

The Unremitting Grief of Falling Out of Time

By David Patrick Stearns, Musical America

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Any new offering from composer Osvaldo Golijov is welcome after his years of silence, during which he worked on any number of projects although reportedly not to his satisfaction. Small wonder, given the success of the brilliant musical fusions achieved in his opera *Ainadamar* (2003-5) and the mammoth *La Pasión según San Marcos* (2000).

His 80-minute song cycle *Falling Out of Time* made its Covid-delayed New York debut on May 6 by members of the Silk Road Ensemble, and as welcome as it is, the piece seems not to have found its legs. The 2020 recording issued on the In a Circle Records label was good to hear in advance, clarifying the multi-layered score more than what could be immediately apprehended amid the somewhat diffuse amplification at Carnegie's Zankel Hall. And clarity is crucial in a piece whose allusive text is sung, spoken, and whispered by three vocalists in Hebrew and English,

with an ensemble where modern and ancient instruments try to create a musical world with its own unique logic.

Nothing about *Falling Out of Time* is easy. The source material—the 2014 book by David Grossman—is an internal chronicle written in short, explosive, poetic sentences by a man who can't accept the reality of his son having died during an Israeli conflict in Lebanon. The composer edited the words into a narrative about a grieving father feverishly attempting to conjure his son back into being, partly while walking in circles near his home, with his concerned wife observing from above in a belfry. Ostensibly a song cycle, the piece is structured in 13 substantial sections, each with its own distinct character using one or more of the three

vocalists. The sections often elide into each other and so are not easy to follow—perhaps appropriate for a piece that often takes place inside the mind of the protagonist.

The sound palette is diverse. Electric bass lines propel some sections almost in the fashion of rock-music riffs. The three vocalists—Biella da Costa, Nora Fischer and Yoni Rechter—were highly individual and each used vernacular techniques. Compared to their unfiltered intensity on the recording, however, they sounded dialed back.



Oswaldo Golijov's *Falling Out of Time* gets its Covid-delayed NY premiere at Zankel Hall

The small string section's harmonic writing can be described as a 21st-century viol consort. Adding a more vibrant edge was pipa player Wu Man, who sometimes gave extra muscle to the ensemble, but more significantly broke into plaintive solos. Perhaps the best music was in the purely instrumental sections, especially the electrifying duet played by violinist Johnny Gandelsman and Wu Man in which each player took turns with wild (though eloquent) flights of virtuosity. Slide projections by Mary Frank were appropriately stark, often showing the silhouette of a man against alternately tumultuous and barren landscapes, mostly black and white. Surtitles were included, though in such elaborate script as to require extra effort to read.

The handling of all of these elements is a testament to Golijov's constructive talents. At its most effective, the music indeed captures the kind of grief that's almost physical, the sense that you've ingested ground-up glass and that every part of you is ripping away at every other part of you.

Such music is courageous, since it's not likely to attract the kind of audience enjoyed by other Golijov works. But his achievement here is not consistent.

The piece seems to repeat the same emotional ground, perhaps appropriate for a protagonist walking in circles but tough on the listener. It's possible that *Falling* is destined to be less sympathetically received in our (hopefully) post-pandemic times, that a prerequisite to appreciation is sharing an unconditional reverence for Grossman's grieving process. *Falling Out of Time* dares to publicly expound upon a deeply private experience but lacks the impact of Golijov at his best.

Top photo: Nora Fisher

Photos by Jennifer Taylor

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