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Composer's New Passion Unspooled

By ZACHARY WOOLFE

LOS ANGELES — For two of the great American composers, it is a season of daunting models and high expectations.

Philip Glass's expansive Ninth Symphony, which had its first performance on New Year's Day, looks toward the famous Ninths of Beethoven and Mahler; John Adams recently took on Beethoven's late quartets and piano sonatas, quoting them in his "Absolute Jest." And now, after a career spent wrestling with, and reinventing aspects of, Bach's seething Passions, Mr. Adams has composed [his own](#).

["The Gospel According to the Other Mary,"](#) which Gustavo Dudamel and the [Los Angeles Philharmonic](#) performed at Walt Disney Concert Hall here on Thursday evening, is big and ambitious, churning but ultimately limp, with moments of beauty among the longueurs. It evokes Bach's form and craft but not his sustained intensity.

Working with his [frequent collaborator](#), the theater artist Peter Sellars, Mr. Adams has chosen to focus not on Jesus — who is never present, only quoted — but on the members of a family, whose lives he touched: Mary Magdalene; her sister, Martha; and their brother, Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead.

As with most of Mr. Adams and Mr. Sellars's work together — including their Nativity oratorio, ["El Niño"](#) (2000) — the libretto of "The Gospel" is constructed entirely as a collage of pre-existing material, much of it from the Bible but also including poetic and prose texts by Dorothy Day, Louise Erdrich and others.

In "El Niño" this felt pleasantly teeming, with the myriad sources sharing the stage in a kind of party that suited the celebratory subject matter. Dark and sober, "The Gospel" feels more crowded and less coherent, as in the creators' well-meaning but anodyne and scattered attempts to juxtapose the biblical story with reports from contemporary social justice movements, like César Chávez's labor activism.

It is a use of political content far less bracing and unexpected than that in Mr. Adams's early operas "Nixon in China" and "The Death of Klinghoffer." And it distances us from the characters Mr.

Adams and Mr. Sellars are trying to create: Their Mary is suicidal and self-dramatizing, Martha quietly responsible and overburdened.

At first Mr. Adams approaches these distinctive personalities with energy and precision, opening the work with a harrowing account of Mary's night in jail, followed by Martha's calm summary of her charity work. There is a visceral thrill to the hushed ending of Mary's narrative, "I am surprised that I am beginning to pray daily," in the second scene. But that monologue is also one of many moments that ignore a basic principle of drama: show, don't tell.

"If I get down on my knees, I think: Do I really believe? Whom am I praying to?" she sings. "And a terrible doubt comes over me, and a sense of shame."

But Mary shouldn't have to say all that: Her doubt and shame should be clear through the story and music. Mr. Adams and Mr. Sellars seem to want to have it both ways, to create fully realized, emotionally deep characters that are also abstract, philosophizing archetypes.

The results fall between those stools. Mary and Martha, not to mention the cipherish Lazarus, are simultaneously opaque and obvious: We learn just enough about them for it to be frustrating that we don't learn much more.

These dramaturgical flaws (which may be addressed when the Philharmonic presents Mr. Sellars's staged version of the work next March) stand out, since "The Gospel" shows Mr. Adams in excellent musical form, orchestrating with creativity and mature mastery in sequences like the second scene of Act I, when he subtly troubles and energizes a calm soundscape with a quiet, persistent tremolo in the double basses.

Brilliantly, the backbone of his score is the cimbalom, the hammered dulcimer that is now associated with the folk music of Central Europe but was also a feature of the Middle East; it makes sense to hear it in a biblical context.

Though rare in modern Western music, the instrument, played with brilliant clarity here by Chester Englander, gives "The Gospel" an edge of otherness entirely free of cliché — a genuine exoticism — when its astringent twang rises out of the dense orchestral textures.

But despite many artful touches, the looseness is palpable in a work that was commissioned to be 90 minutes and ended up as an evening nearly double that length. "The Gospel" is full of orchestral interludes that are carefully constructed; just listen to how the music slowly, flawlessly builds and then recedes during the third scene of Act I. But they have grown numerous and unwieldy enough to strain the coherence and force of the material they are linking.

Mr. Dudamel and the Philharmonic, sounding clear and transparent, do their best to bring out the

elusive drama, as does a gifted group of young soloists with distinctive voices: the focused mezzo-soprano of [Kelley O'Connor](#), the rich contralto of [Tamara Mumford](#) and the bronze tenor of [Russell Thomas](#). There is also an excellent trio of countertenors, a feature the work shares with “El Niño,” which serves as a general narrator.

And if Mr. Adams’s “Gospel” impresses, and sometimes even dazzles, more than it illuminates or moves, there are still sequences as fresh as anything he has written. The first act closes with a tenor aria set to Primo Levi’s poem “[Passover](#).” The serene melody of its opening line — “Tell me: How is this night different from all other nights?” — gradually becomes heated before easing back into tranquillity.

Mr. Thomas sang the closing couplet — “This year in fear and shame,/Next year in virtue and in justice” — with ringing power. As he finished at the final rehearsal earlier on Thursday, my eyes filled with tears.

But then a long orchestral postlude follows, first crashing, then hushed, and it works to slacken rather than amplify the power of the aria that preceded it. This happens all too often in “The Gospel According to the Other Mary.” Mr. Adams has written a piece of grand scope and confidence. That isn’t always enough.

“The Gospel According to the Other Mary” will be performed on Saturday and Sunday afternoons at Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles; (323) 850-2000, laphil.com.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: June 7, 2012

A music review on Saturday about “The Gospel According to the Other Mary,” a work by John Adams and Peter Sellars that was performed in Los Angeles by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, misstated the given name of one of the people whose writings are quoted in the libretto. She was Dorothy Day, not Dorothea. The review also misstated the history of the cimbalom, the hammered dulcimer that is a crucial instrument in the score. Scholars date its forerunners to the 15th and 16th centuries; it does not date back to the Bronze Age.