

Cultural importers.; Musicians cross borders -luckily

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Body

Whether you're confused, appalled or heartened by the presidential proposal to stem immigration with the National Guard lined up along the Mexican **border**, there's one peripheral element of that issue that's justly immune, at least for now, to legislation: The immigration of culture.

Whatever the economic and regulatory reasons to revise immigration laws, you know there has to be a fair amount of xenophobia lurking about. At the very least, parts of the establishment are threatened by ethnic minorities' being not so minor these days, their numbers now mighty enough to propose a Spanish-language "Star Spangled Banner."

The irony is that immigrants - whether Latino or, for example, Chinese - are hardly limited to service-industry jobs (as suggested by public demonstrations earlier this month). They are vital artistic influences in the belly of the beast, at **cultural** palaces like New York City's Lincoln Center and Washington's Kennedy Center.

Even in an artistically conservative city like Philadelphia, Brazilian concert pianist Arnaldo Cohen enjoys an extravagant response when he plays South American composers who normally wouldn't be heard here. Years back, when Chinese immigrants were crawling out of decrepit freighters on the West Coast, Beijing-trained composers Tan Dun and Chen Yi were retraining American ears to hybrid expressions of Chinese folk and Western classical music. Tan did so with his video/orchestral work *The Map* last season with the Philadelphia Orchestra and Chen with a Philadelphia Classical Symphony program last month that, to judge from audience members' e-mails, changed lives.

Nationally, the hottest current opera recording is *Ainadamar*, by Argentine-born Osvaldo Golijov on Deutsche Grammophon, a Eurocentric company if ever there was one. Opera Company of Philadelphia's Robert B. Driver, having seen the piece last summer in Santa Fe, says it's one of the few recent operas he'd love to produce. And the indefatigable Tan just finished what promises to be one of the most theatrically ambitious new works in Metropolitan Opera history, titled *Death and Fire*.

Of course, none of these artists is an illegal immigrant. The 45-year-old Golijov earned his doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania. Chen and Tan came to the States as Columbia University students. Since 9/11, though, even the most established **musicians** not based in America complain about what lengths they must go to - hours of waiting, sometimes under outdoor winter conditions - for the papers to perform a single concert in the United States. No wonder they sometimes cancel.

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One could argue that the well-educated U.S. of A. has more than enough talented singers and composers. We don't need outsiders, thank you. And indeed, the numbers are here. But these immigrant composers constantly come up with possibilities that others don't and probably would never imagine.

Who but Tan would consider building a concerto around a video of a Chinese folk musician playing music by blowing on leaves, as he did in *The Map*? Even Chen's more modestly scaled *Song in Winter* has a flute/harpsichord combination that, once heard, becomes lodged in your memory.

Golijov's *Ainadamar*, which I saw onstage at Lincoln Center earlier this year, in addition to hearing the new recording, is a huge achievement. Fueled equally by Latin rhythms and serpentine Semitic note-bending (thanks to his Eastern European Jewish heritage), Golijov is one of the few composers since Schubert to make music teeter between emotional extremes - from doom to celebration, from frantic desperation to ecstatic fulfillment - with the change of only a note or two.

Ainadamar, the story of poet Federico García Lorca's death, as recalled by Spanish actress Margarita Xirgu, arrives chronologically jumbled, a dramaturgical shambles compared to tidy, linear, well-made operas such as *An American Tragedy* or even *Margaret Garner*. But you don't care. *Ainadamar* is a testament to opera's hallmark - irrationality, that it's a force and world unto itself that is often more engrossing when flouting the rules of the exterior world.

Theoretically, great art would be created no matter what. But would our ears have the proper conditioning to perceive it were we not surrounded by immigrants, legal and otherwise, in our everyday lives?

One case history: When tango albums began to be issued on classical labels in the mid-'80s, I had no patience for the music or its seemingly ludicrous primary instrument, the bandoneon (a concertina accordion on steroids). But after years of random encounters with Latino music, whether at street festivals, on car stereos, or in the zarzuela operettas that Plácido Domingo has recorded and produced onstage, I arrived at a 2004 Philadelphia Orchestra performance of Astor Piazzolla's concerto for bandoneon and orchestra, titled *Aconcagua*, to find that it feels as familiar as Gershwin.

The opposite can also happen, of course - and did so for me with popular Indian music, as represented by the Bollywood music videos so often seen in Indian restaurants. Even after being force-fed them, the Kronos Quartet's Bollywood disc, *You've Stolen My Heart*, was not (with all its novelty and lyricism) for me. Proper exposure to the music may not yield affection, but at least your decision isn't based on confusion.

Consider the alternatives. Endless performances of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5* isn't such a bad fate. Neither is what so many current American composers are writing - new works that often recycle the mid-20th-century manner of Aaron Copland and Samuel Barber. Would we be locking ourselves in - or out - without immigrant composers leading us away from our artistic inbreeding? How long can such a redundant art form last?

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