quartet -- I wanted to see if I could create a new world.' (Kozinn, 1995). During the final decade of the 20th century American artists released a vast range of compositional outputs and styles. In 1993, one year before the commissioning of Dreams and Prayers, Steve Reich in collaboration with his wife, Beryl Korot, created an opera entitled The Cave. This opera can be also described as a musical documentary which delves into the roots of Judaism, Islam and Christianity through the stories of Israelis, Palestinians and Americans. The music resembles the tonal world of klezmer styles but its function of echoing the dialogue distinguishes this piece more as a story-telling multimedia, whereas Osvaldo is creating a story and history through the raw and impactful music alone.

Dreams and Prayers stands apart from other leading works of the 1990’s by exploring a unique cross-over territory of chamber music. During the period in which Golijov was working on the commission for Giora, prominent composer Elliot Carter was completing his 5th string quartet - an incredible feat of notation through its dense and precise dynamic, articulation and rhythmic markings. Carter had also just completed a gift composition to celebrate the 80th birthday of his dear friend Witold Lutoslawski - a solo piece for clarinet entitled GRA. The clarinet fundamentals to execute a performance of this piece differ greatly to what Golijov requires from clarinetists in Dreams and Prayers. GRA is built upon a technical and detailed score with an expectation to adhere to all markings. In contrast, deciphering Golijov’s score requires deep cultural investigation, performance practice, awareness and reading beyond the score. Other clarinet compositions at this same period include three works by Milton Babbitt which display further variances. Quatrains for Soprano and two Clarinets (1993), Triad for Clarinet, Viola and Piano (1994) and Clarinet Quintet written in 1996. Within these works, the counterpoint is exceptionally dense throughout the ensemble and solo instrument line. These American-based composes were releasing music that was similar in the raw technical challenges it presented for clarinetists but opposing in tonal worlds.

The intercultural influence on Golijov’s music transcends notation on the page. It is crafted from the inspired teachings and writings of Rabbi Yitzhak Saggi Nehor (also known as Isaac the Blind) and the aural sharing of Eastern European traditional music. “Around the shadow of an opaque body, klezmer music and klezmer life itself present not only a historically shaded, but a

culturally opaque core” (Slobin, 2002, p.6).

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? (Golijov, 2019, para. 2).

In the above quote, Golijov ponders the philosophy of Jewish prayer and likens the act of making music in a quartet setting to a therapeutic form of cleansing the human conscious. Golijov quotes Jewish prayer and folklore extensively throughout Dreams and Prayers and imitates the languages of Aramaic, Yiddish and sacred Hebrew. “The first movement simultaneously explores 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'.” (Golijov, para. 4).

Avinu Malkeinu - Our Father, Our King

Osvaldo Golijov - The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind (Quotation).

Golijov suggests that 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’. I find Isaac’s lifelong devotion to his art…as striking as that of string quartets and klezmer musician.” (Golijov, para. 2). Despite blindness, Isaac was believed to possess the ability to see into the soul or aura of any individual. The reading of such an aura in Hebrew terms is referred to as hargashat ha’avir - feeling the air (Crispino, 2015, p. 40).

The implementation of extended clarinet techniques in Golijov’s work is incredibly effective (although it is not a technically ground-breaking phenomenon). Decades before Dreams and Prayers, clarinettists have utilized further techniques in Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue with the infamous opening glissando and flutter tonguing seen in Strauss’ Alpine Symphony (1915). Elliot Carter’s clarinet solo piece GRA, written at a similar time, also requires a plethora of techniques to be executed by the performer. Golijov’s approach to notating extended clarinet techniques is unique by simply suggesting timbral qualities or emotions and expecting the performer to deliver them accordingly. Dreams and Prayers demands absolute conviction from performers and is written for A clarinet, Bb clarinet, bass clarinet, C clarinet and basset horn, requiring absolute mastery of all auxiliary instruments. When questioning what range Feidman was capable of playing on the bass clarinet, Feidman replied with; “Kid, whatever you write I can play” (Feidman, 1994) Golijov took that to heart and near the end of the first movement he wrote the bass clarinet in the extreme altissimo register (Crispino, 2015, p. 22).

The Bass Clarinet playing a written G5.

The clarinet explores multiple traditional klezmer dreydlekh (musical ornamentations) such as Shofar , Davenen , Krekhtsn , Balkan Trills , Tshoks and Portamento ‘the uninterrupted flow of tone connecting two or more notes of different pitch’ (Lovelock, 2013, p. 34). As klezmer music is derived from an aural tradition and sees variances in ornamentation between performers, a standard form of expressing such ornamentation has not yet been created (Crispino, 2015, p.

33). Golijov oragnises the score with traditional string quartet notation and similar detail to that found within Brahms' music, in which the clarinet part has little direct instruction. This requires the performer to include their own traditional klezmer ornaments and personal 'spin'. Unlike the strict notated structures of Elliot Carter, Golijov dictates freedom and improvisation with markings that require the performer to have developed their own personal klezmer techniques to fulfil the written objectives. Examples of this include, "ornamentation until letter X (grace notes, trills, pitch bending etc.)" and "progressively becoming a harsh laughter (of the devil).

The example of harsh laughter is a representation of dybbuk : "the forces of God and man, they never unite, but they do commune; you can hear the dybbuk and the shofar, searching for a revelation that is always out of reach" (Crispino, 2015, p. 46). To assist the performer achieving specific sound representations in the following examples of Shofar and Davenen, fingering suggestions are attached to the music.

Klezmer is a unique aspect of American musical roots. Since its birth, it has spread through all Jewish and non-Jewish Europe as well as most corners of the world (Slobin, 2002, p.6). The contemporary ideology of klezmer music took root in the United States during the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th Century due to the heavy Eastern European Jewish immigration, especially from Austro-Hungarians and Romanians. The developing recording industry of the early twentieth century documents and shares klezmer music at this stage of bicultural fusion. Furthermore, the impact of World War I and its Jewish persecution had a profound effect on klezmer traditions and thus created a void in the timeline of this music (Blazich, 2016, p.3). A prominent collection of klezmer recordings that survived from the early 20th Century bicultural fusion were pressed in the New York City area.

The klezmer revitalization spread surprisingly quickly across North America and even to Europe by the late 1980s. Even Israel, where people had been commonly hostile to "Yiddish" culture, became a site of klezmer activity. Female musicians increasingly participated, and some of them became prominent klezmer soloists for the first time. (Slobin, 2002, para.12)

The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind is a 20th century masterpiece through its achievement of intercultural creativity and accessibility to all audiences. Golijov's forged heritage and forefront compositional approach to the modern clarinet delivers a free-to-interpret score that inspires a historical understanding of klezmer music. The depth and storytelling this piece ventures through is mysterious, passionate, sacred and bold. The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind is a modern work of equal calibre to the clarinet quintet staples of Brahms and Mozart.