

Musical bounty a real audience treat  
Music review: Juan Orrego-Salas' 'La Ciudad Celeste'  
By Peter Jacobi, Herald-Times Reviewer  
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To be regaled in one concert not only with the world premiere of an impressive cantata but a hefty segment from Bach's B Minor Mass is to be spoiled by musical riches.

But so it was Sunday evening for a near-capacity audience in Auer Hall when Carmen Helena Tellez conducted the Contemporary Vocal Ensemble, University Singers and IU Chamber Orchestra in performances of "La Ciudad Celeste" ("The Celestial City") by Juan Orrego-Salas and the Missa, the opening 45 minutes or so of Bach's grandly proportioned Mass.

Almost 260 years separate the creation of those two works, and yet, as different as they are in their styles and impact on a listener's sensibilities, they proved a fit, with the Orrego-Salas designed to provoke and stir, even to agitate, the Bach meant and able to calm and elate, even to inspire. The first startled; the other restored equilibrium.

Bach wrote his Missa, the Kyrie and Gloria sections of the B Minor, separately from the rest, in 1733 (the remainder followed in the 1740s), as a gift to the new elector of Saxony, hoping thereby to prove his worth and, perhaps, be chosen as court composer, a result that then actually occurred three years later.

Orrego-Salas completed his "La Ciudad Celeste" in 1992, on commission from a foundation in Chile, the composer's homeland. The foundation, though it paid him his stipend for writing the cantata, discovered it lacked the funds to follow through with a performance. Twelve years later, the work finally had its premiere, at the place where Orrego-Salas spent so many of his productive years as a professor of composition in IU's School of Music. The performance came as culmination of a weekend of seminars and celebration honoring Orrego-Salas for his achievements as composer and teacher and for having reached his 85th birthday, which actually occurred last January.

"La Ciudad Celeste" is built on the content and language of the 21st chapter of Revelations ("I saw a new heaven and a new earth: For the first heaven and the first earth were passed away"). Orrego-Salas says he was long taken by the biblical text, specifically with "the New Jerusalem, coming down from God," the vision of a city descending which, at the present time, he explains, also represents the hope of "a new Jerusalem," of better times ahead in the dangerous Middle Eastern crisis involving the Israelis and the Palestinians.

The score suggests both worry and expectation, worry in the torrid outbursts from the chorus, the high tessitura given the solo baritone and the dense textures often reserved for the orchestra, expectation in galvanizing climaxes and an atmosphere of hyperactive ecstasy. The cantata unfolds as a dialogue, with the baritone, Benjamin Eley on this premiere occasion, relating the Biblical narrative from John the Divine and the chorus offering affirmation and confirmation. There are dissonances galore but also resolutions as the music shifts back and forth dramatically from the baritone's declamatory storytelling to the emotional responses from the chorus.

Though there were moments when the excellent Benjamin Eley came close to being vanquished by the density of the accompanying orchestration and the high range of the musical line given him, he ultimately conquered his assignment and added the urgency that the Biblical message denotes. Conductor Tellez did what she could to maintain aural balances, meaning she did so successfully most of the time. She also teased passion and edginess out of her chorus to evoke the portentous nature of the topic.

Bach's score, to the contrary, breathes calm in the opening Kyrie and great jubilation in the Gloria. These feelings were most definitely evoked in performance on Sunday. The choral harmonies were pure; in the always-breathtaking chorus, "We give thanks to You because of Your great glory," the massed singers emitted the most resplendent of tones.

The soloists (sopranos Georgina Joshi and Natalie Ford, alto Teresa Herold, tenor Zachary Novak and baritone Chris Carducci) did nobly. An ornate duet by Joshi and Novak held particular beauty and clarity. One should also commend soloists from the orchestra (the

trumpeters as well as representatives from the violins, flutes, oboes and bassoons) called upon for special duties in accompaniment of the solo singers; they honored Bach's ministrations.

Over the host of stage-filling musicians, Tellez maintained persuasive authority throughout.

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