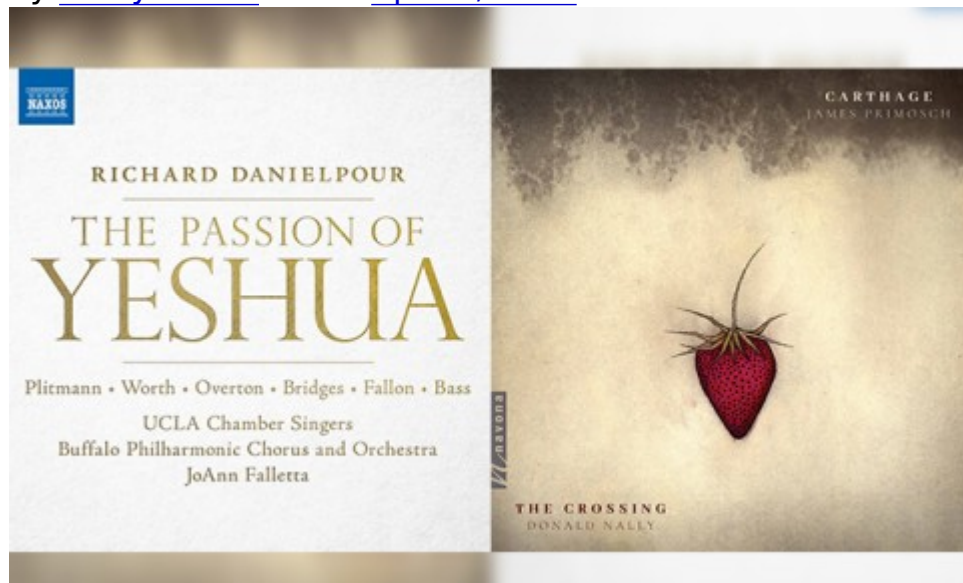


New sacred choral music at the Grammys

Richard Danielpour's universal Passion and James Primosch's mass for doubters

by [Delvyn Case](#) in the [April 7, 2021](#) issue



Two powerful new sacred works appear on recordings nominated in the Best Choral Performance category for this year's Grammy Awards. James Primosch's expressive *Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus* is the featured work on *Carthage*, from the vocal ensemble The Crossing. Richard Danielpour's monumental new work *The Passion of Yeshua* comes to life in the hands of conductor JoAnn Falletta and an army of musicians including the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra and Chorus.

Each work is deeply personal, reflecting the composer's views on faith, doubt, and Christianity itself. Both are compelling explorations of the significance of the Christian tradition in the modern world.

Primosch's choral piece is unaccompanied and performed predominantly in a style reminiscent of the great Renaissance masses. It bathes us with the same kinds of sounds our Christian forebears would have heard in the cathedral on great feast days. Though this new composition features a much wider range of textures and harmonies than a Renaissance worshiper would have heard, it still calls to mind an

era in which God was inescapable, faith dominated all aspects of life, and doubt was a public impossibility.

But Primosch does not exploit these traditionally “sacred” sounds in order to evoke a bygone time of simple faith. Instead, he uses them to invite the listener into a respectful yet unflinchingly honest dialogue with the Christian tradition. This allows the piece to address the unique situation of the modern believer caught between the historic claims of our tradition and the modern, subjective experience of faith.

Primosch describes his mass for Thomas as “honor[ing] the juxtaposition of doubt and belief that is the basis of life in pursuit of the divine.” As Benjamin Britten did in his *War Requiem*, Primosch adds a number of contemporary poems to the traditional Latin mass texts. In this case, he pairs each section with the corresponding poem from Denise Levertov’s cycle that gives the work its title. He distinguishes the two texts by assigning the mass to a group of four solo voices and the Levertov poems to the larger choral ensemble. This allows him to use musical texture to explore the relationships between two kinds of texts that are seemingly worlds apart: ancient and modern, public and personal, faithful and doubting.

Those relationships are, of course, complex. In the opening Kyrie movement, the different vocal groupings expose the two texts’ similarities and differences: while each is a plea for mercy, the Kyrie addresses God and Christ, while the Levertov poem cries out—fearfully at times—to the “deep unknown.” At times the music exposes the gulf that separates the two.

For example, at one key, dramatic moment, the choir’s desperate, unison cry of terror (Levertov’s crushing phrase “our dread sinks and sinks”) is immediately cut off by a return of the “Kyrie” offered by the small group in an equally powerful unison. But this is not a triumphant moment of faith conquering doubt. At the split second when these two worlds collide, the resulting notes combine to form a tritone—a combination of notes that, during the Renaissance, was deemed so dissonant that it was dubbed the “devil’s interval”:

This is not a moment of repose. It is not a peaceful border between the worlds of faith and doubt but instead a no man’s land: a place where our desire for God-as-Christ battles our fear of God-as-unknown. This moment of deep, personal honesty is not an ending, however, but instead the springboard for the rest of the movement. It is this fearless honesty that allows the “Kyrie” movement to eventually draw to a

close with an uneasy yet unmistakable sense of reconciliation. Its quiet confidence is earned.

In this movement and the four that follow, the rich and complex interplay of faith and doubt become a sacramental experience. The piece offers a gift of grace that lifts the burden we often feel to fully understand, articulate, or reconcile our faith and our doubt.

In contrast, Danielpour's *The Passion of Yeshua* is not reflective or meditative. It is a large-scale work for soloists, chorus, and orchestra that dramatizes Jesus' final days. Yet in its own way it raises the same questions as Primosch's piece.

As a setting of the Passion narrative, Danielpour's work brings to life the violence and tragedy motivated by conflicting claims about Jesus' authority. Though the libretto was adapted and compiled by the composer from a variety of sources, its overall characterization of Jesus seems to come from John's Gospel: Jesus is calm, confident, and utterly faithful in the face of a political and theological maelstrom. Over almost 100 minutes, Danielpour sets Jesus' words to music that is simple, measured, and personally expressive—but not melodramatic. The Jesus of this work is a noble figure: a man who faces his accusers and his fate with righteousness and grace.

Yet the protagonist of Danielpour's work is not named Jesus. Instead, it is Yeshua. He is joined by other characters with less familiar names: Kefa, Miryam Magdala, and Kayafa. As the title makes clear, this is not a Passion according to John or Matthew—that is, a narrative attributed to Christian saints—but instead a Passion of, or about, a first-century Jew.

Danielpour further emphasizes the Jewishness of the work by including choral and solo movements featuring biblical texts sung in Hebrew. An American of Middle Eastern descent, the composer writes that he had two goals in this piece: to encourage American Christians to recognize the deep Jewish roots of their faith and “to allow for the possibility of Jewish people in America to see the person of Jesus without the presence of all of the European accretions and outrageous acts that were committed in the name of European Christianity over the last 2,000 years.” This is ultimately a work that harnesses its “Jewishness” in service of a greater goal: in Danielpour's words, “to bring people together in a constructive, intelligent, and civilized dialogue about faith.”

Texts aside, it is the music itself that accomplishes this goal most powerfully. Danielpour's choice of a dramatic and highly accessible musical style works to emphasize the piece's universality. Its symphonic and even cinematic musical language—it often calls to mind the great Hollywood scores of the mid-20th century—make his *Passion* a very public work. Ultimately it addresses itself not just to those familiar with the *Passion* story but to as wide an audience as possible.

Primosch explores the big questions of God and faith from within the Christian tradition. He doesn't change the words of the mass; he brings other contemporary texts into conversation with them. In this way, his piece emphasizes the humanism that is central to modern forms of belief. It points to the honest and authentic work of reflection demanded of those who seek to understand our relationship to the ancient tradition of our faith.

In contrast, Danielpour challenges the Christian tradition from without. Unlike Primosch, who is a devout Roman Catholic, Danielpour does not seem very comfortable calling himself a Christian, instead writing that "I am a firm believer in Jesus as Messiah but I am a strong advocate against organized religion." Through its idiosyncratic approaches to text as well as its almost missionary zeal, this work is just as much an example of Christian humanism as Primosch's, but realized in an unapologetically progressive way. Like Jon Sobrino, Thomas Jefferson, Martin Luther, and the Gospel writers themselves, Danielpour is convinced that recovering the "real" Jesus is necessary for the world to become what God intended it to be.

Both composers have written contemporary works that raise the big questions confronting modern believers. They wrestle with the Christian tradition and what it means for people today.