

A Composer's 'Travel Guide' to His Family's Unspoken Past

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“I recognize my father in this picture,” the composer Michael Gordon said during a recent interview, turning through a shoe box of photographs that were taken in Poland before World War II.

“But all these other people in the pictures, the people who are not my father, were killed in the Holocaust,” he continued. “Those photos stayed in that box in my father’s closet, and I think that’s where he put that part of his life.”

Gordon — one of the three insurgent founders of Bang on a Can — thought he had finished a concert-length piece about Nicaragua, where he lived until he was 8, when the pandemic hit. Written for the cellist Maya Beiser and for the Crossing, the peerless new-music chorus directed by Donald Nally, it was scheduled to make its debut in March 2020.

But that work, “Travel Guide to Nicaragua,” will be quite different at its premiere on Wednesday at Congregation Rodeph Shalom, the Philadelphia synagogue, before it travels to at Zankel Hall in New York on Thursday, when projections by Laurie Olinder will accompany it.

The title has remained the same, but the score changed as Gordon thought more about that shoe box.

“I woke up and realized this was always part of my father’s life,” Gordon said of a moment of inspiration, during the darker days of the pandemic. “He was a person of good humor, and he had a rich and fulfilling life, but it was always there, this memory and this trauma, and that’s the way he dealt with it. This is the story behind my upbringing. So I realized, this piece isn’t about my childhood in Nicaragua. I really got the focus of it wrong, and I have to rewrite it.”









Clockwise, from top left: the shoe box that Gordon's father kept old photographs in; his father's Medal of Honor; his father's dog tags from the U.S. Army; and some of the photos inside the shoe box. Credit...Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

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“Travel Guide” now is a deep reflection about how a household of Eastern European Jews from Zdzieciol, Poland, wound their way through Cuba, the United States and Nicaragua; about what they took with them, and what they didn’t; about the complications of piecing origins together amid tales unheard and traumas untold.

“I always thought of him as lucky; he got out in March 1939,” Gordon, 66, said of his father, who acquired a visa to the United States, which soon drafted him for war. In 1942, the Nazis murdered almost all of the Jews of Zdzieciol, which the Soviets had by then renamed Dzyaltava. A handful escaped into nearby woods.

As “Travel Guide” relates, Gordon met a woman, one of those “forgotten Jews of the forest,” as the historian Rebecca Frankel has called them, in Israel in 1985; her memories of her father’s town and its fate brought home the gravity of what his own father had avoided.

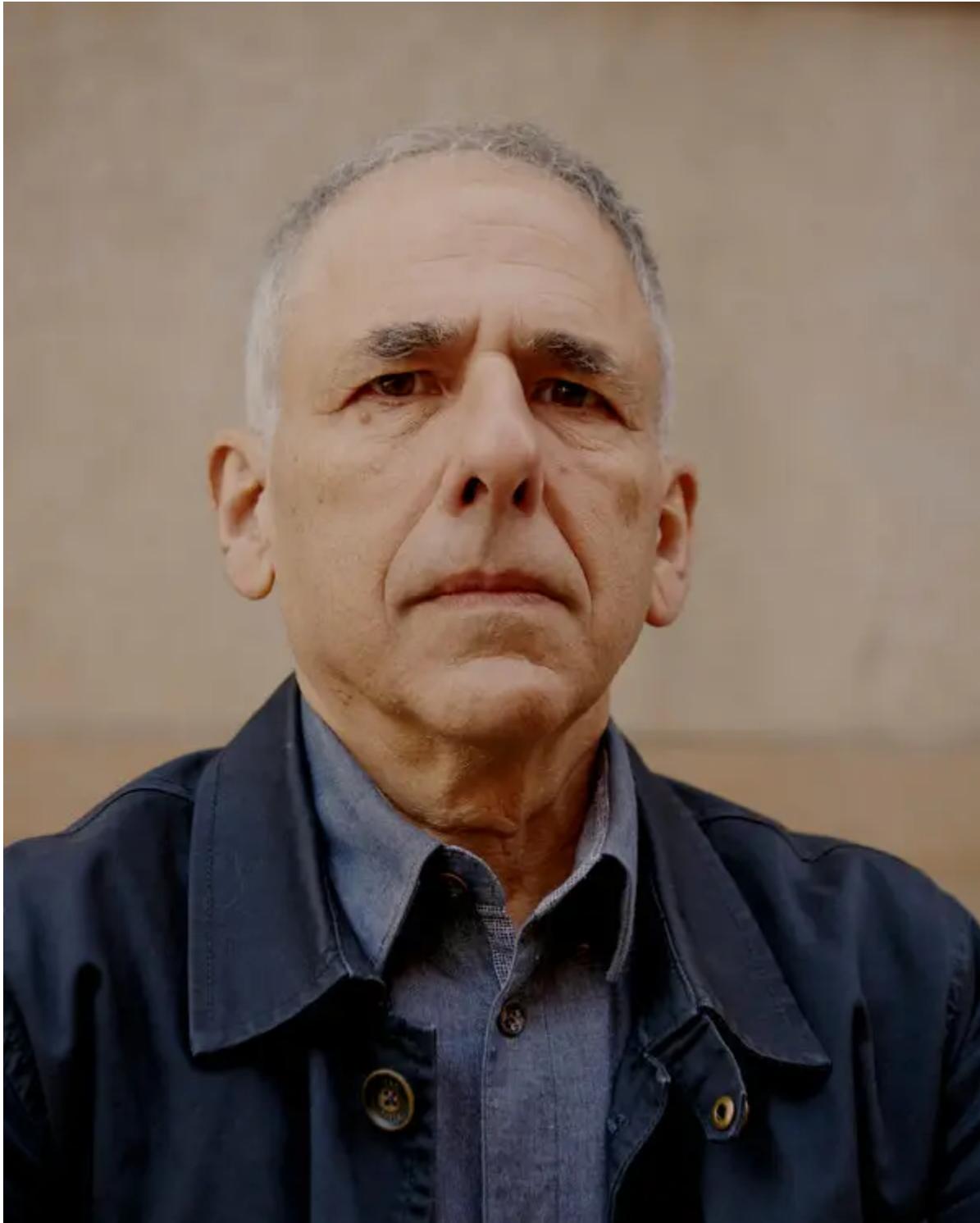
The result, with new material added and some excised, is an eight-movement work with contemporary resonance — about the rise in antisemitism, the passing of the Holocaust generation and broader issues of migration. It’s a fitting successor to Gordon’s first piece for the Crossing, “Anonymous Man” (2017), which includes an unnerving, swaying remembrance of Sept. 11 and ends poignantly reflecting on homelessness on his TriBeCa street.

As in “Anonymous Man,” Gordon, in “Travel Guide,” takes a deeply personal story — a grandfather inexplicably runs away to Cuba; a grandmother follows him but takes only two of her children along; a sister is sung of, though Gordon was unaware of her existence as a boy — and makes it more universal.

“You go through all these stories, but at the very end it’s just his childhood memories like our childhood memories,” Nally said of the last section, “I remember,” noting that Gordon recalls his mother baking a cake and a jungle growing beyond a wall. “If I’m daydreaming about my childhood, I go, ‘I don’t remember what happened to the sandbox, I remember how much I loved the birch tree.’ It sends the story on to the listener, and on out of the theater in a really magical way.”

As much as Gordon is interested in retelling stories that need to be told, “Travel Guide” leaves details strikingly obscured. Almost all his family members are left unnamed, and family lore, with its clashing narratives, offers little clarity about what happened to them, or why. Rather than pick forensically through the past — as Daniel Mendelsohn did in “The Lost,” a book that strongly influenced him — Gordon hopes that “Travel Guide” is intentionally “allowing all these stories the hazy memory, the cloud over history, to exist simultaneously.”

Image



“He was a person of good humor and he had a rich and fulfilling life, but it was always there, this memory and this trauma,” Gordon said of his father. Credit... Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

That’s reflected, Nally said, in the music, which has an “out-of-focusness” that comes from Gordon’s taste for glissandi and love of canons. There are times in the piece when the Crossing’s two dozen singers are given the formidable task of each singing the same melody

as tightly as half a beat apart, further blurring the already uncertain text.

“He’s such a rhythmic creature, a lot of it feels instrumental,” Nally said, describing the writing. “But you could say the same thing about Bach, in some ways.”

Beiser, who shares a similar family history of Jewish emigration to Latin America and spent her childhood on an Argentine kibbutz in Israel, added that if the combination of cello and chorus is relatively unusual, the piece still sits in a lineage with Gordon’s earlier compositions, including the two he has written her for cello and electronics.

“Michael’s music in my mind is very beautiful in a nonconventional way,” Beiser said, adding that he finds “acoustical ways of creating distortions, a sense of delays and all these things that you would associate with electronic music, but he’s creating them in real time with the voice. The cello merges with it, sometimes leads it, sometimes is behind. There’s something almost psychedelic, in a way. I find that to be really original, and unique to him, and to the way that he works.”

Although Gordon had written short, locally themed works for the Young People’s Chorus of New York City, his approach to choral writing has become possible only through his continuing collaboration with the Crossing, an ensemble that he values for its directness of communication.

“Even 20 years ago, I would not have ever imagined writing a work for chorus,” Gordon said, explaining that while he has no interest in writing for the operatic voice, he is attracted to singers with a more raw style. “Donald has fashioned a group of singers and a way of singing that has taken the chorus out of wherever it was, and brought it into right now.”

And that makes it easier, Gordon added, to speak to the present, even through puzzles of the past.

“It’s a strange thing because it’s not like you want the Holocaust to be the defining moment of being a Jew, and we’re not living in that past and in that era,” he said. “But telling the story is important. It honors the memory of the people who were killed, and it hopefully teaches us something.”