

Review: 'Water Passion' proves the Tacoma Symphony's musical chops and vitality

ROSEMARY PONNEKANTI; The News Tribune
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Sarah Ioannides conducts "Water Passion." Courtesy

Tacoma has proven that not only does it have the chops to do a major contemporary classical work, it's got the audience to appreciate it. A host of forces, from conductor Sarah Ioannides to the Tacoma Symphony Chorus to soloists, stage crew and sponsors came together Sunday afternoon at the Pantages Theater to perform Tan Dun's epic "Water Passion." The theatrical oratorio was inspired by St. Matthew and Bach, but takes both into new realms of tonality and spirituality.

While not everything completely gelled, the production was skilled and heartfelt, taking the nearly-full audience to the extremes of agony and beauty that this story demands.

It's a piece that takes the Tacoma Symphony to new levels of sophistication. Set out theatrically onstage, with the chorus on risers, soloists (soprano, bass, violin and cello) in front and a cross-shape of water percussion bowls illuminated in the middle (with three percussionists at the extreme points), this Passion is more like static opera than any traditional piece. As the narrative (with selected gospel verses that served more as captions than lengthy storytelling) took Jesus through his baptism, temptation in the desert, prayer in Gethsemane, betrayal, trial and crucifixion, the

ensemble of soloists blended seamlessly in virtuosic, dramatic roles, with the chorus amplifying the emotion.

Bass Gary Sorenson sang Jesus with a human warmth, coping with the rather distracting overtone singing written into his part. Soprano Elizabeth Keusch made a powerful, brittle Satan, contrasting the unearthly high coloratura and augmented fourth tremoli with a more compassionate tone for the roles of Pilate and various side characters. Cellist Kevin Krentz gave passionate, anguished renditions of his operatic motifs and quasi-rock double stops, while TSO concertmaster Svend Rønning added an unexpected but brilliant touch as he swaggered around the stage playing demonic violin passages. The three percussionists (two

HIGHLIGHTS

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Tan Dun's 'Water Passion' given a rare performance outside major cities

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Skilled, heartfelt performance from chorus, soloists and instrumentalists

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Part of a three-work Passion project over 10 days in Tacoma

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from TSO, plus soloist David Cossin) held the piece together in a remarkable tour-de-force, almost flawlessly together despite the distance and captivating in their interpretation of the spectrum of sound from water bowls, waterphones and other instruments. Only in the desert scene was there a rhythmic problem, with the synthesized melody out of time with the water bowl cups.

Stepping completely out of their comfort zone here was the Tacoma Symphony Chorus, who sang, shouted, acted and played their lines with conviction. Their overtone singing created a chilling, haunting atmosphere; their traditional notes were sweetly sad; their bell notes and stone clapping perfectly executed to create an otherworldly soundscape. The only thing that could have been much better were the percussive words — too soft and timid, they didn't add either the ferocity or rhythmic power intended.

Holding all these forces together, along with the dramatic lighting (red for blood, gold for rebirth) and amplified sounds was Ioannides, whose personal connection to Tan Dun made the piece possible in the first place. Ever sure of the work's choreography and architecture, the director guided securely and seamlessly to the very end, which saw all performers uplit with gold as they silently plunged hands into the water and let it fall.

With this kind of imagination, skill and engagement, this is the kind of event that proves the Tacoma Symphony is an integral part of our city's culture and communal spirit.

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The Tacoma Symphony's next concert is Symphonic Django. Information: tacomasymphony.org

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The "Water Passion" is part of a three-work Passion Project in Tacoma. The final piece is "St. Matthew Passion" by Sven-David Sandström, performed by the Pacific Lutheran University choirs and orchestra Wednesday and Thursday. Information: plu.edu



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