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SAN FRANCISCO  
CLASSICAL VOICE

## Sounds in Space at Grace

Grace Cathedral Concerts  
By Be'eri Moalem  
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Joshua Roman presented a unique concert at San Francisco's Grace Cathedral on Monday night. The audience was invited to bring yoga mats or lie on the pews and look up at Anne Patterson's illuminated ribbons hanging down about 100 feet from the rafters while listening to Bach's E-flat Cello Suite. I could really get behind this horizontal concert experience. Sitting up straight is so energy-consuming, in comparison. Sure, you can do this in bed with headphones, but you'd have to have a top-notch live cellist and pretty high ceilings to match the effect.

The eight-second reverb at the cathedral atop Nob Hill is not ideal for Bach's voluble counterpoint, especially in a solo cello recital; the low-end frequencies muddled the sound, obscuring the runs of 16th notes.

This is why it was appropriate that music was not the sole focus of the evening. Rather, combined with colorful lighting and the unorthodox setup, the event was more of an atmospheric sound-and-light installation than a traditional concert.

Earlier in the program, Roman sat behind a backlit screen and appeared in silhouette while playing Gabriela Lena Frank's *Suite Peruana*. Roman changed angles, rotating his cello toward the apse, the transepts, or the nave for different movements, toying with the different acoustics of each position. The audience was seated toward the back of the cathedral for this part of the concert.

The distance, coupled with the cloth screen and the extremely "wet" acoustics, all



Inside Grace Cathedral, photo by Be'eri Moalem

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combined for a muffled sound. It was difficult to follow Lena Frank's composition with all these distractions.

Visually, though, the silhouette effect was artsy and interesting. The sharp outline highlighted Roman's perfectly erect posture, his exemplary bow hold, and the cello's beautiful contours. Roman made sure to throw in extra-emphatic head tosses on accented notes, sending his mop of hair flying in the silhouette, to great effect.

*Suite Peruana* (2011) is an eight-movement collection of vignettes in which the cello is supposed to imitate Andean flutes and Incan melodies. But don't expect the Peruvian pan-flute ensembles found at tourist destinations around the world. Frank focuses more on raspy sound color and wandering modal phrases. There is little drive to the piece — or at least it was hard to catch it in this performance. The "Canción Infantil" was the most evocative movement, employing the cello's highest natural harmonics — these resonated clearly in the cathedral's boomy space.

I always like instrumentalists who also compose. Classical musicians' avoidance of improvisation and composition, in favor of obsessing over other composers' fixed notation, has always seemed unnatural to me. Roman's own composition may not have been the most profound statement in the program, yet his facility with the cello did enable him to write a piece that goes well with his instrument and sits well with his technique. Roman's work, *Riding Light*, is tinged with pop rhythms (just as Bach's suites are also imbued with the popular dance music of the Baroque), interesting harmonic shades, and pleasant melodic lines.

**The program was commissioned by Grace Cathedral itself, in conjunction with resident artist Anne Patterson's project. Her work involved having another cloth screen lowered behind the cellist as lamps at his feet cast shadows upward. The concrete walls of the cathedral were projected with colored lights for various sections of Roman's piece. The cellist's program notes included a brainstorm of words that he associated with the project: light, energy, refracted, glittering. His piece is also a brainstorm of ideas — a solo cello fantasia written specifically for Grace's acoustic. With his final chords, the backdrop was released from the ceiling, falling to the ground in a silky swirl.**

**Before the concert, another of Patterson's creations was projected on the long vertical screen: something that looked like fluorescent intestines, or perhaps a blurry Medusa head covered by coils of neon snakes. According to the dean of Grace Cathedral, the Very Reverend Dr. Jane Shaw, the installation will continue to grow and will remain on display in the coming months.**

Religious institutions have traditionally been supporters of the arts, and it's great to see that continue with Grace Cathedral serving as a house of worship, a museum, *and* a concert hall.