

**Concert Report: Clarinetist Franklin Cohen with
Titi Muñoz and the Cleveland Orchestra (May 13)**

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Overture, concerto, symphony. The time-honored formula for orchestra concerts got an infusion of new life on Thursday at Severance Hall when the concerto position was occupied by Osvaldo Golijov's *The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind* in its 2005 reworking for clarinet(s) and string orchestra with assistant conductor Titi Muñoz on the podium and principal clarinetist Franklin Cohen making his live debut not only in Klezmer music but on the bass clarinet as well.

Born to Russian Jewish parents in Argentina, Golijov moved to Israel when he was 23, then to the United States, where he currently teaches and composes in the Boston area. There are many musical traditions rattling around in his head, and he manages to synthesize them into fascinating pieces that never sound contrived.

There are also usually complex layers of meaning in his compositions. *Dreams and Prayers* (recently released on CD by Franklin Cohen in its original version for clarinet(s) and string quartet) is a mystical work based on the metaphysical musings of Yitzhak Saggi Nehor, the thirteenth century Provençal Kabbalist, which seems to have flowed almost subliminally from Golijov's pen. After it was completed, the composer began to see things in it he hadn't noticed earlier: its three principal sections

(prelude and first movement; second movement; third movement and postlude) seemed to speak Aramaic, Yiddish and sacred Hebrew as though the piece were an epic encompassing the history of the Jewish people through successive languages and dialects. The piece is threaded through with suggestions of prayers (the central prayer of the High Holy Days, a prayer of Yom Kippur), the voices of a dybbuk, a shofar, a cantor, and the more unrestrained sounds of Klezmer wedding music, all episodes in an evocative, dreamlike musical landscape.

Mr. Cohen's place on stage was pre-set with bass clarinet and clarinets in B-flat and C; he took his introductory bow carrying a clarinet pitched in the key of A -- all to obtain different timbres, from the dark sounding A instrument to the normal B-flat and the sharp-tongued C clarinet, which came into play for the Klezmer sections. At the beginning, Mr. Cohen emerged from an ostinato of repeated notes with soulful tones in the low register, then climbed progressively higher into wailing territory. As moods changed, he conversed squeakily with the nervously chattering strings, played a calm Hebrew melody which grew more and more intense to resemble a jazz soprano sax line, then switched to the bass clarinet to explore low, empty, vibrating timbres as well as high, penetrating figures before slipping off into silence under a magical string chord. And all of those musical events happened in the first section.

Golijov had more fascinating sounds to explore as the piece unfolded -- tremolos punctuated with whooshes from the strings, a lyrical clarinet melody studded with Hebraic filigree, a raucous wedding tune followed by a cadenza where Mr. Cohen was joined by concertmaster William Preucil (who played the piece as first violinist in the Cleveland Quartet at its premiere), more solos between violin and viola, curious stops and starts and a surprising ending to part two. In the third section, which was calm almost to the point of being static, Mr. Cohen entered with a low, lyrical melody played sotto voce then took off into a loud, impassioned cadenza. Bass clarinet came into play as the

strings built in intensity, then a sudden major chord introduced pillars of minor chords before soloist and orchestra faded into nothingness. Mr. Cohen was rewarded with a strong ovation for a brilliant performance (though some patrons in my section got a bit fidgety during the third part of the piece).

Mr. Muñoz, who has done excellent “pit” conducting with the Joffrey Ballet at Blossom and at the recent FusionFest (Stravinsky’s *Soldier’s Tale* and Salonen’s *Catch and Release*), was a fine partner for Mr. Cohen in the *Golijov*, which had a lot of shifting meters to keep track of. Given his normally keen sense of pacing, Johann Strauss Jr.’s *Fledermaus Overture*, which opened the concert, seemed hurried and breathless.

The Symphony tonight was another kind of dream -- Hector Berlioz’ *Symphonie fantastique*, the faux-opium reverie of an artist we would today

call a stalker. Mr. Muñoz conducted from memory, making the *idée fixe* truly obsessive and leading a performance that seemed at some points too slack and at others too driven. Onstage English hornist Robert Walters and offstage oboist Frank Rosenwein set up lovely *ranzes-des-vaches* and, playing principal, clarinetist Daniel McKelway contributed memorable solos to the “Scene in the Country”. The “March to the Scaffold” was appropriately tumultuous with timpani and boisterous with bassoons and even if not quite cheekily enough, the “Witches Sabbath” brought this admirable warhorse, as it always does, to a satisfying conclusion. This is a piece where it might be much more fun to be playing in the orchestra than listening from the house. Well, maybe if you could toss it off with the *panache* of the Cleveland Orchestra.