

# “How Easily Things Get Broken:” Leonard Bernstein and Oswaldo Golijov on the Body and Blood of Christ



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## Abstract

This essay offers a theological interpretation of two musical works on Christian themes by Jewish composers: Leonard Bernstein’s *MASS* (1971) and Oswaldo Golijov’s *La Pasión según San Marcos* (2000). My claim in this article is that a comparative theological understanding of living Jewish traditions can enable Christians to understand and appreciate theological implications of the interaction between two Jewish composers and traditional Christian forms of liturgical art, specifically music.

## Keywords

Jewish, Christian, comparative theology, God, music, liturgy, Jewish-Christian Relations

Before engaging in the main comparative theological part of my article, I want to begin with a few remarks to clarify the background and context of my specific approach.

I begin with a general observation. It is remarkable that so few studies in comparative religion (and theology) have been written about the role of music, and more generally sound, in expressing religious traditions in various cultures.<sup>1</sup> This is remarkable because music and sound are considered an utterly fundamental aspect of reality from a religious point of view. As the Spanish-Indian theologian Raimon Panikkar points out in his Gifford Lectures, “music expresses and reenacts the harmony of the universe.”<sup>2</sup> One may hear echoes of Hindu but also of Catholic

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<sup>1</sup> Exceptions are Guy L. Beck, ed., *Sacred Sound: Experiencing Music in World Religions* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), with chapters about Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism; and Harold Coward, *Word, Chant, and Song: Spiritual Transformation in Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Sikhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being: The Gifford Lectures* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 39.

traditions in these words.<sup>3</sup> In my own study of the Islamic traditions—typically, if not stereotypically, seen as a religion that is rather wary of any links between God and music—I have not only been able to observe the power of the recitation of the Qur’ān as the deepest form of human representation of the Divine Speech, but I have also noticed how *huzn* (sadness), the fundamental emotion evoked by this recitation, convinces the hearers of the beauty of the Word of God.<sup>4</sup>

Some of my colleagues in this journal may be able to show how such fundamental considerations of sound as God-talk can be compared in a theologically meaningful way; yet the type of comparative theological work in which I want to engage through this contribution starts with a very specific background and context. In the recent past, I have taught a course that fits in the liberal arts tradition of undergraduate college education by making connections between theology and music. Since I worked in a department of theology at a Catholic institution, the focus of the course was on “the interpretation of the life of Christ in theology and music,”<sup>5</sup> and therefore references to the Christian tradition were predominant, even if some contemporary composers, such as British composers John Tavener (1944–2013) and Karl Jenkins (born 1944), include music from other religious traditions in their compositions. From the beginning, I focused on the classical tradition of Western music, expecting that students would supplement this with their own presentations of interpretations of the life of Christ in contemporary pop culture. Since I was born in the Netherlands, I looked forward to teaching about the music for Holy Week, culminating in the German passion music of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750). However, the American tradition of celebrating the Christmas season not only with the liturgical tradition of Lessons and Carols but also with *Messiah* by Georg Friedrich Händel (1685–1759) gave me the opportunity to start the course with rich textual and musical reflections on expectations, passions, and promises.

It was the context of teaching this class in Baltimore that suggested the possibility of including music by a Jewish composer and to reflect on the relationship between Jewish and Christian interpretations of this music. The Baltimore Symphony Orchestra regularly performed music by Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990) because the conductor of the orchestra from 2006–2021, Marin Alsop, who describes him as her “hero and mentor,” actively promoted his music.<sup>6</sup> I was able to attend two performances of Bernstein’s *MASS*, in October 2008 and again in October 2018. Yet, more importantly, I was invited to participate in two interfaith events about Christian

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Anthony Ruff OSB on the function of chant in his *Sacred Music and Liturgical Reform: Treasures and Transformations* (Chicago / Mundelein IL: Hillenbrand Books, 2007), 496.

<sup>4</sup> See Navid Kermani, *Gott ist Schön* (München: Beck, 2007). For a short comparison with the spiritual practice of *compunctio cordis* and the “gift of tears,” see Pim Valkenberg, *Renewing Islam By Service: A Christian View of Fethullah Gülen and the Hizmet Movement* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 237–246, at 244. See also Michael Sells, “Introduction,” in *Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> I taught this class twice at Loyola University Maryland (2009, 2011), and twice at the Catholic University of America (2016, 2019), each time in the Spring semester because of the liturgical context—from Christmas to Easter—for the course.

<sup>6</sup> See the release notes for Marin Alsop’s centenary tribute:

<https://www.naxos.com/MainSite/BlurbsReviews/?itemcode=8.508018&catnum=508018&filetype=AboutThisRecording&language=English> (accessed February 22, 2024). The complete Naxos recordings of Bernstein’s orchestral works (including the Mass and the Kaddish Symphony), are found here:

<https://www.naxos.com/CatalogueDetail/?id=8.508018> (accessed February 22, 2024).

and Jewish interpretations of these performances by the Institute for Christian and Jewish studies in Baltimore.<sup>7</sup> It was, however, a third interfaith moment that convinced me of the power of music to transform a multireligious gathering into a deeply spiritual event: the haunting performance of the “Jewish prayer in honor of the deceased” by cantor Azi Schwarz at the National September 11 Memorial and Museum in New York, which was attended by Pope Francis.<sup>8</sup> So, when I taught the course on “the Life of Christ in Theology and Music” once more in 2019, I introduced a more explicit focus on Jewish Music in America.<sup>9</sup> I was excited to discover that Osvaldo Golijov, a Jewish Argentinian composer born in 1960, whose music I had learned to appreciate very much, had composed a Passion according to Saint Mark.

Yet, before I discuss my theological interpretations of Bernstein and Golijov in more detail, I need to address a specific danger that is ever present when a Christian theologian works with Jewish sources: the danger of forgetting that Judaism is not only an indispensable source for Christian self-understanding but also a living tradition. In my case, this means that I need to be mindful of living textual and spiritual traditions of Judaism, more specifically liturgical traditions. Even though I am not a specialist in this field, I have been able to participate in Jewish liturgy when I was a visiting fellow at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles during the fall semester of 2016.<sup>10</sup> My claim in this article is that a comparative theological understanding of these living Jewish traditions can help Christians better to understand theological implications of the interaction between two Jewish composers and Christian traditional forms of liturgical art, specifically music.<sup>11</sup>

### **Leonard Bernstein, *MASS: A Theatre Piece for Singers, Players, and Dancers* (1971)<sup>12</sup>**

Bernstein’s *MASS* was composed at the request of Jacqueline Kennedy for the 1971 opening of the John F. Kennedy Center for Performing Arts in Washington D.C. It is a spectacular work for singers, players, and dancers, and the libretto contains many different layers. Yet the core of the

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<sup>7</sup> Between the first event (on September 23, 2008) and the second (on October 29, 2018) the institute was renamed as Institute for Islamic, Christian and Jewish Studies. See “Exploring the Interfaith Message of Leonard Bernstein’s *MASS*,” *ICJS Annual Report 2019*, p.13.

<sup>8</sup> *A Witness to Peace: A Multi-Religious Gathering With Pope Francis*, September 25, 2015, New York City. A Youtube video of this prayer can be found at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NoH6V9S7\\_D4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NoH6V9S7_D4) (accessed February 22, 2024).

<sup>9</sup> See Tina Frühauf, *Jewish Music in America: A Listener’s Companion* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> I was invited by the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies at USC to showcase interfaith friendship, together with Dr. Reuven Firestone and Dr. Amir Hussain. Since I lived with Reuven and Ruth for some time, I went with them to IKAR. For more information about this community, see <https://ikar.org> (accessed February 22, 2024).

<sup>11</sup> I should add that I concentrate more on theological than on musical analysis in this contribution. For the latter form of analysis, I owe a great vote of thanks to my teaching assistant in the spring of 2019, Fr. Phillip Ganir, SJ. In 2023, Fr. Ganir defended his PhD thesis at the Catholic University of America on the catechetical potential of sacred music in James MacMillan’s symphony *Le grand inconnu*.

<sup>12</sup> Discography: Leonard Bernstein, *Mass: A Theatre Piece for Singers, Players, and Dancers*. Text from the Liturgy of the Roman Mass, with additional texts by Stephen Schwartz and Leonard Bernstein. 1/ Alan Titus, Celebrant; The Norman Scribner Choir; The Berkshire Boy Choir; Orchestra Conducted by Leonard Bernstein (Sony Music, original recording 1971); 2/ Jubilant Sykes, Celebrant; Morgan State University Choir; Peabody Children’s Chorus; Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Marin Alsop (Naxos recording, 2008). A full performance from the tenth anniversary of the Kennedy Center in 1981 can be found on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RL96d80DJRI> (accessed February 22, 2024).

entire theatre piece is the Roman Catholic Mass in which the celebrant has a central role together with two acolytes. In the midst of all the complexity, the faith of the celebrant is the focal point of the entire piece. His is a faith oscillating between moments of simple faith and moments of severe doubt and even unbelief. The celebrant begins in a mode of celebration with a hymn (No. 2 in the libretto): “Sing God a simple song / sing like you like to sing / God loves the simple things / for God is the simplest of all.” Yet other voices soon begin to introduce notes of doubt and unbelief, and the celebrant starts to challenge God in a way that sounds similar to the questioning, challenging faith of the narrator in Bernstein’s *Symphony No. 3 “Kaddish,”* composed in 1963. At one level, these doubts and questions to God are characteristic of the spirit of the 1960s, yet at another level they call into memory the spirituality of some of the Psalms where God is questioned and held responsible for the situation of the human being in distress. In *MASS*, the doubts are voiced by the street chorus and the rock band with their repeated “I don’t know” (No. 10). Yet, the celebrant carries on with his doubts, singing at the place of the offertory, “When my courage crumbles / when I feel confused and frail / when my spirit falters on decaying altars / and my illusions fail / I go on right then / I go on again” (No. 28).

*MASS* unfolds as a classical drama, with a climax and a catharsis brought in the end by the acolytes and the boys’ choir.<sup>13</sup> The climax comes in the form of what is called the fraction (no.31), when the celebrant stumbles (echoing the halting way in which he sings) and smashes the chalice with wine. He then sings softly and wonderingly “isn’t that odd / glass shines brighter / when it’s broken / I never noticed that. How easily things get broken / glass and brown wine / thick like blood.” Of course, in the context of the Roman Catholic Mass—and the mind of Catholics who speak and hear these words—the association is with the transubstantiation of the wine into the blood of Christ (“it’s *supposed* to be blood,” interjects the celebrant), and with the body of Christ that is broken for the salvation of many. These associations go back to the words of Jesus at the Passover Supper as related, for instance, in the Gospel according to Matthew (26:26–28). However, there is a second web of meanings for those who speak and hear these words from a Jewish perspective. The association is here mainly with the fragility of the good things of life like bread and wine, and with the mixture of joy and sadness signified, for instance, by the breaking of a glass at the wedding ceremony. This may be interpreted as a reminder to the partners and participants that the Temple was not yet rebuilt, Israel was not yet liberated, and God was not yet in complete unity with God’s people.<sup>14</sup> In the life of Bernstein, there is certainly also an association with the great human losses, the Holocaust first of all, but also the murder of Kennedy, the war in Vietnam, and the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>15</sup> Again, there is plenty of room to expand on the associations mentioned here, but my point is that we get a richer understanding of the musical, lyrical, and dramatic meanings in Bernstein’s *MASS* when we are

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<sup>13</sup> In the interfaith discussions referenced before, this redemption “from the mouths of children” (*ex ore infantium*, Matthew 21:16 and Psalm 8:3) is often mentioned as an important interfaith resonance. See also Frühauf, *Jewish Music in America*, 112 about Bernstein: “This led him to a profound conclusion – that a renewal of faith in modern times requires a return to innocence, a shedding of the trappings of dogma and orthodoxy, and a fundamental belief in our common humanity.”

<sup>14</sup> These reminders have Talmudic origins and different interpretations, depending on various circumstances. I owe thanks to Ruth Langer, Adam Gregerman, and Heather Miller Rubens for pointing out some of these possible interpretations.

<sup>15</sup> The version of *Symphony No. 3 “Kaddish”* that I shared with my class was directed by Bernstein in Hiroshima on August 6, 1985, forty years after the first atomic bomb.

able to use the registers of two religious traditions and their evocations of brokenness as a bridge between human suffering and divine liberation.

### **Oswaldo Golijov, *La Pasión según San Marcos* (2000)**

The Argentinian composer Oswaldo Golijov was born in 1960 and grew up in an Eastern European Jewish household in La Plata. He lived in Jerusalem (1983) before coming to the United States in 1986 where he is (since 1991) the Loyola Professor of Music at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts.<sup>16</sup> His *La Pasión según San Marcos* was commissioned in 1996 by the International Bach Academy of Stuttgart, as part of a project to commemorate the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Johann Sebastian Bach's death in 1750. In the beginning, Golijov was very hesitant to engage in this project because he realized that the passion of Christ had been used historically as an instrument of antisemitism, but he ultimately decided to embrace the challenge. The work was premiered in Stuttgart in 2000 and was an instant success, even though the director of the Bach Academy, Helmuth Rilling, wondered "is this a passion?"<sup>17</sup> Golijov's *Pasión* is a theatre piece not unlike Bernstein's *MASS*, and it is strongly colored by Golijov's Latin American background in the choice of the percussion, the rhythms, and the style of singing.<sup>18</sup> In an interview, Golijov compared his style of composing the passion with *ceviche*, a style of cooking without fire but with lemon juice. When you omit the woodwinds, the flutes, and the violas, you only have "the extremes in the orchestra, the acid instruments, and the piece burns."<sup>19</sup>

Listening to Golijov's work and watching the performance of his passion gives impressions at two levels, similar to Bernstein's work. The most obvious impressions are related to cultural expressions—the rock culture of the 60s for Bernstein, the Latin American style of dance and music for Golijov—but underneath this level there is an influence of Christian and Jewish religious motifs that is less obvious but still essential for a fuller understanding of the work. Golijov tells us that he did not even possess a New Testament when he decided to accept the commission, yet in his composition he shows a great awareness of European Christian musical and theological approaches to the passion of Christ. The best place to start an analysis of these musical and theological influences is the scene of the crucifixion that transfers into the death of Jesus, and the kaddish that concludes the passion. In this complex scene, there are several musical resonances, to start with an echo by the women's choir of the cry of Jesus at his death, Psalm 22 in Aramaic: *Elohi, Elohi, Lama Shabachtani?* ("My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"). Next, there is an echo of the music of the Tenebrae responsories for Holy Saturday in the

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<sup>16</sup> Information from <https://osvaldogolijov.com/> and

<https://www.holycross.edu/academics/programs/music/osvaldo-n-golijov> (both accessed February 22, 2024).

<sup>17</sup> Discography: Oswaldo Golijov, *La Pasión según San Marcos*. 1/Biella Da Costa, Latin-American Alto; Jessica Rivera, Soprano; Schola Cantorum de Venezuela; Orquesta La Pasión; Members of the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela; Maria Guinand, conductor (DGG 2010: 2 CD's and a DVD of the performance at the Holland Festival 2008, directed by Robert Spano). The texts quoted from the *Pasión* are from the booklet included in the DGG edition.

<sup>18</sup> See the official DGG promotion video on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvTiWPV2da0> (accessed February 22, 2024).

<sup>19</sup> This is from a listener's guide on Golijov website, accessed in 2019 but no longer available at that place. For a long interview with Golijov by Brian Bell on the occasion of a performance by the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 2014, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELO90llngpg>. Another interview, from 2010, is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxoDLrXIIimg> (both accessed February 22, 2024).



words of Jeremiah’s *Threni* or Lamentations in Latin: *O vos omnes qui transitis per viam, attende et videte si est dolor sicut dolor meus* (“Come all who pass by the way / look and see whether there is any suffering like my suffering”).<sup>20</sup> This is sung by the Latin American alto, who sings most of the words of Jesus; there is no stable identity here, since different persons and the choir sing the role of Jesus. Then there is a faint echo, in the strings, of Bach’s passion music. The alto sings again the words of Psalm 22 while the choir sings the beginning of the Kaddish in Aramaic: *yitgaddal veyitkaddash shema rabbah* (“may His great name be exalted and sanctified”). The music quiets down and the alto ends with the following: *Le-alma min kol birkhata ve-shirata tushbekhata venekhemata damiran ve-alma. Ve-imru: amen* (“Blessed be He, beyond all the blessings, songs, praise and consolation, uttered in the world. And say: Amen.”).

This final phrase from the Kaddish prayer functions as a catharsis, just like the hymn by the boys’ choir in Bernstein’s *MASS*, yet differently. While the musical and textual phrasing of Bernstein’s closing hymn is indubitably Christian, the hallowing of the Name of God offered on the occasion of the death of Jesus in Golijov’s *Pasión* is Jewish and communal. The Spanish of the Gospel transforms into the Hebrew and the Latin of the Christological reading of the Old Testament, only to fade out in the Aramaic of the Kaddish. Yet even more important than the text is the way it is sung, viz., alternating between the alto and the chorus. It is not only Jesus who hallows the Name, but the entire community of the Jewish followers around him who perform the Kaddish in honor of his name. When I first heard Osvaldo Golijov’s *Pasión*, I was struck by the interaction between the alto/Jesus and the choir/community in praying the Kaddish, and I realized that this might be part of what Paul means when he talks so often about the community of believers as the Body of Christ in the New Testament. In the synagogue where I attended weekly services in 2016, the Kaddish was prayed standing by the mourners while the others sat and silently prayed with them. So, if there is any salvation brought by Christ—and this is of course an issue where Christians and Jews go separate ways—it is brought by the entire Body of Christ that was, and is, and ever will be a body of God’s firstborn.

For the students in my class about the mysteries of the life of Christ in theology and music, the most confusing thing in Golijov’s passion was the fluid identity of Jesus: sometimes a Latin American alto, sometimes an Afro-Cuban vocalist and dancer, but often the chorus singing *in persona Christi*. These shifts between an individual and a collective representation of Christ remind me of a rule in Patristic and medieval Christological exegesis of the Psalms, according to which the events related there tell us something about Christ or the Church.<sup>21</sup> According to this Christological exegesis, Christ may speak in the Psalms words like “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” on behalf of himself as head of the Church, or on behalf of his members.<sup>22</sup> It should be clear that this Christological interpretation is not at all acceptable for Jewish readers of

<sup>20</sup> Text from Lamentations 1:12. The most famous settings are by Tomás Luis de Victoria (1572) and by Carlo Gesualdo (1611).

<sup>21</sup> See, among others, Thomas Aquinas’s prologue to his commentary on the Psalms: *beatus... Hieronymus... tradidit nobis unam regulam quam servabimus in Psalmis: scilicet quod sic sunt exponendae de rebus gestis, ut figurantibus aliquid de Christo, vel Ecclesia*. Translation: “Blessed Jerome ... gave us a rule which we will follow in regard to the Psalms, namely that events should be explained as prefiguring something relating to Christ or the Church.” (Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Psalms*, translated by Sr. Albert Marie Surmansku, OP, and Sr. Maria Veritas Marks, OP. Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas, vol. 29, Green Bay WI: Aquinas Institute, 2021), 25.

<sup>22</sup> See Thomas F. Ryan, *Thomas Aquinas as Reader of the Psalms* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000); Pim Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God: Place and Function of Holy Scripture in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 183.

the Psalms, and yet the alternation between the alto and the chorus in the Kaddish reminded me of the unity of the Body of Christ.

Is this what Golijov meant when he let the chorus act and sing and pray in the name of Jesus? Hardly. For him, it is about the suffering people of Latin America, such as the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo that embodies Jesus. In an interview, he says the following: “The ‘mission’ of writing the St. Mark Passion was to write a passion as it is *lived* in Latin America, which is a very different Jesus than the Jesus in Europe...In my case, I decided that Jesus would be the people, because the people in Latin America are the carriers of the suffering.”<sup>23</sup> This leaves me with an ambiguous emotion. On the one hand, I’m convinced that my comparative theological “reading” of the works by Bernstein and Golijov really helps to unfold an interfaith dimension in their works. Yet, at the same time, it seems as if my interpretation remains shallow and hardly relevant when confronted with the suffering resounding in the broken bodies and the blood that is shed on behalf of so many.

## RY

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxoDLrXIIlg> (accessed March 1, 2024).