

Review: A Composer Reconstructs Painful Family Stories

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Shaping memories into a complete narrative can often be like creating a mosaic. It may call for picking up certain shards — one’s own tactile recollection here, a story inherited from an elder there — and piecing those bits together to form a new whole. One such reinvention is the composer Michael Gordon’s dreamlike “Travel Guide to Nicaragua,” which had its New York premiere on Thursday night at Zankel Hall after its debut on Wednesday at the Congregation Rodeph Shalom synagogue in Philadelphia.

The title of this eight-movement, program-length work doesn’t quite convey its intent. Gordon had initially conceived of the work as a musical revisiting of Nicaragua, where he lived until moving to the United States at age 8. However, when its planned March 2020 debut was derailed by the Covid lockdown, Gordon realized during the pandemic that he wanted to tell a different narrative: one about the circumstances that brought his Jewish family to Latin America. At Zankel Hall, he had excellent companions for the journey, the same lineup planned for prepandemic: the cellist Maya Beiser and the chorus the Crossing, conducted by Donald Nally; Gordon has previously written for both Beiser and the chorus. An incisive musician, Beiser’s demeanor on Thursday was equal parts earthy and intellectual; the Crossing paired emotional nuance with tight musicianship.

“Travel Guide to Nicaragua” traces the journeys that brought Gordon’s ancestors out of Europe. The realization that he wanted to rewrite the work came partly after recalling a meeting he had with a woman from Zdzieciol, the same town in Poland (that is now part of

Belarus) that his family was from.

As a teenager, the woman had survived the August 1942 slaughter of nearly all the Jews of Zdzieciol — a mass murder that occurred mere months after Gordon's father left for the United States — by hiding in a nearby forest along with a few other members of their community. (Gordon's epiphany about what "Travel Guide" needed to be and the timing of its premiere particularly resonates at this moment, as antisemitic rhetoric has surged in the United States.)

Gordon's recounting of the woman's story, paired with a meditation on the shoe box his father kept that contained a few family photos and a handful of World War II mementos from his father's Army service, form the piece's emotional pinnacle — with Beiser playing emphatic chords to punctuate the choir's accounts.

Gordon tasked the Crossing with the expository storytelling of complicated and sometimes competing family narratives. Frequently, melodies played with virtuosity by Beiser served as Gordon's own response to his family's stories, bridging those complicated and often painful chronicles with arcing and aching emotional replies.

The Crossing also had plenty of opportunities to show off its artistry. The piece opens with a quotation from the Bible's Book of Genesis, when God commands the prophet Abraham to leave his father's house and go out to a new land. ("That's the story of my life," Gordon's father remarks wryly.) The chorus issued the divine edict in a long series of rising, otherworldly glissandos that also call to mind a very specific and worldly sound: the wailing of emergency sirens. The ensemble created individual moments of beauty and color within a shimmering, intentionally hazy whole — the stuff of faded photographs and fragmented memory.

The music is accompanied by projections by Laurie Olinder, which in contrast to Gordon's frequently ethereal writing tend toward the concrete: a video of Gordon going through his father's shoe box; ocean waves to evoke a journey by sea; and maps of Poland, Cuba and Nicaragua seen as the chorus delineates the various voyages taken by Gordon's relatives.

In the final two movements, Gordon explores his own early memories and those of his sister — ones that he should, at least in theory, be able to count on as the most reliable. Those, too, ultimately prove to be only splintered bits of yet another hidden family story within their own generation. Memory, as it turns out, does not provide a full, multifaceted account of larger truths.

Travel Guide to Nicaragua

Performed on Thursday at Zankel Hall, Manhattan.