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A Timely Oratorio Arrives on New Year's Eve St. John the Divine Concert Sharpens Social Message

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By [Brian Wise](#)



George Mathew (Chris Lee)

The Concert for Peace at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine has frequently tailored its programming in response to international events. When it began in the mid-80s, Leonard Bernstein was on hand to say a prayer for peace, Susan Sontag read Gertrude Stein and other speakers denounced war and nuclear proliferation.

Over the years it has continued to offer a mixture of inspired music-making, muddy acoustics and a sometimes earnest solemnity. This New Year's Eve promises something different. Instead of a beloved chestnut by Beethoven or Copland, George Mathew, the conductor and artistic director, will lead a performance of *A Child of Our Time* (1939-41), Michael Tippett's rarely heard oratorio that was a pacifist response to the Nazi persecution of the Jews.

Tippett's focus is the events of November 1938: the killing of a German diplomat boy a Jewish boy, who then becomes the scapegoat that triggers Kristallnacht and the Jewish genocide. As with Handel's *Messiah*, the story is told in a series of solos, ensemble and chorus numbers but its political text scares many organizations away. Mathew, a conductor who runs a nonprofit called Music for Life which has organized concerts to raise funds for Darfur or victims of catastrophes in South Asia, felt it was "terribly relevant" to our times.

"On the surface of it, it's a piece about the circumstances of the events leading to the beginning of the Holocaust," Mathew explained. "And yet, there are other topics that lie below the surface. Today we have situations such as the discourse around race and the discourse around immigration and the discourse around economic justice. All find a tremendously powerful resonance inside this piece."

Tippett chose to use Negro spirituals as the chorus numbers of the oratorio, a modern equivalent to the way Bach used Lutheran chorales in his Passions. While the piece is based on actual events

(it takes its title from a novel by the Hungarian anti-Nazi writer Odon von Horvath) the closest Tippett comes to portraying specific characters is to call the vocal soloists Boy, Mother, Aunt and Uncle. The Boy shoots an official, the bass recounts as the narrator, and “they took a terrible vengeance.” The Child of Our Time, we learn, is the scapegoat.

On Saturday night, the work will be performed by the Ubuntu-Shruti Orchestra and the Dessoff Choirs, with soprano Indra Thomas, mezzo-soprano Rachel Calloway and bass Morris Robinson as the soloists. The iconic folk singer Jody Collins will also make a cameo appearance. Mathew, a Singaporean-born Indian conductor who is based in Harlem, said that he hopes to bring the annual concert back to its roots as "a plea for peace."

"We're interpretive artists engaged in creating meaning," he said. "We can never really know what bygone artists meant. But we have a very good chance of finding out some kind of a starting point. From that, there is a place where you can actually create meanings that are resonant with situations on the ground, situations in our lives, in our world today."

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