

Zohn Collective and La Coperacha at Cleveland Museum of Art

by Mike Telin



It is often impossible to say why a work of art captivates you to the point of becoming an obsession. Such is the case for composer Ricardo Zohn-Muldoon and [Juan Rulfo](#)'s novel [Pedro Páramo](#). In his program notes for his scenic cantata *Comala*, Zohn-Muldoon writes: "To explain why *Pedro Páramo* moves me so deeply is beyond my capabilities as an essayist."

On Friday, October 18 at 7:30 pm in the Cleveland Museum of Art's Gartner Auditorium, the [Zohn Collective](#) will present "Portals," which pairs *Comala* with the world premiere of Daniel Pesca's *Nocturnes*, a setting of four poems by Irving Feldman. Conducted by Timothy Weiss, performers include soprano Tony Arnold and tenor Zach Finkelstein, with La Coperacha Puppet Company. The performance is part of CMA's Performing Arts Series. Tickets are available [online](#).

"This is a piece I've been composing on and off for all of my adult life," Zohn-Muldoon said of *Comala* during a telephone interview. "Every time it gets performed I add a new theme — I just finished one that will be premiered on this occasion — so now it's gotten very large."

Comala was premiered by The Furious Band at the Festival Música y Escena in México City in 2001. A later version was recorded for Bridge Records in 2010 by the Eastman

BroadBand. The following year, it was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in music composition, and was awarded the Lillian Fairchild Award. Since then the work has continued to grow with the creation of new scenes that give voice to additional characters from the novel. The current version, comprising 24 scenes, was completed for this tour, which also includes stops in Oberlin (Oct. 16) and Chicago (Oct. 20).



Although Zohn-Muldoon calls the piece a concert work, he's always felt it should include a theatrical element. "I always wanted to do the staging with puppets," he said, "but for one reason or another it never happened." That is, until the Collective was invited to perform at the Festival Cultural de Mayo in Guadalajara in 2018 and was paired with La Coperacha, a celebrated puppet company based in that city.

The composer said that *Comala* is a tragic love story as well as a search for identity. "A man comes to a village and eventually figures out that everyone he is meeting is actually a spirit. But this is not clear at the beginning because they appear to him as people."

Why was he certain that puppets would be the right choice for the staging? "One of the things that attracted me to puppets is that they are actually an alter-ego. They are inanimate, but once a person starts working with them, even though you see the operator, you are taken by the idea that the puppet has life. There's this kind of magic. I love the idea of disassociation — you see people who are alive and puppets who are not, but there comes a point when you don't know who is alive and who isn't."

In *Comala*, Zohn-Muldoon juxtaposes singing (the spirits) with speech (the people who are alive). “The spirits have all the time in the world, so they can sing as much as they want. And in real life, we use speech because we’re impatient and always in a hurry. I feel that is reflected in the puppets.”

The puppet design by Antonio Camacho, director of La Coperacha, was inspired by Alejandro Santiago’s sculpture project *2501 migrants*. Zohn-Muldoon explained that Santiago left his village in Oaxaca to study in Paris. When he returned, nearly all the people had left the village. “They were gone because they were migrating to the U.S. to look for work. Santiago decided to make a clay sculpture for each person who had left the village — there were 2,501 because he counted himself a migrant.”

Zohn-Muldoon said he first thought the idea of pairing Rulfo’s novel with Santiago’s sculpture project was unusual, but he soon realized that the two works were speaking to the same subject. “Life changes, places become empty, and all you have left is an embodied memory of what there used to be.”

The idea for “Portals” began to take shape right after the festival in Guadalajara, and it began the way most projects begin: “Some other members of the Collective and I were talking over coffee, which makes everything seem great, and then of course it was like, how do we make it happen?”

Soon after the fundraising began, they realized that a second piece was needed, one that would make the project bi-national — a counterpart to *Comala* but with a text by an American author. “Daniel Pesca, the pianist in the group, is a very fine composer, and one of the members of the group had been in touch with the famous poet Irving Feldman, who lives in Chicago. Daniel looked at many of Feldman’s poems and selected ones that reflect on some of the themes of *Comala*, but from a very different poetic perspective.”

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