

Passion project: Three musical organizations bring contemporary settings of the crucifixion story to Tacoma

ROSEMARY PONNEKANTI; The News Tribune
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During Lent, many choirs around the Christian world perform a “Passion” — a musical retelling of Jesus’ death by voices and instruments. It might be Bach’s massive “St. Matthew Passion,” or maybe the “St. John.”

But this month, Tacoma will see a musical event usually reserved for much bigger cities: three Passions by major contemporary composers in 10 days. The Passion project is a rare collaboration between choral groups and venues. The University of Washington Chamber Singers will sing Arvo Pärt’s meditative “Passio” on Sunday at Christ Episcopal. The Tacoma Symphony Chorus fuses cultures with Tan Dun’s “Water Passion” March 20 at the Pantages Theater. At Pacific Lutheran University March 22-23 will be the North American premiere of Sven-David Sandström’s intense “St. Matthew Passion.”

The project includes lectures, composer question-and-answer session and open rehearsals.

HIGHLIGHTS

Passions by Arvo Pärt, Tan Dun and Sven-David Sandström include multimedia, water instruments

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Performers are UW Chamber Singers, Tacoma Symphony Chorus and PLU choirs

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10-day event includes composer Q&As, lectures, open rehearsals and a premiere

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IT’S NOT JUST A STORY FOR CHRISTIANS. IT’S A STORY FOR EVERYONE.

UW conductor Geoffrey Boers

But what it’s about, on the deepest level, is a way for people to feel true compassion for all of humanity.

“The Passion is not just about Jesus,” says Geoffrey Boers, director of choral studies at the University of Washington, who will conduct the UW Chamber Singers and is rehearsing the Tacoma Symphony Chorus. “It’s about us: our story, what we do. Passion means ‘to suffer.’ But compassion means, ‘to suffer with.’ We’re trying to do that in this project. The music is uncomfortable, yet beautiful, visually stunning and hopeful.”

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THIS IS BACH BROUGHT INTO MODERN MUSICAL LANGUAGE. THAT’S WHAT’S SO SIGNIFICANT ABOUT IT.

PLU conductor Richard Nance

The project began two years ago. In 2014, PLU choir director Richard Nance went to the world premiere of the Sandström Passion in Uppsala, Sweden, and met the composer and the original conductor Stefan Parkman. After talking and hearing a choir demo tape, Sandström asked Nance to premiere the work in North America, and Parkman offered to conduct. A few months later, new Tacoma Symphony director Sarah Ioannides — who assisted composer Tan Dun in preparing choirs, directing production and once even conducting the “Water Passion” in its first performances — was exploring the Olympic Peninsula with her family after her Tacoma debut. At Rialto Beach, she found exactly the kind of flat, resonant stones she’d always had to find for the choir to play in “Water Passion” performances, and she decided to bring the work to Tacoma.

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THE WATER PASSION IS A STUNNING AND EXPRESSIVE WORK THAT’S VERY APPROACHABLE. IT REALLY BUILDS BRIDGES OVER RELIGIOUS DIVIDES AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES.

Tacoma Symphony Director
Sarah Ioannides

“I thought we should collaborate to both share audiences and perhaps explore ways to bring the idea of the modern Passion outside the limits of Christianity or dead white-guy music, and into a vibrant, relevant vision for the general public,” he says.

It’s a rare, important event in many ways.

First is the works themselves. The Oscar-winning Tan Dun doesn’t usually allow other conductors to perform his theatrical, multimedia piece, and it’s mostly done in big cities. But because Ioannides has such a deep experience and understanding of the work (which includes music made with amplified water bowls, rocks and more), she “has his blessing” to bring it to Tacoma — the first performance in the state. Sandström is another major international composer, and the opportunity to premiere his work with him in attendance is “an incredible honor,” says Nance. Arvo Pärt, meanwhile, is the world’s most-played living composer — yet his “Passio” is long and difficult, and not often performed locally.

Second is the performers. Soprano Elizabeth Keusch and percussionist David Cossin have performed “Water Passion” all over the world. Other performers include bass Gary Sorenson and violinist Svend Rønning. Meanwhile, the PLU performance — all students or alumni — includes Met Opera soloist Angela Meade and New York-based tenor Anthony Webb, as well as Swedish conductor Stefan Parkman.

But above all, it’s a rare opportunity to hear three very different works inspired by the same texts and music — the gospels, and Bach’s iconic compositions — within a 10-day period. It’s a unique chance to experience, to reflect and, hopes Boers, to be moved by compassion to action.

“Bach wrote his Passions at the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment,” says Boers. “He was saying, ‘This story is pertinent today, not just in history.’ How he did that was by using familiar tunes (the chorales) that the audience could participate in, as well as beautiful, personal poetry (the arias). It’s not just a story for Christians. It’s a story for everyone. We see patterns of human behavior and a message of hope. Composers have used that to help bring (the Passion) into our present.”

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PASSION EVENTS

“Passio” — Arvo Pärt

Who: UW Chamber Singers.

When: 5 p.m. Sunday

Where: Christ Episcopal, 310 N. K St., Tacoma.

Tickets: Admission by donation.

Information: 253-383-1569, ccptacoma.org.

“Water Passion” — Tan Dun

Who: Tacoma Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, directed by Ioannides.

When: 2:30 p.m. March 20.

Where: Pantages Theater.

Tickets: \$12-\$80.

Information: 253-591-5894, broadwaycenter.org, tacomasympphony.org.

“St. Matthew Passion” — Sven-David Sandström

Who: Pacific Lutheran University’s Choral Union, Choir of the West and Symphony Orchestra, dir. Stefan Parkman.

When: 8 p.m. March 22-23.

Where: Lagerquist Concert Hall, PLU, 868 Wheeler St. S., Tacoma.

Tickets: \$15 general; \$10 senior, alumni; \$5 17 and younger and PLU community.