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## [David Lang's divine pursuit: "the little match girl passion"](#)

by Reed Johnson

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When David Lang's "The Little Match Girl Passion" had its premiere a few years ago, there was every reason for the L.A.-born composer to celebrate.

Equally inspired by Bach's "St. Matthew Passion" and Hans Christian Andersen's story "The Little Match Girl," Lang's piece is a rare bird in contemporary classical music: a broadly accessible work on which critics as well as the public bestow their blessings.

Minimalist in form and quasi-medieval in its sublime austerity, "Little Match Girl Passion" was awarded the 2008 Pulitzer Prize in music and is being performed this year from New York and London to Nashville and Chicago. It will have its West Coast premiere in its original four-singer version on Saturday and Sunday at First Presbyterian Church of Santa Monica as part of a concert program by the chamber-music series Jacaranda: Music at the Edge. Additionally, large-choral versions of the piece will be performed April 17 by the Pacific Chorale at the Segerstrom Center for the Arts in Costa Mesa (formerly the Orange County Performing Arts Center) and in November by the Los Angeles Master Chorale at Walt Disney Concert Hall.

But initially, Lang was apprehensive about sending his "Little Match Girl" out into the big, cold world.

"I really felt that I was going to get stoned for being a blasphemer after the premiere, for trying to tell the Gospel by taking Jesus out," said Lang, perhaps best known as co-founder and co-artistic director of the pioneering, aggressively innovative new-music ensemble Bang on a Can All-Stars.

"What kind of blasphemous Jew would do that?" the 54-year-old composer, who is Jewish, added rhetorically, with a laugh.

Clearly, he needn't have worried. The affection and protective urge that Andersen's story has inspired in generations of readers is akin to what many listeners feel upon hearing Lang's approximately 40-minute composition. Tim Page, a USC professor of musicology and journalism and a member of the Pulitzer panel that named Lang's work as a finalist, described "The Little Match Girl Passion" as a deeply affecting piece of great beauty and purity.

"It's very spare, it's very simple," Page said. "The thing that I love about it is there's not one wasted note."

Intended as a kind of secular Passion, Lang's work replaces the narrative of Jesus' suffering in his final days with Andersen's pathos-laden 1845 tale of a shoeless girl traipsing through snowdrifts while futilely trying to sell matches. Scared to go home and face her father's beatings, she takes refuge under a Christmas tree, lighting matches and having visions of her grandmother, the only person ever to treat her with kindness. The next day the match girl is found frozen in the snow by passersby.

Lang, who was raised in a Reform Jewish household and attended University Synagogue on Sunset Boulevard, said that writing "The Little Match Girl Passion" helped him come to grips with the explicitly Christian bent of Western classical musical that had its birthplace in the church.

"I love this music, but I'm not a Christian, so it's always been an obstacle for me," said Lang, who has lived in New York for many years but still follows the Dodgers with fanatical fervor.

Lang said he'd been considering various secular source materials, including newspaper obituaries, to build his "Passion" around, but nothing had quite worked. Then his wife suggested Andersen's story. "I just jumped on that because it was exactly right," he said.

Invested with a reverence befitting sacred music, Lang's "Passion" in its original version is performed by four singers who are also required to play a battery of percussion instruments. The relative simplicity of the arrangements coincides with the story's theme that a humble heart and a soul able to endure severe hardship are the surest conduits to the divine.

In Jacaranda's version, the singer-percussionists will be Grant Gershon, a tenor; Elissa Johnston, a soprano (married to Gershon); alto Adriana Manfredi; and bass Cedric Berry. Gershon, who also serves as music director of the Los Angeles Master Chorale at Walt Disney Concert Hall, will conduct the Chorale's November performance of Lang's "Passion."

"When I listen to the recording, it's impossible to get through the piece without weeping," Gershon said. "It seems to me there is that aspect of his musical language that universalizes the story and certainly takes it beyond the boundaries of this specific narrative and does it through his use of techniques that are non-Western structurally and — how to put it? — austere.... There is so much Bach in the piece. But it is Bach distilled down to its absolute essence."

Johnston described the work as "sort of an endurance piece, so you really have to stay focused as you set up this trance world."

"The piece itself is so restrained, you can't sing it in a heart-on-your-sleeve way, and yet there's room to be really expressive," she continued. "I really find when we stop

[rehearsing] that it takes me awhile to get my feet back on the earth."

Patrick Scott, Jacaranda's artistic director, praised the work's skillful braiding of storytelling with meditative sections that "allow your mind to spiral away from the story and into the ethos of the moment." He also was struck by how "Little Match Girl Passion" contrasts with the bulk of Lang's prolific catalog of orchestral, opera, chamber and solo works, which the composer's own biography characterizes as "by turns ominous, ethereal, urgent, hypnotic, unsettling and funky." (Lang's opera, "The Difficulty of Crossing a Field," based on an Ambrose Bierce story, will have its Southern California premiere in June at Long Beach Opera.)

"I find this work so startlingly different than the rest of his music and so counter to his image as this hardened, downtown- Manhattan, Bang on a Can guy with closely cropped hair," Scott said.

A number of prominent music critics hailed "The Little Match Girl Passion" as an instant classic. Typical was the New Yorker's verdict: "With his winning of the Pulitzer Prize for 'The Little Match Girl Passion' (one of the most original and moving scores of recent years), Lang, once a postminimalist enfant terrible, has solidified his standing as an American master."

Lang expresses gratitude for that reception and gratification that "The Little Match Girl Passion" already has been "sung many times in Christmas and Easter services and in churches" and that its message apparently speaks to so many.

After all, he said, that message is pretty simple: "You need to pay attention to the suffering of people around you."

"It's not like Grimm's Fairy Tales where you wonder, 'Well, what's that story about?'"